

A NOVELLA VOL. ONE

LORE & LUST

The Arrival

KARLA.NIKOLE

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PUBLISHING

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K A R L A . N I K O L E



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For you, dear reader. Thank you for all the love.

OCTOBER

ONE

PRACTICE

Nino sits at the kitchen table, his hands hovering over the surface as he takes a deep breath in, then out. The air around him is cool but laced with something more. Something invisible that hums and flows, both from within his body and all around. It tingles like sunlight and static against his skin.

He's focused, but a thought floats in the cavern of his mind like an echo, always present. Quiet but persistent.

A baby. I'll be a father...

The true beginning of their surrogacy process is still months away and a start date doesn't yet exist. They've spoken with Doctor Davies about their desire to grow their family, but the program itself has only just been approved. The groundwork is currently being laid.

Even still, this idea... Nino is committed to it. He accepts it, but wrestles with the weight and emotional complexity he feels—like peeling back the layers of a thousand-pound onion.

One thing at a time. Nino shakes his head, then flickers his amber eyes up to his mate sitting across from him. "Are you ready?" he asks.

Haruka raises an eyebrow. "I believe that the more important question is, are *you*?"

Nino narrows his gaze. "I can do this."

"I have faith in you."

Rolling his shoulders, he concentrates on the salt-shaker in front of him. The distinct heat of his energy seeps out, slinking toward the glass object and examining the details of its composition—the smooth, hard surface disrupted by hand-carved swirls and curves. His aura glows as it hovers

over the metal top, then pours thickly into the plethora of tiny holes. He feels all of it. Not with his hands but with his mind and essence. With this unique extension of himself that is derived from the ancient energy of his race. Like magic. Inexplicable but real.

Countless grains of salt fill the container, soft in their unity but individually... rough. Sharp? A cloud of microscopic snowflakes but made of broken glass. He can't quite decide.

Nino blows out another breath, then shifts everything up—the glass, hardness, metal and flecks—all of it. He raises his palms, and the salt-shaker smoothly levitates above the table. It rises higher, shiny in the steely, overcast sunlight filling the kitchen.

When it's stable at his eye level, Nino takes a chance and shifts his gaze to meet his mate's rosy irises just past the object levitating in between them. "Alright... I think—"

Something stirs. The fluidity of his essence and its control over the object break, like two elements suddenly pushing against each other instead of sinuous—no longer in alliance. He blinks. The entire thing bursts, escaping from his mental grasp and shattering.

Haruka reacts quickly and with precision. He raises his hands and the mess of Nino's efforts floats fragmented in mid-air. Countless shards of glass and grains of salt hover in the light, shimmering like an elaborate art installation.

Nino's eyes burn out. He bends forward, dropping his forehead onto the table with a groan. "Fuck."

"Would you like feedback?"

"Yes, please."

"Why did you attempt to manipulate the salt within the shaker?"

Dragging himself upright, Nino considers. "I wanted to be thorough and understand all the individual elements so that I had more control. I did this before, when I manipulated the tissue box, and it was fine."

Haruka smiles, the chaos of Nino's failure still suspended in mid-air between them. His mate holds all of it in place, effortless as his hands rest folded atop the table's surface. "My love, tissues are a vastly different material than grains of salt—the latter being much more complex and greater in quantity. With these instances, it is better to focus on and manipulate the outside as a whole. When the inside is intricate or overwhelming in nature, leave it be."

Nino's attention diverts when Asao walks into the kitchen. The manservant assesses the situation, then pauses, frowning. "Are you serious?"

"We'll take care of it," Nino assures him, rubbing the back of his neck.

Slowly, Haruka releases the mess, but as it settles onto the table's surface, the salt and finer shards of glass slip through the planks of the wood. Nino clenches his teeth as Asao groans behind them.

"Why didn't you just hover it over and into the trash?" Asao asks.

Haruka scoots his chair out, examining the floor. "I... had not considered that."

Shaking his head, Asao stalks toward the refrigerator. "I hope this means we're taking a step back in our training?" With the door open, he eyes Nino. "If you explode a person, I'm *not* covering it up."

Nino grins. "You would definitely help us cover it up."

Asao pauses, then disappears as he leans behind the open door to scavenge the fridge. "I would. But please don't put me in that situation."

"Let's try this again," Haruka asserts. "But keep your attention and aura focused on the external matter, exclusively. You are capable of holding and lifting objects very well with surface control. Distinct manipulation is not necessary for now. What do you think?"

"I think we shouldn't be using anything *glass*," Asao barks.

"Jesus." Nino scratches his head. "What if we go back to the tissue boxes, but I try to manipulate the tissue out of the container? That way, I can practice exerting more finite control." The salt-shaker may have proved a little too advanced, too soon, but he's ready for a new challenge in his training.

"What tissue boxes?" Asao lifts his chin. "Who's replenishing these—"

"Asao, it does not matter." Haruka closes his eyes as he massages the bridge of his nose with his long fingers. "Please be more encouraging."

"I'll be encouraging when I don't need to replace four pillows, two coffee mugs, a sliding door and now a salt-shaker within a month." Asao takes a long pull from the bottle of green tea he's taken from the fridge. When he finishes, he looks at Nino. "I'll be your biggest cheerleader then."

Nino folds his arms, grinning despite himself. "I'm getting better. The pillows and the door were three weeks ago."

"Rah rah." Asao smirks, leaving the kitchen with his bottle.

Haruka frowns. "Ignore him. You have made wonderful progress in a very short amount of time. I am proud of your efforts."

Beaming, Nino stands, then moves toward the pantry to retrieve the broom and dustpan. "Well, I have an amazing teacher, don't I? Even though he can be a little strict... Can you grab a dishcloth and clear the tabletop first? Unless you want to expend the energy to clean all this up with your aura?"

Haruka stands from the table as well, huffing. "I do not."

For almost two months, from the moment they returned from their vacation in Trentino, Nino has practiced controlling his energy with his mate on a rigorous schedule. Things have returned to normal since he was vanished and abducted in May, but Haruka has held Nino to his promise of taking their meditation exercises more seriously.

But after the conversation they had at the cabin about growing their family, Nino sincerely wants to be stronger. Not just for himself.

When Nino is standing beside his mate at the table, Haruka turns, lifting his hands and holding Nino's face between his palms. "I am strict because I believe in your abilities. You are a phenomenal student." He leans in, tilts his head and blesses Nino with a soft touch of their lips.

Nino scrunches his nose. "Mm, I love it when my teacher rewards me with kisses."

"In this context my behavior would be seen as inappropriate conduct."

"It'll be our secret." Nino juts his chin forward, placing another kiss on Haruka's mouth before pulling a chair out so that he can sweep the mess from under the table. "Jun texted me, by the way. He said he'll be here tomorrow at noon to start dressing us for the party."

Not surprisingly, Haruka groans as he bends and takes hold of the dustpan. Nino laughs. "You agreed to this. Don't try to back out of it now."

"Yes, I agreed. However, why can't I know what my costume will be? I should have a say in this ridiculous situation."

"It's not ridiculous." Nino sweeps the salt debris onto the pan as Haruka holds it steady. "It's unusual as far as aristocracy events go, but I think it'll be really fun. And you don't get a say because when Jun and I asked you what our costumes should be, you said vampires. Your vote was annulled."

Haruka stands with the dustpan, frowning. "I am punished for being pragmatic?"

“Nobody wants pragmatism on Halloween, tesoro. We get to play and be someone else—like a fantasy.” Nino waits, bright-eyed and wanting his mate to understand. Haruka dumps the contents of the pan into the trash, his brows scrunched in concentration.

“I don’t need to fantasize. Truly, *you* are my wildest dream. What more could I possibly desire? Why should I imagine anything else?”

Nino’s cheeks warm as he shakes his head. “Haru, you’re thinking *way* too deeply about this. We’re just going to have fun, alright? Trust me?”

“Of course,” Haruka says, handing him the emptied dustpan. “Just know that I am pleased as I am, with you and our life together.”

“Alright, alright. Sheesh.” Nino chuckles, moving back toward the pantry.

“Has Jun invited Doctor Davies to this event?” Haruka asks.

“No. He said some friend of Jae’s from the UK unexpectedly showed up to his apartment yesterday. The situation sounds complicated.” With the broom returned to the pantry, Nino rejoins Haruka at the table and sits down beside him.

“Indeed.” Haruka nods, folding his arms. “Jae’s awakening from a human and into a vampire is unprecedented, but the doctor is handling it all very well—likely due to the stability and assurance that Junichi’s presence offers. It is a positive sign.”

“It is... And you really think Jae is purebred?”

“I do.”

“That’s *wild*. After Jun fed him that day, the whole situation turned around. His energy registered more strongly to me, too. Jae’s vampiric nature is undeniable now.”

“Junichi has been conditioned to exceptionally clean purebred blood since he was an adolescent. I am surprised that he doesn’t suspect Jae’s true nature. He has been irrefutably enticed by the doctor from the moment he first laid eyes on him.”

“Denial,” Nino says. “He’s been so averse to ranked vampires that he’s only been dating humans. I mean, I dated a couple of them back in London, but Jun’s stance on that is pretty extreme.” Nino raises his eyebrow, curious. “Would you have considered dating a human? I mean, before we met.”

“No.”

“You could have thought about it. At least for a second?”

“If you recall, I was intent on not dating *any* creatures prior to meeting you. After a decade of hiding myself away, I was forced to leave my home one time... and look what happened.” Haruka glances at him from the corners of his eyes, biting back a grin.

An awkward pause hangs between them as they watch each other. That is, until Nino turns, then reaches out with a snap to grab hold of his mate’s waist beside him. The unexpected movement makes Haruka jolt and snicker.

“What are you trying to say, exactly?” Nino wriggles his fingers in the concave of Haruka’s waist, making him squirm.

“Did we date?” Haruka asks, his deep voice strained between gasps of breathy laughter. “Is that what we were doing?”

“We had one, officially, at least. You drank a lot of wine and put your hands down my pants.”

“Ah, my favorite pastime.”

Nino shakes his head as Haruka lifts his arms. He leans in, wrapping them around Nino’s shoulders and bringing their foreheads together. His voice is quiet. The sweet coolness of his breath wafts against Nino’s lips.

“If I had known that you were my destiny, I would have left the house much, much sooner.”

“Oh yeah?” Nino closes his eyes, centering himself in the comfort of their entwined energies and closeness—the soft familiarity of his almond milk skin and the sumptuous aroma naturally emanating from his body. He inhales deep, then exhales the tension from his shoulders. “I thought you didn’t believe in fate?”

Their noses brush, playful and sweet. Haruka slides one hand up and into Nino’s hair at the back of his head. “Perhaps I’ve changed my mind,” he whispers. “You in my life... The goodness of it is too significant. Miraculous. It cannot be attributed to something as imprecise and frivolous as chance.”

Nino tilts, pressing their mouths together with an urgency that rushes from his heart and spreads all throughout his body. The sensation is hot and airy in his chest, as if he could float upward and into the sky like a balloon, never once returning to Earth.

He shifts, kissing Haruka’s jawline and toward his ear. His voice is hoarse when it passes through his lips. “When you say things like that, it makes me want to bite you... like I need to devour you.”

“Mm, perhaps that is my underlying objective? My devious motivation.”

Nino nuzzles his face lower, sprinkling kisses down the elegant curve of his neck. He breathes the delicate scent of roses as his lips brush his skin. The fragrance of him isn't quite like a bouquet. Not overbearing or concentrated. More like a whisper. A single petal that brushes against his senses like velvet and swirls inside him, making him want more.

“Knowing you the way I do,” Nino says, “I'm surprised that you went a whole decade without having sex.”

When Haruka laughs, it vibrates from his throat like a bassist gently plucking the thick strings. “Once trust and sincere affection were removed from the equation, the activity became largely unfulfilling.” Sensing Nino's goal, Haruka lifts his chin, allowing him access to the stretch of his neck. “Until you, of course.”

Nino drags his tongue up his skin, savoring him. He opens his mouth wide and bites down into his flesh. The delicious flavor rushes straight to Nino's brain, making him dazed—bewildered, as if his head is swimming in a haze of blush-colored clouds.

Soon, Haruka's long fingers are fisting the back of his hair within their embrace, urging Nino to drink deeper and take from him. To pull and satisfy the ancient, powerful entity deep within his core.

And so, he does. As Haruka arches and gasps in his arms, Nino pours all of his trust and affection into him. Confidently fulfilling him, because he knows that he was destined to do so.

TWO

HALLOWEEN

[G? Are you going to call me back??]

Exhaling, Nino sets his phone face down on the vanity table. The weight of anxiety is settled in his gut, locking him in a state of discontent, as if he's a criminal awaiting his sentencing.

Guilty but remorseful. Repentant.

He rolls his shoulders. *There's nothing else I can do. Just enjoy the night.* Looking down, he examines the weighted golden cuffs wrapped around his wrists and notes the way they shine against his tan skin. "Where did you guys get these from?" he asks, glancing up at the vampire responsible for his elaborate wardrobe.

"I have connections." Aries shrugs in the mirror's reflection. He's behind Nino at the counter in their master bathroom, putting makeup into his bag. "I borrowed them exclusively for tonight. Conceptualizing this with Jun as a side project has been thrilling. I'm so pleased that I could be here for the execution—although, I admit, I'm still disappointed about your foregoing the sword and shield."

Nino was only introduced to Aries Moralis earlier this afternoon, but already, he likes him. His face is lean, youthful but in a mature way—the visage of someone well traveled and astutely aware of the world at large. This distinction is heightened by the premature gray streaks in his thick dark brown hair.

"Carrying a sword and shield all night would have been a pain in the ass." Nino sets his shoulders back, taking in the heavy, ornate breastplate and tawny leather kilt, the elegant golden leaves strategically placed at his

shoulders to fasten his waist-length cape—vibrant red and regal. When he shifts, the light catches the subtle bronzing of his exposed shoulders and arms. “Even without the sword and shield, you and Jun went all the way. I thought I’d just have some foil wrapped around my wrists and a toga. But this is like *real* armor.”

Aries pauses, his pale blue eyes flickering up at Nino in the mirror’s reflection. “Foil? My God, man. I’m sorry, but—have you ever *met* Junichi Takayama? Do you know him personally?”

Nino laughs, flitting a strand of his impeccably coiffed waves away from his forehead. Aries has littered Nino’s mane with golden flecks as well. “Right. That was a severe miscalculation on my part. Thank you so much for doing this. I’m impressed.”

Aries bows. “It’s an honor. When Jun asked for my help, I jumped at the chance. I’m always grateful for an opportunity to travel. Plus, the timing lined up. Starting tomorrow, I’m in Shanghai for the next month and working on a production there.”

Nino turns to face Aries. “I’ve heard that the Athens aristocracy is...”

“Archaic?” Aries offers, his eyebrow raised. “Oppressive? A functioning mausoleum of vampire politics and ideologies?”

“Well... I was looking for something a little softer.” Grecian vampires come from very old families with ancient blood, like Haruka’s. But unlike Nino’s mate, they consider themselves to be royalty and are notoriously rigid about social etiquette and ranking.

Aries waves a hand. “No need. I take no offense. In fact, I always feel as if our aristocracy is teetering on the edge of some proverbial cliff—the rigid norms that we all adhere to are mere centimeters from an inevitable and much-needed collapse. My clan is based in Mykonos, but all of the royals in our aristocracy take themselves very seriously.”

“It sounds suffocating.”

“It is. Being here is refreshing—the fact that you and Haruka are dressing up like this, and that you allow me to call you both by your first names, is foreign to me. The royals—rather, the purebreds—at home would never allow that, or entertain this kind of event.”

Nino turns, scanning his appearance in the full-length mirror once more. “We definitely don’t take ourselves too seriously—we’d never call ourselves ‘royals.’ Yikes.”

“Yes, ‘yikes’ is an apt response. Sums it up perfectly.”

“It’s too bad. Living life that way and enforcing such strict, outdated rules, they can’t be enjoying themselves.”

“I do believe that’s the point?” Aries grins, but then his smile drops, eyes narrowing. He walks over to stand behind Nino, adjusting the back of his belt. “This isn’t fastened quite right.”

“Do you interact with the purebreds in your aristocracy?” Nino asks, standing still and lifting his arms slightly. “Seems like you would, given your success in the theater industry.”

Satisfied, Aries stands straight, his height level with Nino’s. “I haven’t, because they typically keep themselves separate from us lower-ranked vermin—well, unless we prove especially useful in some way. Unfortunately for me, I’ve been summoned.”

“Why? Who summoned you?”

“The purebreds of Athens. There’s a wedding next fall and they want me to design for the youngest son and his mate to be. A popular magazine has written a pretentious article about me, and it’s caught their attention. Weddings and proper formalwear aren’t really my thing, but Jun is going to help me. We’re trading favors.”

“I hope it turns out well,” Nino says.

“You and me both. I’ve grown quite fond of my head. I’d like to keep it on my neck, if possible.”

“*What—*” A knock at the door makes Nino pause. “Yes?” When it opens, Junichi pokes his head through the crack.

“Gentlemen, he is finished. Are we done in here?”

“We are,” Aries confirms.

Nino grins, his heart racing. “*Shit*, I’m excited. Is he mad?”

“There’s a lot of eye-rolling happening,” Junichi says. “But I don’t care because he looks fucking phenomenal. And speaking of fucking phenomenal, *you*.”

Nino moves toward the door. “Thanks. I can’t wait to see Haru.”

“Come, come.” Junichi leads them down the short hall and toward the formal dressing room, which houses a small stage, a three-paneled mirror and a closet full of Haruka’s formal kimonos and Nino’s suits.

“Shaping the hair was tricky,” Junichi continues. “But it’s the perfect length right now, so I think I nailed it.”

“If you implemented everything we discussed, I’m confident that you did,” Aries says as the three of them approach the sliding paper door. “My

task was easy, given that my muse is rather Herculean to begin with. This wasn't much of a stretch."

Junichi enters the room first, but Aries steps aside to let Nino pass. He enters, and the moment Nino sees his mate reflected in the mirrored panels in front of him, he stops. His pulse thrums in his temples as he breathes out. "Wow..."

"Behold," Junichi says, lifting his arm in a grand gesture. "My masterpiece."

"He's perfect!" Aries steps around Nino, walking forward to face Haruka and take him in. "Excellent work, Jun. You could pursue costume design if you truly wanted to. The taste level in combination with your technical skill and flair for drama... it's all here."

Junichi folds his arms. "This is fun on occasion, but I think I'd be an uptight and stressed-out asshole doing it all the time. I'd want everything to be perfect, but then I'd be held to obnoxious shit like production schedules, opening-night reviews and costume changes—*research* for historical accuracy. No thanks. You're a better man than me for managing all that."

"Mm." Aries nods. "I blame the production schedules for these gray hairs. You don't have any gray, even though we're the same age. How is that fair?"

The conversation between Junichi and Aries fades to the edges of Nino's psyche as he steps forward to stand directly below his mate on the pedestal. Junichi has perfectly swept Haruka's slightly overgrown hair up in neat sections so that it smoothly curves into points, giving the effect of blueish-black flames—or a moonlit ocean with its waves frozen in place. His dark toga is long, flowing and smartly draped all the way down to his ankles. Where Nino's exposed skin has received a subtle golden-bronzed treatment, Haruka's face, hands, arms and shoulders have been painted in a rich shade of sapphire blue.

Nino looks up at his mate, awestruck. "What do you think?"

Haruka's expression is flat as his eyes flicker down to Nino's face. "I feel like a clown."

"You don't look like one. You look beautiful. I think we chose well."

"Is this your true impression of me? God of the dead?"

Nino takes hold of his hands, then slowly brings them up toward his mouth. "Not usually, but at the moment, yes, a little. Your stoic demeanor matches this costume perfectly—"

“Dios mío, *do not* touch him.” Junichi stalks forward. “Please don’t mess up my hard work before anyone gets to see and appreciate it. Just restrain yourself for a bit, lover boy.”

Dropping Haruka’s hands, Nino frowns. “The whole night?”

“Well, most of it,” Junichi says, walking toward the closet and pulling a garment bag from inside. “Don’t smudge him—especially his face.”

Haruka smirks. “You did not think this through.”

Nino shakes his head, grinning. “Are you doing this on purpose? I feel like you’re very in character right now.”

Haruka places his index finger under Nino’s chin, raising his head. “You look delicious.” He slides the tip down, lightly tracing the length of Nino’s neck, past his Adam’s apple and stopping just atop the thick material of his breastplate. The sensation is feathery and makes his groin pulse. “I like you in a skirt,” Haruka says. “May we keep this?”

“I bought that fabric and made this especially for tonight,” Aries says. “All of his gold accessories are on loan, but yes, the toga, cape and kilt are yours to keep.”

Haruka raises an eyebrow, grinning. “Good.”

Sighing, Nino lifts his palms, resting them against the silk fabric at Haruka’s narrow waist. “Why do I suddenly feel like it’s going to be a very long night?”

“You’ll live.” Junichi checks his reflection in one of the mirrored panels. He places a white partial mask against the top half of his face. “Aries, are you sure you won’t come? We can sneak you inside. It won’t be a problem.”

Their guest shakes his head. “I must pass—my flight to Shanghai tomorrow morning is insanely early. But rest assured, the thought of rebelling against the staunch social norms engrained within me and crashing an aristocracy party is *very* appealing. Thank you for the kind offer.”

“Have it your way, darling.” In a flourish, Junichi whips the fabric of his cape so that it floats and moves behind him. As it settles against his shoulders, he clips it together just at his neck and over his fashionable suit. He turns, fanning out the floor-length cloak again as he stalks toward the door. The action reminds Nino of a great magician exiting the stage after a standing ovation.

“Let’s go, gentlemen,” Junichi says. “Asao is waiting with the car.” He disappears into the hallway, leaving the three of them gaping after him.

“Is it just me, or should he wear that all the time?” Aries smiles, then gestures for Nino and Haruka to leave first.

“It suits him.” Haruka firmly takes hold of Nino’s hand as he steps off the platform. “I envy his attire. Why couldn’t *I* have that costume? Why am I the only one painted in an ostentatious color? At what point in Greek mythology did Hades become *blue*?”

Nino squeezes his palm, preceding Haruka through the doorframe. “It’s a modern interpretation, and you look incredible. If you were the Phantom of the Opera, then what would I have been to match?”

“Hm. Perhaps Comte Philippe de Chagny?”

“No one knows who the fuck that is, Haru. That’s why me and Jun took creative control—this just isn’t your forte, tesoro. You’re good at so many things, but not this.”

“I cannot believe that you’re making me go out in public like this.”

“I don’t mean to eavesdrop, your grace,” Aries chimes in from behind as they round the corner into the foyer. “But you really do look wonderful. Believe me, everyone will think so. The result of Junichi’s effort is impeccable.”

Nino scrunches his nose as an idea pops into his head. “If nothing else, just look forward to later when we shower together and I can clean you off. That should be messy and fun—you like it when we get messy.”

Haruka huffs, shaking his head. “Aries, please pretend that you did not hear that.”

When Nino glances back, Aries winks. “Hear what?”

As they approach the foyer, Asao steps inside the threshold wearing a long wool coat with a navy-blue scarf neatly tied around his neck. Nino clenches his teeth. *Ah, hell...* Haruka’s mood is already sour. A snarky quip from his guardian and manservant is the last thing they need.

Asao tilts his head, examining the two of them. After a moment of pause, he looks directly at Haruka, his eyes soft as he smiles. “Hayato would have loved this. It’s right up his alley. Your mother would have fussed about it the entire time. She would have done it though, for him. God, I miss them. You two look great.”

Nino exhales in relief, then gives Haruka’s palm another firm squeeze. “Thanks, Asao.”

The manservant folds his arms. “So... you asked a Greek vampire to come all the way here to dress you up as Greek gods for a Halloween party? Seems rude. And excessive.”

