

SAM SCHOOLER

**THE PRACTICAL
GUIDE TO TRYING
NOT TO DIE**

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

THE PRACTICAL GUIDE TO TRYING NOT TO DIE

By Sam Schooler

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader

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THE PRACTICAL GUIDE TO TRYING NOT TO DIE

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Photo Description

A shirtless guy in jeans stands with a sword slung across his shoulders.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Overnight, my whole world has changed. I woke up with psychotic LOTR-looking freaks trying to kill me, only to be rescued by my scary next door neighbor. He claims to be my guardian and that I'm some sort of key. Key to what? And oh gosh, are those guys in my bedroom really dead? There's no way I'm getting my security deposit back now.

Fantasy, time-travel, AU all welcome. Please no BDSM. I do like snark, UST, HEA!

Sincerely,

Ithra

Story Info

Genre: urban fantasy

Tags: coming of age, geeks/nerds, magic users, college, humorous, road trip, slow burn/ust, soul mates or bonded

Content warnings: some violence

Word count: 25,744

THE PRACTICAL GUIDE TO TRYING NOT TO DIE

By Sam Schooler

Aragorn, Boromir, and Faramir are trying to kill him.

Danny tightens his grip on the silver candlestick he snagged off the dining room table, trying to muffle his panicked breathing. He had migraines as a kid and his mother took him to a relaxation therapy clinic; he remembers the CDs they gave him and breathes in, holds it, breathes out. In, out. Calm. He's capable. He knows this house better than they do. He can do this.

A floorboard behind him creaks.

Oh god, he's going to die.

Candlestick at the ready, Danny whirls, bringing it crashing down on the shoulder of the guy... who...

...is his next-door neighbor.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" Danny hisses, eyes wide, and then he sees the sword in Neighbor Guy's hand and backs away so fast that he knocks his head on the bathroom doorframe. He yelps and Neighbor Guy makes a cutting gesture with one hand, signaling for silence. "No," Danny says, "no, you are trying to kill me, and—"

"I'm not," Neighbor Guy starts, half a second before Aragorn slides into the living room, hefting his sword over his head in what is possibly the worst attack plan that Danny has ever seen. He isn't, like, a master swordsman, and nor does he know anything about hand-to-hand that doesn't come from action movies and the mandatory self-defense section of gym class in eighth grade—but, regardless, he knows that the guy is kind of an idiot if *that's* how he's going to come at Neighbor Guy, who has at least three inches on him vertically and four or five on him horizontally (because seriously, the guy has Shoulders. Capital S-worthy Shoulders).

Neighbor Guy promptly uses those Capital S Shoulders to drive his sword through Aragorn's stomach. He drops one knee at the last second, ducks, and heaves upward, putting his shoulder under the hilt of his blade and dragging it through Aragorn's chest until he hits bone he can't break. Aragorn gasps and gurgles, reaching for Danny, who may or may not be having a mild panic attack right there in the hallway, and then, oh gosh, he's dead, all the life sinking out of him in one limp flop. Neighbor Guy stands, letting Aragorn's body drop off his sword, and looks at Danny.

"I really don't want to die," Danny reminds him.

"I'm here to make sure that doesn't happen," Neighbor Guy says. He has a nice voice, and Danny would take more time to appreciate it if he wasn't sure that his life was in peril.

"What do we do?" he asks, holding his candlestick closer to his chest. Neighbor Guy's eyes drop to it, and then he actually has the fucking nerve to *roll them*, like Danny's attempt at self-preservation isn't good enough for him. "What?" Danny snaps. "I'm sorry, is this not sufficient for you? I could have grabbed a pepper shaker or something else useless. I was going to die!"

Neighbor Guy squints at him, his mouth open a little. After a moment, he asks, "...Is there something wrong with you?"

"Is there," Danny says. "Oh my god, *is there something wrong with me?* Fuck yes, there's something wrong with me! People are trying to kill me!" He almost wants to swing at Neighbor Guy with the candlestick again, but too late he realizes that he's been shouting, and that there are heavy footsteps thudding toward them, and equally heavy footsteps above, on the second floor.

"Come here," Neighbor Guy says, and grabs him by the collar of his shirt, dragging him forward and into Neighbor Guy's chest. Neighbor Guy walks backward, pulling Danny with him into the bathroom. He pushes Danny into the corner where the door wall meets the side wall, and of course, Danny starts fucking sneezing right there, because Malia insists on putting these incense things in the bathroom that smell like Moonlight Vanilla and Beach Pineapple Coconut, and they irritate his asthma like nothing else. "Be quiet!"

Danny gives him an ugly look and lifts the candlestick again. He doesn't want to kill anyone, and he's trying not to think about what the police are going to say when Danny calls and says that he has a dead *Lord of the Rings* cosplayer in his house. Whatever they say, he's sure it will end with him in prison, wasting his young life away in solitary and eating fake baked beans and stale bread.

"What," he says, and Neighbor Guy pushes into his space, putting a hand over his mouth that Danny is immediately tempted to lick. A shadow falls on the far side of the hallway, and Danny breathes into Neighbor Guy's hand, assuring himself that his lungs aren't going to go traitor on him now. *We've come so far*, he thinks, sucking in a slow breath. Neighbor Guy is looking into the hallway, his whole face dark except for the line of one cheekbone and the groove on the top of his lip, which is prickled with five o'clock shadow. Unfair, since it's only like eight-thirty in the morning and Danny hasn't even had coffee yet, much less breakfast.

The shadow stalls, then creeps forward, and Danny sees the glinting edge of a sword before he sees the rest of the man. He can't tell if it's Boromir or Faramir—and then it doesn't matter, because whoever it was is dead now, his left arm mostly severed, and his blood painting the wall in a spattering wave.

"Oh," Danny says weakly. "That's great. That's a lot of blood."

"I'm really going to need you to be quiet," Neighbor Guy says, glaring at Danny. He has blood smeared on his face, droplets arched artfully over one side of it, a line from his chin to his hairline. God, *ew*, there's probably some in his hair, too, but it's too dark for Danny to tell. "Here," he says, and Danny looks up to see Neighbor Guy offering him a sword.

"Uh," Danny says.

"Take it," Neighbor Guy snaps. He pushes it hard into Danny's hand. "There's one more of them." Easing back out into the hallway, he glances left, then moves right, motioning for Danny to follow. Sword in hand, Danny does, keeping his back pressed to the wall as he navigates his way over Aragorn's splayed limbs. As soon as he lets himself think he's in the clear, he slips in

Aragorn's blood, and Neighbor Guy hauls him back to his feet with one hand under his arm, his eyes set ahead, on the front door. The front door is less appealing than upstairs, where Danny could dress himself in something that isn't, you know, *Star Trek* boxers and a ripped orange T-shirt that says BIG LOUIE'S SUPER SHRIMP from his cousin's failed attempt at a shrimp truck.

Neighbor Guy leads Danny forward, checking the stairs and the study as he goes, his barefoot steps silent on the hardwood floor. He motions Danny closer and leans into him, passing a set of keys into his hand. "Listen to me. You go get in my truck and you drive it down to Clairview Park. Got it?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find the other one." Neighbor Guy pushes Danny toward the front door. "Go. I'll meet you."

Really, Danny would have more questions about why Neighbor Guy seems so bent on saving Danny's life, and why he has this whole *Man on Fire* act down pat, but he sees the third one—definitely Faramir—coming around from the hallway before Neighbor Guy, and he... Okay, yes, he shrieks, "Behind you!" as he throws his arms up on instinct. To his surprise, his blade meets Faramir's and the shock ricochets up his arms, jangling his nerves. Faramir looks as stunned as Danny does, and Neighbor Guy uses that to his advantage, sliding between them and bringing his sword up, the tip resting on the heaving bob of Faramir's throat.

"Don't," Neighbor Guy growls, pushing Faramir back.

Faramir smirks and brings his free arm up, knocking Neighbor Guy's sword away as he pulls a dagger out of his shirt. It's glowing a cherry red, sparking here and there, and Danny scrambles backward too late; the cut the dagger makes is quick and it *hurts*, worse than the time Danny broke his arm playing hopscotch.

"Too late," Faramir murmurs as Neighbor Guy rallies, turning on him, and Neighbor Guy's sword... goes through the side of his throat.

Danny has never seen so much blood in his life. It *sprays*, it's fucking Old Faithful. Danny is never going to make fun of horror movie blood after this.

“Guardian,” Faramir spits, his voice hoarse. “You are too late.” He coughs and blood sprays thickly from his torn throat. Danny recoils as some of it hits his arm, warm and wet.

“Who sent you?” Neighbor Guy—Guardian? Is that his name?—demands. When Faramir does nothing but smile up at him, he pushes the tip of his blade deeper into the new wound. “*Who sent you?*”

“A new reign is coming,” Faramir murmurs. Danny can see his eyes glazing over. Neighbor Guy seems to realize he’s losing him, too, and he steps back, letting Faramir hit the ground. Faramir gasps and chokes, his smile widening. “My life I give in service, so the light will be remade. My salt to this land, my flesh to this soil, so his reign may extend here. My ancestors take my spirit.”

“You’re not on soil,” Neighbor Guy says. “And you’re a murderer. No spirits are coming for you.” He pauses, watching Faramir’s chest heave. “At least, not the ones you want to see.”

Danny feels a flash of sickening satisfaction that is replaced with pure sickening, because he doesn’t know who this guy *is*. He doesn’t know who any of them are. Who says that Neighbor Guy is the good one here? Danny means to ask this, and he means to dig his heels in, but instead he looks at the keys in his hand, then looks back up at Neighbor Guy and asks, “What now?”

“Pack a bag. We’re leaving.”

“We’re leaving,” Danny repeats. Neighbor Guy reaches for his keys and Danny snatches them back, stuffing them into the useless breast pocket on his T-shirt. “No. No, that is incorrect. I don’t even know who the hell you *are*.”

Neighbor Guy sighs and switches his sword to his right hand, offering his left to shake. “My name is Soren. I’m here to protect you.”

Danny’s life is officially a bad movie. “Protect me from *what?*”

Soren raises both eyebrows and looks down at Faramir. “Uh...?”

That is the precise moment when Danny knows that this man is going to drive him *up the wall*. “Uh, yeah,” he says. “‘Uh,’ he says to me. Uh, who the fuck is he?”

“I don’t know his name,” Soren says slowly.

Danny boggles at him. “I can’t tell if you’re purposefully missing what I’m asking you here or if we’re having—I don’t even know. Who are you?”

“My name is—”

“Soren,” Danny cuts off. “I know that.” He points at dead Faramir. “You asked him who he worked for.”

“Right.”

Danny drags a hand down his face, remembering belatedly that there’s blood all over it, at least eighty percent of which isn’t his. *Ugh*. “You and I are gonna have a difficult time with each other, aren’t we?”

Soren shrugs. “I like you fine, Danny.”

“You don’t even know me,” Danny says, half-laughing it. He feels hysterical, suddenly, because he can smell blood. There are three dead men in his house and he has their blood on him. He needs his inhaler, and he needs to call Malia, and he needs, he thinks, to call his mother, who will probably make the four-hour drive down here in three. “How do you know me?”

He knows Soren in the way casual neighbors know each other, sure, but Soren is looking at Danny like he expects him to know everything, like Soren is miles ahead and he expected Danny to be walking next to him, matched step for step, only to find that he let Danny fall down a fucking hill, *Princess Bride*-style. Soren has lived in the house next to his and Malia’s since they moved in, and he’s kept to himself. Malia met him once but didn’t ask his name, and aside from gawking at him when he did laps in the small swimming pool behind his house, Danny has had zero contact with the guy.

Soren’s expression is strange. He steps into Danny’s space and cups his jaw in one hand, tilting his face to one side so Soren can examine the cut. “He marked you,” he murmurs, his jaw ticking. He lets Danny go a second later,

which is good, since Danny's body has developed a sudden and ill-timed fever that is located primarily in his groin. "We really have to go," Soren says. "I need you to pack a bag. There's going to be more of them, once these don't report back."

Danny grits his teeth. "Are you going to call the police?"

"The police won't help us," Soren says. "Pack, Danny."

So, he does. He washes his hands and face, first, and then he fishes his old high school backpack out from under his bed. When he catches sight of himself in his bedroom mirror, he's so pale that he looks sick. Even his freckles have lightened. He drags a hand back through his hair, fixing it and, belatedly, remembering to check it for blood. Nothing; his hand is clean.

That done, Danny calls Malia. He gets her voicemail and he tells her not to come home, that something's happened and he'll be at Soren's house. Come there, he says, and he wonders if she'll hate him for this. Probably. She holds a hell of a grudge.

Inhaler. Clothes. Wallet. Cell phone. Cell charger. Toothbrush. Deodorant, even. His mother would be proud.

Danny doesn't call his mother.

"Look," he says on his way back down the stairs. "I have a roommate. If she comes back here and finds this..."

"She can't come back here," Soren says. "The seekers won't kill you, but they'll kill anyone who gets between them and you."

Danny picks up the short sword from the floor, wincing as sticky blood coats his palm. "When I asked who that guy was, 'a seeker' would have been a good answer. You know. FYI."

"He's a seeker," Soren says, with a tone that suggests he's only humoring Danny. "They're looking for you because they've been sent by someone."

"For me." Danny has three dead bodies to prove that Soren is right. "Why?"

“I’ll explain.” Soren opens the front door. “Later.”

“Have you done this before?” Danny asks. “Any experience? Y’know, student teacher placement?”

Soren’s shoulders stiffen. “No. Why?”

“Because you have a terrible bedside manner. It needs work. For all I know, you’re one of them and you’re going to cut my liver out and sell it on the Black Market.”

Soren blinks. He has this amazing ability to rearrange his entire face from scowl to bemusement and back in seconds. “What?”

“Nothing.” Danny isn’t sure why he believes Soren in the first place; he doesn’t want to have to explain the fact that he does. Not to himself, and especially not to Soren.

Malia calls as Soren is slinging a leather satchel into the back of his pickup truck.

“What,” she says, “the fuck was that message, Daniel.”

“Uh,” Danny says. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Soren look up. “Look, I need you to... not come home for a while.”

“Why?”

“I see dead people?” Danny says, and only when it’s out of his mouth does he realize how *wildly* inappropriate it was. He darts a glance at Soren, whose face is carefully blank.

Malia’s voice is very calm and very low. “Excuse me.”

“I’ll explain when you get here,” Danny tries. “I just need you to trust me, Mal.”

“Tell me that when there aren’t dead people in my house.” She hangs up. Danny pulls his phone away from his ear, sighing. If the next Tolkien crew doesn’t kill him, she might.

“She’s a black belt,” he says morosely. “D’you realize what she’s going to do to me?”

“It’s better than ending up dead.” Soren has his arms folded loosely on the lip of the truck bed. “When she gets here, she needs to pack a bag and leave. We’ll meet up with the rest of the League when we get to Lohrfast.”

Danny waves his hands in a way that kind of signals that he’s having a seizure. He might be, he doesn’t know. For a brief, terrifying moment, he can’t remember where he put his inhaler; it’s in his pocket when he slaps his hands down, a comforting and familiar shape. He takes a hit off it, sighing at the instant relief.

“Okay,” he says. “Okay, *look*. There are about fifty things wrong with what you just said. That’s her *house*,” he says, throwing out an arm to point at it. “That’s her house, dude, and there are three *dead guys* in it!”

“I realize that,” Soren says. He’s doing this thing where his eyes are dark and unreadable, and his face is utterly devoid of emotion, like some demented C-3PO. Hell fucking no, Danny is not about to be his R2-D2.

“*Look*,” Danny repeats. “I can’t leave them there and leave her to deal with it. The police might not help us, but somehow I doubt they’ll have an issue arresting her.”

Soren sighs. He seems very put-upon by Danny’s whole freaking out episode. Danny scowls at him. “Okay,” Soren says slowly. “We’re going to go to Lohrfast—”

“I don’t want to go to *Ireland*—”

“And then,” Soren says, slightly louder. “We’re going to send someone back here to help with cleaning up your house. Okay?”

