



Love is Always Write

Volume Seven



an M/M Romance Collection

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Love Is Always Write

An M/M Romance Collection

Volume Seven

Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate love, sex and romance between men. They are a product of the *Love Is Always Write* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and are published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Is Always Write?

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

Nearly 150 stories were submitted and published as a ten volume set – as well as an additional special bonus volume with three novel-length stories – titled *Love Is Always Write*; this edition is Volume Seven.

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

Words of Caution

The stories in this collection are sexually explicit and **intended for adult readers**. Some stories may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating nearly 150 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in eprint involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Dozens of members chipped-in to help; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special **thanks** to the following volunteers for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm:

SueM

Melanie

Jackie

Nancy

Shaz

And last but not never least, the *M/M Romance Group*'s fearless leader **Jen McJ**.

Ebook Layout and Navigation

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

The **story titles** link back to the original posts in Goodreads M/M Romance group. The **author names** also link back to their Goodreads author profiles.

The original photo that inspired each story is displayed, along with the letter or story prompt that inspired the tale. If a license for the photo was not available, a written description is provided; you can also **view the photos at** www.goodreads.com/group/show/20149-m-m-romance

[Enjoy](#)

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NOT A PIECE OF FICTION

by Harry Issott

Photo Description



A dilapidated fairy tale type library. Wooden trellises, balconies and furniture are in various states of disrepair. Vegetation has taken hold: trees are pushing against the ceiling, moss thinly carpeting the ground and vines gripping at every vertex. The style is antiquated, yet bright and open, making it a comforting and peaceful scene even in the midst of this decay.

Request Letter



Dear Author,

The stories are old. They go back even before my father's father, and his father's father before him. I don't exactly know what happened. I just know how we live today. What was this place once? And what can it teach me today?

Sincerely,

cturtlechick

General Information



genre: paranormal romance; fantasy

tags: first time; post-apocalyptic; immortals; loneliness; supernatural; alternate-world

content warnings: quasi-innocence

word count: 22,561

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NOT A PIECE OF FICTION

by Harry Issott

CHAPTER 1 – The Glimpse

Why?

They burnt down every place and person, even themselves. Except my home and the library. They didn't destroy those. They couldn't find them. I rose from the ashes, a burnt corpse in appearance if not fact, as my immortality held onto its atoms, at the edge of death. Swaying towards life, I lived.

I must continue: Duties now passed down to me, the sole "survivor". I will continue for everyone else's sake and do as I must. It is not as if I can do anything else! The pain and experience of burning flesh puts everything into perspective: I have a Duty to do, and not even my blood boiling or my roasting flesh could stop me from doing it. I will do my best and ignore how my familial colleagues failed.

Even as my hand flakes to ashes as I write this...

I will make notes for the future on the past. I will not make the same mistakes. And, yes, that is as trite as some of the novels in the library. But this is all I can do.

~ Jeremy, January 1st, Journal Number 1

JEREMY COULD not think of anything else to do: the library was in adequate shape and all the documents were updated, and even his minute hunger did not provide an adequate diversion. There was no news, so the television screen remained mute and blank in the communications room at home. No ordered groceries or documents were scheduled for pick up from the Wall, although the ten-mile walk through the lanes would be a nice distraction. The latter held

most appeal.

The silence of his home settled on him like dust, stirring him to action. He wandered through the grounds to escape from this oppression. The gardens of decades past were overgrown, overrun and impossible to traverse: only the grass lawns, now thriving meadows, provided the only so-called paths to travel. The grounds under his care only necessarily required a passable trail to get to the library from his home. The remaining forests and land to the north of the Wall was his to do with as he wished, but the wild had a better hold than any of his rudimentary efforts. The Wall, roughly five miles south from home, separated all his land from the Northern County below. The Wall once was the famous *Hadrian's Wall*, but now it has been reduced to a border only Jeremy knew how to cross.

He swept through the flowering grasses, thinking of the pressure that was his inheritance: the land, the Duties and the immortality. His family's death, decades past, provided all three through hereditary process. These Duties, all outside knowledge of which had been weathered away by time, impressed themselves on the shoulders of those unwittingly involved and knowledgeable – him. Firmly.

After passing the guard of coniferous trees around its perimeter, the library came into sight: its huge mass bulging into the golden grass plain and trees bordering it. Ivy lay generously over the gothic façade of the building, climbing up columns that spouted from the forward veranda and piercing through the rooftop and warped balustrades. It seemed to be waging a war with the other vegetation embedded in the piping and crevices, neither gaining any advantage.

This was the place for work and Duty. Inside contained books, documents, papers, ledgers, and many other miscellaneous forms of media and items due his position. His first Responsibility was to keep all this information, now laid to rest in the library's fathomless depths, safe. He passed through the myriad galleries on the inside, deactivating the rudimentary security that theoretically safeguarded his obligations.

Content in being alone, Jeremy chose the role of secretary of the Northern Council. This role, due to the other positions his deceased family members

previously held in this isolated community, came with unique opportunities to veto and participate in any decisions made in the county council debates. However, he outright refused to actively participate in any other role than secretary on the council, so he would not be required to leave his original post as librarian and thus compromise the nation's security. Being a librarian held a relaxing, monotonous regime and routine that Jeremy valued highly. Especially as all the other Responsibilities often lacked this quality.

Jeremy climbed down a staircase, accessed through a hidden door deep in the bowels of the mansion. The clicking of his hard leather boots echoed down the stone staircase to the floor below. The concealed door closed with a whisper behind him as he descended into the mild depths.

It was because of the additional Responsibilities, that the organisation of the floor dedicated to council matters in the library was unique. In a general plan, this belowground floor was open with the staircase ending in its centre, splitting the floor in two, and contained everything relating to Northern County administration. Any resemblances to the other floors in the building were disregarded, as he was indifferent to the fantastical designs of the upper floors. The balconies, room divisions and labyrinths of bookcases overladen with leather bound burdens were common enough for him to feel nothing but a bitter familiarity.

In hindsight, it was these vital Responsibilities, his democratic attitude and aptitude in his tasks, which gave him respect and granted him high esteem. This in turn ensured the Northern County met all his needs to encourage his benevolent governing: this floor of the building alone contained a significant portion of the county's budget kindly donated to him. Especially, as people would not dare to antagonise Jeremy by being deliberately troublesome. Jeremy was unforgiving on betrayal, especially considering his eternal heritage, rising like a phoenix from a traitorous arson attack

Ledgers lined the walls and bookshelves with a lingering must, covering centuries of miscellaneous entries. In a corner near the entrance to the room, stood a single iron filing cabinet – the only one of its kind that exists outside antiquated pictures of office cubicles.

The top and middle drawers contained his summaries of the county's

history as well as a contact ledger that contained details of any person who may provide important services, and their respective contacts. The two at the top of this list were the grocery delivery and IT services, both of which solely exist due to Jeremy's unique position and modern situation respectively. The bottom drawer contained some of his journals, library summaries and a button that, once pressed, mechanically slid a bookcase to the side, to reveal a large room.

This room contained a large, geographically accurate map covering most of the floor and a server screen on the wall in the corner that held the council-only communication device. It looked like a plain television screen; however, it filmed, recorded, transmitted and received video conversations to the populace, council members or individual people. It also acted as the central server for all the electronic equipment on Jeremy's side of the Wall.

In short, there was a lot to maintain and take in – even given the lack of human interaction – with it often filling up Jeremy's time in his normal routine. Yet, what he did know was that the red flashing button on the edge of the screen was not a good omen, worse than the usual dark atmosphere of the place. He walked over the map of the Northern half of the British Isles projected on the floor and tapped the corresponding flashing section running across the hanging screen.

Whirring mechanically, the screen refreshed the map of his grounds, focusing on the entrance to the property. A crosshatched line appeared and bisected the lower half of the screen, loading a corresponding section onto the floor map, highlighting the only entrance to the property that remained after the great Wall was remade, in a red haze. It was indicative of an intrusion, if the aged manuals were accurate. Yet the yellowing loci around this area on the screen indicated security had been activated, but not breached as well.

This was trouble. Being alone mattered little, as Jeremy was quite proficient in his decades of experience, but the fact that a breach has occurred, or a glitch in the system has manifested, were, in both cases, seriously problematic forecasts of further stressful times. Ignoring the pounding of his heart and shortening breath, he uploaded the full security system onto the screen. A detailed status report of the computer system and the current

situation ran across the screen simultaneously. The rough stone brickwork of the room began folding into itself like an anatomical puzzle piece to reveal other screens, streaming live images from the cameras along the Wall and the path to the library. None were triggered or had anything of interest except for the camera screen that had triggered the alarm.

It presented the usual image, focusing on the path towards the library, facing away from the gateway on the Wall. Foliage and bracken were thick and undisturbed. The one discrepancy in this mundane image was a chestnut blur across the corner of the screen.

Relief was palpable in Jeremy's chest, leaving him uneasy at the hollowness within his ribs. *Stupid! Emotions shouldn't make me react like that*, Jeremy scolded himself, *it was just a leaf!* He amended quickly; *nothing could get past the gate without triggering the other security as well*. Satisfied with his reasoning, he sighed and resumed his wandering through the building and out into the grounds. As he did not trust his thoughts while his emotions were in play, he left the security systems online as he left the building, ensuring his safety and to quieten the panic clawing his heart.

CHAPTER 2 – The Staring

I am the king of no-mans-land. Between all of my positions and roles lies my barren Earthly plain, containing only the native wildlife and forests. Within this, I have had the space to think and contemplate my existence. Education and work became entirely dependent on my thought: when stagnant, they would suffer; when active, they – and I – flourish.

So you could say that I have had things planned. I forbade any clichéd notion of the white picket fences or one-point-eight-nine children found in the storybooks in the library, and instead compiled and ordered my personal goals. My teachers were right about something: with all this planning, I achieved everything I set in my mind to do. Even if they only said this

because of my future position in the county. And even though some used this advice to betray us all.

Yet, I am still living my dream. These dreams have saved me for all these years. No harm can pass through the boundaries into my haven in the depths of Northern England. No criticism can break my tranquillity; only the birds may twitter a melody after dawn, after the cockerel crows thrice, welcoming me in my dependant solitude. The gravel and dirt may crunch, crack and click as I walk by through stubborn tracks, and doors may bang as I pass through, but nothing can shatter the sanctuary I have created.

Not even the “tomes of knowledge vital for the nation” that I’ve been charged to safe keep because of my immortality, although the importance of all that fiction (ground floors and higher) in the library is beyond my understanding. Moreover, I maintain to be an integral part of the Northern County council. Therefore, I have all I could ever need in the place of my deceased family.

And you can’t feel emptiness or silence, so they don’t matter to me in the slightest.

~ Jeremy, November 13th, Journal Number –

AFTER HE came home through the concealed pathway from the library, Jeremy finished his journal entry. He found the process of writing down his thoughts an excellent way to keep track of, and moderate, his thoughts and emotions; to minimise any that may be undesired or that could impede his decisions and Responsibilities. A cathartic process, his tutors had said, and a method to continue practicing his writing, off the job.

Nevertheless, as he lay writing, leaning back on the headboard of his bed, the silence screamed at him. An indifferent chill oozed over the large emptiness in the remaining space of the bed, creeping closer. Only the

scraping nub of his pen on paper in his leather bound diary whispered to the air until he finally stopped writing. The mask of serenity remained unbroken on his fair features.

He was still distressed. The gnawing feeling continued to eat at his gut and push agonisingly against his stomach and lungs, shattering his reverie. There was nothing else to do, and he could not risk another emotive episode again. Feeling on edge, living, is not a healthy position to be in.

Standing with a sudden precision, his feet touched the ground with no sound. Jeremy left his softly illumined bedroom and crossed the hallway to deposit his writing implements in their respective drawers and shelves on the oak sideboard piece. He journeyed downstairs to the split open plan living room and kitchen. His home was large by old standards, but was a palace for any other person, with a few thousand square feet of space personally designed and built by Jeremy decades ago with the aid of his now deceased family members.

He sat on an overstuffed chair in the living room, standing comfortably by the wall with the iron-sheltered fireplace gluttonously roaring with a golden flame. He gazed though the gallery style windows at the back of his property to the field and woods beyond it. The sight always astounded him and reminded him of the magical stories stored in the library.

In the twilight, laid back in the deep seat, he watched the flickering flames in the fireplace cast golden globes on the shining glass. Most shimmered, but some danced with consistency. Jeremy took great liking in following two globes float slowly across the glass like eyes in the night. His thoughts slowed as the globes died as they left the glass edge, and he slept.

His last conscious thought was to get some flowers for the vase on the table next to the front door, opposite the stairs splitting his home in half. The vase, a family heirloom, was the only object left to him that did not include more Responsibilities. Consequently, as the last of his line, the vase only symbolised the familial pressure on him to extend the only branch bloodline. It was about time for him to fill it with something worthwhile, even if temporary, before he decided to get rid of such a gloomy antique. After all, *I am (what they call) gay*.

CHAPTER 3 – The Encounter

I went to the collection point today, by the Wall's entrance, next to the area with the sensitive camera. Fresh milk and eggs spoil after the fourth day, so it was while I was on a usual collection that I also went and gathered some wild flowers along the way for the vase. However, the first time I got some flowers was a while back; I just did not have the inclination to document it.

The kitchen usually is fully stocked by the next stop at the collection point: a normal meal would feed me for a week, if it ever lasted that long. My immortality reduces my need for conventional food due to my slow routine. Only with that recent fright did my appetite rear its head for something wholesome and hearty in the morning. Nevertheless, even that did not dent the stock or supplies. So on most of my outings for flowers I didn't have any other necessities to procure.

The pain still won't go away. No matter how I run it through my mind, I can't think of any thought or memory that could be running amok. There is nothing left to cause any more pain or possible injury. The pain is still excruciating; a burning, with no heat, in my chest; and my food becomes a viscous paste in my throat and turns to acid in my gut. I know I have been subjected to something, and it hurts. But, for the life of me, I don't know what!

At least I still look better than the curdled milk or rotten eggs I threw to the forest refuse pit.

~ Jeremy, November 29rd, Journal Number-

AS JEREMY returned home, he held the roses he found along the way underneath his large, red jumper. It kept him warm from the incessant drizzle falling from the sky and dampening his simple clothes. Thus, his track through the wilderness to the Wall's entrance was unusually fortuitous by finding the

blooms, so he was not as disgruntled as he usually was. His anxiety led him to stride through to the gap in the Wall that would hold any provisions on order, if it were a collection day. However, this was not the case today, so the handful of blooms lightened his mood considerably by making his walk useful.

The constant cold morning rain fell: light, but enough to have him semi-saturated in seconds. He moved carefully, with perseverance, through the labyrinth of yellow grass tracks in the wild meadows. He passed the opaque hedgerows and trees that outgrew his slender and average frame and height, refusing to break his habit of a walk simply to get dry. The roses will still survive as they are by his heart, in the dry.

With the velvet petals against his chest, he arrived home, and saw his manor in a new light. Its lines seemed too straight, and the natural design too formalised next to the wilderness beside it, sparking feelings of unease and pains again. He looked up at trellises woven with a fine tapestry of ivy over and around the door, providing a slight shelter from the rain through the arch, and slowed his pace further.

He took a single step into the shelter with only a single tap of his heel. He froze. Only a few drops fell from the living canopy and onto his dripping forehead as he stood still on the porch. The soft patter of rain was all that could be heard as many minutes passed. The noise that had made him freeze eventually resumed from inside his home.

It came from the kitchen. As he silently passed through the front door, muted sounds of shuffling, scrapes, soft bangs and muffled curses greeted him on his right hand side, in the kitchen. Being quiet was his skill, and silence was his self-imposed virtue; he may now be the ostentatious eccentric and an enigma in the council, but this was after he ensured his competency and safety in this sanctuary. Old skills were not forgotten as he entered. Silent and like a shadow, he crept over to see the sacrilege screaming from the room.

Jeremy could not decide if it was the fury or fear, both burning in his chest at the evidence of an intruder, that forced him to sneak into the kitchen to see the extent of the damage. The beautiful shining chrome workspaces were in a state of seemingly irreversible disarray. Cartons and contents dusted all the surfaces and floor; dented aluminium tins rolled sporadically from bare

cupboards and shelves. Everything was out of its precise and ordained place.

While moving with stealth, Jeremy had little idea what to do next. However, after seeing a naked leg stuck out past an island counter cupboard door, he stilled and smiled malevolently, letting outrage stew. The man was obviously trying to get at the secret compartment under the base of the counter top – the cooled compartment where he stored all his chocolate. He could not blame the guy: the chocolate was a luxury few could procure.

Yes, he definitely was a “guy” if the innate strength that radiated from the pillar of muscle in the protruding foreleg was any indication; as well as the streaks of dirt tracked across the floor from mud-soiled feet as he single-mindedly went about his task – no one could have less pride in their self than a man impassioned could. Nowadays, vanity and pride were essential characteristics of people, so this presented a desperation that was seldom seen in the county under his council and occasional command.

Nevertheless, Jeremy knew he had to save the chocolate – another order may take months. *Not acceptable*. His smile dissolved into its usual benign expression as he began the rescue of the chocolaty goodness that was essential for any serenity in his life.

After slowly depositing the thorny roses on the greasy countertop, Jeremy cleared his throat, his hands loosely folded behind him while leaning forward into the counter. A bass thump rang as a head struck the aluminium cool drawer containing Jeremy’s chocolate. It was a welcoming sound as it meant that the intruder had not found the way to open the compartment. A relieved smile formed on Jeremy’s face while he chuckled under his breath. Such a release was acceptable as the expletives expressed from the other man covered any noise Jeremy could make. However, he still quickly schooled his smile out of courtesy for the first sentient creature Jeremy had met in the flesh for decades.

The man tried to scramble out of the cabinet at the sudden noise. The man retracted his leg behind the cabinet door centring his mass before attempting to escape the cabinet’s confines. The motions were far from smooth or practiced as Jeremy could hear the guttural strains and the crack of a kicked cereal packet sliding across the floor as the intruder panicked and struggled

fruitlessly to get out of the cabinet. Jeremy breathlessly spoke what came to mind, relieved that the violence was contained in the hollowed cavity and not released at him as the man intended.

“Thank you for not eating the chocolate. I might have been enraged enough to sentence a punishment otherwise.” Jeremy could not help the chuckle he disguised as a self-depreciating cough escape as he noticed, through the gap below the cabinet door, the stranger’s bare buttocks smack against the ground. The man levered and shuffled out of the cabinet – every never-ending inch of him. His sweating thighs clapped against the tiles like applause of a sober audience. As he manoeuvred into a better position, he still hid behind the cabinet door.

“If you really needed something, you could have asked,” Jeremy continued with perfect elocution and inflection. He surreptitiously reached into the nearest cupboard and brought out a baking tray – just in case. He then leant further forward over the countertop. “It would have saved all the contortionist effort and the indigestion or heart burn you are bound to have after raiding my stock like that.”

The stranger’s efforts became frenzied as Jeremy had him cornered with his accurate insight; frustrated gasps resounded through the room as the stranger slowed and flustered. Jeremy waited, and his smile unconsciously grew, as deep breaths resounded in the otherwise silent room, while the stranger heaved and the movements ceased. He sighed in sympathy and waited. The ridge of the stranger’s back arched over the pine cabinet door exposing a broad expanse of rippling muscles the colour of acorns and covered in perspiration, before it receded from view behind the door like a leviathan to the depths of an ocean.

“Well, if the posh twit,” boomed the rich, honey baritone of the stranger, his voice becoming increasingly malicious, “would *deign* to help instead of laughing... and got the *hell* off his high horse before I come round and knock him off it...”

A few consecutive bangs resounded from the cupboard as the stranger flexed and punched and kicked in exasperation. The cabinet and its door, made of the local oaks, stood firm against the barrage of blows and failed

contortions. Jeremy continued to stand his ground, his grin melting into a sweet sympathetic smile at the obvious attempt of intimidation: it only endeared the stranger to Jeremy further. He could not refuse to help those in need, especially one who has found himself in such a unique position – figuratively and literally.

After the blows reduced to a stop, Jeremy spoke to the stranger with a soft, but firm voice, “I don’t mind you taking what food you need. I *do* mind you taking the chocolate – that is mine – so you need to ask permission, assuming I grant it, before you can have some. You *did* pass the boundary Wall and enter in uninvited; so slow down, calm down, stop and listen to me. Pace yourself, be ready for the consequences of your actions and then we can both be civil. Is that reasonable?”

The stranger growled menacingly, “I am not going to the police ‘civilly’ you aristocratic idiot – no silver platter of yours can fit me – and...”

Jeremy, shaking his head (slightly bemused at the out-dated term “police”), interrupted, his voice growing harder, “I said nothing about the *police*. That is, unless you give me no choice – like I am giving you now. So stop with the attitude and get away from the chocolate! There is nothing the *police* can do that I am not able to do or provide here: food, lodging, semi-amiable company and opportunity for reflection. Possibly a kick up the backside if I’m not happy with the improvements! Is *that* understood?”

With a soothing voice he continued, “Here, take this as you seem to have no clothes.” Jeremy moved forward and handed the baking tray to the brooding stranger. The stranger’s thigh and buttock muscles quickly tensed and flexed in frustration and indignation at his vulnerable position, hiding behind the cabinet door.

Jeremy continued keeping his eyes focused away from the stranger standing behind the cabinet door, “I had to guess your size, so I erred on the side of safety. Try it on for size so you do not have to hide behind the cupboard door anymore. And I hope you know how to clean because this place is a mess. That will be your punishment. I’m going upstairs now to get you some clothes and cleaning supplies – nothing else – so stop being rude and get used to how I express myself.”

Without further ado, Jeremy completely turned away. The stranger gingerly took the tray from Jeremy's hand as he left the kitchen and trod lightly up the stairs. The stranger quickly covered himself with the tray Jeremy had passed to him as he realised Jeremy's insinuation, watching the exiting lithe figure of the owner.

As Jeremy's soft footsteps ascended the steps, with a slight overwhelmed shuffle, the stranger stood and stretched. He quickly blitzed through the kitchen, piling everything into the edges of the room to quickly finish his task, not thinking of the slight hint of a crease in the saturated trousers covering the owner's arse as he left the room.

When the stranger thought the place was cleared enough to walk through, if one ignored all the spilled foods and fluids, he stood awkwardly waiting to be dismissed. Uncomfortably shifting on his feet and clenching his hands, he moved and assumed a position behind the island counter like Jeremy had. He pursed his lips tighter, not amused, at the owner of the property's alarmingly perceptive and refreshingly modest mind. This was why he did as he was told, the stranger quickly reasoned – nothing else.

CHAPTER 4 – The Surrender

So hungry.

So exhausted.

My enigmatic sharp sense for self-preservation and ability for camouflage seem to save me from a danger that I wasn't aware of in this unknown land. I don't doubt it – it was proven, fortunately, by all the times it had saved my hide and skin. If only it wasn't so tiring to be alert all the time. But my skin is kind of important to me.

I found a trail after the Wall, so I stayed off it, scouting parallel to it into the unknown territory. No one knows what's beyond the Wall – the greatest defence in centuries – and if it could save me. So that is why I went over: to see if there is a salvation

in this diseased world.

And thank the heavens for the house. It was scarily neat, yet I could smell the pile of edible refuse just inside the nearest tree line. It had sustained me while I stalked the juicy prey walking briskly with a pained look on his features.

Watching was interesting. I always lost him as he left the vicinity of his home, and not for a lack of trying. But his routine was constant, as was his supplies, so it did not matter. The scraps of out of date food were sufficient, but I could almost taste the delicacies that I smelled being cooked, partially eaten and then unknowingly thrown to my disposal. Mouth-watering.

I need to stock up and get my fill: I will raid his house soon.

Gah! When will my thoughts stop being about food? Yet my responsibilities will have to wait. For now I am starving for real food hinted by the refuse I'm now savouring, that few of the villagers I've passed on the run could ever create.

~ Jacob, musings

“FIRST THINGS first,” said the house owner conversationally, awkwardly averting his gaze, “Are you decent?”

Jacob stood alert in the kitchen. He stared at the enigma in front of him. Tactically, the owner of this property had brilliantly incapacitated him: finding Jacob giving in to his natural instincts; then manipulating his pride and vanity to leave him in this compromising position, and give him no other option than to do as instructed. Jacob seemed to be at a disadvantage, with only a baking tray occupying his hands and a full stomach figuratively handy.

Yet the owner did not realise the lengths Jacob could go – such distances brought him to this position in the first place, after all. *But for now*, Jacob thought, *I will see if this could turn to my benefit*. The violet circles under the owner's eyes impinged upon Jacob's vindictiveness. The evident strain pulled at Jacob's conscience, so his plans of escape using brute force or speed seemed

less likely and more distant, as if reproaching him.

Jacob tensed his already strained muscles as he realised he was standing silent whilst thinking. Embarrassed again, he said with spite, “I am *covered* if that’s what you mean.” The owner boldly turned and clinically looked him over, even after the venomous line. He leant against the wall by the door, blocking off the closest exit, mildly flushed. Held in the arm against the wall was a navy bundle of cloth, and in the other, a large plastic bag – containing the prophesised cleaning supplies – in front of him. Jacob was shocked that, given the situation, someone would keep their word, not to mention to actually expect it to be followed. Again, conflicting emotions of indignation and surprise left him momentarily speechless, especially over something as trivial as spilt food. It was only very ripe!

“That’s good,” the owner dismissively replied. He awkwardly threw the bundle of cloth to Jacob and then, after placing the bag on the floor, averted his gaze to look out of the window, absently rubbing his hands in thought.

With deeper breaths, and with a hesitant and breathless voice, the owner continued, “Second thing, well, second. I am Jeremy. And, as you may have guessed from my reaction, this is my home and I have more important Duties around than to waste time protecting it. Consider that a warning against a wandering curiosity and further trouble. So then, what is your name?”

As Jeremy talked, continuing to lay down his law with gusto, Jacob turned to action. *Two could play at this game*, he thought; and reasoned, *it was only fair*. So, while Jeremy nattered, Jacob began some underhanded tactics of his own.

Jacob had initially tried to hold the overflowing bundle in one hand while maintaining his modesty with the other. *Now*, he thought, *Jeremy will get a taste of his own medicine*. He then elaborately tugged the bundle into shape, just as Jeremy turned, and deliberately removed the warmed and now misted tray to the side, placing it on the counter and into Jeremy’s vision.

Jacob then put on the cloth – a large robe – that was almost certainly the largest Jeremy owned. It barely reached his mid-thigh and could not fit the bulk of his upper arms in their respective holes.

To add to the figurative insult to injury to Jeremy, Jacob quickly tore off

the sleeves to allow his limbs through; the now gaping holes were lined with torn threads, the consequence of their final debacle. As the fabric tore and snapped, Jacob saw an equally violent flinch pass through Jeremy. Jacob smiled at his victory as Jeremy merely pinched his lips together as his face blanched dramatically. *He masks his passion well*, Jacob conceded.

The owner, Jeremy, stopped talking, as if something outside suddenly took his attention. Yet the deepening hue of his cheek and a quick cough, barely moving his tense frame, made the fact that he was mentally visualising Jacob dressing crystal clear – evidently not as objectively as Jacob anticipated.

“Now,” Jacob said sarcastically after a long, deliberate pause to fasten the knot on the robe, “I am decent.”

Jeremy partook of a slow breath. His form was slight and slender, but a wave of power and control radiated outward – no tremors fled him as he exhaled – despite his obvious emotional passion. Jacob may be able to overpower him; however, he did not wish to risk the skill shown by the subtle muscles he glimpsed, stretching purposefully in the crimson jersey.

“This is the cleaning bag. I assume you know what to do with it; otherwise, there are instructions on the bottles you can follow. Clean this kitchen so it shines. Put everything back in order.” Jeremy quietly ordered with a clipped yet calm tone. “If you do anything else wrong, I am likely not to forgive you. Then, I am highly likely to dish out punishment.” A sadistic gleam sparkled in Jeremy’s eye as they both made eye contact on the final line, stressing the final word. Jacob knew this was a fight lost when Jeremy continued without change in his tone, stating in an unyielding monotone, “I am going to go on my patrols. You had better be busy while I am away.”

The midday sunlight illuminated Jeremy’s lithe form as he left, leaving Jacob standing alone in the kitchen. The glimpse of the world outside was bright at the end of the near silent showering drizzle, leaving everything glistening attractively. Jacob shouted his own name compulsively into the silence that pervaded the home. He felt a sickening twist invade his gut; dragging him down to reality along with the slammed door. He could not leave with only Jeremy’s generosity and curt words. The least he could do would be to clean the kitchen and remove the evidence of his depravity – his loss of

control.

However, it was obvious that the bad impression he left on the kindest human he met in centuries made this feeling all the more poignant. That and the increasing pain entering his heart. He would never admit the significance of this sudden portent, sticking with the belief that it was indigestion.

But it still hurt, how Jeremy left, after the best conversation Jacob had had in memory.

CHAPTER 5 – The Realisation

There are some times, I must admit, that I can't solve any problematic feelings or thoughts using the journal, or by rationalising them. Not that anyone could tell! Even if there were people around to pay attention.

During those times, I can only ride the wave. Like the sport that I read about in those fiction books, surfing, although I don't believe any place could be that sunny. Letting it carry me away into salty depths, crashing and tumbling on the horizon, waiting for the calm after the storm.

I managed to avoid such a display after the computer debacle. I just had that awful pain. But I've had worse and the gnawing in my gut held nothing to melting flesh or bone beginning to char... Sometimes I must recall the phantom memory just to clarify the stark contrast of perspectives: the pain now shouldn't hurt as bad!

Nothing else needs to be reported, unless you can call fresher air a problem – the smell from the waste pile is finally stopping with the deteriorating weather. That's a relief, I suppose.

~ Jeremy, November 21st Journal Number-

JEREMY WAS irate.

He was distraught.

He was in pain: the type of pain that haunts the stomach and turns into a fully integrated poltergeist rampaging through his body. Body in full revolt, no pen had the strength to cut the rebellion down. He refused to give in the urge to pick up a sword-like implement to start hacking at *anything* as he walked, leaving the intruder and his home behind him.

Jeremy ran his hand over his head and into a tangle of hair, pulling hard at the root. His breath clouded even in the shade of the oaks surrounding him. He was at a loss. *What was I thinking?* Jeremy screamed into his mind.

The answer: a hollow echo reverberating through his skull. The forests remained silent and still, and the thorns of unnamed plants clawed at him. The pinch and twinge of pain grounding him enough to produce further thought.

“Why do I trust him? *Can* I trust him? Did I do all of *that*?” Jeremy was at a loss for words. No question presented a rational answer: *I can empathise with such degradation; the man’s violence continued to remain internalised – I could see it in the tense, naked, overwrought muscles; and, drat!*

His chain of thought broke: *Was I flirting?* Jeremy had read an obscene number of romances from the myriad fiction in his safekeeping, but to have him express such nonsense... He *did* say what was needed, but, *really?*

Jacob.

Jeremy’s thoughts suddenly turned towards the intruder, brooding in silence to distract him from the rising tide of his own distress. Contrary to the occasional sly inflections to Jacob’s conversation, Jeremy had not seen anything – despite the temptation. There was an earthy musk to him, what people would normally consider overly ripened with age, but it narcotized Jeremy’s actions like an addictive drug. He could not help but lean against the kitchen doorframe to take a second helping of the scent earlier. A kaleidoscope of dark mythology came to mind; tasting the virility and strength imbued in such a potent scent – a musk that appealed to Jeremy’s sensibilities to leave him almost weak at the knees.

Jeremy swallowed, his throat suddenly dry, and coughed a sigh, examining his surroundings. No clue as to his whereabouts, he relaxed into his impromptu

solitude, lost in the wild scenery. Sitting in a knell of a nearby oak's roots, he leaned his head back against the rough bark, closing his eyes in contemplation.

His name is nice, Jeremy thought, refusing to smile while recollecting Jacob's desperate shout as the door slammed.

He glimpsed the colour of russet, like tanned leather – that was the hue of the man. *Jacob*. He snickered at the realisation that even though he deliberately, thoroughly, looked him over – *purely for discombobulating purposes, of course* – he could still remember a few details of the giant. How Jacob barely had a few inches leeway from the (eight-foot) ceiling. Or, how Jacob was perfectly proportioned. Even with some muscles the size of his own arms, crawling beneath and stretching the unmarred canvass of autumn skin, he worked with grace. Yes, Jeremy was rather interested in Jacob's bulging muscles; the *steaming* haze surrounding those consistent, deep definitions everywhere Jeremy could see on Jacob's body (around that baking tray)... Although he was, perhaps, slightly emaciated...

Violent shivers shook Jeremy as the cold day licked his sides, imbuing him with a renewed cold fury, frustration and rage at his situation. He screamed, loud enough to make him hoarse and high enough to distress any sentient animal nearby. His pain came back with vengeance, leaving a festering gap beneath his ribs. With all his effort, Jeremy refrained from scraping his skin, as the painful itch spread through him like a rash.

"*Jacob*", Jeremy purred. The pain reduced to a throb. All the hurt in his life held back tight by the dam dividing his mind, the overflow now being increasingly reduced to a slight trickle.

Time ran past, shadows twisted in the sky, lengthening and darkening. Jeremy could not recall why, as he remained in a foetal position, with his senses closed around him and breathe deepening, he could feel hunger. The caressing scratches turned into a cruel itch as the hunger burned from inside the void left by the previous pain.

The thirst in his dry mouth; his skin, throbbing, aching for a touch; a hunger that no full stomach could cure, all kept him company through his increasing calm. Like a balm, these new feelings, accepted without question, soothed away the derision. Clarity shone through his eyes once again and a full

breath flowed from stable, non-shaking, lungs. For Jeremy, this unfamiliar process gathered his wits, the glowing feelings basking him in a healing light.

Time passed by. The light of the world seemed to brighten as his eyes opened, clenched fists and body relaxed, and thoughts resumed with clarity.

Jacob, Jeremy simultaneously whispered and thought to himself, awaiting another reaction. Nothing in his body rebelled against him. As Jeremy came to his senses, only a growing warmth from the centre of his belly marked any change as he gathered his energy for this third iteration of Jacob's name. It was nice. The name relaxed Jeremy as he thought over Jacob, the enigma.

Jeremy made his way back home through the twisting vegetation, following the trail of destruction he had wrought in his fit of insanity. *Jacob only took the best course of action available to him*, Jeremy conceded. His sense of order, previously lost with the abuse of his kitchen and stressful events, revived with a place in his heart for his new companion. It also marked the creation of another mental barrier to protect him from his self-destructive feelings as he selflessly threw himself into the newly resolved charity, whether Jacob liked it or not.

This decision was final. His frown dissolved into a relaxed, congenial expression.

His purpose was renewed.

CHAPTER 6 – The Understanding

What can I say? Fate bit me back.

Listening to my stomach, I was just so hungry, but I knew the consequences! Now I'm cleaning up after my depravity, knees and elbows deep in the mess. When rotten, it all feels the same, so while it all feels fresh with every texture, clinging to every crease of my skin there is nothing to describe the pervasive revulsion of the task with the new friction driving me to distraction. How demeaning and degrading all this is! Not even the robe will live out this punishment without its own scars.

But I couldn't stop. I deserved this. The kindness he, Jeremy, gave me was more than I deserve, and less than what he does. I should know better. This is the least I can do for his hospitality, no matter how spontaneous.

The pain is a small consequence to atonement for my judgement and mistreatment of... Jeremy. My nostrils are burning from the fumes and the ruined food. Even with the temptation to leave, to eat, to do as I wish, I will persevere and do what I know is right.

~ Jacob, musings.

THE RHYTHMIC sound of fluids slapping and sliding across the floor rang throughout the kitchen. Jacob had already sorted anything that could be picked up into three piles. The first, on the island counter, were items that seemed all right; the second, on the opposing side of the counter, held the items that *might* be all right; and lastly, the third pile, in the corner, housing everything else.

It was towards this last pile that Jacob pushed the sticky sludge. He may not know where things went, or how to work in a domestic environment, but Jacob felt proud at the rudimentary organisation and inventive ingenuity of his efforts and their results.

Jacob was chagrined at the fact that the prophesised digestion problems began to churn within his stomach, making him edgy and nauseated. He continued nonetheless, with the regular sweeps of the wet hand brush, pushing a moist mess off the counter top onto the floor, and then in the direction of the waste pile in the corner. Finally, only a trail of stickiness remained after thoroughly sweeping and scrubbing – most of it clinging to Jacob.

The front door shut with barely a whisper. Jacob remained oblivious to the cool breeze admitted by the now closed door, incapable of refreshing the warm, fuming kitchen air – his focus was entirely on the ritual of cleaning.

Jeremy silently entered his home. He knew his presence was compromised when his leather boots peeled away from the sticky floor with an obnoxious crack. He could see the muscles twitching, visible even underneath the stained

navy cover, leaning forward, with the blemished back in his view.