Nino starts, frowning. “No—that wasn’t—”

“I knew nothing about this,” Haruka asserts. “But once I realized the irony, privately, I had similar concerns.”

“Kids these days would call this ‘problematic,’” Asao snarks.

Aries grins, laughing. “No, no. Jun and I have been friends for decades, and while the three of us brainstormed many possibilities, this was truly the best fit for them. Plus, I just so happened to have the necessary resources to pull it off well. It’s as simple as that.”

Asao nods in approval, then looks at Nino. “Alright, so he’s Hades, but who are you? Hercules?”

“Bingo.”

“I voted for Poseidon,” Aries says. “It would have been thrilling, makeup wise... and oh, the joy I would have had in procuring a proper trident—adorned with jewels, of course. Ugh. The drama. A man can only dream.”

“We don’t need a jewel-incrusted trident lying around the house,” Asao says. “Why not Zeus?”

Nino shrugs. “Zeus is old. And I didn’t want to wear a beard. It doesn’t suit me.”

“Zeus and Hades are also brothers,” Aries interjects. “So there’s a bit of awkwardness there with this being a couple’s costume. This is also the case with Poseidon, though—and technically, Hercules is Hades’s nephew...” Aries throws his hands up in defeat. “Anyway, Greek gods. It’s fine, it’s fine.”

Haruka pouts, blinking. “I would have liked to see you in a beard.”

“Noted,” Nino says. “Skirts and beards. Speaking of things we would have liked, I just realized... why aren’t you wearing the blue eye contacts? I know Jun bought them. He showed them to me last week.”

Haruka looks away. “I refused.”

Nino rolls his eyes.

“Um, excuse me?” Junichi pokes his head inside the frame, eyeing them from behind his half-mask. “What the hell? Can we leave? We’re going to be late!” He flips around, the silky fabric unexpectedly floating upward and toward Asao’s face, making him lean back just before Junichi disappears.

“If he whips that damn cape one more time, I’m going to grab it and yank him backward.” Asao storms out the door as well. Nino is about to bend and start putting on his sandals but pauses at his mate’s bubbly laughter beside him. “What is it?” Nino asks, relieved.

“I agree with Asao, and I retract my earlier statement,” Haruka says, smiling. “Jun should *not* wear that all the time.”

THREE

DISQUIET

[Is something wrong?]

Nino sighs as he stares at his phone. He types his response.

[No. I don't only call you when something is wrong.]

His brother's response swiftly pops up.

[Right. Since when?]

Nino glares at the text—the image of Giovanni's smirking face is crystal clear in his mind.

[Since now. Since you told me off in front of Haru in the back seat of a town car. I just want to check in sometimes. Can you stop ignoring my calls, please?]

His heart in his throat, Nino waits for his brother's response. He feels as if he's been waiting like this for the past two months—on edge and increasingly aware of Giovanni's unresponsiveness when he tries to reach him.

“Are you alright, my love?” Haruka asks. The sapphire makeup radiates against the soft light spilling in through the car windows. The moon is a

sharp white crescent set high in a vivid and clear sky—a spectrum of navy blue and stars.

The dreamlike ambience distracts Nino for a moment, and he smiles at his mate. “I’m okay. G is being an ass.”

“This is his perpetual state of being. At least he is responding?”

Nino sighs. “Well, you know I called him yesterday.”

“Yes.”

“He didn’t answer or text back, so I messaged him again before we left. I don’t know... I apologized to him, but it feels like he’s holding a grudge. I don’t know what to do.”

“Did something happen in Italy?” Junichi asks from the front seat, his head turned in Nino’s direction.

“It did, but I’ll tell you about it later.” Nino’s phone buzzes in his palm. He lifts the device to read the incoming message from Giovanni.

[I’m not ignoring you. I’m just busy and have a lot on my mind. I need some space. Let’s talk about it when you’re here for the wedding.]

Nino balks, his jaw dropping.

[That’s SIX MONTHS from now!]

Giovanni’s response comes quick.

[So? That’s like a week in vampire time. You’ll be fine. You’re a big boy now.]

Dropping his head back, Nino takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. *What the hell?*

“Whoa, the Ito Clan went all out for this,” Asao says, slowing the car to a crawl. When Nino looks beyond the glass, they’re pulling through a black iron gate covered in white cobwebs and decorated with large fake hairy spiders.

The windows of the estate glow with purple light in the darkness, and the surrounding mountains roll in the background like a hoard of shadowy,

looming monsters. The front garden is littered with rows and rows of jack-o'-lanterns large and small, their inner flames flickering brightly like laughter in their mouths.

"Is this how they do things in Tokyo?" Nino asks, staring out the window as Asao stops the car at the front double doors.

"Halloween is getting more popular there," Junichi answers. "I, for one, welcome this enthusiasm."

Nino sits back, smirking. "Even if Hisaki comes with it?" Ever since this family moved into their realm, the young punk rock star vampire Hisaki relentlessly visits Junichi's shop, much to the designer's annoyance.

"No," Junichi spits. "In that case, they can keep their Halloween parties if it means my shop can return to a Hisaki-free zone... little shit."

"Alright, kids, let's do this." Setting the car in park, Asao pulls something from the dashboard then places and adjusts it on his head. "I told Sydney I'd help him in the kitchen, and we're late." When he looks back at them, Nino realizes he's wearing a wool deerstalker cap with the earflaps fastened to the top.

Haruka gasps, his eyes wide. "He—he's Sherlock Holmes!"

Asao wiggles his eyebrows. "A brilliant deduction."

"Why couldn't we have done that? And Holmes has Watson! They are both well known."

Nino pouts. "I didn't want to be Watson—"

"Then you could have been Holmes, and *I* could have been Watson—or Moriarty—"

"Haru, are you going to spend the whole night complaining about your costume?" Nino asks. "Or are you going to trust me and try to have fun? When have I ever steered you wrong?" Between Giovanni giving him the cold shoulder, Nino's own ineptitude in shattering the salt-shaker and Haruka's displeasure, his patience is suddenly wearing thin.

God. It's like I can't do anything right lately. Why should I be anyone's father?

Soon, Asao is out of the car and opening the door for Nino. He climbs out, taking in the glowing lights and the rolling fog pouring from the front doors to the estate and onto the ground at their feet. He inhales deep, shaking off his frustration and taking in the crisp autumn air laced with wet leaves, wood-fire and smoke.

When Haruka stands at his side, he takes one of Nino's palms in both of his hands and looks into his eyes. "I apologize," he says. "I trust you. Always. You know this."

"I do." The tension in Nino's shoulders eases. "Thank you."

"I love you."

"Il mio cuore è solo tuo. Ti adoro."

My heart belongs to you only. I love you.

Haruka's gaze softens and Nino can sense his mate's stifled rosy aura swirling within him in a familiar way—the prelude to a knowing moment. A void, where everything around them ceases to exist and all that matters is the intensity, heat and love between them.

Nino shakes his head to rouse himself from the trance. "Don't look at me like that. I'm not supposed to kiss you or mess up your face. Let's go inside." Nino walks up the path, pulling his groaning mate along behind him.

"Then don't say those things to me," Haruka contends, a smile behind his rich voice. "You know how it affects me... Are you wearing underwear?"

Nino beams, casting a glance at Haruka as they walk side by side. "Should I say no?"

Haruka's eyes flicker down, then back up. "Yes."

Biting his lip, Nino snickers as they step over the threshold. Eerie instrumental music floats along the cool breeze of the entryway, which is also caped in heavy cobwebs and fake spiders.

In the foyer, the fog rolls thickly around their ankles, bubbling and churning like smoke in a witch's cauldron. Nino looks up. There are hundreds of tiny glass skulls glowing in purple hanging from the high ceiling, casting everything around them in ultraviolet light. When he holds his arm out, the golden flecks are peppery, like an interstellar constellation against his skin. Nino glances at his mate, and Haruka is literally glowing.

Having visited the Ito estate before tonight, he notices the change in the wall decor as well. Where there were once expensive, abstract modern art pieces, now there are antique framed photos of skeletons posed and dressed in formal attire. One wears a traditional British military uniform and stands beside a tall and skeletal horse, while another mimics the Mona Lisa, except this rendition shows her as nothing but skull and bones.

“Lord Bianchi, Lord Hirano. You honor us with your presence.” Hana Ito glides toward them as if she’s on roller skates, her elaborate white Victorian ball gown sweeping the floor. Her face, skin and hair are the same stark white as her dress. The front of her dramatic wig is piled with pin curls, while the back falls in ringlets over the puffy satin sleeves of her shoulders.

She smiles despite the dark circles smudged underneath her eyes. “Oh, you both look *marvelous*—Wait, let me guess... Hades and... not Zeus. Hercules?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Nino says, returning her smile and offering a slight bow. “Thank you for having us—this is incredible.”

“It is a pleasure to see you again, Hana,” Haruka says, mirroring Nino’s bow.

“You as well, your grace. It wouldn’t have been much of an affair without the two of you here. Ah, Asao, let me see...” Hana scans the older vampire, considering. Asao smoothly lifts a bent wooden smoking pipe from his large pocket and brings it to his lips. Hana gasps, clapping. “Sherlock!”

Asao pulls the pipe from his lips. “Precisely.”

“How thrilling, you handsome devil.” Hana floats over to Junichi next, her arms outstretched as her hips sway. “Speaking of handsome devils, is this mysterious masked man Mr. Takayama?”

Junichi bows, lifting one of Hana’s hands to his lips and placing a kiss there. “Good evening, my lady.”

Hana swoons, then snaps open a lacy white accordion fan. She waves it furiously with her free hand. “Heavens, please don’t let Ren catch us. The thought of his reaction makes me feel even more ghostly than I am now.”

Junichi stands straight, frowning. “Ren is here?”

“Yes, he’s out back—you can’t miss him with those colossal wings. We couldn’t even get him through the front door. Such a mess. Anywho...” She turns, lithe and graceful as she gestures toward the hallway behind her. “Cocktails are being served in the garden and there are appetizers in the main hall. Please, enjoy yourselves, my gracious lords.” She offers a bow before whisking off to the side to greet another guest, her full skirt sweeping and her arms like a ballerina’s.

“Drinks?” Junichi asks.

“Please,” Nino says. “I need something to take the edge off.”

“I’m going to inspect the ballroom,” Asao says, still holding his pipe to his lips. “I sense that there are games afoot.”

“I sense the woman who owns that izakaya that you drag me to every Friday night lately,” Junichi counters. “I thought you needed to help Sydney in the kitchen?” Sydney, one of the young vampires they rescued from Socotra, is now a permanent resident within Nino and Haru’s home. Acclimating Sydney to modern society was rough in the beginning, but lately, he’s been cultivating his interest in cuisine and making a name for himself within their local aristocracy.

“All shall reveal itself in due course.” Sticking the pipe between his lips, Asao precedes them down the hall. Junichi fans his cape out so that it moves stylishly as he walks behind Asao. Nino rolls his eyes and Haruka laughs as they link arms and trail behind.

The back garden is strewn with more intricately carved jack-o’-lanterns, glittering purple lights and even black pillars serving as cocktail tables. Each table holds a cluster of blood-red candles in the center—the flames flickering and the wax carelessly dripping onto the surface. The pool in the center of the snug space has also been treated so that the still water appears scarlet.

Immediately, Nino and Haruka are pulled into an inevitable cyclone of greetings, compliments and genial conversations. Tonight’s event is informal, so, much to Nino’s relief, most of the vampires they encounter keep the conversations lighthearted and free of official aristocracy affairs. No questions about the imposed tax rates, unwarranted suggestions for improving the refugee program or requests for Nino’s advice on how to deal with some personal business issue.

“So, when can we expect the little one within your clan?” The vampire in front of him is older and wears a black cape with a high collar that curves around his ears. His dark hair is slicked back, his face painted white, and an intentional drizzle of fake blood trails from the corner of his mouth and down his chin. “I heard that there’s a human doctor launching a surrogacy program in Himeji, and that you and Haruka are the first clients. How excellent. How long will it take to find a proper match for you? Are you excited to become a father? I, for one, am thrilled that the Hirano line will finally prosper. I feel strongly that Master Hayato would be pleased.”

Nino has no idea how this creature knows about their private business. He also doesn’t know why this vampire is dressed like a vampire. “I’m a

cliché!” he’d said, to which Haruka had thrown Nino a quick but distinct sideways glance before being dragged off by Hana. Nino has been left on his own to deal with this creature’s barrage of questions.

“I—We don’t know about the timing yet.” Nino inhales deep. He hasn’t even had his drink and this vampire is only heightening his stress.

“Yamaguchi-san, may I borrow his grace?” Junichi comes up from behind, his fingers lightly touching Nino’s elbow. “There are some things we need to discuss.”

“Oh, yes, yes. Of course.” Yamaguchi-san grins, his fangs forcefully exposed to emphasize his costume.

Nino bows as they head toward a stone bench just beside the pool, where Haruka is already sitting. As Nino approaches, he frowns at his mate. “You abandoned me.”

“I did not. Hana wanted to show me her latest acquisition—a book of historic ensembles by George Wither. First edition. I am not inclined toward fashion history, but it is an impressive procurement on her part. The condition of the manuscript was stunning. Very well preserved.”

“Fine. Then why not come back for me once you were finished?” Nino holds his hand out, and despite the confused furrow in his brow, Haruka takes it. He urges his mate to stand. “Yamaguchi is the worst.” Nino sits, taking his spot on the bench. Haruka understands and settles himself down against his thighs.

“I sent Jun,” he reasons, making himself comfortable against his lap. “If I had returned for you, then we’d both be trapped in an intrusive conversation.”

“And I don’t mind,” Jun says, sitting on the short bench beside them. “Just keep me away from Ren—Nino, your drink is behind you. I got you an old-fashioned.”

“Thank God.” Nino twists to his side and sees the drink sitting on the low pillar just behind his mate’s back. He brings it to his mouth, careful to avoid spilling it.

“You haven’t greeted Ren yet?” Haruka’s eyes are wide. “What are you waiting for?”

Junichi brings his own drink to his mouth. “Hell to freeze over.”

“Will you tell Ren about Doctor Jae’s residing with you for the short term?” Haruka asks.

“No. It’s none of his business.”

Haruka sighs, his back straight as Nino looks up at him. He drapes his free arm against his mate's lower back and hip, cradling him. The weight of Haruka offers Nino an odd contentment, or solidity, maybe, that he can't quite explain. He smiles to himself.

"I do understand the disdain that you hold for Ren as your source," Haruka explains. "And I am not playing devil's advocate, but it is unquestionably his business that you as his source will be housing and feeding another vampire."

Nino turns his head toward the walkway leading up to their bench. He speaks around the glass rim at his lips. "Hell is frozen..."

Ren's traditional robe is jet black and perfectly fitted to his tall frame as he strides. Two enormous, glistening dark wings are attached to his back, and his long hair is bone straight, cascading over his left shoulder and down to his waist. He draws closer and the light warms him. His face, chest and hands have been painted cherry red.

"Wow..." Nino blinks, staring up at him.

Ren's expression is flat as he lifts his chin. "Nino. *Haruka*."

"Hello, Ren." Haruka smiles, but he doesn't move from his seated position on Nino's lap. "It has been a long time. Are you well?"

"Well enough..." Ren's butterscotch-colored eyes scan the two of them and Junichi. He glares. "You all have come tonight dressed as... Europeans?"

Nino chokes in a laugh despite himself, almost spilling his drink on Haruka.

Ren narrows his eyes on Nino. "I suppose it isn't too much of a stretch for *you*."

Junichi speaks up. "No. I'm a character from a legendary Broadway show, and they're creatures of mythology—like you, tengu. Who made these insane wings?"

"You look great, Ren," Nino offers. "I love your costume." As part of Nino's acclimating to Japan and running their aristocracy together, Haruka taught him early on that the best way to counteract Ren's volatility is to show him sincere kindness. "*It is like handing him an infant*," Haruka once said. "*He doesn't know exactly what to do—only that he should not drop it.*"

Ren straightens, setting his shoulders back as if it pains him to accept the compliment. "Thank you... Junichi, will you walk with me? Or will you

further publicly shame me by pretending like I don't exist?"

Sighing heavily, Junichi stands and places his glass down on the bench before he offers an arm to Ren. "I'll be back—save my seat, please."

They watch the tall, dramatic pair stroll down the path and into a clustered group of vampires. Everyone steps aside, parting like the Red Sea to make room for Ren's magnificent wings and Junichi's flowing cape.

"Not telling Ren about Doctor Davies will only create difficulties later," Haruka says. "Ren is prone to tantrums—he has always been this way. When he finds out, he will have one, and Junichi will bear the brunt of it."

Nino tilts his head, looking up at him. "Are you a fortune teller? Why are you being ominous right now?"

Twisting slightly, Haruka lifts one hand to hold Nino's chin with his long blue fingers. "Because I am Hades—lord of the underworld. Does this not match my aesthetic tonight?"

"No, your aesthetic is sexy as hell and powerful, not foreboding. Kiss me before Jun comes back and yells at us?"

Haruka hums a breathy little sound of satisfaction as he smiles, leans down and does as requested, softly meeting Nino's mouth as they part their lips for a decadent, teasing kiss. With his drink back on the low table and both hands free, they indulge. Nino wraps both arms around his mate's waist to secure his position like a seatbelt. When Haruka lifts, Nino's heart is fluttery like a butterfly on the wind. "Is my mouth blue?" he whispers.

"No." Haruka touches his fingertips to Nino's lips, examining them. "This concerns me. How difficult will this makeup be to remove later tonight?"

Nino shrugs, embracing the warmth of his body in his arms. "Don't know. We'll get it off, though. I promise."

"My love, why are you stressed? I have not deliberately read your thoughts, but I sense the unease in your nature. Is it because of Giovanni?"

He leans in, kissing Haruka's exposed bicep. "Partially. I have a lot on my mind."

"Will you talk with me when we've returned home? Or would you rather not discuss it?"

"We can... but I guess it depends on how distracted we get between my skirt and cleaning you up."

Haruka's bubbly laugh rings out once more. He lifts both palms to hold Nino's face. "Truly, I want you naked under this skirt. Can that be

arranged?”

“It can.” Nino’s smile broadens. “Per te farei qualsiasi cosa. What will you do if I make it happen?”

Sighing, Haruka brushes his nose against Nino’s as he whispers, “Touch you. Kiss you... suck you.”

“Jesus.” Nino’s head spins as he parts his lips again and his groin practically catches fire. “Mi hai fatto perdere la testa...”

You make me lose my mind. The sensation and taste of Haruka’s tongue sliding into his mouth makes Nino groan. He meets his mate’s intention while pulling him in closer and tighter against the hardness of his shaft.

“Ex—excuse me?”

Nino’s mouth freezes against Haruka’s. Lifting, he turns his head to the side and folds his kiss-swollen lips. A young vampire with his face painted in full skeleton makeup blinks at the two of them.

“I... I wanted to greet you properly, Lord Hirano.” Hisaki lifts his chin, then bows deeply. “I love your costume. You look exquisite. Celestial.”

Haruka’s eyes are cold. “Will you not acknowledge my mate?”

Hisaki shifts his gaze to Nino, then nods. “Hello, Lord Bianchi.”

“Hi, Hisaki.”

“Thank you for the compliment,” Haruka says. “Is there something that we can help you with?”

The young vampire stands straighter and takes a breath. “Yes, well, I have a concert in Osaka next month. I would be delighted if you could attend... Of course, I would provide VIP access and tickets for you. It would be my honor to have your support. Th-there’s even a song I’ve written that was inspired by you.”

“I understand. Please submit your request formally to Asao. Upon receipt, we will respond within the week. As you know, he manages all appointments for the estate.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I know, but—I will do as you’ve asked, my lord. And... thank you for attending tonight. It’s a pleasure to see you out like this. Truly.” Hisaki hastily bows once more before rushing down the path.

Nino looks up at his husband. “You big meanie.”

Haruka scoffs. “I have seen this behavior countless times—he romanticizes me solely based on my appearance and the inherent allure of my nature. He is openly insolent toward you, and I will not tolerate his behavior.”

“He’s a child with an inappropriate crush. He’s brazen, though. I’ll give him that. Little jerk... When I graduate to manipulating people with my aura, can I try Hisaki first?”

Haruka chuckles. “No. Naturally, I should be your first test subject. This way, if you kill me, there is less damage for Asao to conceal.”

Drawing back, Nino scowls. “I will *not* kill you.”

“I meant that as a joke. Obviously, I can defend myself if necessary.”

“Anyway, are you going to his concert—”

“Absolutely not.”

Nino snorts. “But VIP! We could go together and make out backstage?”

“Tempting, but still, no. Besides, I can have you right here and now.” Haruka blinks his sangria eyes, confident in his assessment.

The heat in Nino’s groin kicks up again, like a rush of liquid fire straight down his spine and directly to his shaft. “You’re doing that frisky devilish thing tonight. I love it.”

Haruka tilts his head and steals a swift kiss. “From what I understand, this is appropriate behavior for a party of this nature.”

“Dios mío, I walk away from you two for ten minutes and you’re all over each other.” Junichi walks up, his mask in one hand and the other running through the tight curls atop his head.

“How was the Tour de Ren?” Nino asks.

“I survived... and fed, which was convenient, actually. I won’t need to go all the way to Hiroshima this week.” Junichi huffs, picking up his glass and sitting back down on the bench beside them. “The aristocracy at large is at peace once more—having seen me with my monster. Everything is as it should be.”

Nino raises an eyebrow. “You know, if you link up with Jae as a source and companion after he awakens, it could help solve that issue. I mean, I could be wrong, but he seems like the much healthier choice for you?” Nino has deliberately avoided using the terms “bond” and “mate,” knowing Junichi’s aversion to those specific words.

Junichi pulls his glass from his lips, one corner of his mouth upturned. “Who’s to say that Jae would be open to that? Maybe he won’t want anything more to do with me once he becomes a full vampire.”

“He will,” Nino confirms, unblinking.

“Mm.” Haruka nods. “Without question.”

“You two are confident.” Junichi turns his head to stare across the blood-red pool. “I like Jae, but... I don’t know. One step at a time, alright? Just relax.”

A moment of pause settles around them, and the collective sounds of laughter, chit-chat, music and even the autumn wind rustling the leaves rush to the forefront of Nino’s senses. He likens it to a playlist—sound effects for a successful Halloween party.

Haruka stretches his arms up, then exhales. “This is fun.”

Nino draws back. “Holy shit—did you hear that, Jun? *Please* corroborate this moment for me.”

“I did,” Jun confirms. “Somewhere, an angel just earned their halo.”

“What are the chances that you’ll dance with me in the ballroom? A slow song.” Nino grins. Haruka stares down at him, silent as he contemplates.

“Yes, okay...” Haruka stands, smoothing the fabric of his toga. “But I require another glass of wine first.”

“Easily done,” Nino says, standing and taking his hand.

The night had started off somewhat ominously, but as Nino looks around and registers the twinkling lights, the brisk, earthy air and the feel of Haruka’s hand firmly gripping his own, he realizes that he, too, is having some much-needed fun.

FOUR

PROFOUND

The important business of getting underneath Nino's skirt had been a fulfilling venture indeed. However, what had not been enjoyable was the process of removing the sapphire makeup from Haruka's face and upper body. They'd spent at least twenty minutes together in the shower—vigorously wiping his skin and shampooing the gel out of his hair. By the end of it, Haruka felt raw, as if he'd been a filthy street cat that someone had adopted, taken in and thoroughly scrubbed. To make matters worse, when he looked in the mirror, his skin still blushed in a light pastel blue.

Like an Easter egg.

"We'll give it another try in the morning." Nino yawns, rolling onto his side as Haruka climbs into bed. "I don't know what the hell he used, but it's almost gone now."