Danny gapes at him. “No,” he says finally. “No, not okay.”

Soren sighs again, more exasperated. “What else do you want me to do, Danny?”

“Explain all this shit!” Danny says, throwing his hands up. He quite abruptly needs his inhaler again, and he takes a couple puffs. This is more than

he's ever taken in such a short amount of time, and he hopes he isn't about to keel over. Then again, dying might be a reprieve from the torrent of bullshit that his life has become. "Where is Lohrfast?"

"Not here," Soren says. "Where I'm from..." He falters, his eyes dropping away for the first time. "Where we're from," he begins, "isn't here. I need to take you there. For protection."

"Protection."

"From seekers like the ones in there." Soren nods to the house.

Danny turns out of habit to look at it. It looks... foreign. He thinks about the three dead men in it and it feels less like the place he's been living in for the past year. This is how his childhood bedroom felt, the first time he went back to it, but that had been after months of living here. He didn't think a place could change that quickly. He swallows hard, rubbing his fingers into the hot metal of Soren's truck.

"What about my parents?"

A flicker of emotion. "They'll be informed."

It sounds so *clinical*. "Informed," Danny echoes.

"They knew already," Soren says. "They knew when they took you into their home."

"I'm..." Danny blinks at him. "What?"

Soren's mouth twists at one side, wry. "Sorry."

Danny sags against the flank of the truck. He's adopted. There are three dead dudes in his house, his roommate is about to kill him, he's being whisked off to Ireland, and he's adopted.

"I should never've gotten out of bed this morning," he mutters. "Shit."

Of course, that's when Malia's car screeches around the corner at the far end of the street and comes barreling into their driveway. "What," she says, stepping out. She's near six foot, taller than Danny is, and she run-walks at

him on her five-inch Manolos, doggedly determined to... *Oh god she's going to rip my face off.*

"Malia," Danny says.

"Nope," she interrupts. "Nope. If there are dead people in my *house*, Danny—"

"Look—"

"Don't you *look* me! I hate when you *look* me!"

"For the record," Soren says pleasantly, "I hate when he does that, too."

Malia squints at him. "Why the hell is my roommate's shit in your truck?" she asks, looking pointedly at Danny's duffel bag.

"I'm taking him with me."

"And leaving me with the dead bodies?" Malia snaps.

Soren shrugs. "I'm sending someone to fix your house. You should—"

"*What.*" Malia whirls, turning her laser focus back on Danny. "There are *actually dead bodies in my house*? I thought you were fucking joking, you asshat!"

"I'm sorry," Danny says, itching for his inhaler again. "It was—What happened was—What..." He breaks off, fending away the tightness in his chest. "I don't even know what happened," he says lamely. "I don't know, Mal."

She stares at him for another long moment, her jaw clenched, and then she softens and touches his lip where it's split. "You okay?"

"Oh yeah," Danny mutters. "Fabulous."

Soren clears his throat from behind them. "We need to go," he says to Danny. To Malia, "You should find somewhere safe to stay. A hotel, a friend's house. Stay there for a couple weeks, until I can draw their attention away from here."

“Is that why you’re taking me?” Danny says. It’s near squawk-level. “Am I bait for Legolas?” He cannot handle this. He just can’t. “I…” He snatches his bag up from the truck bed. “Look, I’m just going to stay here. With Malia. At a hotel! I’ll be fine. Just fine.”

“No,” Soren says. He’s back to that deep, scary voice that Danny can tell he uses to end conversations.

Unluckily for him, Danny rarely responds to conversation-ending tones. “No,” he parrots instead. “No way. If Malia can stay, I can stay. I’ll *inform* my parents myself.”

Soren’s jaw tightens. “My job is to look after you,” he says. “That’s what I’m trying to do. I’d appreciate if you’d let me *do it*.”

They lapse into tense silence, Danny staring at Soren and Soren staring back at him, puffing up, and spreading his stupid Shoulders until he’s taking up as much room as possible.

“You look like a fucking peacock,” Malia says eventually. Her voice is practically a snarl. “I sure as fuck am not staying here if there’s dead people in my house. Wherever you two are going, I’m coming with you.”

“No,” Soren says. Conversation-ending voice.

“Yes,” Malia says. I-will-fucking-kill-you voice.

“Dude,” Danny says, “don’t even bother. She’s gonna win.” He can practically hear Soren grinding his teeth from here. “I’ve tried, believe me.”

“Two years of law school,” Malia says, by way of explanation.

“I can tell,” Soren agrees, and just like that, the tension dissipates. Danny glances between them. This is baffling, he thinks, and almost says it, but Soren is already saying, “Go pack a bag.”

“Two minutes.” Malia jogs toward the house, still on her five-inch heels.

“She’s your girlfriend?” Soren assumes, watching the still visage of Danny’s house.

“What? No.” Danny shrugs. “We met through a friend. I needed a place to stay.” Soren hums, noncommittal, which is when Danny realizes that maybe he’s asking so he can *date* her, or *court* her, or whatever the fuck it is that people from Lohrfast do. God, he can’t imagine what would happen to the world if Soren and Malia hooked up. That’s like... that would be like, Jesus, all that’s coming to mind for him are bad WWII-related images. Superpowers.

Malia is gone longer than two minutes. Danny gets antsy, *wants* his inhaler again. He says, “I need to call my parents.” Soren makes a face, but he doesn’t say no, so Danny pulls out his cell phone.

He gets voicemail.

“Fuck,” he mutters, listening to his mom’s cheerful, familiar intro. “*Hi, you’ve reached the Marlaeto household! Leave a message after the beep, and we’ll call you back as soon as we can. Have a great day!*” He turns away from Soren, tucking his phone and face into his shoulder. “Hey, Ma,” he says. He tries not to look at his house. “I love you a lot, okay? You and Dad.” *You never told me.* “I’m safe, okay? I’m going with Soren. I’m okay. I’ll...” He grits his teeth, then lies through them. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

Soren is watching him impassively when he comes back to stick his (turned off) phone in his bag. “They know me,” he says. “They met me before I moved here.”

Danny leans on the truck, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. He wants to set his whole life on fire, and Soren’s face on fire, and this truck. And the house. “So I guess everyone knew but me. And I *still* don’t know.”

“I’ll explain,” Soren says. His voice is softer, but when Danny drags his hands away from his eyes, it hardens again. “We don’t have time right now.” He leans in the open driver’s side window and slams his hand down on the truck’s horn, blaring it for five short blasts. Danny sees one of the front window curtains rustle, and an extended middle finger appears in it. He ducks his head, laughing. A moment later, the front door slams.

Malia has stripped down out of her dojo uniform and has sneakers on. Her long blonde hair is tied back in a severe ponytail. “We’re in Montana,” she

says to Danny, tossing her duffel in the truck bed. “I needed to oh-so-suddenly go to rehab for a Vicodin addiction.”

Her selflessness makes Danny’s chest ache, and he reaches for her, hugging her around the waist. If he said thank you, she might say, *You’d do the same for me*, except Danny doesn’t know if he would. He doesn’t even know if he *could*. Could he pick up and leave his entire *life*? Go off on some... some *quest* with rules and backstory that were only vague shapes? With no playing cards and shitty figures and loaded dice?

No. But he isn’t Malia.

Soren climbs into the truck. His eyes are cool now. He says he’s Danny’s guardian—so how much of his own life did he give up? “We need to go,” he says, peering at them through the passenger window.

“Shotgun,” Malia says. She gives Danny a lopsided smile.

He can’t look back at the house when they drive away.

They don’t go to Montana, but it’s a close thing. Soren drives for six hours, Danny and Malia exchanging *WTF?* looks and napping on and off—Malia worked an all-nighter at her dojo, and Danny’s reaction to trauma has always been sleeping. Soren shakes Danny awake when the sun starts to set so they can go through a McDonald’s. Danny has zero cash on him, and he’s a little surprised when Soren is fine with him using his debit card. Isn’t that how action movie heroes get found out? All the bad guy has to do is *ping* and there’s the tracking chip.

“Seekers are behind the times,” Soren says, stealing a handful of Danny’s fries. Malia is sucking her way through a triple-thick shake, her cheeseburger forgotten in her lap. “Not many people from Lohrfast spend time on Earth.”

“Right,” Danny says, focused on *food holy fuck food* until he realizes Soren just said *on Earth*. “You’re an alien,” he says blankly.

“What?”

“You know,” Danny says, gesturing vaguely. “E.T.? The Doctor?”

“Which doctor?”

There are so many terrible jokes Danny could make right now. Instead, he says, “How much time have *you* spent on Earth?”

“A year.”

Since Danny moved out of his parents’ house. Danny glances at Malia, who shrugs and widens her eyes at him. “You said my parents... know you?”

“It’s tradition for the parents of a key to meet the guardian before they take post.” Soren steals more of Danny’s fries, despite the fact that he has his own *bag* with his *own fries* right in his lap.

“Stop it,” Danny snaps, hoarding his fries in against his chest. Soren raises both eyebrows at him. “What’s a key?”

“You’re a key.” Soren’s fingers twitch on the steering wheel.

“A key is...”

“A source of magic,” Soren says, reluctant. Danny can see why he would be, because the second the word *magic* is out of his mouth, Malia is laughing, and so is Danny.

“You’re fucking kidding,” Malia says. “*Magic*. And he’s a source of it?”

“Don’t say that like it’s impossible!” Danny snaps, grabbing her milkshake from her.

“Honey, you’re awesome, but you can’t walk ten feet without tripping over yourself.” Malia unwraps her cheeseburger and takes a huge bite. “God,” she says through it, “San Francisco needs to get better burger places.”

“Agreed,” Soren says. And really, his whole attractiveness level is steadily declining. Danny sticks his hand in Soren’s bag to steal back the handful of fries Soren pilfered from his carton. Soren watches him the whole time, dark eyes keen, but he doesn’t stop Danny. It’s uncomfortable. His laser stare is... is uncomfortable. And stupid.

Danny pulls his hand back and stuffs the fries in his mouth. “I hate you both,” he says, with less conviction and more good humor than he’d intended.

“So,” he says loudly, to distract them both from that fact, “what did the warriors three want with me?”

Soren sighs, shifting his hand on the steering wheel. His skin is cast orange in the sunset. Danny can barely make the four-hour drive to his parents’ place without going cross-eyed; he isn’t sure how Soren’s still going. Maybe with magic. Ha ha.

“There’s been talk lately about a sorcerer rounding up keys,” he says. His voice is affected for the first time, some emotion Danny doesn’t want to think might be hopelessness, or, or loss of resolve, or sadness. Danny is overreacting, that’s all. Malia is silent, listening. “I think they were working for him.”

Danny goes quiet, processing this. Malia speaks up abruptly. “So he wants a shitload of power.”

Soren nods. “That’s what the League thinks. At first, his men stayed in Lohrfast, seeking out keys there, but lately he’s moved to the other dimensions with the help of keys he’s already caught and bound to him.”

“Bound?” Danny asks.

“Sorcerers can...” Soren’s fingers flex on the steering wheel again. “They can use a key’s magic at will. See, it’s like... Keys are like a well where magic is stored. But unless you have a bucket, you can’t get to that water. Sorcerers are the people who have the bucket—the natural ability to access a key’s magic.”

Danny rubs his fingertips together. “Can’t I just use magic to avoid them?”

“You can’t,” Soren says. “Only a sorcerer can. A well doesn’t do anything with its own water.”

“That’s really fucking shitty,” Malia chimes in. She balls up her cheeseburger wrapper, then takes her milkshake back from Danny’s loose grip and sips it noisily. “Where are we going?”

“Mount Rainier.” Soren puts his bag on Danny’s lap. Danny’s all set to protest until he sees the fries that are still left. “There’s a portal to Lohrfast set up there.”

Malia makes a faint noise in her throat. “I thought Earth didn’t have magic?”

“It can,” Soren says. “If we bring it here.”

Danny glances over at Malia. She looks... not unhappy, but thoughtful. He nudges her gently in the side. “We aren’t coming back,” she says, swatting at Danny’s arm. She peers over his head at Soren. God, Danny hates being 5’6”. “Are we.”

Soren’s jaw flexes. “Not until the League can be assured that this sorcerer’s handled.” He glances back at her. “Are you sure you want to come?”

“No, that’s why I’ve been sitting in a car for six hours with you two. Of course I’m coming. You may be his guardian, but I’ve kept him from falling on his ass more times than you ever will.” Malia hands her milkshake back to Danny, who is rapidly being convinced that he functions only as a) comic relief, and b) a garbage disposal. She goes on, “Are you guys just hoping he dies of a massive heart attack, or are you trying to stop him?”

“We’re working on it.” Soren takes the milkshake out of Danny’s hand and sucks the rest of it down. Maybe he needs the sugar rush. “He has upwards of two hundred keys bound to him already. It’s hard to neutralize that much magic.”

“You guys don’t have any keys,” Danny assumes.

“We have some. Our leader is a woman named Ilyana, and her wife is a key.” The way Soren says it is completely offhand, with no odd tone at all. Like the leader of an immensely powerful group of warriors being female and having a wife is a common, everyday thing.

...Okay, maybe Danny could like this League. At least they seem friendlier to queer people than all of Earth does.

Danny takes the empty milkshake cup from Soren and sticks it in the bag. “That’s not the problem,” he says, dropping the bag between Malia’s feet. She jumps a little, dozy. They both slept earlier, but this truck, while huge, is mostly made up of bed instead of cabin, and there isn’t a lot of room to act as good sleeping ground.

“What *is* the problem?” Malia asks, blinking.

“The problem is you don’t have any sorcerers,” Danny says, looking Soren’s way. “Do you?”

“We don’t accept unbound sorcerers into our ranks,” Soren says. “We have few bound pairs. Keys usually do their best to stay unbound.”

Malia snorts. “Big surprise there,” she says. “If a key is so easy for a sorcerer to control, who the hell would do that? Willingly, I mean.”

“Wait,” Danny says. Malia and Soren both look at him, and he shrinks down in his seat. They have the same piercing, hawkish stare, even with Malia half-asleep. “Wait, so how many keys are there?”

Soren shrugs, switching lanes to pass a semitruck. “A few thousand. Most are sent out of Lohrfast when they’re born. Keys are harder to detect in realms that don’t naturally have magic. The majority have guardians assigned to them, we think, but there are some whose parents refuse to reveal them as a key, even to us. We can’t be sure of how many.”

Danny huffs out a long breath. This morning, he got up and worried about his geology final (he’s going to miss it; his grade is definitely fucked). Now he’s... *magic*, and, and alternate dimensions, and Soren, sitting next to him, is so calm about all this. Danny’s lungs catch on the next inhale; he fumbles for his inhaler and takes two puffs of it, letting the medicine sting its way through him. Soren is watching him when he looks up, and Danny offers a weak smile. “Stop the ride, I wanna get off.”

He thinks he sees an answering smile flicker on Soren’s mouth, but he can’t be sure. Maybe it’s the streetlights.

Somewhere between then and the next morning, Danny sleeps. He remembers waking up, once, and hearing Malia talking lowly to Soren. Everything before and after that is a long, blank gap, broken occasionally by car horns or rough ground.

When he does wake up completely, the truck's clock says 5:54 in blurry red letters. The sky is still dark.

His head is on Soren's shoulder.

"Sorry," he mumbles, pushing upright. Soren wears cologne, or strong deodorant, and Danny has a nose full of it and maybe a boner—which is not his fault. He will personally dare any nineteen-year-old gay guy to sleep on an attractive man who smells nice and *not* pop a stiffy, for real.

"It's fine," Soren says. He glances over Danny and shrugs the shoulder Danny was probably drooling on. "I don't mind."

Yeah, no, Plan B is better, so Danny says, "Don't worry about it," and slumps against Malia, putting his head on her shoulder instead. After fifteen minutes of half-hearted dozing, he can admit that his body has had enough sleep and is rebelling against any and all notions of attempting to get more. Danny groans, straightening up again.