They both slowly continued cleaning after a pregnant pause. They each analysed the other, orbiting the room in a silence broken only by the squelch underfoot and the crackle of torn packets. The smell of warming foods left out in the open maintained the atmosphere with its fragrance.

Jeremy reached into a corner cupboard, taking out large buckets, sponges, and more bottles of cleaning fluid. He placed the bottles aside as he precariously filled the buckets from a concealed tap at the back of the cavity. The sound of rushing water echoed in the room, almost deafening its inhabitants with the disruptive noise. It stopped with a squeak of the handle, climaxing in a deep clang, as the full bucket was placed quickly on the floor.

Without any other communication, Jeremy walked over to an increasingly tense Jacob. Jeremy placed a sponge in Jacob's hand and led him towards the bucket. Jeremy then took a sponge of his own and demonstrated his practised ministrations silently: wet the sponge, squirt cleaning fluid on a nearby surface, then wipe until there were no streaks and it shined. Jacob made no comment and followed every movement with unparalleled attention and compliance.

Jacob's pursed lips and furrowed forehead prevented Jeremy from breaking the silence. The reverence in Jacob's stare was disconcerting, even though it was focused on the tasks at hand, as demonstrated by Jeremy. Jacob was evidently feeling guilty and wanted to make reparation; despite being unused to cleaning, it was apparent he did his best. A self-imposed focus that Jeremy knew all too well: he could see the same expression on his own face when his Duties threaten to drown him as he overcomes the suffocating burden.

As they moved to work, cleaning, an obstinate silence isolated them in their own thoughts. Jeremy could not help but admire Jacob's form: the strength, the potency and the concentration. Jeremy absently rubbed a drying sponge against the cabinet door as he continued to think dreamily. The peace that had swamped him in the forest lay to rest most thoughts except for the most immediate. All he could contemplate was the growing warmth spreading to his fingertips and toes, making his skin tingle. His efforts on the offending,

dirty surfaces were listless and distant as he focused on the internal monologue of feeling.

Jacob, on the other hand, was confused. Again. Yet he was resolved within himself to see this through. It was only cleaning a room – nothing truly demanding – an effort to apologise for his poor behaviour. Yet Jeremy continued to surprise him and keep him on edge: literally in fact, surprising him by sneaking up into the room without him sensing anything. Or the natural compliance that Jeremy brought out of him, guiding him like a puppet under puppet master Jeremy; an uncomfortable understanding glinting in his eyes as he methodically communicated intent without words.

Their role over the other, and the connection they shared, was deep – it hit him hard.

No one had ever commanded such power over Jacob, as before, he was always in charge. His vulnerability, apparently being expressed so clearly, struck a chord within him, explaining why his resolve and dominance had been so easily undermined. Helpless against his fate, without the resolve to do otherwise, an intangible weight was released from his bowing shoulders, and so he resumed his efforts with vigour. He was unaware of his surroundings and Jeremy's increasingly lethargic efforts, polishing the same spot for minutes before he realised the space sparkled as stars from his ministrations.

They remained like this for hours, bent over in labour, breathing deeply, as they both unconsciously harmonised their efforts to the other, mirroring each other's motions as they cleaned the kitchen.

At one point, they both agreed to finish cleaning, without words or motions, and moved to rearrange the piles. Jeremy focused on sorting the heaps, putting things in their proper place, while Jacob walked out to remove the refuse. Neither considered the opportunity that this freedom provided, confident that the other would return to the rhythmic circular motions of wiping surfaces clean and creating order.

Eventually, the kitchen was flawless again; however, it was considerably emptier. It also contained another "monster" – as every other person would say, omitting Jeremy – within its walls. Not that either of them were eager to claim such a title in their exile.

CHAPTER 7 – The Switch

I have the strength and ability of many men together.

My alien nature marking me as an abnormal that the past has turned into a demon. Abhorred and detested, I found no haven with people. Instead, I learned from example to be independent and self-sufficient.

I can't make the same mistake of trust as my parents had. "Setting roots" in a place with people who claim sympathy; but only to make their cruelty all the more sweeter when they massacred my parents and desecrated everything they held dear before our eyes – antiques and personal mementos all destroyed in seconds.

My power, strength and dominance were triggered as I stormed through the mob at our door and into the wilderness of the fallen world that I now call my home. The previously dormant aspect of my nature coming to the front thus, my ancestry became apparent. The last in a diluted line; enough to live, but not enough to be human.

~Jacob, musings.

“HERE,” SAID Jeremy breathlessly. He handed Jacob a glass of cold water with condensation dripping down the side. “To help with your stomach,” Jeremy added awkwardly, turning away as Jacob rose from his final ministrations to grasp the drink, meeting Jeremy’s eyes with a hard focus. Jeremy busied himself by clearing away the cleaning supplies, reluctant to leave the room, relegating all the supplies into the corner cupboard, taking great interest and forced concentration in ordering the space.

Exhausted from cleaning and surviving through life’s trials, with skin rubbed raw and filthy, the cold from the glass permeated his hand with a soothing embrace. His throat was so dry from work and fumes; he knew he could not talk, even if he was able to break the enchantment holding him. The

one glass held such relief that it brought tears to the corners of his bloodshot eyes; not weeping simply due to his dehydration. Jeremy just had an authority over him that Jacob could not fathom. Jacob drank slowly, savouring every sip.

Jacob would not admit how Jeremy's compassion and lack of an obvious commanding air left him powerless under Jeremy's authority.

A short while later, when there was no more work to complete, the embarrassment was forgotten as they both stood and faced each other. Neither comprehended the fluttering in their stomachs as anything more than the consequence of inhaling fumes for so long. Nor could they understand why the other seemed so close even as they stood on either side of the island counter.

Jeremy put aside this feeling for later; instead, letting the calming feelings neutralise the warmth spreading in his chest so that he would be able to act with further motion. With an audible deep breath, Jeremy took charge and began dispensing with his Duties in light of a more important one.

"Okay," Jeremy dictated uncomfortably, "now the room is clean, it is only right that, erm, we should be as well." Jeremy's cheeks heated, as he refused to think on the implications of his order.

Seeing incomprehension in Jacob's eyes, like someone remembering a distant dream, with lined brows, Jeremy elucidated. "Come, follow me, I'll take you and, erm, show you where to go. Because we're dirty and these clothes are, er, *disgusting*."

They both glared at their garments: a bleached to sky blue, ripped robe covered Jacob. A lax opening to his navel showed lines of grease covering his skin, making Jeremy's heart quickly beat rapidly over the impulsive need to clean and scrub the area thoroughly.

Jacob beheld Jeremy: hair askew, clothes rumpled and stained, with lines of red and brown marks marring the pale flesh. The image was comical: seeing Jeremy's power-holding figure all *rumpled*. It brought a tight and hesitant smile to his lips, not thinking of the fact that he looked similarly uncouth.

Jeremy took this smile as assent, so he leapt around the island counter and grasped both of Jacob's hands that were floundering aimlessly and tapping nervously at his side. With a firm grasp, he tugged, leading Jacob slowly out

of the kitchen, waiting anxiously for any disagreement. At the same time, making sure, he did not think about the dark, plump curves peeking coyly from below the hem of Jacob's robe, nor the firm buttocks impressed against the fabric...

Fighting the urge to stare and contemplate what he saw, he focused on more pressing matters. The rush of action had begun to make his own head spin and he was *feeling* filthy.

Jacob swallowed a lump in his throat as he was led to the front door. A slight sweat broke out on his hands, hidden by the slick sludge coating them from cleaning. With relief, he was guided to the rising steps opposite the door. Walking over the carpet, soft and lush under his soiled feet, he became nervous and self-conscious, as he climbed to the next floor and its corridor.

Jacob distracted himself by scheming how to remove the prints he was leaving in his wake before Jeremy noticed. From the phrases of instructions on the various cleaning bottles that his mind quickly ran through, he considered the best options while being led forward by Jeremy. Especially after watching Jeremy thoroughly rub down every surface until it sparkled...

Jacob quickly interrupted himself. *Jeremy's quite amazing! To lead me – while going backwards through this maze...*

Jeremy noticed Jacob's quickening breath as he moved forward to the bathroom. He reluctantly released the warm hands he held to open the door to his destination. He could hear his heart thumping in his skull as his hand slipped while trying to apply the force needed to twist the knob to enter. Although focused on this task, Jeremy could not help but notice Jacob's head bowing down in consternation, his feet shuffling self-consciously, leaving dirty brown marks across the thick cream carpet fibres.

Opening the door, with a hushed exhalation of breath, he quickly entered, pulling Jacob along with him into the cool depths.

CHAPTER 8 – The Cleansing

I can't help it.

I realise some of my actions are compulsive or obsessive, but there is nothing that can wholly distract me. They laughed at my diary keeping, but these journals are now what keep my thoughts sharp. Likewise, my routine may be constricting and weighty but I have an eternity to complete it, so I will seldom be driven to distraction. And if I am? Well, I eventually stop and return to my routine. There is nothing else.

I maintain all of this with meticulous precision, from cleanliness to Duty, all in their specific places in my life. The former is not even important: good hygiene is one effect of my immortality. However, it is the value of the routine that provides the benefit. It's the indulgence of scalding water over the nerves, with scents and warm cleansers, that provides such luxury!

In hindsight, I knew I shouldn't have slept by the fire – I probably got dehydrated and started reliving my nightmares. If I can't cope with such stimuli, how can I cope? I awoke the next morning feeling hollow inside, and that is not a good sign. Pathetic really. But I'll still carry on.

Ha! As characters from some of those books say, there's a little violin – whatever that is – playing for me somewhere.

~Jeremy, November 20th, Journal Number-

THE AFTERNOON sunlight cast the room in a golden luminescence. The large bath (enough to fit four, quite helpful in the current situation) and the other amenities shone, reflecting the royal colour throughout the room, onto the marble objects and whitewashed walls. A dark canopy of trees greeted the base of the landscape through the frosted-glass walled-window. The large globe of the sun rested in the centre of this surreal window scene.

The sight would often make Jeremy breathless; today however, he was focused on a more ensnaring sight. Leaning forward to turn on the taps of heated water and pouring in a large dollop of cleansing scent, Jeremy's head

ducked down enough to catch sight of the enigmas dangling playfully under the dirtied robe in the rising heat. Jacob was insensible to Jeremy's distraction as he stood uncertainly in the middle of the cool room, looking out at the lowering sun on the horizon.

Looking through his peripheral vision, keeping track of Jacob, Jeremy rambled out instructions. "Jacob," the subject started at hearing his name spoken with such an authoritative, unusually deep gruffness, "take the robe off. Put it by the door. The bath is full and ready, so get in while I get everything else we need."

Jacob quickly did as instructed, perplexed at the sigh released from Jeremy as he turned away after staring at the bath. Evidently, Jacob's comments when they met had made a lasting impression and so, with chagrin, he entered into the blissful depths. As the light coating of bubbles floating across the surface of the water covered him, he risked a glance over at Jeremy, watching him reach into a cabinet for materials for washing. The near-boiling water kept him from becoming too ashamed at his underhanded tactics earlier as it scalded his balls.

He let a loose a small smile as he could see the ridiculousness of his benefactor in the oversized, soiled red jumper. *What a sight we must be*, Jacob thought selfishly, momentarily forgetting the genesis of his situation. Yet he schooled his expression after recalling his reprehensible liberties at the expense of his host: *I'm nothing to him. I should just be thankful for what he is giving me and be ready to leave when Jeremy tires of me.*

Jacob tucked his chin into the fragrant bathwater, realising how exposed he now was, leaning forward, and sitting naked in a stranger's bath. He knew he should not trust Jeremy, not after his parents' incident, but he could not resist the kindness that Jeremy seemed to selflessly give. A tear fell from Jacob's eye, mingling with the water and hiding his confused feelings. Perhaps his parents were reasonable to try to end their desolation, but he would never depreciate himself and hide who he was, even if it meant his continued suffering and humiliation. Otherwise, there seemed little else to live for, other than his principles and a hope of others like him.

A clattering and a clang sounded behind him along with the order to,

“Move forward.”

Jacob moved, keeping his face averted to hide the burning tears falling freely down his face. A soft thud sounded as Jeremy snuck up from the other end of the bath, and placed the cleansing bottles on the floor. Jacob turned away, planting his hands on the bath rim to stabilise his thought. He felt a ripple against his back and a groan from Jeremy as he entered the water. Jacob tensed and refused to move or even think about Jeremy being naked behind him, forgetting his woeful trails of thought entirely. He definitely refused to think of Jeremy undressing before his unseeing eyes, frustrated with his distraction.

Jeremy saw the tension creep into Jacob as his ivy-like veins swelled under his skin. The dirt moved with the sensually flexing muscles. The water enhanced the dance as the movement created ripples that intensified the effect, leaving a yearning in Jeremy’s chest. He could not resist the urge to move his foot out and touch Jacob’s lower back with his toe. A searing ache ran through his nerves from the pad and toes of his foot; it was hotter than the scalding water they both sat in. They both felt the shock; Jacob turned puce while Jeremy went lax in the water’s embrace.

“Lean back, into my lap, and relax Jacob. You will only hurt yourself otherwise. It has been a stressful day, so relax.” Jeremy clucked entreatingly. Jacob eventually leant back, collapsing under the weight of his own thoughts and shaking, aching muscles, his skin darkening, flushing in the heat.

Jeremy reached out and pulled Jacob firmly into his lap, not permitting the little resistance Jacob offered in return, adjusting his body until he lay submerged in the water with only his face kissing the air. Jeremy looked down into Jacob’s eyes and said with absolute conviction, “You are going to stay here until you relax. You will stay here with me until you are well. Then you may decide what you wish to do after I agree you are well enough. Your bones show and you are evidently in a pained way, so let the water wash it all away, and I’ll deal with the rest.”

Another single tear escaped Jacob’s eye. He shut them both to prevent more tears escaping as he broke off the stare in acceptance. Focusing, as Jeremy ordered, to relax, Jacob felt the weight of the world disappear,

dissolving in the water. *To Hell, with every condemnation, if I'm to die now or in the future because of my dependence*, Jacob exclaimed in his mind; he finally felt a closure and sense of belonging in this stranger's lap. *I want to stay*, Jacob thought with complete faith, giggling hysterically at himself as he continued, *if only to see what Jeremy has in store for me*.

Jeremy was relieved all this worked. The glimmer of innocence conveyed by the slight smile on Jacob's mouth spread warm contentment through his being, filling him with an ethereal glee that expanded like a balloon in his chest. He was not a specialist on the subject, so everything he did instinctively was because it felt *right*. So he was glad when he saw his efforts come to fruition and gratified by the fact that he is doing something truly worthwhile.

It was at this point that Jeremy knew he would care for Jacob until he became better, offering his home as sanctuary for him if he ever had need of it again – Wall, library or personal security or not. However, he also knew this would not be enough. The thick shoulders resting on his thighs, warmed him beyond boiling, instilling the slight ache in his chest that grew to pain when he considered a separation of any kind. The alien feeling bound him to Jacob, and Jeremy felt with every fibre of his being that Jacob was the key to realising what this feeling was.

With a sigh and a blink to stop unshed tears, Jeremy turned to resolve more practical matters. He reached down beside the bath and took the soap bottle that contained one of his favourite scents. With his other hand, he reached down between his legs, platonically, to gently push Jacob forward. Jacob's eyes opened and he did as requested without a sound and barely a ripple displacing the peace between them both as he turned to sit straight facing Jeremy.

Jeremy smiled congenially as he got down to business. "Time to get clean," Jeremy motioned with a smile towards the bottle in his hand and added with a sinful gleam to his eye, "Like those *police* you mentioned, I think I have a right to ensure the prisoner is looked after properly."

Brazen with confidence, Jeremy moved forward, straddling Jacob's outstretched legs, torsos almost touching. He squeezed a dollop of soap onto his hand – yet another golden luminescence – and ground the liquid

therapeutically, firmly and thoroughly, over every inch and crevasse of Jacob's skin. Jacob initially tensed, but the fluid movements and the cool lotion had him speechlessly bowing into Jeremy's hand with a rumble resounding from the depths of his chest.

All this was only the result of Jeremy's treatment on Jacob's collarbone! Jeremy relished Jacob's reaction. *Yes, like a prison, it'll be a prolonged torture.* He moved his worship to Jacob's chest, over every russet mound and peak, eliciting verbal gulps and gasps. Jeremy worked lower, keeping his eyes on Jacob's face above him, with hands moving in synchronicity.

Jeremy firmly worked over the narrow hips and thick thighs, deliberately ignoring the responsive flesh between them both. Jacob released an explosive breath when Jeremy's hands moved to finish coating what remained of his legs, refreshing the cooling effect of the cream, using a new dollop of soap that Jacob seemed to enjoy.

Jeremy's smile outshone the midday sun. He took the arms that gripped the bath edges after Jacob realised his intention, and worked a dollop of soap into every crease. He added pressure to massage into every muscle, feeling them tense and relax under his efforts. When they were done, he motioned for Jacob to turn around so he could reach his back. Thus, with a languid peaceful compliance, Jacob sat between Jeremy's legs.

Kneeling and reaching up, Jeremy soothingly stroked Jacob's collarbone and meandered to encompass his neck. He could feel Jacob's life pulse beating erratically, oscillating between fast and slow, underneath his fingertips. With pressure, he applied the massaging techniques he learned – *it takes two to tango*, as his tutors said – from the medical section in the library.

Jacob mumbled, murmured and moaned, leaning back into Jeremy. Jeremy felt the vibrations travel up through his wrist as he heard Jacob talk in a hoarse whisper. "Why are you doing this?" Jacob's hands caught Jeremy's loosely as he waited for an answer.

Instead, Jeremy began exercising the tension in his hands away, maintaining the contact between their hands. He moved up to whisper his cooler breath in Jacob's ear, the steam creating a surreal picture before his eyes, "Because I want to help. But I already said that, I guess," he blew

another teasing exhalation over Jacob's ear. He did not flinch. "I guess, I'm finally enjoying myself and I kind of don't want to stop." Jeremy kissed the tip of the teased ear.

"Time to help and wash yourself," Jeremy declared after a motionless moment. He could not take that last step; to lean over Jacob to wash the last remaining expanse of skin – he would not take advantage – so he moved back to the other half of the bath. Instead, as Jacob turned to look dolefully (he was evidently aroused) at Jeremy, Jeremy took another bottle beside the bath and proceeded in the methodical process of cleaning his own hair, refusing to give into those amber depths or coy images reflecting in the ripples of the water.

Jeremy passed the bottles over to share with Jacob, his motion hesitant as his eyes wandered.

Jacob quickly washed his long hair and openly displayed himself, purposefully. He rubbed the soap into the remaining virgin skin with languid motions. Jeremy sunk low into the bath, his eyes just above the peaking ripples. He rubbed his body, mindlessly cleaning, focusing instead on the hazy image of Jacob's hands moving through the trail of hair on his stomach down to his... groin. Cleaning far more thoroughly than he did any surface in the kitchen, Jeremy randomly thought.

The display became too much for Jeremy after he finished his body rub, as he could see Jacob purposely pulling at his foreskin to rub underneath and around the bulbous head. He left the bath abruptly in a cloud of mist and water droplets, beginning to dry himself while covering his response at the same time.

Jeremy heard Jacob follow shortly after behind him, the splash of water and slap of wet skin cut through the marble chamber. Steam condensed and glistened on every surface, the sun seemed almost swallowed by the dark forest treeline through the window.

Jacob came and stopped behind him; the warmth encompassing him, brushed temptingly at Jeremy's exposed back. Jacob also seemed to be in the process of drying as the sound of fabric shuffling provided a companionable noise, as the motions shifted clouds of steam around the room. The sight of the dancing vapours caught with the dying light struck a knotted chord inside him,

reminding him of the romantic notions found in fiction. Or was it non-fiction?

Afraid the dream would end, desperate for it to continue, Jeremy whispered impulsively, “The sun has almost set. It’s time for bed. Come, follow me.” Refusing to let a cold hesitation grip him, he turned to the damp Jacob and grasped his hand. Completely naked, Jeremy quickly left the room with Jacob in tow.

CHAPTER 9 – The Night

I was always held as sacred. Immortality puts everyone in its grasp on a pedestal, or a hermit’s cottage. In retrospect, I was lucky my eternal Responsibility was so close to home, for however long it lasted.

I had no chance to bond with anyone other than my family, so I haven’t had much communication with anyone in the flesh for decades, or was it centuries? So watching those floating globes was refreshing. I should’ve been scared seeing a new manifestation of my unnatural privation, but those globes were inexplicably full of wanting... It drew me like a moth to a flame. Until they left.

I would have assumed that this yearning started the pain inside me, growing from the nagging discomfort that existed beforehand. I don’t know anything else: it is just a yearning that I have no capacity to understand.

Yeah.

~ Jeremy, November 16th, Journal Number -

MOVING ALONG the dim, bare corridors, Jeremy felt loathing at the clinical nature of the space in contrast to the bright alternative he and Jacob previously just shared. The off-grey of his room turned into many variations of shadow as

he entered, emphasising the starkness of a traditionally personal space. Everything was in its place. In the centre of the room, the large bed had two small side tables at each side; the sliding doors in one side of the wall, painted in battleship grey, housed his entire wardrobe. All other space was empty, like every other room and corridor in his home, with the exception of the sideboard in the corridor behind him.

Jacob stood awkwardly in the room with no place to put his hands while Jeremy stood with a look of stone on his face, surveying the space. Jacob already recognised Jeremy's expression as the genesis of an *objective* decision that will have the capacity to strike fear in the most hardened of men – man – *him*, when it comes to fruition.

Breaking his reverie, Jeremy turned to face Jacob with a look akin to shock in his eyes. Jacob, averting his eyes, closed the door with an inaudible thud to break the stare with which Jeremy seemed to reach into his soul. However, his efforts were futile as his eyes soon sought the connection found in their mutual appreciations. Vanities faded as they both stood there without obstruction, looking into each other, flirting with their eyes and similar thoughts.

Jacob took in Jeremy's slim form, under no illusion of the power in the compact shape, both physical and mental. He was not afraid of whatever the future held for him, or of the position they both found themselves in, only feet away from each other. Nevertheless, he felt on edge standing between Jeremy and the exit. The exit held no attraction for him; however, he could not help but be insecure at what Jeremy may ask after his contemplation.

Without breaking eye contact, Jacob shuffled and swallowed his unease. Jeremy's awed expression melted to a sweet sincerity as he beheld the divine creature before him. They both could not express the loneliness that kept their lives out of balance – a juggling act for them both between their Duty and necessity.

The warmth of the handsome figure melted away Jeremy's inhibitions and the inbred dictates of Duty; painless, and without reprieve, he could now understand what it is like to "fall" as his heart leapt into his throat. He could remember the term found in the fiction he protects, but he could not recollect anything else, as he saw his own fantasy before him.

Jeremy guided Jacob onto the pristine bed, destroying the meticulous order without regret. They both lay down side by side. Jeremy was not reluctant, but neither was he overly impatient as his life began to change, an inch closer at a time. Jacob did not dare to break the temporary peace in Jeremy's trepidation with his deepening and quickening breaths. Gravity seemed to move them together with their admissions, melding them to each other's side, in relative silence.

As night fell, they came together. Jeremy lay on top of Jacob's stomach, lost against his great length. He could feel a light layer of soft, near invisible fur across Jacob's skin as they slid sinuously together into position. He could imagine the brown of Jacob's skin flush and bruise as he pulled at these sensitive hairs, Jacob mewling underneath him defencelessly.

Jacob pulled Jeremy tighter towards his chest, craving the closeness.

Clawing closer, pulling at fur and hair, Jeremy was met with the indecision to either caress or close the distance between his lover. In the end, he tried to do both in the confined expanse of Jacob's heated arms.

Their hands roamed with reverence, arching into each other, in the dark of night. Only aware of their contained passions – an unspoken agreement keeping them from progressing further on their first night – already finding sanctuary in the other's embrace. No longer did the bed merely have function; it had purpose, as every inch was used to accommodate them both as they explored each other, savouring each action.

Jacob fondled Jeremy in a myriad of places, containing them all in the palm of his large hands, fitting perfectly each time, cool and blazing hot against their nerves. Jeremy's skin was firm with subtle muscles, Jacob confirmed, as he pressed lightly to restrain his primal need to *claim*.

Jacob was aware of the implications of this sudden need, yet, *Jeremy's pressing every button in me...*

Jeremy slid down Jacob's prostrated body. He stroked through the light fur, pressing and squeezing the bulging muscle of Jacob's abdomen and arms, pinching and relishing the slight salty tang of his sharp, erect nipples and skin. Between limbs, Jeremy reached down to cup Jacob's heavy and laden sac, easily filling, almost overflowing, his cupped hands. Jacob could only moan as

Jeremy kneaded his balls and blatantly ignored the particularly large, blood-laden organ rising into the hot, moist breath in front of Jeremy's face.

...*I feel so alive!* With a vibrancy that had every muscle strain like no run or fight ever had. The force that was Jeremy dominated his heart, soul and body. The strain did not hurt or burn as he lost control, arching and whimpering into Jeremy's embrace, his body felt completely relaxed as he held lightly on to his lover's shoulders. He submitted to his dependency on Jeremy's love and care.

They both claimed each other. Jacob twisted to meet his lover's penis, stroking, nibbling and kissing his way down Jeremy's body with none of the urgency he felt expanding inside himself, before eventually reaching the desired organ. Jacob held Jeremy's shaft, rubbing with toughened hands, while Jeremy, reciprocated, with silken skin against silken skin. Jeremy tongued beneath Jacob's foreskin, creating marvellous friction, which had Jacob squeeze him almost painfully as he moaned without abandon. With little comprehension, Jacob did the same, using his fingers to stroke under the ivory rim of foreskin to elicit similarly crazed cries. Jacob could feel these vibrations (as Jeremy's mouth swallowed him) around his girth.

Jeremy struggled, but the taste of the released bitter-sweetness encouraged his hunger and efforts, stretching his lips and throat to accommodate the hard length. He could feel Jacob's foreskin slide against his throat, holding his breath to maintain the taste and sensation, almost choking on Jacob's cum from his thick, long cock. In return, Jeremy stroked and held the ample length, tugging at the musky pubes, milking him with desperation at the same time, suckling like a babe.

Jeremy could feel the distracted efforts of Jacob as he fondled Jeremy's balls before stroking him roughly towards completion. To increase the friction, Jacob's sweaty fingers began rimming Jeremy's twitching hole, simultaneously pushing into Jeremy's bottom to encourage him along. Jacob enjoyed watching the small entrance pucker in delight at the pressure and Jeremy's balls bouncing painfully towards relief.

Thought ceased, as they became the source for their other half's pleasure. Their energies peaking to a wet heat, bed sheets rumped and both side tables

knocked askew from flying limbs as they played the stimulating game. Tasting each other, bending and stretching to seek virgin flesh, they both were breathless from their efforts to willingly corrupt. Touching every inch of skin, learning each component of their partner, they shared the secrets of themselves and the other. No longer could they play the part of the beneficiary and philanthropist; they became equally and deeply besotted as men, initiated to the feelings of love and the unity of two persons.

Ejaculating with wild rapture into Jeremy's mouth, Jeremy swallowed the multiple spasms of sweet fluid, while Jacob finally felt the abuse of his body as his balls painfully emptied, remaining caught between screaming muscles of epic completeness and pleasure. While Jeremy continued to swallow every drop from his softening cock (reduced enough to fit almost entirely in Jeremy's mouth), Jacob manoeuvred Jeremy closer, so he could do the same.

They both sucked on each other's cock; Jacob twisting to take Jeremy fully in his mouth, teasing his balls by taking them alternately in his mouth with every other suck, fondling Jeremy's newly discovered sensitive flesh. The wet slurping sounds outmatched their groans and whimpers as tortured, oscillating bodies strained in the throes of true passion. Jeremy, slack in Jacob's embrace, hips held by tight arms, focused all his efforts on massaging Jacob's cock to hardness once again with his tongue.

As the night matured, they both climaxed together, drinking the essence and joy of the other. When every drop was dry or swallowed, Jacob made a last colossal effort to place Jeremy over him like a blanket. Ever the romantic, with their remaining energy, Jeremy pulled the blankets away from their forms, leaving them bare and alone with each other in a loving embrace.

With euphoria and fatigue, limbs – as their bodies had been for most the night – entwined, they drifted off to sleep. Darkness changed into the dark background of their minds where they explored their love again, refreshed, and with renewed enthusiasm, dreaming until dawn.

Jeremy could remember the feeling that haunted him, deep in his soul. With a smile, he could not believe how he could have forgotten: *I'm in love.*

CHAPTER 10 – The Morning

My parents were given a role as the last of the immortals to live. Doing something “important for the nation”, as they called it.

Unfortunately, the locals didn’t know this. Soon after the previous world completely ended, and the new, adapted one began, they saw it as a chance to get rid of us – the monsters in the night. Apparently.

My parents were continually on the run. Then I was born. Inheriting the immortality quirk that both my parents had, along with the “immunity” that it provided. Community to community, they saw our differences eventually and, sparking their inbred suspicion and hatred of outsiders, we were driven out. This time, not because we were the diluted offspring of monsters, but merely because we were new, different.

I couldn’t trust again. Even then, I had no one to trust or depend on as my parents died, painfully and torturously, as only immortals can.

Jeremy changed that. I am his in my heart and mind. I would not risk the body in case it may scare the mortal. I may be his, but the urge to claim what is also mine is – was – almost as painful as being an immortal virgin, while it lasted. But his touch did not corrupt, it sanctified all my being.

Come what may...

~ Jacob, musings.

JACOB AWOKED to cool sheets and a cold, empty bed. Yet he could still feel Jeremy’s sleeping body impressed on his. He could feel the warmth permeating through every cell his lover had touched – everywhere.

He awakened earlier, with Jeremy warming him immeasurably, spread

over him like a blanket. It was an old habit – self-preservation prohibited sleeping in. However, an involuntary twitch in his side caused a slumbering Jeremy to murmur indistinctly and instinctively stroke his side in comfort while he slept on oblivious.

Such domesticity warmed Jacob's heart. It was reminiscent of his parents who shared similar habits at dawn; calming the other from troubled dreams, promising tomorrow, even though for them, that promise would be broken. He swallowed and tensed. Jeremy responded, still encumbered by sleep, by jabbing Jacob in the sides to return him to reality, away from his brooding and let Jeremy's mattress of muscle relax once again. With a smile and the soothing caresses of Jeremy's hand, he fell back asleep.

Yet now, *Jeremy is missing*, Jacob thought, *I won't panic. Yes, no need to worry... yet...*

Taking the discarded sheet from the floor as a cover for modesty's sake, he quickly took in his surroundings. The grey room was pleasantly illuminated; yet, the door ajar took his attention. It provided a harsh slither of light, highlighting the sideboard in the corridor and the emptiness screaming at him in the room. Quickly tying the sheet loosely around his hips, he exited the room in a hurry.

Marching through the corridors, he smelt a rich aroma that made his stomach growl as loud he had last night. He smacked his lips together, his mouth moistening with growing need. Refusing to think about the musky aftertaste in his mouth, he stalked through the corridors towards the origin of the fragrance. The white sheet swished uncomfortably against the fine hairs on his legs, restricting his movement as it tangled in his rush, slowing him down to a regular pace.

As Jacob silently entered the – sparkling, even with the evident activity – kitchen, Jeremy's sixth sense activated without prompt. He talked, with his face studying the concoctions cooking in preparation on, and around, the stove to Jacob's left.

“Sorry I didn't wake you, but I thought you needed your rest,” he smiled with approval.

With a sigh, he continued, “Your breakfast is ready – on the countertop, by

the stool that you *haven't* broken yet – something light to start you off, but rich with nutrition.” Jacob’s head ducked as he shuffled to his meal, his feet squeaking on the cold hard surface, mortified at Jeremy’s casual reference to his misdemeanour the previous day, at a loss with what to do or where to look.

Jeremy began dictating Jacob’s orders for the day, “It’s small because I saw your discomfort after eating through the stocks, so after your bath – as we definitely had fun last night – if you are up to it, you can have some more – food that is. Little and often, is the cure for privation, I think – you can choose which is more important...”

Jeremy’s face ran through a spectrum of expressions throughout this diatribe. Jacob was baffled at the bold insinuations coming from a person who seemed so reserved, while seemingly reacquainting himself with his dramatic expressions. *Until last night*, Jacob thought with a smile, watching Jeremy move with intent.

“Then I must go and do my work,” Jeremy sighed in exasperation.

Jeremy suddenly turned to face the bemused Jacob. Foreboding rumbled in Jacob’s gut as Jeremy smiled at a seemingly impromptu idea. “Perhaps, you could keep me company?” Jeremy’s apparent eagerness left no room for Jacob to decline – he felt he could climb a mountain – the *food* was so good after so long without.

Between a mouthful of moreish delight, Jacob responded, “Um, yeah, okay.” Another mouthful swallowed afterwards, “Um, what shall I wear?”

A look of consternation crossed Jeremy’s forehead. The question of clothing obviously forgotten while he also realised the swaying spectacle he displayed for Jacob’s personal viewing, standing naked in front of him. Snatching the infamous baking tray from the drying rack close by, he covered himself, both blushing at the familiarity of settling into each other’s lives.

Jacob ate another mouthful, focusing on swallowing; while the sheet tented at his acknowledged voyeurism. Jeremy stood as awkwardly as Jacob had the previous day as a complicated thought crossed Jeremy’s eyes.

After a pregnant pause, Jeremy sighed and relinquished the baking tray to a new pile of washing with a flick of his wrist, baring all, again. Jeremy elucidated, “It is not like you haven’t seen this before. And I think the baking

tray has seen enough action.” His passion sparkled in his eyes again as he strolled around the kitchen audaciously, causing Jacob to choke as he tried to take a mistimed swallow and chuckle.

“Is there a problem Jacob?” Jeremy asked over his shoulder as he fiddled with the knobs of the nearest appliance. Jacob gulped at the sudden, molten stare focused at him, caught by Jeremy’s flexing figure, a dribble of breakfast escaping out of the corner of his mouth.

“No,” Jacob said with a strangled cough and a wipe of his mouth. To digress, he asked politely, “Aren’t you going to have breakfast?”

“Not hungry,” Jeremy dismissed simply, mumbling into the metallic machine. He finished his actions with a flourish and bounced to the exit, on the opposite side of the kitchen.

Mesmerised by the resumed dance of taut muscle and swaying, pert flesh, Jacob almost missed Jeremy say, “When you are done, go up and bathe – everything is ready for you and the water is hot. I’ll put something together for clothes and bring them to you. Remember to *not* destroy my kitchen again, so please don’t be tempted to take my chocolate, and place the bowl in the sink when you’re done.”

Jeremy skipped – causing spectacular gyrations elsewhere – out of the kitchen, into the rest of the house. Jacob noticed an antique vase by the door filled with the flowers Jeremy returned with that day. Again, with the past on his mind, Jacob sat eating his fill, caught between feeling guilty and incredibly horny. He *knew* Jeremy would get the last laugh.

CHAPTER 11 – The History

Now that I have a moment, I thought I should really update my journal.

Not because I need a moment to myself to not be mortified at not even realising nor actually caring about not-not wearing clothes with Jacob. Yes, it is trivial now that we – we shared company and a bed for the night, but it is the principle of the

thing! I would've given him anything he needed, but it just seems to be going too fast.

But we get along so well. Our walk later might be fun. I wonder what he might like for dinner...

Oh, speaking of dinner, I really should get some clothes ready for us both.

I knew Jacob would be interesting... hmm...

~ Jeremy, December 1st, Journal Number -

JEREMY DID manage to find another robe for Jacob, one in pale green. He ripped off the sleeves and quickly knitted the threads together to leave a neat hole before he entered the bathroom. Seeing Jacob's back glowing in the morning sun through the soft cloud of steam, Jeremy laid the pile of clothes – his and Jacob's – to the side as he sauntered closer.

Entering the bath next to Jacob, Jeremy began his own wash, scrubbing the remains of the previous night away. He watched Jacob, out of the corner of his eye, wash awkwardly, as if he did not quite know what to do. However, Jacob did seem to try, if the look of focus was any indication. Jacob's mounting arousal as Jeremy scrubbed through his short hair, his torso stretching in the warm waters, revealed the losing battle of concentration.

Out of sudden benediction, Jeremy paused washing his body and began helping Jacob. He thoroughly scrubbed through the salty skin and hair, without any mercy over the sensitised skin Jeremy had discovered the previous night. The flinch as Jeremy cleaned over Jacob's collarbone; the gasp as Jeremy scoured over Jacob's sides; or the almost outright rebellion as Jeremy firmly cleaned every crease of Jacob's engorged rod, paying meticulous attention to the throbbing head after pulling the foreskin firmly back.

In the end, when they were dressed, watered and fed, Jacob had another ache to add to his previously decreasing list of maladies. However, they did leave cleaner than when they entered, feeling lighter, with a spring in their step. With thundering heartbeats filled with repressed passion, they exited into

the sharp, fresh air of the new day, with clothes finally on.