Haruka folds his legs as he sits upright. He runs his fingers through the top of his damp hair. He doesn't want to think about it anymore. "Are you too tired to discuss your concerns?" As he looks down at his mate, Haruka's heart skips a beat. Nino's eyes are closed, but his beautiful tanned skin is still flush from the hot shower.

He looks like a sleeping angel lying beside him—a handsome and generous gift from the heavens. In Haruka's estimation, he is, and if his love for Nino grows any more, he worries that his heart might burst.

Nino yawns again, his golden-hazel eyes opening like slits. "Mm. Morning is better." He reaches out, taking hold of Haruka's wrist and urging him down. Haruka complies, adjusting until he lies on his side and Nino makes himself comfortable against his spine. He wraps his arms around Haruka's waist, tightly molding the curves and contours of their bodies

together. When they're settled, Nino's chest gently rises and falls at his back, like a steady pulse at the heart of their embrace.

Closing his eyes, Haruka inhales his mate's cinnamon-mahogany scent, letting it fill his lungs and soothe his nature. Combined with the heat, assurance and firmness of Nino's body behind him, sleep overtakes Haruka swiftly. Deep and peaceful. Restful. The absolute best kind he has ever known.

IN THE MORNING, Haruka opens his eyes to the familiar sensation of his mate running his fingertip from the center of his forehead down the bridge of his nose. Sometimes, he awakens to a soft kiss there.

"Buongiorno, amore mio." Nino is propped upright with his elbow against the pillow as he looks down at Haruka. His leg rests on top of Haruka's thigh, their bodies lazily entwined. "You can't sleep late today. We have an appointment with the contractor for the new clinic in Takahashi, remember?"

Groaning, Haruka turns on his side and into his mate, further entangling their legs so that Nino's thigh is at his groin, and his head now rests within the concave of his armpit against the pillow. It is awkward, but strangely perfect. Haruka closes his eyes.

Nino chuckles. "Don't ignore me."

"I'm not ignoring you." Haruka's voice is muffled. "I'm ignoring my obligations. There is a difference."

"Hm..." Nino breathes out, the sweetness of it caressing Haruka's cheek as he lies still. Soon, Nino crawls his fingers underneath Haruka's sleep shirt, then drags them up and down, delicately tracing his naked spine. "Can we talk?"

Haruka shifts his head so that he can see Nino's face. "Of course." His mate stares over his body, seemingly into the distance and contemplating something.

"This weird situation with Giovanni... it bothers me. But what's becoming more apparent to me is that I... I don't know how to be a parent, Haru. I don't know how—or if I'm capable of being a good father."

Haruka blinks, his mind and body tense. A moment ago, this was a languid, typical morning in bed. Suddenly, his chest is tight, as if the smoke detector has sounded. He isn't sure if the house is truly on fire, but he is alert and concerned as he stares up at Nino. "My love, no one knows how to be a parent. It is largely a matter of addressing situations as they come, and as best we can, given our resources and intentions."

"You're right, I know that, but..." Nino sighs, falling onto his back beside Haruka and staring at the ceiling. "Based on everything you and Asao have told me, your father was amazing. And Asao himself is so consistent—stable and faithful, like a rock. Until recently, my father avoided me for almost my entire life because of his guilt about what my uncle did to me, and G..." He inhales deep, bringing one hand up to the top of his coppery head and massaging his scalp.

"My relationship with my brother is... I don't know. Giovanni took care of me and made sure I had what I needed, but he was forced into looking out for me, you know? As we got older, there were moments where I could see his resentment. It was palpable at times. But I didn't have anyone else except him and Cellina. I know he loves me, but he's the only example of a father figure that I have, and it isn't exactly healthy."

Both of Nino's hands are in his hair as he lies against the pillow. To Haruka, this gesture is akin to an SOS. He rolls, adjusting himself so that he leans into his mate's side. His elbow is on the pillow beside Nino's head and his palm rests atop his chest.

Nino goes on, rubbing his hands against his eyes and covering his face. "I know that you lost your dad when you were twelve, but... at least you have a *healthy* example of what a father should be—or how you should interact with a child. I don't. What if we have this kid and I fuck up, Haru? What if our family is dysfunctional because of me and my weird issues?"

Haruka waits silently while Nino takes another deep breath. When he drops his palms from his face, Haruka reaches up with his free hand to cup his cheek. "You will fuck up."

Nino's eyes widen as he draws back into the pillow. "D-did you just... What?"

"You will," Haruka reiterates. "And I will, too, inevitably, because neither of us is perfect. I will not lie and tell you otherwise. We will make mistakes, but you should not be afraid of this, because..."

Haruka pauses, considering what he feels about his mate. The irrefutable truth of it and how to properly express it. To comfort him. “Because I know the soul of you—the love, patience and compassion you embody. These things that you have given to *me*, over and over again. I am confident that you will show our child these same traits. It is who you are at your foundation, Nino, and that is what matters.”

Caressing his fingertips along his mate’s jawline, Haruka stares into his eyes, wanting to convey his infinite trust and confidence. Needing Nino to understand.

Nino blinks, his chest slowly rising and falling. “I can’t believe you just said ‘fuck.’”

“It was a strange sensation.”

“It caught me off guard...”

“I won’t do it again.”

Nino huffs in a weak smile, his eyes still glassy with tears. “Do you really want to do this with me—have this kid, I mean? Are you positive?”

“There is no one, nor can there ever be anyone else on this Earth, that I would want to have a child with. You have been a light and refuge in my darkest hours, Nino. You are my angel, and it is *impossible* that you would be anything other than an incredible father—because you are an incredible creature. There is no other scenario.” Leaning closer, Haruka presses their lips together. When he lifts, his voice is low and steady. “I believe in you. But please tell me what we can do to help you believe in yourself?”

Grinning, Nino slides his hands up Haruka’s back. His aura is fizzing against Haruka’s flesh like the initial sparks of a fire. “The things you say, and with that tone and the look in your eyes... It’s like you know exactly how to soothe my soul.”

“I try.”

“I’ll think about it,” Nino says, sighing once more. “I might need to talk to someone professional to help me sort through this shit.”

“Then we’ll find someone. I love you and I trust you, with every fiber of my being.”

“I know, tesoro. You’ve never called me your angel before... I like it.”

“Do you?” Haruka drags his body upright, simultaneously resting his hand against Nino’s thigh and following the curve between his legs.

“Mm... I do.” Nino smiles and bites his bottom lip as he lifts his knees. Scooting his tailbone down further on the bed, he gaps his thighs wide, like

an invitation. Haruka shifts between his knees in a fluid motion. As time progresses, the inherent energy they share choreographs their physical movements—two bodies in perfect harmony, like the gravitational pull of the Earth flowing in rhythm with the churning waves of the ocean.

Nino swallows, the swell of his Adam's apple bobbing within the lovely stretch of his neck. "You can say it more often, if you want to..."

Playfully, Haruka slips his fingertips underneath Nino's sleep shirt, feeling his mate's taut belly tremble as he caresses below his navel. Haruka lifts his chin, his gaze focused. "You are my angel." When he reaches the waist of his mate's briefs, he tucks one finger between his skin and the fabric. Lazily, he drags it down and toward Nino's hip, the way one might slide their finger across a cake covered in frothy, thick icing.

Nino moans in a soft, clipped sound while stretching his neck against the pillow. Slowly, Haruka grips the waist with both hands and shifts the fabric down, just enough to free his mate's shaft from the restriction. Haruka sighs from the delicious view of his hardness and the steady rise and fall of his beautifully sculpted chest. His lips are parted, his coppery hair mussed, and his golden eyes are hooded with desire, watching in anticipation.

Haruka's spine is hot, his own energy bubbling and responding to Nino's vitality and woodsy scent. Something within him, something primal and very old, delights in this: his mate, his one true partner and love, undone and longing for pleasure. For a passionate release and deep fulfillment that only Haruka can give.

Tilting his head, Haruka examines the thick hardness of him, running his fingertips along the tip and feeling the wetness there. Nino's frame twitches underneath him, a little spasm of movement as he breathes out, watching while Haruka brings his own fingertip to his mouth and sucks.

Nino's eyes alight in the morning sunshine pouring in through the patio doors. His voice is soft, imploring. "Give me everything... I want you, tesoro. All of you. *Please.*"

Pulling his finger from his mouth, Haruka grins. "You do not need to beg."

Nino closes his eyes and lies back against the pillow. "I don't want you to hold back at all right now. I just want to feel you."

Exhaling, Haruka unfurls the enclosed weight of his vampiric aura. The nature of it is heavy, intricate and laced with a seductive, voracious magic

that even he cannot explain. In the past and before Nino, he rarely ever released his energy this way. To give his true nature what it desires means holding its target captive—spellbound like a predator using something sweet to entice its prey. Rich and decadent honey in a bear trap, or a rare nectar in the center of a spider's web.

This, combined with his immeasurable love for Nino flowing all throughout his being, makes Haruka cautious. He worries that the biological and emotional core of him might overpower or dominate his mate in a way that he would never intend to, especially given Nino's traumatic past.

But time and time again—even from the very beginning—Nino has always held strong. Haruka doesn't understand why, but somehow, his mate is able to withstand the allure of his aura where others have not. It has never rendered him senseless, violent or frenzied. Nino indulges in it, healthily and sincerely. Willingly, but controlled.

It frees Haruka in a way he never thought possible.

"Yes." Nino gasps, groaning against the bedsheets as Haruka's aura hovers thick, enveloping them in an enchanting haze. With his eyes glowing bright, Haruka takes hold of his mate's shaft, intentionally gripping and pulling in his learned way—a knowing manner in which Nino's body faithfully delights and responds to him.

Nino's chest heaves, his core writhing and his skin rosy and blush. He is stunning in the throes of ecstasy. A work of art that Haruka wishes to capture and cherish within the walls and folds of his mind. If he were a shameless creature, he'd pay an obscene amount of money to have Nino painted this way—uninhibited and flawless, an erotic portrait of reference for his eyes only.

He pulls, teases and grips with his hands, reveling in the sticky wetness of Nino's pleasure until he is rewarded with his mate's release. It spills against his fingers and Nino's belly, his mate gasping with his eyes clenched shut and his head thrown back.

Taking him in, Haruka considers Nino's observation from last night and agrees. He absolutely prefers things messy.

When Nino opens his eyes, they meet Haruka's. His voice is a rough whisper. "Come here."

Obedient, Haruka lifts, leaning between his gapped thighs as Nino lazily takes hold of Haruka's sleep shirt and drags it up his body while sliding his hands up the center of his back. Together, they make quick work of

removing and tossing the shirt aside before he lies flat into the damp heat of Nino's stomach, skin to skin. Haruka nuzzles and licks the concave of his neck. Nino lifts his chin and they're moving together once more—melding in an unspoken, effortless rhythm. The skies and the seas. The planets orbiting the sun in the galaxy.

Mesmerized by the allure and scent of him, Haruka bites down. Nino wraps his arms around his waist and back, coiling around him as if holding on for dear life.

As Haruka's fangs elongate deep into Nino's flesh, his mate's fingertips press dimples into his back and spine. He pulls, swallowing, and the taste of him is perfection. Spicy, but sweet. Vibrant. To Haruka, drinking Nino's blood is like consuming the life and exuberance at the height of summer, when the sun is high in a cloudless sky and every flower is in full bloom. But underneath this, there's a subtle, complex layer of something more—the heat and oak of a vigorous fire.

As he indulges, he pours his love and confidence into Nino. The honor he feels in being his mate—that Nino distinctly chose and trusted in him. The assurance he has in their ability to accomplish anything in life together. Everything.

Haruka pulls up, licking his neck to clean the space where he fed. His eyes are still alighted as he raises his head, but he starts when he looks into his mate's face. Tears are running from the corners of his glowing apricot eyes.

He lifts a palm to hold Nino's face. "My love, what is it?"

Nino smiles as he exhales, satiated against the pillow. "Your mind—your aura and the way you love—it's just... profound, Haru. Beautiful."

Sitting up a little more, Haruka traces the line of his jaw with his fingers, searching with his eyes. "But... if I overwhelm you, please be honest with me and I'll restrain—"

"No." Nino laces his hands into Haruka's hair and urges him back down. "I'm alright, I promise." He lifts his chin, pressing their mouths together in a kiss before drawing back and staring into his eyes. "Do you want to read me?"

A spark of excitement glimmers in Haruka's chest, but he swallows. "I don't have to. I believe you if you tell me that all is well."

Nino's smile broadens. "You're cute, but I know how much you want this. Go ahead, I'm open."

Unable to stifle his grin, Haruka leans down to bring their foreheads together. He closes his eyes, indulging in the essence of him as he reaches into Nino's mind and thoughts. The sensation is like stepping through a heavy veil and into a comforting space—his favorite library where every book is open and the words of every page effortlessly seep into his skin.

He misses this, greatly. For a time, they had no choice but to read each other's thoughts every day. Always having access to and knowing his mate's mind was comfortable for Haruka. In the very early days of their relationship, Nino had been easy for him to read.

But as their relationship deepens and becomes more complex and layered with shared experiences, Haruka finds that he is not nearly as naturally perceptive as his mate. Often, he feels as if he is in a dark cavern with a flashlight—able to see some things but never the entire scope of his surroundings.

Doing this, opening their minds to each other, the cavern becomes flooded with light and everything between them is exposed.

He inhales deep, sensing the sincere pleasure and joy that fills Nino's mind. There are muddy spots of worry and insecurity, but on the whole, there is calm. Deep contentment. He opens his eyes, resting his palms against Nino's chest. "You could never disappoint me. Giovanni is not disappointed in you either."

"I know." Nino sighs. "Ignore that. It's just a nagging thing that flares up sometimes. It'll probably always be there, but I manage it. And you never need to worry about restraining yourself. We've talked about this—so many times."

Haruka traces his lips, memorizing the exact shape and softness of them. "Like you, I imagine it is a nagging thing that will always reside within me, based on my past experiences. But I do relax. Much more often now than I ever have in my life."

"You do," Nino confirms, wrapping his fingers around Haruka's wrist to hold his hand still. "And I love it. Every time." He parts his lips, then takes the tip of Haruka's finger between his teeth. He bites, softly breaking the skin there before sucking and sliding it against his tongue.

Haruka pauses, watching him and considering. "I know, but I am always thoughtful of you. I never want you to feel overwhelmed because of me."

Pulling Haruka's finger from the warmth of his mouth, Nino frowns with his nose upturned. Everything falls still as they look into each other's

eyes, saying nothing. Haruka is waiting for his response, but gasps when Nino wraps his arms around him and hurls him to the side.

He lands on his back in a soft tumble of laughter, tangled limbs and bedsheets until their positions are switched. Nino hovers above him in the morning sunlight, haloed like a literal angel as Haruka stares up at him in awe. Sometimes, he has an out-of-body experience where he cannot fathom how he has met and become mated with this kind, intuitive and delicious vampire. It is beyond his scope of understanding.

“Why would I ever feel ‘overwhelmed’ by you?” Nino asks. “The idea is oxymoronic. It *isn’t* possible. And I’ve told you a million times—I can handle you.”

“Alright,” Haruka says, exhaling and letting the subject rest. Nino does handle him, undeniably. But it never hurts to be vigilant. To be considerate and sensitive to another’s past experiences. “Thank you for letting me into your thoughts.”

“You’re welcome. I know you enjoy doing that with me, so I want to try more. It just reminds me of the whole ordeal with Lajos, when that was the only way we could communicate. But... I don’t want us bound by that.”

“We never have to do it if it truly disturbs you.”

“No, I want to... just like I want you to be even less restrained. I want us to work on these things. To be more open with each other.” Nino sighs. The scent of him wafts like spiced-mahogany powder brushing Haruka’s face. “We should shower and start getting ready, but did you come earlier? I was drunk on your aura so I wasn’t paying attention.”

Haruka shakes his head against the pillow, stifling a smile. “I fed from you deeply, so I am more than satisfied.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.” Nino bends, kissing down the center of his naked chest. He pauses at his belly button, his fingers curled into the waist of his pajama pants. “Did you come—yes or no?”

“Nino, if we should start getting—*Ah*—” Haruka clenches from a sharp pinch inside his thigh. It stings, but also creates a flurry of arousal in his groin. Nino pulls Haruka’s sleep pants down past his hips to expose him, then presses his lips to the skin just below his navel.

“Shall I please his lordship here?” Nino smirks from between his gaped thighs. “Or would he prefer to come in the shower?”

While Nino speaks, his fingers slide and tease lower, caressing the sensitive flesh underneath his shaft, then down into the chasm of his cheeks

and toward his opening. Haruka shifts his hips, the throb of his length almost painful as he chases Nino's fingertips. Pulling himself together enough to fully undress and walk to the shower sounds like an insurmountable task—like walking across the Sahara Desert with an erection.

As he lifts his head from the pillow, his deep voice passes through his lips on a breath. "Here, please?"

Still grinning, Nino dips his head. When the wet heat of his mouth slides and licks over his hardness, Haruka's energy radiates and surges once more from the bloom of pleasure racing throughout his body—across every inch of his skin.

He *was* satisfied having fed from Nino. Truly, he had been content. But this is his existence now, and with this attentive, honeyed vampire. Always above and beyond anything he could ever want. More than anything he could have ever imagined.

APRIL

FIVE

GRATITUDE

“Where did I...”

Haruka abruptly turns in the silence of his library, contemplating. He scans the tall bookcases lining the back wall, the rich wood shining in the glare of sunlight streaming through the windows.

“Ah.” He pulls a thick book with a faded red spine from the shelf, then stalks back across the tatami and toward the low floor table in the center of the room. He opens the book, skimming as he crouches and sits atop one of the ornately designed cushions. Against the wash of brown, beige and tan dominating the rest of the room, the pattern of the floor pillows is bold—rich, satiny blue fabric with oversized golden chrysanthemums.

He finds the exact page he’s looking for and sets the weighted hardback open on the table before him. Grabbing his pen, he leans over his notebook to continue writing his observations regarding the doctor’s awakening.

... it is unknown. Five months after the awakening, the subject’s vampiric biology continues to thrive and advance despite the absence of a dense community to support their needs. Of note:

Physical

- *Marked vision improvement of 20/50 to 20/10 (confirmed)*
- *Increased physical strength (anecdotal evidence)*
- *Eye color transformation (confirmed)*
- *Supernatural resilience in scarring and scraping of skin (anecdotal)*

“What are you doing?”

Haruka looks up from his journal to find Asao standing in the doorframe of the library. “Updating my record on Doctor Jae’s progress post his awakening.”

“That’s nice, but have you finalized the Hashimoto-Arima confirmation certificate?” Asao’s hands are in his pockets as he strolls forward. He walks with the confidence of someone who has asked a question but already knows the answer.

Sighing, Haruka drops his pen and rubs his palms against his face. “No.”

Asao sits on the cushion opposite him, folding his legs and leaning against the table with his elbows. “The preliminary meeting is in two days.”

“I am aware.”

“Then why isn’t it finished?” He shakes his head, smirking. “It’s amazing. Your personality is the mirror image of Aika’s, but this damn procrastinating you do—one hundred percent Hayato.”

Haruka’s eyes are flat. “There is a problem.”

“Oh? Do tell.”

“The couple requested that the bonding certificate trace five hundred years of their respective genealogies.”

Asao scoffs, folding his arms. “That’s even before my time. The standard for these certificates is only three hundred years.”

“Yes, but it’s a good thing I went back farther than usual, because after much digging through government records and corresponding with my colleagues in Fukuoka and Nagasaki, I discovered that the Arima and Hashimoto family lines have already crossed.”

“Ah.” Asao smirks. “Incest. The leading occupational hazard for you vampire Historians.”

“Precisely. If these two vampires form a bond, their family lines will have crossed twice. In my professional opinion, it is not a good arrangement.”

Rubbing his fingers through the top of his short, spiky salt-and-pepper hair, Asao casts his eyes up to the ceiling. “How close are they?”

“Cousins.”

“Sheesh. How could they not know this already?”

Haruka sighs, massaging his temples with his fingertips. “The records were altered and concealed because of a scandal. The vampires involved in

the circumstance are all deceased—their indiscretions buried with them. I do not wish to unearth this.”

Most days, Haruka genuinely enjoys his work and research. Uncovering the mysteries of each clan’s ancestry across eons and cultures. Then, he presents his findings in a linear, neatly arranged document to be both publicly heralded within a festive gathering of society and privately cherished by those families involved.

In this instance, though, not particularly.

Asao shrugs. “This revelation doesn’t necessarily ruin the engagement. Some vamps care about that, but some old-schoolers don’t mind. It’s ultimately up to them. You have to tell them.”

“I know.” Haruka sighs. “I will... eventually.”

“Better to get it over with. What they do afterward is their choice. How far back did you cross-check your lineage with Nino’s?”

Haruka narrows his eyes in disbelief. “Are you joking?”

Asao laughs, lifting his palms in submission. “I’m just asking a question... especially since Nino’s mother was Japanese—”

“I cross-checked our family lines three times, going back five hundred years to start, then seven.” Haruka folds his arms in a huff. As if he wouldn’t have checked something so critically important.

His manservant leans against the table, eyebrow raised. “Did you do this before or after you bonded?”

Haruka blinks. “B-before!”

“That’s your story and you’re sticking to it, eh? I’m just saying, I never saw you doing in-depth research when we first got back, and this bond definitely wasn’t something the two of you planned in advance, so...”

“Enough.” He sighs, pouting. “How is it that the integrity of my relationship is suddenly being called into question? I resent the insinuation.” Regardless of when he checked, he had checked. Painstakingly, to be certain. The Bianchi and Hirano family lines have never crossed until now, and that is the only thing that matters.

At Asao’s silence, Haruka glances over at the older vampire to find him still smirking and watching him. “*What?*” Haruka spits.

Asao stretches his arms up, then lazily cradles his head with his palms. “We’re much better off, though, aren’t we?”

Exhaling, Haruka allows the tension to fall from his shoulders. “Yes, we are.”

“Those years... weeks, *months* were miserable. It was a hard road and I hated seeing you like that, Haruka. I hated every second of it. But look at you now.”

Haruka nods, contemplating their lives prior to Nino. That time...

It is an unspoken and heavy thing for Haruka. He existed then—moving, living and breathing. Walking, talking and carrying on with everyday matters as expected of him. He knows that he did. But all of it occurred within a dense fog. A dark and empty space where his mind and body were on autopilot, not unlike an artificially intelligent life-form void of organic emotion. Programmed for the most basic and polite functioning.

Asao’s gaze softens as he looks past Haruka’s shoulder and toward the bright light of the window behind him. “They’d love him. You know that.”

Haruka’s chest warms, his cheeks flush. “I like to think so.”

“And my God they’d be over the moon about this kid. I’m looking forward to having a little one around again. Your wish is finally coming true, after all these years. You’d given up hope, hadn’t you?”

“I had. I was not expecting this.”

Asao smiles. “Are you ready?”

He nods. “I am. Nino is having some reservations, but I think he’s just nervous.”

Waving a hand, Asao shakes his head. “He’ll be fine. Hayato was nervous before you were born, too.”

“Really?” Haruka’s eyes brighten with interest.

“Mm. He was worried about all sorts of things—whether or not he could keep you safe, or how much or little to feed you. He worried that you’d grow up to dislike him, because his relationship with your grandfather was strained. That worried him the most, I think. He wanted a much stronger bond with you than what he had with his own father.”

Haruka is listening, but a blanket of melancholy settles in his chest. His father, Hayato, had worried about the nature of their relationship. But in the end, they didn’t have much time together to build one. Not truly. “I think we would have had a wonderful relationship,” Haruka offers.

“I *know* you did. You may not have had as many years together as we would have liked, but the time you did have is packed with good memories, isn’t it?”