Soren is eyeing him again from under the dark fringe of his hair. Danny watches him right back, trying to telepathically impart some meaningful wisdom about staring, but then Soren says, "Want coffee?" and Danny likes him a lot more, in that moment.

"Please," he moans.

Soren pulls off at the next exit ramp and they find a Dunkin' Donuts. Danny is enjoying the silence, so he doesn't wake Malia, but he *does* order her a mocha frappe for whenever she wakes up. He buries his face in the largest size of black coffee they have, and Soren, *Soren*, gets a "Caramel Drizzle Dunkaccino". With extra whipped cream. It's possibly the least manly coffee order Danny has ever heard, which is why he thinks it's appropriate to ask, "How old are you?"

He doesn't get a response until Soren has swallowed his sip of caramel and licked the whipped cream from around the rim of his cup. Then, "Twenty-six."

Huh. He's only seven years older than Danny. Somehow Danny expected him to be in his early thirties, not stranded in the middle of that nebulous twenties existence, wherein everyone over twenty-one and under thirty is essentially the same age. "Why'd you become a guardian?"

"You do know I'm going on about an hour of sleep here. Not a good conversational partner," Soren says, sipping his coffee again. They're back on the highway, and Soren has coaxed his pickup to eighty-six miles per hour. When Danny raises both eyebrows at him, he sighs. "It seemed like a good idea."

"So what does..." Danny waves his non-coffee-occupied hand vaguely. "Besides, you know, keeping me from getting my face cut off. What's it... like?"

Soren shrugs. "A lot of non-action. Until now," he adds, mouth twisting. "You take the Oath at eighteen, if you're committed that early. You train, and then you're used like a police force until a key needs your protection. Now, though..." He shrugs again. God, it kills Danny that he was napping on one of those Shoulders and was too zonked to appreciate it. "Who knows."

"Does this sorcerer have a name?"

"Not that he's given away."

Danny hums into his coffee cup. "I'm gonna call him Doctor Doom."

There's a noise from Soren's side of the truck. Danny doesn't realize what it is until he hears it deepen; it's Soren *laughing*, mouth open and white teeth flashing and all. "...Well," Danny says. He's blindsided, he'll totally admit it. He's in a truck cabin at six in the morning, sitting next to a guy sworn with an actual, medieval *oath* to protect him, a guy who likes to garden and swims twenty laps every day at four o'clock and who drinks *Caramel Drizzle Dunkaccinos*, and he's blindsided. "There we go," he finishes lamely.

Soren sets his coffee in one of the cup holders, eyeing Danny. “There we go, what?”

“You,” Danny says. “I didn’t know you could smile, much less laugh. You’ve kinda got a ninja thing going on here. Like Ra’s al Ghul, but less... I dunno.” He takes another sip of coffee.

“I don’t understand sixty percent of what you say to me,” Soren says eventually, “but thanks? I think.”

Danny grins at him, feeling marginally better about life. “So,” he ventures, “can I ask you a personal and possibly invasive question?”

“...Is me saying no going to stop you?”

“If you’re from Lohrfast,” Danny says, “why do you sound American?”

“Oh my god, Danny,” Malia mumbles. “You can’t just ask people why they sound American.”

“Did you wake up just to use that line?” Danny asks. “Impressive. Ten of ten. Go back to sleep.”

“Mm,” Malia hums, and does.

Soren has an expression of profound bemusement on his face. Danny decides instantly that he likes sleepless Soren better than he likes regular Soren. The whole emotionless C-3PO thing is way less fun than this is.

Soren says, “What?”

“Pop culture,” Danny says. “My question?”

“If guardians are assigned to keys in other dimensions, we’re taught to assimilate.”

“Dude,” Danny says, “Mal just made a *Mean Girls* reference and you missed it. Also, *Star Wars*. The Fantastic Four! You’re seriously missing some chunks of assimilation here, Borg.”

“Borg,” Soren repeats. “*Borg*. Is that even a word?”

Danny takes in the fact that Soren knows nothing about either *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*. He hasn't had that happen to him... uh, *ever*, because his dad (adopted dad?) was the biggest *Trek* freak on the face of the planet, so much so that Fridays were designated TOS rewatch nights. Danny was never short of geeky kids to hang around with. "If you ever come back to this dimension," he says, "we have work to do."

Of course, then Soren has to go and change the whole mood by saying, "That's a big if," in this... this *stupid* accent. It's sort of South African, close to the exchange student from Johannesburg that Danny was friends with in his senior year of high school. Soren's voice is deeper now, too, and raspier.

"Whoa," Danny says. "Say something else."

"I need to sleep," Soren says dryly. He checks his mirrors and eases over into the right lane.

"I see a Motel 8 sign," Danny offers.

Soren shakes his head. "Can't stop. They'll know we're heading for Rainier once they realize we're gone. It's the closest and most accessible portal on this coast."

Oh, so they're driving right into a giant interdimensional target. Great. "Let me drive, then," Danny says. Soren shakes his head again, and Danny knocks their knees together, purposefully obnoxious. "Let me drive, I'm serious. I have coffee and I actually slept." He taps his knee against Soren's until Soren gives in with a sigh and pulls over on the shoulder.

The highway is mostly empty this early in the morning, and it smells thickly of clean dew. Soren's graceful as a cat, stepping out and bending in half, stretching to touch his fingertips to the asphalt while Danny sleepily clambers out, coffee clutched to his chest.

"If I tried to bend like that, I'd snap," he says, watching Soren twist at the waist, one arm extended.

"Brittle bones?" Soren asks, doing a... thing with one of his legs. He's a big dude, he's got a lot of limb, and it's really weirdly attractive when he's

arching his back like that. “Danny?” Soren says, and Danny jerks away from staring at him.

“Brittle, right,” he says. “Yeah.” He turns, ostensibly to look out over the fall of the highway into the road below. There are mountains in the distance, and a lot of mist (smog?), and a lot of evergreens. He drifts, looking, forgetting that Soren is there until Soren leans in next to him, elbows braced on the truck’s hood.

“It looks like Lohrfast here,” he says, rubbing at his eyes. Danny wonders how long he’s been awake. Then looks into the truck, at Malia, who can sleep through anything.

“Why’d you decide to become my guardian?” he asks. He can’t help himself.

Soren tilts his head down, looking away from the view and at Danny instead with all his laser focus. “I didn’t... pick you,” he says. He pauses, then reiterates, “I was called for you.”

“Assigned to me.”

“Yes,” Soren admits.

“What did you do before me?”

“I was a town sheriff,” Soren says. “Posted at a small town popular amongst travelers. We keep a network between us, so it’s easier to track sorcerers.”

Danny hums, vacuuming down the last of his coffee. He’s about to say something else, something about how he hopes Soren doesn’t think he’s totally useless, or a shitty hobbit joke, but Soren is already stepping back and stretching one last time.

“We should go.”

They settle back into the truck. It manages to feel both bigger and less roomy with Danny behind the wheel (no power steering, fantastic) and blocked between the driver’s side door and Soren. Soren, for his part, drops his head back and promptly passes out. He snores, ugh, but he also twitches in his

sleep, like a running dog, and Danny occupies the time between other cars (a *lot* of time) watching him move, memorizing his little tics. He's seen Soren big and bad and deadly, and yes, he knows that Soren is a twenty-six-year-old warrior from another dimension who could probably kill him with a pen, but seeing him like this is like... Like they're on a road trip, the three of them, and they're going to Rainier to hike and camp and do stupid teenager things.

He finds himself wanting to check his phone for the first time, so he opens his window and sticks his arm out, sealing his fingers together and turning his hand into a plane. Overhead, a sign tells him he's one hundred miles from Mount Rainier.

Twenty miles out, Malia wakes up. She's annoyed at the noise the truck makes and at the sun and at the world in general until Danny hands her her coffee. "You're my favorite," she mumbles, burying her face in it.

"I'll remember that," he tells her. He gives her the required fifteen minutes to wake up. "We're close."

Malia hums, peering between them at Soren's sleeping face. Danny's expecting the needling, is preparing himself for it, but all she says is, "You okay?"

"I'm on the run from magic warriors from another dimension," Danny says. "Other than feeling like a Power Ranger, I'm good."

"You're not cool enough to be a Power Ranger," Malia responds, grinning.

"Yeah, well, you're not cool enough to get into Starfleet."

Malia mock-gasps. "Take that *back*."

"Never." Danny toes the truck's sluggish brakes, hoping that if he does hit something, he'll just run over it and not have to worry about stopping. They're slowed to a crawl, stuck in rush hour traffic. "Do you want to," he starts, just as Malia slaps a hand on Soren's chest and says, "I think we need to move." Soren startles awake, glazed eyed, and Malia says, "Really, we need to—"

They're thrown forward as something slams into the back of the truck, juddering them forward with enough force that they rear-end the tiny sedan in front of them. Danny whips around.

It's a fucking semitruck.

"What the hell," he says.

"*Drive, Danny.*" Soren grabs the wheel, jerking it hard right. Danny puts his hands up and jams his foot down on the gas. They shoot out between a honking Miata and a pickup and into the "oh fuck" lane. Apparently willing to trust Danny with making them go straight, Soren lets the steering wheel go and pushes himself over the backrest, scrabbling in the backseat. Malia is turned around, too, and Danny is mostly just making sure they don't crash into the guardrail.

That's why he's the one who sees the motorcycles zip past them.

"Uh, you guys," he says.

"What," Soren and Malia say.

"We've got company," Danny says. Forget *Power Rangers*—he's in fucking *Fast and Furious*, and it's no longer as exciting when he has three people on motorcycles yanking around a few hundred feet up the road and then *heading for them*. "Guys," Danny says, high and panicked.

Soren drops back into his seat. With a rifle.

"Is that an AK-47," Danny says, numb.

"Yes it is." Soren slings it across his lap. "Drive."

"But they're—"

"Drive!" Soren snaps. Danny obeys, gunning the engine up to twenty, thirty, forty miles per hour. "Keep straight. They'll move." Fifty, sixty.

"I thought you said they weren't high-tech," Danny says.

"This isn't high-tech, it's vehicles. Remember how I said we assimilate?"

“They do too,” Malia murmurs. Her hand is white-knuckled on her door handle, her body leaned forward. She’s bracing to hit them, Danny realizes, and that’s when the panic rising in his stomach starts to whirl.

“I’m gonna throw up,” he says weakly. Soren puts his hand on the steering wheel. They keep barreling toward the motorcycles, which aren’t wavering in the slightest. What if one of them hits? What if the truck blows up? What if Danny can’t—

“Here they come,” Malia says. She stiffens on Soren’s other side, hunching her shoulders, and Soren says something low to her, something that ends in *okay*, and then he turns and says, “You can do this, Danny—”

The first motorcycle hits them.

Danny didn’t expect it to. After all of this, he expected them to veer off. To dart away between traffic.

Instead, the driver’s body is flung forward, splintering the windshield, and the little Suzuki bike becomes an ornament for the truck’s grille. Danny screams, he knows he does, and he reflexively hits the brakes. Malia yells, “No, keep going!” as Soren pushes out of his seat, slamming the butt of his rifle into the windshield and shoving the seeker’s body off. Danny can’t see, can’t think, can’t *breathe*, but he knows that Malia is right: he has to keep going.

They want him to stop. If he stops, he’s going to be taken.

The truck bowls over what’s left of the Suzuki. Danny hears its corpse crunch under the tires, and then they’re free, fishtailing into—

Nothing.

“You said they’d move! Where’d the other ones go?” Danny shouts, both hands on the steering wheel. There’s an exit ramp coming up, and he aims for it, struggling to see through the busted windshield. Soren apparently reads his mind—he shoves his rifle through it again, pushing it into breaking away from the frame. Cool wind whips in, the smell of traffic air. Danny is having issues breathing.

“They’re behind us, still on the freeway,” Soren says, pulling his gun closer in his lap. “I need you to stop for a second.”

“Get off the exit first,” Malia adds. She’s still braced, her long legs stiff and planted on the floor of the truck. Danny shoots down the exit ramp and takes a right. He pulls into the nearest parking lot and brings the truck to a screeching halt that he can barely hear over the pounding of his heart. Malia says his name, he thinks, maybe, and then something louder, and then Soren’s warm hand is digging into the pocket of Danny’s jeans and his inhaler is brought to his mouth.

He inhales twice on instinct, his hand coming up to wrap around Soren’s. Fuck, this is embarrassing.

“...anxiety medication?” he hears, as he’s coming out of it. “Do I need to give him—”

“I don’t think so,” Malia says. Danny shakes his head, meeting her eyes. “No,” she amends.

Soren peers down at Danny. Danny gives him a half-shrug and tugs backward, taking his inhaler from Soren. He lowers it, slowly, and caps it. Soren is still frowning, leaning over him, but the faint whine of motorcycle engines is drawing closer. “Let me out,” Soren says to Malia. She hops out, letting Soren onto the pavement, and swings back in as Soren makes his home in the bed of the pickup.

“Can you drive?” Malia asks, meeting Danny’s eyes.

What she means is, *Can you maneuver this four-thousand-pound truck at excess speeds down a two-lane road to Mount Rainier while your guardian plays sniper—all without having an asthma and/or panic attack?*

“You know,” he says, tightening his hold on the steering wheel, “if I was the Slayer, the whole world would be dead by now. This isn’t that bad. I think I can manage to not kill just the three of us.”

“You really know how to put things in perspective.” Malia rolls her eyes and slams her door closed. “All set, Rambo?” she calls, and gets two thumps in answer.

They peel out of the parking lot and turn north, toward Rainier. Danny, for all his consumption of action movies and superhero movies and the *Fast and Furious* movies, numbers one through six, has no idea how to get out of a high-speed chase, so he mostly hangs onto the wheel and follows the directions that Malia gives him. Luckily, her sense of direction is sharp as all hell, and within twenty minutes, they’ve lost their motorcycle tails (one to Soren’s sharpshooting skills, the other to side streets) and they get inside the park with little issue.

“We should walk from here,” Soren calls, as soon as they pass the first parking lot. Danny’s lungs already hate him. He parks and climbs out, peeling his shaky, stiff body from the driver’s seat. If he never drives this truck again, it will be too soon.

But hey. At least he’s alive.

At least they’re all alive.

Soren takes the heaviest of their equipment strapped to his back. He leaves the AK-47 buried under blankets in the pickup bed—by the time anyone goes picking through it, the three of them will be long gone. “It’s not legally registered to anyone, anyway,” Soren says, tossing the keys through the windshield hole and into the driver’s seat.

“How does *that* work?” Malia asks, nudging the back license plate with the toe of her shoe. “Feels real.”

“Assimilation,” Soren reminds. “The League has willing keys who work for us. They take care of the details.” He hefts up his backpack, which has Danny’s duffel tied securely to it with Velcro straps. Malia is carrying her own pack and has a dagger on her thigh, plus a leather sheath of Soren’s throwing knives on the outside of one forearm. Soren is similarly outfitted: two daggers, one on each thigh, and his sword on his back, under his pack. Danny has the

short sword Soren gave him sheathed at his hip. He expected to feel more badass with it on, but mostly what he feels is that it keeps tripping him when he climbs over tree roots.

“Just to the base” turns out to be a two-hour hike. Soren and Malia handle the quick clip with no issues; after all, they’re both Cylon killing machines. Danny, however, has to puff on his inhaler every half hour, and he’s relegated to carrying nothing but himself.

No one talks. Soren is terse, his shoulders taut. He’s back to Neighbor Guy from yesterday morning, ready to pull some Norman Bates on Aragorn. Danny can barely see the guy from earlier, who leaned on the truck hood with Danny, hair a mess, and talked about his life before.

Danny starts to lag behind in the last quarter of the trip; both Malia and Soren slow down for him, keeping him sandwiched between them. He doesn’t know when Malia decided that she has Soren’s job, too, but he knows that he’s grateful for it, in his oxygen-deprived blur of a world. He’s in decent shape—he has to hike out to the quarry by his university twice a week for “lab,” a.k.a. all the geology students sneaking vodka in their water bottles and sitting around on the various boulders so they can watch the quarry workers dig. He lifts weights, too, twice a week. But hiking over flat scrubland is different than hiking through trail-less *forest*. Even without a pack, Danny feels like his body is turning into lead, like his shinbones are separating from his muscles. His cheek hurts.