In the shade of a particularly beautiful day, Jacob's pulse quickened under Jeremy's grip and Jeremy could feel the anxiety radiate like heat from Jacob's vein as they walked hand in hand. The birds could be heard singing, and the plants could be heard gently whispering, but it was the heat of his hand that drew his attention. Feeling the extremely fine hairs on his palm tickle and sensitise every nerve on the limb.

Jacob trusted Jeremy. That was his resolution.

Jacob was insensible to the surroundings, completely engrossed in his partner who, again, was leading him without any input of Jacob's own volition. Doubts clouded his mind and fear ran through his blood, but Jeremy's happy face eased any unwarranted emotion other than a soul deep magnetism to the spritely figure, almost strolling leisurely through the hidden trails of the forest.

Jacob absorbed the setting as Jeremy's expression sobered. They slowed, waking Jacob from his reverie of the hypnotic scenery. Jacob's senses sharpened. He looked questioningly at Jeremy, trying to find the source that seemed to drain the happiness out of Jeremy's features and dug valleys into his forehead.

Jacob was not distressed; he was alert to danger, as he scanned their surroundings. The building rising before his eyes, behind the coniferous trees, screamed to his senses, as he found the source of Jeremy's derision.

As only Jeremy could do, he calmed the protective beast rising from its dormancy, before Jacob did anything rash. Like protecting Jeremy by running away, fast, with Jeremy cradled in his arms; then ravish him senseless in the undergrowth, claiming him with *teeth*... Jeremy leaned against Jacob's side to disperse the urgency that gripped Jacob, releasing the tension that had built up in his fists.

When did "teeth" become a rational option? The beast within him was closer than Jacob thought. Focusing Jacob enough to listen as Jeremy began an explanation. "This is where I work: the National Archive. Prohibited to humans. I call it the library."

Jacob ignored the intricacies of ivy strangling any protruding masonry.

“‘Humans’?” Jacob questioned, with a flustered inflection. Silence met his unease as they continued to walk closer to the dark stone building.

Jeremy finally answered in a matter-of-fact tone that challenged any argument, “You and I are both immortal. I know this, and now you know the full truth of it. In short, we are the descendants of the ‘creatures of nightmares’, as humans often generalise us.”

Jacob was shocked. He could not tell if Jeremy would grab a pitchfork or dance with Jacob in hand – no emotion remained in his voice. *No one knows the truth!* Jacob thought in confusion, *how does Jeremy know?* Jacob could not express the fear that he may have just walked into his own execution. Regardless, he continued to walk along with Jeremy.

Jeremy saw the panic claw at Jacob’s throat as he swallowed compulsively – the only sign betraying Jacob’s thoughts. Jeremy knew if he were in such throes of emotion, the possibilities for escape in the open would provide an unnecessary risk of Jacob running away with his heart. He pushed and pulled Jacob into the library, against the legs reluctantly carrying Jacob, into the depths of the ground floor to a section he seldom visited, but was certain had seats.

He pushed Jacob into an ivy-wrapped chair standing against a wall of bookcases. Neither the squelch of squashed plant life nor the beauty around them, displayed in a natural light, held their interest. Jeremy stood staring seriously into Jacob’s eyes, parallel to his own, glazed over with fear. He was only held in check by the stoic expression of Jeremy’s crossed arms, and enclosed surroundings, daring him to move. He stayed sitting. The intervention began.

“You have fur – no humans do – and there are records of non-humans having such characteristics.” Jeremy reasoned in a steely voice. “The fact you are immortal comes from my assumption that, although you have the human hair anyone would expect, you *naturally* have fine hair – abundant everywhere else – all over, which is not like a normal human, even the hairy ones you get in novels. In fact, they blend seamlessly, like... fur – with normal hair?” No change in Jacob. Evidently, this “proof” of Jeremy’s would not cure Jacob’s fear. He continued with barely a flourish.

“Immortality is a misnomer, as I’m sure you are aware. All it really means is that we – those burdened by the stigma and label – cannot die of old age and are particularly resistant to many traditional weaknesses because of the occasional quirks of our unique ancestry.” Jeremy’s lecture fell upon deaf ears as he realised Jacob may have already discovered this, *possibly causing this trauma*, Jeremy thought. *Perhaps going into details, to show that I’m one like him, will help him.* Jeremy deliberated. He sighed and collected his thoughts, only a shuffle responded to his deepening frown.

“Do you know of our origins?” Jeremy asked rhetorically, planning to continue regardless of any answer, a slight hitch in his voice betraying his own personal demons. Jacob remained rigid as if manacled to the old wooden chair.

“Of the old world and this world we now live in?” A slight shake of Jacob’s head responded, a pleading look in his eye shone as curiosity began to take over the turmoil in Jacob’s mind.

“Well it seems you know the basics if you understood what I was talking about, so I’ll tell you.” Jeremy’s intuitive statement started a rebellious tick in both Jacob’s cheeks, the robe shifted as painful tensing began to take place. *At least it is better than the resignation I saw earlier*, Jeremy reasoned with relief.

“It starts – as always – with an ideal: obviously, humans are always right, doing as they wish, and taking over. Like the ivy here – enough to be everywhere, but with a precarious balance that maintains what it has taken over. Then ‘everything else’ fought back. To cut a long story short, the mythological creatures were cornered, and communities were founded for them, for a price of course, to ensure their survival.” Jacob remained still, but Jeremy’s bitter tone seemed to mildly placate him.

“The typical price was asked and procured. Nevertheless, as we both know, the complexity of such mythological creatures makes nothing simple, and the dominating characteristic of humanity – oh, such irony – just complicates things. The main one that is relevant to us would be the ‘elixir of life’. Such tragedy.”

Jeremy’s explanation stalled. He became apprehensive while he recalled the detailed “medical” procedures and “procurements” that the archived

histories revealed. He simplified with a shaking breath, “Humans took their elixir, derived from many creatures’ different forms of immortality. Each form of immortality had myriad consequences and conditions by itself, but combined with all the others...” Jeremy bit his lip in consternation. He resumed.

“Add to the mix human manipulations and experimentations, it combined to create a mismatched, patchy elixir, programmed so that there were ‘no negative consequences’. But, obviously, that was not the case.” The woe in Jeremy’s voice roused Jacob from his own distress, dismayed at causing Jeremy any more trouble, yet desperate to find out what happened to the world that had made him hated by everyone – everyone except Jeremy.

“They gave the mixture to every human able to afford it – our forbearers already had their immortality and peace of their own. They also explained the so-called ‘generosity’ of the creatures people had traditionally feared, in ‘helping’ with the creation of the elixir. No human objections at this stage: immortals were confined and a minority, thus voiceless. Not until those unexpected consequences began.” Although they both looked into each other’s eyes, they saw nothing except the story playing out in front of them both.

“It changed what it meant to be alive. Like a disease it killed those humans whose bodies’ could not, or were unable to, accept it. It took the away the immortals’ eternity and granted those mythological beings a human lifespan instead. Only now, this span was now extended by a few years or so for *every* creature that survived the devastation – it was *indiscriminate*. People rebelled at the consequences of their action, and so they slaughtered all the weakened immortals, naturally, as the ‘cause’ of this ‘disease’.

“Society broke down. The remaining immortals – watered down originals – were tasked to maintain the previous societal system, while supporting the current, as the only creatures able to ensure this. There was a term, I think, that described what we are now – feudalism. Whilst before – even the books in archive fail to explain – there were many complex systems that I couldn’t make sense of... For example, I keep the old ways alive in the antique books in my keeping here, whilst using the knowledge – of healing, technology, et cetera – to help others at present.

“In my case it almost worked, until the fire...

“So, what are we then?” Jeremy wound down with resignation. Jacob likewise calmed to hear the quietened words and more peaceful expressions, not the rejection he expected. “We are shadows of our original makers. Mortality remained for most, but those with enough of the ‘poison’ in their makeup became immortal, and often feature characteristics of the creatures we benefited from.

“So, this is where a library full of fiction comes in handy, I suppose – probably being the reason for its existence – to discover such origins. I assume the remnants of the elixir in you, Jacob, comes from a shifter, hence your form, with it being passed down through infected, but possibly dormant, generations before its potency came to you. I, on the other hand, believe my origin is that of a vampire, but only with pale skin, sharper teeth and a reduced appetite to show for it – with the characteristic immortality as well.”

Their eyes broke contact as they thought over the new information, heads bowed low, reluctant to see the effect of the information in each other’s expression. Jacob seemed to have calmed down when Jeremy risked a glimpse, his hands were relaxed and his shoulders hunched in thought, rather than in pain. Jeremy, after sweeping ivy off a nearby chair, sat down. Given the situation, Jeremy did not dare glance at the flesh hidden by the robe ending above Jacob’s knee. Instead, he waited for Jacob.

They both sat still for a time. Jacob eventually shifted in his seat, earning a sticky squelch and another stained robe. He raised his head, met Jeremy’s eyes and spoke after setting aside his inhibitions, and with a blush rising from his collar to his ear. “Canine. Canine shifter. Both my parents were too, before they died from an attack by a mob, while I escaped. Erm, yeah, fur, but I also have a, erm, bulbous glandis, you know, a penile knot, as a *quirk*.” A smirk, filled with self-loathing transformed his face, becoming bitter on the last word.

Jacob’s voice silenced and his head bowed once again. Jeremy swiftly moved over behind Jacob, encircling him in a crushing hug around his neck. Jacob began to sob, his body heaving and undulating beneath the embrace, turning into Jeremy’s neck for comfort. Hot tears dripped down his neck and began to soak into his matching green clothes.

Jeremy whispered consolation into Jacob's open ear, "My family died as well. Killed by one of their own, destroying our village – razing it to the ground – only leaving the library and my home. I rose from the ashes, burning as my family did, as they died around me. I may have had a home, but I had to support it, as well as continue all the Duties that now fell solely upon me."

He moved to face Jacob directly, hands holding his face so that tear stained eyes met his. "You have a home now, forever, with me, if you wish. Never forget that. They may hate what we represent, even if they don't understand the true history of matters, but we don't hate them, only their sin.

"That is why I go on: not to survive, but to help others and our kind. I will never forgive what they did to me, and no doubt you, but I could never stand back and let them squander their lives as society degenerates. I use the books, my place on the council and the respect as an immortal to do my Duties for them. Mutual respect and dependence provide this ambivalence as their need for me outweighs their distrust. But they can't help that.

"And now my home is always yours as a kindred immortal," Jacob stiffened, even with Jeremy's sweet whispered words and foreheads placed together, "I feel something more than this, wouldn't you agree, so I *want* you to stay, irrespective of my self-imposed Duty."

Jacob's tears dried at Jeremy's confession. Seeing, instead, the light cast a halo around Jeremy, it illuminated Jacob's place with him even more clearly. He took in his surroundings as he wiped away the tears with his arm.

Yes, the place where he sat was dilapidated, but it still had its beauty, and he realised it reflected them very well. The library, like them, was broken and precariously balanced between function and malfunction, with furniture, bookshelves and balconies all in various states of disrepair. Vegetation made its home in the hearsay that lay between leather covers, embracing the common word. However, the truth existed; Jacob ignored the destroyed vine he sat on and reflected on Jeremy's words. With this truth in mind, he acted.

For their first time, *he* kissed Jeremy on the lips; tasted a thirst between them that began and could not be quenched. Yet at the same time, it was soft and promising a future even as they parted, licking moisture away from their lips, savouring the flavour.

“Come,” Jeremy said with a fair, serene expression that took the regained breath from Jacob’s lungs, “first, we must complete our Duties, if you can bear with me. Then we have the time for... other things.” The allusion was not missed as Jeremy lead Jacob through the maze of corridors and rooms, now companions, together, forever. Their fate already joined.

He loves me, they both intuitively thought, as they left the ground floor, going down to the floor below. Jacob and Jeremy would not have been able to remove their beaming smiles of pleasure even if they were cut off by a mob or burned in the pits of Hell.

CHAPTER 12 – The Duty

...I think I may need to alter my usual routine to get an emergency delivery of supplies – especially for Jacob.

If I see any more flesh, I fear I might be forced to... stroke his fur, hard. But it would be quite a shame to waste opportunity. What am I thinking? I am immortal, and I am definitely going to enjoy the limitless opportunities that it provides. The pain has gone so, at the risk of sounding like a hedonist, I expect pleasure all the way.

After I have done my Duty first. Bah.

~ Jeremy, December 1st, Journal Number-

WALKING WITH Jacob was a fun task, leading him everywhere, subjecting him to the new environs while watching his face turn from passivity, to curiosity, to wonderment. However, walking him through the library was hilarious! Jeremy did not realise that for all Jacob’s abilities and prowess, he was so clumsy. So, after the fifth consecutive bookcase shattered and ejected its dusty contents on the floor that Jeremy decided it would be for the best if he led Jacob.

After all, Jeremy thought with a smile, *Jacob will only be forced to clean it up later.*

Jacob was thankful to Jeremy when he began to lead and direct him again, as he had no idea where he was going – already lost and out of his depth, between precariously placed shelves and random piles of books all over the place. He also felt relief at their partnership as he interpreted the promise the sadistic gleam sparkling in Jeremy's eye cemented every time a bookcase fell, prophesising some sort of *cleaning* later.

He supposed there was some order, but it would be an order of which only Jeremy would be able to understand the complexity and dynamics. Therefore, to be on the safe side, and not wanting to ruin that tempting smile on those moist lips, he said nothing and followed Jeremy's lead.

Jacob sneezed as he was abruptly led past a camouflaged corner and into a dusty passage descending into darkness. Before he could sniff away the tingling irritation in his nostrils, Jeremy opened yet another door, revealing the light of the next floor down. Minding his step carefully, and traversing through even narrower passages of laden bookshelves, Jacob found himself breathless from the stressful excursion, yet proud at reaching their destination without any more leather-bound casualties.

Jeremy unlocked a drawer in an iron cabinet hidden at the end of a bookcase row, just inside Jacob's sight. Jeremy reached in and pressed a button. Jacob started at the mechanical hum and ticking as a bookshelf slid aside to reveal yet another room. With enthusiasm, Jeremy grabbed Jacob's hand firmly to bring him forward into the unknown space it revealed.

For Jacob, this room was yet another incomprehensible thing; filled with contraptions that resembled the display screens in large homes like Jeremy's, but in an unbelievable number. While he stood aimlessly in the room, Jeremy began to fiddle with the display on one screen in the corner. After a while of pensive mechanical prodding, Jeremy turned to stand in the middle of the map displayed on the floor as it dispersed around his legs, before materialising the normal stone floor. Jacob had no time to be amazed as he predicted a presentation from the enthusiastic Jeremy, shivering and grinning, before him.

“This is the main control room for all my Duties – a little cheat of mine if

you will.” He strolled over to lean against Jacob, pointing at equipment as he explained them all.

“... those screens are linked to cameras that monitor and record any suspicious movement around the Wall and the entrances to the library. On that one, I am sure you may be able to guess whom that is – I don’t know why I haven’t reset it yet – but I thought you might find it interesting how, in hindsight, I had my eyes on you from the start” Jeremy digressed.

“Technically now that I have done my Duty for the day, and ordered emergency supplies to replenish food stocks and ordered some other items – like clothes – for you, we can go back now.” Jeremy ended with a huff of breath, breathing heavily after his prolonged explanation.

Jacob ignored the myriad contrasting and exaggerated expressions of Jeremy and merely smiled and squeezed Jeremy’s hands together in encouragement.

He was in awe of Jeremy; nothing was given to Jacob with restriction, not even government secrets, divulged like the show of a painting. He felt so much trust. So kissing the warm hands felt right, giving a part of him in return, without any hesitation.

Jeremy’s wide eyes met Jacob’s as they opened from the cherishing kiss, Jeremy’s lips were set apart in an alluring bow. With a certainty Jacob felt deep in his being, he stooped down, pulling on their crossed arms, capturing Jeremy’s lips with his own, kissing them with every emotion focused on where they joined. They could feel the buzz of energy run through them both as Jacob deepened the kiss, massaging and luxuriating in the taste of Jeremy’s tongue, exploring his mouth and laying the beginning of his claim.

Jeremy broke the kiss with sudden trepidation. *This is not the right place*, he felt in his stomach, automatically making space so he could talk, trying to ignore the hurt mortifying Jacob’s features. “We can’t do this here,” Jeremy cried with a single harsh breath, disregarding the pain coming to Jacob’s eyes at the construed rejection.

“I *want* you. I love *you*. But not here.” Jeremy earnestly pleaded, head bowed against Jacob’s chest, now exposed between the gaping edges of the robe. He refused to cry as words failed him. Instead, unfamiliar to the

sensation of being at a loss, he buried himself deeper into the pounding warmth of Jacob's chest. He let Jacob's size engulf him as the soft fur cooled the ache radiating from his flushed cheeks.

The world and any Responsibility vanished as Jacob took charge. He grasped Jeremy's shoulders; aware of Jeremy's hand in a vice-like grip on his arm, holding onto him as if his life depended on it.

Jacob gave his first order.

"Take us home," he stressed the last word, humming the syllable in Jeremy's ear. Jeremy nodded slowly into his chest, his breathing gradually easing. Peaceful once again, he stepped back before taking Jacob's hand in his own to start the journey back. Jacob still held him back to whisper with a conviction Jeremy could never rival at that moment, "I love you too."

With a pause to process the absolution, Jeremy led them both out of the library without incident. Demure, quiet and optimistic, Jeremy could only think while they walked side by side as equal partners, *we are going home!*

CHAPTER 13 – The Compassion

Jeremy is keeping me – he cares for me. I'm so happy. I'm euphoric.

But does that means he feels the same way as I do? Does he want me?

I am sure the answer's "yes".

And I can only disagree if he says, "more than you do". And if he says otherwise... I guess I will just have to prove him very wrong... this will be fun.

~Jacob, musings.

WHEN THEY reached Jeremy's – their – home, Jacob led them toward *their* room.

Jeremy found himself curled up in Jacob's strong arms, being carried though the long corridors. *Perhaps*, he mused, *I no longer need to be the carer, but can be cared for, after all these long years.* All he had ever craved was to end the cold void festering in his chest. Jacob, by carrying him so they were almost heart to heart, was filling the void with a viscous warmth; being filled by Jacob himself.

Before he realised it, Jacob reached the bedroom with the enraptured Jeremy curved perfectly against his chest, stroking absently at his fur, slowly removing the green robe at the same time, without much thought. Jacob almost smiled. He was going to do all he could to ensure Jeremy's happiness: to be fully mated to each other, like a harmony in tune with its component parts, it only required the physical actualisation.

Jacob would give Jeremy everything: his very existence, to complete the mating that he had so far repressed, and be a pillar of support and comfort for him. The unity of their souls: it was something they had both considered in their youth before life tore that dream away, but now seemed a miracle as their beings synchronised with each other.

He laid Jeremy on *their* bed, all cleaned from the previous night. He gently pried off pincer-like fingers from the fur on his pectorals as he set Jeremy down, laying him straight. The acquiescence in Jeremy's demeanour approved of Jacob's robe dropping to the floor and the gentle tugging and pulling off Jeremy's clothes.

In these circumstances, Jeremy was glad he was wearing the casual clothes he usually wore – ones without complicated knots or buttons – as Jacob slipped the fabric off him with ease. Every centimetre of flesh revealed, Jacob scorched the area with his eyes, memorising every detail, with a slight twitch of muscles flickering underneath the soft, pale skin. Jeremy's stomach flattened as he held his breath at such probing inspection.

Jacob expressed another order, "Breathe out and relax." He said this with a smile, recognising the role reversal, but not having the patience to wait for a bath this evening or night time, before he made his claim.

The room was alight with the midday sun, but all Jacob saw was Jeremy. Jacob could feel the burn of his flesh as Jeremy eyed him; each lost in the

other, a world separating them from anything else. Their essences responded to each other, supernaturally aware of the bond that they would soon be sharing.

First, without an obstacle between their skin, Jacob loomed over Jeremy. Jacob's light fur caressed Jeremy's skin as they merged their mouths together in a continuation of the kiss they had started in the library. Their bodies moved unhurriedly as Jeremy squirmed over Jacob, enjoying the caressing sensation found in the worship of each other's bodies.

This time, Jacob broke the kiss that otherwise would only end the day after Judgement. Instead, he tasted and probed Jeremy's skin with his tongue, following the bold beating pulse behind one ear to the dip in his shoulder. He sucked the velvet skin, and resumed his exploration, traversing a confusing pattern all around Jeremy's torso. Jacob made particular effort to cross Jeremy's erect, pink nipples and nibble particularly thoroughly on the stiff buds. Jacob relished this journey as his furred body ground into Jeremy with every twist and motion in his trail of caresses.

Jacob's legs latched on to Jeremy's thigh, deliberately rubbing his already engorged and leaking cock head over Jeremy, eyes closed, purring in pleasure, marking him with his scent. Jacob could feel large amounts of Jeremy's seed coat his own stomach, as his ministrations culminated in Jeremy shaking in tortured ecstasy. Jacob knew Jeremy would have arched or moaned even more violently into him if his hands and body had less of a firm hold, pushing him into the bed. The crushing sensations mirrored their pleasure as their souls bonded with glee.

As Jeremy's breaths became increasingly laboured and desperate, Jacob knew the continued sensation was not enough for their release. Showing resolve, Jacob had to actively try to match and curb his efforts to maintain his position over him and not submit to the pleasure before Jeremy was his completely.

The minx, Jacob thought with amusement, also wondering if Jeremy also had the "poison" of a succubus in his being as well. Yes, he did have to wonder when Jeremy exclaimed, "In either drawer... natural... lubricant... for hands... but elsewhere, as well."

Jeremy cried out each phrase between breaths or moans, indecisive as to

which were more important in his overwhelmed thoughts. Jacob dominated him, surrounding him with the heat that had him flushed and mewling, desperate for touch on his sensitised flesh, feeling the need right down to the bone. Jeremy begged for more contact. Jacob met with a concession; moving his hands to naked skin aching for his touch, leaving abandoned flesh to fester on its own as he met Jeremy's hoarse appeals.

The torture was exquisite as both of his hands left the squirming body beneath him to attend to the bottle nearby. He barely needed to stretch to take the bottle out of its confines, smiling at Jeremy's neediness. Letting the cool air settle for a moment on the hot body beneath him, he began his next game with a smile.

Jacob enjoyed Jeremy's groan as he emptied a bottle, presumably, of lubricant onto Jeremy's stomach. He firmly rubbed the liquid into Jeremy's torso, moving slowly down, letting a little edge of pain from his nails again skin raise Jeremy's pleasure. At the same time Jacob kept him restrained to prevent Jeremy from losing control before all his preparations were complete. Jeremy arched his groin into Jacob's hands as he massaged between Jeremy's inner thighs, brushing lightly over Jeremy's erection.

Jacob lowered a lubricated hand to play again with Jeremy's hole, circling it, while he pressed one finger in. Jeremy writhed in Jacob's hold, pushing back on Jacob's finger at the new sensation, before Jacob leant into his chest to hold him back down. Jacob was speechless at the sucking sensation on his penetrating finger and Jeremy's aggressive reactions to the preparations taught to him (rather reluctantly) by his parents.

Jeremy vocalised his displeasure at Jacob's slow and restrained pace with a myriad of animal cries, his hips grinding hopelessly against Jacob's arm for a chance of more friction. Jacob gave in to his pleas, and mercilessly pierced Jeremy with another finger. Jeremy's body, hot and tight around his fingers, made Jacob whimper in want. He pushed a third finger into Jeremy, lessening the restraint upon him, eliciting a grateful cry as he began to thrust himself harder on Jacob's fingers.

Jeremy still became increasingly restless, so Jacob inserted his last finger. Jeremy's gluttonous hole greedily accepted the increasing width. He was

not content with only the fingers, as he was well aware of Jacob's greatest digit; how it might feel inside him...

Yet Jeremy became increasingly insensible at the added breadth, with no fingers left holding back, it allowed Jacob to rub tantalizingly at Jeremy's prostate. An action Jacob exploited to collect his thoughts while Jeremy was entirely self-absorbed, focusing on reaching his peak.

The wanton creature claimed his fingers thoroughly, becoming both Jacob's possession and master. However, regardless of Jeremy's immortal body, naturally and quickly accommodating his fingers and, without a doubt, larger objects, like Jacob himself, Jacob was reluctant to hurt him during the act of finally claiming his mate. Yet, as Jeremy reached an even higher, throbbing pleasure, Jacob was no longer in control.

Merely by watching him, Jacob's cum leaked onto Jeremy's tidy treasure trail. Jacob's gums pounded with the need for his partner's blood in his throat. Rising towards Jeremy's neck, he exclaimed, "Please. I must claim you... have you... feel your blood pulse down my throat... lay my mark inside you. Forever."

He ground into Jeremy as his body joined the momentum Jacob had created with his hand. Jeremy cried out in frustration as the friction helped him reach his peak, but not enough to push him over the precipice. The words were indistinguishable, but the meaning was clear as they desperately screamed for completion. Now.

They did not hesitate. Jacob locked Jeremy's arms around his back, while Jacob's hands held the back of Jeremy's neck possessively. His knees pushed Jeremy's legs apart and over his hip, Jeremy's legs clamping around his waist to maintain the heat and friction of the fur on his nipples, torso and throbbing penis. Jacob, in his last rational thought, slicked his length, larger than Jeremy's forearm, and retracted his foreskin even further, letting the pain clear his lust filled mind, as he aligned his cock in place of his four fingers, now moist and cooling in Jeremy's hair.

He pushed in: slowly, as Jacob needed to shuffle forward to sink his entire length through the quivering sphincter and into the heat of Jeremy, scarcely letting him adjust to the penetration. Jeremy gutturally screamed at the

invasion moving significantly through his system, up to his belly button. His internal organs stretched unnaturally before adjusting to the additional massive length.

Jacob seated himself deep inside Jeremy, his balls tight with desire. He began to thrust. Withdrawing his length until he was barely inside, he slammed back into the heat, rubbing furiously against Jeremy's prostate as his thrusts continued to quicken with a desperate pace.

Jacob felt the beast within him rise: his balls seemed to be on the verge of exploding, his cock seemed to burn and his gland began to fill.

Jeremy could feel the lovely burning of his hole reduce as pressure in his rectum increased. Jacob's gland, Jeremy understood, continued to fill to the size of two separate fists, stretching him mercilessly. He could feel the gland at the base of Jacob's penis become rock hard, pushing into Jeremy's prostate cruelly with forceful sensation.

By now, Jacob's thrusts were shallow to accommodate for this change, letting them regain their breath in the interval. Jacob increased the friction to the rest of Jeremy's skin with his soft fur while his unbelievably sensitive organ swelled. His balls and penis also swelled even harder with semen and blood respectively, as he underwent, for the first time, the physiological changes that occur when true mates come together, something his parents forewarned might happen.

With only the few glorious thrusts inside him, it left Jeremy yet again on the edge. So he tried his best to generate movement inside him or on his own cock. He stopped when he heard Jacob literally growl, sending a delicious vibration through his nervous system, as Jacob took possession of his autonomy.

Another growl came with renewed friction as Jacob resumed thrusting rhythmically, getting faster and harder, into Jeremy. He could feel Jacob's penis slightly move inside him, the wild vigour of his efforts reaching an even greater high as the swollen gland anchored Jacob back. Jeremy howled at the varying pressure on his prostate. Feeling his climax approaching fast, yet still far enough away that he could enjoy scratching and clawing Jacob's back and pulling on his hair, encouraging him to take him harder and faster – anything

to increase the feeling. The deep purring groan was his reply before Jacob succumbed to their bodies' passion.

Jeremy met the golden eyes saturated with animal hunger before they quickly lowered as Jacob bit into the Jeremy's curve of skin between neck and shoulder. Out of instinct, Jeremy reciprocated with far more force and violence, tearing a gash instead of neat punctures.

Neither bite was fatal, nor were they going to scar in the morning when they healed, so they enjoyed the salty, metallic tang of each other's life's blood as they shared their souls and tasted their passion in union. As they joined, they both could feel the depths of the other, as well as an intangible bond forming and solidifying as their climax came upon them.

Jeremy felt his boiling hot seed release, like a geyser under pressure against both their bodies, reaching as high up as his neck, rubbed in thoroughly as Jacob continued to stroke, grasp and knead him sensually in the post climactic euphoria. Jeremy had also felt the copious amount of seed implant itself inside his depth, held in tight by Jacob's expanded gland, providing a comfortable filling pressure, even as both erections flagged in the exhaustion of their virgin-taking sex and bond making.

He smiled at the thought of all the other ways Jacob could take him, or he take Jacob if Jacob is suitably naughty, and the many other opportunities to come now that the completed unifying bond would no longer drain them. The hole in his chest filled with satisfaction.

Jacob turned them both around, licking at Jeremy's shoulder, while Jeremy sucked at his, enjoying his vampire characteristics for all they were worth. Like their first night, they lay on top of each other in their cooling fluids, Jacob's gland remaining just as hard, keeping them joined together as their neck wounds healed before their eyes.

In the silence of the fading day, as the grey of the room turned golden in the recent good weather, they quietly conversed into the night. The topics; random and serious, personal and unimportant. They were simply conversing, getting to know each other more deeply; enjoying the new bond and new life partner with hearts filled to bursting.

Jacob instigated the last line of conversation they had before they slept.

The recently deflated gland removed from Jeremy a small while ago, allowed them to cuddle each other more comfortably as they talked. “Shouldn’t we get clean before we – go to sleep?” Jacob yawned midway through his question.

Jeremy just adjusted himself into a comfortable position on his new living mattress with fur. Lethargic, he huskily responded, already partially asleep, “Nah. I like that we are together like this. As – like what you’ve just done – you’ve claimed me, as I’ve done to you.”

Jacob felt the bashful smile of Jeremy’s lips against his breast while Jeremy fell into slumber. Jacob mirrored the smile as he confirmed simply; *Yes, mine and yours.*

CHAPTER 14 – The End

I don’t know what it is, but I feel myself attracted to it regardless.

Those golden globes and colour, they broke my reverie and stagnation. I could say I love them, if I ever knew how to do that.

All I know is that the pain disappears when I fixate on the phenomenon. Crazy, I know.

~ Jeremy, November 22nd, Journal Number-

JACOB MADE his way to the kitchen naked, disgruntled at the empty embrace he awoke to. Yet, he sincerely hoped it was a habit of Jeremy’s: it promised many future inquisitions Jacob intended not to cease. Unless Jeremy was so exhausted with their loving that he *couldn’t* move the next morning, and even that was only an option. Jeremy may have his *cleaning* and *organisation*, but Jacob had *possessive issues*, and neither of them willingly wanted any of this to change. Especially, as it was beginning to become *fun*.

Point in case: remaining naked while entering the kitchen would make the

confrontation far simpler if he did not have to worry about clothes. Any clothes Jeremy may have on would be making a quick trip to the waste pile as he tears them off before starting *correctional therapy*.

We – he – definitely could do with a clean, Jacob considered with a serious thought, recalling the previous night. That gave Jacob a spring to his step as he jumped down to the ground floor, feeling lighter than he ever could recall.

Hell, Jacob thought in exasperation as he entered the kitchen. *Jeremy's going to get a taste of his own medicine, ill or not*. Thinking of the “punishment” Jeremy will dole out for destroying clothes and with a predatory smile, he entered the kitchen.

The kitchen was empty. Nothing indicated occupancy that morning. As rage at the unknown force that stole Jeremy away gripped his heart, Jacob raced back upstairs, then blitzed through the upper floor searching for Jeremy in the multitude of corridors and rooms, before continuing his search on the ground floor; sweeping through the building semi-systematically. A few tables and chairs were knocked over in his rising panic.

However, it was the resounding smash behind him halted his path of destruction. Turning, he saw the flowers' porcelain home Jeremy had arranged the other day smashed beyond recognition on the floor, just out of range of the main door.

Any thought of fun this morning turned his stomach, like eating rancid meat, imagining Jeremy's reaction. He might ignore the accidental destruction of property, but the sadistic depths that Jacob had only touched the previous night had him seriously considering hiding.

Unfortunately, Jeremy opened the door next to the consequence of Jacob's anxiety and entered the crime scene before Jacob could escape. The bags hanging by his side were ignored as he stared nervously into Jeremy's piercing and unresponsive gaze. Jeremy took in his surroundings: a guilty Jacob, a broken vase, *and a naked Jacob*. Jacob remained statue still, barely daring to breathe.

His gaze held Jacob in place while Jeremy turned to place the bags at the foot of the stairs, clanking and rustling broke the absolute silence. Jeremy just stood there, staring serenely at Jacob; hand on his hip, with steel in his eyes.

The flowers limp on the floor mirrored the futility of Jacob's situation, and they both knew it.

"Well, I did have a few plans we could do today," Jeremy broke the silence in a passive voice, "but it seems you desire something far more appropriate for your prowling urges."

"So then, now that painting our room is out, and flower picking – you evidently do not like my arranging – is as *well...*" Jeremy began debating to himself all the "nice" things he planned for the day. Jacob almost spoke out, but knew that Jeremy was being sarcastic, so waited for the real pain.

"... so, there seems there is a lot of cleaning for you to do. And wonderfully enough for you, you appear to be poorly attired for a job with chemicals, so you'll only require your pure brute strength. I think places in the library on the ground floor would be enough for you to handle. But first, breakfast!"

Jacob could only guess at the multiple stipulations and distractions Jeremy would plan as his punishment, but he could not think of anything better. If it helped Jeremy, then Jacob would have done it in a heartbeat anyway, so these *alluded* distractions by the bright molten steel glowing in Jeremy's blue eyes excited him to no end. In fact, there was a whole library requiring maintenance, and Jacob enjoyed physical exertion – especially if Jeremy watched – so *that* left many punishable actions Jacob needed to think up.

Following with sudden enthusiasm, he trailed after Jeremy into the kitchen, avoiding the debris on the floor and taking the bags along with him. He tried to appear as if slightly humbled by the day's prospects as he took a seat at the island counter, but failed as he strode into the room cockily, with all on display, hoping for a morning *warm up*. All to no avail as he saw Jeremy lean on the counter, facing Jacob's seat, waiting for him to be seated. His erection was becoming painfully hard at the mere thought of such close contact to the man he loved.

"Hmm," Jeremy contemplated, disconcerting Jacob by staring, searing the skin off his eyeballs (Jacob wishing it was another kind of "balls"), "If you finish, then you can paint our room. And before you even start getting *comfortable* in your seat eating your breakfast, clean the mess in the hall. Poor

flowers!”

Jacob noticed the relevant cleaning equipment piled by his steaming breakfast cuisine, catalysing the selfish hunger pains rumbling in his stomach. He wished another hunger was satisfied instead; however, given Jeremy’s night time appetite, he would happily wait for the multiple preludes destined to be in their close future.

Jeremy smiled benignly, watching Jacob eat. Jeremy could feel the anticipation in Jacob’s body as he gulped down the hot breakfast in record time. He thought he might offer something even sweeter than Jacob could guess, but first, an apology, “I’m sorry I left early, but I had to get the important first load of the emergency supplies up here so they can fit in the rest. So in doing so, I’ve had a quick wash down so I could wear clothes while going through the forest, but in truth, so you can soil my clothes later. *And*, if you do well today and please me,” Jacob quickly turned attentively, “then I may give you a piece of chocolate as well...”

Oh yes, this was no piece of fiction. Mythological creatures existed and effectively created us, Jacob thought. However, he also realised the fantasy he now lived; his own “happily ever after” (Jeremy mumbled this in his sleep the previous night, while curling deeper into Jacob’s chest) with Jeremy.

The future only promised more for them both...

However, first, Jacob craved a lot of chocolate. *Hehe...*

THE END

Author bio: Hello, my name is Harry and I live in England. (Oh! How bland but true.) I never like (auto/)biographies because I know information would always be missed and consequently out of date. However, rest assured that I am (arguably) human and have (questionably) grown up as everyone else has (although I am no sheep). I love my jumpers and reading romances. I currently question which I prefer the best: sex or storyline in such novels – and that is a difficult choice. Diplomatically, I would say that I would not turn down either, and that it depends on the style etc... well, you could say I’m awkward like that. Anyway, as my first publication, there is currently no real

site where I base myself as an author, but feel free to browse (or contact me through) my current blog: [A Hazzard's Blog](#)

AN OCEAN APART

by Sammy Goode

Photo Description



Two nude men are sitting side by side on the beach as the tide comes in. The man on the left has dark hair and his back is covered in beautifully drawn tattoo art. The other man is blond. It is obvious that these men are in love. Their faces turned toward each other, the blond man rests his forehead against that of the other man. Their eyes are closed. The picture reflects a love of great depth, a passion as sure as the tide that crashes against the beach in front of them.

Request Letter



Dear Author,

Two nude men are sitting side by side on the beach as the tide comes in. The man on the left has dark hair and his back is covered in beautifully drawn tattoo art. The other man is blond. It is obvious that these men are in love. Their faces turned toward each other, the blond man rests his forehead against that of the other man. Their eyes are closed. The picture reflects a love of great depth, a passion as sure as the tide that crashes against the beach in front of them.