Multiple images and sensations flash across Haruka’s mind: How he used to be small enough to fit perfectly within the hollow of his father’s

folded legs as they sat on the tatami together. The smell of cedar as he hid in the ambient dark of an old chest, waiting to be found, and then the flood of excitement and bright light with Hayato's beaming face staring down at him. Heavy rain tapping against glass while he lay wrapped securely in his mother's arms. The rosy smell of her as his father's voice soothed him to sleep.

Haruka takes a breath, suddenly overwhelmed by the clarity and intensity of his reverie. He hadn't actively recalled those memories in quite some time because of their bittersweet nature. "Yes," he admits, his chest tight. "I have very good memories."

"Damn straight." Asao grins, pushing up from the table to stand. "I can't believe today is the day. Is Nino close to the estate? The clinic appointment is in a couple hours—and don't forget you're having dinner with Abe-san to talk about the land contract."

"Yes, I know, and Nino should be here any minute, but..." Haruka rubs his fingers through the back of his hair, keeping his gaze down. This moment of recollection is rare for him. Strange. He doesn't like focusing on his past because of the severe pain there, like reaching back to touch a very hot stove.

He never talks about that life—the life of an orphan, and then a broken man with no hope, walking through the monotony of each day, empty—but it feels appropriate to do so in this moment, somehow.

"Asao, I... I am sorry for the hardship that you endured because of my behavior after my bond broke. I have never said so, but I know that attending to me back then was very difficult."

"You don't need to apologize to me," Asao says. "You were wounded and bleeding out for decades. Thankfully, you finally let someone help you."

Haruka meets his gaze, sincere. "I should have let *you* help me, but... I was so content and justified in my misery. I was blinded by it. Regardless, thank you for being patient with me."

"We should be thanking Mr. Sunshine for thawing you out."

"Is that what you call me behind my back? I guess there are worse things." Nino stands in the doorway, business casual in a white lightweight sweater, dark slacks and a knee-length trench coat the color of sandstone. Before anyone can answer, he lifts his hands, flashing a bright smile. "Wait—you're both here. Don't move."

Drawing back, Asao frowns “Who? *Me?*”

“No.” Haruka stands from the table and rolls his shoulders. “He means me.”

Nino’s eyes glow to life like a fiery sunset. The air within the room shifts. Soon, the effervescent spark of Nino’s energy snakes around Haruka’s frame from the shoulders down and he relaxes, completely submitting to the sensation and trusting in his mate.

His body levitates higher, then carefully moves around the curve of the table, around Asao and toward Nino just inside the doorframe.

“Should I go grab a mop in case he explodes?” Asao snarks.

“Not funny—and gross,” Nino says, never taking his eyes off of Haruka as he draws nearer. Haruka’s mind is calm, his frame relaxed as he hovers like a human-shaped drone across the tatami. When he’s just in front of Nino, he expects to be placed feetfirst onto the floor. Instead, Nino opens his arms and Haruka gently bumps into his chest, huffing out a breath from the impact. Nino holds him in a secure embrace before releasing Haruka from his energy.

“Hello, gorgeous.” Nino hugs him tight, and with his arms now free and his feet planted, Haruka wraps his arms around his shoulders. “How was that time?”

“It was excellent.” Haruka inhales, filling himself with his scent. “Better every day.”

“All that practice has paid off. Good job, Nino.” Asao steps up beside them and offers Nino a firm pat on the back. “I don’t think I actually have a mop, so you saved me a lot of trouble.”

Nino rolls his eyes as he lifts from the hug. “Tesoro, are you ready? We should leave so we get there a little early.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drive?” Asao asks. “I don’t mind.”

“I think this is something that we should do on our own,” Nino says. “Do you agree?”

Haruka nods, his heart full of anticipation and gratitude. “Yes. But thank you for the offer, Asao. I appreciate it.”

SIX

TOGETHER

The waiting room of the small clinic is quiet. Nino looks at his wristwatch. They've only been sitting down for about three minutes, but his pulse is racing. His knee is bouncing without his direct consent. He rests a palm on his thigh to stop it.

The space is bright from the fluorescent lights lining the ceiling. Long rectangular windows across from them artfully showcase a row of cherry blossom trees in full bloom. The wind gusts, making the branches and flowers sway wild and silent like a vision from a daydream. It calms him in a much-needed way.

"Lord Bianchi? We're ready for you to come back."

Standing, Nino inhales a breath. He can't believe he's about to do this. He *wants* to do this, but the reality of it still shocks him despite having prepared for it and talked about it for almost seven months. Even saying it in his mind still makes his chest tight and his breath hitch in a panicked way.

A baby... Jesus Christ.

In his defense, he hadn't considered having a child at all for the first one hundred and twelve years of his life. Then, within the span of a year, he's progressed from contemplating the idea of a child to physically standing in a clinic and looking at a nurse who's about to tell him to ejaculate into a cup.

It's a little jarring.

Swallowing hard, he takes two steps, then pauses and turns. Haruka is sitting in the chair and innocently staring up at him with doe-like sangria eyes. Nino raises his eyebrows. "What are you doing?"

Haruka blinks. “What do you mean?”

“Aren’t you coming with me?”

“I—Should I?”

“Yes.” Nino whips around to the nurse. “He can come in with me, right?”

The nurse straightens, smiling. “Y-yes! Of course he can.”

Nino turns back, his voice an octave higher than normal. “Let’s go!”

His mate stands, quickly joining Nino at his side as he follows the nurse through the door leading to the examination rooms. It feels too cold as they move down the hall, as the air in medical facilities always does. This can’t possibly be helpful for what he needs to accomplish today.

When they step into the room, both the temperature and light are warmer compared with the harsh, sterile nature of the hallway and lobby. It’s sparse, but simple and clean with typical doctor’s office accommodations—stiff wooden chairs, an examination table, a sink, television and a rack of magazines.

“The cups are there.” The nurse points to a small shelf beneath the sink that’s filled with empty plastic cups. “Please use one of those for the sample, and when you’re done, you can just leave it on the counter beside the sink for us to retrieve. Do you have any questions?”

Nino grins, feeling more awkward than he ever has in his entire life. “Nope. I think we’re good.”

“Wonderful. We’ll see you at the nurses’ desk when you’re done.” He nods, waiting for the nurse to close the door behind her. When she does, Nino turns, his eyes narrowed.

“Harukaaaa.”

His mate huffs a laugh and rubs his palms against his face. Nino shakes his head.

“For fuck’s sake—you thought I’d come in here by myself? Look at some gross porn magazines to get myself off?”

His palms still covering his face, Haruka’s voice is muffled. “I hadn’t... thought about it. Explicitly.”

“Well *I* have.” Nino takes the step needed to place himself within Haruka’s space. He takes hold of his wrists, gently pulling his hands down. His face is red. Nino smiles. “Are you embarrassed?”

“Slightly.”

“Welcome to the club. You’re unbelievable.”

Haruka chuckles in his bubbly way, lowering his head as Nino holds on to his wrists. Dipping, Nino presses a soft kiss to the mole on Haruka's nose. "You've been pretty damn explicit about wanting *me* to give the sample."

"Because I—I want... I would like our first child to resemble you."

Nino's face reddens as he grins. "That's fine, but if you want a baby from me, you have to help make it."

Haruka lifts his head, understanding in his eyes. Nino tilts, brushing their lips together and whispering against his mate's mouth, "Make love to me, tesoro. Make me come."

The softness in Haruka's eyes shifts, intensifies with a familiar heat and resolve. The panther takes over. Without another word, Haruka tangles his long fingers within the back of Nino's hair and brings their mouths together. They collide in a decadent fury of lips and passion, their mouths open as their tongues twist together, tasting and exploring.

The rhythm of their movement is slow but concentrated. Nino gasps, trying to keep up and match his mate's energy as he always does. But when he senses Haruka's luscious, intoxicating aura surrounding him and filling the small space of the room, he doesn't want to think or keep up anymore. He closes his eyes, intentionally letting go so that he can only feel his mate's hands sliding down, undressing him as he trembles from the cool brush of fingertips against his skin.

Something in his mind shifts to where his sense of Haruka's vampiric energy intensifies—his mate's body and soul manifested and cocooning him in a gauzy web of mist, sweet roses and earth.

Somehow, the sensation of it deepens, like free-falling into a black hole for hours until suddenly, everything brightens. The scene around him slowly takes shape, richly swirling with color, light and ambience.

He doesn't understand how, but he's making love in a rain-soaked garden, inhaling the scent of blooming flowers in the damp air. He feels the wet, sticky grass pressed against his naked back and the delicious weight and slickness of his mate's body on top of him. Lush green hedges surround them, tall and protecting in a secluded space. Isolated. Just the two of them together.

When Nino opens his eyes, Haruka is there. His beautiful, glowing red gaze is focused on him and backdropped against a steely-gray sky rolling with frothy clouds.

Nino reaches for him, needing even more, threading his fingers into the thick of Haruka's hair. He pulls him down into a kiss but his breath hitches. His body, nature, everything within him spikes. Tenses. The rain falls even harder around them, drenching his hair and skin, pelting him and puddling at his shoulders, hips and spine as he writhes against the earth.

Every sensation is pure ecstasy, and he welcomes it—allows it to take his body and have its way. The release is liberating but serene. A soft but overwhelming pleasure he's never known before. At least, not until Haruka. This vampire with ancient blood—an eminent, powerful force completely devoted to and protective of its mate. The singular creature that it has chosen to love and rely on.

The elaborate scene dissolves in his mind—gently darkens and fades to nothing as if he's waking from a dream.

When he opens his eyes, he's met with dim yellow light and plain beige walls. He's sitting upright on the edge of the examination table (not on his back, not in wet grass), and he's only half dressed. Haruka is staring at him from underneath furrowed brows, his hand frozen on his naked thigh as he stands in the gap of Nino's legs.

There's concern in his voice. "Are you with me?"

Inhaling a breath and blowing it out, Nino nods. He runs his hand against the back of his head. "Yeah... o-of course." Taking inventory, his body feels limp, utterly satiated, and his mind blanketed in a profound sense of serenity.

That sensation... the experience has never been so strong. So vividly clear. There have always been inklings of it when he's fed from Haruka—like tasting a hint of something in a recipe. Notes of cherry and cocoa in a glass of wine, or a hint of lemon in a marinade. But never like this. Never truly transcendent, as if he were hallucinating.

Nino blinks and realizes Haruka is watching him with concern. He lifts his palms to hold his mate's face. "I'm fine, Haru, I promise." He leans in, kissing his mouth and lingering there until Haruka responds. After he returns the affection, Nino raises from the kiss, chuckling. "We didn't even bother grabbing the—"

"It is done," Haruka says, eyeing him with the same hesitation.

"Oh..." Nino looks down, and Haruka is holding the sealed cup in his hand. Nino meets his eyes, grinning. "Indeed it is."

INSIDE THE PARKED CAR, Nino flattens his palms against his cheeks as he sits behind the steering wheel.

That sumptuous scene. The garden, heavy rain and hedges. The scent of roses in the air and the damp weight of Haruka against him—it keeps replaying in his mind, but faded. A shadow of something that’s stirred him deeply within his core.

His cheeks are hot. He keeps blushing.

“What happened to you inside the clinic?”

Nino turns to see Haruka watching him with that same concerned expression on his face as he waits for an answer. The entire time he was getting dressed, and even as they walked to the nurses’ station to finish the appointment, Haruka kept staring as if he were expecting him to sprout horns and a tail.

“I don’t know.” Nino takes a deep breath, then exhales, still patting his face. “Why? What did I look like on your end?”

“You seemed... euphoric. But when I spoke to you, you were not as responsive as you usually are. It was unsettling, so I finished the task and waited for you to come to your senses.”

“Huh...” Turning forward, Nino stares out the windshield, noticing the flutter of pale pink flower petals littering the glass. His entire body is still relaxed. Maybe even a bit spellbound, as if he’d been under some kind of soothing hypnosis and he’s gradually waking up. “I don’t remember you saying anything.”

“Nino, *what happened?* I didn’t do anything differently than normal, please tell—”

“Calm down, tesoro. I’m fine—better than, honestly. I... I don’t know what exactly happened, but I think it was me. Not you.”

“Go on.”

He rests back against the seat, dropping his hands into his lap and closing his eyes, recalling the situation to his mind to pick it apart. “I always tell you that when I feed from you, the taste of your blood reminds me of a rose garden and rain. It’s what I see, vaguely.”

“Yes...”

“Well, this time, and even though I wasn’t feeding from you, I... I let your energy take over. I always try to meet you halfway, but... I don’t

know. You felt really *good* and I've been fucking stressed and I didn't want to think or do for once, so it kind of swept me away?" Lazily, Nino turns his head, but he's surprised when he's met with Haruka's horrified gaze. He reaches out, taking hold of his mate's hand.

"Not in a bad way!" he assures him. "It was amazing. I had this scenic vision of you and me in this place, but everything was so clear and I could *feel* you all around me. I thought I was submitting to your aura all this time when we made love, but maybe I haven't been? Not really. This was something totally different. A deeper level."

The horrified expression is gone, but something still isn't right. Nino squeezes his hand. "Talk to me."

Haruka shakes his head. "I do not like this. My nature is too old and compelling, and I do not wish for you to lose control or submit to me to a point where you lose yourself. I should be more careful going forward."

Nino shifts his gaze back toward the windshield. "So, I dug a little deeper and saw a new side of you, a new side of us—which I loved because it helped me to relax—but I'm cut off? You won't give me that again?" He glances from the corners of his eyes. Haruka's head is turned, looking forward at the snowfall of petals swirling outside the glass.

"Haru, why are we *always* having this conversation? It's like you're afraid of..." A thought suddenly occurs to Nino, making his brow crease. "Why do you think that your nature is overwhelming and too old? Who made you feel like this about your aura?" Nino stares at his mate's profile, waiting. This topic never seems to go away. Never completely.

Nino would be remiss if he didn't acknowledge his mate's obvious growth over the past two years. But this insecurity in Haruka is always there. It hovers like a small dark rain cloud within the otherwise bright blue sky of their relationship.

"Was it Yuna?" Nino presses, his voice quiet in the silence of the car. Opening up and talking about his problems, his wants and needs, even his past—these things are difficult for Haruka. Nino knows this, so he's patient. He shifts their hands so that their fingers entwine, waiting.

"Not just Yuna," Haruka finally answers, keeping his eyes focused on the view past the windshield. "But she, too, made it very clear that my energy was overbearing, and she did not appreciate feeling subjugated by me in any way. I don't blame her for that."

"Okay... Did someone else say these things to you?"

Holding his hand a little tighter, Haruka shifts his gaze down to his lap. “Nino, I—I do not like to talk about my past.”

“I know. But sometimes I wish you would, so I can understand why you feel the way you do. Just think, what if I never told you about what happened to me when I was little? How would you feel, not knowing about that?”

Shaking his head, Haruka rubs his free hand against his face. “I...”

Nino waits, but nothing. He nods. “If you’re uncomfortable, it’s okay. But I think this conversation is important. I’ll wait until you’re ready.” He puts his foot on the brake, about to push the start button for the ignition, but his mate sighs. Haruka avoids Nino’s eyes as he speaks.

“Many, many years ago, after Yuna but before settling in Devonshire, I traveled. I met many creatures who expressed a variety of responses to my aura, some positive but predominantly negative and unwarranted. On one specific occasion, I believed that I had entered a safe, consenting arrangement, but things went horribly wrong.”

Haruka takes a silent breath, bringing his palm to his forehead once more. “That creature blamed *me* and the raw allure of my aura for their forceful behavior. They did and said things to me—called me names that I... I had never been addressed and treated in such a way that truly shamed me, Nino. Deeply. And I—I would *never* want you to think of me that way, or for my nature to overwhelm you.”

Haruka’s palm is pressed hard to his face, his skin bright red. Nino leans over, pulling him into his embrace. It’s awkward, tugging at him from across the passenger seat and with Haruka’s face in the curve of Nino’s shoulder, but as he wraps his arms around him, he doesn’t care.

Haruka’s voice is hoarse as the words continue pouring out. “You have given me *everything* I have ever wanted, and now with us growing our family... I just wish to be careful.”

Nino stares in awe out the passenger-side window, his throat tight from his mate’s confession. Truthfully, he wants to know more about this “one specific occasion.” He wants to know what this demonic creature said and did to traumatize and gaslight him this way about his nature—and if Nino had to guess, his sexuality. The things that Haruka likes and prefers but Nino has to fight tooth and nail to get him to openly admit.

He wants to know, but he won’t ask Haruka to repeat the words and relive the hurt. This is far enough.

Grasping Haruka's shoulders, Nino urges him upright so that they face each other. Haruka is shaking his head, one palm still plastered against his eyes and nose. "I am sorry, Nino." He inhales a breath, attempting to wipe his face with his fingertips. "Today has been very strange for me, emotionally. But I am genuinely happy and grateful. I—Your reaction to me inside the clinic surprised me. Truly, I would never—"

"Hey." Nino pulls his hand down, then rests their foreheads together. "Breathe for me? Just breathe." He pulses their shared energy outward, filling the small space with radiant light. Love and comfort. Shaky, Haruka does as asked. When Nino feels his heartbeat calm and aligned with his own, he speaks.

"Your energy is compelling. It is old and exquisite—but it is *not* controlling. I have never once felt 'overwhelmed' by you, and it does not make me do anything." He reaches down, clasping their hands between them. "Your nature... When you let it go and allow me to feel you, it touches me, but always as an offer. Never a demand. Today, *I* chose to let it have me. I said yes, completely, and it gave me something glorious."

Nino sits up, meeting Haruka's fretful burgundy eyes and smiling. "I think I've been pulling at the edges of this with you for a while. I always feel like there's something inside you, like you have more to give, and I finally tapped into it today. But you don't need to be scared of that, Haru. Do you know why?"

Squeezing his palms, Haruka shakes his head. Nino goes on. "Because I trust you. You said you know the soul of me. Well, I know *you*, and no matter what we do or how deep we go, I know I'm always safe with you. Even from the start—meeting you in London and going to your house to study—I was drawn to you because I felt safe. The love you give is like a shelter. If Yuna and those other vampires couldn't see who you truly are, that's their issue, Haru. Not yours."

Haruka finally meets his gaze, and the tension in Nino's chest eases a bit. "I won't cut you off," he says. "I wouldn't do that to you."

Nino tilts his head and places a quick kiss upside his nose. "Please don't. I never want you to restrain yourself. And frankly, why does Yuna's opinion even matter? It took you nine tries to bond with her. We bonded on the first try, so my opinion should carry *all* the weight. You two shouldn't have even been bonded. You weren't compatible."

Finally, Haruka smiles. "We should not have. That is correct."

Nino huffs. “I also want to know who this other, ‘one specific occasion’ fucking vampire is and what the *fuck* they said and did to you... but I’ll drop it.”

Haruka leans in, brushing his lips against Nino’s. “You sound like your brother.”

“I’m irritated.”

“Don’t be.” Haruka closes his eyes, placing a soft, teasing kiss on his mouth. Nino growls, channeling the annoyance he feels into hunger and pushing into his mate. When Haruka eventually lifts, Nino gasps from the loss of him.

“You gave me a child today,” Haruka whispers.

“I did.” Nino grins, his cheeks reddening once more. “Well, the beginning of one, anyway.”

Haruka draws his cool fingertips across Nino’s lips. “What should I do to express my gratitude?”

“Hm.” Nino’s eyebrow quirks up. “When you get home from dinner tonight, I want a repeat of this afternoon—except this time, I want you on your back, with your thighs gaped open to me as I push inside you. And I want your aura *fully* bloomed and you writhing and making those sexy little sounds from your throat that tell me I’m doing an excellent job. May I have that?”

“Yes,” Haruka breathes, sprinkling kisses against his neck. “You can have that right now.”

“You’re having dinner with Abe-san in an hour.”

“To hell with Abe-san.”

Nino laughs, draws back and kisses him on his lips. “Tonight. Trust me, I’ll make it worth the wait.” He unwraps himself from Haruka’s arms and turns to finally start the vehicle. When he hears Haruka’s voice, there’s a smile behind it.

“I have no doubt.”

AFTER HARUKA HAS LEFT for his dinner appointment and Asao has returned from dropping him off, Nino goes looking for the manservant. He finds him cooking in the kitchen.

He steps inside, and the lighting is intimate with the setting sun beyond the patio doors. Sesame oil, soy sauce, ginger, onion and radish are just a few of the scents floating through the air and teasing his nose. Tempting his tastebuds. “Where’s Sydney?” Nino asks.

“He’s at the Ito Clan’s house.”

“Again?”

“Yeah. I have a feeling Hisaki is up to something. This is the third time this month.”

“Poor Syd.” Nino stalks toward the table and pulls out a chair. “He’s so excited about us leaving for Italy next week. He’s never been.”

Asao glances over his shoulder. “I’m excited, too. Hell, I haven’t been in forever.”

“You didn’t have to cook for the two of us. I could have thrown something together.”

“I don’t mind. Today is an exciting day, with the clinic appointment and all. Let’s celebrate. Go ahead and grab a bottle from the wine rack.”

“Sure.” Nino stands and heads toward the pantry.

“Did everything go smoothly today?” Asao asks, lifting the top of a large pot and dipping a ladle inside to stir.

“It did. For the most part.”

Asao turns his head, his thick brows furrowed. “What does that mean?”

Bottle in hand, Nino goes to the counter and retrieves the opener from the designated drawer. “Can I ask you about something?”

“You can always ask, but I won’t guarantee an answer.”

Nino chuckles as he works the cork loose. “After things ended with Yuna, you and Haru traveled quite a bit, yeah?”

“We did.”

“Was there... maybe a turning point? A distinct moment—or place or person—that changed things and led to your settling in Devonshire?” With the bottle open, he walks to the cabinet near Asao’s head to retrieve two glasses. The manservant is still hovering over the stove, his hands busy but his mouth silent.

Glasses in hand, Nino prods. “Well?”

“You’re digging up old, buried bones right now. Did you ask Haruka about this, directly?”

“I did, but... you know how he is.”

“Vague. Reluctant.”

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s his business. And it’s the past. The most important thing is that he’s a million times better now than he was back then, and I attribute one hundred percent of that to you. Take comfort in that?”

Nino nods, carrying their glasses over to the bottle. “I do. Absolutely.” He manages his task, pouring carefully. A waft of nostalgia hits, reminding him of his bartending days—the shine of clean glasses lining shelves, the smells of sweet and bitter liquors under soft, ambient lighting. “Sometimes I just think... if I knew exactly what he went through, I’d understand his behavior better, you know? His worries and why he reacts the way he does sometimes. I’d know what I was fighting against.”

When Nino glances over his shoulder, Asao is pulling two bowls from the cabinet beside the stove. “I disagree,” the manservant says. “I don’t think you need to know the details.”

“You don’t think there’s value in me knowing?”

“Well, that’s a different question. Is there value in you knowing—maybe? But do you *need* to know?” Asao shakes his head. “Nah. You know enough.”

Picking up the wine glasses, Nino carries them to the oak table. A moment later, Asao joins him, placing a hearty, steaming bowl of stew in front of him. He sets his own bowl on the circular placemat before sitting in the chair across from him.

“Haruka isn’t like you,” Asao goes on. “It’s very, very difficult for him to talk about the people and situations that hurt him. But he does open up for you—which is more than he ever has. You see it too, don’t you?”

“I do. Of course. He’s like a completely different person compared with when we first met. Even in the two years we’ve been bonded, he’s opened up more.”

“Exactly. That’s what matters most—not the specific details of what he went through in the past. Don’t dig up and scrutinize old bones. Let them lie and keep moving forward together. That’s where the good stuff is.” Asao claps his hands to bless the food and Nino follows his lead. “Itadakimasu.”