He doesn’t ask to rest. He gets the feeling that it’s either impressing or worrying Soren, but all Soren’s focus is being put into making sure they’re not being stalked like especially tasty gazelles.

“Not too much farther,” Soren says after a while. Malia makes a quizzical noise. Danny slants a questioning look at her.

“There aren’t any signs,” she says lowly. “No markers. How the hell can he tell how close we are?”

Danny cocks his head. “Practice?” She shrugs. “What? You think he’s...?”
A traitor?

“Fuck, no. He’s as Boy Scout as they come.” Malia flips one of her throwing knives into her palm.

“Maybe he has a homing beacon. E.T. phone home?” Danny says, louder.

“Very funny,” Soren says from ahead of them. He comes to a stop at the base of an enormous hill made mostly of gnarled, dried tree roots.

“No,” Danny says.

“Yes,” says Soren, checking the buckles on his pack. “This is it. Malia?”

“I’ll play spotter,” she agrees. It creeps Danny out, seriously, how well the two of them get along. He fully expects them to be playing the death warrior version of house by the time this is over (which is fine, totally fine; it’s *fine*).

The climb is slow and arduous, and halfway through, Danny’s reconsidering his career choice. How the fuck is he supposed to be a geologist, hauling rocks around, when he can’t even pull himself up a root wall?

Knowing that Malia is under him helps. If he fell and hit her in the face, he would probably lose a good chunk of his own in divine retribution. He’d never be able to sleep again. There. That’s his inspiration.

Well, that and Soren getting to the top of the wall and shrugging his pack off so he can lie flat on his belly, one arm extended down to grab Danny’s. That helps. “Got me?” Danny pants. His whole body is clammy, and it takes a second for him to be able to grip Soren’s wrist.

“Got you,” Soren says. His hand is warm and sure. That surety settles under the hand Malia has on Danny’s calf and pushes him the rest of the way up to Soren’s side. Soren hauls Malia up as well, and they lie there together, catching their breath, on the plateau of ground. That’s what it is: a plateau. It isn’t a wall or a hill or a simple barrier. It’s a *rise*, like a burial mound, ancient and solid under them, and it sinks into Danny’s bones, the feeling of it. Suddenly risking his life to get here doesn’t seem like such a huge price after all, not if he can bask in this for the rest of his life.

Now Danny understands how Soren got them here with no signs. This place is *thrumming* with...

Christ. With *magic*. No wonder that sorcerer is bringing keys to him. If this is what one portal worth of magic means, Danny can't *imagine* feeling an entire key full of magic, or ten keys, or a hundred. The thought of that makes him dizzy.

"Lying here on the ground is great," Malia says, breaking the mesmerized silence. "But we need to get up?"

"What?" Soren murmurs. His voice is dazed and drunk, exactly the same as Danny feels.

"Up," Malia says. She pushes onto her feet and stands over them, watching them with narrowed eyes. "What's wrong with you two?"

"It's..." Danny manages a wave of one hand.

"It's the portal," Soren says, scraping together a semblance of a normal voice. "The magic, it's... overwhelming."

Malia frowns. "I can't feel anything." She bends double and fists both hands in Danny's shirt, pulling him upright. "We need to go. Big rush? Lohrfast? Does no one fucking remember this?" She stands firm as Danny sways into her, still dazed but slowly recovering the sense of panic that has been his best friend since yesterday. "Soren!" Malia snaps. "People! Chasing us!"

Soren groans and rolls himself over, shaking his head hard. "Sorry," he says. "I'm sorry, I should be able to..." He shakes his head again and straightens, swaying on his feet.

"This isn't a poppy field," Malia says dryly. "Get us out of here." She slings Danny's captured arm over her shoulders and props him up easily, holding him pinned to her side. Soren has to unsheathe his sword and stab it into a tree root in order to prop himself up on it.

"Sorry," Danny slurs, aware that he's useless. At least he doesn't feel like he needs a hit off his inhaler—for the first time since, you know, ever. "How do we...?"

Soren grabs Danny's free hand, swaying dangerously on his feet, and there's a jolt between them, a zing through Danny's entire body that is not unlike the time Jenny Aarons, his fourth grade science partner, zapped him with an electrified potato. He jerks, the drugged haze falling away from him, and his wide eyes meet Soren's.

"...The hell?" Danny says, staring at him. Soren looks similarly shocked. Then he pulls his hand away from Danny's.

"Keep hold of him," he says to Malia. Danny starts to feel drunk again immediately, and he sags into Malia's shoulder, dizzy. This time, it's less like drowning in euphoria and more like being extremely hungover, sapped of all his energy and faintly nauseous. *Fuck.*

"You need to tell me what the fuck is going on here," Malia says, squeezing Danny close to her.

"I will," Soren says, digging in a side pocket of his pack. When he brings his hand back, he has a loose handful of sparkling herbs cupped in his palm. He takes Malia's free hand with his. "Take a deep breath," he advises them both.

The ground swallows them.

Outside of the sucking vortex, Danny can function.

They hit the ground hard. Malia shouts in Danny's ear for him to let his knees buckle, to let his body take the impact, and he does. It knocks the wind from him; he doubles, his stomach threatening to bring his Dunkin' Donuts right back up to him. "Fuck," he wheezes, burying his hands in...

Snow.

"It's snowing," he says, wrenching his eyes open. He's on his hands and knees in the middle of a white tundra, and in the distance are trees.

"Isn't this where you say something about Kansas?" That's Malia, who has regrouped already and is refastening her dagger to her thigh.

“Yeah,” Danny says. “We aren’t in it anymore.”

“I understood *that* reference,” Soren says from off to Danny’s left. Danny looks over to see him crouched a few feet away, one hand in his pack. “Welcome to Lohrfast.” He unearths two small, wrapped bundles and tosses them to Malia and Danny. “We have a hike ahead of us.”

The last thing Danny wants to do right now is walk more. He would rather lie here and let a Yeti eat him. Honestly. Really. He is so done walking. He didn’t volunteer to carry the ring into Mordor. “How much farther?”

“Not long.” Soren takes another wrapped bundle from his pack and unties the length of ribbon binding it closed like a scroll. It unfurls into a fur-lined cloak, and Soren fastens it around his shoulders, then pulls the hood up to cover his hair. “We need to go,” he reminds them.

“Big talk for someone who went all cat-on-catnip,” Malia says pointedly. God, Danny loves her.

Soren frowns at them both, then straightens, easing his pack on over his cloak. “I’m sorry. It shouldn’t have happened. But stopping then isn’t a reason to stop now.” He offers Malia a hand up, which she takes after an appropriately grudging pause.

He doesn’t help Danny up.

“C’mon.” Malia strong-arms him to his feet. She eyes Soren’s back, lowering her voice to a whisper. “*Now* do you get what I was talking about?”

“Yeah,” Danny says. “That was weird.” Finding the portal can be explained: Soren has had more experience with magic, and obviously he could find the portal by feel alone. But the random changes in his personality—here and then there, stoic warrior to Caramel Drizzle Dunkaccinos—are starting to give Danny whiplash.

“It was more than weird,” Malia mutters. “He’s not telling us something.”

“Maybe it’s for our own good?” Danny offers faintly.

“Don’t let his blinding hotness distract you, Danny.”

“You’re the one who said he was totally Boy Scout.” He doesn’t bother to deny the blinding hotness comment. Soren looks back at them and waves; Danny checks to be sure he still has his sword before starting off after him, doing his best to step in Soren’s footprints. The snow here is at least a foot thick, but it’s packed solid, and is easy enough to walk on.

Malia matches him stride for stride. She’s undone her hair under the hood of her cloak, and it curls down her front in loose waves of blond. “He is,” she says. “I just... I don’t know, Danno. There’s something. What the hell was up with you two back there?”

Danny shakes his head. “It was trippy as shit,” he says. His one and only encounter with pot was two years ago, and it ended in sixteen stolen lawn ornaments and a stack of mortifying Polaroid photos that his cousin still had stored away for future blackmail purposes. Rolling around in the portal magic felt like that, but with less shame and no apology letters to write. Malia doesn’t respond, so Danny finally adds, “I dunno. It was *magic*.”

He kind of expects her to laugh again, but she doesn’t. She looks up at the evergreens they’re walking toward, and at the mountains behind those. “Yeah,” she says. “It was.”

Soren waits for them at the tree line, and together they make their way into the dense forest. It is, amazingly, even more impossible to push through than Mount Rainier’s surrounding foliage. “I hate trees,” Danny says. He’s given in after two hours of getting whipped in the face by branches and is hacking the low-hanging ones out of his way with his sword. Ahead, Soren is clearing a walking path with his own sword. “I hate trees, and I hate snow, and I hate walking.”

“Lohrfast’s hospitality is wasted on you, I see,” Soren calls back to him. Danny isn’t a prideful guy, but it’s nice to see that Superman Soren is winded, too.

“Hospitality,” Danny gasps, slashing through another branch. Malia was the one to point out that they are leaving a gaping trail in their wake, but Soren

assured her that this forest is magic (because why wouldn't it be) and will heal itself before any pursuers come close enough to see. "Hospitality? On Earth, hospitality is giving someone a drink and letting them sit *down*."

"We're almost to White Oak." Soren crests the top of the hill, balancing on a tree root. Danny envies his steady feet. "See? You can see it." He offers Malia a hand getting up onto the same root—it is enormous, good Jesus, Danny is starting to feel like he's in that James Cameron movie that shall not be named—but, again, leaves Danny hanging until Malia takes pity on him and yanks him up with them. Soren points at a point of light in the steadily growing darkness, cupped in the valley and surrounded by mountains. "There." His voice is warm, almost excited.

"Is that where you live?" Danny asks. He is maybe stalling for a little time to catch his breath, but he's also genuinely interested. Maybe Soren only turns into Dunkaccino Guy when he's looking out over nostalgia-inspiring landscapes.

"It's where I was trained," Soren says. "It's another hour's walk at most, if we move quick." He sheathes his sword at his back and plants his foot, beginning the descent into the valley. Danny is beginning to lose feeling in his fingers, but having something visible to move toward pushes him on. There will be a fire. Fire, and a bed, and Danny will be able to stop shivering.

Halfway to White Oak, he realizes he hasn't used his inhaler since they arrived in Lohrfast. It's solid in his pocket, and he finds it with one hand, touching it. Back before all this had happened, he would've taken a hit of it just in case, out of the fear that an asthma attack would come on him when he least expected it. His doctor had warned him off using it so much, but for a while during his freshman year, Danny had barely been able to get through a test without feeling like his chest was on fire. When he told her *that*, Dr. Grey had told him he was conflating his panic attacks with his asthma attacks. She'd offered to help him talk to his parents about finding a therapist.

But Danny had handled it on his own.

Mostly.

He's thumbing his inhaler out of his pocket, already craving the taste of it, when Malia bumps into his shoulder. "Look," she says, nodding ahead. Danny squints into the darkness, inhaler forgotten, and for a moment he can't see anything, and then the trees' shadows *flex*, and he sees three figures solidifying.

"State your name!" one of them calls, in an accent similar to Soren's. Danny hears the whicker of a horse, the crack of branches.

"Soren Greenfield," Soren calls back. He puts a hand up to keep Malia and Danny from moving forward. "I'm bringing my key into the keep."

"Key," the same voice responds. "State your name."

Malia digs an elbow into Danny's ribs. "I, uh," he says. "Danny. Danny Marlaeto."

There's silence, then the shadows advance, until Danny can tell that it's three people on horseback. The horses are wicked huge, and their riders are outfitted in smooth, fitted armor. Their leader halts her horse and lifts the mask of her helmet. She's grinning. "Soren Greenfield," she says. "You've grown five hands since I saw you last, boy."

"No I haven't," Soren mumbles, tipping his head down. Danny has to choke down his laugh. Soren's capable of being *bashful*. Wow. "Hi, Leith."

"Hello," she says. What's visible of her face is smooth when she turns her smile on Danny and Malia. Her eyes are a clear, cold gray. "Welcome," she says to him. To Malia, she adds, "You are?"

"Malia Hesse." Malia offers her hand; Leith's smile widens, shark-like, at the gesture, and she leans off her behemoth of a horse to reciprocate.

"We welcome you, Malia Hesse, of Earth. And Daniel, Key, we welcome you home." Leith's horse turns underneath her without any visible cues. "Shall we?" She and her flanking guards lead the way into White Oak. It's structured the same as the camps in the war movies that Danny's dad collects: one enormous main tent in the center, which curves around a bonfire. Other tents are littered around the clearing, none of them uniform. Most are patched with

scraps of fabric or old pieces of clothing, and some are rounded, built up to contain a fire. There are people *everywhere*, sitting around fires and eating bowls of stew. Over a small hill, in a bonfire-dotted field close to the base of a mountain, Danny can see tightly-packed troops running laps around a bunch of upright figures made of bundled straw.

“Whoa,” he mumbles, taking it all in.

Soren stops beside him and gives him a grin. “Like it?”

“It’s something,” Danny says. His chest squeezes inexplicably, and he pulls out his inhaler for a breath. He can feel magic here, too.

Leith waits for them to finish taking in the sight, her mount still underneath her. “You are tired,” she says, surveying them. “And you must be hungry. Come, we will care for you. Soren, Ilyana has care to meet with you. You will find Kat in the main tent with a scrying glass.”

Soren nods. He lets his pack slide off and unhooks Danny’s duffel to hand it to him. “Go,” he says, nodding at Danny. His expression is pinched. “I’ll come find you when I’m finished.”

The camp sheds some of its militaristic order the deeper they venture into it. Danny sees people as young as he is, looking equally out of place. Soren had said that there were other guardians bringing their keys here for protection, but somehow, Danny hadn’t expected to see them. He rolls his shoulders inside his cloak, keeping a good way back from the hooves of Leith’s horse.

“You too?” Malia asks him, voice quiet.

“Me too what?”

“You too, you’re restless,” she clarifies. She has a hand on her dagger. “It’s like...”

“Yeah,” Danny says. He understands what she’s trying to say: that they drove themselves on for two days, and now they’ve reached their Mount Doom and there’s no fucking volcano. “I’m sorry,” Danny says belatedly. “For dragging you here.”

“Hey, you didn’t drag me anywhere,” Malia says, elbowing him. He gives her a weak smile, and she knocks into him again. “Like you *could*.” She looks worried too, and Danny sticks close to her all the way through the camp, until Leith halts them in front of a tent half the size of the main one.

“We are keeping our keys here,” she says, smiling. “Malia, you are also welcome to stay.”

“Where’s Soren staying?” Danny asks.

Leith’s smile sticks firmly in place. “He will be in a gathering for quite some time. I assure you, you are safe here. I suggest you make yourselves comfortable. I will have food brought to you.” She gestures again to the opening of the tent. “Sleep well, Daniel.” Danny slips past her horse and inside, the hair on the back of his neck prickling at the way her voice lingers on the syllables of his name. This time, he drops his hand to check for his sword, not his inhaler.

The tent is full of low beds, close and cramped—probably forty of them. Half of them are full. Danny nods Malia in front of him, letting her choose where they’ll sleep. He’s beginning to wonder if the tightness in his chest when they first came into White Oak wasn’t wonder, but wariness. Or, hell, maybe it’s culture shock. After all, Danny is practically an alien to them, even if he is Lohrfastian. Lohrfastfolk? Whatever.

Malia snags them beds close to the back of the tent, on the side furthest from the camp’s central bonfire. Others glance at them curiously, but the ones who aren’t sleeping are cloistered close to people that Danny can only assume are their guardians, judging by the Tolkeinesque fashion parade. Soren’s absence is suddenly noticeable. If they were back home, Danny would probably be watching him swim his night laps. Instead, he watches a short girl with thick brunette curls lean, laughing, on the arm of her female guardian, her body screaming *flirt flirt flirt*, and he has to turn away.