Sincerely,

Susan

General Information



genre: contemporary

tags: established couple; hurt/comfort; visual arts; culinary, HEA

word count: 15,119

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Dedication.

When one writes, there is so often a team of people about them that supports, challenges and gently guides and corrects. I am one such author to have been blessed with such a team. To my dear friends, Shaz and Kaje, thank you for making my writing better...for making it sing! To Susan and Heather, thanks for these boys—I hope you like what I have done with them.

AN OCEAN APART

by Sammy Goode

SHANE PUSHED back his chair and tossed the stylus down on the desk. It bounced a few times before coming to rest atop the thick file that sat like a glaring reminder of the absolute failure his life had become. He ran his fingers through his hair and blew out an angry breath, wishing for the hundredth time that he still smoked. A smoke would go a long way in calming his frazzled nerves. *Jesus, get a grip McAllister, it's a fucking coffee ad not the end of the world.* But that is exactly what it felt like...the end. By rights it shouldn't.

In fact, Shane should be jumping for joy at winning the Dexham Coffee account...the million-dollar Dexham coffee account. After all, he had fought tooth and nail to land this account, working long hours, doing mock-up after mock-up of an ad campaign that should and did knock the socks off of the Company's collective feet. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe the 12-hour days and 6-day weeks were finally catching up to him.

Right that had to be it! That had to be the reason his gut was in knots and his head was pounding from an oncoming migraine that threatened to blow his head right off his shoulders. And, it must be the reason why his hands cramped every time he picked up the stylus and turned on the computer and began to create...hah, create? Sure, that was what he was doing, Shane thought bitterly. *I'm creating— I'm an artist! Isn't that what the great Mr. Dexham said himself?* Bile rose in his throat.

Once upon a time, he had been an artist. Once upon a time, he had dreams...big dreams. He recalled bitterly how “once upon a time” his lover had shared those dreams. *His lover. Christ! Jaime could hardly be called that anymore. They barely saw one another these days. And when they did their exchanges were rarely of the loving kind.* Shane rubbed his eyes and tried to recall the last time he and Jaime had actually made love. It had been so long he could barely remember what it felt like to hold the man in his arms. When did that happen? How had they managed to drift so far apart?

The phone on his desk buzzed causing Shane to jump and knock over his

mug of coffee. Swearing aloud, he made a grab for the meaty file that lay in the wake of the oncoming spill and snatched it up right before the steaming black liquid could reach it. The phone continued to blare out its annoying alarm as Shane grabbed tissues to catch the liquid before it reached his computer keyboard. He frantically mopped up the offending pool, the buzzing mercifully stopped. Throwing the sopping tissues into the trashcan beneath his desk, the silence was again broken by the raucous sound of the phone once more demanding his attention. Snatching it up in his left hand, Shane barked into the receiver, “What the fuck do you want Margaret?”

Unfortunately Shane’s appalling lack of luck continued as his order was answered not by the clipped tones of his secretary but with a loud sigh and the sarcastic tones of his partner, Jaime.

“Well, sounds like your day is going well.”

Shit! Great, just great! “Sorry, I just spilled coffee all ov...”

“I’m calling to let you know I’m going to be late tonight. Jim just called me and Danny’s sick so he needs me to cover his shift.”

“But we had plans I made reserva...” Jaime interrupted again, frustration clearly coloring his voice.

“It’s not like I planned this Shane. For god’s sake, he was in a bind and I had the time. It’s not as if you never cancelled at the last minute.”

Shane gritted his teeth, trying to clamp down on his anger. “You know that I have always tried my best to keep our time together sacred. You also know what a bitch my work schedule has been. Jesus Jaime, you have to know I’m doing this for you...for us.”

“Right and my working as an assistant manager to one of the most influential men in the restaurant business is nothing I suppose? Christ, never mind Shane I should have known you wouldn’t understand. I should have remembered just how you felt about my little ‘waitering job.’ You’ve certainly made it clear often enough!”

“My god Jaime, I said that over a year ago— and I was joking! I know how important this is to you. I get it! But why is it that every time someone calls out sick, Jim decides you’re the only one who can fill in? You guys employ 12 waiters at that place— why can’t one of them do it for once?”

“Because I am the assistant manager and that’s what assistant managers do— they fill in during emergencies!! God, why are we even having this argument again? You never listen! You refuse to take my job seriously. Jim was right! He said you never...”

Jaime’s voice stopped abruptly. Shane felt his entire body coil as anger ripped through him. *Fucking Jim! That’s all Jaime ever talked about anymore. Jim said this, Jim said that. Jim said he likes my hair, my clothes, my cologne. Why the hell was Jim even getting close enough to his partner to smell his damn cologne anyway?* Shane felt his control slipping.

“Oh do tell, what did Jim Almighty say this time? What pearls did the lord and master of the fucking restaurant world impart, huh, Jaime? Can’t remember? They aren’t imprinted on your memory so that you can recall them verbatim just like a good little lackey should?”

The responding silence was deafening. Shane realized that all he could hear was himself panting. Panting because he was so worked-up, so pissed off that he felt as though his heart was going to leap out of his chest. *How did this happen every time? Why did what Jim had to say have the ability to fuck with him like this? Make him so angry that his blood boiled and he lost all control over his mouth?* He drew in a ragged breath and heard a faint sob, a hiccup really. *Oh god, was Jaime crying? Had he made the only man who mattered to him in this world actually cry?*

“Oh Jaime, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean that. Oh Jesus babe, I don’t know what I’m saying. I’m sorry Jaime. Please, honey, don’t cry. Please baby, talk to me. Please!”

Shane heard Jaime draw a shuddering breath. “I’m okay. It’s okay. I know. I’m sorry too. I know, I do, Shaney. I’m sorry, it’s just that...” Jaime’s voice trailed off, his voice faltering, emotion threatening to choke him. Shane closed his eyes against the tears that the familiar nickname evoked. *How long had it been since Jaime had called him that? How long had it been since he had heard anything but sarcasm and disdain in his lover’s voice.* Carefully, afraid to break the fragile olive branch that Jaime was offering, Shane spoke:

“Ah Babe, it’s okay! We’re okay! God, I just miss you so much, Jaime. I feel like we never see each other anymore. I really wish things could be

different. I hate what this is doing to us. All we ever do is work.”

“Me, too, I hate it too. But I have to do my job Shaney. It’s the only way I’m going to learn enough to run my own place one day. And I want that more than anything. It’s always been my dream you know that.”

Shane felt as though he had been punched in the gut. Yes, he knew. He knew all about Jaime’s dream to one day own his own restaurant. They had talked about it so many times. Just like they had talked about Shane’s dream job. He looked around the plush office suite and realized for the hundredth time just how far away his dream had flown. He straightened up in his chair and drew in a deep breath, trying to get a grip on his emotions. This was not the time to be thinking about himself. He needed to be here for Jaime. He had to fix this.

“Okay, so you have to work Danny’s shift. Does that mean you’re stuck there till closing?”

“Yeah, but tonight is an early closing, ’cause it’s Monday— so I should be done by nine.

Shane could hear the relief in Jaime’s voice and his heart warmed to the sound. If he was careful here, maybe, just maybe Jaime and he could still salvage the night and connect. It had been so long since they had taken the time to just be with each other without any drama, any angst. That’s all there seemed to be these days, one fight after another. When had their relationship dissolved into an endless series of angry, painful sound bites? Jaime’s voice pulled him back from his thoughts.

“Uhm, I...I don’t suppose you still want to come pick me up, do you?”

Shane winced at the timid tone in his lover’s voice. Had he put that there? Had something he’d done made Jaime doubt how much he loved him? Speaking quickly to reassure him, Shane blurted out, “Yes, absolutely yes. Nine pm right? I’ll be there— and we’ll go out, maybe dancing— would you like that baby, dancing? Shane’s question was met with a deafening silence. “Shit, what am I thinking, you’re probably going to be too tired to go out, ah hell, I’m sorry Jaime I...” He was babbling like a fool.

“Shhh honey, it’s okay. I would love to go dancing with you but you’re right, tonight might not be the best night. After working a double shift I don’t

think I'd be a very good dance partner."

Shane tried to hide his disappointment. "Right, right, I'm such an idiot—of course you're going to be exhausted. So, I'll just pick you up then and we can go home so you can crash in bed and get some sleep."

"Yeah, that would be great. Bed sounds really good."

"Okay Babe, bed it is. That sounds good to me too. I'll be there by nine."

"Uhm, Shane maybe we could talk a bit...when we get home? I mean if you're not too tired?"

Shane felt his pulse quicken. He and Jaime rarely talked anymore. He wanted to hope that this meant something good, something positive, but he couldn't help the feeling of dread that was creeping up his spine.

"Yeah sure, Jaime, whatever you want."

"Whatever I want? You mean that?"

The dread blossomed into full-blown panic.

"Absolutely. You know that right? That I'm here for you— for whatever you need?"

"Does that mean if I need some time to just be with you...maybe just with you holding me? Would that be okay too?"

Shane closed his eyes as the rush of sheer relief engulfed him. Jaime wasn't mad at him. It was going to be okay, maybe even better than okay. Maybe...maybe they could do more than just hold each other tonight. It had been so long since they had made love...so long. But he would take what he could get and right now his lover was waiting to be reassured that things were okay between them.

"Yeah babe, that would be okay...better than okay. I want to hold you too Jaime. Want to feel you in my arms again. God, I missed you baby, so much."

"Me too, Shane. I missed you too. I know it's been rough lately. I've just been so distracted by the job."

Shane could hear the longing in Jaime's voice. Maybe, just maybe the two of them could take some time away...together. If they just had a few days to unwind and talk...maybe make love...surely then things would go back to the way they had been before. Shane drew in a deep breath and began to speak before his courage left him.

“Maybe you could tell Jim you need a few days off. I still have some vacation time on the books. What if we tried to get away for a long weekend together? We could drive up the coast, do some swimming, lie out in the sun for a bit. Just a few days, you know? It’s been so long since we’ve gone away together.”

“Gee, I don’t know. Jim is always telling me that he couldn’t run the place without me, so a few days might be too much for him to handle alone.” Shane shut his eyes against the anger that was pushing its way into his gut. Jim. It was all he ever heard about anymore. When did this fucking partnership become a threesome? Shane clawed his way out of his own furious thoughts to hear his partner still speaking. The thread of conversation had changed however, morphed into what sounded like the possibility of something more than another rebuff.

“But maybe, we could uhm...”

“Could what Jaime?”

“Well, since I can’t get away right now...maybe we could spend some time together here, tonight?”

“Tonight? But I thought you were going to be tired...you said...”

“Yeah, I know what I said. A guy can change his mind, right?”

“What are you trying to say Jaime?”

“Just that, well...maybe we could try out that gift you gave me for Christmas. You remember that gift, don’t you Shane? The one we both laughed at when I pulled it out of my Christmas stocking?”

Shane searched his memory for what Jaime was talking about. Over 6 months had passed since Christmas. He was lucky to remember what he had eaten for breakfast that morning.

“You remember that paint you gave me? That uhm, chocolate *body* paint?”

In a flash, he did remember buying the paint and thinking how sexy he thought Jaime would look using it. He closed his eyes and saw his lover’s lithe naked body covered in edible paint. Shane gulped, his pants suddenly feeling just a bit tight, his pulse beginning to race. When he spoke his voice was a bit strained. “Yeah, I remember. Some chocolate would be good. I’d like that. Would you like that baby?”

“Yeah, I’d like that a lot. So, it’s a date then.” Jaime sighed. “I better get back to work.”

Shane groaned at the thought of returning to work. Jaime laughed aloud this time and said in a teasing voice, “Poor Shane! I’ll see you tonight. Don’t be late, okay?”

“I won’t. I’ll be there right on time.” Shane murmured goodbye into the phone and began to hang up, only to be stopped by Jaime’s last words.

“Shane, I love you. You know that right? You know I love you, so fucking much.”

“Me too Jaime. Me too.”

The phone went dead and Shane slowly put it back down on the desk. He smiled, his hand unconsciously reaching down to rub at his erection. Things were going to be okay. He and Jaime were going to be okay. It would be just like it was before...before this shitty, hateful job and schedules that always seemed to conflict. They would be good again. Just like they had been all those years ago when they had first met and fallen in love.

6 years before....

SHANE SAT on the patio sipping his drink, contemplating the pounding surf below. His week to “get himself together,” as his former boyfriend had so lovingly called it when he flounced his way out of Shane’s life a month earlier, was just beginning. His Father had paid for the vacation right after he had “suggested” that Shane accept the job offer he had so nicely procured for him. *Suggested...* he felt his lip curl in disgust as he recalled the conversation in which his father had told him exactly how his future should look.

“I’m cutting your lazy ass off if you don’t man up and get a real job, you faggot.”

“Nice, Dad, really nice. You use that mouth in the boardroom do you?”

“What the hell do you care about what goes on in my boardroom? And watch your smart mouth! If I hadn’t promised your mother that I would make sure your pansy ass was always taken care of, you would have been out on the street long ago!”

“As if the street wouldn’t be paradise compared to this hellhole!”

Shane’s hand stole up to his jaw remembering the bruise that he had worn for almost 2 weeks after that conversation. His father’s fist had lashed out faster than a cobra striking its prey. His sainted father’s way of ending every argument was to hit...hit hard.

Shane closed his eyes as he struggled against the sadness that threatened to overwhelm him. He refused to shed one more tear over that bastard. After his mother had died, the father he knew seemed to die right along with her. At the age of 13, Shane had been freshly out and angrily defiant about it. His mother had been his lifeline...his anchor in a sea of confusing emotions and desires. And then she was gone. Cancer that had been left undetected for far too long stole her from their arms like a thief in the night, and the light had gone out in his father’s eyes and shriveled his soul.

Shane rubbed at the tears threatening to spill from his eyes and took another sip of his drink. Getting drunk seemed like a good idea right about now! On top of all that, right before he had left for the ocean side resort, his friend Ryan had informed him that he was not going to be able to hire him to work in his tattoo parlor. For as long as he could remember he had wanted to work with Ryan. He was, simply put, the most amazing artist Shane had ever known.

They’d met during their third year at college. Ryan was already working part time in a parlor across town and offered to show Shane the ropes. He became Shane’s first crush. Oh sure Shane had lusted after other guys but never before had he felt the world tilt quite like it did when Ry walked in the door.

Unfortunately Ryan’s heart was already taken by Tom, the store’s owner, leaving Shane to often wonder what life might have been like had he been the one to put that light in his friend’s eyes. By the time Shane had finished his apprenticeship, his sketchbook was full of drawings that he had hoped one day to preserve in ink and they were good...damn good. Hell, his own back was a testament to his artistic talent. But the recession had hit small business owners hard and Tom and Ryan simply couldn’t afford to hire another artist right now.

So with the loss of his dream job as a tattoo artist down the drain, he was

licking his wounds and still trying to figure out a way to turn down the job his father had offered to him. Graphic designer. A euphemism for computer hack! Somewhere in the back of his mind Shane knew that it was unfair to think like that but still the crushing weight he felt wrap around his soul every time he contemplated working a 9 to 5 job in an office left him feeling claustrophobic.

The very thought of no longer pursuing his dream fed his feelings of failure and left him with a sense of hopelessness. But he knew that if he went home and told his old man that he was turning down lucrative employment, his ass would be handed to him on a platter. Every way he turned the future looked more and more dismal. Yeah, getting drunk was looking better and better all the time.

Shane was pulled away from his depressing thoughts by the sound of running feet across the patio. He looked up just in time to see a flash of red trunks and long, muscular legs as they flew by in front of him. Standing up to see if he could figure out the reason for all the activity on the beach below, Shane caught his first full glimpse of the man who was attached to those legs. He stood just a little taller than Shane's 6 feet. His lean muscled body was tanned a golden brown from the sun and his hair was blond, almost golden. As the man stopped and pivoted round to look back at the patio, Shane caught a glimpse of stunning blue eyes. Without a doubt, Shane had never seen such a beautiful man.

As he stood watching, the reason for all the running and commotion became clear. Someone had gotten pulled under the pounding surf and was being rescued by a second lifeguard, already in the ocean. The blond man began to help the other guard who was now struggling to pull a prone figure from the crashing waves. Shane found himself stumbling toward the shoreline to watch the drama unfold.

"Jaime, grab her feet and let's get her further up on the beach away from the surf."

So that was the blond man's name. Jaime. Shane let it roll off his tongue as he watched the two men carry the unconscious woman straight toward the area where he had stopped. As they rushed toward him, he found himself pedaling backwards to avoid collision.

“Whoa— watch out buddy.” The blond man was talking to him. He was pointing behind Shane. He glanced over his shoulder and realized he almost stepped on a young boy who was sitting in the sand, building a sandcastle. Shane looked quickly around for somewhere else to stand. Jaime noticed his confusion and took pity on him.

“Listen, how about you stand over there for now and help us out by keeping the crowd back while we work.”

Shane nodded and moved toward the small crowd that was beginning to gather. As he asked the people to move back and give the guards room to work he heard Jaime talking softly to the woman, who was just beginning to come round.

“Shhh, it’s okay Ma’am. Try not to move until my friend Rob here checks you out.”

The woman began to cry softly. She was visibly shaken. Jaime reached out to hold her hand while using his other to wipe the sand from her forehead. He kept speaking quietly to her, murmuring comforting words. Shane found himself straining to hear the man’s voice above the noise of the surf and the restless crowd. The voice seemed to draw him. He felt its warmth flow over him and something within him responded to the rich tone of Jaime’s voice. Shane watched as stormy blue eyes rose to meet his and he swore he felt a jolt of electricity shoot through him, causing him to inadvertently raise his hand and reach out to the other man. For a brief second, Jaime’s eyes widened in shock as if he too felt the pull...the need to touch...to connect. The moment was broken by instructions from the other lifeguard.

“Okay Ma’am how about we try to help you stand up now. Can you do that for us?”

Quickly Jaime turned his focus back to the woman lying in front of him and Shane felt a chill as if the sun had suddenly gone behind a cloud. He shook his head and silently berated himself for his ridiculous behavior. *Get a grip Shane. He’s just some guy who you’re never going to see again. Stop acting like a fool, mooning over some guy you haven’t even met.* But the very thought of that happening, of never seeing Jaime again filled Shane with a sudden fierce sense of longing. It wasn’t just that Jaime was easy on the eyes,

no it was more than that, much more; but if Shane had been forced to put it in words he would have come up empty-handed. There was a connection, something that just felt right when Jaime looked into Shane's eyes.

The lifeguards helped the woman to her feet and began to walk her down the beach toward the first aid station. Shane stood, rooted to the spot, unable to move. He wanted to say something...anything to make the man come back. Just then, Jaime turned and looked toward the sand where he had just been kneeling. Shane looked down and saw the rescue buoy that had been left behind. Bending down he picked it up and ran the several feet until he came abreast the trio. Breathless from the jog, he held out the buoy toward the guard.

"Ah man thanks! Ah, do you mind carrying it a bit further for me— my hands are a little full right now." Jaime let out a little chuckle and continued walking, holding up the exhausted woman in his charge. Shane fell into step beside him and marveled at how right, how good it was to be in the other man's presence...to hear his voice. Upon arriving at the station, a nurse came out to take charge of the woman, leading her away. Jaime turned to take the buoy from Shane and thanked him for his help. Shane searched for a way to ask the man if he might like to meet up later for a drink or dinner, but the words seemed to stick in his throat. Disgusted with himself and his cowardice, he began to move away, heading back toward the patio where he'd been sitting before the entire ruckus had begun. He heard Jaime clearing his throat and stopped mid-stride.

"Hey, thanks for all your help out there."

Shane slowly turned. "No problem— just doing my civic duty I guess." *Doing my civic duty? What the hell am I saying? I sound like an idiot!*

"Well I wish there were more civic minded folks like you. Most people just stand around and gawk during an emergency. It makes our job a hell of a lot harder I can tell you that."

Shane nodded his head. His mind was racing, frantically trying to tell his stupid mouth to say something, *anything!* However, before he could string two coherent thoughts together, Jaime was turning and beginning to walk away. *Shit, shit, shit. Say something McAllister, anything for god's sake just don't let*

him get away!

“Uh, you looked real good out there. Uhm, running and all...you know down the beach...when you were, uhm, rescuing...that uh...that uh...woman and everything...”

OH MY GOD! He was babbling—fucking babbling! This guy was going to think he was a lunatic! Disgusted, Shane started to turn, readying himself to accept defeat graciously and try to salvage what little pride he had left before the guy laughed in his face. But just as he began to move, he saw Jaime’s mouth twitch, and then it happened. A smile...Jaime smiled...a drop dead, gorgeous smile. And it was for him! Jaime was smiling at him! Suddenly the world was just a little brighter. The tight, anxious feeling that had wrapped itself around Shane’s heart lifted and he could breathe again. Shane didn’t stop to analyze it, he just enjoyed it— enjoyed basking in that beautiful smile. Suddenly, he realized that Jaime was speaking again.

“Listen, I know we just met and all but I was wondering if you might be free a little later for din...?”

“YES!” *Had he just shouted that?* “I mean, uh sure, dinner— you were talking about dinner right?” *Good god, he was sweating bullets. What was wrong with him? He never acted like this!*

Jaime chuckled and took a step closer to Shane. “Great! How about I meet you on the patio at 7 o’clock. I’m done with my shift at 6 and that will give me enough time for a quick shower and change. Does that work for you?”

Shane didn’t register anything Jaime was saying because he was lost. He had fallen, deep into those baby blue eyes and simply gotten lost. Without thinking, he reached out his two fingers and swept a lock of hair away from Jaime’s eyes. He heard the other man’s quick intake of breath and began to jerk his hand away. Quick as lightening, Jaime’s hand whipped up and grabbed his, holding it tight. It was now Shane’s turn to gasp as Jaime dove in and his lips locked onto Shane’s, probing gently, sweetly. Shane felt a jolt race right to his groin. He leaned into the kiss, sucking at Jaime’s lower lip as if it were a lifeline. Jaime’s tongue pressed gently against Shane’s mouth, seeking entry. With an audible moan, he opened his lips to receive it, his own tongue seeking to do battle. Shane felt two steel bands wrap around his torso, pulling

him in tight and a hot stiff prick rub up against his own equally hard shaft.

The two men rocked together one light as the sun, the other dark as night, in what could only be described as a motion just shy of full-on sex. Slowly they broke away from each other, breathing heavily, still wrapped in each other's arms.

“Hi, I’m Jaime.”

“Hi, I’m Shane.”

The two of them smiled at each other. Shane dipped in for another brief kiss.

“I have to get back. Rob will be wondering where I am.”

“Okay.”

Neither man moved. Once more, Shane leaned forward and slowly kissed Jaime's soft lips.

“Okay, then, I guess I’m going now.”

“Uh-huh.”

This time Jaime swooped down, using his hand to pull Shane's head in for a long, slow kiss. This time when he pulled back, he whispered softly:

“See you at 7--don't be late.”

“7...right.”

With one last lingering kiss, Jaime turned and jogged down the beach, stopping after a few yards and turning back to wave at Shane. Shane raised a hand to wave in return and then slowly dropped it down to his lips, pressing his fingertips against them as if to trap the warmth of that last kiss. He closed his eyes for just a moment, savoring the memory of Jaime's hot body pressing against his own. He could feel his dick lengthening as if every drop of blood in his body was heading south to pool in his groin. Opening his eyes, Shane was now very certain of two things. First, he had a raging hard-on. Second, this thing he was feeling might just be a bit more than lust.

THE WEEK had flown by. One dinner had turned into lunch every day, stolen moments of frantic kisses and groping hands in the shadows. Dinners and walks on the beach and long, intimate goodbyes. With each encounter, they

grew more comfortable with each other. Tomorrow, Shane would be heading home. Back to the job he hated, the one he was “settling” for to appease his bastard of a father. Over the last 6 days the only bright light in an otherwise dismal future had been the thoughts of spending time with Jaime.

Shane paced back and forth on the patio, checking his watch every few minutes as if by sheer force of will he could make time move faster. Almost 7pm now. Any moment Jaime would appear and the anxious feeling that had been nagging at Shane like a dog worrying a bone would finally disappear. Oh, he had it bad...really bad. Shane had no idea how things had escalated to this point so quickly; he only knew that he had never felt like this before.

Shane continued to pace restlessly. He had wrestled with himself for the last few hours, turning this love thing over and over in his mind. *It just isn't possible. I barely know this guy. Plus he's a lifeguard! I mean, c'mon, Shane thought to himself, could this be any more clichéd— gay guy down on his luck who finds the love of his life that just happens to be a bronzed and beautiful lifeguard?* Shane shook his head in disgust and for the twentieth time resolved to cut this thing off at the knees. “Dinner and a drink and that's it,” Shane muttered to himself.

“What, no walk on the beach?”

Shane froze. How did this keep happening to him? When was it that karma had become determined to make him look like the biggest fool every time he was around this guy? Gritting his teeth, Shane once more turned toward that seductive voice. The man standing before him nearly made his heart stutter to a full stop. Jaime was, without a doubt, simply stunning. He wore a tailored pair of linen pants that were molded like a second skin over his tight ass. His shirt was buttoned in a way that allowed a long line of graceful neck and a hint of chest hair to peek through. At the waist the buttons had been left undone, so that a glimpse of a flat, well-muscled stomach that was the color of golden honey flashed occasionally. His blond hair had been styled in what appeared to be an artfully windblown mess that hung over one eye. Shane felt his breath hitch in his chest and his cock begin to fill. Jaime was the most erotic sight he had ever laid eyes on and Shane knew with certainty that his heart was, simply put, lost. *I am so screwed.*

“You look beautiful.” *Oh god, had he actually said that out loud?*

A blush rose on Jaime’s cheeks as his eyes met Shane’s and with a fervency in his voice that belied his quiet tone, he replied: “I think you’re beautiful too.” And then, they simultaneously said each other’s names.

“Jaime”

“Shane”

The two men laughed and Jaime took another step closer to Shane. “You first.”

Shane knew without a doubt that this was his make or break moment. Regardless of how this night played out, he felt he owed it to himself and to Jaime to put his cards on the table. What was the worst that could happen? Granted, Jaime could still laugh in his face, but he was pretty certain if that hadn’t already happened given all his fumbling about that it wasn’t likely to happen now. Of course, Jaime could still run away. After all, it’s not every day that some crazy-ass, out of work, wannabe artist tells you he has fallen hopelessly and completely in love with you. But again, Shane felt fairly confident that Jaime had left his track shoes at home for the evening and he could barely achieve a quick jog in those sandals he was wearing. So that left only one possibility on the worst-case scenario shelf. Jaime could thank him politely and tell him that as nice as their week together had been and as much as he liked Shane, he couldn’t see himself falling in love in return.

A solid ball of ice settled deep in the pit of Shane’s stomach and the balmy winds that blew around them seemed to take on an arctic feel. As unbelievable as it all seemed, somewhere in the past 6 days this man standing in front of him had captured his heart and now held it in a grip so tight that its very beat seemed dependent on what response was given in the next 30 seconds. *Well, no time like the present McAllister!* Shane cleared his throat and dove in, head first.

“I know this is going to be a shock, hell I’m not even sure I believe it myself but still I can assure you that it is the god’s honest truth ‘cause you got to know I am not the kind of guy who goes around declaring his undying love for virtual strangers every day, I mean no one in their right mind would even think that all that crap about love at first sight was even real, I mean Jesus this

is like a really bad gay romance you have to admit...”

Somewhere in the back of Shane’s mind it occurred to him that he was speaking at a decibel level that only wild dogs could hear and at a speed that landed somewhere near breaking the sound barrier. To top it all off, Jaime had stepped closer, probably to verify that Shane was not, as he suspected, having a full on nervous breakdown. Or maybe it was to possibly knock the shit out of him when he was finally finished speaking. Of course for Jaime to do that, meant Shane would have to stop long enough to actually take a breath to replenish what little oxygen was making it to his brain.

“...and then there’s this whole lifeguard thing, I mean don’t get me wrong it IS admittedly one of the hottest professions around next to firefighters but I mean DUDE— after 4 years in college you couldn’t come up with something a little bit more future oriented...”

Jaime reached out and put a finger over Shane’s lips. Shane was vaguely surprised that the other man’s ears hadn’t begun to bleed from the endless babble that was pouring unchecked from Shane’s traitorous mouth. Panting slightly, Shane still tried to speak. Somehow, somehow he had to fix the unintelligible mess that he had just vomited all over the man. The very man whom he was pretty sure was in fact his soul mate. *Holy shit when did I start to use words like soul mate? Oh my god I am so fucked!* Shane was pretty sure he had traveled to another dimension. Wait, what was that noise? *Shut up asshole— he’s trying to say something!*

Jaime was indeed speaking. Shane tried to focus on the words but he couldn’t seem to get past Jaime’s opening statement. THE opening statement that had included:

“I’m pretty sure that somewhere along the way I fell in love with you too.”

Wait...wait. Back up. Did he just say what I think he said? Did he just say he fell in?

“And about the lifeguard gig...I didn’t want to tell you till I was sure but the job offer came through today. Meet the new management trainee for *Café Miletto*.”

Café Miletto? That was one of the swankiest places in San Diego. Oh my god! Jaime was going to be working at a restaurant that was located just a few

miles from Shane's apartment! He didn't have to say goodbye to him. He didn't have to think of going back to his apartment and living a life that didn't include seeing the man he loved every day.

"I know this all seems sudden. And I understand if it's too soon but I've never felt this way about anyone before. I can't seem to stop thinking about you. Can't stop wanting to be with you, to touch you, to kiss you."

Jaime's lips hovered just above Shane's mouth. The two men stared into each other's eyes for just a moment and then Shane moved that last precious inch and the world seemed to explode. Mouths crashed into one another, bodies pressed tight against each other, hips grinding together in a frantic rhythm. When the two finally broke apart, Jaime pulled back only long enough to grab the back of Shane's head and pull it in close enough to whisper: "Fuck the walk on the beach, if I don't get inside you right this minute I am going to cum in my pants. Are you with me Shane? Are you ready for this?" Jaime thrust his pelvis hard against Shane's leaking erection causing him to whimper out his agreement. Grabbing Shane by the wrist, Jaime pulled him into the building. Jaime hit the main lobby at top speed, almost running toward the elevator with a dazed and besotted Shane in tow.

Once the large steel door had slid shut, Jaime turned and began to assault Shane's mouth once again, this time reaching down between their straining bodies to cup Shane's sizeable erection. Mere seconds went by before the bell pinged to indicate they had reached their destination. Jaime pulled back, still cupping Shane's cock in his hand, and said in a lust-ridden voice, "Do you want to know what I'm going to do to you when I get you back to my room? What I've been wanting to do ever since I saw you on the beach that first day?" Shane nodded his head, barely breathing, arching his cock further into Jaime's hot hand. Jaime leaned in, stroking over Shane's rock hard shaft, and whispered: "I'm going to take this bad boy out and suck him until you cum down my throat. Would you like that Shane?" Shane's only answer was another strangled moan. Then the elevator doors opened and Jaime took his hand and led him out into the light of the corridor.

AS SOON as the door to Jaime's room snapped shut, Shane felt himself pushed against the wall in a blistering kiss. They began fumbling at the other's clothing, frantically pulling and snatching up bits of fabric to get at the skin that lay beneath. Breaking their lip lock briefly, they tore off their shirts, kicked off shoes and reached out once more to grab at waistbands and zippers.

"Too many fucking clothes", groaned Shane as he tried to make his brain somehow speak to his fingers, which were uselessly attempting to locate the pull to Jaime's zipper. Stopping his own attempts to disrobe Shane, Jaime pushed down his pants, with a tearing sound that ricocheted off the walls, and kicked the offending clothing to the side. Shane's breath caught in his throat as he drank in the sight of a naked, fully erect Jaime. He licked his lips and tentatively reached out one hand to connect with the long, thick cock that jutted proudly from his lover's hips. Closing his hand around the hot, silky shaft he gently fisted the other man, slowly sliding up and down, using just the tips of his fingers to rub gently over the head, eliciting a moan of pure ecstasy from Jaime.

"Oh yeah, yeah, just like that."

Shane grew bolder, sliding downward to cup Jaime's balls and stroke them gently. Jaime reached out and grabbed the back of Shane's head bringing him in for a bruising kiss. His other hand dove down into Shane's pants digging for the rock-hard cock that was straining to break free. The two men jerked and pulled at one another while their mutual grunts and moans filled the air. Jaime's hand kept slipping as the precum oozed from the tip of Shane's cock. Finally, with a frustrated growl, he broke off the kiss and using both hands jerked Shane's pants to the ground, watching as Shane's dick sprang free and slapped against his waist. Dropping to his knees, Jaime licked a long wet line along the shaft until his tongue found the oozing slit. As Shane pressed back against the wall and his eyes began to roll back in his head, Jaime relentlessly fucked the little passageway with his tongue.

"Oh god...oh yes... Jaime...Jaime..."

Shane's head rocked from side to side as his hands snaked out to grasp Jaime's head,

begging the man to take him all the way inside. Jaime willingly complied

and sucked Shane down to the very root. Shane began to writhe in ecstasy, moans pouring from his throat as Jaime took him in deeper and deeper each time. Each time Jaime pulled his head back he would wrap his tongue around the tip, bathing the sensitive area. Suddenly, Shane yanked Jaime's head back and his mouth pulled off with a popping sound. Shane panted harshly, gulping in deep breaths.

"In...I want you in me, please Jaime. I want you inside me...I need you inside me."

Jaime smiled and rose to his feet in one fluid movement. Leaning in, he slowly kissed Shane and then taking him by the hand led him into the bedroom. Pressing him down onto the bed, he stood above him, his hard cock jutting out. Shane thought to himself once more how incredibly beautiful his lover was and how much he wanted him. Desire burned a path straight through him, causing him to arch off the bed and grab hold of Jaime, pulling him down on top of him. They rolled together grinding into one another, rubbing and thrusting until both were gasping with need.

As they broke from their kiss, Jaime looked into Shane's eyes, taking in the flushed cheeks and pouty red lips that almost appeared bruised from their passionate kisses. In a hoarse voice that was laden with lust, he said, "Tell me again...tell me again what you want."

Shane reached up and once again pushed back the lock of blond hair that always seemed to want to hide the beautiful eyes of his lover. Gazing intently at Jaime as if trying to see into his very soul, Shane whispered: "You. I want you. For as long as I can have you...I want you."

Almost reverently, Jaime dipped down and kissed Shane once more. Then he reached across their entwined bodies and opened the drawer to the bedside table, pulling out condoms and lube. Laying them on Shane's chest, Jaime unsnapped the lid to the lube and squirted a generous amount onto his fingertips. Sliding down Shane's body, Jaime gently pushed Shane's already spread legs further apart and gently began to circle his hole with one finger. As he carefully pushed in, he bent down and laved the top of Shane's weeping cock with his tongue. Push, lick, push, lick. Jaime kept up this rhythm until he had three fingers inside Shane and was sucking at the head of the rock-hard

shaft. Shane, now barely coherent, managed to gasp out:

“Please Jaime, please I’m gonna cum if you don’t stop.”

Pulling off, Jaime looked up at his lover, and reached for the condom. Tearing into the package, he held Shane’s eyes, as he slid the sheath onto his cock and spread lube up and down. As Jaime moved into position, Shane pulled his knees up to either side of his chest, exposing his aching hole.

“You ready for me Shane?”

Shane whimpered. Nodding his head, he pulled back even further and reached down to grasp his freely leaking cock. Jaime moved into place against Shane’s hole and began to slowly push in. Shane felt the growing fullness that told him his lover was entering and began to fist himself in time with the gentle thrusts. Jaime leaned over him and began suckling a nipple, pulling the tender bit into a hardened point. Shane’s head thrashed back and forth as ripple after ripple of acute pleasure shimmied down his spine straight to his groin. As his lover kissed his way across his chest to suck in his other nipple, Shane pushed up against Jaime and began to plead for more.

“Harder, Jaime, harder.”

Jaime began to thrust against Shane roughly, pulling away from his chest and reaching down to slap the man’s hand away from his cock. Grasping Shane in his fist he began to pull in time with his thrusts, slamming against him harder and harder. His cock swelled and his balls drew up tight against his body.

“Now, Shane, come for me now!”

With a guttural cry of ecstasy, Shane arched his back and came with explosive force. At the same time, Jaime’s rhythm stuttered, breaking off into jerky spasms as he climaxed and poured forth hot cum. Panting, Jaime collapsed atop Shane and lazily began to kiss him on the lips; both men lay caressing each other, in seeming perfect bliss.

A few minutes later, Jaime carefully grasped the end of the condom, and pulled out of Shane’s body. He went into the bathroom to clean up. Returning a moment later with a warm, wet washcloth, he gently bathed Shane and then tossed the rag toward the bathroom door. Both men climbed under the comforter and turned to one another, cradling each other, kissing once more.