“Itadakimasu,” Nino repeats, then picks up his ladle. “I hear you. Thanks for that reminder.”

Asao scoops a healthy portion of vegetables and soup onto his ladle and blows. “Of course. I’m just glad it all worked out. *God*, was I rooting for

you. I really thought he'd stay frigid and push you away, but thankfully, he just melted. Softened right up for you."

"I wouldn't say he 'just melted.'" Nino grins, picking up his chopsticks as well and fishing for noodles to load up his spoon. From his perspective, it definitely was not that easy or certain.

After Asao takes a bite and makes a satisfied sound in his throat, he counters. "You have no idea. Listen. He went to Italy *without* me. That was the first time I'd let him out of my sight in decades, Nino. Decades. I was always worried about him and watching him, you know? For a while there, I wasn't completely sure he wouldn't intentionally hurt himself. But when you showed up, I knew he'd be fine with you. I knew it was right."

"How did you know?" Nino asks, curious.

"First, he let you in the house. He wouldn't even let that girl he was feeding from come in—he always went over to see her at Emory's estate. Then, it was your conversations. I was listening a lot in the beginning."

Nino's face falls flat. "Yeah. Eavesdropping."

Asao shrugs. "Call it what you want. But it was the first time in forever that he was... enjoying talking with someone. Not just talking because he had to—because it's a pain in the ass but the polite thing to do given his rank. I could tell he was trying with you, and he was nervous. It was... I was happy about it. Really relieved." Asao takes hold of his wine glass, then raises it. "Anyway, enough reminiscing."

"Are you getting weepy?" Nino asks, grinning.

"Shut up. Cheers to you, Mr. Sunshine, and the little vamp brightening our nest soon."

Shaking his head, Nino lifts his glass. "Cheers."

Asao takes a healthy sip then smacks his lips, obviously pleased with Nino's wine selection. He smiles. "You're going to be an awesome dad. You know that, right?"

"I don't know that, but I appreciate the vote of confidence."

"You will." Asao winks, refilling his soup ladle with vegetables. "I'm never wrong about these things."

ITALY

SEVEN

CONFESSIONS

The morning after Cellina and Giovanni's bonding ceremony is warm and hazy, the air damp, golden and teeming with spring flowers. The estate where everyone is staying oversees Lake Como, which is sprawling and churning in aqua blue before Nino as he sits on the terrace. The surrounding mountains loom in cool green shadows.

His coffee cup is soothing between his palms. Aside from the bright whistling of sparrows in the trees and the ambient hush of water hitting the shore, it's quiet.

"Are you the only one up so far?"

Cellina's comforting voice registers behind him in perfect harmony with the atmosphere.

Nino twists to view her. "Morning. I think so?"

With her own coffee in hand, she sits beside him on the wooden bench, then fans out the length of her casual, flowy dress. "Is Haru still sleeping? It's so late—I thought for sure I'd be the last one up."

Nino chuckles. "Haru is a relic. If he could sleep all day and stay up all night reading and studying, he would. If there's nothing pressing that he has to get up early for, it's not happening."

"Ah, right. He was nocturnal after you got kidnapped around this time last year, yeah?"

"He was." Nino frowns, remembering that time. "It was a pain in the ass to get him out of that. And I wasn't 'kidnapped.' I prefer the term 'vanished,' or 'abducted.' I'm not a kid."

She twists with her coffee, her knees hitting his in an affectionate bump. "You're certainly not. Sorry. But you have a youthful heart. It's a good

thing.”

Nino smirks. “Is it?”

“Of course. It’s what I love most about you. Why are you sitting out here alone?”

Nino inhales deep, filling his lungs with the balmy spring air and cool breeze. “Yesterday, Jae asked me to help him with controlling his aura, so I figured I’d get up and just hang out. But he hasn’t surfaced yet.”

“Mm.” Cellina takes a sip of her coffee. “Well, he and Junichi are a newly bonded couple. I’m positive that they’re in the throes of passion right now... Those first few days after your brother and me bonded were—”

“Nooooo.”

The space falls silent between them as Nino shakes his head. Cellina bumps his knee with hers once more. “Nino—”

“No.” He laughs. “No thank you. I’m not interested.”

Cellina lifts her chin, indignant. “I thought you didn’t want me to treat you like a kid?”

“That doesn’t mean I want you to divulge your sexual exploits with my brother!”

“You’re so rude.” She takes another sip as Nino chuckles. When she’s finished, she glances at him. “Speaking of your brother, he’s been working up the nerve to talk to you.”

Nino draws back, frowning. “Why? Since when does G lack confidence in anything—especially when it comes to telling *me* off.”

“You’d be surprised,” she says. “He thinks about you a lot, Nino. So much.”

“I find that hard to believe. He’s been ignoring me for six months because he’s tired of me being a thorn in his side. He’s done with me.”

Cellina shakes her head. “That isn’t it at all. But he’ll tell you. Just... be patient with him?”

Nino glances out across the lake, which seems more alive as the sun climbs a little higher in the sky. The stacked houses lining the perimeter are an array of rust, mustard and taupe—like manmade mountains cultivated from red rock, sunlight and sand.

The idea of his being “patient” with Giovanni feels ludicrous. Hasn’t it always been the other way around?

“Have you been practicing at manipulating your energy more?” Cellina asks. “The last time we talked about it, you told me that you had frozen Ren

with your aura.”

“I did. He was the first person outside of Haru that I tried it on. It’s pretty easy for me now, but I don’t have nearly the level of finite control that Haru does.”

“Yet.” Cellina lifts a shoulder, smiling.

“Sure. Radiating my energy as a shield is much easier now, too. I barely have to think about it.” He does this now, feeling the power and vigor of his aura within himself and flaring it outward so that it covers them both on the bench. The world around them becomes filtered in golden-crimson light.

“Very nice. Your energy has always been so comforting.” Cellina leans into him, and Nino returns the gesture, snuggling into her shoulder.

“Thanks.” Nino smiles. “Me and Asao tested the strength of this shield once. He couldn’t even break it with a metal baseball bat.”

Cellina sits up. “What the fuck? Why were you doing that?”

“We wanted to test it! Haru wasn’t around, so don’t tell him. He doesn’t know we did that.”

“Oh my God—”

The sharp tap of knuckles hitting glass makes Cellina turn and look over her shoulder. Nino already senses and knows it’s his brother.

“Hey,” Giovanni says.

“Hey yourself,” Cellina says. “Did you know that Nino’s shield can withstand a metal baseball bat?”

There’s a long pause while Nino closes his eyes and takes another sip.

“No,” Giovanni says. “I was not aware of that strange fact. Why do we know this?”

“Because Asao tried to break it,” Cellina says, “but he couldn’t.”

“Why the fuck does Asao own a metal baseball bat?”

Nino sighs. “I don’t question Asao about why he owns the things he does.”

“Weird.”

“Oh, and don’t tell Haru,” Cellina chirps. “He wasn’t there.”

Giovanni scoffs. “I’ll bet he wasn’t. Are you busy? Do you have a moment to talk?”

Nino tilts his head backward, viewing his brother upside down as he stands behind them, filtered in sunset from outside of his shield. “Are you talking to me? Is this our official biannual conversation?” Cellina elbows him in his side.

“Yes,” Giovanni says. “Do you have time or not?”

The protection and solidity of Nino’s aura dissipates. Like a vacuum, it draws into him, settling within his core. “I do,” he says, standing. He sets his empty coffee mug on the side table and stretches his arms up. “Do you want to talk here?”

“No,” Giovanni says. “Let’s walk.” He takes a few steps toward a stone path that leads down to the lake shore, but then turns back to Cellina. “They’re going to set lunch up for everyone out here. We’ll be back by the time they’re ready.”

“Kaay. Be nice.”

“I’m always nice.”

Nino rolls his eyes, stepping ahead of his brother on the speckled path. Soon, Giovanni meets his casual stride. “A metal baseball bat, huh?”

“It was Asao’s idea.”

“I’m not surprised. How are things going with the surrogate? Cellina told me you’re starting the first transfer soon?”

“Yeah, when we get back to Japan, it’s pretty much full speed ahead. Jae’s taken care of everything—the identities of both the donor and carrier are anonymous to us, although Jae did disclose that the carrier is a Socotra refugee. Once we know that the transfer is a success, Haru will start doing blood draws for her weekly. Everything is in place.”

“This is happening pretty fast...” Giovanni glances over, his eyebrow raised. “You excited?”

“I am. And nervous. A lot of things can go wrong. Plus, the thought of an actual child depending on me is scary.”

Shifting his gaze ahead, Giovanni nods. “It’s terrifying. And very hard. It never stops being hard.”

Nino sighs, reading between the lines. “G, give me a break, alright? I haven’t even called you in six months—”

“That’s not what I mean.” Giovanni stops along the path where a stone wall emerges as a barrier between the lake shore and the trail. He runs his fingers through the length of his wavy brown hair. “Look, this is... Father and Cellina have been badgering me to talk to you for months, and I know it’s overdue but I just... Will you listen? I just need you to listen.”

Swallowing, Nino sits along the edge of the low wall, preparing himself for whatever’s coming. Since they’ve barely spoken since October, he

doesn't think he's done anything wrong, but he can't help scanning his memory to make sure. "Yeah, what is it?"

Giovanni paces, inhaling deep and then blowing out a breath. He stops and looks at Nino. "Do you remember right after Mom died, when Dad got sick and I disappeared?"

"Yeah, of course."

"And you started leaving peaches outside of my door, but then I tripped over them and yelled at you?"

Nino folds his arms, thinking back to that time. It's fuzzy in his mind—disjointed flashes of photos without context, but with a melancholy and raw overlay. "I remember you eating peaches with me late at night when you came home from meetings sometimes, but I don't remember you tripping or yelling at me..."

Giovanni steps toward the wall and plops down, hunching with his elbows against his thighs and running both of his hands into his hair. Nino glances over at him, confused. "Why?"

His brother takes another breath, his broad shoulders rising and falling. "Because that night was the worst night of my life. After we found out Mom had died, I ran away from Father and the estate because I... I just needed some time alone. When I finally came home, he ripped me to shreds.

"He told me that he and Mom hadn't raised me to be a pathetic coward—running away from my responsibilities and sticking my cock in anything that moves. He told me that they had wasted their time with me—that I was worthless and that Mom would be ashamed of me. He promised that he would end my life if I kept dishonoring our clan name."

The air around them stills. Tenses. Nino can feel the stress of it in his throat and temples. He remembers those words explicitly, because he overheard them that night. The rage and frenzy in his father's voice from behind the closed door. The dim yellow light shining from underneath the door sweep and the dark hallway where he sat crouched against the wall. All of it washes over him as if it were yesterday.

Giovanni goes on, still stooped and with his fingers massaging his scalp. "Later that night, when I left my room, you'd put a pile of peaches outside my door. I didn't see them so I tripped. I guess you had been waiting there—God only knows how long—but when I saw you, I started screaming at you, just like how Father had yelled at me.

“But then you started crying, and I... It’s like I saw myself and what I was doing, and it *crushed* me. Everything. The things Father had said about me... Even though I’d tried so hard for so many years to please him and Mom, it killed me. Mom being gone, him being sick, then you, bringing me fucking peaches because you felt bad for me, and you basically had *no one*.”

Sitting up straight, Giovanni sets his shoulders, blankly staring at the trees and brush in front of them. “Something... clicked. That night. I looked at you and realized, ‘This kid doesn’t have anyone else but me.’ It was weird because when I thought about it later, it really felt like Mother and Father had been preparing me for this all along. Everything was in place for me to take over and I’d even been registered as your legal guardian. I don’t know when they did that, but it had all been predetermined.”

Giovanni looks over to Nino, his gaze softening. “So I knew what I had to do. I decided that you were *my* kid that night, and I had to look out for you and take care of you. I told myself that I wouldn’t ever make you cry or talk to you the way Father had spoken to me—that I would make sure that you always had *everything* you needed.”

Evoking these things and listening to his brother talk makes Nino’s heart heavy in his chest. His mother’s death, his father screaming and those dark days of his youth. Giovanni has never spoken about these things with him. They lived through it together, coexisting in a strange, delicate parallel of discomfort, but they never talk about that time.

“Why are you telling me these things, G?” Nino asks, his voice quiet.

Giovanni lifts his hand, rubbing his palm against his forehead and taking another breath. “Because I hit a breaking point last year. And instead of talking to you about it, I screamed at you and upset you, which is exactly what I promised myself I’d never do.”

“The way I reacted to your relationship with Cellina was rude... and selfish,” Nino reasons. “I should have been supportive. I was wrong.”

“You should have, and you were. But if I had talked to you like this earlier on, it wouldn’t have happened. That’s on me. I’d spent a century looking out for you, protecting you. Protecting our family estate and reign in Milan. An endless stream of business meetings and talks, appointments and parties and deals. People coming along and challenging me. Doubting me—over and over I had to prove that we still deserved to oversee this realm.

“I never thought about myself or my needs, because I wanted to prove to Father that he and Mom had prepared me well, and that I *wasn't* a disgrace. Everything I did was for our family. I existed solely for you and them.”

“That’s not healthy, G.”

“Yeah, I know that, Sigmund Freud. Are you going to keep listening?”

Nino chuckles, bringing his fingers to massage the bridge of his nose. “I’m listening.”

Sitting straighter, Giovanni folds his arms. “After you met and bonded with Haruka, things shifted for me. Obviously, you were mated, which meant that you had someone to look out for you now—your own life and family to focus on. I started to lay off a bit, trying to feel at ease. But then you were vanished, so I rushed back in.”

“You did,” Nino acknowledges. “I can’t believe you ran two major aristocracies for that long. I appreciate everything you did, but you’re insane, G. Asao should have just canceled all our appointments!”

Giovanni shakes his head. “I know I’m a vampire, but I legit almost fucking died from anxiety. So stressful.”

“It was too much.”

“It was. And I don’t know the exact moment, but somewhere in that chaos, I started to think about me again. Spending all that time with Cellina... For me, she was always like a far-off, blurry window—a glimpse of a life that I wanted forever ago. A life that I had dreamed about but could barely fathom. When she and I reconnected, the window became a little clearer and I started dreaming again. Before I knew it, I felt starved for it—for *something*. My own life.

“But I felt guilty. Dad was still sick, and you were married but you still needed me. I didn’t know how to walk away from that feeling of ‘He’s my kid, I’m the only one who can look out for him,’ you know? It’s weird, and I get frustrated with myself. But I don’t want to take it out on you and yell at you, either. Can you understand?”

Relaxing his shoulders, Nino nods. “I understand, I think. So... the reason why you haven’t spoken to me in six months *isn't* because you’re angry?”

“I’m not angry about anything. I just need to... disengage myself from this feeling that I always need to check on you and rescue you. I don’t know how to do it. I know ignoring you isn’t healthy either, so...” Giovanni

shrugs. “And I don’t want to ignore you. I want to know what’s happening with the new kid and your businesses. I’m *proud* of you and everything you’ve accomplished in the past couple years, but I just... I need to reset my mind and know that you’re fine. That you don’t need me anymore.”

Reminiscing about the hurts and hardships of their family’s past, the mood had been grim. Heavy. But Nino’s chest hitches with understanding. He smiles. “Can I say something?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you... for always being there for me—even though I apparently made you trip over a pile of peaches, which sounds stupid but also very me.”

Giovanni scoffs, but he’s smiling and shaking his head. “You were a weird kid. But it was cute. You meant well.”

“You know what I think about fairly often?”

“What?”

“How I never would have bonded with Haru if it hadn’t been for you. When we first met, he asked me to go to that bonding ceremony and study at his house, remember? I told him no, and I meant it. I really didn’t want to do it. But then you told me to go, point blank. I trust your judgment, so I did. The rest is history.”

Giovanni folds his arms and lifts his chin. “Great. I helped you get laid.”

Nino turns his nose up. “Yeah, but a lot more than that, obviously... and that stuff came much later—”

“Noooo, fuck no. I don’t need to know any details about that. Walking in on you two making out is already permanently burned into my cerebral cortex.”

Laughing, Nino stands. Turnabout is fair play. “I’m serious, though. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me. I still need you—not as a guardian but as my brother. Like a friend.”

“Yeah, the problem is, I don’t know how to do that.”

“We can figure it out together.” Grinning, Nino opens his arms wide. “I love you.”

Giovanni rolls his eyes and groans, but he stands, then steps into Nino’s embrace. “I love you, too... and Lina told me you’re worried about being a good father to this kid. Don’t worry about that. You’re going to do great. You can’t be any worse than I was.”

“Given our circumstance, you were amazing, G. Don’t feel that way. And thank you for telling me that you’re proud of me.”

“I am. But don’t let Asao hit your aura with a baseball bat. Or at least, don’t tell people about it. That shit subtracts from your pride points. Like minus five hundred.”

Nino chuckles as they move back up the path, the spring breeze sweeping through his coppery hair. “Alright, fair enough.”

EIGHT

FLAWLESS

“Honestly, I’m just so surprised that Junii has officially settled down.” Simone, who is apparently one of Cellina’s best friends, shifts against the blanket to fold his legs. They’re clad in very tight stonewashed jeans with tatters and rips across his thighs. Haruka is watching him and thinking that he could not possibly be comfortable. “It’s weird. Like, a sign of the end times.”

Jae looks at Junichi beside him. “Have we triggered the apocalypse?”

Breaking apart his croissant, Junichi takes a bite and speaks around the mouthful. “No. Shut up, Simone.”

Simone places his palm against his chest, his eyes sincere. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for you. But wait until the hommes et femmes of the Paris fashion industry hear about this. Oh, mon Dieu, quel désastre!”

Jae looks at Junichi once more. “Have I ruined your career?”

“Ignore him, Jae,” Cellina says from Haruka’s side, spreading mascarpone atop her biscuit. “Simone is all drama, all the time. It’s best to understand that upfront.”

Sensing Nino drawing nearer, Haruka glances toward the path, relishing in the gentle wind brushing against his face as it subtly carries the inexplicable scent of his love. As they approach, he takes note of Nino’s relaxed countenance. His tender smile.

Cellina’s voice is low beside him so that only he can hear. “Looks like the talk went well.”

Haruka nods. “Yes, I’m very relieved.” Something in Haruka’s chest eases. A tight, small but tense ball finally unraveling. Nino’s quiet internal

conflict with Giovanni had been weighing on him as well. The two brothers desperately needed to have a candid conversation. It was long overdue.

Cellina scoots along the blanket, creating an empty space next to Haruka as Nino approaches. When his mate is there, Haruka lifts his chin. Nino drops to his knees, his smile broadening. “Buongiorno, tesoro.” He presses a soft kiss to Haruka’s mouth, then another before sitting down and folding his legs.

“Ciao, angelo,” Haruka says. “Is everything well?”

“Everything is fantastic.”

The tense ball officially melts, shifting to something light and assured inside of him. “I’m glad.”

Simone claps his hands and sits straighter, drawing attention to himself. “Alright, now that we’re all here, I thought it might be fun for us to play a game. Let’s pick numbers and answer questions so I can get to know you all a little better.”

“Oh boy,” Asao says, sitting at a small bistro table on the patio just off the grass, with Sydney across from him. “This has interloper written all over it.”

“What?” Simone swings his head around to Asao, his nose upturned. “Why? I’m friends with Cellina and Junii. I think it’ll be fun to learn more about this beautiful vampire family we have here. I *was* invited, after all.”

Giovanni huffs in a laugh beside Cellina. “Yeah, but you don’t really need to know us better. We hardly ever see you. You’re like a side character—*Ah*—” Cellina’s hand whips up and smacks Giovanni’s shoulder.

She scowls at her mate. “So fucking rude.”

“Where are Sergio and Cosimo?” Nino asks, leaning over and filling his small plate with fruit. An assortment of berries, breads, cheeses and biscuits have been set out for them in the center of the large blanket.

Giovanni smirks, leaning away from Cellina. “In their rooms—off camera, where the side characters belong.”

Cellina’s eyes widen. “Oh my God, this is Sergio’s estate, and he’s like your only friend! How is he a side character?”

Junichi lifts his chin from across the blanket. “Simone, just do the thing. How do we play, exactly?”

Simone winks. “Will you start us off? Are you volunteering as tribute?”

“Ha.” Asao slaps his knee. “I’ve read those books.” He looks at Haruka with his eyebrow raised. “You don’t get that reference, do you?”

Haruka smiles mockingly in response, but Nino eyes him, too. “Of course not,” his mate says. “Haruka doesn’t read anything written after the twentieth century. I don’t know why, but that’s a hard stop for him. If you’ve got an Alice Walker, Oscar Wilde or Ernest Hemingway reference, though, he’ll be all over it.”

“Alright then,” Jae chirps, tilting his head. “What do you get when you mix liquor with twentieth-century literature?”

Haruka glances around and everyone is silent. He shakes his head. “I don’t know...”

Jae smiles. “Tequila Mockingbird.”

Running his fingers against the back of his head, Haruka laughs. Nino’s palm is plastered against his forehead. “Jesus.”

“Simone?” Junichi commands. “Save us?”

“Okay, okay.” Shifting, he pulls out a smartphone from his back pocket. Haruka marvels at how this occurrence is logistically possible given the tightness of his jeans. He opens the screen and stares for a moment. “Pick a number.”

“Twelve.”

“Hm... what is your ideal vacation destination?”

“Easy,” Junichi says. “The South of France. I love the beaches and the culture there.” He turns to Jae, his eyes affectionate. “We should go together.”

“I am very much disinclined to being half or even partially naked in public, but, sure?”

“Jae, you’re next,” Simone announces.

The doctor blinks his blueish-brown eyes. “Er, am I? Have I formally agreed to participate in this?”

“Yup. Pick a number.”

“Out of what?”

“Honey.” Simone looks up at him. “One to fifty.”

“Twenty-two?”

Nino suddenly chuckles, shaking his head. “Jae, everything you say is a question.”

“I’m naturally inquisitive. I’m a doctor... a vampire doctor.”

“Alright,” Simone interrupts, sliding his finger against his phone screen. “Twenty-two... Do you want children?”

Jae’s jaw drops, a look of sheer terror plastered on his face.

Asao huffs from the patio. "That took a turn."

"I... ah..." Jae shifts his gaze to Junichi, who also wears a look of less exaggerated but undeniable concern. The doctor rubs his fingers against the top of his ombre-blonde hair. "Well... no. But—"

"Oh, thank God." Junichi exhales and slumps. He laughs. "*Shit*, that was a tense moment."

"We probably should have talked about that before now, but no, I definitely do not."

"Same. Dios mío."

Haruka folds his arms. "I find it ironic that you do not want children, Jae."

The doctor shrugs. "It's weird, I know. I have a passion for helping other people grow their families, but personally, I have no interest. It's a bit like teachers who don't want kids. They're in it all day every day, so they don't want to go home to it as well."

"Harukaaa," Simone sings, waving his hand in a flirtatious movement. "Will his highness take the next turn?"

With his arms still folded, Haruka stares at Simone. He has definitely not agreed to take part in this strange exercise. But he jumps at the sensation of Nino pinching his waist.

"Go on," Nino encourages. "Pick a number."

Sighing, Haruka looks back to Simone. "Forty-six."

"Okaaaay... what is your worst quality?"

"Damn," Giovanni says. "These questions are all over the place."

"That's the fun of it," Simone exclaims. "The spontaneity! And I doubt that his royal vampire majesty even has any bad qualities?"

Haruka ruminates. In his estimation, he has many undesirable qualities. They run like a long, heavy list in his mind: He is introverted and lazy. Old-fashioned. His aura is overwhelming and oppressive. He doesn't understand literary references past the twentieth century and—

"Tesoro?" Nino slides his hand into Haruka's palm, then squeezes. "Don't, alright? It's not a serious question. For me, you're perfect. And my opinion matters most, right?"