He sleeps. For a while, at least. A man brings the two of them a large pot of stew and a crumbly loaf of bread to share. Stomach full, bed warm, Danny

goes to sleep, his sword tucked beside him. He's used to catching naps in the geology hall at his university, so the constant footsteps of passersby don't bother him, and he doesn't wake until late, when the other beds' occupants are still and the only sound he can hear is the crack of a distant fire.

Go back to sleep, he tells himself, but he can't. He's sticky and hot under the fur that his bed is padded with, and he's... *itchy*, under his skin. Restless, like Malia said.

He gets up and straps his sword to his waist, makes sure his inhaler is in his pocket, and puts his cloak on. His Payless-brand sneakers have taken a hell of a beating; he puts on the League-issue boots that were so kindly dropped off for him instead. In the other bed, Malia is asleep, curled in on herself. Danny pulls her blankets higher over her shoulder. He's still sorry he brought her here. He thought that coming to White Oak would be an *end* to this clusterfuck, and that the League would solve all their problems, but instead, they're stuck here, and nothing feels right. Danny wants to go home. He wants to figure out what the hell is *really* going on here. Why he feels out of sorts.

Most of all, he wants to find Soren.

The camp is quiet. Danny's sure there are guards stationed all around it, probably as invisible as Leith and hers were earlier. He walks aimlessly, cloak pulled tight around him, and his vague idea is to do a loop of the camp and see if he can catch Soren coming back from... wherever he was, but he's lost within five minutes. All the tents look the same; Danny's isn't the only one filled with keys. There must be a hundred in the camp, at least.

Thoroughly turned around, he picks out the arch of the main tent against the full moon and crunches his way to it. Snow is starting to fall in slow, dozy flakes, and Danny sees his breath mist. *Dragon*, he thinks, exhaling hard to watch it cloud out from his mouth. Oh god, what if there are dragons here? He pulls his cloak tighter around him. There's everything else here—those horses were definitely not the same horses from Earth. And plus, Danny has *magic*, right? A dragon isn't that far-fetched, when magic is a new part of your reality.

He's nearly at the main tent, mostly considering whether or not he should keep his phone on hand in case he has the chance to take a picture of a dragon, when a heavy hand falls on his shoulder. He yelps, hand going to his sword hilt, and spins, swinging it in a graceless arc to come down on the stranger's shoulder.

Only it isn't a stranger. "We need to stop meeting like this," Soren says, peering at Danny from under the rise of his leather armguard, which Danny's sword has bitten into.

"Fuck," Danny says, half-laughing it out. He lets the sword down, its tip thudding into the snow. "Sorry."

Soren examines the cut in his armguard. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

"I slept." Danny moves to sheathe his sword again, but Soren puts a hand out.

"Can't sleep any more?"

Danny shakes his head. Soren makes a thoughtful noise. "Come on," he says finally, heading past Danny.

Danny falls into step with him. "Where to?"

"The training fields."

Silence falls between them, thick as the snowflakes, until Danny works up his nerve and says, "Can you tell me what's going on now?"

Soren glances over at him. "With...?"

"With *everything*. You brought me here to protect me from a sorcerer. Now I'm here. Now what?"

"Now I help the League and we focus our efforts on finding him," Soren says, like it's the only option in the world. "Once he's taken care of, you and Malia can go home."

Danny rubs at one eye. The moon is heavy and full above them, round and bright. It's giving him a headache. "And all these people..." he says, gesturing back at the tents. "All the keys here, we can't help?"

“I told you,” Soren says. “Keys have to let a sorcerer tap their magic in order for it to be used. That ends in binding, more often than not. And binding doesn’t end well for most keys.” He seems tense, his Capital S Shoulders taut under his cloak.

Might as well get all the awkward questions out of the way. “What’s gonna happen to you?”

“I’ll come back to Earth with you.” Soren unsheathes his sword when they crest the small hill that slopes down into the training field. Here, the sounds of the camp are muffled, and the light from the fires is no longer visible. It feels like isolation, and Danny, for all his bitching about Soren, is happy to be sealed away from the world with him. “You’re still my key.”

Danny unsheathes his sword, too, and hefts it in his hand, weighing it. His first instinct is to hold it two-handed, but Inigo Montoya didn’t double-fist, and neither does Soren, so he’s not going to get any props for style doing it that way. “Don’t you have a family here?”

“No,” Soren says.

Danny blinks at him. Then, with surprise, because it’s the first time this has occurred to him, “Do *I* have a family here?”

“Your birth parents still live here, yes,” Soren clarifies. He lifts his sword gracefully, letting it spin once in his hand. Danny... doesn’t know what to do with that. He’s had his parents forever, has thought of them as his parents forever, and he can’t imagine going on horseback to some strange village to tell them that their cosmically important son is a geeky geology major who regularly has panic attacks about how he’s going to pay off his student loans.

“Do they know I’m here?” he asks.

Soren spins his sword again, looking at Danny with his clever, knowing eyes. “You don’t want to see them.”

“I mean,” Danny says, waving a hand. “Like, I mean, it’s like they sent their kid to Earth and expected to get Superman back, but I’m just Clark Kent, you know?”

“No,” Soren says. “I told you, I like you fine.”

“Yeah, you keep telling me that.” Danny lifts his sword up and puts his feet in what he hopes is a “ready” position. “How are we gonna—”

Soren moves too quickly for Danny to react and slams his shoulder into Danny’s chest, taking him down. Danny splutters out a cough, hacking out cold, moist air.

He points his sword at Soren, who’s grinning. What a *bastard*. “That wasn’t fair.”

“All’s fair,” Soren disagrees. He offers a hand; Danny considers batting it away, but this is a welcome difference from Soren’s earlier WHOA HEY NO TOUCHING policy. When Danny is back on his feet, Soren switches sword hands and adjusts Danny’s grip on his. “What do you think of, when you’re fighting with this?”

“Mostly that I’d like to not be fighting with it,” Danny admits. Soren rolls his eyes at him. God, Danny would swear on at least three Bibles that he and Malia literally share DNA. “I don’t know, a baseball bat?”

“That’s your problem.” Soren works his fingers around Danny’s, fitting his fingers into nonexistent grooves on the sword hilt. “Let it be your arm.” He steps away and brings his sword up to touch the underside of Danny’s. “If this was your arm, you wouldn’t let me hit it, would you?”

Danny shakes his head, letting his arm relax and move with the push of Soren’s sword. If he’s going to survive here, he’s going to need more than his inhaler and dumb luck. When he thinks *medieval*, it looks a whole lot like the training camp, but it also looks like people’s heads on spears and their guts pulled out by a giant cranking wheel. Add magic into that...

He parries on instinct when Soren swings his sword. “Pay attention,” Soren says. He swings again, a cross cut that makes Danny’s arm ache with the impact. “You aren’t strong enough yet to push my strikes back on me, so be defensive until you see an opening.” Another strike, another parry. Another strike—and this one catches Danny on the side, ripping his cloak with a soft, velvety tear. Danny tucks his head down and brings his sword arm up,

guarding the spot. Soren lunges, feints, and slashes down Danny's other side. "Don't show me weaknesses," Soren tells him. Danny huffs out his frustration, about ready to tell Soren that he just *isn't* a warrior, not like Soren, but then he sees the opening.

Before he can chicken out, he parries Soren's next swing and drives it back into him exactly the way Soren said he couldn't, overbalancing him and sending them both toppling to the snowy ground.

"Ow," Soren says, tone pleasant. He's smiling, the dark wedge of his mouth open under his dark hair and against the white backdrop of the snow. "Good job. We should try this again when I'm not exhausted."

"Don't even. I got you fair and square." Danny tosses his sword away and flops down, spreading out next to Soren. He's reminded immediately of the portal, and he stretches his fingers out, digging them into the snow, searching for a trace of that magic here. There's nothing, of course. He doesn't want to ruin whatever this is by asking about it, so he wiggles a little, sinking down into the snow. "So is this gonna be a thing? We do sword practice and gardening in your backyard?"

Soren breathes out long and slow. "I'd like this to be a thing, yes."

Danny tips his head in Soren's direction, looking at his profile. "You never talked to me, before."

"We try to be as unobtrusive as possible. Most people don't handle it well." Soren's mouth twists wryly and he glances back at Danny. "Most guardians never have the opportunity to go to arms for their key."

"Lucky you."

"Mm." Soren is still watching him, and Danny doesn't know how to look away. Snow is falling between them, and their shoulders are nearly touching. "Lucky me," Soren says at length. "I don't think you give yourself enough credit," he adds.

Danny squints at him. “I’m a skinny, asthmatic geology major who has panic attacks and knows too much about *Firefly*. I’m realistic enough to know that I’m useless here.”

“You hiked fifteen miles today,” Soren says. He straightens his head and closes his eyes. “You survived what happened in your house, and on the highway. You saved Malia. And me. You’re more capable than you think you are.”

“Yeah, right. *Now* you’re reaching,” Danny says. He folds his arms over his stomach, dragging the edge of his cloak to cover them. “Look, we aren’t... I don’t need you to lie to me.”

Soren stiffens beside him, and Danny wants to bite the words back, aware that he’s being a jackass for absolutely no reason. *Learn to take a compliment, dude*, but Soren is already sitting up, their moment broken.

“Wait,” Danny says, pushing up to stand. “Soren—*Wait*. I’m sorry. That isn’t what I meant.”

“It is what you meant,” Soren says. “You meant exactly what you said.” He sheathes his sword and straightens his cloak.

Fuck it, Danny is cutting himself down at the knees here. “Okay,” he says, and reaches out to grab the edge of Soren’s hood. Soren stops, looking down at him with guarded eyes. “Okay, yeah, I meant it. But what else am I supposed to think? You and Malia, you’re both—you’re so *capable*. She can kick anyone’s ass, and you’re all, all medieval King Arthur McBadass, and here I am, and all I can do is suck on my inhaler and sometimes not kill us.” Danny lets Soren go, his body thrumming with nervous energy. “You guys’ve both given up your entire *lives*, and I’m just...”

“Just what?” Soren asks, turning to face Danny fully, his body squared. His face is smooth and his voice is emotionless. “Just what, Danny, hmm?”

“Not worth it,” Danny finishes. He spreads his hands apart. That’s it. There it is: what he’s been thinking since yesterday morning. There are a hundred other keys here who wouldn’t need Soren and Malia to come to their rescue every time they slip.

Soren softens, sighing quietly. “Danny...”

“Tell me what happened at the portal,” Danny says, mostly because he can feel himself going into self-destruct mode, like he did during his freshman year calc exam. He needs to get the attention off him. “Why did it affect you, too? You’re not a key, are you?”

Any give to Soren’s body vanishes. “I’m not,” he says. “It was the magic, that’s—”

“It didn’t affect Malia,” Danny argues. “Don’t give me bullshit, Soren. You asked me to trust you.” He reaches for Soren’s sleeve again; this time, Soren flinches away.

Fucking great. They’re back to this.

“Fine,” Danny snaps. He grabs his sword, praying that he doesn’t slip on the snow, and jams it in its sheath. “That’s just... fine. Thanks a lot.” Is this why it hurt to watch the other keys and their guardians? Because of the easy trust between most of them? He and Soren have to put themselves back together all the time, and Danny can’t even do it right, and Soren—Soren won’t tell him anything. Danny’s sick of hanging on his word, waiting for him to deign to hand out vital information. He can take his Shoulders and his Dunkaccinos and fuck right off.

Danny’s exit is great: his personal moment of badassery is fueled by his rage, and he channels it into walking Charlize Theron queen-style, his sword heavy at his hip.

Then the camp blows up.

Heat sears across Danny’s face, stunning him, and he’s thrown down by the force of the blast. He gasps in a breath, staring.

The camp is on fire. Everything—all the tents, they’re ablaze, and, and there are people pouring from every direction.

Malia is down there. Danny pushes himself up, hand going to his sword, and then Soren scrapes to a stop at his side. “It’s him,” he says, as another blast of light arcs over the camp. It looks like a wormhole swirled with glitter,

and when it touches the ground, it sucks inward, then arches, exploding violently. Soren drags Danny against his side with an arm around his waist, his arm up to shield their eyes.

“Malia,” Danny manages. “We need to find her, Soren, we need to—”

“I know.” Soren’s hand turns heavy on Danny’s shoulder, pressing him down. There are people screaming, now. “Stay here.”

Danny shrugs it off, scowling. “No. I need to—”

“They’re here *for you*,” Soren says. He shakes Danny lightly, like an unruly puppy.

“For me,” Danny says blankly.

“I need to keep you safe.” Soren takes Danny’s shoulders in his hands. “Stay here. Stay hidden.” He holds Danny’s eyes for a long moment, then turns and lopes down the hill, into the camp. Danny’s legs ache with how hard he’s keeping himself from following. But Soren is right. Danny needs to... to stay here.

They’re here for you.

He flattens himself on the snowy ground, his sword in his hand, and it might be his imagination, but the cut on his cheek starts stinging. What was that Soren said about Doctor Doom “marking” him?

“Great,” he says into the snow. “Now I’m Harry Potter.” Harry Potter versus Doctor Doom. If he lives to get back to the Internet, he’s going to put that on Tumblr.

Another explosion rings through the camp, the spray of sparks making Danny’s vision spotty. He drags himself up closer to the crest of the hill, peering over it to see a melee mess of people, most running, some fighting—but there are a lot of them on the ground.

God, there are a lot of *dead people*.

Danny fumbles for his inhaler, watching as a woman rushes a horseback-riding, cloak-clad figure and gets a sword through her throat for her trouble.

He feels like he's waiting for the motorcycles to hit, like he's standing in his bathroom, watching for Boromir's shadow. The seconds before the implosion, the chest-tightening anxiety. Anyone who fights Doctor Doom's seekers is being slaughtered. The deep cracks of their bones shattering are louder than the explosions.

Don't lose it now, D. Danny takes a handful of snow and rubs it down his face, his grip on his sword tightening. He starts to count.

At three hundred, his panic deepens. Shouldn't Soren and Malia be here by now? They should.

At three hundred twenty, the ground under him starts shaking. Out of the smoke, weaving between burning tents, comes a small herd of horses, their eyes rolling in terror, their flanks streaked with sweat. Danny flattens back down, throwing his arm over his head, tucking into himself as they gallop past him, into the training field.

"Danny!"

"Malia?" Danny uncurls, and there she is, sitting on the biggest black horse Danny has ever seen. She has a sword in hand, one even longer than Soren's, and she's holding the reins to another fully saddled horse. One of their packs is strapped to her back. Danny doesn't need prompting; he scrambles down the hill and swings himself up into the saddle, trying to remember the basics of making a horse go from his first and only horse experience (his cousin's twelfth birthday party). "Where's Soren?"

"I lost him," Malia says. "He told me to keep going."

Danny cranes his head around, looking back into the flames. The main tent is collapsing, leaking burning cinders everywhere. Soon, there'll be nothing left. He tightens his one-handed grip on his horse's reins, his jaw tight. "We're just going to leave all these people?"

Malia leans into his line of sight. Her face is pale and drawn. "We have to. They're rounding up the other keys and putting them in chains, Danny."

"Soren said he's after *me*," Danny says, touching his cut.

“Doesn’t mean he doesn’t want the extra firepower.” Malia nudges her horse forward, heading for the training field. “Come on, before they see us.”

Teeth grinding, Danny pulls his horse around and follows. He’s only going to make things worse if he goes back in there. He won’t be able to do any good—not for Soren, not for himself, and not for anyone else.

It still feels a whole hell of a lot like he’s abandoning them all.

At the top of the hill, Malia kicks her horse into a run, and Danny’s takes off without his consent. He’s relegated to clinging first to the front of the saddle and then to its mane and hoping he doesn’t fall off. For as big as it is, it moves gracefully, and they’re across the field in under a minute, heading into the thick forest at the base of the mountain.