As they lay together, Shane spoke:

“I know how this sounds...I know in another place and another time this could never seem real but here, now, I have never been more sure of anything than I am of this...I love you. I love you and I want to be with you. No matter what it takes, no matter what I have to do, when I leave tomorrow, I want you to be with me.

Jaime looked at the man in his arms.

“Just try leaving without me. “

Shane reached over and lovingly brushed the blond strands away from his lover's eyes one more time. Closing his eyes, he nestled against his broad chest and sighed contentedly.

The two fell asleep in each other's arms.

Present Day

A FEW HOURS after Shane hung up the phone, he turned off the light on his desk and grabbed his messenger bag. Locking the office door behind him, he headed out to pick up Jaime. Deep in his heart he knew that tonight would be either a new beginning or the beginning of the end. They simply could not go on as they had been, like two ships passing in the night, barely seeing one another, rarely making love. As Shane walked across the parking lot to his car, he began recalling all that he and Jaime had been through together.

Over the last six years the love Shane and Jaime had declared so dramatically to each other met many challenges. In fact, Jaime did indeed have a “future-oriented” career in mind and the pursuit of that career was, more often than not, a source of great conflict in their partnership. Jaime was not only in love with Shane but also with the idea of one day managing his own restaurant. Over the years, every spare moment he had was given to the pursuit of that goal. For Shane, giving up his dream of becoming a master tattoo artist had left him slightly bitter and disillusioned. In the midst of all that however, he'd remained faithful to Jaime and thought that Jaime had done so as well. Their partnership was based on love and trust.

Was, that is, until Jaime had left *Café Miletto* and gone to work for the one

and only Jim Hadrian, owner and manager of *Whispers*, an intensely popular restaurant in Hollywood, California. Now, along with a killer commute, Jaime was working double the hours he had before, predominantly with Jim. Jim was a remarkably handsome man and almost 15 years older than Jaime, rich, successful and gay. He drew people to him like moths to a flame. Shane secretly feared that Jaime had become one of those moths, although he desperately hoped that he was wrong.

Ever since Jim had come onto the scene, Jaime had become distant. Often he seemed preoccupied, and was rarely at home before 10 or 11 at night. Once there, he was barely able to hold a conversation and hardly ever asked Shane how his life...hell, how his day had gone. His conversation was peppered with “Jim said this” and “Jim did that”. “Jim was so funny tonight” or “Jim told me I’ll make an amazing manager one day”. While all that could be tolerated, what had happened just a few weeks before had set Shane’s stomach churning and his paranoia into overdrive.

The two of them had been lying in bed, kissing and loving on one another. It had been quite a few weeks since they had made love and Shane was on cloud nine that Jaime seemed to finally be in the mood for more than a quick kiss and sleep. Things were progressing nicely, hands moving over hot, needy flesh, kisses becoming bruising and hard. Then, as if someone had turned off a light, Jaime pulled back and put up a hand to stop Shane. He mumbled something about needing to rest and began to physically withdraw, moving away to his side of the bed. When Shane pushed him to say more, his response stopped Shane cold.

“Babe, what’s wrong? Did I do something you didn’t like?”

“No, I’m just tired Shane. I’m sorry I shouldn’t have led you on like that. I’m just not up for sex tonight.”

“Oh, well, that’s okay. C’mon back over here and just lay with me then. Let me hold you a bit.”

“Not right now okay? Besides, I get enough of that at work with Jim hanging all over me. I swear that guy has more arms than an octopus sometimes.”

Shane felt as though someone had just gripped his windpipe and was

cutting off all the oxygen to his brain. Over the roaring noise of alarm bells going off in his head, he managed to gasp out the question:

“He hangs all over you? You mean he touches you without asking you?”

Jaime’s sleepy voice gave the answer that confirmed all of the wrong suspicions that were creeping into Shane’s head.

“Yeah, I don’t mind, though. The backrubs are kind of nice. I told him no more touching me on the ass though. He listens most of the time.”

The roaring in Shane’s ears was deafening. His heart was pounding like he had just sprinted ten miles. *Some man was touching his lover. Some fucking man was touching what was his. And, oh Jesus Christ, his lover was allowing it...was okay with it.* Shane felt a shot of white-hot anger tear through his body. He turned toward his partner ready to rip into him and tell him in no uncertain terms that Jim was to keep his fucking hands off Jaime from now on. Just as he was about to roll over and spew his diatribe all over Jaime, he heard a soft snore and realized that Jaime had fallen asleep. Shane laid there the rest of the night, tossing and turning, trying to figure out how to tell Jaime that he wanted him to quit his job, the job that he loved.

Since that night and the subsequent morning after when the two men had argued over Jim, the job, and what Jaime referred to as Shane’s “unreasonable jealousy” life had been strained more than ever between the two of them. Then came this phone call about working late...again...and now, the chance to hopefully have time together just for them. He only hoped that it was not too little too late.

Shane held onto the hope that Jaime’s desire to be with him, to be intimate with him would help them recapture what they once had...a love so full that neither had to look anywhere else. Yes, tonight was surely going to be a new beginning. That thought alone should have brought Shane some hope, some peace.

So why did he feel so lost and afraid?

THE CAR rolled to a stop in front of the now dark restaurant. Luckily Shane had his own key, given to him by none other than Jim himself. Since Jaime

often closed the place on weeknights, Shane had insisted that someone other than Jim have a key in case Jaime ever needed emergency help. Surprisingly Jim had acquiesced quite readily. So Shane was able to let himself in through the front door, and, after checking that he had disarmed the alarm, make his way to the kitchen at the back of the main dining room. He noticed that only a faint light shone under the swinging door leading into the prep kitchen, which meant that Jaime had finished the cleanup and that Jim was undoubtedly already gone for the night.

He pushed his way in and heard a soft giggle, followed by a moan. As he turned his head toward the noise, he noticed that a pair of shoes, looking remarkably like Jaime's Doc Martens, were lying on the floor right inside the door. As his gaze moved along the pathway leading to Jaime's office he saw a pair of khaki pants lying a few feet from the shoes. As he bent down to pick them up, a wallet fell from the back pocket and flipped open to reveal the smiling face of one Jaime Deveraux, his lover.

Another moan rent the air and had Shane shooting upward, pants still grasped tightly in his hand. Shane didn't bother looking for underwear. Jaime often chose to go without, teasing Shane with the idea that nothing but a zipper and thin piece of fabric kept his cock from being happily naked. But Shane was thinking anything but happy thoughts right that moment. In fact, Shane was getting progressively more angry and scared as he made his way closer to the office. *Just what the fuck is going on and who the hell is that moaning?*

Just as that question entered his mind, the sound of two voices murmuring together shattered Shane's tenuous hold on anything resembling reasonable thought. With anger building in his chest, he strode forward and pushed on the slightly open door leading into the office. He froze, his heart plummeting to the ground, as he took in the scene before him.

Jaime stood by the desk in nothing but his button down shirt and socks. Jim was crouched down in front of him, his mouth level with Jaime's cock that lay limp beneath his shirt. He was rubbing up and down Jaime's legs with a towel, each time pushing slightly higher on his thighs. Jaime had his hands on the man's shoulders but from where Shane stood he couldn't tell if he was pushing the man away or urging him on.

Urging him on...

Shane saw red. With a loud bang he shoved the door against the wall and strode into the room. He grabbed Jim by the hair and shoved him to one side. Jim hustled back to his feet and came at Shane bellowing, "What the fuck was that for? Are you a goddamn lunatic?"

Jaime was yelling as well. "Shane stop, what are you doing? It's not what you think!"

Shane was panting with fury. He swung a fist at Jim's jaw, connecting with a loud thud and watched with satisfaction as Jim went down, yelling out in pain. Shane bent down and picked up the pair of pants he had dropped to the floor when he had entered the room and threw them at Jaime's face, snarling, "Cover yourself the fuck up. NOW!"

Jim began to moan and move as if to pull himself upright again. Shane turned and ground out a warning between clenched teeth.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll stay the fuck down there or so help me god I will beat the shit out of you."

Turning to Shane, he glared at him and spoke in an angry rush, "Get your pants back on and get in the car Jaime."

"Not until I help Jim up off the floor. Jesus Shane, are you crazy? What did you think was going on here? He was just helping me clean the grease off my legs. Did you even look at my pants before you threw them at me and jumped to all kinds of stupid ass assumptions? Look at them Shane. They are covered in fucking oil from the grease trap on the fryer. I spilled the shit all over me. "

Jaime reached behind to a pair of sweat pants that Shane recognized as his own. Jaime was forever borrowing them because he liked the way they felt, had told Shane that wearing them made him feel like a piece of Shane was wrapped around him, holding him tight. Never before had Shane felt such pain at seeing a simple article of clothing.

"I was just about to put these on, when you came in here like a fucking madman. Christ, what is wrong with you? Don't you trust me at all?"

Shane felt like his head was going to explode. *He trust Jaime?* Just who the hell was standing here with his dick hanging out while the fucking pervert

who had been lusting after him for the last 6 months nearly had it in his mouth? How DARE he talk to Shane about trust!

“GET IN THE FUCKING CAR JAIME!”

Shane heard himself screaming at the top of his lungs. He was so angry...so hurt...so betrayed. He watched with growing dismay as Jaime put on the greased pants and then threw the sweatpants at his chest. Then with all the dignity he could muster, Jaime turned and bent down extending his hand toward the man on the floor who was watching the entire episode unfold with what looked like both shock and just a bit of guilt. Shane felt as though any moment the floor would open up and swallow him straight down to hell. For this was what he imagined hell to be...Jaime turning away from him to be with another man. He clutched at the sweatpants and tried one last time to make Jaime come with him. This time, with as much control as possible, he spoke in carefully measured tones, his voice barely more than a whisper.

“Please Jaime, please if you love me, please get in the car so we can go home.”

The man Shane loved more than his own life turned and with a cold stare and distant voice said, “Go away Shane. I don’t want you here right now. I can’t talk to you right now. I want you to leave. We can talk later.”

Shane closed his eyes against the pain that the dismissive tone of Jaime’s voice produced inside him. It was as if each word was the thrust of a sharp blade tearing at his heart. His lover was sending him away.

Shane turned and began to walk out of the office. The last thing he heard before he closed the door was Jaime’s voice saying over and over again:

“It’s all right Jim. I sent him away. I’m so sorry.”

Shane felt the first tears fall to his cheek as the door clicked shut.

THE NEXT morning, the light filtering in through the closed curtains caused Shane to roll over, jostling the empty whiskey bottle out of his hand and making it fall to the floor. He clutched at his head and moaned aloud. His cell began to chirp out a happy little tune that made him grind his teeth as he searched for it among the blankets. By the time he located it, the call had gone

to voicemail. Shane threw it across the room where it smashed against the wall, the cover breaking off and sliding under the bed. He lay back down, knowing that he should get up...should go into the office...should try to reach Jaime.

Jaime.

A lump rose in his throat and tears began to fall again. Angrily he swiped at them, mentally cursing himself for the weakness they represented. *Christ, McAllister, you're nothing but a fucking pansy. Now get a grip on yourself. Get up, get a shower and go find him. Tell him what an ass you are. Tell him you're sorry. Beg him to come back. Beg him...to let you love him again.* The tears began again and this time Shane simply let them fall. He closed his eyes and prayed that Jaime would come home.

3 days later

"I DON'T GIVE a shit what the man said, Margaret. You tell Dexham that his fucking presentation will be ready when I say it is!"

Shane slammed down the phone and ran a shaking hand through his hair. He was coming apart at the seams and it wasn't pretty. Not in the least. He hadn't had contact with Jaime nor had his lover been back to their condo since the night of the incident. *Incident! God I can't even call it what it really is! Break-up! Separation! Divorce! Nightmare!* Shane shuddered as he thought of going home one more time to the empty condo he and Jaime had once shared. He had been drinking heavily for the last 3 days and had barely been able to drag himself into the office today. Now that he was here, all he wanted to do was go back home and crawl into bed with another bottle of liquid forgetfulness.

The intercom buzzed again and this time he let it go on and on. He had no doubt that it was Margaret calling to offer her resignation. He had taken most of his grief out on her in the last few hours and he was pretty sure she had reached her limit. He swiveled around to his computer screen and looked at the email he had been composing before Dexham had called to ask when his million-dollar presentation was going to be ready.

Dear Jaime,

I am so sorry. I know you would never consider cheating on me with anyone else. When I saw you with Hadrian I lost my mind. I love you so much and seeing his hands on you, him kneeling in front of you, touching you...

That was as far as Shane could get. Every time he tried to write more the tears would threaten to come and he had to stop and breathe until the tightness in his chest passed. He was so lost without Jaime. So very lost. Each day it got harder and harder to make himself care...about anything. But today had been the worst of all. Today Jim had called to tell him that Jaime would be coming by to pick up his things and drop off his key. Jaime was moving out. Then Jim had dropped the other bomb...the one that had made Shane run to the toilet and heave his guts into the porcelain bowl.

“So, he wanted me to call and tell you to please not be in the condo between 12 and 4 today. It shouldn’t take us much longer than that to gather up his things.”

“Us? You’re coming with him?”

“Well, of course. I mean he is moving into my place, so I want to be there to help him get situated.”

“He...he’s moving where?”

“My place. Do we have a bad connection? You sound far away. Shane? Shane? Hello? Shane? I think he hung up babe. Aw Jaime honey c’mere, don’t cry honey.”

Shane felt the bile rising in his throat as he recalled holding onto the phone and hearing Jim Hadrian call his lover...”babe”...”honey”. Shane felt the room begin to spin again as he dove down between his knees, grabbing the trashcan beside his desk and vomiting into it what little contents remained in his stomach.

The phone rang again. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand he lurched upward to snatch up the offending instrument and threw it across the room. In his grab, he jostled the receiver and heard Margaret telling Ryan that he was unable to take his call right then. Shane snatched up the phone and cried out for Ryan to wait. He was there. He could talk. Margaret responded

that she would put the call through and Shane waited as the clicks and whirs on the line indicated that the call was being redirected. Then he heard his best friend's voice...

"Shane, are you there?"

Silence. Shane could barely breathe let alone speak. Raw emotion clogged his throat and made it impossible to utter a word.

"Shane, I know you're there. I can hear you breathing. Look you don't have to talk, just listen, okay? Jaime asked me to call you. He's worried about you. He's been trying to get a hold of you for the last 3 days. You haven't been taking his calls and there's something wrong with your cell phone."

Shane vaguely remembered pieces of the cell sliding under his bed. He had yet to replace the broken phone. In addition, guilt now rose in him as he recalled telling Margaret to hold all his calls until further notice. The only reason Dexham had managed to get through the iron curtain of silence that he had invoked was because the man had threatened to pull his account entirely and Margaret felt Shane should know before his business crumbled around his ears much as his private life was now doing. Ryan continued to talk and Shane forced himself to listen.

"...he doesn't want to move out Shane but you've given him no choice. And that bastard Hadrian is happily picking up the pieces...moving in on your man...taking advantage...fucking knight in shining armor..."

Shane shook his head trying to make sense of what he was hearing. He kept losing the thread of the conversation, each new piece hitting him like a fist to his stomach. His head was spinning again. Finally shaking his head to try and clear it, he gasped and moaned into the phone, "Stop...Jesus, Ryan stop. I can't hear you...I'm not understanding you...I'm so lost...so fucking lost..."

Ryan swore into the phone.

"That's it. You stay right there! Do you hear me? I'm coming over. I'll be there in 10 minutes. Do you hear me Shane? I said to stay there, I'm coming over."

Shane nodded his head and hung up the phone. He slid off his chair and landed in a heap on the floor. He was going to be sick again. And he was so

tired...so very tired.

Hours later Shane woke up to the smell of coffee and the sound of soft jazz filtering in under his bedroom door. He sat up and tried to remember exactly how he had gotten from his office to his condo but couldn't seem to remember anything beyond the phone call from Ryan...Ryan? Ryan had called him. Had said that he was coming over, that he was going to help him. Shane heard the bedroom door open and looked up to see the concerned face of his best friend. Ryan was holding a tray laden with coffee, toast and eggs. He put the tray on the bedside table and sat on the corner of the bed.

“Sleeping beauty awakes!”

Shane smiled at the familiar nickname that Ryan had bestowed on him so many years ago when Shane would sleep large portions of the day away after marathon drinking parties. Of course, that was all before he had met Jaime...Jaime who had made him want to be a better man. Jaime...who was leaving him...moving

“Out! Jaime's moving out. And that bastard Jim...he's moving in with that bastard Jim.”

“That's right! So what are you going to do about it?”

Shane looked confused for a moment. “Do about it? What do you mean? Didn't you just hear me? He's moving out, Ryan. Moving in with another man! He's taking his shit and leaving me! There's nothing I can do! Its over!”

“Bullshit! The Shane McAllister I knew would have plenty to do about it!”

“The Shane McAllister you knew is dead— died the night he found his lover practically being given a blowjob by his boss!”

“But you didn't see Hadrian giving him a blowjob did you, Shane?”

“Well no, not exactly. But,”

“No buts! You didn't see Jaime doing anything but standing there while somebody helped him get a shitload of grease off his legs. Hell I'll even bet his dick was limp wasn't it, Shane?”

Shane blanched as he recalled that very fact.

“Yeah it was but”

“I said no fucking buts, Shane! Now you listen to me you asshole. You're throwing away the one good thing that ever happened in your shitty life.

Jaime! That's right Jaime fucking Devereaux. You're acting like he's done something wrong when in fact all you've succeeded in doing is wrongly accuse the man who loves you of cheating on you, and forcing him into the arms of the bastard who started all this shit to begin with! Now are you honestly going to lie in that fucking bed like some pansy-assed girl and let some son of a bitch take away the only goddamn man you have ever loved? Well? Are you, Shane?

Shane looked into the blazing eyes of his best friend and realized for the first time just how close he had come to throwing his life away. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, stood up, and strode over to his closet. Flinging open the doors, he grabbed the first pair of pants and shirt he could find and started dressing himself. He vaguely heard Ryan talking on the phone in the background to Tom, his husband, about keeping Jaime there until he and Shane could manage to drive across town. He spun around and stared at Ryan.

"He's there? He's there at your house with Tom? Jaime is with Tom?"

"Yeah, where in the hell do you think he's been sleeping for the last 3, make that 4 days?"

"He's been with you guys all this time?"

"Yes Shane. Jaime has been with Tom and me since you effectively called him a cheating slut! If you had picked up the goddamn phone you would have known that 4 days ago!"

Shane dropped his head into his hands and began crying with great gulping sobs. Jaime was with Tom and Ryan. He wasn't with Jim. He hadn't been cheating on him. The relief was so huge that it felt as though a dam had burst deep inside him. He felt Ryan's hand on his shoulder, soothing him and heard his voice saying, "Shhh, it's going to be okay Shane. You'll see. You're going to get him back. I promise. C'mon buddy, we have to get you dressed. Jaime's waiting."

Jaime was waiting. Those three words were like water in the desert to a thirsty man. Shane drank them down and wiped the tears from his eyes. With Ryan's help he finished cleaning up and got dressed. When he was ready, he asked Ryan to wait in the car for him. Shane made two phone calls. One was to Margaret. First he apologized and then asked her to contact Dexham to let

him know that he would be out of the office the rest of the week. He gave Margaret no information as to where he would be, simply telling her he would be back in the office in 5 days. The next call was to a small beachside resort that he and Jaime had gone to for their first anniversary. He booked the honeymoon suite and arranged for champagne and roses to be placed in the room.

As he walked down the stairs to meet Ryan he mentally began making a list of clothing he would have to buy for himself and Jaime when they got to the resort. Underwear was not on the list.

SHANE SAW the highway sign for the resort and put on his turn signal, taking the exit. Just a few minutes now and he and Jaime could get out of this damned car and finish their discussion. *Discussion? More like fight—a knock down drag out fight! Jaime was so pissed at him he was going to be lucky if he spoke to him in the next century let alone that night!*

The reunion at Ryan and Tom's had not gone well. Jaime was icy, distant, and had barely grunted his assent when Shane asked him...no begged him to accompany him to the resort. From that point on Jaime had simply not spoken at all, despite Shane's repeated attempts to draw him out. Shane wasn't really sure why Jaime had agreed to come along on the trip. He took it as a positive sign, however, that the other man would eventually forgive him.

As they drove the last few miles, Shane tried once again to cajole Jaime into talking with him.

“So, Jaim, do you remember this place?”

Silence.

“It's been what...5 years since we were last here?”

Silence.

“I remember our first night when we called for room service and they took so long to get there that we couldn't wait any longer. Hell, I can still see the bellhop's face when he brought up the champagne and you answered the door buck-naked. I thought he was going to burst into flames he was so red in the face. You closed the door and laughed so hard you nearly dropped the bucket

on the floor. Christ Jaime, you were so fucking bold! Balls of steel. “Shane’s voice dropped to a sultry whisper. “Fucking gorgeous balls of steel. Can’t wait to taste them again babe. Can’t wait to wrap you up in my arms again, Christ Jaime I missed you so much!”

Silence. And then...a subtle shifting in the seat that Jaime occupied. His hand dropping down to rub his thigh as if to remove excess sweat. A faint tremble in his lower lip. Was that a smile? Shane’s heart picked up. He put the car in park. He had deliberately parked far away from the hotel entrance, close to the beach. Looking out through the car window, he could see the surf pounding the shoreline. He spoke again, hope giving strength to his voice.

“I really fucked up Jaime. I know I did. I failed you. Failed to trust you. Failed to remember how much we loved each other...love not loved. There’s no past tense about us Jaime. No what ifs or might have been. You and I are made to be together baby. We can’t live apart from each other. I can’t live without you Jaime. Can’t breathe without you. We need each other. Have to be with each other. Forever Jaime. Remember that promise? Together forever. We made it right here, right here on this beach 5 years ago. We sat here as the tide washed in and we told each other how much we loved each other. How we would never be apart ever again. You remember that don’t you babe? Tell me you remember that, please.”

Jaime turned toward Shane. Unshed tears glittered in his eyes. His voice was quiet when he finally spoke.

“Walk with me.”

Shane scrambled from the car, tearing around to open Jaime’s door and reach out a hand to draw his lover to his feet. Jaime ignored the outstretched hand and rose from the car. Shane fell into step next to Jaime and they walked on in silence. When they got to the edge where sand met roadway, Jaime stopped to remove his sandals and Shane did likewise. Jaime then pulled off his shirt and turned toward Shane, silently waiting for Shane to do so as well. Shane willingly complied. Jaime carefully took the shoes and shirt from Shane and, together with his, left them in a small pile under a bush that hugged the strip of dirt where the parking lot ended.

“They’ll be safe there.”

Shane nodded his head at Jaime's quiet promise. He was unwilling to break the tenuous peace that had sprung up between them. They walked on, the warm sand pressing between their toes, the air sharp with the salty tang always present at the ocean.

Jaime led Shane on to a small cove just off the beach proper. Not another soul could be seen for miles in either direction. Shane remembered this cove. The two of them had discovered it on their last trip here. It had become their "private" beachfront. Shane recalled with a shiver how often they had come here with a beach blanket and picnic. As they paused in their walk, he closed his eyes for just a moment and replayed the many times that they had slowly stripped one another naked and made love in this spot. After, they would run into the pounding surf and swim until they were utterly exhausted.

At the sound of clinking glass, Shane opened his eyes and felt them widen in surprise as Jaime pulled a blanket and picnic basket from behind a set of rocks just to their right.

"When you told me where we were going...back at Ryan's house, do you remember what I did?"

Shane nervously licked his lips. He wasn't sure what was going on here. He didn't dare hope that the familiar picnic items meant that Jaime had forgiven him---in fact, had *planned* ahead for them. But when? Shane's frantically searched his mind to remember when Jaime would have made the call to the resort. How had he known ahead of time that Shane was planning on bringing him here? The only possible time he could have had to make any phone calls was right after he had told Jaime where they were going and Jaime had gone into the...

"bathroom! You made the call to the hotel when you went into the bathroom. But how...why? You were so pissed off. You were in there for so long. I was really worried. I thought you were going to come back out and tell me to leave. But all along you were making a..."

"phone call. With a phone."

Shane face lit up with a mystified look at Jaime's response.

"The answer to your question, how? With my cell phone. I used it to make the call to the hotel while I was in the bathroom. I asked them to leave these

here on the beach for us.”

“But...”

Jaime took a step closer to Shane and placed a finger on his lips, silencing any further protestations.

“And the answer to your second question? Why? Well, that is a little more complicated. Help me spread out the blanket so we can sit down and I can explain. Tell you everything. Including how much I love you despite your fucking jealous streak.”

Shane felt as though his heart had just leapt out of his chest. With trembling hands he helped spread out the blanket and then carefully took a seat next to his lover. Jaime began slowly, his voice low but sure.

“First I have to apologize to you Shane. You were right to suspect that Jim’s intentions weren’t exactly on the up and up. He was trying to make a move on me. After you left...” Jaime’s voice faltered for a moment, pain evident in his expression as he went on. “After I sent you away, he tried to “comfort” me. Christ, I was so blind.”

Shane reached over and took Jaime’s hand in his, letting the other man feel his love...his forgiveness. Jaime turned and gave him a hesitant smile, then clearing his throat as if to push back the rising emotion, he continued speaking.

“I thought he was just being nice despite the fact that you had just knocked him on his ass. Every day he asked me if I had heard from you. When he found out I was living with Ryan and Tom he somehow got the idea that I was going to leave you. That’s when he called you and lied about my wanting to move out. Then I realized he had made plans that included seducing me and having me move in with him.”

Shane gritted his teeth trying to push down the anger that was coursing through him. For a moment he was tempted to speak, but Jaime was continuing, so he clamped down on the murderous vision of Jim Hadrian’s restaurant burning to the ground with him inside and tried to focus on Jaime’s words.

“When I figured out just what Jim had done, I tried to get a hold of you but you weren’t taking any calls and your cell phone was going directly to voice

mail. Then Ryan took pity on me and came after you. And I'm really glad he did."

Jaime squeezed his hand and shuffled his body closer, resting his shoulder next to Shane's. The two sat for a moment staring out at the ocean, letting the peaceful calm grow between them.

"You don't ever have to doubt my love, Shane. You are everything to me. Our life together is the most important thing in my life." Jaime paused to let the impact of his words sink into Shane's heart and mind. Then he continued. "Do you know why I've been working so hard to learn everything I can about the restaurant business?"

Shane could barely speak as the raw emotion of love clogged his throat. Dumbly he shook his head, staring into Jaime's eyes, barely breathing for fear of losing this fragile peace that covered them.

"Because I have a dream of owning my own place one day. Then I can..."

Shane broke in, trying to reassure Jaime of his determination to see that dream come true as well.

"I know Jaime. I do. And that's why I'm working so hard. I want you to have your dream baby, I do..."

Once again Jaime placed two fingers over Shane's mouth, stopping his words.

"Shhhh, let me finish Shaney. You always want to jump in and control things, run things. It's okay just to listen for once. To let me be the one to fix something."

Shane blushed and hung his head in shame. Jaime was right, he was always rushing in, messing things up when all he had to do was wait and trust Jaime to set things right. Jaime drew his chin up and looked him in the eye. His smile told Shane that despite his mistakes, Jaime loved him, forgave him. Shane turned his face into Jaime's palm and kissed his hand.

"I work so hard for you, Shane. I work hard to earn enough so that one day you can leave the job that you hate and become the artist you've always wanted to be. My dream is to see **your** dream come true Shane. Because I love you. And I want nothing more in this world than to see you happy."

Tears flowed down Jaime's face. Shane reached over and brushed them

away and closed the distance between them. The kiss was gentle, loving and full of promises that spoke of a life together, a love that was lasting. Shane pulled back and silently reached for the button on Jaime's shorts. His lover watched as he opened it and slowly slid down the zipper. Shane smiled as he saw that familiar naked flesh...Jaime was going commando. Gently, almost reverently he drew out Jaime's cock and lovingly stroked it up and down a few times. Jaime gasped and reached out to grab Shane's shoulder. Sliding his hand down he too undid his lover's pants and went in to grasp the hot flesh of Shane's leaking cock. The two men stared into each other's eyes as they began the age-old dance together.

Falling backwards on to the blanket, they shimmied out of their clothing and embraced each other again, pushing together, rubbing with slow, languorous movements. Their kisses became rougher, and their bodies became slick with sweat as they rocked against one another.

Shane moaned. "Oh yes, so good, so good. Harder, Jaime, harder. I want to feel you, need to feel you."

Jaime responded with his own moan and pushed against his lover, the precum dripping from their cocks making the slide easy and fast. "Soon, Baby, soon!"

With those words echoing in his mind, Shane began to buck and shake as his orgasm ripped through him, hot jizz pouring out of his slit. In response his lover's body went rigid as he too ejaculated ribbons of creamy cum onto Shane's already wet torso. They lay panting in each other's arms. After a few minutes, Jaime reached into the picnic basket for a napkin and gently wiped down Shane first and then himself. Tossing it aside he sat up, drawing Shane with him. Gently he stood and led Shane down to the shoreline and sat back down again, leaning against him, sighing in contentment.

The two men sat, shoulder to shoulder, one golden as the sun...the other dark as midnight. Shane spoke softly but with certainty.

"No matter what happens from here on out I will always be with you, always love you, always be right here by your side."

He turned his face toward the man who he loved more life itself and said: "Even if we were an ocean apart, I would find you, come back to

you...love you.”

He leaned forward, resting his head against Jaime’s, closing his eyes. They sat there together as the tide came in.

THE END

Author bio: Sammy Goode began life as a writer of children’s plays. She was quite content in her world of all things small and wonderful until a band of rabble-rousers, (otherwise known as her friends at Goodreads), ganged up and forced her to begin writing stories—delicious little dirty stories—the kind called m/m. This little tale was born out of all their persistent nagging and well wishing. Oh and lest she be misread, she would not trade that little band for all the world!!!

[Goodreads](#)

OF CANYON ASHES

by Cody Richardson

Photo Inspiration



Story Prompt

“Save me, Mister Firefighter! No really, I swear it was just a small bag of caramel microwave popcorn...”

~ WildFlower3D

General Information

genre: contemporary

tags: firefighter; disaster; hurt/comfort; cheating ex; bareback; PTSD

word count: 5,569

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OF CANYON ASHES

by Cody Richardson

THE WIND pulled charred wood and dust through the Canyons.

The debris wasn't so bad; it stayed on the ground, rolling along and leaving bits of blackened slough in the dirt. The dust, though, the dust was the bitch of the thing. It got in your eyes and your nose and your clothes and your skin and the sky, making you itch and cough and blink while it blotted out the sun, turning it red and unfriendly.

And it smelled good.

I think that was the worst part of it. I *liked* the smell of it, of everything. My father and I had gone camping often when I was a child, and the smell of the fire pit when the fire was gone always comforted me and made me glad to be with my Daddy. Even now, as people trudged along the highway with dirty blankets and dirtier children, I was comforted by the smell of their burned lives.

The Canyons are dangerous places; anyone will tell you that, if you ask them. When you meet them at the small lake in the summer, they'll sit in their plastic lawn chairs made pliable and unstable by the extreme temperature and the relentless exposure to the sun, and tell you about their nephew, the short one, who was bitten by a rattlesnake while hiking in some pass; they'll tell you about the pets and sometimes the children that have been taken and eaten by the mountain lions, about the woman who lost her way in the hills and wandered in the heat until she died, her tongue swollen in her mouth like a phallus. They'll tell you about those things, those Folk Tales and Local Legends and True Stories, because none of them are the real danger of the Canyons. Like humorous children's songs about disease and famine and war, they are lies told to obscure the horror and finality and inescapability of the truth.

And the flames are the truth.

Firemen still ambled around, helping people carry things. Many of them had died, I knew, and while the monster had still been swallowing homes and

people and memories whole they had been steadfast and unyielding in their fight. But now the monster was quiet and still, and they were hollow, their faces as blank and black as the landscape around them. I fell into line behind one of them, adjusting the emergency pack on my shoulder.

Something had happened with the road. I lived high up in the hills, and there was but one road back to the highway. There were no cars or fire trucks or ambulances; the injured and the dead had been carried out by hand hours ago, and now there was only us, walking the path to the 14.

“Never actually walked this road before.”

I hadn’t heard him approach, but there he was beside me.

“Nice view.”

I’d been composed until that moment. Through the evacuation and the charred bodies and the screaming, I’d been composed. Through the heat and the fear, I’d been composed. Through the waiting for the rescuers, I’d been composed.

“Fuck off, Cale.”

I must have spoken loudly, because people turned to look back at me. I could feel my hands beginning to go numb.

“Lang...” He was tentative, not like he was afraid I’d hurt him, but like I was a toddler threatening a tantrum at the bank. “Do you really think this is the time-”

My backpack was on the ground and I was on him. He crashed to the ground, back first, letting out a deep *oof* and then gasping. I straddled his abdomen, my bare knees and calves cutting themselves open on the rocks and the burnt debris. I landed a solid right hook and felt his nose crack beneath my fingers before a man stronger than me was pulling, dragging me away. I fought him, the man behind me, but it was no use and I soon exhausted myself and collapsed in his arms. He let me down to the ground gently.

“Okay...” he said. He rubbed my back as I lay there, face down. Others that had stopped to look were moving on at the behest of another fireman. He nodded at the fireman above me and continued herding people along. I could hear Cale screaming.

“He broke my *those!*” His shoes scratched against the rocky ground. “He

broke my thucking *those!*”

I closed my eyes.

“It’s okay,” the man above me said. “You’re gonna get out of here. I promise.”

I tried to breathe and inhaled dust instead. I spluttered and he pulled me up until I was sitting. He moved around until he faced me and put his hands on my shoulders.

The last of the others were disappearing down the hill, even Cale, still yelling. I tried to stand; I didn’t want to be left behind.

“Hey, hey.” He held me tight. “Not just yet.”

“I-”

“I’ll take you down in a moment. Just rest for a second.”

The light around us was orange in the fading and smoke-clogged sunlight. I looked him in the face, but I couldn’t see much; it was covered in soot and dirt, as was his hair. He was big, though. And strong.

After a few minutes he stood, taking my hands and pulling me with him. He waited while I got my bearings, then walked beside me. We moved down the road at a slow pace, but I was glad to be moving again. Away from this place.

“It smells nice, doesn’t it?” My voice sounded far away, like I was listening to an underwater recording of it. “The wood.”

He replied – I could see his lips moving – but I couldn’t hear him anymore. The brown-orange sky got bright and hard to look at, and black spots appeared in it.

Then I was gone.

WHEN I opened my eyes again, I was on my back and there was a cannula in my nose. Machines beeped around me. The ceiling was pink and everything else was white and seemed to have a cottony quality, even the bed rails. I touched one of them to see if it was covered in fur.

It wasn’t.

“Well, look who’s awake.”

Her voice was both loud and muffled, like she was shouting into a pillow. Her face was blurred and I blinked to clear my sight.

“It’s the soot and dust,” she said. “They’ll clear out in a few hours, you just sit tight.”

“I’m thirsty.” I sounded as though I had sandpaper in my throat. “I...”

She handed me a small paper cup with ice chips inside, and pressed a button on the bed. There was a low hum, and then I was sitting up. The television was on; flames billowed beneath a helicopter.

I took the cup and swallowed some of the ice.

“Where are we?” I winced; my throat was sore. “Los Angeles?”

“Palmdale,” she said. She wrote something on a clipboard, then looked up and smiled at me. “Or Lancaster, rather. You’re at AV Hospital.”

I looked around, and soon, I recognized the layout of the place. My mother had worked here for twenty years before she died.

“H-How...”

“Fire department brought all the smoke inhalation folks and the minor stuff here. Burns went down the hill. Poor things.”

There was a slithering in my abdomen, and a troubling thought tried to crawl into my consciousness. I shoved it away.

“You rest up now. Don’t mess with the IVs. The stand is on wheels, in case you need to use the restroom. You’re cousin said he’d be back in a few hours, after he got some sleep.”

“My cous-”

But she was already out the door, headed down the hall toward a nurses’ station.

I wondered who this cousin of mine could be. I didn’t have any family in California anymore. I hoped it wasn’t Cale. I wasn’t in the mood for any of his bullshit.

Not ever again.

I listened to the news drone on about the fire and the direction of the wind. I must have fallen asleep again, because a man I didn’t recognize was talking softly as I awoke.

The nurse was back, and she was whispering to him.

“...should be able to go home today,” she said. “His O2 is high, and he’s had a chance to rest. More folks will be headed in here soon, and we need the space.”

“That’s great,” he said. “I’ll take him home with me tonight. His aunt is worried sick about him.”

“Great. When he wakes up he can sign himself out. Just ring me when he’s ready.”

She left.

“Who the hell are you?” My throat wasn’t hurting anymore, but it was still scratchy.

He looked surprised to see me awake, but then he smiled in a way that made me regret the harsh question. His expression was one of relief and painful tenderness.

“You don’t remember?” He put a giant hand to my forehead. It covered half of my face.

“No...”

“I’m Michael Rourke. With the fire department,” he said. He hushed his tone. “We were walking down the hill when you passed out.”