Ignoring the tightness in his throat, Haruka nods. "Yes."

"You leave wine glasses all over the house," Asao declares. "And I have to find and catch them all, like Pokémon."

“And you lie to me about your smartphone,” Nino says, bumping his shoulder again and grinning. Squeezing his palm a little tighter. “You hide it in weird places, which is annoying but also makes me laugh.”

Simone shimmies his shoulders. “Mmm, sounds like some kinda cutesy foreplay.”

“Nerds,” Giovanni gruffs, reaching for a biscuit.

Haruka takes a breath, the dark cloud that had settled over him breaking as he glances at his mate and Asao. “I’m not sorry about either of those things.” Nino leans in, angling his head to stamp a quick kiss against Haruka’s neck, just beneath his jaw.

“I... I would like to answer one, if that’s okay?” Sydney lifts a palm, timid, like a student answering a question they aren’t sure about but want to try.

“Ah.” Simone twists slightly to view Sydney, who is seated behind him on the patio. “The youngest among us wants a turn. Sure, darling. Pick a number.”

“How about five?”

“Five it is. Let’s see... what is your favorite activity?”

Giovanni theorizes, “So, the higher the number, the more fucking intense the question?”

“Shh.” Asao places his finger to his lips. “Let Syd talk.” Surprisingly, Giovanni takes a bite of his biscuit without contestation.

“Well... I really enjoy cooking,” Sydney says, his sage-green eyes lifted to the sky in serious contemplation. “But... I also love sleeping in a bed. It is a tie for me.”

“Oh my.” Simone slaps his hand to his chest once more. “That was the most wholesome and sweetest answer ever. Sleeping in a bed! The world doesn’t deserve you.”

“It really *is* wonderful,” Sydney goes on, speaking directly to Simone. His attention is fixated, as if only the two of them are speaking. “In the mud house that I grew up in, we didn’t have bedframes—or mattresses or sheets. Heavy duvets and pillows. The surfaces were hard and smelled of earth and rot. The summers were so dry, and the dust made my skin peel and scab. Sleeping in the caves after I came of age and was forced to join the army was harder. There, the ground was so cold, wet... Strange things would crawl on me and sometimes bite me. But in beds, those things never happen. I really enjoy it. I’m grateful for it.”

The group is quiet, stunned by the dark imagery of Sydney's words. The descriptions take shape in Haruka's mind, the same way they do every time he speaks with a vampire from Socotra. Their stories haunt him—the cruelty and inhumane conditions that they were subjected to for years.

“Oh, honey...” The playful tenacity in Simone's countenance is gone, like a roaring flame suddenly doused with a bucket of water.

Sydney shakes his head, his eyes filled with unease. “I-I'm sorry.” He looks to Asao, then Haruka. “Have I upset everyone? I don't mean to, I—”

“You did well, Sydney,” Haruka says encouragingly. “Thank you for joining in the game. You know that I *always* want to hear whatever you have to say.” Sydney has come a long way within the seven months since leaving Socotra and moving into their home. The young vampire is still shy and rarely speaks when they attend events or social gatherings outside of their estate in Kurashiki.

This moment is indicative of his great progress.

“We all want to know more about you,” Giovanni adds. “What do you like to cook the most?”

Sydney's eyes flicker over to Haruka, but Haruka simply waits, fully attentive. “Um... well... I—Lately I have been learning about Italian food. I wanted to learn more while I was here, and Nino helps me sometimes, too. It's my favorite style of cooking so far.”

“Any particular recipe?” Cellina asks.

Twisting his hands in his lap, Sydney takes a breath and goes on. Haruka smiles, focused, but distinctly recognizing his mate's hand clasped in his own. It's reassuring, and Nino grips him just a little bit tighter.

THE AFTERNOON WEARS on with the sun inching higher in the hazy blue sky. The weather is warm for a spring day, so much so that Haruka decides to open the patio doors, allowing the balmy air to filter into his and Nino's large bedroom.

With plans to reconvene for dinner, the group has separated. Nino is greeting and speaking with his father and Giovanni in another part of the estate. Jae has agreed to Haruka's previous recommendation that he should learn the capabilities of his aura slowly and with his mate. But both Haruka

and Nino assured the doctor that they would be happy to assist with more finite control, if necessary.

This day—with its temperature a little too hot and its partly sunny sky—is soothing to Haruka. Leisurely in an exceptional and rare way. In Kurashiki, his afternoons are typically filled with tasks and requests. His mind and consciousness buried deep in some research manuscript or historical reference to the point where time escapes him like some elusive thing.

Today, though, he is fully present. The afternoon hovers thickly around him like a new, exciting and mysterious dimension.

Stretching his arms up, Haruka takes in the stunning view of the lake, the grandiose mountains and the bounty of early-spring green. He suddenly wishes that he had access to a hot spring. A relaxing soak would be the perfect exclamation point on this moment.

Since he doesn't have an onsen here, he decides that a shower is the next best thing.

Taking his time, he makes his way into the indoor-outdoor bathroom space to undress. The shower within their suite is outdoors, but walled. Only the ceiling is open to the view of the sky. Stepping onto the stone floor, it's heated against the soles of his feet, naturally baked from the sun up above.

With the showerhead on, Haruka closes his eyes and dips underneath the heavy, hot stream. Breathing, he opens his senses to absorb the world around him—earthy air and the sensation of water dotting and rolling down his body. The undeniable calm and white noise of the spray hitting the stone. Birds singing amidst the hush of windswept tree leaves.

When he inhales deeper, his heart accelerates, knowing that his mate has returned to their room. Haruka turns so that the water streams against his back like a massage. He's thinking that it would be wonderful if his mate joined him in this rogue moment—this stolen afternoon of placid freedom. It would be like a second exclamation point, or perhaps a form of grammatical punctuation that does not yet exist but should. Some new symbol to express sublime passion and fulfillment. Haruka will give this more thought later.

For now, though, his wish is granted.

"May I join you?" Nino appears in the narrow doorframe, superbly naked. His tall, sculpted body lavished in golden-honey skin. The sight of

him makes Haruka's fangs pulse and his groin hard. Already, his nature swirls in excitement from want of him.

"As if you have to ask," Haruka says, grinning and lifting his arms to welcome him into this space. Not just the shower, and not only within his physical embrace, but into this emotional atmosphere as well. To bring Nino into his serenity and contentment—into the loving veil of his passion and desire.

Nino steps into him and Haruka lifts to his toes, playful as he wraps his arms around his naked shoulders. Nino pulls him flush with his body, gripping his waist and guiding him in a slow dance. He turns them, switching their positions so that Nino's spine absorbs the heavy pour of the shower. His mate tips his head back, letting the water soak his hair before lifting his head and using one hand to smooth back his coppery mane. Nino smiles. "Hello, gorgeous."

Haruka leans even closer until they're nose to nose. With heavy lids, he brushes their lips. "My angel." They kiss. The connection is firm and hungry, with Nino grunting in a way that makes Haruka's spine tingle.

Their mouths move, deep and searching as if synchronized—fusing in a slow, practiced rhythm. Nino kisses down, tracing Haruka's jaw and into the concave of his neck. He sweeps his lips against his damp skin, provocative and concentrated as his arms wrap even tighter around Haruka's waist, drawing him into the heat, wetness and hard friction of their bodies.

Closing his eyes, Haruka lifts his chin, wanting Nino to take of him. To indulge in him and satisfy his every biological, physical and emotional need. Haruka knows that it is impossible to be all things to his mate and fulfill him in totality. He understands that such dependency would create turmoil within the foundation of their bond and would only lead to disappointment. Frustration and bitterness.

But in his heart, he wants to give what only he can. Acceptance and trust. If he cannot reasonably give Nino everything that he needs, Haruka desires to at least offer refuge. A faithful, loving and safe space where they can shelter life's storms and recharge together.

As Nino's palms caress up the length of Haruka's spine, he bites down hard. Haruka gasps from the force and pleasure of his mate's fangs elongating and sinking deeper into his flesh. His eyes are alight as he opens them, staring up into the hazy blue sky filled with wispy clouds. The

intensity of Nino's bite resonates all throughout Haruka's body and it makes his knees weak.

He drinks deeper, gripping Haruka's back and waist even tighter. Nino is pulling and stirring the ancient entity within him. Like a ravenous beast made of fire, it thrashes within him, threatening to break free and overrun everything, anything in its path.

With his mouth agape, his eyes wide, Haruka gasps for air. He has to set it free. There's no other choice.

Just as Haruka's knees buckle from the pressure building inside of him, Nino pivots, pressing Haruka's back against the stone wall. Haruka lifts his leg to half cradle his mate and Nino's palm is there, gripping and holding underneath his thigh to fully support his weight as the passion of his aura expels from every pore of his body. From every inch of his damp flesh.

Haruka succumbs to the pleasure—emotionally, physically, he is swept up in the glorious rapture of his nature being liberated. As Nino feeds, Haruka feels the soft but powerful thoughts radiating within his mate's mind. They echo within Haruka like heartfelt stanzas or amorous declarations.

You are flawless to my nature. You are perfect for me. I love you more than you can ever truly comprehend.

Nino moans as the elegant thoughts flow into Haruka, making him weak. The rosy, ambient light of his aura surrounds them. Haruka's body trembles, satiated in his mate's arms.

His mind had been relaxed before, but his consciousness has shifted colors—crimson and starved for something more. Something concrete, almost feral as the sensation slithers across his naked, wet skin. Haruka pants as Nino lifts his head from feeding. His mate's eyes are glowing in golden-scarlet light.

When he looks into Haruka's face, a knowing smirk pulls at the corner of his beautiful lips. "Does the panther want to fuck me?" Haruka answers with a ravenous kiss, his mouth pushing into Nino's to feel his tongue slick against his own—to be further inside him somehow. To feel and taste him.

Nino pulls up from the smoldering kiss and his gaze is frisky. "I'll take that as a yes?"

"Yes," Haruka breathes, craning his neck to reestablish their connection. Chasing Nino's perfect, full and sweet lips. But Nino steps away, quickly

turning off the showerhead before taking hold of Haruka's hands and guiding him back toward the bedroom.

NINE

MOOD

Everything inside of Haruka feels alive, electric but also stripped bare—exposed to where the weight and energy of his aura are in full bloom. Liberated.

It feels marvelous. He enjoys the sensation as he pulses into Nino's warmth—his tight body stretched and yielding to the hardness of Haruka's shaft. But through the thick red haze of his passion, he watches. Mindful. Always careful.

Nino's spine is concave, his ass in the air as he rests down on his elbows and knees in front of Haruka on the bed. His thighs are gapped wide, and droplets of water from the shower still dot his golden-tanned flesh. Or perhaps the sheen is from the labor of their love-making—from their bodies being enfolded by the sultry spring air flowing in through the open patio doors.

As he pushes into him, Haruka reaches around to firmly grab Nino's equally hard cock within the palm of his hand. When he grips his length, Nino's spine arches and he groans in wanton pleasure. His mate huffs, breathless as his voice passes through his lips. "You're not with me."

"I am," Haruka assures him, his voice low. He rocks into Nino again, gripping and jerking his shaft in his fist. Nino inhales sharply, then speaks on an exhale.

"Not all the way..." He takes a breath, swallowing. "You're holding back—I can feel it."

Haruka leans forward, placing one palm flat against the bed beside Nino's shoulder so that he's close to his ear. "My love, my aura is fully

released.” He closes his eyes, kissing underneath Nino’s ear, then another soft press to his neck. “What more should I do?”

Nino’s body subtly rises and falls in heavy breaths. He turns his head to the side, judging him with one glowing iris. “You’re always like this when you fuck me—like, detached. Hovering above us and watching instead of being down here with me.”

Something in Haruka’s chest drops. Fissures. He feels like a child that has been caught red-handed in a lie. His cheeks burn as he presses his forehead to Nino’s temple. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Nino cranes his neck a little more, urging Haruka toward his mouth. He dips, entwining their lips in a soft, messy kiss. Nino pulls away, his voice desperate. “You have me, tesoro. I’m already yours, so give me *everything*.”

Understanding, Haruka shifts and rocks into him once more. Nino’s breath hitches as Haruka kisses the top of his spine, then around to the concave of his neck.

Nino wants his mind. Clear of thought and prudence. He’s demanding it.

Haruka closes his eyes, solely focusing on the delicious heat and tightness of Nino’s body. The woodsy, cinnamon scent of him that makes his nature and every inch of his flesh sing. The comforting purity of Nino’s nature that radiates and fills his heart to the brim.

Haruka’s energy around them shifts and changes. It weighs even heavier in the atmosphere, but he doesn’t stop. He doesn’t hesitate or try to restrain it. Instead, he runs the tip of his nose against the concave of Nino’s neck, indulging in his golden skin.

Biting into him, feeding from him and being inside of him is unadulterated euphoria. A unique ecstasy that satiates the ancient entity within him—like the cool rush of an ocean wave on the hottest day, lavishing and invigorating his body. It soothes him, and he exhales in a throaty growl. Perfection.

As Haruka feeds, the compelling desire within him pours into Nino. Deep love and yearning. Wonder, passion and overwhelming gratitude—to be mated with this man. To have his rich blood, golden aura and soothing spirit as his source. His heart and mind reach out to Nino, wanting him to understand as he pulls at the edges of his mate’s nature inside of him to release it.

Nino surrenders to the pressure almost immediately, his aura pulsing out in a bright crimson-orange haze and swirling and mixing around them. Haruka moans, exhaling as he comes inside his mate. Spilling into him and holding him tightly in his grasp. Nino shudders, his frame quivering against Haruka's chest and his voice ragged and gasping. Soon, Nino groans, his ass and thighs trembling as he comes in Haruka's palm.

Still in his haze, Haruka pulls his fangs from Nino's flesh and licks him, over and over. He is mindless with cleaning Nino where he fed, but also something more. Greedy and yet mollified. Profoundly contented.

Nino sighs heavily, shifting to disentangle himself, and Haruka's mind snaps back into focus like a light switch being turned on. He shakes his head to rouse himself a little more, then withdraws himself from Nino's body.

His mate flops down hard onto his stomach, stretching his legs out straight underneath Haruka. "Wow... holy *shit*."

Still propped up with his palm flat on the bed beside Nino's shoulder, Haruka leans closer, resting his other hand at the damp concave of Nino's back. "Are we okay?"

Nino's head is turned to the side against the bedsheets, but he flickers his gaze up. Without a word, he uses one hand to grip Haruka's wrist and pulls, making Haruka tumble unceremoniously onto his stomach. "Ah—Nino—"

"Just get your ass down here." Nino chuckles, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. Haruka can feel his body rise and fall because of his awkward position halfway atop Nino's back but also tilted against the bed.

He means to move. He intended to get off of Nino, but then, he doesn't. He simply lies there with his mate, tousled in this stretch of long legs and arms and naked flesh in the soft chaos of messy bedsheets. He breathes in deeply as well, closing his eyes. The spring air and silence coat them like a sumptuous blanket as they lie. Beyond the open doors, birds chirp and whistle. The lake breathes in a steady hush, gently knocking against the shore.

Eventually, lazily, Haruka tumbles onto his back, drawing one leg up so that his foot is planted against the mattress and he can feel the warm breeze between his thighs. Stirring, Nino sits up slightly, his hips and stomach still flat against the bed as he rests on his elbows. He looks over, his

countenance peaceful as he meets Haruka's eyes. "That was fucking fantastic, Haru."

Haruka grins, lifting a hand and running his fingers through the top of his still damp hair. "What is the old adage? The customer is always right?" They both snicker in a quiet huddle of laughter—in this casual, palliative bubble of intimacy.

"That was... perfect," Nino goes on. "You know what it is?"

"Mm?"

"Whenever we make love and you bottom, I listen to you and give you what you're asking of me. I feel like you're in control, so I do things based on your reactions and needs."

Haruka frowns, looking up at his mate. "Where... is this going, exactly?"

Nino shakes his head. "But when *I* bottom, you don't listen to me. You've got the guard rails on and you don't give me what I want. You decide, 'This is enough for him, this is nice and safe,' and then you're watching me like a supervisor. You're not truly *in it* with me. Do you get what I'm saying?"

Haruka smiles, shifting his head toward the open patio doors and the sun-dipped expanse of pinkish-blue sky along the horizon. "You are saying that you typically feel dissatisfied with my sexual performance. That you would like to file a formal complaint with my manager." He snickers, but Nino scootches even closer, lifting his leg so that his thigh rests on top of Haruka's. He adjusts so that his elbows are on either side of Haruka's head, making their eyes meet.

Nino's amber gaze is engrossed, patient. "No. What I'm saying is, when I'm pushing my cock into you, you're totally unraveled and uninhibited. I can tell you're with me, mind, body and aura. I want you the same way when you're making love to me. I want what you just did *every* time. Is that too much to ask?" He places a teasing kiss on Haruka's mouth, then another before he lifts expectantly.

"It isn't," Haruka whispers. "I'll try... I will do better. I promise."

"Wasn't it better for you, too?" Nino tilts and bends once more, this time lingering in the delectable kiss, parting his lips and allowing Haruka to snake his tongue into the sweet heat of his mouth. His nature is swirling again as he raises his head, chasing the kiss.

But Nino pulls away for his answer. Haruka pouts from the loss of him and drops his head back down. "Yes, it was... thrilling."

"I could feel you," he says, biting his bottom lip, his voice low. "I could tell how much you wanted me, and how satisfying I am for you. I love that, Haru. When I sense your raw desire like that, it turns me on even more." Nino brushes their lips together, like friction before the spark of a fierce flame. Haruka's eyes flutter closed from desperate want of him, but Nino speaks again.

"We have to perfect this art while we still can. Once the baby comes, there won't be any more languid, sex-filled afternoons."

Haruka frowns at that, sliding his hands up the soft concave of Nino's spine. "Why not?"

"Um, because raising a child makes people very busy, Haruka."

"I know that. But we have Asao, and also Sydney. They will help us, sometimes."

Nino's expression is incredulous. "Yeah, *no*. Asao is not going to watch our kid so that we can have sex. And no disrespect to Sydney, but I'm not sure he's ready to be responsible for another life. He's still getting a firm grip on his own... not that I can't relate."

"That is true, but there will be time for us." Haruka feels sure of it, somehow. They will make a way, because their connection is too strong to be denied. Too profound to cast aside or neglect. Eventually, they will come together again like magnets. Like two comets soaring on the same trajectory and fated to collide.

"We'll see," Nino says, his gaze affectionate. He lifts a hand to cup and hold Haruka's face. "I'm just saying there may not be a lot of free time for experimentation like we've had for the past two years."

Nino's palm against his face makes Haruka's heart pulse. He closes his eyes, leaning into the sanctuary of it. "Hm, I suppose I'll have fewer opportunities to whisk you away to my rain-soaked garden of enchanted pseudo-mind sex."

"Are you making fun of me right now?"

Haruka laughs. "No. I just find it... strange. Did it happen this time?"

"No. But I was yelling at you, so I was a little distracted."

"Another time, then."

Nino surprises him when he slips his knee in between Haruka's legs to part them. He climbs over his leg, settling himself in the gap of Haruka's

thighs and at his groin. Compliant, Haruka lifts both of his knees, setting his feet flat against the bed to cradle him.

His mate bends down so that their noses are touching once more. “You’re being a smartass.”

“I am not.” The thrill and closeness of Nino buzzes across the length of his body. He caresses his hands down Nino’s sides, following the delicious line of his hips to the plush curve of his ass. Opening and releasing his nature this way... It stirs him. It makes him insatiable, and already, he wants Nino again. Or to be had this time.

Something. Anything.

He’s considering. Building his nerve to express as much. But Nino’s voice interrupts his thoughts. “Do you want to read me?”

Blinking, Haruka slides his hands up, placing his palms at the small of Nino’s back. “Yes, always. If you’re comfortable?”

“I want you to,” he says. “It’s important.” Nino rests their foreheads together and Haruka closes his eyes. Immediately, the wall he usually senses in his mate’s mind is lifted, and his own consciousness flows inside—like a guest stepping into a cozy and welcoming space.

Nino’s mind feels different than usual. He is always contented at the forefront—however, Haruka knows that his mate’s troubles typically reside deeper. Dark, muddy corners of doubt or insecurity. Inadequacy and fear, particularly surrounding the topic of becoming a father. Of expanding their family together.

When Haruka searches now, though, those corners aren’t quite as murky. Not completely cleared but not stress-inducing either. It is difficult for him to describe, but everything feels... lighter? More confident?

Haruka opens his eyes, his heart skipping a beat. “You’re ready.”

“Yes.” Nino grins, his expression ironically childlike in its sincerity. “I am. I... I know I can do this. We can do this. We’ll be okay.”

“We will be much more than okay.” Haruka lifts his head from the pillow, pushing into Nino’s mouth and wanting him more than he’s ever wanted anything. The relief within him wells up, making his throat tighten in a sudden and unexpected rush of emotion.

They kiss, passionately. Lovingly and soft. But a moment later, Nino breaks the affection to stare into Haruka’s face. He uses his thumb to wipe the wetness from the corner of Haruka’s eyes. “Tesoro, don’t cry. If you cry, I’ll cry, and it’ll just be a big mess.”

Haruka reaches up to wipe his own face. “I’m sorry. But... you were very stressed about this, and I worried that I had put pressure on you to do this when—”

“No. You never pressured me. Not once. I want this with you, I was just... scared. Overthinking? I’m still nervous, but I think that’s natural. Talking to G earlier today really helped. And then sitting with my father a little while ago... He apologized to me, Haru.”

“Domenico did?”

Nino nods. “He’s never done anything like that—shown vulnerability with me. He’s always very kind when we sit and talk, but it always feels like I’m talking to a nice stranger. Obviously, I’ve known him all my life, but he’s more like this abstract figure to me—father by title but nothing more. Nothing deeper or meaningful. But he apologized to me today for being so absent in my life. He said that he wants to learn how to be a better support to me, and he wants to tell me stories about Mom, and for me to call him with updates about the baby... It was a good conversation.”

When Haruka exhales, it’s as if a heavy weight has dissolved and floated from its resting place atop his chest. Disintegrated and vanished into the atmosphere. “I’m so glad. When the baby is old enough, we should bring them here to meet him.”

Grinning, Nino flops onto his back beside Haruka. The movement is playful, but the opposite of what Haruka wants at this moment. “Speaking of,” Nino says, gazing up at the high-beamed ceiling, “should we start talking about names?”

Haruka turns his head against the pillow to view his mate. “Do you already have something in mind?”

“Yeah, I was thinking... if it’s a girl, I’d like to name her after my mother or yours—two ferocious women, right? What do you think?”

“Well, in my clan, we typically do not give children the exact name of any of their ancestors. We would need to alter the name, slightly, to pay homage.”

Nino’s face is flat. “Really? Why?”

Haruka waves a hand. “It has to do with an old superstition about carrying the weight or burden of the ancestor of their namesake. It is silly but engrained within me.”

Chuckling, Nino lifts his arms to cup his head against his pillow. “Alright, I respect that. How about for your mom, ‘Ai’ instead of ‘Aika,’ or

‘Nami’ instead of ‘Namie’ for mine? I like Nami...”

“I like Nami, too,” Haruka says thoughtfully. “And if it is a boy?”

“You pick.”

“Hm... my father wanted to name me Shōta. His intention was to break the tradition of using ‘ha’ as an initial syllable for men named under the Hirano Clan.”

“Right. Your father was Hayato and your grandfather was Hatakemori.”

“Correct. And in doing so, the derivation of the name Shōta means ‘prosper’ or ‘leader.’ It connotes a prosperous and grandiose future for a new generation.”

Nino’s brow furrows as he smiles. “But your name is almost the opposite—the kanji reading makes me think ‘springtime long ago.’”