Really, if Danny never spends any time in a forest ever again, he’ll be the happiest man alive. As it is, he lets his reins go loose, and his horse picks a delicate path deep between the trees, following docilely after Malia’s.

After a while, Danny says, “We were set up, weren’t we.” He feels it, a gut-deep *knowing*: this didn’t happen by chance.

Malia looks over her shoulder at him. “Yeah,” she says.

“Not by Soren,” Danny says.

“No.” Malia finally sheathes her sword, but leaves her hand on her thigh, prepared to draw it again. “By Leith, I think. I saw her taking a horse out of the camp after the first explosion.” She makes a faint, disgusted noise. “I fucking knew I didn’t like her.”

“Your people sense is A-plus,” Danny says, smiling weakly at her when she glances back a second time. Her cheeks are soot-streaked and her hair is limp, hanging down around her face. “Also, you’re rocking the came-through-hell Xena look, there.”

“Yeah, shame I’m Californian,” she says blandly. “I’ll never get to use this cloak again.”

They ride a while longer, long enough that Danny is starting to slump over on his horse, lulled by its rocking walk. Malia makes the executive decision to stop as the ground starts to incline enough to make their horses breathe hard. To Danny's grateful surprise, they stumble on a creek, and its water is freezing, but it's clear and it wakes him up when he shoves his face in it.

"No fire," Malia says. She's tied the horses up and is piling handfuls of pine needles in a space between two trees. Danny nods, stripping his cloak off. Now he's glad he put on the boots; Malia is still wearing her Earth sneakers, and while they're higher-quality than what Danny wears, they're blackened and probably soaking wet. Malia looks his way, apparently weirded out by Danny's silence. She says, "If you're thinking about apologizing again, don't. Soren and I—"

"I had a fight with Soren," Danny mumbles. He leaves his boots on and rolls his cloak to make a pillow for both of them.

Malia sighs, sitting back on her heels. "About what?"

"He tried to compliment me. I bit his head off. And chewed it vigorously."

The silence drifts as Malia finishes padding their bed. "He cares, you know. You're not just a job to him."

"He doesn't even know me."

"Like shit he doesn't. You're easy to pin down, D." She flops onto her back. When Danny follows suit, she throws her cloak over both of them, fur side down. "That's not a bad thing," she says, gentler. "You just put all of yourself out there, you know? No bullshitting anyone, or pulling an act."

"I guess," Danny says, burrowing deeper under the cloak. Now he remembers how tired he was. "Do you think he's okay?"

Malia's quiet for a long time, long enough that Danny thinks she's probably asleep. Then she says, "Yeah. He'll find you."

The morning light is cold and clear. There's no chalky San Francisco smog, no honking of traffic horns. Danny wakes up and breathes in and, for that moment, he feels *okay*.

Smelling seared skin is a fantastic way to jolt yourself out of a good mood. He sits up, shivering and trying not to gag, and eases the cloak off Malia, scanning her for burn marks. There aren't any. "Mal?" he murmurs, pushing at her shoulder. She stirs, grumbling, and turns over, baring her other arm. No, it's definitely not her.

A soft whuff makes Danny turn. Oh—it's one of the horses. They're both black, so it's impossible to tell which one Danny rode last night. He checks both of them, and finally finds the scorch mark along the hindquarters of one of them: a deep, ugly gash that is red and raw on the inside. "Sorry," he says, patting its side, behind the strap that is holding its saddle on. It turns its head to peer at him with dark, liquid eyes, and pushes its nose against his shoulder. Danny puts a hand up, and the horse bumps into that too, soft lips tickling Danny's fingers, probably searching for a treat.

"You're not so bad, are you, buddy," Danny says, stroking the horse's muzzle. "You look like a big badass, but you're a softie."

He's not sure he's entirely talking about the horse anymore. Great. He rummages around in the pack Malia grabbed—it's his, not Malia's—and fishes out clean clothes and a shirt to use as a towel. Going for a dip in a freezing creek is pretty much the last thing he wants to do right now, but he's aware that he smells like sweat and smoke and an old bag of Doritos. He's thankfully out of that phase of teenagerhood, where he never knew what he smelled like and thought he was immune to needing to shower, especially after eight-hour Halo marathons.

He leaves his sword on the bank along with his clothes and his inhaler and steps into the creek, telling himself not to be a pussy. He is at least eighty-seven percent sure that his balls are never going to reappear outside of his body. Danny's built for heated swimming pools, not nature adventure shower escapades.

In the middle of scrubbing himself down with handfuls of creek water, the hair on the back of his neck stands up.

“Oh my god,” he says, in a desperate bid to distract whoever is watching him from immediately killing him. “Can we not do this while I’m naked?”

“I’m not in control of that,” the voice responds, and it’s *Soren*.

Danny turns on his heel, stumbling over a rock in his haste. Soren is on the shore, beat to hell with a ripped cloak and a scrape on his cheek and blood all down one hand. “You’re alive,” Danny says.

“I think.” Soren smiles lopsidedly at him, then sways and sinks down to sit. Danny scrambles out of the water and yanks on the waiting pair of sweatpants. Soren is watching him in a dozy way that suggests that maybe he doesn’t actually *know* he’s watching, his gaze sliding down the length of Danny’s wet body and back up to his face. “You okay?” he asks.

“Fine.” Danny comes to crouch at his side, hisses when he sees the gash in Soren’s shoulder. “Did you *walk* here?”

“Someone freed all the horses.” Soren’s smile turns rueful; his eyes are glazed and unfocused. “That’d be me.”

“Plot twist,” Danny says, sliding an arm under Soren’s good one and levering him up to his feet. “C’mon, dude, I can’t lift you by myself. Your legs are not noodles.” Soren obediently gets his feet under him, stumbling into Danny once he’s upright. “How long has it been since you slept?” Danny asks, to distract Soren from the fact that Danny is valiantly failing at holding him up.

“Long time,” Soren murmurs. “The truck?” He drops his head on Danny’s shoulder. “Where’s Malia?”

“Back in the camp. If I bend over, are you going to fall down?”

Soren considers this intensely, his eyes half-lidded. “Probably.”

“Don’t,” Danny advises him, and props him up so he can grab his sword and his clothes. He steps into his boots and eases back under Soren’s arm, his own wrapping tight around Soren’s waist. Holy god, he can feel the muscles

through his cloak. That just isn't fair. (What's more unfair is the fact that Soren has wedged himself so high on the attractiveness scale that nothing he does is diminishing his rating. Fuck.) "Left, right, Soren. Pick your feet up."

Malia is awake when they get back, and she rushes over to help with Soren. Together, she and Danny lay him out on their makeshift bed, where he's out, body falling limp into the pine needles' embrace. Malia immediately starts working her fingers into the buckles of Soren's leather vest, loosening the sides, and Danny makes his ice cube fingers cooperate on unlacing the ties that bind the front closed. Their eyes meet over his body, and Malia smiles faintly at him. She looks no better than she did last night—still exhausted, still pale.

Also, still managing to cope better than Danny is.

Soren groans as Malia lifts his shoulders so they can slide the vest off him. Underneath is a soft blue tunic, ripped over one shoulder in a clean slice. "Do we have anything?" Danny asks. It doesn't look as bad as the burned gash on his horse, maybe, but the blood is a sick, dark color, and touching the crunchy edges of the wound makes Danny's stomach clench.

"No. I shoved some of my shit in here, but I didn't grab anything from the camp." Malia digs around in the pack and comes up with a purple toothbrush holder. She dumps the toothbrush out and heads for the creek, leaving Danny to strip Soren's shirt off.

He doesn't want to cut it, since it's the only clothes they have that'll fit him, unless he wants to Jon Snow it and walk around with a fur cape over nothing. Danny undoes the collar laces and eases it over Soren's head, carefully maneuvering his injured arm. More blood spurts out when it tears anew, and Danny swallows nausea, moving to cut strips out of a shirt. Malia comes back and Danny soaks the strips of shirt in cool creek water, bathing the wound until the crusted blood is gone and it's free of dirt and soot. The wound starts to bleed again; he packs it with shirt strips, and it isn't until he gets to the last of them that he sees PER SHRIMP on it. He stares at the letters, dumbfounded, until Malia reminds him to keep pressure on it with his hands.

This doesn't feel like the shirt he was wearing three days ago. It feels like the shirt he was wearing years ago, when he graduated high school, or when he signed the lease with Malia. A lifetime ago, an entire world away, where his biggest worry was studying for his (missed, by now) Geology 296 exam.

How is he supposed to give a shit about a *geology* exam when he's getting frostbite from a fucking river in the middle of another dimension? One that has *magic*. Where he's sitting, licking his guardian's wounds, because his life really has turned into *Harry Potter*, and he's being hunted? He just watched a hundred people's lives be *ruined* over him, and there's nothing he can do.

You're more capable than you think you are.

Hah. Right.

Soren sleeps until twilight. Danny and Malia take turns dozing beside him in shifts to stave off the cold and the hunger; neither of them have experience with eating things that grow in forests—and plus, the last forest was magical. Danny has a feeling that magic wouldn't be good for his digestion.

No one comes looking for them. Danny is both disappointed and not. On the one hand, it could be survivors from the camp who followed their trail, but on the other, it could be Doctor Doom's men, come to retrieve Danny. Soren said that Doom didn't take well to losing. That he didn't let keys he'd marked slip from his grasp. That it made him angry. They're still looking for Danny—there's no denying that. Danny is being stalked, and it's only a matter of time before another of Doom's pet keys finds him.

If he were stupider, he'd leave Malia and Soren. Him being here puts both of them in danger. But if he took off, he'd just be captured, and then the two of them would try to save him. He's seen enough Chosen One plot movies to know that separating himself from the people capable of keeping him safe is *The Worst Idea He Could Possibly Have*, deserving of all capitals. So, he stays in the camp, watching their horses graze and watching Soren sleep while Malia goes off to the creek to do her meditation tai chi routine.

Just after Danny and Malia decide that they won't chance a fire, Soren groans and stirs under Malia's cloak.

"I'm gonna go get some water," Malia says, and is gone with the toothbrush holder before Danny can reply.

"Where...?" Soren mumbles, his eyes still clouded with sleep.

"Near the mountain," Danny says. He leans over him. "You found us."

Soren groans again, bringing his good hand up to scrub across his eyes. "Right."

"Smooth move with the horse thing."

"How'd you know that was me?" Soren squints up at him.

"You told me."

"I did?"

"You told me all the things," Danny says, wiggling his fingers. He means it as a joke, but Soren's face goes stricken, color draining from his cheeks.

"...Like what?"

"Like your favorite pajamas are pink." Danny rolls his eyes. "You didn't tell me anything, Soren. It was a joke. Kidding. Relax, your secrets are safe. You *did* get to see me naked, though."

Soren shoves him, then drops his arm back over his eyes. "I don't remember."

Danny shoves him back. Maybe it's the relief at seeing Soren awake, or maybe Danny is batshit insane, but he says, "You sound disappointed," before he can censor himself.

"Do I?" Soren's mouth flicks up on one side. "I've got *no* idea what you're talking about."

Danny becomes aware of two things: one, Soren's accent is super great when his voice is all low and growly like that, and two, they're flirting. It goes up like a neon sign in Danny's lizard brain: F-L-I-R-T. FLIRT: GO. GREEN

LIGHT FOR FLIRT. “Sure you don’t, big guy.” Danny starts peeling the scraps of his Big Louie’s shirt off Soren’s shoulder. Soren grits his teeth and stays silent through it. Danny lets his fingers drift, somewhere between the third strip and the fourth, and then it falls into a pattern: stroke, tug the scrap loose, stroke, move another one. Soren is watching him—it seems like that’s all Soren does when Danny is trying to hit on him. His focus heats Danny from the inside out.

Danny’s voice is low in his chest when he says, “What do we do now?”

“Now...” Soren’s eyes dip from Danny’s face to the line of his neck, and further down to Danny’s spread and kneeling knees, and wow, this is a really interesting positioning, isn’t it? Danny has definitely seen this in at least sixty percent of the gay pornos he’s watched.

“Uh,” Danny says. Soren’s lips part like he’s going to say something, but he doesn’t. He stalls out, half-smiling, and Danny’s chest does a thing that’s almost like the beginnings of a panic attack. He leans closer, telling himself to man up and *just do it* (and now he’s thinking of Nike shoes; sexy they are not)—and then out of nowhere, Soren moans.

Maybe that’s because Danny is leaning on his injured shoulder.

“Oh my god, I am so sorry,” Danny says, taking his hand off it. Soren laughs in a wheezing sort of way. “Are you okay? You’re not okay.”

“I’m fine,” Soren says. His eyes are watering. He is *so* not fine.

“Oh good, everyone’s still clothed.” Malia strides back into the camp, the little toothbrush holder cupped in one hand. “How’s your shoulder, Soren?”

“It hurts.”

“I, uh,” Danny says, and Malia sighs, giving him license to shut up.

She bathes and rewraps Soren’s shoulder for him, using strips of one of her shirts this time. Soren tells them between taking sips of the water Malia forces on him that they need to move soon, and that they need to head to Fell Lake, where Ilyana and her wife live. Ilyana has connections everywhere, he says,

and the League's headquarters should already know about the attack on White Oak.

"Do they know about me?" Danny asks.

Soren nods. "They're calling every key and their guardian back to Fell. Ilyana can't afford to send individual hunting parties after him anymore, not after last night."

"Not after I got here," Danny corrects.

"Getting marked wasn't your fault." Soren nods to Malia when she asks if the wrap is tight enough and sits up, testing the band of cloth across his chest and around his shoulder. He grabs a thick tree root and eases himself upright. "We should find something to eat."

"God, please," Malia mutters. "I had granola bars in my bag, but I lost it at White Oak."

Soren levers himself up on his good arm, accepting Malia's arm when she offers it. "I'll find something," he says, picking his sword up. The sheath's strap dangles, impossible to secure with one hand, so Danny does what best serves his own interests and says, "Lemme help." He buckles the strap around Soren's waist and then around his thigh. When he glances up, Malia is stifling laughter into her hand and pretending to be very interested in their remaining pack.

"Thanks," Soren says; his expression tells Danny that he knows *exactly* what is up. "Back in a moment. Get a fire going—a small one." He ducks around a tree and vanishes, his footsteps nearly impossible to hear.

"Wow," Malia says. "Wow with spaces between the letters."

"Shut up." Danny points at her. "You're the worst."

"How am *I* the *worst*? I could've told the two of you to get a room, but I stayed quiet, like a good best friend."

"Yeah, well," Danny says. "*Well*."

"*Well*," Malia echoes. "Odds of hitting that?"

Danny shrugs. “Two-thirds?”

“Holy shit, Danno. What was the last two-thirds you had?” Malia pushes off her knees and circles the camp, picking up any sticks that haven’t been soaked through with melting snow.

“Jacobs, I think,” Danny says. Don Jacobs had been a fellow student in Danny’s religion course a semester ago; he was hot but had serious confidence issues, which meant that Danny was more confident than he was, which had been an ego booster, which had turned Danny briefly into an asshole. Malia hadn’t been remiss in telling him, but he had only stopped “dating”—a.k.a. going out for campus frozen yogurt twice—Jacobs when she’d started calling him Reed Richards and refused to stop.

“Ugh,” Malia says, with feeling. Kindling gathered, she dumps it a few feet from their makeshift bed. “He doesn’t count.”

Danny hums agreeably. “I was probably gonna kiss him,” he muses. “Uh, Soren, not Jacobs.”

“Please stop putting the image of you kissing Jacobs in my brain.”

“Only if you can take it out of mine,” Danny sighs. “He was seriously shi—” He snaps his mouth closed when Malia’s hand jerks up, her fingers pressed together. It’s her signal for *silence*, mostly used when new *Doctor Who* TV spots come on. (Danny is not, for the record, a *Who* fan, but if he had to pick a favorite, it would be Ten all the way.) He waits until she relaxes, but a moment later, she’s tense again.