“Oh...” They must have put something strong in my IV; I was still a little confused. “Thanks, then... but, why are you here now? Is something wrong?”

“No, I just...” He looked down at his hands. “I was worried about you. Just wanted to, uh, make sure you were doin’ okay.”

I was more awake now, and I could see him clearly. He was gigantic, and muscled up like some kind of bodybuilder. His hair was dark brown, and it was arranged in a messy mop on his head. His face was plain, average, but his eyes were a deep brown, like freshly turned earth. He wore an enormous sport coat and jeans.

“Oh...thanks...” I couldn’t think of any more words.

“Well, uh...” He tapped his fingers on my bed rail and breathed deep, looking at the ceiling. “I, uh, have an extra bedroom. Since you need a...a place to stay for a while, and everything...if you want...”

It took me a second to process what he was saying.

“Wait...wait w-what about my house?”

The anxiety that had crept onto his face faded into sorrow. “Oh...it...I’m sorry, but it’s gone. Burned.”

“But it was fine!” I sat up. Too fast, it turned out, because I was immediately lightheaded. I grabbed the rails for support, but he caught me first, his big hands taking my forearms and steadying me.

“The fire-”

“It was out!”

“It was just contained,” he said. “Over the ridge, and down a little ways-”

“It was gone!”

“I-I tried to save the houses, we tried, but it came back, I’m sorry, the whole subdivision – it’s gone.”

His eyes were wide and glassy, and I was acutely aware of his rough hands on my skin. It was comforting, and I breathed through my nose for a few minutes, relaxing into his grasp.

“It’s okay,” he said. “You’re gonna be fine. I can help you. I can.”

“But where...what...”

“You’re coming home with me.”

“I...”

“You need time to recover. I won’t let you stay in some cheap motel after everything you’ve been through.” He averted his gaze again. “I won’t.”

His hands moved past my elbows and up to my shoulders, and they squeezed me tight. I was grateful; their firm grasp made me feel secure, like I might be able to get up without falling.

“Okay.”

There was nothing else to say.

HE LIVED in east Palmdale, where I had grown up. His house was a modest three and two near the new high school, and I was relieved when he led me in through the air conditioned front door.

The carpet was tan, just like every carpet ever installed in Palmdale, and the room was decorated in muted earth tones. The furniture was solid and large, just like him.

“I used to live around here,” I told him.

“Yeah?” He beamed, and his smile was just as big and sure as the rest of him. He was very close to me, I noticed; life and strength radiated from him and I soaked them in, hoping I could hold on to them after he was gone.

He sat me down on the giant brown sectional with a gentle push on my shoulder.

“Yeah, when I was a kid. There was no school over here back then. It was all sand and Joshua trees.”

“This place is that new, huh?” He sat beside me, rubbing his hands together. Even sitting, he was half a head taller than me and half again as broad. “My agent wasn’t lyin’ then.”

“Nope.” I stared at the side of his face. “When did you move here?”

His mouth twitched. “Just this year,” he said. “From Ohio.” He looked down, then over at me. “Needed a change, you know?”

“Hmm, yeah.”

He shifted, and his mouth twitched again.

“Is everything okay?” My voice wavered; I coughed to clear it.

“Yeah...” His eyes left my face and traveled the length of my body, slowly and reluctantly. He lost control of the expression on his face, and his eyes flashed with lust and shame, back and forth. I put my hand on his forearm and squeezed his wrist. He wrested it away from me. His eyes flashed with something. It looked like anger, or maybe frustration. It happened too fast for me to tell.

“You must be hungry,” he said. His tone was flat, and cold.

He stood and disappeared into the kitchen before I could speak. I sat for a moment before going after him, hoping I hadn’t made a mistake. I’d already made too many big mistakes.

He was looking into his freezer, moving things around with his hands. I sat in one of the chairs at the table and folded my hands in my lap. He pulled out a pizza and set about putting it in the oven.

“So...” I fidgeted. “Ohio, huh?”

He paused and turned to look at me.

“Yeah,” he said. He opened the oven door. “My whole life.”

“Were you a fireman there, too?”

“Mmm.” He set the temperature. “Just house fires every few years, though, nothing like this.” He cut his eyes at me. “I’ve...I’ve never seen anything like this.”

He paced in front of the stove for a while, not looking at me. Then he walked over and sat down at the other end of the table, his expression forcefully neutral.

“Got any family around here?”

“No,” he said.

We sat in heavy silence. His giant frame seemed to have swollen; his shoulders were locked in a stoic position and shoved back like he was a king. He kept looking right through me with a flat expression, and it gave the impression that he held me in some sort of contempt. It was odd to behold after how concerned he’d been at the hospital. I kicked myself again for my earlier presumption.

The oven beeped, and he went over to get the pizza, his feet thumping on the tile. He set it on the table along with some plates and a knife.

“I hope you like sausage,” he said. “It was all I had-”

“It’s great, Michael.” I stared at him until his eyes actually focused on mine. “Really. I appreciate all this.” I swallowed. “More than you know.”

We gazed into each other’s eyes, and the anxiety between us melted away. He smiled, not as brightly as before, but warmly. I was comforted, and I realized how lucky I was that someone had taken it upon themselves to help me when I had no place to go, even if he was a bit prickly.

And you don’t even deserve it, do you?

I thought about my house and all of the memories there, of my art. And of Cale. Suddenly, I wasn’t hungry anymore.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s nothing,” I muttered.

“You can tell me, you know,” he said. “It’s not like I’m weak or useless or something. I could help you. I *can*.”

“I don’t fucking want to, okay?”

I didn’t mean for it to sound so harsh, and I immediately wished I could

take it back.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean-”

“I understand,” he said. And he really did. I could see it in his eyes. The man confused the hell out of me; one moment it seemed like he was mad at me, and the next he was so understanding that I wondered why I had ever felt uncomfortable. Or maybe it was me, and I was just being too sensitive. Maybe people who’d been traumatically displaced all acted like this.

I didn’t know.

He walked around the table and took my hand. He pulled me to my feet, and the feel of his enormous hands in mine was both comforting and a little arousing.

“C’m on,” he said.

I followed him down a hallway and into a bedroom. It was very obviously a guest room; the bedding looked as though it had never been slept on, and most of the surfaces were dusty. It was welcoming, though, and I realized how much I wanted to sleep. I had been lying in the hospital for two days, but I was unbelievably tired.

He pulled sweatpants and a t-shirt out of a drawer and handed them to me. “The bathroom is right across the hall,” he said. “You’re welcome to anything in the house you need. But you should get some rest now.”

“Yeah,” I said. I yawned. He smiled at me and squeezed my shoulder and walked out the door, closing it softly behind him. I put on the pants, but didn’t bother with the shirt, and climbed into the bed.

I WOKE up gasping and clawing at my throat, my vision blurred. I writhed on the bed for a few minutes, convinced I was dying. Eventually, my breathing slowed, and I closed my eyes and laid still, my body twisted up in the sweaty bed sheets.

I’d dreamed of Cale, and the day of the fire. We were on the patio at his house, a few hills over from mine, and we were fighting about another one of his affairs. I was chasing him around like a dog, the way I always did, begging him to stay with me, to work things out. He was nonchalant, flighty, and didn’t

take me seriously, waving me off and telling me it was just a fling, and not to worry about it.

Waving things off was a specialty of Cale's, I'd come to learn; nothing ever seemed to worry him. When I'd first met him at the beginning of the summer I thought it was attractive. He was always so calm and self-assured and together that I thought he'd be good for me, as neurotic as I was. I only discovered later that he wasn't calm or self-assured or together or any other such euphemism. He just flat out didn't give a damn. About anything.

Like leaving silverware in the microwave.

It was early in the morning, the day of the fire, and we were sitting outside. I'd already decided to forgive him – again – when the microwave exploded and flew into the brush beside the patio. Cale shouted and I shouted and then I went to get the water hose but it wouldn't come on because he never used it. And then he yelled at me to hurry because the fire was on the fence now and next door and I told him I couldn't because the fucking hose was dead and then we just gave up and ran out front and called the fire department, but by then the fire was in the hills behind the house and spreading fast. It really is something to watch, a canyon fire; even though you know there'll be nothing left by the time it's out, the speed and agility and grace with which it spreads is nothing short of mesmerizing.

I could feel the panic rising in me as I lay there, and I pushed Cale and his hand-waving and his yard from my mind and thought of Michael's hands on my arms and my shoulders. I knew he couldn't fix things, couldn't fix how I felt, but I wished he was with me.

And then he walked in, throwing the bed into shadow as the door blocked the night light in the corner. His hair was a shaggy mess and he wore nothing but a pair of gray briefs. They made his body seem even more oversized. When he closed the door, the light at his back made him look taller, and a little sinister.

"I heard you," he said. "You were yelling."

"I'm sorry." I sat up. "I didn't mean to wake you. I was just dreaming."

He leaned against the wall beside the bed. His arms were crossed over his chest, and he wore that forced-neutral expression from earlier.

“You were screaming for help.” He pursed his lips. “You said my name. You talked about your house.”

“Oh...I...” I didn’t know what to say. “I...I was dreaming.”

He nodded, and he made a sound in the back of his throat, like a scoff. I told myself I was just being sensitive again, but the sound pissed me off. It made me think of Cale when he was tired of listening to me.

“Is something wrong?” There was a hard edge to my tone, and part of me scolded myself for being rude. “Have I done something to upset you?”

“We did, you know,” he said. “I did. I hope you get that.”

“What?”

“I saved you,” he continued. He was breathing through his nose like a bull. “And I tried to save your house. I *saved* people. Lots of people.”

“I never said-”

“It was a big fire, okay? Bigger than the ones back home, a lot bigger. But I still saved people. I did. So...so you just remember that the next time you go to sleep, okay? I *did* help you. I *tried* to save the houses, but I couldn’t. So...so just think of that.”

“What the fuck are you even saying?” I wasn’t sure what had precipitated this, and for some reason my confusion pissed me off even more. And it felt good to be angry, after so long being numb. “What the hell is your problem?”

He made that scoffing noise again. “You’re just like them,” he said. “They think I failed, too.”

“Who?”

““Don’t come back for at least a week, Mike.”” He spoke in an exaggerated baby voice, mocking someone. ““It’s for your own good, Mike.’ ‘We’re worried about you, Mike, you seem upset.””

He wasn’t even speaking to me anymore, it seemed; it was like I was just a stand in for whoever he was pissed at. This made me even angrier, because I had apparently gotten upset for nothing.

“I helped, too,” he said. His brow furrow would have make King Leonidas proud. “I saved people.”

“I’m going to sleep,” I said coldly. “I’ll leave in the morning, since apparently you just brought me here to bitch at me.” I lay back down and

turned away from him. “Don’t forget to close the fucking door when you leave.”

I bounced on the bed when he flopped onto it. He took my shoulder in a giant hand and flipped me toward him. I rolled away again and he flipped me back, harder.

“What the fuck do you-”

His mouth covered mine, his tongue forcing its way inside. He rolled on top of me and parted my legs, pinning my torso to the bed. I struggled against him, turning my head sideways. His facial hair scraped against my neck as he licked and bit me there. One of his hands was on my hip, squeezing.

“What are you doing?” I writhed and tried to slide from underneath him, even as my cock stirred between my legs. The hair on his chest scraped my nipples, and I fought to keep my head clear enough to speak.

“We can’t just-”

A hand slid between us and swallowed my cock whole. I had a moment to be pissed that my cock was small enough to be covered by his hand, and then I didn’t even bother struggling anymore and just groaned as he stroked me.

He wasn’t subtle, that was for sure. I had never felt my cock enveloped completely unless I was topping, but his hand was so damn big that it felt like I was fucking someone. He had pulled me out of my sweats and was rubbing and twisting and palming my cock while he sweated on me and attacked my throat with his mouth. I ran my hands through his hair and tugged at it, pressing his head into my neck.

“You smell like fire,” I said.

He left my neck and crushed his mouth to mine again, his tongue crashing inside and pinning mine to my jaw. His eyes were closed and he was somehow managing to growl and moan at the same time.

“I helped,” he said. His breathing was ragged and his cock strained against my thigh. His eyes were closed and his face was screwed into a frown. “I saved them. I did.”

I didn’t know who they were, but I was past caring. I was fully erect and leaking, and his hand had slowed in stroking me. I did my best to hump against him with his weight pressing down on me. One of my hands left his

hair and moved down his back and into his briefs. His ass was firm and covered in hair, like the rest of him, and I squeezed it, parting my legs wider.

“I know,” I said. “You did it-”

He went back to biting and sucking on my neck and his hand starting moving again. I sighed, relieved, while the hair on his head and his ass tickled the palms of my hands.

His weight was gone and his hand stopped stroking me. I opened my eyes, confused and horny and pissed that he’d stopped. He grabbed at the waistband of my sweats and yanked them down, his nails scraping the skin of my hips and thighs. Then he was on me again and our cocks were touching and he was stroking them both at the same time. The hot, smooth skin of his cock pressed and throbbed against mine and he spread our pre cum together over the heads of our cocks.

“Ah...” My orgasm was stirring in me, and I didn’t want it to be over so quickly. “Michael...”

He left me again, my cock suspended in the air. The temperature of the room seemed cool compared to the heat of his body, and gooseflesh rose on my thighs and arms. I didn’t have long to feel cold, though; he took me by the shoulder and flipped me onto my stomach. I moaned as the sheet touched my cock.

He parted my legs again and climbed between them and I bent my knees to spread wider for him. My ass was in the air and his cock was nudging at me, threatening to push in. I hugged a pillow to my face and arched my back, spreading myself as wide as I could.

He grunted and put a hand on my tailbone, the other gripping one of my thighs.

“You...” He took an enormous breath. “You want...”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, do it, yes...”

His hand disappeared from my thigh and then he was shoving into me. I cried out and let myself go lax, loosening my grip on the pillow and pressing my face into the sheet. I breathed slowly as he entered me. There was a tight burn and a painful stretch but I didn’t care; I needed him to fill me, to own me, to make me alive again.

“You...you listen...”

“Yes...”

He was buried in me. He hadn't bothered to take the briefs off, and he had only pulled them to the side; I could feel the cotton against my ass.

“I did help...”

My cock had softened when he first entered me, but now I was hard and leaking into the sheet.

“Yes...”

“I saved them...”

He pulled back and slammed into me. It hurt, more than I thought it would, but there was pleasure, too. He did it again, and my cock jumped when he was buried in me.

“You saved them...”

He was fucking me hard, my ass slapping the front of his thighs, and I thought of how I must look to him, spread wide and begging and fucking him back. The thought made me fuck harder.

He grunted and took my waist in his hands while he rammed me, his hands slipping in my sweat. “I am not weak...”

“No, no, you're not...”

“No...”

“Mmm...”

He bent over me and pressed his chest to my back, reaching around and grasping my cock roughly.

“Y-You want it, you really, really want it-”

“Yes-”

My insides were clenching around him when he tried to pull out and I was close to losing it.

“Do it faster,” I mumbled. “W-With your hands, do it faster...”

He did.

“You want it more?”

He was yanking on my cock with his whole hand while his own was buried in me. I shoved my ass back against him and gripped the sheets in my hands.

“Yeah yeah I do I want it a lot more...”

I only lasted through another three strokes.

The smell of him and fire and smoke was all around me and inside me. He was hot and sweaty and his chest was pressed to my back and the hair on it scraped my skin and drove me higher. My cock was enveloped in the simultaneously rough and smooth surface of his hand and he fucked me in time with his strokes.

It started deep inside me, somewhere behind and below my navel, a light fluttering that intensified and then spread through my groin. I closed my eyes and moaned long and low as it built, slow at first, then faster until it burst from cock.

All the muscles I had tensed up and froze as my cum spilled into his hand and the bed beneath me. I cried out and kept fucking, desperate for more, for longer, for harder. He gave it to me, muttering and moaning words I couldn't understand.

I was only just coming back to myself when I felt him spill inside me, hot and fast. His cry was louder than mine, much louder, and he slapped my thigh and pulled my hair while he came. He was inside me all the way to the base of his cock, and he rubbed my back and ass, moaning and talking until he was spent.

He collapsed onto the bed beside me, eyes still closed. We lay there in the muted glow of the night light, our legs crossed and his hand on my forearm, like it had been in the hospital.

“I...I'm glad,” he whispered. He moved close to me, our faces inches apart. The fitted sheet had come loose, and our heads lay on the bare mattress.

“Hmmm?” I was content, more so than I had been in years. His giant body pulled down his half of the mattress, and it caused me to slide toward him. *I could get used to sliding toward someone at night*, I thought.

“I'm glad you're here.”

I closed the last of the gap between us and pressed my chest to his. The smell of smoke had lessened, somehow. “I'm glad I'm here, too.” I passed my lips over his nipple. “I'm glad you came back for me.”

“I know I seem...difficult right now, but I swear, it's just the fire. So, do

you...do you think you'll stay?" His hand made its way up my back and into my hair. "Until tomorrow, I mean?" he added.

I leaned back until I could see his face. He looked down at me, and the uncertainty in his eyes flickered in the low light.

"Yeah," I said. "I...I can't promise I won't be...difficult. But I can stay until tomorrow." I kissed him briefly on the lips. "And maybe the next day, too."

THE END

Author bio: I started writing in 2009 on a whim – I heard about a contest on an erotic writing website and thought, what the hell? It was the beginning of a rewarding and deeply satisfying period in my life; I began writing regularly for the site, and the feedback and encouragement I received there gave me the courage to strike out on my own and try to make a real go of this.

Other books by Cody Richardson:

A Bit of Sunday Gardening

And Now I Know

In Purple Candlelight

The Lynch Pin

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OF ETERNITY AND TREMBLING

by Thursday Euclid

Photo Inspiration



Story Prompt

“When I found the water stained photo in the ashes of the old church, a shiver ran through me. It was him, that strong, quiet guy who had saved me from the muggers last night. But how could it be? The photo was dated 1954. If it was him, then he hadn’t aged a day. Somehow, though, I just knew...just like I knew I had to find him again before it was too late.”

~ Zee

General Information

genre: urban fantasy; paranormal

tags: religion; angels; bonded; first time; redemption

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OF ETERNITY AND TREMBLING

by Thursday Euclid

THE SHADOWS closed in around me as I took the shortcut through the alley between a leather bar and the beignet shop. Even a couple of blocks from the club I'd left, my blood still beat with the rhythm of the disco hits the drag queens had been lip-synching all night. My face burned with pleasure at the memory of the lipsticked air-kisses I'd received as I left, just after midnight.

It embarrassed me that small signs of acceptance meant so much to me, but I'd learned back home in Warren County, Mississippi that if one was gay, one couldn't expect even the basic social conventions to apply. It wasn't that everyone was awful. It was more that a few people were awful and most others indifferent enough not to interfere with those screaming that I'd burn in Hell. As soon as I got my scholarship to Tulane, I left and didn't look back.

New Orleans wasn't perfect, but now that I was old enough to drink, I'd gained access to the refuge of gay bars and people who judged me by criteria that gave me at least some chance of success. Judgment was passed no matter where I went, but at least a cute butt counted for something with the men who smiled at me from across the dance floor. Still, I always went home alone. Across the dance floor was close enough for me.

As I turned into another alleyway, I saw a blur of motion. The darkness poured and smeared like swift-moving ink over black paper. Then I felt hands on me, gloved fingers closing over my mouth before I could even shout.

Malice emanated from my attacker, a gut-churning disdain for my life that froze me on the spot. In the shadows, he seemed supernatural. It occurred to me with stunning clarity that I was going to die.

"Just take the money," I tried to say, but the hand over my mouth muffled my voice, stripping me of what little power I had. I'd always talked my way into and out of trouble. Without my words, I was defeated.

"Finish this." The voice was cold and distant. I turned my head to seek its source and saw nothing but more shadow. My attacker replied with a grunt, and then punched me in the kidney. My legs buckled as pain flashed bright

behind my eyelids and lanced along my spine like lightning.

I wailed against the musty cotton gag of his hand. I couldn't help it. I wanted to go out fighting, but I couldn't make sense of how. My body belonged to the fear.

My eardrums ached with the sound of sudden thunder, and then I fell. My knees bruised as they hit pavement, the shock of impact ringing in my skull like a hollow-toned bell. I heard nothing else. I was down in a well, alone, blind in the shadows.

Terror roiled in my belly, the instinctual panic of a small animal in a trap. "Please, please," I prayed, knowing that if I died now, I'd die without dignity. I'd die a rabbit, a chattering, useless sack of meat.

"Shh." The soundless word entered my mind like an intravenous sedative. My skin felt warm. My thoughts skittered away.

Arms went around me, lifting me without apparent effort. But I was not a rabbit. I was a twenty-one year old man, one hundred sixty pounds at my last physical. Tall, wiry. This man who'd lifted me carried me as though I was no more than the glittery detritus on the floor of the drag show's dressing rooms.

"Please," I begged, praying again, praying because Mama raised me to pray. God hated me, I knew it, but I wasn't dead yet. Maybe He'd listen if I prayed hard enough.

"Prayers haven't worked in this city since the Ursulines came." It was the silent voice again, penetrating my mind, rich like incense and resonant like footfalls in an empty cathedral. I couldn't place the exotic accent, but English was not his native tongue. "Remember it was I who saved you, not your prayers."

I couldn't formulate the questions I needed to ask, couldn't form the words. Unable to fight any longer, I lost consciousness. I was home when I woke. It was almost dawn.

My dreams swam back to me through the murk of just-waking. There had been peace for once, sweetness, but something more, something awful and awe-inspiring. I waded through the flotsam of conscious thoughts that tried to assert order and logic over my memories. Slowly, I lost my grip on the dreams. Their fabric unraveled and floated away.

One word remained with me: Ursulines.

My laptop sat open on my dorm room desk, hibernating like my roommate at this hour. I tapped the touchpad and pulled up Google. I typed “Ursulines + ‘New Orleans’” and the page flooded with historical information that I’d not lived in the city long enough to have context for. There was a coffee dispenser in the common room, and I made it there and back on that Saturday morning without seeing another soul.

Swilling thick, burnt-tasting vending machine cappuccino, I browsed the internet looking for some clue to my dreaming, some trigger to bring back what seemed to me, as I sat in the growing light through my barred window, increasingly urgent. Something inside me still slumbered, and I needed to find the alarm it took to wake it.

As I sipped my coffee and read site blurbs and news item synopses, I realized why Ursulines should sound familiar. There was an avenue in the French Quarter, not far from where I was attacked, named for the Ursuline order of Catholic nuns.

A chill went through me as I remembered his words: “Prayers haven’t worked in this city since the Ursulines came.” But the monstrous scholarly database system I accessed through the university confirmed that the Ursuline nuns had been in New Orleans since the 1720s. It was Ursulines who provided medical care for the early settlers of the fledgling city. They were regarded as heroines whose lives of self-sacrifice were nothing short of holy.

No prayers answered in almost three centuries. What a strange thing it had been to say, and with such certainty. It had seemed ordinary in that illusory world of shadows and weightless, childish relief, but now I wondered.

The sky brightened moment by moment beyond the cheap miniblinds. Soon Prime bells would ring to call the worshipful and penitent to morning prayer. I was neither, and the stillness before the tintinnabulation seemed the best time to escape. Ursulines Avenue called to me. The voice in my head, the effortless strength, mysteriously waking in my own bed compelled me.

I dressed in a white polo and khaki cargo shorts in deference to the humid swelter that increased by each degree the sun rose above the horizon. I noticed as I dressed that I bore no bruises from my beating. When I knelt to tie the

laces of my running shoes, I felt no pain in my kidneys. My knees bore no scrapes. I felt mystified and energized, brimming with curiosity.

Though I was confused, a perverse instinct drove me: *Knowing* dictated my actions. I *knew*, and for the first time since I was thirteen and first jerked off over another boy, I understood what it was to have faith. The heady wonder of it propelled me from the quiet dormitory near Audubon Park and across Freret, through Broadmoor, Central City, the Central Business District. Each neighborhood stirred a vague sense of *déjà vu*.

Had my rescuer carried me home this way? Had he driven me? Put me in a cab? It was more than five miles, a long way to go on foot carrying a grown man. I jogged it, as I jogged most places in the city. Disowned by my family and living on a tiny scholarship stipend, I couldn't afford any mode of transport but my own feet.

I arrived in the French Quarter sweaty, thirsty, a little winded. As always, it was magical, a repository of secrets even in its state of perpetual decay and reconstruction. Though Katrina had raised her fist to destroy it, the people here refused to yield. Every freshly painted residence, every newly planted tree seemed to me a middle finger raised to God. *You will not erase us so easily from the earth*, they seemed to say. *You may own the heavens, but upon this land, we lay our claim*.

Oh, I liked it here.

My mother would weep to know I thought such things, if she still thought of me at all.

Unlike so many here, I was not raised Catholic. My people, the Coopers of Mississippi, were Pentecostal snake handlers until two generations ago, holding on well after the practice fell from favor. It wasn't until police drove up from Vicksburg to investigate after a snakebite victim died in the hospital there that they finally gave it up.

That I preferred to handle a different kind of snake was a stoning offense. I didn't doubt that if my great grandparents still lived, they *would* stone me. I'd heard it for years now: *Abomination!*

My roommate at Tulane knew. He'd said only, "Don't bring any strange men back here, and we'll get on fine, Remy."

I'd said, "You don't bring any strange women back here, and we'll get on fine, Todd."

We didn't speak much, but I was certain if he'd seen my rescuer bring me home, he'd have said something. He wasn't altruistic enough to keep it to himself. I once left the cap off a pen and woke in the morning to see a passive aggressive note about it. A strange man putting me to bed would have merited at least a half page on my inconsiderate behavior.

I pondered these things as I wandered Ursulines Avenue. Historic buildings still crowded the pavement, nestled amid riotous greenery, and hid from the sidewalk behind wrought iron fences. It seemed in the early light that they moved and I stood still.

After a while, I realized I was no longer on the avenue but rather traversing a series of side alleys around a neglected building complex. The morning bells sounded from very near. I scanned the area trying to locate which church had the gall to bombard the air and demand my presence at its altar.

My shin banged against a crumbled stone wall, and I stumbled. My forearms broke my fall, but the air was knocked from me. In the mossy shade, I rolled onto my back and stared at the blue sky, just visible beyond the leafy canopy overhead.

"Have you come back to me?" The familiar voice I could hear only in my thoughts startled me to my feet. It had not sounded this way last night: desperate, lonely, trapped. I shivered despite the heat.

"Hello?" I called into the stillness. "Hello? Sir?"

There was no answer, but the Knowing was back. It moved me toward a swampy grove I'd only half-glimpsed from the pavement. Gnarled roots caught at my feet first, then the wet, sucking ground. It wasn't mud but that spongy turf one found at the lowest spots in this swampy city. As I stepped down, my foot sank into nothingness.

I scrambled, gripping for handholds as the ground gave way.

I fell twenty feet and landed with a thud that sent up a cloud of dust. I lay in mud made of my own sweat mingled with a thick layer of soot.

This is wrong, I thought. Derelict basements in New Orleans flooded

without fresh waterproofing and pumps or whatnot to keep them dry. This place was dry as old bones except for my damp skin.

After ten minutes or an hour, I rose. With only the faintest glimpse of sunlight through the hole made by my arrival, I couldn't tell how much time had elapsed. Golden motes danced in the rays as if rejoicing at the touch of the outside world. I'd rejoice myself when I got out of here. At the moment, my ankle hurt too much for dancing. I must have sprained it when I fell.

This place must still be used, I told myself as I took in the stone bench--No. Pews. I was in an old chapel.

At the farthest reach of the light, there were stone pews turned on their side as though they had been thrown there during the last flood. Someone had surely righted those closest to the center. The ash-covered floor showed time-softened tracks suggesting as much.

As for the ceiling, there was nothing left of the roof but charred stumps of timber. Over the years the roots of the trees and grasses had formed a thick mat overhead, twining together as they layered atop the stone buttresses at the sides of this...what? Cathedral? It seemed too intricate to be just a prayer hall.

With a sigh of relief, I spied a hurricane lamp with a small tin beside it on a nearby pew. Inside the tin was a Zippo lighter, modern enough to fuel my hopes for an easy way out. I removed the lamp's chimney and adjusted the wick, then held my breath as I lit it. It caught fire at once, and I put the Zippo into my pocket and the chimney back in place.

The chapel felt smaller now that I could see into the shadows. It had not extended much beyond them, and there was a warped ironbound wooden door set in a frame at my right just beside a large stone sculpture of an angel. A tarnished plaque on the sculpture's plinth read:

Sariel Malachim

Our Holy Protector

The angel's face had been worn away by the years, and perhaps it had been crudely carved to begin with. Its wings stretched up and up, eroded like its face, until they met the buttresses at the apex of the apse and formed the foundation holding up the ground overhead. It seemed impossible that it hadn't collapsed.

I wondered which angel Sariel was. I knew the main angels, the ones the Bible had promised the Mississippi Coopers they could command as Sons of God. Angels were little more than non-corporeal animals to them, winged messengers, servants of their Father, while they were mortal Children awaiting a rebirth into Glory.

I knew seraphim, cherubim, the Holy Archangel Michael. I knew of Lucifer the fallen and the legions of the proud who were cast from Heaven. And I knew that, through Christ's name, we supposedly were granted power to bid angels guard us, demons flee us, and God save us.

I'd grown up in backwoods Protestant congregations taught by people who said Catholicism was a cult, as if their own beliefs were less radical or insular. Catholic pomp still seemed exotic to me. For my family, pomp had been the tent revival when an evangelist came through town.

I approached the altar with a certain uneasiness to shine my light on its weathered surface.

Before Sariel's plinth stood a shrine. A lockbox sat on the ground beneath it, but I didn't touch it. Whether or not I'd go to hell for being gay, I wasn't adding robbing a church to my sins.

Instead I touched the melted pools of wax affixing the myriad candle stubs to the wood beneath, feeling a thrill of power as I imagined what rituals were performed here. It seemed to me that I had stumbled onto the core of New Orleans's mysteries, that I was in the very heart of her pact with the wind and waves, whatever higher power allowed her to stand in defiance of logic and the delta's whims.

As I marveled at each item, I felt again the Knowing. I crouched and looked at the ashes coating the floor, then instinctually reached into them. My fingertips skated over something smooth, and I brushed away the soot like an archaeologist unearthing a fossil.

A water-stained portrait revealed itself. My skin broke out in gooseflesh. I knew this man.

It was my savior.

With a careful touch, I lifted the photograph closer to the lamp to study it. I turned the photograph over to see a date scrawled on the back: 1954. My

savior hadn't seemed more than thirty, but I knew this was him nonetheless. In this place, anything seemed possible.

And my savior had seemed so sad. I had to find him. It didn't need to make sense. I had faith.

I slipped the photograph into a pocket and made for the old, iron-bound door. Its swollen, misshapen planking would not budge from the tightly fitted stone frame. I had the mad thought that I ought to set the planks on fire, and then realized it would do me no good if I tried; the wood was swollen with moisture and would no more light up than the green flesh from a sapling.

On impulse I uttered a forbidden prayer, as Pentecostals did not pray to saints or angels, but only to the Lord Their God, "Sariel, help me."

A screech of iron on stone split the air. The door's wooden planking disintegrated before my eyes. A twisted mass of cold iron hung uselessly from old bolts in the stone. The doorway stood open, awaiting my escape.

I felt faint.

I wanted to be brave, to hold my head high, to find witty things at the tip of my tongue. Instead, I struggled not to piss myself.

"Sariel?" As I said the name, I realized that in my prayer I had conflated the angel with the man who rescued me the night before. At first, I tried to argue that thought, to dispel the Knowing with logic.

Then the silent voice entered my mind again, and no amount of logic could dispel it. "Burn the image. Burn it like once I burned the painted icons and the spell-carved roof and the blood-soaked paneling and the priest-blessed floor. Burn it with cleansing fire in the light of the sun, then return to me."

As I started toward the stone stairwell, I realized my ankle no longer hurt. I thanked Sariel with wordless gratitude projected like a prayer and ascended the steps to find myself again beside the grove. The stairwell rose to ground level and then emerged as broken chunks of rock like the one I'd stumbled over before.

The sun overhead was still well to the east, and as I blew out the hurricane lamp and set it at my feet, I heard church bells sounding Terce, the nine a.m. call to mid-morning prayers. I straightened and withdrew the photograph and the Zippo from my pocket, then held them up like offerings to the sky.

I set the old photograph aflame. It burned slowly, malevolently, with an eerie violet fire. I dropped it, my fingers shaking, and it went out at once.

“Pay the blood price.” Sariel’s words insinuated into my thoughts. “Sacrifice.”

Fear radiated from deep in my gut outward through my limbs. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t obey the voice.

Again it intruded on my consciousness, seeming stronger now. It caressed my mind like an irresistible whisper, seductive and husky. “I am the Archangel Sariel, of Eternity and Trembling. Since the Ursulines pinned me to earth in this place, I have waited for you. Free me, and I will walk this earth as your guardian. Heaven is no longer my home.”

Entranced, I knelt like a suppliant and lifted the charred photo. Again I lit it aflame. With detachment I watched it burn down to nothing, blistering my fingertips and leaving them glossy red and throbbing. The pain was nothing to me. There was no fear. A blister burst, dripping plasma.

The sunshine disappeared. I stared around me at darkness. Had I fallen through the earth once more? Alistair in Wonderland.

Then I heard the voice, and it was not in my mind, but in my ear with warm, sweet breath that stroked against my cheek. “Thank you, Remy Cooper.”

“You’re welcome,” I said automatically, polite because Mama taught me to be a good Southern boy. I strained my eyes in the darkness to see the face that must be close to my own. I saw nothing.

“You would bid me to be male, would you not?” A hand stroked my sweat-matted hair back from my face.

“Aren’t you a man?” I remembered the statue, the paintings in art books and hanging in churches. Then I remembered my Sunday School lessons and said, “No, angels are beings of spirit.”

“I’m flesh now.”

The way Sariel said it sent a rush of blood to my cock. It stirred, defiant and so wrong. Sariel laughed softly and the hand on my hair trailed down my chest, down until it cupped my growing erection through thin cotton. The hand flowed like water, growing, changing. I could feel it but not see it.

Then, breathing against my lips, Sariel said, voice deeper than before, “It is easier, on earth, to be a man. I do not blame my Ursulines for summoning me like a servant, for binding me like a slave. What choice had the Sisters when only men had voices? But they do not need me now, and I will not wait for them to see it. Let them fend for themselves. I am lonely.”

My senses failed me. I was lost in the darkness that would yield nothing to my straining pupils. It seemed I could smell cinnamon on the air, and fire, like Christmastime in a movie. I heard a faint rustling, like feathers, and Sariel’s soft breathing.

Then that voice, velvet now, dark chocolate, the perfect man. “You will show me this world. You will be my guide as once I guided mortals.”

I sighed and closed my eyes, admitting defeat. Defeat by what, by whom? The darkness? My own stupid heart that already felt like it would break for this creature? I’d thrown away all that Divine bullshit when I left home, but now I felt that love flood through me, the religious ecstasy that had made the toughest men I knew as a child fall to their knees crying.

But no angel would love me. No angel would choose me. This was some demon. This was some trick.

As if reading my thoughts--and mustn’t he, to know my name?--Sariel said, “You are outcast. I see the mark upon your soul, the words spoken over you. There is a power in the tongue, and no man can tame it. The Scripture so decrees. Those words spoken over you are branded into your soul for all beings of spirit to read.”

Sariel’s fingers slid up from my crotch and under my shirt, chilly like marble now, refreshing. “I will give you new words, Remy Cooper. I will speak them over you. Eternity is my domain. The trembling of mortals, of the wind and sea and land, it is all my domain. I will walk this world with you, and I will speak power over you, peace unto you.”

I felt it then, the power and peace. They were not only words but etched into the fabric of me. I felt it, and I saw the words like glow in the dark paint, phosphorescent sigils in some arcane language that appeared over my bared stomach. By their light, I saw Sariel’s face at last.

Oh, such a face.

My muscles tensed with unbidden desire, and I floated. I was suspended horizontally in space, though before I would have sworn I was upright. Disoriented, I reached for Sariel to keep my balance. My fingers closed over enormous feathers so soft they seemed like down. At my touch, Sariel let out a startled moan.

Encouraged, I stroked along the feathers and watched what I could see of his face. That sensual mouth gasped in unaccustomed bliss. The proud chin with its faint cleft lifted in the same exultation that I felt. Then Sariel looked into my eyes for the first time. His glowed, as silvery and dangerous as uranium.

If God created man in his own image, in whose image had He created Sariel? Sariel seemed more godlike than any man I'd ever seen.

"You must take me from here. Please." Sariel sounded sad and sweet. His fingers moved over my body, seeming to mend and change me, molding my being with his hands.

"Take you away? I don't even know where we are." The faint illumination of Sariel's sigils didn't provide enough light to get my bearings.