Haruka smirks. “Also correct. This is my mother’s choice. She wanted to keep the tradition of the Hirano Clan and preserve the idea of our family unit. Plus, I was born in the springtime... long ago, at this point.”

“So, your father complied to your mother’s choice, obviously?”

“Not exactly. If you ask Asao to tell the story, he says that my parents were in fierce disagreement about this. My mother only won because they played janken—best two out of three.”

Nino’s laughter bubbles loudly as he slides his knees up to comfortably gap his thighs. “Your parents decided your name from a game of rock-paper-scissors? That’s *hilarious*.”

“Mm.” Haruka looks down the length of Nino’s delectable and naked body, still wanting him very, very much. “My parents were opposites in their temperament, but somehow very well suited for each other. Asao often says that they were like fire and ice, except the crucial link is that ice can also burn when necessary. He used to tell me stories about them—how much fun they had together and the innocuous banter my mother and father would engage in. I do remember a little of this, myself, which is comforting.”

The memories of his parents are always swirled together with a multitude of emotions. Pain and bitterness, but also joy and wonder. Longing. A sincere desire to have had more time with them. To have grown older with them and known them more deeply. And selfishly, for them to know him.

Would they be pleased with the vampire he has become? Would they be proud of him? Would his father tell him that he is too serious and to lighten

up, or would his mother tease him for his procrastination habits?

Would his character be very different, had they lived? Perhaps he wouldn't be as serious, or lackluster about his work, because they would have guided him in a full life—one without the hollow, broken agony of loss and solitude. A life without knowing what it's like to have the ground completely snatched and dug out from underneath you until you're standing in a deep hole, looking up at the sky and wondering why you've been left there to rot on your own. Wondering why you should bother digging yourself out.

Haruka looks at Nino's profile and takes a deep breath. In the end, he's very glad to have been helped out of that hole. To be standing above ground again, and in the sunlight no less.

Lately, he feels that he is even surrounded by flowers. A new, dense family and community ever growing all around him.

"I love hearing Asao tell stories about your parents," Nino says. "They sound like they were amazing vampires."

"I am biased, but I think they were."

Nino grins a little brighter, his eyes sparkling with delight. "Alright, Nami if it's a girl and Shōta if it's a boy, yes?"

"Yes. Agreed."

"Was this too easy?" Nino chuckles. "Should we argue a little, like your parents?"

"I love that our interaction is easy." Shifting, Haruka settles on his side so that he's leaning into Nino's hip and chest. "I've had enough hard things in my life. You are a much-welcomed relief." He lifts a hand and places it atop Nino's tight belly. Haruka caresses the smooth, tanned skin there before sliding it down to wrap his long fingers around his cock.

"Speaking of hard things," Nino says, his face flushing. "Can I help you, sir?"

Haruka grips him while leaning into the curve of his neck to kiss just beneath his ear. He whispers, "I want you inside me."

Nino swallows thick. Haruka can hear it as he runs his nose along his jawline. "Mm, round two, then?"

"Yes." Haruka kisses. "And three, if possible."

"Alright, we're having one of *those* nights."

"You started this."

Haruka starts when Nino suddenly reaches up and takes hold of his chin, serious. He looks into his eyes. "And I'll finish it."

Haruka's entire body springs to life, his pulse and heart racing with anticipation. The feeling intensifies when Nino flips him onto his back then pushes his knees apart to crawl into the hot, needy space of him.

Haruka writhes his lower spine against the mattress. Distantly, he is thinking that this day is, quite possibly, one of the best in his entire life. He cannot think of another singular moment in which he has been so uniquely fulfilled emotionally, mentally and, soon (very soon), physically.

"I want to watch you come," Nino says, running his hands down the outsides of Haruka's thighs. His fingertips and palms against Haruka's skin are like warm tingles—fiery champagne bubbles teasing and arousing his flesh. "Do you want it like this, or do you want to sit in my lap?"

Feeling lazy, Haruka smiles. "Like this."

Nino smirks. "You just want to lie here and be fucked without doing any work."

Haruka laughs from his throat. That is absolutely what he wants. "I did the work earlier!"

Chuckling, Nino leans into him, teasing his opening with his fingertips. "And you're going to do more later if we're doing three rounds." He dips, licking the inside of his thighs and kissing his way down lower.

Haruka means to respond, but he can't seem to form the words through the haze of lust and ecstasy clouding his mind. And when Nino's mouth replaces his fingertips against Haruka's opening and he feels his tongue pulsing inside of him, he loses his breath and mind altogether.

SEPTEMBER

TEN

ARRIVAL

The months leading up to Nami's birth are surprisingly calm for Nino. For the Kurashiki household as a whole, really. Nino takes this as an excellent sign.

Having intentionally lightened his workload in the weeks before the baby's arrival, Nino is able to spend more time at the estate. He loves his work, but this new balance of work and home life fulfills him in an unexpected way.

After his abduction last year, he'd been forced to stay home for two months straight. The anxiety he felt during that time weighed heavily on him both mentally and emotionally. Once he'd physically healed, Nino had flung himself headfirst back into his work—like a bird frantically flapping its wings after being set free from its cage.

But now, he feels centered. He works and travels to Osaka and Kyoto four days in the week but spends the long weekends at home with his mate, Asao and Sydney. Together, they've finished setting up the nursery.

The wallpaper is a soft blue background laden with white birch trees. Bright yellow birds are littered within the branches like cheerful dots of color. The oak crib, rocking chairs and storage units are all painted white, and a soft, blue and fuzzy area rug covers the center of the hardwood.

Something about the room is calming, and Nino has found himself sitting in a rocking chair some evenings in silence. The back window propped open so that he can hear the birds singing into the twilight. Sometimes Haruka joins him and they sit in the lulled atmosphere together.

On the day that Nami is born, Nino and Haruka are at the hospital, waiting together in a small, innocuous room. Asao and Sydney are

anxiously awaiting back at the estate.

“It’s been *two hours* since we’ve gotten an update,” Nino says, pacing the speckled white tile as Haruka sits in a chair against the wall. “What if something has gone wrong with the delivery? Should we go and ask if everything is okay?”

Haruka closes the novel he’s reading and sets the thick hardcover in his lap. “My love, this process takes time. When they have news, I’m sure they’ll inform us.”

Nino sighs, rubbing his palm into his hair. “I know. But we’ve been here for seven hours and I just—”

A soft knock at the door makes Nino pause and stare. “Yes?”

The door slides open slowly, and Nino’s heart is pulsing in his throat. Soon, Doctor Jae appears in his white lab coat, smiling, with a nurse beside him. In his arms, he’s carrying a bundle swathed in a canary-yellow blanket.

“I’d like to introduce you to someone, if you have a moment?” Jae says, his eyes bright as he steps forward.

Nino walks to meet him. Already he senses the quiet, tiny swirl of familiar vampiric energy. Not quite identical to his own, or even Haruka’s. There are elements there that he recognizes—a certain coolness and power—but it is altogether new. Unique.

Haruka is standing beside him as they peek down at the bundle in Jae’s arms, which is almost completely covered except for a bright tuft of coppery, shiny hair.

“She’s asleep, at the moment,” Jae says. Still holding her in the crook of his arm, he lifts one hand, then uses his fingertips to pull the blanket’s edge lower. “I’m sorry for the long wait. I wanted to run all the tests and clean her up before we brought her so that she’d be ready to go home.”

Doctor Jae reveals her little round face—radiant olive skin, sparse coppery eyebrows to match the thick hairs on her head, and full rosy cheeks. Nino inhales, blinking. “She’s... lovely.”

“She looks like you,” Jae assures him. “Wait until she opens her eyes.”

“May I?” Haruka asks, raising his arms in a gesture.

“Of course.” Doctor Jae lifts the baby, carefully shifting until the weight of her is settled in Haruka’s arms.

Haruka looks down, his face filled with focus and wonder. His gaze is soft. “She... she is perfect.” His head whips up to Nino unexpectedly, his eyes glassy in the bright light of the room. Nino can feel the incredible

pulse of love and gratitude swelling within his mate. The force of it radiates outward, touching him and making his chest tight.

Nino swallows hard and waves a hand. “Haru, stop. If you cry right now it’ll be a big mess.” But it’s too late, because Nino’s eyes are already watering. He lifts a hand, quickly wiping the corners with his fingertips.

Thank you. Haruka’s voice registers deep and clear in his mind. Heartfelt.

Nino shakes his head. *You don’t need to thank me. We’re in this together. I love you.*

“I know.” Nino leans in and kisses him on the cheek. “Cuore mio, I love you, too.”

“Take your time with her,” Jae says, sniffing and clearing his throat. When Nino looks back at him, he notices the doctor’s eyes are watery as well. “When you’re ready, we have a little more paperwork for you to sign. She also needs to feed very soon. Ideally, from Nino, since she’s been conditioned to Haruka’s blood throughout the gestation period. The sooner she grows accustomed to Nino’s blood as well, the easier it will be for the two of you to share feeding responsibilities.”

“How long will it take for her to adjust to me?” Nino asks, staring down at her. The soft rise and fall of the blanket and the blush of her cheeks.

“It depends on her, honestly,” Doctor Jae says. “She could accept you right away, or she could reject you and it takes a few weeks. We won’t know until you try.”

Nino frowns. “Reject me? I don’t like the way that sounds.”

“Not personally,” Jae says. “It isn’t like she’s blocking you on social media. It’s just that she’s used to one kind of thing, and a new thing may be a bit abrupt for her. But she’ll adjust. And maybe she’ll accept you right away?”

Exhaling, Nino nods. “Alright, I got it.”

“Thank you, Doctor Jae,” Haruka says, his aura still brimming with emotion. Glowing and blissful. “For everything. Truly.”

“It’s my pleasure. This is a dream come true for me as well. Thank you for trusting me.” Jae turns, walking toward the door with the nurse slightly ahead of him. “Let us know when you’re ready to go or if you have any questions. I’ll be in my office. And congratulations!”

“Thank you, Jae.” Nino grins, waving as the doctor and nurse leave the three of them alone.

The three of them. A new family unit. Nino takes a breath and turns to Haruka. "Can I hold her?" Haruka nods, then gestures for Nino to take her in his arms. He does, carefully accepting her like a precious and fragile gift. Just as he settles the blanketed weight of her against his chest, she stirs. He gasps as her eyes slowly flutter open. Soon, she's glancing up at him with light blush-colored eyes that are shaped like large almonds.

"Oh... hello," Nino whispers. To his amazement, a tiny smile flashes on her mouth, and then it's gone. Her eyes blink and close once more. Nino looks up at Haruka. "Did you see that?"

"I did." Haruka smiles, his hand resting at Nino's waist as he stands in front of him. "Since she is rousing, you could try to feed her now?"

Nino nods. "Let me wash my hands." He gently hands Nami back to Haruka, goes over to the sink and turns on the faucet. He's read many of Haruka's books and even talked to Sora about feeding a newborn vampire. They won't develop their own fangs for a while, so both he and Haruka will have to bite themselves in order to feed her—usually in the crook of the finger or on their fingertip while the baby is small. Their palm as the child gets older.

Stalking back toward his mate and daughter, Nino rolls his shoulders. "Alright, I got this."

Haruka chuckles. "It isn't a difficult task."

"But it's weird, Haru. Alright? I'm feeding someone new... this kid."

"Our kid. And you feed me all the time?"

"That's totally different. Don't talk about that right now." He has the sudden, strange urge to cover her ears, like, "Your father and I never do that sort of thing, don't be silly."

He brings the crook of his finger to his mouth, wills his fangs out and bites down. When he pulls his finger from his lips, there are two small pools of blood there. He raises an eyebrow. "I don't think I've ever bitten myself until this moment."

"Lots of firsts today," Haruka says, smiling.

"Have you bitten yourself before?" Nino asks, settling his finger against the baby's mouth.

Haruka shrugs, watching him. "Most likely. When I was younger and out of curiosity. I think most vampires do this at some point."

"I feel like a cannibal." Nami stirs once more, opening her eyes. Her gaze flickers up at Nino and he smiles. "Ciao, topolina. Are you hungry?"

She is. He can feel the tiny suction of her feeding against the curve of his finger, but then her little brow crinkles. He draws back. “Uh oh...”

Nami opens her mouth wider, but not because she wants to feed more. She cries. Her eyes clench tight and her entire face crumples as she screams and hiccups in utter distress. Nino glances up at his mate. “Do you want to try?”

“Hm.” Haruka adjusts her so that he can comfortably cradle her in the bend of one arm. He swiftly brings his fingertip up, bites it, then places it down against her mouth. Nino’s eyes widen as she grows silent and her entire demeanor shifts. Contented. Her brow relaxes and the tears dry up. She feeds, peacefully and without a sound.

Frowning, Nino folds his arms. “What the hell? So, I’m rejected?”

“It isn’t like that,” Haruka says. “Remember what the doctor said.”

“Jesus... we’re back to ‘the doctor said.’” They stare at each other. Nino’s face is flat. “Triggered.”

Haruka rolls his eyes. “She simply needs a little time. You’ll see. Be patient, my love.”

“Mhm.” Nino smiles, leaning in to watch her as she falls asleep. “She’s really cute... I wonder what she’ll be like. What kind of person will she grow into?”

“Only time will tell.” Haruka pulls his finger from her, then lifts his chin in an expectant gesture. Understanding, Nino tilts his head and places a soft kiss on his mouth. Then another.

He sighs. “You can’t be the only one to feed her. If you’re feeding her *and* me, you’ll be exhausted within a few days.”

“We’ll be fine,” Haruka assures him. “We’re in this together, yes?”

Nino leans over, caressing Nami’s soft round cheek with his knuckles. She flashes another sleepy smile, her eyes still closed. Nino grins, his heart light. “Absolutely.”

TWO WEEKS LATER, Nino’s eyes flash open and he sits upright in bed. The room is dark save for the glow of white moonlight spilling in through the patio doors. He rubs his eyes, shifting from underneath the bedsheets.

Lately, he's like a well-trained robot. Nami cries, he gets up. Unthinking. Disoriented. Placing his bare feet on the floor, he slogs toward her bassinet near the foot of their bed. He peeks inside and she's squirming, her blankets disheveled and her eyes shut tightly as if she's in pain.

Reaching in, he wraps his palms around her small frame and lifts her to his chest. "Topolina, non piangere, per favore. Va tutto bene!" As he cradles her, Nami's sobs become less intense, but she still huffs in quiet whimpers. Discontent. "Well, let's see..." He lifts his finger to his mouth and bites himself, then tries to feed her for what feels like the millionth time.

She calms, seemingly taking his offering. Or at least, contemplating? Nino holds his breath, thinking that this may be the breakthrough they've been waiting for.

A second later she draws her head away and is crying again. He exhales, shaking his head. "Jesus, Nami. Why?"

"I will feed her."

Nino watches as Haruka drags himself upright in bed. His dark hair is a messy nest, and even in the soft moonlight, Nino can see that his almond skin is a little too pale. His mate has been carrying the burden of feeding both Nino and Nami for two weeks now. Nami is small, but she needs to be fed several times every day—almost once every hour as her nature strengthens and stabilizes itself.

This is natural for vampire children, but the stress of it has thrown their household and routine into a subdued chaos. With her still rejecting him, Nino has to be very careful about how much he feeds from Haruka, and neither of them has gotten much sleep since they brought her home.

Holding her in his arms, Nino walks to Haruka's side of the bed, then sits along the edge of the mattress. "She's lucky she's so cute."

Haruka's chuckle is weak but genuine as he brings his own hand to his mouth to bite himself. When he's finished, Nino keeps hold of Nami while Haruka feeds her. She takes his offering contentedly, and soon, her eyes are closed. Haruka sighs. "You should feed too, my love. It's been three days."

"I know," Nino says, his eyes focused on Nami. Her chest rises in a deep breath and falls. Soon, her breathing is shallow. She's sleeping. "I wanted you to regain some strength first. Are you feeling alright? You still look pale."

Nodding, Haruka pulls his finger from her. "I am alright. I just miss sleeping through the night... or during the day. Whenever."

Nino laughs, gently bouncing her as he smiles. “Agreed. Maybe we should cut her off from you so she doesn’t have a choice but to feed from me? She takes my offering, but then, it’s like she knows if she cries, she’ll get you afterward—like if she complains she’ll get an upgrade. I think we should stop doing that.”

Haruka frowns, pouting. “*Not* an upgrade.”

“I know, I know. It was a joke. But what do you think?”

Sighing, Haruka lifts his hand. He surprises Nino when he laces his fingers through his hair at the back of his head. While lifting his chin, he pulls Nino forward and into the curve of his neck. Compliant, he leans in.

Nino quickly licks his skin, and the sweet, rosy taste of his mate sends an intense rush of longing through every inch of him. He hasn’t fed deeply from Haruka since they brought Nami home, and his nature is in a constant state of defiant objection from want of him. It hates these shallow, sparse and hasty feedings. It wants Haruka the *right* way. Slowly. Intensely. The way in which his body has grown accustomed to over the past two and a half years.

He bites down, exhaling from the pure exhilaration of his taste and scent. From the intimate closeness and sharing of his blood and body. Nino only indulges for a moment, though, before he stops himself and pulls up. He glides his tongue across the puncture wounds to clean him, then licks his lips as he sits up straight again.

When he speaks, it comes out like a whine, although he doesn’t mean for it to. “You taste so fucking good.”

Haruka chuckles as he leans into Nino’s neck. “I’m quite popular these days.” He takes his turn, biting down and pulling from Nino to feed. His mate is tired, but his mind is perfectly clear. Full of gratitude—for this circumstance, and for this moment. The three of them here, safe, together and enshrined by this peaceful and moonlit halo of love.

When Haruka finishes and lifts, Nino quickly catches his face with his palm and leans in to kiss him softly. He holds Haruka close so that their foreheads and noses touch as he whispers, “You keep pouring these fluffy and romantic thoughts into me when I can’t do anything about it. It’s driving me crazy, tesoro.”

Haruka smiles. “I’m not intentionally trying to arouse you.”

“As if you have to try.” He tilts his head, kissing him again. “The minute she’s sleeping through the night, we’re putting her in her own

room.”

“Agreed.” Haruka bends down, resting his face into the curve of Nino’s neck and breathing in deep. They sit in silence for a long moment with Haruka hunched and lying against him. Nami sleeps in Nino’s arms.

Eventually, Nino whispers, “Should I put her down?”

“You can try? Oyasumi, Nami-chan.” Haruka sits up, watching as Nino slowly stands from the bed and walks back toward her bassinet.

He places her down carefully against the blankets. “Per favore dormi e fai sogni d’oro.” Nami squirms and frowns, but her eyes remain closed. Soon, she’s still once more. Nino blows out a breath as he watches. Her hair already seems thicker, and it’s so similar to his that it amazes him. He can see himself in her, but something more.

Maybe his mother? Subtly, in the lovely curve of her jaw, or the button roundness of her nose. Her eyes are a mix of both his and Haruka’s. Blush, but backlit with something warm like golden light. It amazes him.

He sneaks back around to his side of the bed and quickly crawls underneath the sheets. Haruka scoots into him, spooning him and melding their bodies together tightly. Nino grins from the comforting heat of his frame against his spine. “Sometimes I still can’t believe that we did this. We have a *kid*, Haru.”

“Mm.” He sighs. His voice is sleepy and deep. “It is wondrous and exciting and peculiar.”

“Right? All of those things, but... I love it. I love her, and the three of us. Well, the five of us if I’m including Asao and Sydney.”

“Sydney has been very engaging with Nami,” Haruka says. He yawns. “It surprised me.”

“Once we get her past this constant feeding hell, it’ll get better. Next time she needs to feed, it’s me and only me, yes?”

There’s a long pause where Nino assumes that Haruka has fallen asleep. But then his mate responds softly, “Yes...”

Nino closes his eyes and relaxes his frame, settling into the security of Haruka behind him. He sleeps, but only for another forty minutes, at which point the sound of Nami crying wakes him again and he gets out of bed.

Haruka doesn’t wake up, and Nino doesn’t rouse him.

He feeds Nami. She accepts his offering at first, then pulls away and cries as per her typical routine. But this time, Nino bites himself once more.

He speaks softly. “No more picking and choosing, topolina. It’s me or nothing.”

She cries, a little harder than before, as Nino places his finger down. He waits, though, ignoring the drama and not giving in. Not backing down or waking his mate.

Slowly, miraculously, her sobs soften into sniffles. She quiets down, her golden-rosy eyes open and watching him as she contentedly feeds.

ELEVEN

SNAPSHOTS

Nine months

Shaking his head, Nino switches out the bowl of banana oatmeal for the small bowl filled with bright red strawberries. As he sets the latter on the high chair tray, Nami's eyes light up and she bounces excitedly.

"Papapapa."

"I know," Nino says, grinning. "This is your favorite, huh? *Ti piace proprio mangiare le fragole*. But I think this is the last batch. You can't eat them anymore until winter." He picks one from the bowl with his fingers and Nami's eyes follow his movement. He touches it to her nose. "Boop."

She laughs, her tiny ponytails shaking as she whips her head back and forth. He holds it still and she reaches up to grab the fruit. When he's sure she has it steady, he lets go, watching as she brings it to her wide-open mouth to take a big bite. He sighs. "*Come fai a essere così carina?*"

Why are you so pretty?

Before she was born, Nino knew that he would care for their child when the time came. He had to, right? He wasn't sure, but he assumed that it would be an inherent feeling. Something organic that automatically sprang up within him that he wouldn't be able to explain.

Now that she's here, he realizes, it isn't like that. At first, it was a little awkward. She screamed a lot and it was annoying. She kept them awake at night for weeks, and the flow and peace of their nest were completely disrupted by this small, helpless creature.

But then, there were moments strung together over time. Radiant instances like stained glass glowing in the sunlight. She'd open her golden-

rosy eyes and smile at him, leaving him breathless. Or she'd grip his finger within her tiny palm and hold on to him tightly even as she slept. Watching her learn to crawl, sit upright independently and marvel at the sound of her own voice.

One by one, these instances threaded themselves into the depths of Nino's heart, filling it with a profound glow. A different, new kind of love that he's never quite known. Soft, but powerful and fiercely protective. Suddenly, he understands the complexities of Giovanni's feelings toward him, and also why his mother reacted the way she did toward his uncle. If anyone ever dared to harm a hair on Nami's coppery head, he would, without question, respond the same way.

Nami pauses in her messy devouring of the strawberry and whips her head toward the kitchen doorframe. There's no one there, but Nino smiles. "Smart girl."

A moment later, Haruka walks into the room. Nami bounces in her high chair, her mouth red and messy with smooshed strawberry as she squeals in delight. Junichi swaggers behind him, winking at Nino.

"Hola, papi. Hey, pretty girl."

"Hey," Nino says, adjusting the small bowl of banana oatmeal in his lap. "How was the new restaurant?"

When Haruka reaches them at the table, he kisses Nino first in a swift greeting, then turns to Nami in the high chair. She looks up at him, still holding the squished fruit in her small grip. "Haahaa."

Haruka shakes his head. "Hello, sweetheart." He leans in, scooping his hands underneath her armpits and pulling her from the chair. "Not 'haha.' Watashi wa okaasan janai yo. Otōsan da yo. O-tō-san."

Junichi frowns. "Why is she calling you 'Mom'?"

"She's *not*." Nino chuckles. "She just can't say 'otōsan' yet. Jesus. She can only string together two syllables, everyone relax. Plus, she hears me call him by his name all the time. You should pick something simpler. Maybe 'toto'?"

"I'd take 'haha' over 'toto,'" Junichi says. "What is this, *The Wizard of Oz*?"

"Haahaa." As Haruka holds her, Nami brings the half-eaten, sticky strawberry up and presses it to his mouth. He closes his eyes, parts his lips and takes the offering.

"Ugh." Junichi shivers. "Kids are so gross."