She motions to his sword, and that’s when a bright green bolt of... *something* lances out of the forest and cracks within an inch of Danny’s left temple.

“Holy *shit*,” he yelps, skittering sideways. The bolt snaps back and reappears, sweeping toward Malia. She rolls, grabbing her sword, and throws Danny’s to him. He has the feeling it isn’t going to do a damn bit of good against this shit, but he curls both hands around it—only for a second, before he switches to one, remembering Soren’s advice.

The green bolt is joined by a second, yellower one, and they snake across the ground, coiling around a tree and slithering straight for Danny's feet.

"Yeah," he says, "fuck this." He grabs the pack and slings it over one shoulder. Malia is already untying the horses and tightening the bands on their saddles, her fingers quick and efficient, thank god. She tosses the reins of the horse with the burn to him and swings up on hers. "We need to find Soren!" Danny shouts. He slips climbing into his saddle, and his horse takes off a step early, following Malia. Behind them, men streak out into the small clearing.

Danny clings haphazardly to his horse's mane, only one foot secured in a stirrup. He clamps the other around his horse's belly and looks back again, trusting his horse not to run them into a tree. The bolts of energy—of magic?—have vanished, but he can see the hands of two of the men glowing. God, there must be fifteen seekers. How had they not heard them?

"There!" Malia shouts. She turns her horse hard and—

"Mal!" Danny shouts, in the spare second he has before his horse gathers itself and bounds over an enormous fallen tree. Danny slips further when they land, jolted out of place, and he loses the pack when they drift too close to a tree. Goodbye, limited edition Tony Stark underwear.

Malia's horse swerves right, and Danny catches sight of Soren.

"What happened?" Soren calls as soon as they're close enough. Both horses' nostrils are flared, and Danny's horse's flanks are heaving. He fixes himself in the saddle, shoving his feet firmly in both stirrups.

"Doombots," Danny says, glancing behind him.

Soren's jaw ticks. "How many?"

"Fifteen," Malia answers.

"Two of them..." Danny says. He holds a hand up. "They were glowing."

"Sorcerers," Soren says, his jaw tightening further. He drops the handfuls of food he had—aw, they're mushrooms, too; Danny was going to get to have *roasted mushrooms* for dinner, goddamn it—and comes up on Danny's left.

“Stay still,” he says, planting one foot on a tree stump and swinging up behind Danny.

“Uh,” Danny says, “are you going to stay on?”

“I hope so,” Soren replies. Danny can hear wry humor in his voice, and when Soren’s arm circles his waist, Danny leans a little back into him.

“Where to?” Malia asks, nudging her horse forward.

“West,” Soren says. “Through the pass. Fell is a day’s ride from here, but we can push.” He adjusts his seat, shifting closer to Danny, and points forward. “That way, toward the creek. We’ll follow it upstream to the pass.”

Shouts filter up to them, the crashing of feet through underbrush. Danny tenses, hoping this isn’t like last time, that the seekers aren’t already upon them, but Malia isn’t going to wait around to see: she digs her heels into her horse’s sides, sending it forward. Danny does the same, leaning forward when his horse breaks into a run. Along the bank of the creek, the snow is soft and melted, giving way to the sand underneath, and the horses eat up the ground, long legs flashing. Danny’s is favoring its hind leg a little, maybe weary from the burn, but it pushes on without complaint, responsive in Danny’s inexperienced hands.

The pass is not as grand as Danny was expecting. He figured it would be grand and dramatic, closing as they swept through à la *Ice Age*. Instead, it reveals itself as a gap between two imposing mountain ridges. It’s about ten feet wide, and the rock is bared, bereft of snow.

Above, though. There’s snow above, caught between shelves of rock that jut out from either ridge, closing off the top of the pass.

“Hey,” Danny says, pulling his horse to a stop. He twists in his saddle, peering up. “You guys thinking what I’m thinking?”

Soren turns, too. “If they have sorcerers, they’ll get through that easy,” he says. “...But if we can bring down enough, it’s worth it.”

“How?” Malia asks. “We don’t have shit to do it with.”

Soren tenses up behind Danny, and Danny *feels* his uncertainty. It's the weirdest thing Danny has felt in his life, catnip portal magic included.

Soren says, "You're right. We can't. We should keep moving." He presses his calves into Danny's horse, urging it on.

He's right. He's totally right—they've got nothing to bring the snow down with.

But Danny can't get the hesitation out of his head. He's about to ask when he sees what climbing down from the pass is going to entail. "Fuck me," he mumbles.

It's ice. Ice, and some patches of rock, leading down into another valley.

"Slow," Soren says. He lets go of Danny's waist and takes the reins from his hands, wrapping them around his fingers. "Everyone go slow."

The descent is slow and arduous. Danny's horse is pure concentration, its ears pricked forward and its body low. Danny wishes he could look like that: sleek and confident and not terrified out of his mind.

His terror multiplies exponentially when Malia's horse slips once on an iced embankment, nearly throwing her. She recovers without batting an eye, doesn't even look back at them as she presses her heels into her horse's flanks and clicks her tongue against her teeth. She leads them all the way down to flat snow before she drops her horse's reins to its neck and leans forward, blowing out a long breath.

"She'd have made a fantastic guardian," Soren says into Danny's ear.

"I think she is one," Danny says. Soren passes the reins into his hand, and he keeps his grip on them loose, letting his horse relax. He's thinking about taking a hit off his inhaler, but elation at not being dead from the descent makes him babble instead. "No offense, I mean. I'm not trying to replace you, I'm just saying, it's, you know, we met because she kept me from falling down a flight of stairs and breaking my face."

Soren laughs, also in Danny's ear. Danny's going to have to start keeping track of his unfortunate erections as a hobby. He's had more in the past three days than he's had this entire year so far.

He wonders what that says about him, since he's also had more near-death experiences in the past three days than the rest of his life combined.

The flat snow gives way to forest after ten minutes of walking. Once there, they pause, hidden in the trees, and watch the pass, but nothing comes through. "Did we lose them?" Danny whispers.

"No," Soren says. "They're just behind."

An hour of walking later, it starts snowing.

"I hate snow," Danny complains, peering up between pine tree branches. "I hate being cold."

"Whine when you don't have a riding buddy to keep you warm," Malia tells him. She pulls her cloak closed pointedly.

"She has a point," Soren says.

Danny aims a scowl over his shoulder. Secretly, he's glad for the conversation; he was starting to doze off. "Are you two sure you aren't related?"

"Pretty sure," Malia says. "Not a hundred percent, though. Maybe seventy-eight percent sure. Soren?"

"I'm stuck around ninety percent."

"Ooh, such a lack of faith."

Danny sighs perfunctorily at both of them, but he's grinning so wide it hurts.

"Not too much farther," Soren says. "Through that pass and another few hours." He closes his arms tighter around Danny, the grooves of his elbows fitting against the curves where Danny's ribcage ends on each of his sides.

Okay, so maybe this isn't all suckage.

Even if they did spot the human glowworms a while ago. They're moving slower—they were only dipping down into the valley by the time Danny, Soren, and Malia were traipsing through the second pass; it's much less treacherous than the first, though no more impressive. They head through, and there, across yet another valley, is a castle.

“Heigh-ho,” Danny says. “It’s off to Hogwarts we go.”

“Your wit is stunning,” Malia tells him.

Soren sighs out hot on the back of Danny’s neck. “Another mile,” he says, “and we can rest. We’ll be within the castle’s protection.”

Danny can’t remember the last time he was this tired. It’s too snowy for him to tell what time it is; it could be twilight or dawn, for all he knows. He can’t bring himself to care, either—he’s cold and hungry and exhausted, and his hair is doing weird things, probably in Soren’s face. What keeps him going, though, is the fact that while both Soren and Malia are flagging visibly, neither of them are slowing or complaining or letting it fuck them over in the least.

If Danny can’t do anything else to help, he can at least not fall asleep on his horse.

Setting foot inside the castle’s barrier is like being pushed through a human-sized bubble. There’s a flex and a *pop*, and then they’re inside. Danny feels the faint tickle of magic in the bottom of his stomach, the fizzing sensation from the portal but less, more tolerable. He can’t tell if it’s the acquired taste his body is getting for magic or if this magic is weaker, and he can’t bring himself to care.

They stop in a thick stand of trees. Soren ties the horses while Danny helps Malia make another pine needle bed. No fire this time, and no food; Danny can hear Soren’s stomach rumbling from five feet away. At least it’s stopped snowing. Malia is the first to lie down, flopping face-first onto the cloak she’s thrown over the pine needles.

“Never moving again,” she says, muffled, and is asleep immediately, snoring softly.

“She’s pretty amazing,” Soren says. He smiles tiredly at Danny, working the straps of the horse’s saddles with his one good hand.

Danny pads over to him, swaying on his feet. “She is,” he says. He nudges his hand under Soren’s, shooing him back so Danny can loosen it. He does the same to the other horse—his, he’s starting to think of it. He can’t tell if it’s a dude or a lady and is kind of weirded out by checking, so he pats its nose and decides it’s a she and Charlotte is her name. “Good girl,” he tells her, rubbing her nose. She snuffles at him, then drops her head to doze.

Soren is stretched out on the bed, his sword unsheathed and set at his side. Danny takes his cloak off and tosses it over Soren. “Shut up,” he says, cutting Soren’s complaint off preemptively. “It’s for sharing.” He sets his sword down next to Soren’s and settles between him and Malia, groaning as his whole body pops. He’s pretty sure that nineteen is too young to be stricken with horrendous bodily problems, but since this whole debacle has aged him, oh, seventy years, he’s due for some.

He tugs the cloak over him and over as much of Malia as he can manage. Soren shifts obligingly closer to allow it to cover the three of them. Danny’s got the lucky spot, cocooned between the two of them. He folds his arms up to his chest, then tucks one under his head, his cheek pillowed on it. “Can I ask you something?” he says. It’s not dark, not really, but it’s hazy, and Soren’s face is cast in shadows from the trees.

Soren says, voice sleepy, “Sure.”

Danny gestures at the space between their chests. “I’m not hallucinating this, right?”

“This particular moment?”

“This *us*,” Danny says, pushing it out before he can gag on the words. Honestly, he’s too tired to give a shit anymore. If Soren doesn’t think he’s attractive, then they can let it go, and Danny—

“No,” Soren says.

“Uh,” Danny says. “No?”

“No, you’re not hallucinating.” Soren squints at him. “I think we should have this conversation when you’re more awake.”

“No,” Danny mumbles. He plants his hand flat on Soren’s chest. God, ugh, so much muscle. “Is this a, is it a guardian thing?”

“Hmm?”

“Like, is it...” Danny pushes Soren’s chest; predictably, it doesn’t budge him at all. “Nothing, I just saw a lot of guardians get pretty snuggly. I thought you said guardians are supposed to kinda stay out of the way?”

“Guardians tend to befriend their key quickly,” Soren says. “It’s not always romantic, but...”

“Sometimes it is.”

“Right.” Soren glances down at Danny’s hand. “Are you pushing me away, here?”

“What? No.” Danny drops his hand. “TBH, I was kind of feeling you up.” Soren snorts, ducking his head to laugh. “What?” Danny says, indignant.

“Nothing,” Soren says, and kisses him.

Danny opens his mouth to say *oh* before he processes that Soren’s mouth is on his, and that opening it is an invitation to do what the French people do. Soren readily takes this invitation, his tongue sliding hot and wet against Danny’s.

This is a three-thirds situation. If Malia were awake, she’d be clapping.

“This is good,” he manages when Soren leans back to breathe. Danny turns his mouth into Soren’s jaw, nipping his bottom lip. He wants to duck under the cloak and suck Soren off, or have a mutual jacking off session, but Malia is asleep *right behind him*; Danny is not that inconsiderate. “I’m gonna sleep on you,” he says, nudging his forehead into the crook of Soren’s uninjured shoulder.

“Good,” Soren says. He sounds as tired as Danny feels. His heartbeat is slowing under Danny’s ear, and he drapes one arm over the curve of Danny’s side like a shelter.

“Night,” Danny says. Soren’s already asleep.

Some hours later, Danny wakes up, and Soren is turned away from him, curled at the furthest edge of the pine bed.

He means to do something about it, but sleep overwhelms him again.

In the morning, Soren makes them breakfast. Danny wakes up when Soren stands and crunches away through the snow, his usual light-footedness interrupted by the fresh-fallen snow and (probably, since Danny has one) a sleep hangover the size of fucking Montana. He’s back fast, with a shirtful of tubers that make Danny’s mouth water. His whole body thrills when Soren puts together a small fire and starts heating a rock in the middle of the fire. The tubers sizzle and blacken quickly, and they taste kind of like stale potato chips, but they’re *food*.

The three of them sit around the fire, eyes half-lidded and conversation stilted.

“These need salt,” Soren comments, chewing the end off a tuber.

“These need a miracle,” Danny corrects.

Malia laughs, her voice throaty. “Where’s Bear Grylls when you need him?”

Danny chokes on his next bite and has to spit it unattractively over his shoulder so he can laugh without killing himself. “Sun’s going down,” he says. “Water’s running out...”

“Better drink our own piss,” Malia finishes.

Soren stares at each of them in turn, still gnawing the end of his root.

“Your assimilation training needs work,” Danny tells him, fishing another root from the fire. Having hot food in his stomach is returning him to status: human. “How’s your shoulder?”

“It’ll be fine,” Soren says around a yawn.

“You should clean it again,” Malia says. She dusts her hands off on her pants and stands. “I’m gonna go for a walk.” She winks at Danny as she leaves.

Oh god. She was *awake*.

Soren is watching her go with keen eyes. “You two have an interesting friendship,” he says, reaching for the last of the tubers.

“We dated for three weeks.”

“Only three weeks?”

“We had sex,” Danny clarifies, “for three weeks. It didn’t work out, but it turns out you can be great BFFs after you see someone naked in ten-plus sexual positions.”

Soren huffs out a laugh, ducking his head to eat. There’s blood on his tunic still, caked dark over his shoulder and down one sleeve. His stubble is thick, fast-growing. Danny’s never had any luck with facial hair, aside from a truly unfortunate creeper moustache when he first started shaving. It looks good on Soren, though—the stubble. Danny’d like to rub his face on it, get some beard-burn.

“Wait ’til we get to Fell Lake,” Soren says.

“Huh?”

“You’re looking at me like you want to eat me.” Soren flicks one eyebrow up. “Wait until we get to the castle.”

“Okay, Soylent Green,” Danny mutters, snagging the rest of Soren’s tuber out of his hand. Secretly, though, he’s stoked to tell Malia that this is a three-thirds, one-hundred-percent sure thing. Hell yes, Danny Marlaeto is going to *get some*, and it’s not going to be from Don Jacobs. Tuber gone (he is never

taking table salt for granted again), he rubs his hands on his slacks. “So long as you’re offering, we should probably get go—”

The ground is vibrating.

Danny freezes and puts his hand to it, hoping that it’s him being dizzy, but Soren is feeling the ground, too. “Horses,” he says. His voice is off-kilter.

“A lot of them,” Danny assumes.

“Too many.” Soren pushes himself up and kicks dirt over the fire, blanketing it. “Find Malia, Danny, *now*.”

Danny bolts into the trees, heading the same direction Malia had. “Mal! Malia, where are you?” he shouts, ducking branches.

No answer. Nothing. *Jesus*.

He splashes across a shallow creek and climbs the bank of it, staring into the dense trees. Desperation sets in as he takes in just how fucking *many* of them there are. She could be anywhere.

Cupping his hands to his mouth, Danny yells, “*Mal!*”

“Here!” Malia calls back, thready. “Danny, fuck, come here!”

Fear sets in immediately. Danny has seen Malia teach self-defense classes with a broken arm, seen her half cut her thumb off while making dinner and wrap it herself, and she’s never, ever sounded like *that*.

Her leg is caught in a fucking *bear trap*. “No,” Danny says, sliding to his knees beside her. Oh god, he can see bone. A lot of bone. Too white under the fleshy red of her muscles. “Shit, Mal, I’m sorry.”