"We are in the shadow of the Shekinah. Think of the moon, Remy Cooper. God is as the sun, and where He smiles, there is light. We stand now on its opposite hemisphere, in the darkness beyond God's eye, on the dark side of the moon. He is all-powerful, and He could look here, but He will not. The Shekinah is His earthly presence, His spirit here on earth, a sense of home for His children, the Mother aspect, for Mary was only human, though exalted above all women."

Though Sariel spoke with the same patient, confident air as the best teachers, what he said was so beyond my ken that I could only blink uncomprehendingly. It sounded terrible, heretical. Then his hands cradled my skull. He stared into my eyes as if imparting knowledge by osmosis.

His voice grew hoarse, urgent. "The Ursulines bound me here. It is a pocket dimension, a purgatory for the host of Heaven. It is Void."

"Are angels afraid of the dark too?" I meant it light-heartedly, but Sariel pressed against me with a shudder. His body was warm and solid huddled against mine. I felt the power flow into me from the sigils, as if activated by

his touch.

“There is nothing worse than outer darkness, to be cast from the sight of God.” Sariel’s long hair tumbled down his bare shoulders, pale and creamy as fresh milk. His wings, regal and improbably strong, enfolded me. I could not tell from his expression whether it was to protect me from the darkness or show me what it was to be hidden from God’s sight.

“How do we leave? How do you return to...Shekinah or whatever it is?” I felt again the rush of unquestioning love, the need to protect my protector. I thought it would be worth dying, if I could save him.

Gazing at me, Sariel’s eyes narrowed. His full lower lip jutted in a distinctly human way, stubborn, and then he seemed to light up from within. His hands kneaded my muscles, releasing knots and tension until I felt weak with relaxation. I breathed deeply and entrusted myself to the cradle of his wings.

“I can never go back, but if I lose my Grace, I will be mortal as you are mortal.” Sariel studied my face as he spoke. “In the first age of the world, angels lay with the daughters of men, and I watched my brothers fall. I held back my fleshly form and gave them secrets instead, knowledge of the universe in exchange for their company, but I will be yours, Remy Cooper, if you save me.”

Sariel’s fingers were cool and certain as they moved down my belly. I held my breath, hollowing my stomach as if I could will those fingers lower faster. I wanted to promise him anything, everything, in return, but I’d learned already how foolish that was.

Before that moment, I had never been comfortable with sex. I’d lost my virginity at sixteen in the bed of my friend’s pickup truck. He’d closed his eyes tightly not to look at what he was doing, not to admit to himself he wanted me too. Afterward he’d cried that he was going to Hell. I told him to shut up and go already, pulled on my jeans, and hobbled home. I’d never expected much from anyone since then. I didn’t go to clubs to pick up men; I just hung out backstage with the queens. They took care of me.

This was something else, though. Whom could I trust if not an angel who’d saved me once already? The Knowing filled my mind and drove out all

doubts. I would be Sariel's, and then he would be mine.

I held still, enveloped in Sariel's wings, safe and warm as his deft fingers pulled my polo over my head and pushed my cargo shorts down my legs. I kicked off my running shoes and shook my feet 'til the shorts fell too. I didn't hear them hit the ground. I wasn't sure if there *was* ground. It should have been terrifying, but Sariel's breath was on my neck, his lips on my shoulder, speaking wordlessly. Fear had no place there.

I reached between us, trying to find his cock, wanting to know if he was hard yet, if he wanted me at all or just to get out of this place. It seemed absurd to hope, but then he shifted, and my fingers curled around his shaft. He felt enormous against my palm, bigger than anyone I'd ever been with, bigger than the dildo I kept hidden from Todd in a shoebox under my bed. I couldn't help groaning with excitement that a goddamned angel was that hard for me.

How many thousands of years had Sariel been celibate? Who would ever resist this creature if he deigned to be interested? But he wanted me. He had chosen me, saved me, called me here.

Our eyes met, and a frisson of need shot through me like nothing I'd ever felt. My lips ached, my arms, my ass, as if I would die if I couldn't kiss him, hold him, be filled with him. His mouth pressed to mine innocently, like I might have kissed my mother at bedtime long ago, when she still let me do such things. Then he seemed to get the hang of it and teased my lips with the tip of his tongue. It was obvious he'd never done this, but he was going to do this now, with me of all people.

The weight of what I was going to do descended. I would take this immortal creature's Grace. He would fall from heaven and into my arms, and he would belong to me like no one and nothing else ever had.

"Why?" I blurted, regretting it even as I plunged onward. "There are others. Why me?"

Sariel's hips shifted closer until his cock brushed against mine. We gasped in tandem, united by pleasure. Then he kissed me again and said against my lips, "They almost broke you, my beautiful man, because they couldn't see what you did: Love is always right. You wanted to live by the law of Love. You tried."

I felt vindicated. Sariel looked into my heart and wanted what he saw. I'd tried so hard for so long, pushed through the rejection, the hurt, the condemnation, and it *mattered* that I had survived. It mattered to Sariel. He wanted me.

Tears stung my eyes as I kissed him and wrapped my arms tight around his waist. Feathers brushed against my skin all over, sending tiny, tickling currents of air rushing against my nerves until every hair stood on end. He frothed against me with the same artlessness with which he kissed, ageless and sincere, as hungry in his way to know me as I was to know him.

He spoke a word in his arcane language and another sigil floated against my skin, just above my heart. Its light burned brighter than that of the others, dazzling my eyes until I had to squint through my lashes. Sariel traced it with his fingertip, smiling in a way more dazzling than light. He was so beautiful that it hurt to look at him.

I loved him, help me. I loved him so much that without thinking I wrapped my arms around his neck, my legs around his waist, fighting to be closer. We seemed to drift through nothing, his wings buoying us, his might inexhaustible. The light flared around us until I had to close my eyes. I knew then that the third sigil was Love.

Sariel kissed me until my lips bruised and chafed. His fingertips brushed against my forehead, leaving something slick and wet there as he marked symbols on my skin. Its spicy fragrance was ancient, numinous, intoxicating.

“Aleph-Tav. The first, the last, the joining. So are you anointed, Remy Cooper, human that I will love.” Sariel stared into my eyes. His were pale and gleaming, beatific but fierce as no human's could ever be. My heart flipped over. No words were enough, so I begged with my body, arching and rubbing against him, clinging with arms and legs and kissing him 'til I was breathless.

His fingertips trailed down my spine, seeming to count the vertebrae. They were slick still, and I realized it was the precious oil of anointing that coated his fingers and dripped down my skin. I'd read about it in the Bible, heard it talked about by Christian ministers who tried to appropriate the Hebrew mysticism to bolster their credibility as scholarly men.

Now Sariel circled my opening, teasing my hole as if this was why such

oil had been created. He breathed faster just as I did, as excited as I was. It amplified my own excitement until I felt drunk. I rubbed my cock against him, reveling in the ridges and dips of his muscular abdomen, in the faint friction of the hairs trailing downward from his navel.

An angel with a navel, I thought. It seemed so funny I wanted to laugh, but my laughter turned to a moan as he breached me with two fingertips at once. He worked me relentlessly and I opened for him, pushing into the pressure of his touch as my cock throbbed with arousal.

Sariel slicked my entrance with more oil, and its spices burned as if I'd caught fire, but it was no different than when I'd burned the photograph. I would pay the price. Sacrifice. I surrendered to the pain until it blossomed through me and overtook every aspect of my being. I was nothing but the heat, God's holy fire. It would erase every other man's touch from my body until I was pure and worthy of my angel.

The third sigil burned red against the blackness inside my eyelids. It radiated power, pulsing with the ebb and flow of Sariel's fingers inside me. Then his fingers left me empty, grasping at nothing as air currents cooled the tingling oil around my opening. I whimpered low in my throat, ashamed at first to sound so needy, so helpless, but he kissed me then, his arms hugging me close, holding me.

I clamped my legs tighter around his waist and his wings wrapped around my back as solid as a wall. They supported me as his hips shifted, the tip of his cock glided between my cheeks before catching against my hole. It pushed against that tender spot, enormous as a battering ram, hard as the marble from which Sariel seemed carved.

My hands fisted in his long, silken hair and I breathed out slowly, deliberately. I cried out as he entered me, carving me open and splitting me wide, reigniting the fire of the oil until my spine arched and I threw my head back, trying to escape my own skin.

It hurt so badly that I began to panic, but he kissed me again. "Be still. I am yours now. We are joined, my Remy Cooper."

"Mine," I whispered back, hesitant, as though he might take it back.

"Yours. My oath on it." The way he said it sounded melodic, but his voice

seemed less resonant than before. His body felt more alive pressing against mine, less like stone and more like real flesh and blood. Instead of feathers behind my back, I felt flowers and lush grass. Instead of the third sigil blinding me, softer light dappled my closed eyes.

I opened them to see Sariel's face above my own, illuminated not by some mythic halo but by sunlight streaming through his platinum hair as it fell around his broad, wingless shoulders. The scent of fresh, rich soil mingled with the scent of the oil and Sariel's own ancient, heavenly smell and the musk of precum smearing between our stomachs as he drove against my prostate and forced the waves of pleasure through me.

"Oh, take me," I breathed against his lips as he leaned down to kiss me again.

"Mine?" Sariel sounded younger, vulnerable in his humanity but still so strong. I clung to him and nodded, writhing beneath the solid, comforting weight of his body to get him to touch all the right places. He wasn't reading my mind now, but I didn't mind working for it. It was better that way, better to feel like equals, like lovers.

I reached down his smooth back to grip his ass and pull it closer, guiding his thrusts as we strove together to be closer. I trembled and gasped as I stiffened, as my balls drew up and everything I was before dropped away. As I came for Sariel, I was born again, and as he came inside me, we were bound not by magic or religion but by the profound choice of utter belonging.

We lay catching our breath in the sunshine not five yards from the underground chapel. My clothes lay just beyond my feet. The ashes of the burned photograph blew in the breeze.

As Sariel rolled off me onto the grass, I turned onto my side and rested my head against his chest to hear his heart. He stroked back my hair, dark against his pale fingers.

"So are we consecrated to the service of Love," Sariel murmured. His expression was reverent and tender. "We have made a covenant. There will be no other law for us, my Remy Cooper."

It was sacrilege, and I knew it, but if I rejected every law but Love, there was no sacrilege any longer, no sins but indifference and hatred.

In the tent revivals, the evangelist had sprinkled the penitent with cheap olive oil in imitation of the holy oil of anointing and shouted, “Free in the name of Jesus! Be free of your shackles!” I had gone to the altar calls and stood waiting, arms outstretched to Heaven, begging that this would please, please be the time my shackles fell away and I could go forth and sin no more.

Now I know what it means, what I waited for in vain 'til now. I am free.

Sariel will hold my hand on the sidewalk, as proud to show he is mine as I am to show I am his. We will walk to the cafe and have a Mimosa brunch with the queens who still haven't made it to bed, shamelessly public about our love. We'll have a disco nap at Amanda Playwith's apartment, and when Sariel sleeps in my arms, I will have no fear of dreams. My hands will rest over the shoulder blades where once there were wings, and when anyone asks after that sweet angel of mine, I will smile a knowing smile.

THE END

*Author bio: The Thursday Euclid (scientific name T. Euclidus) is a strange and elusive creature dwelling in the Texas Gulf Coast region. Frequently mistaken for Bigfoot, Chupacabra, or the monster of the week, T. Euclidus is, in fact, a 30-ish black sheep with a penchant for indie music, fedoras, and hot and sour soup. Together with co-author Clancy Nacht, Thursday has published four novels, including **Le Jazz Hot**, which has just been released in paperback.*

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OF HONOR AND LOVE

by S.J. Frost

Photo Description

With a black sky dotted in luminescent stars framing him, a beautiful young man stares into the darkness, his face concentrated, as though his thoughts are with someone else. His golden hair reveals him as a stranger in a land so very far from anything he's known, and yet he's comfortable in the silk kimonos draping his body. He gently holds one between his fingers, as if caressing the skin of his lover. Strings of gold and jade earrings adorn him, tokens of affection from the one he waits for now.

Request Letter

Dear Author,

I think this man is much more, or much less, than he seems. Who is he really, and who or what is he pretending to be? What sort of trouble will his secrets cause him? I'd be grateful if you could answer these questions for me.

Sincerely,

Megan

General Information

genre: historical

tags: 19th century Japan; samurai; erotic; sword fighting

word count: 26,046

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OF HONOR AND LOVE

by S.J. Frost

The Pacific Ocean, not far from the coast of Japan, June 1867

DARK WAVES crashed against the ship, sending whitecaps splashing up the sides, as if to batter it down to the depths. As far as Jonathon could see, the world looked gray and angry, the steel-colored sky meeting with the turbulent waters into the distant horizon.

Storms had plagued the journey from nearly the first day out of port in San Francisco. He'd hoped it wasn't an omen of what lay ahead for him at his destination. Now he was certain the weather foretold what awaited him in the mysterious, and from all accounts he'd heard, savage, land he was nearing.

Japan

The country had lived in isolation for countless years before its doors were forcefully opened by Commodore Perry some fifteen years prior. From his recent education on the country, Jonathon learned the actions of the Commodore created a division within the nation. There were those who supported the Shogun, the military ruler of Japan, who had acquiesced to Perry's will to open Japanese ports to outside trade. On the other side, there were those staunchly opposed to the new influx of foreigners and sought to see the door to the outside world closed once again. Rumors of rebellion were rampant. It seemed some of the *daimyo*, the great lords who governed territories, wanted to reinstitute imperial rule and place the Emperor back in the seat of power.

Jonathon closed his eyes, pressing his fingertips to his forehead as if to keep the throbbing in his head from increasing. So much chaos. The country was on the verge of a civil war, and he was sailing directly into it. He had no other options, however. Not if he wanted to live.

A grim smile curved his lips. Or maybe he should say if he wanted to live a little longer. He was fairly certain this "mission" would result in death, but at least he would have some control over it, perhaps even the opportunity to defend himself and fight to preserve his life. Slim chances were better than

none. Had he turned down Benedict Barrett and remained in the prison, *none* was all he would have until he was given a noose around his neck.

Jonathon reached up to his right ear, toying with the gold hoop earring there, the match of which he wore in his left. It was comforting to feel the smooth gold between his fingers. He hadn't gotten to wear the earrings much over the years, but with going back to sea, he put them in again. During his earlier sailing days, they were his good luck charms. Granted, they hadn't brought much good luck to the pirate who he'd removed them from, but that was seven years ago and he'd managed to get out of more than one tight spot since then. Hopefully, there was just enough luck on the worn pieces of gold to get him through this time.

"'ey there, pretty! Mr. Barrett is wanting to speak with you. He's in his cabin."

Jonathon glanced in the direction the rough voice came, spying the first mate. He nodded to the man and turned from the rail. "Thank you."

As Jonathon neared the sailors, they gave friendly nods and greetings. He'd earned their respect when as they set sail he worked along with them and proved his competency as a seaman. But then, it was out at sea that he'd grown into a man, and even in the years since he'd left sailing to make a life for himself in America, his body still remembered its way around a ship.

If only he'd never left. He'd thought he would go to land to find wealth and live happily. None of those things came true. Had he stayed sailing the Atlantic, he may have been spared from so many hardships and heartaches. Certainly these most recent ones.

Jonathon entered a narrow hall. Reaching Barrett's cabin, he combed his windswept hair with his fingers and knocked on the door.

A gruff bellow replied, "Come in!"

Jonathon stepped inside to find Benedict Barrett at a table, leafing through some papers. A lantern swung with the roll of the ship, causing Barrett's balding head to alternately shine, then be dropped into shadow.

Barrett leaned back in his chair, resting his hands on his paunch stomach. "Mr. Addison. Have a seat."

Jonathon made his way to a bolted down chair. "Thank you, sir." As he

sat, he focused on Barrett with an expectant look, hoping to prompt the man to move onto business, which was likely to happen even without the look. In his time of knowing Barrett, if there was one thing he'd found true with the man, it was when it came to business, Barrett was sharp...and ruthless. The man may have pulled him from prison, but he felt no gratitude toward him, and Barrett's actions were only meant to help one person – Barrett himself.

Barrett regarded Jonathon with a scrutinizing gaze. "You look well. You've taken care of yourself."

"You requested as much of me, since my appearance is paramount to the success of this endeavor."

"Indeed it is. Mr. Jenkins says you've done exceptionally well in your lessons on Japanese culture and language. He says you still struggle with the written language, however."

Jonathon nodded. "Yes, I still confuse many of the characters, but I feel confident in my ability to communicate."

After he'd accepted Barrett's proposition, Barrett had actually left him in prison until the day to set sail came, ensuring he wouldn't flee. Each day, the mousey Mr. Jenkins, a self-proclaimed expert on Japan, came to the prison to instruct him on the country and her people. He'd thought it was a form of torture at first, but gradually found his curiosity and interest piqued. Since he'd known so little of the nation, it was as though he were discovering a new and fabled land.

Of all the things Mr. Jenkins taught him, what captured his interest most were stories of the samurai; warriors reputed for their masterful fighting abilities, who lived by a sense of honor, duty, and loyalty. They rode through his imagination as romantic figures, fighting ferociously with swords and spears, having no fear of man or beast, or even death itself.

It was silly of him, he knew. Regardless of his fanciful notions of the samurai, there was much truth about them he found appealing, from their Bushido code to their history of loving other men.

As Mr. Jenkins informed him, blushing the entire time, the samurai had their own romantic notions when it came to *bi-do*, the beautiful way, where it was accepted for a man to share intimacy with another man. The men weren't

scorned and persecuted. They didn't have to fear for their lives for doing nothing more than following urges that were in his opinion, as natural as breathing. He knew for himself, he had about as much control over his attraction to men as he had over each breath he took. He could breathe quickly, slowly, even stop it for a while. But eventually, he had no choice but to breathe again.

Mr. Jenkins continued his education on all things Japanese through the voyage, and now he felt very well versed in the culture. He could even speak the language. He certainly wouldn't consider himself fluent, but he felt he was proficient enough. He just hoped to be able to interpret enough to know if a knife should be coming at his back.

"We should be seeing the shores any day now," Barrett continued. "As you know, the closest port to Kyoto that's open to outside ships is Hyogo Port. On a good horse, riding hard and fast, you can reach Kyoto in a day. I was told Lord Kazuhiro Takezaki is sending men to meet you. Make sure you don't let them take the lazy way on the journey. Time is of the essence in getting Takezaki taken care of."

Jonathon heard the loathing in Barrett's voice at having to say Kazuhiro Takezaki's name, and he knew why. Mr. Jenkins had relayed to him the lord was a supporter and close friend to Takamori Saigo of the Satsuma Domain, and Takamori's was one of the strongest voices against outsiders and calling for rebellion.

Jonathon caught his thoughts before they progressed. Damn. He needed to stop thinking so...Western. Surname before given, that's how things were done in Japan. He'd been thinking in the fashion he'd always known. An internal sigh passed through him. Maybe he wasn't as prepared for this as he thought.

He directed his thoughts back to Lord Takezaki. No matter how he thought of Lord Takezaki, there was one thing certain about him; he was a thorn in Barrett's side because he'd managed to not only block some arms deals Barrett had in the works, but the lord's men had also sent a load of weapons to the bottom of a harbor.

Barrett had one interest in Japan – money. To Barrett and all the world,

Japan was an untapped well now that her doors had been opened. He and others hungry to see their pockets grow fat hoped to rush in and swipe up exotic trinkets that they could sell for an ungodly sum to the wealthy and privileged, who would then sit at their dinner parties and flaunt their hard won Asian treasure. Jonathon was sure Barrett and other traders also meant to do the same to the Japanese people, and most likely intended to rob from them even more since he knew for a fact Barrett viewed the entire culture as ignorant and uncivilized.

Jonathon nodded to seem as though he were paying attention. God how he hoped this conversation would end soon. Whenever he spoke with the loathsome man, it was a contest to see if he could keep the bile down long enough to make it through a conversation. He'd always won before, but this was his hardest trial yet.

"Certainly his *lordship* wouldn't deign to meet you personally," Barrett went on. "If he could've done us that favor, this deed could be done much quicker." He let out a derisive snort. "He's an arrogant bastard, as you'll soon find out."

Jonathon fought to keep his tongue still as he'd never met a man so pompous as the one before him. Pompousness in most men was nothing more than an annoying trait. In Barrett, it was deadly, as it filled him with a sense of entitlement to things he had no right to, like Japan.

"So we'll send you ashore in a small boat under the cover of night to try and avoid any patrolling boats. There are so many damn rules and regulations against us coming into their godless land, and we don't have time to wait for clearance. You'll meet the samurai party and they'll escort you to Kyoto. You know what to do from there." Barrett reclined in his chair. A smile that only added ugliness to his features curved his lips. "Do it right, and you're a free man."

Jonathon didn't share in Barrett's grin. "*If* I survive."

"Yes, but you were aware of that caveat when you accepted this venture."

"And should I survive, all I need to do is find my way to Hyogo Port and you'll bring me back to America."

"Exactly."

Then he was as good as dead. Even if he completed his task, how would he find his way to a port in a strange country where many were hostile to foreigners?

He reminded himself, there was still a chance, and with a chance, there was hope.

“If you could clarify something that’s been on my mind,” Jonathon said. “If he’s such an enemy of yours, why has he agreed to meet with me, your representative, to discuss purchasing guns from you?”

“Because for all his *honor*, he’s like any man, willing to sell his values for the sake of a victory, and ignorant though he may be, he knows if it comes down to battle, guns will win over swords.”

Jonathon glanced away from Barrett, needing a moment without looking at the man’s smug face. Disappointment filled him. Barrett’s words wounded his idealized image of what a samurai should be, especially one who was a noble lord. But then, just as there were men in all classes in all parts of the world who didn’t hold up to the ideals set for them, he supposed there were many samurai who were the same way.

“But it doesn’t matter,” Barrett continued. “The man’s a pest. Even if he’s interested in buying guns now, he’ll come back around to bite me like any rabid dog. I’d rather be done with him. I’ve got other connections on both sides where losing him won’t affect my profits.”

Jonathon paused. “Wait. You’re not selling arms to both the Shogun and those who are in opposition to him?”

“That’s the plan.”

“That’s all but encouraging a war to break out.”

“Whether I encourage it or not, it’s going to happen. It’s just a matter of time.”

Jonathon shook his head slightly. “But, isn’t there one side you believe in more?”

Barrett barked out a laugh. “What the hell do I care if they kill each other? This isn’t personal. It’s business. It’s not even our own people.”

Jonathon fell silent. It was long past time for this conversation to end. “Is that all? May I go now?”

“No.” Barrett stood, swaying for a moment with the ship, then moved to a large, worn chest. He rummaged inside and came out with a small, black velvet pouch. Returning to Jonathon, he held it out to him.

Jonathon stared up at him, then slowly took it from him. Loosening the silk strings, he withdrew a dark green vial. Through the opaque glass, he could see it contained white powder.

A condescending smile rose to Barrett’s lips. “Your color has suddenly paled. I thought arsenic would be fitting for one of your delicate kind. But perhaps I was wrong, considering you had no qualms driving a knife between my nephew’s ribs.”

Jonathon snapped his head up, locking a dark glare on Barrett. “Your nephew got less than he deserved. The knife should have been in his heart.”

Barrett burst out laughing. “There’s the devil I found in that prison, debauched and deadly all hidden beneath a pretty face. If the poison isn’t to your liking, then while you’re under the savage, imagine he’s my nephew and find your mark this time.”

Jonathon clenched the vial, the fingers of his other hand curling in a fist. “I ask again, are you finished?”

The humor dropped from Barrett, disgust replacing it. “Yes, save for a reminder. While you’re with Takezaki, remember your purpose. Don’t lose yourself in your perverse ways.”

Jonathon pushed to his feet without waiting for another word. He marched toward the door, tearing it open and slamming it closed behind him. He stormed the few steps to his cabin and darted inside. He sagged back on the door, his anger at Barrett still raging, but fear for his future draining his strength.

He lifted the hand holding the vial. Slowly, he uncurled his fingers and gazed at it. Strange how he felt its contents determined his own life and death just as much as whom it was intended for.

JONATHON CLUNG to the edge of the small boat, fighting to keep his gaze focused ahead rather than down at the water, black with reflecting the

moonless sky. The depths were so dark, it was as if the boat floated on a sheer veil that at any moment could break and plunge him into a bottomless void.

Not that looking ahead to the shadowed shore was much more reassuring.

Jonathon closed his eyes, wondering just how it was that his life had brought him to this moment. He knew the direct action, and though it had been yet another attempt to protect his life, most didn't believe that. Or more likely, no one cared. To society, whether he practiced generosity and kindness toward all who crossed his path, or he was a wastrel preying on innocents, he was morally doomed. And those sentiments were excluding his near killing of Edgar Barrett.

Jonathon looked ahead as the two sailors leaped from the boat and began pulling it up to the beach. Collecting his satchel, he hopped out as well. The dark water swirled around his legs, as if trying to drag him back with each step he took. It seeped through his boots, chilling his legs from the knees down. He broke from the water and trudged ashore, stopping when past the waterline, and gazed into the darkness.

How were his escorts supposed to find him? To avoid being seen by patrolling boats, the ship had moved up the coast from the main port.

Rustling snapped Jonathon from his thoughts. He spun, his head moving in quick, short motions, his eyes darting as he searched the darkness. A horse snorted nearby...and another from behind him. Jonathon whirled around, still seeing nothing other than large boulders and the forest's edge nearby.

His heart pounded, but he willed himself to be calm. If the samurai were watching him, he needed to appear brave. They wouldn't respect him if they saw fear in him.

He straightened his posture and lifted his chin, calling out, "Is someone there?"

Only the rhythmic lapping of the waves against the shore answered him. He glanced back to the boat, seeing the sailors fidgeting and shifting with unease. He flicked a hand toward them. "You may return to the ship."

One of them visibly startled. "But, sir, you'll have no way back."

Jonathon smiled, though he knew the sailors couldn't see it in the dark. "There's no way back for me regardless. Go, and be safe."

Both men nodded and began pushing to boat back out to sea, jumping in and rowing with more vigor than before.

Jonathon hoisted up his satchel. As his watchers didn't seem eager to make contact and he was in no mood to wait all night, he decided he would start in the direction of the village and port. Maybe he would meet his escorts...

A shadow emerged from between two massive boulders, a man on foot leading a horse. Another shadow manifested behind him, two more started out of the forest. Before Jonathon had time to realize what was happening, he was surrounded by four men, five horses. All feelings of fear fled, replaced by wonder as he gazed upon the samurai.

They were magnificent. They weren't large men, the tallest about his own modest height, but the air around them vibrated with a sense of control and strength. He never imagined it would be possible for any kind of warrior, in any culture, to appear elegant, and yet that's exactly how the samurai looked. They were all clean shaven, their hair perfectly coiffed in topknots. Of the four, only one had his crown shaven and he appeared to be the oldest. It wasn't that the others hadn't yet reached manhood. More that as Mr. Jenkins had informed him, the samurai wore their hair in various different styles of topknots, and in recent years, not as many shaved their crowns as older tradition dictated.

Each was dressed in a *kimono* and the flowing *hakama* for their trousers. On each *haori*, the long coat over their kimono, Jonathon caught sight of what Mr. Jenkins told him to watch out for in identifying his escorts; the symbol of Lord Takezaki, two cranes, their wings outstretched, touching wingtip to wingtip in forming a circle.

For as immaculate as their clothing was, what captured Jonathon's attention most were the two swords each samurai wore on his left hip, pushed through the *obi*, the sash around their waist. Mr. Jenkins had explained at length to him about the swords and how they were the most treasured possession of any true samurai.

Jonathon knew he should have some fear of these fierce warriors, and yet he couldn't bring himself to be anything but fascinated. He wanted to speak to them, to learn all there was about them and their culture.

And yet, from how they were looking upon him, they didn't seem to share his sense of interest.

Jonathon realized he needed to make the first move. As Mr. Jenkins informed him, he should show absolute respect toward them. He focused on the oldest, seeming in the middle to latter half of his fourth decade.

Jonathon bowed low to him, speaking in Japanese, "I'm Jonathon Addison. It's an honor to be in your presence. I am here to meet your master, Lord Takezaki Kazuhiro."

Silence replied.

Jonathon stayed bowing. Was his pronunciation that bad? Were they unable to understand him? Had he used a wrong word and just insulted them? Why weren't they bowing back? Mr. Jenkins told him to bow was a sign of respect, and he was bowing very deeply...

Jonathon swallowed hard as the realization came to him. They weren't bowing to him because they didn't respect him. They weren't speaking because they found his very presence offensive. In meeting him, they were merely following the orders of their lord. Doing their duty as any true samurai would. They had nothing personally invested in him. If they wanted, they could kill him and tell their lord he'd never even arrived.

He slowly straightened. If he was to have a sword meet his neck, he'd rather see it coming.

The older samurai stared at him for a long moment. With a barely noticeable flick of his head, he motioned toward Jonathon. The samurai holding two horses stepped forward and stopped one of the horses before Jonathon.

Jonathon took it as a sign he was to mount. It looked as though his head would remain on his neck...for now. He bowed to the samurai who'd brought him the horse and expressed his thanks. No reply came.

Quickly securing his satchel to the saddle, Jonathon mounted and turned the little bay mare to follow as the samurai took to their horses and started toward the forest. It appeared they meant to travel for at least part of the night. He wondered if the entire journey would be like this, the samurai ignoring him. He hoped not, but he also didn't want to push conversation on them for

fear of offending them.

A sigh passed through him. If this was how Lord Takezaki was also, getting close enough to him to carry out his deed was going to prove incredibly difficult. At least he'd already decided doing it wouldn't be as hard as he thought. Not after hearing from Barrett how the lord was willing to forego his beliefs for victory. It seemed his romantic notions that the samurai lived for honor were just that, nothing more than fantasy.

A HEAVY sigh escaped Jonathon. An entire night and day of being ignored. They'd ridden only a couple hours during the night before setting camp, then were up with the sun and back in the saddle, not a word spoken to him the entire time. The most interaction he got from any was assistance with his horse and being handed food and drink.

Of the food, it was simple for travel, *onigiri* – rice balls – and dried fish. Early that morning when they'd neared a small village, he smelled fresh food cooking, and he salivated like a hound, but the samurai seemed unaffected. Even more, they seemed to want to avoid contact with others and would nudge their horses into a purposeful trot to get by any populated area more quickly.

He didn't understand why, but then, as he was discovering, he didn't understand much of anything. For all his lessons with Mr. Jenkins, he felt like he knew nothing of the men or their culture. Of course, other than doing his best to express gratitude for food and assistance, he hadn't tried to interact much with the samurai either. He watched them. He studied them. But his fear of laying an accidental insult kept him silent.

Jonathon glanced to the side. The forest they traveled through was dense. Not far beyond the road – if the ragged path they traveled could be called such a thing – all was covered in shadow. Around them and above them, where the trees were thinned, the late afternoon sunlight streamed down, turning the leaves to a luminescent emerald. He saw flashes of bright colored wings and heard the unfamiliar songs of birds, but they were no less beautiful than the melodies of those he'd always known. He breathed the humid air in deep, closing his eyes in a long blink as he savored warm scent of moist earth and

foliage.

One thing he already had to admit, Japan was beautiful. It was mountainous, with thick, verdant forests and well-tended farmland. From what others had said, excluding Mr. Jenkins, the people here were crude, uneducated. He knew he hadn't interacted with anyone other than his escorts, but the people he saw walking on the road, working in the fields, and in the villages didn't uphold those allegations. They seemed like...people. Just people. Going about their business, trying to live their lives.

It didn't seem so different from many of the rural areas in the United States he'd seen when he traveled from Boston to New York and finally across the entire nation to San Francisco, and just like in the States, he had a feeling life in the cities here would be different. It made him all the more anxious to reach Kyoto, and it surprised him that was even possible with how much he was anticipating meeting Lord Takezaki Kazuhiro.

Jonathon sighed as he looked forward. He'd thought this was going to be easy. Or, as easy as killing any man ever was. With the sympathy he was already feeling toward the country and her people, he feared meeting Lord Takezaki and what that would do to his resolve. He could only hope the man would prove insufferable and make him want to season Takezaki's food with the arsenic. He would find out soon. For how long they'd been traveling, he wouldn't be surprised if were close to Kyoto.

He stared at Nakano's back ahead of him. The older samurai had yet to formally introduce himself, but he'd caught his name from the others speaking to him. His first impression that Nakano was the leader proved true, as he controlled their pace, when they rested, when they ate, and the others obeyed without question.

Jonathon glanced back. Directly behind him was Kita, the youngest of the group and who he imagined couldn't be beyond twenty years. He met Kita's gaze, and the young samurai gave him a small, but friendly smile. Of all of them, Kita seemed to be the most accepting of his presence. He was the one who brought him food, helped him with his horse and anything else he needed. He sensed Kita was interested in speaking with him, but wouldn't because it might incite disapproval from the others.

Bringing up the rear of their little band were Tanaka and Kawada, who spoke mostly to each other besides teasing Kita. So the samurai *did* talk. Just not to him. It didn't stop him from eavesdropping on their conversations, though, and while he learned he wasn't as proficient in Japanese as he'd thought, he was able to understand well enough.

It seemed Kawada was newly married, something Tanaka took great pleasure in teasing him about as it seemed Kawada had unwillingly given up his bachelorhood but pressure from his father forced him to. Lord Takezaki's warhorse had kicked a groom and broke the man's leg, which then led to a discussion of Kita, who had recently been caught in a compromising position with one of Lord Takezaki's grooms, and that delighted Tanaka even more than Kawada's forced marriage.

Even if their banter and casual conversation didn't include him, it was comforting to see them acting like any group of men he'd been around.

As they rounded a curve in the road, Jonathon saw Nakano jerk his horse to a short stop. A downed tree blocked the way. All conversation silenced. Nakano sat alert in the saddle, scanning the forest. Jonathon looked to the others, as alert as Nakano. His heart started pounding quicker without warning. A sense of danger fell over him.

Nakano whirled his horse around toward them. He shouted to turn back.

A breeze whooshed by Jonathon's head, and he belatedly realized it was an arrow. More arrows rained through the trees. Shouts shattered the silence. Jonathon spun his horse. A band of five samurai charged up the road behind them. Two more sprang out from the forest's cover to his left, another two on the opposite side of the road to the right.

Jonathon saw Kawada snap off the end of an arrow lodged in his shoulder while turning his horse to meet their enemies. Tanaka galloped at his side. Two against five, and one of them injured. There was no way they could win, and yet they rushed their attackers without hesitation. Nakano shouted for Kita to take the two men on the left, as he intercepted the two on the right.

Everything was happening in the span of his rapid heartbeats. As the warriors clashed, Jonathon became all too aware he was weaponless. All he had was a Colt revolver in his satchel and that did him no good now.

Hearing a distressed shout, Jonathon snapped his head around. He saw Kita's short sword sheathed in the chest of one of his enemies, but the other grabbed the young samurai, ripping him from the saddle. Kita fell hard, but rolled to his feet, drawing his long sword and striking the second attacker across the chest.

Behind Kita, one of the five samurai engaged with Tanaka and Kawada broke away. He galloped toward him, spear lowered. Kita twisted, the spear grazing his arm. The samurai swung his horse. Its hindquarters slammed into Kita, sending him crashing to the ground.

Jonathon put his heels to his horse. He may not have a weapon, but he couldn't do nothing.

The samurai raised his spear, the point aimed down at Kita.

Jonathon let out a loud, guttural shout as he charged Kita's attacker. It did what he hoped. The other samurai whipped around, his attention broken. Jonathon saw the man's shock an instant before his horse slammed into the samurai's. He caged the samurai in his arms, hurling himself out of the saddle and taking the other man off his horse with him.

Hands grabbed Jonathon, dragging him off the samurai. He started to fight, then realized it was Kita. He stumbled back, clearing the way for Kita to finish their enemy. But it wouldn't be enough. Nakano, Tanaka, and Kawada were all on the ground, back to back, and surrounded.

New voices rose over the cacophony of battle, shouting brave and clear.

Jonathon spun to the sight of another band of samurai racing up the road from the other side of the downed tree. The one leading the charge wore black and gold armor, a fierce black mask and horned helmet. His black stallion outpaced the other horses and leaped over the tree, as if the horse was just as eager for battle.

Their enemies charged the newcomers, but now found themselves outnumbered. Nakano, Tanaka, and Kawada all ran for him and Kita. Nakano grabbed him by the arm, dragging him into the forest and away from the battle, but not so far to not be able to help their allies if need be.

Jonathon's gaze remained locked on the lead samurai. He and his stallion were like a black fury, a whirlwind that destroyed all who came near. The

samurai struck with such grace and fluidity, and though Jonathon knew the actions were horrendous in their deadliness, he couldn't help but see beauty in the samurai's skill and strength.

It took only a few short minutes for the new group of ten to overpower the remaining enemies. Nakano led them forward, reaching the head samurai as he dismounted. He'd no sooner touched the ground than Nakano dropped to one knee, his head bowed. Kita, Tanaka, and Kawada all did the same.