Nino laughs. “Oh, look at this.” He stands, scooping a spoonful of banana oatmeal and bringing it toward Nami’s mouth. “Take a bite, topolina.”

Nami’s cheerful face falls flat. Her bright eyes flicker away as she draws her head back, mouth firmly shut.

“Look at that face,” Nino says. “I made this from scratch but she is *not* having it. That’s exactly Haru’s face when I launch into some pop culture reference that he doesn’t care about.”

Junichi nods. “It’s the same face I get when I try to explain that not all smooth jazz artists sound like Kenny G.”

Haruka looks at Nami, who is looking away from all of them in a distinct attempt to flee the banana oatmeal situation that Nino is holding. He shrugs. “I don’t see it.”

Nino flips the spoon and puts the contents in his own mouth. “Mmm, it’s so good! See?” He grins, but Nami’s face remains flat. Unconvinced. She buries her face into Haruka’s neck, hiding.

“You do that *exact* same thing to me,” Nino says, pointing with the empty spoon and with one eyebrow lifted. “When it’s too early and you don’t want to get out of bed, this is how you act.”

Haruka chuckles. “Alright, I suppose I do recognize this behavior.”

“She might have my face,” Nino says, “but lately, I feel like her personality is all Haruka. Through and through.”

Twelve months

GRIPPING Nami’s hair between his fingers, Haruka twists, threading the strands against her small scalp the way that Cellina has instructed. “Like this, correct?” he asks.

“Yup,” Cellina confirms, seated beside him on the floor in the bright nursery. “Now thread that other strand over, then keep repeating the pattern until you’re satisfied.”

Haruka does so, quietly marveling at the clean, textured pattern materializing before him. Nami’s coppery hair has grown so much in a very short time. It is lustrous and shiny, soft as he braids its length with his

fingertips. When he reaches the end, he grabs a pearly-white bauble and twists it onto the strands to hold the style in place.

“How is it?” he asks his sensei.

“Perfect!” she says. “You picked that up quickly. I tried this with Nino yesterday afternoon and he couldn’t figure it out... but I remember when Giovanni taught him how to tie his shoes. It took Nino a long time to get the hang of it. Same brain function, I guess.”

“May I try the other side?” Sydney asks, his pale sea-green eyes earnest. He’s sitting across from them with his legs folded against the fuzzy area rug.

“Of course,” Haruka says.

“Do you think you’ve picked it up?” Cellina asks. “You watched me try to teach Nino yesterday, too.”

He nods. “I think so...”

Haruka sets his palms at Nami’s core. She’s preoccupied with a plush gray elephant as she sits in the hollow of his folded legs. The stuffed animal is a new gift from her Auntie Cici, and they’ve barely been able to wrestle it away from her.

“Nami,” Haruka says softly. “Will you go sit with Sydney? You can take Elle with you.” He sets the little girl upright on her chubby but firm legs. He holds her waist as she totters forward with the soft elephant tight in her grip. The purple-and-white polka dot romper she’s wearing gives her freedom to move, while also keeping her comfortable in the humid late-summer air.

Soon, he lets go of her waist and she moves independently. She does this lately—takes a few confident steps before falling down in a heap. Haruka is waiting for it to happen again, knowing that the elephant will soften the impact of her tumble.

But she doesn’t fall this time. His eyes widen at her assured steps, slow and steady, as she makes it into Sydney’s arms.

“She didn’t fall!” Cellina announces, clapping her hands.

Sydney hugs her tightly as he grins. “Nami-chan sugoi desu ne.”

Haruka leans back against his palms, reveling in the excitement—Sydney’s and Cellina’s unfiltered delight and Nami’s happy, contented smile. He loves these moments, which seem to settle upon him daily, as if he’s almost constantly being drenched in a powerful ray of light and love.

This life, and this family—how much has he yearned for this, deep down? Perhaps always. Since he was a child and since his first family was so cruelly snatched away from him, leaving him hollowed.

Life can be harsh and unfair. Haruka knows this very well. He can never forget it, nor does he want to. But life has another side. Another filter where, once he opened himself to its possibilities, his world slowly became awash with color, warmth and hope once more. Not just hope but promise. The promise of wonderful moments, like this. Of security and companionship. Peace and joy.

If the turbulent waves of life descend upon him again someday, Haruka wants to weather the storm. He doesn't want to drown in it like he did in the past—letting the violet waves pull him down into the darkness. Sinking him in the dreary depths and willingly submitting to his fate. He wants to fight for the perception shift. To bask in the ray of light and love once more, because he now knows of their inherent goodness.

As Sydney manipulates her hair, Nami looks up, her beautiful golden-sunset eyes landing directly on Haruka. "Tosan, Papa here?"

Haruka smiles. "He is."

"Oh man," Cellina says, shaking her head. "Nino is going to be mad that he missed her first tumble-free walk."

"We'll surprise him," Haruka says. A few moments later, Nino appears in the doorway to the nursery, handsomely dressed in business-casual attire.

"Papa!"

"Hey, how's—"

"Stop," Haruka commands, holding up a hand. "Stay there." He shifts his gaze to Nami, seated in front of Sydney as he finishes French-braiding the opposite side of her hair. "Sweetheart, go to Papa, okay?"

Swiftly twisting the pearly-white bauble at the end of her strands, Sydney then grabs her core and helps her stand upright. In the doorway, Nino shifts to his knees. "Ciao, topolina. Are you going to walk to me?"

With elephant in hand, she steps forward. One foot after the other in a careful, focused movement, her eyes steady on her target. Nino's amber eyes grow brighter, his expression jubilant as she draws nearer, unwavering. Not falling at all. When she finally reaches him, he scoops her up as he stands. The movement makes Nami laugh and smile. Cellina claps once more and Sydney praises her in Japanese.

"Ahh, holy shit—"

“Nino.” Haruka frowns in a smirk, shaking his head.

“Sorry!” He grins, bouncing her against his hip. “You’re amazing, Nami! My smart girl.”

Cellina sighs. “Knowing your brother, I think our kids will come out of my womb shouting expletives.”

“Without a doubt,” Nino says, joining their small circle on the carpet and setting Nami in the fold of his legs. “She’s already starting to repeat the things we say. I try to be careful, but I forget.”

“If she starts swearing,” Cellina says, “one hundred percent it’s because of you, based on the rest of this household.”

Nino crinkles his nose. “Asao swears sometimes.”

“Never in front of Nami,” Haruka affirms.

“Yeah, well, we can’t protect her from ‘bad words’ forever. Who did her hair? It looks great.”

Cellina points. “Left side Haruka, right side Sydney.”

“Huh.” Nino examines both sides. “Well, *I* feel like a chump. But it’s fine. Now I know I don’t ever need to do it.” He wiggles his eyebrows.

Cellina rolls her eyes. “It it’s left up to you, it’ll be messy ponytails every day.”

“Yup.” Nino nods. “I feel like that’s in style now.”

Twenty months

“DON’T FORGET that there are extra blood packets in the side zipper of the bag,” Haruka says.

“And if you need to bring her back early,” Nino adds, “just text us. It’s totally fine.”

Asao waves a hand. “Nobody is coming back early. *Relax*. It’s just one night and we’ll be one hour away with my sister. It’ll be good for her to get out from underneath you two and socialize. Huh, Nami-chan?”

Haruka watches Nami settled in Asao’s arms—her worrisome eyes and the tiny crinkle in her brow. “Otosan and Papa not coming?”

“No, topolina.” Nino steps forward, giving her button nose an affectionate pinch. “But we told you before. You’ll have fun with Auntie

Kaori and her grandchildren. We'll see you tomorrow."

"We're going to a festival!" Asao tells her. "Kodomo no hi, remember? You're going to love it, I promise. Okay, let's go! Say 'bye-bye.'" Asao turns with Nami in his arms. She flips, staring at Haruka and Nino over his shoulder and waving.

"Bye-bye, Otosan! Bye, Papa!"

"We'll see you soon, my heart." Haruka waves. "We love you."

"Love you!"

They both stand outside the door, watching as Asao secures her into the car seat. When he finishes and closes the door, he waves them off again, shouting, "You're just making it worse—go inside! I'll text when we get there."

Frowning, Haruka steps inside. Nino follows him, then closes the door. Suddenly, the house feels oddly still and silent around them, as if they've entered some strange void. They stand, glancing at each other. Nino breaks the silence with a nervous laugh.

"Wow... this feels very strange."

"Indeed."

"We spent two and a half years alone together, but the past twenty months have been so busy and endless... What did we do with all our time before?"

Haruka considers. "We worked more. Had sex more. Should we have sex? I have no desire to work."

Nino folds his arms. "Sex is cool, but when's the last time you slept for seven hours without any interruption?"

"Hmm..." Haruka sighs dreamily at the idea. He can remember the last time they had sex, but he cannot easily recall sleeping so gratuitously and peacefully. Not since Nami was born.

Nino slips his palm into Haruka's and pulls him forward. "If all goes well and we have another one by winter, it's going to get even crazier."

Haruka shakes his head. "Let's not think about it right now."

"Agreed. I vote we take a long nap first. Then you can try to take me to your pseudo-mind sex realm filled with rose bushes."

Chuckling, Haruka grips his palm a little tighter. "Perhaps. I will try to sweep you away."

"You do that naturally, so it won't be too hard."

Their bedroom is cast in morning sunlight, delicate and soft. The cherry blossom trees beyond the glass are nearly bare of flowers, with only a few stubborn blooms fluttering on the branches.

Still holding Haruka's hand, Nino turns to him. "We're doing alright with this, aren't we? I mean... I'm not bad at this father thing after all?"

Letting go of his hand, Haruka lifts his arms and wraps them around Nino's shoulders. He pulls their bodies tightly together, making Nino embrace his waist as their foreheads touch.

Haruka whispers, "You are phenomenal. Even if I searched for centuries, I could never find a vampire so attentive and so tender as a father. The love you give to me and our daughter is *priceless*. Indispensable, like the sun nourishing the center of our universe."

He tilts his head to place a swift kiss against Nino's mouth, but Nino surprises him, parting his lips and colliding into him with an urgent yearning. He grips Haruka's waist tighter, as if to meld the lengths of their bodies into a single entity.

Knowing his mate and this need, he opens his mouth wider to deepen the kiss. The slow, concentrated movement awakens and stirs his aura within him. The cinnamon-oak essence of Nino's mouth and scent takes his breath away.

They meant to sleep first, but they do not. In the end, they work themselves into a passionate, exhausted frenzy until both their auras are released and coloring the light of the quiet room.

And then, at the point of absolute physical depletion, they sleep. Deeply, and for nine hours straight.

-The End-

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A SPECTRAL GALAXY PREVIEW

BOOK ONE: THE NOHVIAN DIGNITARY

EPISODE 1

A COSMIC ENTANGLEMENT

“I think the left composite chamber is on fire.”

Multicolored lights are blinking and flashing on the navigation panel before me. My fingers dance and move—turning dials, flicking switches and pressing buttons. I can’t identify the exact problem, but I pray to the God of Jaden that it’s something more innocuous than part of the racer’s vital energy chamber being on fire. “Don’t say that. Why would you say something like that?”

“Because we’re leaving a weird trail of orange energy waste behind us.”

My hands freeze. “*Orange?*” Turning, I look out the large plate of glass beside me. The infinite black of space stretches all around us—darkness and light. A lustrous, dusty haze of blue and silver in the near distance tells me that a cluster of agmalites are establishing a nest. The gaseous rings of Benei cast a soft pink-yellow glow behind us as we travel away from the planet, having completed our mission. Craning my neck a little further, I see that we are indeed leaving a thick, curling trail of vomit-orange energy fragments in our wake.

That should not be there.

Bam. The racer jars and rattles hard from another hit, jerking my body against the safety straps across my chest. Now, the dashboard is screaming at me because of all the alarms going off—loud buzzers and bells indicative of internal structural failure. Things going boom. The cabin lights flicker, abruptly switching from the usual soft, ambient white to an ominous red, which is accompanied by Laidra declaring what I already know.

“Warning, engine failure imminent. Critical internal damage to the left composite. Currently operating at twenty-two percent and falling.”

“Why are they chasing us like this?” Officer Pax whines, their hands moving over the dashboard like a master pianist’s. “What did you say to the queen when you made the drop?”

“We can fix this. The tube is only another eight quintigrades away. And I didn’t say anything.” My candor suggests innocence, but I’m guilty as sin. I screwed this up big time.

There’s an odd pause that makes me swallow and glance over at Pax. Their haunting golden eyes are narrowed at my face.

“Then what did you *do*?”

“I didn’t—Well, I mean...”

“Jude!”

“That’s not important right now, is it? We need to address the situation we’re in—”

Another showering of green laser beams flies past the racer and I divert the ship into a linear plunge, dodging the attack. We cannot afford another hit. “What if we push the engine to maximum—burn up the last twenty percent to reach the hyper-tube and then coast through and back to the flagship? The tube isn’t that long, right?”

More lasers chase us, and my body presses into the seat as I maneuver the racer back up—keeping us safe but making sure we don’t veer off course from the tube.

“If you push the engine, the composite might blow altogether, and then we’re *dead*.”

“But at this pace, I can’t keep outmaneuvering their lasers with the racer half-functioning.”

“Right.” Pax nods. “Either way, we’re dead.”

I sit up straight and glance over at my friend and colleague. Annoyed. “You know what your problem is Paxy? A severe lack of optimism.”

“I think my problem is that I’m riding in this death trap with a repressed and stubborn idealist that’s clearly offended the honor of the Queen of Benei. *Ah, pëshnal kâp benkjwi shi—*”

“Hey hey hey. Manners, please. Don’t be rude. We got this. What’s the reading now?” Our bodies pull forward against the safety straps as I dodge another attack. Pax’s fingers are moving with lightning speed across the console.

“Fifteen percent, and the hyper-tube is five quintigrades away... I’ve lost communication with the flagship. *Pëshnal kai—*”

“Stop it. I’m pushing it. Hold on tight.”

Pax’s hands fly off the dashboard to clutch the armrests. I propel our vessel forward and into hyperdrive. The force of it draws our bodies tightly into our seats, gravity pulling at the skin of my face and the weight of my head, but I push the racer even harder. Laidra cautions us like a dark lullaby under the flickering crimson lights of the cockpit.

“Warning, engine failure imminent. Critical internal damage to the left composite. Currently operating at five percent and falling.”

The lights of the console are blinking in staccato rhythm with the red cabin lights, threatening failure as well. Damn. Now I’m really nervous. If we’re floating out in the Weyland galaxy or stuck in a hyper-tube in a dead ship, there’s no way we can survive for very long.

“We’re so close!” Pax’s eyes widen as the spectral white light of the tube radiates just ahead of us.

“Warning, composite fire detected. Operating at two—”

“Shut up, we know!” I push the racer even harder, feeling her rumble and protest against my demands as smoke swirls and slinks within the cabin. *Dammit.*

“Jude—when we get inside the hyper-tube, eject both composites at top speed. Maybe the force of it will propel us further so we can ride out the length of the tube.”

I grin. “Ah, there’s my Paxy. I was waiting for you to show up.”

“I would just... not like to die today. If possible.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

Darkness and light blur around us, but the radiance of the tube shines before us like a spotlight. Like heaven, welcoming us with open arms. Well, hopefully not like heaven. We’re not going to die, I promise. Not today, anyway.

“Warning, engine failure imminent...”

The second the racer enters the edge of the tube and I feel that unmistakable shift in the atmosphere dragging the ship, I hit several flickering buttons on the con and pull the red latch we were taught in flight school to never pull, and the racer jerks violently once more.

It’s silent. The ship slows, floats, and I’m weightless. We’re surrounded by ethereal light, dreamlike and soft as it whirls in an expansive tube all around. The console flickers and goes dark. Nothing.

“Preservation mode, auto on...”

Laidra's voice darkens in slow motion, cryptically, like an overused toy where the battery finally dies. Pax turns and meets my gaze, but we say nothing. The weight of the situation is heavy, like a thick fog of dread. Eventually, I exhale a sigh, folding my arms as we float aimlessly in the hyper-tube.

I smirk. "We're not dead?"

Pax looks forward, into the white-blue-silver nothingness. "Yet."

"Lucky for us the Beneians don't travel through hyperspace, ay? How much worse would it be if they were in here and still firing at us?" There's a long pause where Pax doesn't say anything, so I lean over and nudge their arm with my elbow. "I said, 'Ay?'"

They slap my arm away. "You're the worst."

"Some say I'm the best?"

"But they don't know the whole of it, do they? The best and the worst. Gifted and cursed because you're stubborn as hell. Friend and foe."

I refold my arms. "Foe? Nah, I wouldn't go that far."

"The Beneians would."

Biting my bottom lip, I frown. Pax has a point there.

We sit in silence and I look around, taking a moment to truly marvel at this hyper-tube—this ghost-like phenomenon of energy, particles and outer space. I never stop to admire it because we're always just, well... passing through. Busy and on some mission or another.

We travel through these entities all the time when they show up on our main ship's navigation sensors. They serve as a quick passage way to galaxies light-years away from ours—places we'd otherwise never visit or trade with because of the distance. After a century of study, we can predict where tubes might pop up, how long they'll linger and where they might lead. They typically remain in space like a swirling portal of light for three to ten days. This particular tube averages about five days.

Unfortunately, we don't know what happens when a tube degenerates. We also have no clue what happens to anything inside of it when that occurs. Our mission to Benei ran a little long, so as it happens, we're floating in a dead ship within a fleeting hyper-tube on day four of its maturation.

Not ideal.

Rolling my shoulders against my seat, I inhale deep, then exhale. The weighted ache that constantly resides within me is flaring up again. If I'm

preoccupied (with, for instance, outrunning a royal task-force's onslaught of space lasers), it's an invisible thing that I barely notice. But when I'm still like this, the ache pulses inside of me and refuses to be ignored.

"Despite everything, I suppose... it's been nice working with you, Jude."

I smirk, thankful for the distraction. "Don't do this. You always do this."

"You know what I'll regret this time?"

"Here we go."

"That I never told Kailani how I feel about her. I don't think she's into me romantically, but I could have at least tried." When I don't say anything, Pax looks at me. "What?"

"You're pathetic."

Pax shifts their gaze forward once more. "That's not very nice. I'm about to die and that's the last thing you say to me?"

"You are not about to die. And your regrets are always centered around Kailani. When we got trapped in that cave six years ago on Escobar, your one regret was that you never tried talking to Kailani. Then on Crêta Dyliad, when you got bit by that poisonous bug thing that you thought looked like a butterfly—"

"It was an aerclaya. It was green and had tiny blue glittering jewels at the bottom tips of its wings. So pretty but so, so horrific..."

"Right. When you were vomiting up black stuff and sweating in the infirmary, your one regret was that you never asked her to spend time with you outside of your shifts. That was two years ago. Why does it take a near-death experience for your relationship with Kailani to advance? I'm not giving you a big pep talk this time. Forget it."

Pax is a lovely person. I mean that. Their hair is short but thick and wavy in this bluish-gray-brown color. It's hard to describe but it's fantastic. The blue is prominent because Pax's skin is a very pale shade of cerulean, but their golden eyes bring a comforting warmth to the whole operation. An amber fire burning in a wintry, snow-laden field.

The humanoids on Pax's planet are all agender in a sense—at least, that's how they describe themselves. The alliance calls them nonbinary.

Almost all of us come from different planets and civilizations on our flagship, and we're there because we have one mammoth thing in common. We *like* engaging with beings from different planets and cultures. We thrive

on diversity and we're open-minded and curious. Accepting and encouraging. We're not like a lot of creatures who are still land-bound—only accustomed to specific types of people, rules or ways of existing.

What I'm saying is, there's no reason for Pax to be so insecure about Kailani. Our ship—our organization—should be a safe space.

Pax pouts. "Not all of us can wield the confidence of a handsome Jaden man. The few people I've met from your planet are like you in this way. Do you all come out of your mother's womb self-assured?"

"Aw, you think I'm handsome?" I'm grinning at a rare moment of praise from my friend. But Pax is surly again, grumbling.

"You're the worst."

"Do you know what I'll regret?"

Pax's eyes brighten as they draw back. "Y-you're joining me now? This is *not* a good sign."

Breathing out, I adjust my spine, a feeble attempt to ease the ache within me and despite the tight belts crisscrossed against my chest. "That I didn't get to meet the Nohvian dignitary."

"Me too. The people of Nohvia have refused intergalactic trade and communication for so long. It's amazing that we'll be the first CA ship to make cultural contact—and I was excited to have another agender person board. I hear that Nohvians are very beautiful."

"They're your opposite. Pink people!"

"I don't think pink is the opposite of blue. That's an insular failing on you gendered humanoids."

This makes me laugh. "If you look at the visible light spectrum, red and blue are at opposite ends, you smartass."

"If you look at a color *wheel*, red and blue are right next to each other —"

Boom.

The racer rumbles all around us, jolting our bodies and making our eyes widen. I whip my head to the side to look out the window. There's a bubbling orb of red-orange energy expanding behind us. My breath catches as I turn and meet Pax's gaze.

"The..." I swallow hard. Shit. "The composites exploded, I think?"

The next moment is a blur, because the racer violently propels forward and Pax and I are screaming our heads off. The orange light of the

explosion is interspersed with the white gauziness of the hyper-tube, rushing us forward like an ocean wave made with fire.

It's getting hotter inside the ship. It stifles my breath and skin as the walls rattle and buckle around us. *Pop*. Something beside me cracks. It's over this time. We're really done.

Pax and me... we've had a lot of close calls, but I always knew we'd make it out of each one, somehow. I always had faith.

But this is the one we don't come back from. The final mission.

...and all because I kissed the queen's hand. Listen, it's what we do in my culture as a greeting with royalty, and she asked me about it. Yes, I could have told her, but I find it's better to just... show? Plus, she was striking and I have a thing about hands. Don't judge me.

With my eyes clenched shut, I'm literally saying my prayers as my body digs into the seat—wishing that I had restrained myself like I *always* do and not kissed the queen's hand. Wishing I had gone to Jacen's coming-of-age party at Mt. San Jorlia's peak that one summer, because it's been a decade and people still talk about that damn party when I go back home.

Pax's enthusiastic tone disrupts my lamentation. "It's the *Red Specter*—they're here!"

The most beautiful sight of my life looms before us. Our flagship, the *Red Specter*. A giant disk, eloquently engineered and designed. The color of a red sunset. My body slowly disintegrates into silver mist just as the heat of flames and shards of glass bristle against my disappearing skin—echoes of injuries never to be inflicted. Not today, at least.

Smiling, I close my eyes and let it take me. When they ask if I thought this was *the one*, I'll tell them no. I'll make light of it and say it was just a cosmic entanglement, and that I had faith that we'd make it all along. Somewhere behind me, Pax will roll their eyes. But at least their relationship with Kailani will finally take another step forward? For better or worse.

When I open my eyes, I'm whole and standing on the glassy deck of the teleportation dais. The air is clean, controlled and the perfect temperature as I take a deep breath in.

I'm home.

"Behold, the two idiots have miraculously made it back to the *Red Specter*. Yet again."

I grin. "Hello Kailani. It is *wonderful* to see you."

I'm laughing as I step off the platform with Pax trailing sheepishly behind me. I'm partially amused that we actually did make it. The euphoria of being alive. But I'm also chuckling because I do it every time I hear our flagship's name.

Such a stupid name for a spaceship.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karla Nikole has a long-standing love affair with Japan. They have always been very good to each other. Having lived in the country for two years and taken several extended vacations there, she is deeply inspired by the culture, language, landscape, food and people. A trip to Italy in 2018 for a wedding breathed new fire into her writing, eventually leading to the birth of Nino Bianchi and Haruka Hirano—two love letters to these beautiful countries. She has also lived in South Korea and Prague, and currently resides in the USA (although Milan is adamantly calling out to her).





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