“Help me get this thing off,” she says. She’s pale and sweating—her skin is clammy when Danny touches her neck. “I was trying...” She gestures to a thick tree branch, which is frayed from her attempts to wedge it between the trap’s jaws. “Are there even bears in this fucking forest?”

“I kind of hope so,” Danny says, because if this isn’t for a bear, he doesn’t want to know what it *is* for. He jams the branch against the trap’s iron, panic rising in his chest. “Shit. *Shit*.”

“What?” Malia says. “Danny, what’s going on?”

“Seekers. A lot of them.” Danny manages to get the branch in and gasps, hope thickening—right as the trap snaps closed again, breaking the branch. Malia *screams*, blood gushing from her leg. “God, what the fuck.” Danny falls back, panting. “Okay, I. I need to get Soren.” He catches Malia’s face in his hands, brushing sweat from her temples. “It’s gonna be okay. I’m gonna get you out.”

Malia grabs his wrist, holding it with her thumb digging in. “If you can’t,” she says, “it’s okay.”

“Are we really going to have this moment?” Danny demands. “This is one movie cliché I am not going to share with you. Stop.” He pries her hand off him and lets her go, then peels his cloak off and drapes it over her. “I’ll be right back.”

He means it, he does, but somehow it feels like he’s lying.

That feeling chases him all the way back to camp, where Soren has the horses ready. The vibration in the ground has intensified, the trees buzzing. “She’s stuck,” Danny says, grabbing the reins of his horse and mounting. “She’s in a fucking bear trap, come on.” He doesn’t wait for Soren to agree, and his horse, bless her, is eager and quick under him. He bends low to keep tree branches from snagging him. “Should’ve called you Shadowfax instead of Charlotte,” he says into her mane. He grips it tight in one hand, the other directing Charlotte across a shallow creek and up the same embankment Danny climbed.

The trees here are too thick for the horses.

“Where?” Soren says as Danny drops to the ground.

“Down there.” Danny loops Charlotte’s rains over a tree branch and scrambles down into the cluster of trees. Malia is paler now, panting, and the noise Soren makes when he sees her tells Danny that this is worse than it looks.

“Look what I did, Dad,” Malia says, giving Soren a pained half-smile.

Soren kneels, examining the trap. “It’s key-operated,” he says. “I...” He looks up at Malia, who’s making a face that says she already knows.

“You guys need to go, then.”

“Fuck no,” Danny snaps. “Malia, I meant what I said.”

“There’s nothing we can do,” Soren says tightly. “I can’t... We’re not strong enough to get this off.” He meets Malia’s gaze again, and they have this whole silent conversation that makes Danny feel like rotting, useless meat. “We’re going,” Soren says, the decision apparently made.

Danny says, “No.” Soren and Malia both turn to him, and he says it again, louder. “No. We’re not leaving her. I don’t give a shit what we have to do, but we’re not leaving her here. I’m the key!” he snarls when Soren opens his mouth. “I’m the one at risk here, and I’m gonna stay.” He unsheathes his sword, ignoring Soren’s gaping. The seekers will be on them sooner or later, once they see the horses tied up. They’re probably not going to make it out of here.

But he isn’t going to run again. Fuck that. If he has to deal with a Chosen One plotline, he’s going to *own it*.

Soren stops him from shoving his sword between the trap’s jaws. His expression is raw, the lines around his eyes deeper. He squeezes Danny’s wrist. “What’ll you do?” he asks, holding Danny’s gaze. “Huh? What do you expect to do?”

“Anything I can,” Danny says. Soren stares at him a moment longer, then shakes his head, withdrawing. “Soren. Help me,” he orders, fitting the sword in place.

“The only thing that’s going to do is break your sword,” Soren says. He rakes a hand back through his hair and gets up to pace away, cloak swishing wetly on the ground. “You meant it?” he said. “When you said you’d do anything.”

Danny makes a *no shit* face at him. He’s been living with learned helplessness for so long, and he’s never hated it as much as he hates it now.

He realizes, in this bizarre flicker of a moment, that he doesn't know where his inhaler is.

It doesn't matter. He is *in control*, with a cool, hard focus. He is handling this.

Soren paces a line away from them, then back, his breathing harsh. "Do you trust me?" he asks. "Danny?"

"...Yeah," Danny says slowly, as Malia murmurs, "*Oh.*"

Danny looks at her. "Oh? What oh?"

"You're a sorcerer," Malia says. She sounds woozy but certain. "Aren't you?"

Soren glances between them, then nods, mute.

Danny drops his forehead into one hand. "You're a dick," he says. "Worse than that, you're a hypocritical, lying dick." Soren's face falls by inches, his shoulders slumping under the harshness in Danny's voice. When he opens his mouth to speak, Danny says, "Get over here. I'll yell at you later. What do you need me to do?"

"Understand what you're offering me, here," Soren says, crouching by him. "This is *magic*, if I don't do it right—"

"Will you?" Danny demands. "Are you gonna fuck it up, Soren?"

"*No*," Soren says, vehement. "I wouldn't do that to you."

"Then shut up and bond us." Danny pushes his hand at Soren's chest. "How does this work?"

Soren eases his hand down. "Not like that," he says. "It should be easy. We've..." He grits his teeth. "We've already started. Remember the portal?"

"...That's why you wouldn't touch me," Danny says. Of course—the zing of energy, that brief connection. They'd accidentally started, so Soren was trying to keep from... "Fuck, Soren, *really?*"

"I'm sorry," Soren says. He seems to mean it, so Danny lets him off the hook. For now. "Remember the magic. You have that in you. I need you to

find it.” He puts his hands on Danny’s shoulders, his broad, warm palms cupping the rounds of them. “Picture a well.”

“I remember,” Danny says. He imagines a well, imagines seeing down into it...

Ugh, wow, *no*, all that leads to is a hallucinated version of *The Ring*.

Focus. Danny’s imaginary well gives way to a creek. The same creek they camped by last night: cool and clear and running, thick and bubbling. Running through him. To his fingertips. He imagines his bones as individual streams.

After a long time, through water in his throat, he says, “I’ve got it.”

Soren brings his hands in to bracket Danny’s neck. “Push it at me,” he says. His voice is shaking. “You have to open it to me, Danny.”

Okay, so creeks flow into rivers. Danny breathes out, concentrating on the warmth of Soren’s hands. The ground under him is vibrating harder. He imagines he can hear hoofbeats, but he lets the rush of the river drown them out.

The river, showing the creek how to run properly.

Something in Danny’s body *clicks*, and gives way, and he bows forward, falling against Soren’s chest and gasping out his surprise. He feels Soren’s surprise, too; the only way he would be able to explain *how* would be through several bad X-Men references. As it is, he’s drained of the ability to think coherently, and instead he sits there, leaning on Soren’s chest and basking in the *connection*.

He can feel Soren’s heart beating in his own chest.

“Okay,” Soren says hoarsely. His hands settle back on Danny’s shoulders. “Look out.” He slides away, to Malia, and touches the bear trap. “Stay sitting, Danny,” he says. His hands begin to glow blue, and Danny’s reservoir drains immediately. He flops back, lying in the snow, the world swirling. Nearby, he hears the crunch of metal, and then Malia’s yelp, and then a cracking, gunshot-esque sound. He’s too far gone to *care* about the gunshot—too far gone to care about anything but how close he can still feel Soren’s heartbeat. The whole

goddamn batshit NRA could be standing around him and he wouldn't give a shit. He's focused on Soren's river. Danny is feeding Soren's river and that's all that matters.

“Did I give you enough?” he slurs. “Take more, y’can...”

“No.” Soren's head appears, floating. He pulls Danny into his arms—oh, there's the rest of his body—and lifts him out of the snow.

“Shut up, Danny,” Malia chimes. She's... upright. Standing.

“You have two legs,” Danny says happily.

“You're high on magic,” she retorts, smiling.

Soren squeezes Danny closer to his chest. Danny's head flops of its own accord onto his shoulder, which is healed as well. “Let's go,” Soren says. He and Malia manage to get Danny's limp body up the slope and back to the horses. Once they're there, Soren moves as close to Charlotte as he can. “I can't lift you into the saddle,” he says, ready to set Danny down.

“Why not?” Danny says, and Soren breathes, “Oh.” Then there's a pull on Danny's magic again, and then he's being lifted in supernaturally strong arms onto Charlotte. “I'm probably gonna pass out,” Danny informs them. He buries his fingers in Charlotte's mane as Soren settles in behind him. “You're such a good girl, Char.”

“Is this what he's like when he's drunk?” Soren asks, wrapping an arm around Danny's waist.

“Live through the next hour and you'll get to find out,” Malia says. She pushes off the ground on her strong, new leg—the one Danny's magic made for her.

What was it he was thinking earlier? *Maybe this isn't all suckage...*

“... Yeah, sure, for *you*,” Malia laughs. She leans into the guy sitting on her right. Danny can't remember his name, but he's really hot, and earlier, Malia

flashed him a two-thirds signal. Watching them now, Danny upgrades it to three-thirds.

The rest of the table chitters politely, most of them still with mouthfuls of food. “Do go on,” Soren says from Danny’s left.

“Traitor.” Danny steps on his foot under the table, feels the current of his amusement follow afterward. Danny is still mostly out of it, woozy from sleeping, but he’s functional enough to know that their fledgling bond is going to end in a Talk, likely soon.

It’s been three days since Doom’s (real name: Steve. Most non-threatening villain name ever) forces attacked Fell Lake. Danny was helpfully nonfunctional for the entire battle, giving up his glorious Chosen One moment of saving everyone’s lives with his amazing sacrifice, but even with him unconscious, Soren was able to use his magic, and Fell held its own.

Danny is never going to get over missing out on the end of his own heroic story. He’s like Harry Potter sleeping through the final Hogwarts battle. Luke Skywalker taking a smoke break instead of destroying the Death Star.

“For *him*,” Malia continues. “Except the rest of us had to fight a thousand magic death soldiers.”

“Hey, hey,” Soren says. “His magic was present.”

“All right,” she says, rolling her eyes. “Fine. Ten points to Marlaeto for magical presence.” The grin she gives Danny across the table is warm. It says she’s giving him more than a handful of points. She wouldn’t be alive without him.

...Okay, maybe he didn’t miss his heroic moment. Maybe he just passed out like a loser afterward.

Malia says something that makes the whole table ring with laughter, drawing the attention of the rest of the grand hall, even up to Ilyana at her high table, where she sits with her wife, Lena, and a handful of her advisors. Malia fits in here, among these people; she’s better at this than Danny is, and

Danny's grateful for that. He's the whole reason Steve came to Fell Lake—because he was too obsessed to let a key he'd “marked” go. He died for power.

Danny almost wishes he'd gotten to have a face-to-face with the guy, so he could have heard his villain monologue and shot all the necessary holes in it. He bets it was lamer than passing out from overuse of magic.

The hall is full to the brim, and there are a hundred tents set up on the castle's grounds to house the keys and sorcerers freed from Steve's control and/or service when he died. They all get to go home, free and clear, but Danny has been walking around for the past day, working his recuperating body out, and it sounds like most people don't want to go. There's an odd stillness about the castle, a stasis. How many keys are going to have to go back, like Danny, and make up an appendicitis story for their professors to explain missing finals week? How many may have lost their jobs? Lost more than that?

Now that their lives are no longer in immediate peril, Lohrfast is kind of a vacation from the real world.

Don't get him wrong: Danny wants to go back. Shit, he does. He misses Taco Bell and his PS3 and indoor plumbing. He feels an ache in his soul that only manifests when he has a severe lack of *Battlestar Galactica*.

He'll go back.

Just... not yet.

“Wanna get out of here?” he says to Soren.

They walk together to the lake. It's mostly frozen over, but winter is ending—it'll break apart soon. Danny might be sad, in the way-buried cockles of his heart. California will never look like this. He wants to get his fill of snow while he can.

“So,” he says, kicking at a rock. “Talk to me, man.”

Soren sighs, shoving his hands deeper in the pockets of his cloak. He's been in meetings with Ilyana since the end of the battle; this is the first time

Danny has gotten to actually *talk* to him, alone, and if Soren thought he wasn't going to go straight for the throat, he needs to get to know Danny better.

In fact, that's something Danny is counting on.

"Soren?" he prods.

"I was young," Soren says finally. He comes to a stop on the edge of the lake. The sand is still loose, pure white under their boots. "My parents didn't tell me what I was, and there was a boy who lived near us. A key." Soren turns away, nudging the toe of his boot into the sand. His eyes are fixed out on the lake. "I bonded with him accidentally, and I didn't understand how to regulate the magic. He died."

Danny leans into his shoulder. "How old were you?"

"Thirteen." Soren heaves out a breath; Danny watches it drift and dissolve in the air. "I figured the best way to control my sorcery was never to use it. So I joined the League and trained myself and pretended I wasn't one at all."

"That's a fucking big closet to be in."

"Narnia," Soren says.

Danny laughs, startled. "Look at you, catching up."

"Malia said the same thing when I told her." Soren rolls his shoulder, nudging Danny away, then wraps that arm around him, letting him lean into the warm length of Soren's side and be closed inside his cloak. "Do you think she'll stay here?"

"I don't know," Danny says. "She's good at Lohrfasting, but she'll miss home, probably."

Soren is silent for a while, the line of his chest buffeting against Danny's each time he breathes. The sensations from being bonded haven't dimmed at all; he can acutely feel Soren's heartbeat and the ebb and flow of his magic. "What about you?" he asks eventually.

"What about *you*?" Danny says.

"I go where you go."

“Easy as that?” Danny lists into him, eyebrows raised.

Soren’s arm tightens. “I’m still your guardian.”

“But I’m bonded to you now. That’s how it works, right? No one else can use me.”

“Well...” Soren glances down at him, frowning faintly. “I’d assumed you’d want to break the bond.”

“That can happen?”

“I can do it,” Soren says. He holds up one hand, and Danny feels the familiar sink from his throat to his feet as Soren’s fingers glow blue, playing shadow games with the thick lines of his veins. “I *should* do it.”

Danny touches their fingertips together. “No,” he says, before Soren can take that as a go-ahead. “Do you think you’re going to kill me? Is that what it is?”

“No. But magic is unpredictable sometimes.” Soren lets Danny go and faces him, the angles of his cheekbones and jaw cast in shadow by the light of the half moon. “I don’t want it to be unpredictable with you. And we bonded... soon. In a rush.”

“You know what else is unpredictable? A bus hitting me when I get home,” Danny says, pushing up on his toes to drop a kiss on Soren’s mouth. He tastes like wine. “I can handle it if you can handle it.” Danny’s chest tightens; he should be anxious, he thinks, but he figures he’s survived *The Return of the King* (while comatose, even!) and so is entitled to say fuck anxiety. “We can handle it,” he adds.

Soren tucks a hand under Danny’s chin and kisses him more firmly. “Oh yeah?” he asks, his lips turned up with good humor.

“Yeah,” Danny says. “Also, we should go back to my room.”

And look, Danny is nineteen, and maybe two years from now Soren will get tired of him, or maybe five years from now Danny will resent handing his magic over. They aren’t *in love*—they’re barely dating on a level that could be called a *thing*, but the *yet* is there, waiting for them to get to know one another

outside of the context of running for their lives. If nothing else, Danny can feel the pulse of shared magic under both their skins, ready and willing and bright, as they walk together through the white fields back to the castle. Isn't that what this has all been for: the magic in Danny's body?

Make something awesome happen, he thinks at it, curling his fingers between Soren's.

Above the castle, without a cloud in sight, it starts to snow.

THE END

Author Bio

Sam Schooler was born on a Saturday in Cincinnati, Ohio, raised by a geek, and was recently released into the wild. A university student, a journalist, a Tumblr addict, and a queer romance author, she is most comfortable at night, basking in the healthy glow of a laptop screen. She can often be found crying over TV shows and comic books and is known to passionately campaign for the preservation of the Oxford comma. She has associative prosopagnosia. Jeremy Renner played her in a movie once.

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