Jonathon stared at them, shocked at their actions, especially Nakano's. This must be a man of great importance to warrant such respect. He wondered if he should mimic their actions even though he didn't know who this man was, then heard Nakano say, "Lord Takezaki, there are no words to express our gratitude for you coming to us in our time of need."

Jonathon's eyes widened. This man, this warrior, was Lord Takezaki Kazuhiro. He dropped to one knee, his head lowered. He hadn't quite been sure what to expect of the lord, but this certainly wasn't it. Like many wealthy and aristocratic types, he'd thought Lord Takezaki wouldn't directly engage in combat, but rather send his men to do it for him.

Jonathon chanced a glance up at him. Kazuhiro removed his mask and helmet. Jonathon's breath stopped, yet his heart beat harder, faster.

He was young. So much younger than Jonathon expected. He couldn't be more than thirty. Gazing at Kazuhiro's delicate features, Jonathon felt a pleasant tightness in his chest over their beauty. A few strands of ebony hair had fallen loose of the binding, clinging to Kazuhiro's cheek, which was damp with sweat. Though Kazuhiro's gaze was on Nakano, Jonathon stared at his eyes, drinking in their black depths. He was sure moments before they held ferocity, but now as Kazuhiro looked upon Nakano they held only warmth.

Kazuhiro's gaze flicked from Nakano to Jonathon.

Jonathon stared back on him...then realized he was staring and quickly dropped his head.

Kazuhiro focused on Nakano again. "Stand, all of you. Words are not necessary, Nakano-san. I'm the one who's grateful we arrived in time. We caught a Tokugawa spy and were able to learn from him of the attack." He looked to Kawada. "But we didn't arrive soon enough. Kawada-san, how

badly are you injured?”

Kawada bowed to Kazuhiro. “Not bad, my lord. I can ride.”

Kazuhiro nodded his head once. “Is anyone else injured?” His gaze scanned all his men as they shook their heads. “Good. Then let’s get the bodies off the road and covered in the forest. Do it quickly.”

His final word was answered with bows and the men leaping to follow his orders.

Kazuhiro signaled for Nakano, Kita, Tanaka, and Kawada to stay. He looked at the foreigner. He’d seen his share of Westerners, but never had he seen one like the man before him now. The young man was slender, lithe, and not very tall. Thick, golden hair framed his face. Rings as golden as his hair adorned each ear. His eyes were as blue and clear as the sky above, and those eyes were now looking at him with bold and unabashed attraction.

Kazuhiro stepped toward him. “Mr. Addison, I presume.”

Jonathon coughed in shock. Kazuhiro had just spoken English to him. He bowed deep to Kazuhiro again. “Yes, my lord. I’m Jonathon Addison. You may call me Jonathon if you like. I’m here on behalf of Mr. Benedict Barrett. I cannot tell what an honor and pleasure it is to meet you.”

Kazuhiro granted him a small bow and spoke in Japanese again. “The pleasure is mine, Addison-san.”

Jonathon slowly straightened after Kazuhiro, noticing how the lord didn’t take his offer to address him by his given name and couldn’t help but feel disappointment at that.

“Have my men treated you well?”

Jonathon glanced to his side at his escorts, silent with their attention on their lord. Though, Kita shifted slightly as he stood, his gaze darting to Jonathon and back to Kazuhiro as if he wanted to say something. Jonathon looked to Kazuhiro again, also deciding to speak in Japanese. “Yes, Lord Takezaki. Your men have been most gracious and fought with great courage to protect me.”

“I’m happy to hear that.”

Kita took a quick step forward, blurting out, “He saved me.” He dropped to a deep bow before Kazuhiro. “Forgive my rudeness, my lord, but I had to

tell you. I was on the ground, about to be run through by the enemy's spear, and Addison-san charged him and pulled him from his horse. It was my duty to protect him, and I failed."

Kazuhiro looked to Jonathon. "Is this true?"

Jonathan glanced from Kazuhiro to Kita, and back to Kazuhiro again. "It's true that I aided him, but I certainly wouldn't say he failed in his duty. Once he gained his feet, he took over the fight again, and he fought well and brave."

Kazuhiro contemplated Jonathon for a long moment before turning back to Kita. "Rise, Kita-san. You haven't failed me. If the one you were meant to protect says you've done your duty well, then you have."

"Thank you, my lord." Kita straightened and turned to Jonathon, bowing to him as well. "Thank you, Addison-san."

Jonathan returned the bow. "No, thank *you*, Kita-san."

Another samurai rushed up to Kazuhiro, informing him all had been done. Kazuhiro scanned the area, nodded his approval, and ordered everyone to mount up.

The samurai all went to their horses. Kita led the little bay Jonathan had been riding to him.

Jonathan ran his hand down the mare's face. She lowered her head at his gentle touch, and he whispered words of thanks to her for being brave during the battle. Sensing eyes on him, he glanced over his shoulder and met Kazuhiro's gaze. A soft smile curved Kazuhiro's lips, then he turned and mounted his warhorse.

JONATHON RODE a few strides behind Kazuhiro, gazing at the samurai lord. They'd stopped twice to rest and water the horses, but it seemed Kazuhiro was determined to reach Kyoto as fast as possible. Still clad in his armor, minus the helmet and mask, Kazuhiro was like a shadow darker than the night. Nakano had ridden at Kazuhiro's side since they departed, and though they spoke in muted tones, Jonathan caught enough of their conversation to know Nakano had told Kazuhiro all that'd happened from the time they met him at the beach.

He couldn't help but feel a sting of disappointment that since they'd left the battle, Kazuhiro hadn't said anything more to him, hadn't even glanced in his direction. He worked to convince himself the disappointed stemmed from needing Kazuhiro's attention if he were to carry out his mission, all the while knowing he was lying to himself.

Kita kept him company, however. The young samurai rode at his side and had officially introduced himself with his given name, Masanari. His defending Kita in battle and also speaking for him to Kazuhiro seemed to have earned Kita's respect. Now, Kita no longer cared if others disapproved of interacting with him, he was open in his curiosity, asking him many questions.

Jonathon was glad for Kita's company. It was nice having someone be friendly with him. As he'd found out, they were close in age, with Kita being nineteen and himself only four years older. He could see himself becoming friends with the young samurai, but he felt he was starting out a poor friend as his attention kept drifting to Kazuhiro.

As if sensing his thoughts, Kazuhiro glanced back to him. "Addison-san, ride beside me."

Jonathon's heart did a nervous stutter. He nudged his mare to catch up to Kazuhiro, seeing at the same time Nakano rein his horse back. It struck Jonathon that Kazuhiro must want to speak alone with him. Or as alone as they could get surrounded by thirteen other samurai.

As his mare fell into stride beside Kazuhiro's warhorse, Jonathon smiled at the lord. Kazuhiro gazed at him in silence, his only motion being that from his horse. Kazuhiro's gaze lowered, traveling slowly over Jonathon.

Jonathon was used to being appraised by men, but there was a greater intensity to Kazuhiro's gaze than he'd ever seen. And yet the gaze wasn't harsh. It wasn't critical. If Jonathon could name it as anything, it would be appreciative. As though Kazuhiro liked what he saw of him.

He hadn't prayed in years, but he was now that Kazuhiro found him attractive, and with those selfish prayers he confessed it had nothing to do with his cursed mission.

Kazuhiro lifted his gaze to meet Jonathon's. "Thank you for saving Kita-san."

Jonathon shook his head. “Thanks isn’t necessary, Lord Takezaki. He and all your men saved me many times over when we were attacked. If anything, I owe thanks to you. You also saved my life.”

A small, but warm smile rose to Kazuhiro’s lips. He looked forward. “Please speak to me in English.”

Jonathon startled inside at the request, but did as Kazuhiro requested with his next words. “I apologize. Is my Japanese so bad?”

Kazuhiro laughed, still speaking in Japanese himself. “Yes, it is.”

Jonathon choked out a gasp, but then started laughing with Kazuhiro, knowing the jest wasn’t meant to be hurtful, and also, because the smooth, rich sound of Kazuhiro’s laugh was infectious. “My sincere apologies.”

“You needn’t apologize. I find it charming you trying to speak my language.” Kazuhiro looked at him again.

Kazuhiro’s smile, the humor in his eyes, all sent warmth washing through Jonathon, centering in his cock. He couldn’t bring himself to break their gaze, and something told him, Kazuhiro didn’t want to either. “From what I’ve heard of your English, it’s excellent.”

“I’m sure if you heard me speak more of it, you’d find it as bad as your Japanese.”

Jonathon laughed again, Kazuhiro chuckling with him. Kazuhiro was nothing like what Barrett described, which shouldn’t be much of a surprise to him. He should’ve assumed the lord would be the exact opposite of what Barrett said he was. Kazuhiro’s mannerisms were more relaxed than Nakano, who was the epitome of stoic. He’d seen Kazuhiro display that type of restraint and formality as well, but he liked this more personable – and incredibly charming – side of him.

Kazuhiro slowly broke their gaze and looked to the road. “You seem to understand Japanese well, and since I understand English, it might be best if we both spoke in the tongues we’re most comfortable with to avoid any misunderstandings. If I believe I’ve misunderstood you or I’m confused, I’ll tell you, but you must do the same for me. Do you agree?”

“I do and I think it’s an excellent idea. Where did you learn English?”

“From a missionary. He wanted me to give my soul to his Christian God. I

told him my soul belonged to my sword, and if he continued trying to steal it, I would be sending his God a gift very soon when my sword removed his head from his body.”

Jonathon snorted in an attempt to not laugh, but he’d run into missionaries before and had also been on the receiving end of their religious fervor.

Kazuhiro glanced at him, catching Jonathon’s mirth at his comment, and smiled at him. “Despite my refusal to give my soul, the missionary was still kind enough to help me learn English, and I’ve studied it since.” He saw the humor in Jonathon’s expression faded to confusion. “You don’t understand why.”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t. Everything I’ve been told about you is that you despise Western culture.”

“I don’t despise your culture. I despise your culture trying to change mine. Also, it’s best to know as much about one’s enemy as possible.”

Jonathon continued to gaze at him, Kazuhiro’s words striking him strong. He realized why Kazuhiro had agreed to speak with him. Kazuhiro viewed Barrett as a threat, an enemy, and he was nothing more than a means to keep that enemy close. If only Kazuhiro knew just how deep Barrett’s deceit went. “You have no interest in buying guns from Mr. Barrett, do you?”

“No. My men are more than adequately armed, in both swords and firearms. Ones purchased from a far more reliable and reputable source. Not that my men want to use them, but they’ve been trained regardless as the Shogun’s army uses them.”

“You should know, if you plan to hold me prisoner, I’m nothing to Barrett.”

“I know.”

“How do you know?”

“Because most men refrain from sending someone they care for into a dangerous situation unless they know the other could take care of themselves or they were the only one they could trust. It could quite possibly be such with you, but don’t believe so. What I believe is that Barrett cares for no one but himself. You’re here because he hopes I’ll be the savage he believes that I and all Japanese are, and that I’ll kill you. He’ll then have reason to incite the

Shogun further against me, perhaps even call upon your own government to see me punished.”

Jonathon stared at Kazuhiro in silence. What he said made perfect sense, and he felt all the more of a fool for not having seen it himself. He was nothing more than the lamb being led to slaughter. Not that he could ever be considered so innocent, but in this case, he was. Or if not innocent, then naïve. But his knowledge of the politics here was only cursory, so he never would’ve been able to guess a maneuver like this. Whereas Kazuhiro was in the heart of the political struggles, living them every day of his life.

Now he fully understood Barrett’s plan. In Barrett’s mind, however this turned out would be a win for him. It was a completely sound plan...from Barrett’s perspective. Now he understood even more why the samurai had fought so hard to protect him. If he was killed, even not by Kazuhiro or his men, the result would be the same in Barrett claiming it was Kazuhiro.

So while Kazuhiro clearly wasn’t going to follow through on Barrett’s murderous expectations, now he needed to decide what *he* would do.

Kazuhiro’s voice pulled him from his thoughts.

“You seem surprised.”

“I am.” Jonathon paused. “And I’m not. To be honest, I’m not sure what to make of any of it.”

Kazuhiro nodded, but stayed quiet.

Jonathon looked toward him again. “Then since you have no intention of doing business with me, and it seems you don’t want to kill me, what *are* your plans with me?”

Kazuhiro’s gaze roamed over him in the intense and intimate way as before. As he met Jonathon’s eyes, the same soft, warm smile came to his lips. “I haven’t decided.”

Jonathon’s heart hammered heavy and quick. His cock fully filled with the hopes the flirtatiousness he thought he’d heard was true.

Kazuhiro turned forward, his expression and voice carrying a serious tone as he spoke again. “But you have my word that I will keep you safe.”

Jonathon bowed his head, whispering, “Thank you, Lord Takezaki.”

Kazuhiro had just spoken a word he’d longed to hear and experience for

more years than he cared to remember; safe. He never would've expected to hear it in this place, a country thousands of miles from all he'd ever known, and yet the calm certainty that Kazuhiro said it made him believe it.

SLEEP SLOWLY drifted from Jonathon. He stretched out and opened his eyes, finding himself on...the floor? Why was he sleeping on the floor? His sleep sluggish mind finally caught up with him. Because that's where his bed was, the warm futon beneath him. They'd arrived in Kyoto at daybreak, and he thought he'd never seen a city so beautiful.

He rolled onto his back, closing his eyes to see his memories clearer. They had stood on a hillside overlooking the city. Kyoto was surrounded by the forested mountains. Rivers shimmering in the early morning sun wove around it. The dark tile roofs of the wood homes and buildings reflected the sun. Even from his far vantage, he'd seen a great temple built into the side of a mountain, held there with massive timbers, as it watched over the city and her people. A light mist blanketed the city, making it appear as though it were raised from a dream.

When they rode down into Kyoto, the scents of earth and forest gave way to wood smoke and cooking. The fragrant smells of tea and rice, the pungency of grilled fish, all made his stomach rumble. People scurried out of their way, many dropping all they were doing to bow in respect to the samurai, though Jonathon still caught the curious looks directed toward him.

When they reached the section of the city containing the homes of the daimyo, he was in awe. He'd seen many beautiful homes before, many large mansions, but even the most elegant seemed to pale next to the sweeping, graceful architecture of the lords' homes. Lord Takezaki's included.

A tall, wood wall enclosed the estate. Passing through the gates, they came into a courtyard, where to the right was a long, single-story timber building; the barracks, as Kita had informed him. The stables were to the left. In the center, was the main house. Like the barracks, it was one story, but taller, with a sharply peaked, black roof that made it the height of a two-story. It wasn't as utilitarian in appearance as the barracks, the whitewashed walls lined in dark

timber beams. A veranda wrapped around the perimeter. Warm lantern light seeped through the rice paper windows.

Kazuhiro had left him in the care of his servants, who guided him inside, though not before he removed his boots in the entryway. Inside, the walls and floors were wood, all polished and clean. In fact, as he noticed walking through the home, there wasn't a hint of dust to be found or a single thing that looked misplaced.

After showing him to his room, a servant brought him to the bath, and as he stepped into the wooden room and saw the massive wood tub filled with steaming water, he nearly melted. The servant insisted he sit on a stool and wash himself before getting into the tub, which he thought was odd at first, then realized it made perfect sense. After all, getting clean in your own dirty water wasn't truly getting cleaned.

After his bath, he was shown to his room again, where his futon was laid out with the expectation he'd want to sleep, and his breakfast awaited him. He devoured the fresh rice, the bowl of soup with bits of vegetables, seaweed, and tofu floating in it, the grilled fish, and guzzled the tea. Even his clumsiness with the chopsticks couldn't slow him. As if anticipating he'd want more, a servant returned just as he finished his meal with a tray holding second portions. After finishing that, he collapsed to the futon and slept a dreamless sleep, his first in many months.

Now that he was awake, his mind was filled with one and only one thing; Kazuhiro.

He sat up, looking toward the sliding door. Sunlight illuminated the rice paper. He pushed to his feet and went to the door, sliding it open. Beyond, the manicured garden shone in the afternoon sun. The heat and humidity of the day crept through the open door to invade his room. He closed the door again, and made his way to his satchel. As he pulled out his clothes, something fell out from one of his rolled up shirts and landed on the floor with a soft thump.

Jonathon stared down at the black velvet pouch. Revulsion tightened his throat. He didn't want to touch it even to pick it up, but he had to. He snatched it and stuffed it back in his bag, pushing it to the bottom. He closed his eyes tight. He couldn't think about that now. He would know when the time was

right, and it wasn't now.

He dressed quickly, and after a stop at the privy, he began a search for Kazuhiro. He spied a young female servant carrying an armful of linens and called out in Japanese, "Excuse me, miss. Have you seen Lord Takezaki?"

The young girl startled, nearly dropping her bundle, and averted her gaze. She bowed to him and pointed toward the front of the mansion.

"Thank you." Jonathon gave her a smile, but she kept her gaze cast downward until he passed. Was he so fierce looking to the people here that he could frighten a young girl? He certainly hadn't been back home. If anything, people often commented on how he was as pretty as a girl. But he understood here he was different, and while there was no reason for it, different often frightened people.

Jonathon found his boots in the entryway where he'd left them and pulled them on. He stepped out the front of the mansion to the sight of the courtyard filled with men, all standing in neat lines as Nakano paced in front of them and spoke of fighting maneuvers. He realized this must be a training session, and scanned the courtyard for Kazuhiro. He spotted him instantly. Among all the men, he stood out, not only for his beauty, but also for the aura of confidence and strength that emanated from him.

Kazuhiro looked toward him. Even across the distance of the courtyard, his dark gaze stirred arousal in Jonathon, and it hit him stronger than it had the day before. Now rested, cleaned, having eaten a good meal, his body could think of only one other need it wanted satiated.

His cock hardened within seconds. Jonathon tried to will it go down, but that was impossible when all that filled his mind was images of his body pressed to Kazuhiro's, lying beneath him while Kazuhiro thrust inside him, pushing them both to climax. He knew how Kazuhiro would be, confident and in command, like he was now.

Though, there was no guarantee Kazuhiro would be a considerate lover. He hoped Kazuhiro would be. It'd been so long since he was with someone who was concerned for his pleasure, too. It seemed all the men he'd been with lately only wanted their own. It'd been so long – so very, very long – since he'd been with anyone who made it truly enjoyable.

Kazuhiro looked to the samurai near him. Jonathon saw him excuse himself, then start in his direction.

Jonathon moved to meet him. He bent forward in a deep bow. “Good morning, my lord.”

“Morning has long since passed.”

Jonathon straightened and smiled. “I’m in the habit of always saying good morning when I wake, but I’m not in the habit of sleeping so late.”

“It was a long night.” Kazuhiro turned away. “Walk with me.”

Jonathon rushed to walk at Kazuhiro’s side. “Did you sleep well?”

“No, I didn’t. I was restless thinking about you.”

“About me?”

“Yes, and what I should do with you.”

Jonathon’s heart leaped to a galloping pace. “And, have you decided?”

Kazuhiro looked at him, a smirk at the corner of his lips. “Possibly.”

Kazuhiro’s tone was light, teasing, but Jonathon could hear the attraction in it. Was Kazuhiro trying to make his interest known? He had to be. Elation soared through Jonathon. He knew there was a chance he could be hearing only what he wanted, but he refused to give that theory credence.

They passed through a gate to the gardens. Kazuhiro motioned to the veranda for Jonathon to sit. As he did, Kazuhiro remained standing, but his pose was relaxed, his left arm casually resting on the hilt of his short sword.

It struck Jonathon for the first time that Kazuhiro had the weapon, but then during his lessons, Mr. Jenkins had told him a samurai was always armed. *Always*. Even if it wasn’t visible, somewhere on their person was a weapon. It seemed it was true. In the security of his own home, Kazuhiro still wore the *wakizashi* – short sword -, the longer *katana* most likely stored.

It also spoke to the danger of the times. Kazuhiro may be in his own home, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be attacked. An enemy or spy could still infiltrate the complex.

Kazuhiro fixed him with an unwavering stare. “Tell me about yourself.”

Jonathon looked up at him in confusion. “What? Why?”

“I want to know about you.”

“But why?”

Kazuhiro replied with silence, his friendly expression hardened.

Jonathon mentally cursed himself. Kazuhiro had made a direct request of him, and he'd questioned his motives. Twice. What he'd done was a gross insult. He'd been so focused on his arousal, he'd started looking at Kazuhiro as if he were just like any man. But he wasn't. He was a lord and a samurai.

Jonathon started to stand so he could bow to him. "I apologize, my lord. I didn't mean..."

"Don't stand to bow. I *do* have some patience for you since you're not familiar with our ways, and much of that patience you've earned by showing an effort to learn."

Jonathon dropped back to sitting. "Thank you. I think I was just startled by your request. What would you like to know about me?"

"Everything."

Jonathon stared at Kazuhiro. Was this an interrogation? It would make sense if it were. Kazuhiro would be seeking to gain any kind of information about Barrett he could. "I started working for Mr. Barrett about three months ago..."

Kazuhiro shook his head. "No, I want to know *all* about you. A man's past can reveal much about who he is today."

"I see. Then I'll start from the beginning. I was born in London, England. The first twelve years of my life were fairly uneventful. My family lived comfortably, and I spent my days studying. My father was in charge of the accounts for a wealthy merchant, a job that cost him his life. He was working late one evening, and a man broke into the offices to rob them and he shot my father. My mother, who had suffered from fits of melancholy for as long as I could remember, was overwhelmed by a spell so powerful after his death, that she took her own life." Jonathon's gaze lowered, his voice softened. "They were all I had."

He looked up to Kazuhiro again. "I was afraid I'd be put in an orphanage, so I stowed away on a merchant craft bound for America, but was soon uncovered by the crew. Rather than punish me, the captain took me under his wing, and I spent the next six years on the seas. It was during those years my formal education became complimented with the sailors teaching me not only

their trade of seamanship, but how to fight with swords, knives, and my fists.” He decided it was time to let Kazuhiro see a little of his own interest and allowed flirtatious innuendo into his voice. “And how to do *other* things.”

Kazuhiro’s smirk returned. “You sound very skilled. What did you do after being a sailor?”

Jonathon swallowed the disappointment that he hadn’t distracted Kazuhiro enough to have the man drag him inside and ravish him, but he also wasn’t surprised. Kazuhiro seemed to not be easily swayed from anything he had a focus on. “I traveled America. My captain had passed away when I was eighteen, and I decided it was time to return to land. I made my way across the entire country, from coast to coast. It took me a few years, since I would stop in places and settle for a while before I would feel the itch to move on. I’ve been living in San Francisco for some months now.”

“Employed by Barrett?”

Jonathon swallowed. This was the area he’d tried to get over with fast, and now he didn’t want to face it. “Yes. Most recently.”

“And before?”

“I’ve worked a variety of jobs. There’s a lot of building in San Francisco now, so I’ve mostly been a laborer.”

“How did you come to work for Barrett?”

“I...I knew his nephew.”

Kazuhiro contemplated him in silence.

Jonathon could see in Kazuhiro’s eyes that he knew there was more to his connection with Barrett and it seemed he was waiting for Jonathon to volunteer the information on his own. Jonathon wanted to tell him. All the words were there inside him, but his throat was almost too tight to breathe, as if blocking the words from coming out.

Kazuhiro slowly looked away, and Jonathon thought he saw disappointment on his face. He shifted on the edge of the veranda to be even a fraction closer to him. “You’re not what I was expecting.”

Kazuhiro glanced back to him. “What were you expecting?”

“I didn’t think you’d be so young. And I certainly wasn’t expecting a nobleman who would charge into battle. Where I’m from, many who have any

kind of power or wealth delegate dangerous and unpleasant tasks to others.”

“It’s the same here. But as you said, I’m young, so perhaps I’m still rash. My father said that of me more times than once.”

Jonathon mind jumped on Kazuhiro mentioning his father. It only struck him then, if Kazuhiro was head of the Takezaki clan, then his father must have either passed or turned the clan over to his son’s control. “How long have you been head of your family?”

“Six years.” Kazuhiro’s gaze moved over Jonathon’s face. “I was only a little older than you are now, if my guess of your age is correct.”

“I’m twenty-three.”

Kazuhiro’s slender eyebrows rose in surprise. “You look younger. That was my age exactly when I became head of my family and lands.”

“That’s still young for so much responsibility.”

Kazuhiro shook his head. “I don’t think so. The responsibility was good for me, and it was my duty to accept it. My father had the wasting sickness.”

Jonathon offered a look of sympathy and softened his voice. “I’m sorry.”

Kazuhiro inclined his head in appreciation for Jonathon’s words.

“It must be difficult for you,” Jonathon said, “leading your men, trying to take care of your lands, when things are so volatile. I’ve heard revolution is on the verge of breaking out.”

“It’s already started with small skirmishes and many seeking alliances. The Satsuma and Choshu clans aligned last year against the Shogun.”

“And your allies with the Satsuma.”

Kazuhiro tipped his head to the side, contemplating Jonathon. “Barrett ensured you were very knowledgeable about me.”

“Yes, I suppose he did.”

Kazuhiro nodded slowly, speaking more to himself than Jonathon. “It seems he wants to know his enemy better, also.” He looked away from him to the garden. “But you’re correct. The Takezaki and Satsuma clans have long been friends with our lands being so close. But I also believe in some of their ideals.”

“Some? Not all?”

Kazuhiro glanced back to him with a smirk. “If I believed in all, then you

wouldn't be here."

Jonathon nodded. It seemed though Kazuhiro's sympathies were toward those rebellious to the Shogun, he was also a man of independence.

Kazuhiro continued. "Because things are very tense, and as alliances are being formed, so too are new enemies being created, I want you to stay here. Don't go out to the city, even with an escort. My enemies would attack you without hesitation, and my allies don't yet know you."

"I'll stay here. But it sounds like you're planning on leaving."

"I am, briefly this afternoon." Kazuhiro fell silent again as his gaze roamed over him. "I'll be back by evening, and I'd like for you to have dinner with me tonight."

"Of course! It would be my pleasure."

Kazuhiro laughed softly. "You're very eager."

Jonathon focused on Kazuhiro, giving him his most sensual smile. "I can't help that I enjoy your company."

He saw the look in Kazuhiro's eyes shift, the humor fading as a new heat came into them. Kazuhiro was dropping all restraint and showing his attraction for him. Jonathon's cock ached with arousal. He stood to let it shift and adjust. As he did, Kazuhiro's gaze dropped, focusing on the bulge.

Kazuhiro took two steps toward him, closing the distance between them until they were nearly touching.

Jonathon's breath came quicker. Kazuhiro was so close, he could feel the heat of him. He breathed deep, taking in the washed scent of Kazuhiro's body with the delicate smell of flowers, mostly likely from the fragrant oil used to style Kazuhiro's hair into the smooth topknot. He could now see just how stunningly beautiful Kazuhiro's features were.

Kazuhiro's voice left him in husky whisper. "I've never seen such beautiful eyes."

"I was thinking the same about yours." Jonathon moved his hand forward the slightest bit, touching Kazuhiro's in the gentlest of touches. He looked down to the hands, his own skin so light and fair, Kazuhiro's a more golden hue, and the thought fluttered through his mind how beautifully they complimented each other.

Kazuhiro also had his gaze lowered to their hands. Jonathon had his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbow, and Kazuhiro touched his fingertips to the top of the forearm, brushing down it to Jonathon's hand.

A hushed moan slipped from Jonathon's throat at the soft caress. He closed his eyes in a long blink, and when he opened them again, he found Kazuhiro's focused on him. He smiled. "Perhaps we should move dinner up to now."

Kazuhiro let out a warm laugh. "I-"

"Lord Takezaki, please forgive my intrusion."

Both Jonathon and Kazuhiro looked in the direction of the voice, to a samurai bowing low in the gateway to the garden.

Kazuhiro faced him. "What do you need?"

"A messenger has arrived for you, my lord. Nakano-san sent me to inform you."

"Thank you." Kazuhiro looked back to Jonathon. "It seems our time will have to wait until later."

"I'll look forward to it."

Kazuhiro gave him another smile, then turned to leave.

Jonathon watched him walk away, and when Kazuhiro disappeared around the corner, he dropped to the veranda, as if all his strength had fled. It'd taken an immense amount of control to not start stripping and beg for Kazuhiro to mount him.

Though it was more than the intense arousal making his legs feel weak. Swirling in his stomach was a nauseous sense of betrayal. He should've told Kazuhiro everything; how he really knew Barrett's nephew, what'd happened between them, why Barrett had sent him there.

He felt he'd missed an opportunity to gain Kazuhiro's trust, and now that it was gone, he feared it would be too late to capture it again. If he told him everything now, Kazuhiro would wonder why he'd kept it secret to begin with.

Jonathon closed his eyes, thinking on the velvet pouch he'd held just minutes ago. For as much as he wanted Kazuhiro's trust, he also feared what he would do with it once he had it.

KAZUHIRO RECLINED in the tall, round wooden tub, his arms draped back on the edge. He breathed in the steam, letting it relax his body further. Beneath the water, his rigid cock rested on his lower abdomen. He savored the sensation of arousal humming through him. It had lingered within him all day, but now he was able to let himself enjoy it.

That afternoon, he'd met with Saigo-san, general of the Satsuma troops, and informed him about the outcome of the attack in the forest, as it'd been some of Saigo's men who'd uncovered the plot. Saigo wasn't fully pleased he was housing a foreigner, but he wasn't speaking out against him either. And he told Saigo that night the same thing he told him when he agreed to stand against the Shogun; he didn't consider himself at war against the Westerners. This was against the Shogun, whose weakness had allowed them into their country. Saigo-san wasn't the most pleased with that line of thought, but he accepted it since it ultimately meant they were allies.

Kazuhiro opened his eyes, staring into the steam. If he was to be fully honest with himself, he wasn't sure the Emperor would be any different than the Shogun, despite his promises to expel all foreigners. To him, they seemed like words the Emperor knew a few powerful men wanted to hear, and with their support he could gain back the seat of power rather than being just a figurehead. He feared this was a lost battle, even though it hadn't fully yet begun. It had been lost from the very moment the black ships of Perry sailed into Edo Bay. There were many in Japan who saw the value and profit to be gained from the outside world. Even he did to some extent.

Kazuhiro's thoughts turned back to their original focus. Addison-san... How did so lovely a man come to be connected with one as vile as Barrett? When he'd agreed to meet with Barrett's emissary, he thought Barrett would send someone as disgusting and ignorant as himself, not a young beauty who seemed almost desperate to show respect.

However, he suspected there was more to Addison than what appeared. The lovely surface could be meant as a distraction, and the secrets Addison had could be deadly, but he was willing to take the risk. It was likely the only way he'd uncover further schemes from Barrett. And more than that, he

wanted Addison.

Kazuhiro took a deep breath, his voice leaving him in a low rumble. “Jonathon.” He tested the name on his tongue. Addison had requested he call him by his given name. He refrained, as it seemed too intimate, especially in front of his men. He knew, though, Westerners were often more casual in such regards. It was a mark of trust, of friendship, to call one by their given name. He wondered if he should make the concession and use Addison’s given name, since Addison had worked so hard to follow his ways.

A smile rose to Kazuhiro’s lips. He’d spoken true when he told Addison...Jonathon...that he found his attempts charming. And he appreciated his efforts. All the foreign men he’d met had no interest in learning Japanese ways. They expected the people, the entire country for that matter, to concede to them and do things *their* way. But just as when one is a guest in another’s home and one must abide by the owner’s rules, so it should be when in a country. One should respect the laws and the people. Not expect them to change and make allowances for them.

His smile faded. Change was going to happen to Japan. Even if all the outsiders left, their presence would always be felt. It was just as when the Dutch first came to Japan so many long years ago and were granted the right to trade here. Even their very limited, very restricted presence effected change.

Kazuhiro pushed to his feet, water cascading off his body as he stepped out of the bath. He needed to stop his thoughts before they darkened his mood. He wouldn’t allow that to happen. Not when Jonathon was waiting for him.

Allowing Jonathon’s name to float through his mind vanquished his dark thoughts. He felt eager to go to him. Once he had him in the privacy of his chambers, he knew he wouldn’t be able to stop from touching him. Jonathon had almost broken his control that afternoon. Had the messenger not arrived, he knew he would’ve taken him.

The way Jonathon’s golden hair captured the sunlight made him want to run his fingers through it, to feel if it was as silken as it looked. But of all the beautiful attributes Jonathon had, it was his eyes that enchanted him. When he looked in them, their light blue reminded him of every spring day he’d ever lived, and a sense of calm came over him.

Kazuhiro pulled on his kimono and took up the obi, deciding to forego his loincloth as he wouldn't be wearing it long. Not if Jonathon was as anxious for him.

He left the bath, striding quickly toward his chambers. Stepping in, he found the servants had followed his orders and had set the low table with food. The scents of fresh, steamy rice, grilled fish, pickled radish and other vegetables came to him, but didn't stir his appetite. His body was focused on only one thing. He glanced toward his bedchamber, and through the open double doors, he saw his futon laid out.

He moved toward the doors that were open to the garden, feeling the warm night air wash over him. He leaned against the frame, looking out to the garden. Kazuhiro forced himself to be still and quiet, when what he wanted was to pace off his anxious energy. Each motion he made brushed the silk of his kimono against his cock, and it only added to his desire to have it buried in Jonathon's soft hole.

A tentative knock sounded on his outer door.

Kazuhiro glanced toward the door and called, "Enter."

The door slid open. The lantern threw a warm glow over Jonathon. He wore only a white shirt, tight brown trousers, and his feet were bare. It seemed he'd also decided to wear as few clothes as possible.

A smile came to Kazuhiro's lips. What a beautiful vision it would be to see his golden-haired lover in Japanese clothes. He would have to be sure to buy him a kimono, if for nothing else than his own pleasure.

As Jonathon slid the door closed, Kazuhiro started toward him. They met in the room's center. Kazuhiro saw Jonathon's gaze flick to the right at the futon. He grinned at how Jonathon seemed to share in having more interest towards that than the food. Jonathon brought his gaze back to him, and Kazuhiro drank in the sky blue of his eyes. He lifted his hand, cupping Jonathon's cheek, brushing his thumb along it.

Jonathon's eyes closed. He tipped his head into Kazuhiro's touch. As he opened his eyes, he let his gaze travel lower to where the dark blue kimono was parted in a wide V, showing Kazuhiro's smooth, muscular chest. Jonathon reached toward him, resting his palm flat on Kazuhiro's chest. The warmth of

Kazuhiro's body moved through his hand, and he could feel the deep, steady rhythm of his heart.

Kazuhiro took a half step closer. He laid his forehead on Jonathon's. Both of them closed their eyes as they shared the quiet intimacy. No words in any language were needed. Differences in culture and status didn't exist. At that moment, they were just two men, wanting to be together.

Jonathon ran his hand down Kazuhiro's chest. Reaching the obi, he worked the knot free. The sash slid through his fingers to the floor. The kimono parted. He got his first look at Kazuhiro's cock. It was fully hard, the foreskin drawn back from the head to reveal the wet slit.

Kazuhiro settled his hands on Jonathon's hips, slipping them beneath the cotton shirt. He slid them up Jonathon's sides, watching as more and more fair skin and a torso of lean muscle was exposed.

Jonathon lifted his arms to accommodate Kazuhiro in removing the shirt. As soon as it was off, he pressed his body to Kazuhiro, pushing aside the kimono to wrap one arm around Kazuhiro's waist. He rested his other hand on the side of Kazuhiro's neck and leaned forward to bring their lips together.

Kazuhiro drew his head back.

A soft smile curved Jonathon's lips. It seemed what he'd heard that kissing was not common here during intimacy was true. But he wanted to feel Kazuhiro's lips on his. He wanted to show him how good it could feel.

Jonathon touched his fingertips to Kazuhiro's lips and whispered, "Trust me."

Kazuhiro remained still, allowing Jonathon to bring their lips together. It was a gentle brush of soft skin. He was well familiar with *seppun* – kissing – as a way Westerners expressed affection. More than one courtesan attempted it with him, but he'd always refused. He had no desire to put his mouth on another's. It seemed unclean. Now, with pleasure tingling in his lips from the touch, he understood better.

Jonathon grazed his lips over Kazuhiro's again. He licked with the lightest touch of his tongue. Kazuhiro tensed, but didn't pull away.

Jonathon spoke, his lips close to Kazuhiro's. "Open your mouth a little for me."

Even with how close they were, he could see Kazuhiro gazing at him. Jonathon could tell he was trying to decide if he wanted to follow the request.

Slowly, Kazuhiro parted his lips.

Jonathon softly closed their mouths together and eased his tongue into Kazuhiro's mouth.

Kazuhiro focused on the new feeling. Jonathon's tongue was so soft in his mouth. Its movements going in and out mimicked a thrusting cock. Pleasure came from the slick gliding of it over his own tongue, and he felt himself becoming more aroused, wanting to respond and enter Jonathon's mouth, as well. He moved his tongue tentatively against Jonathon's, then pushed to go into his mouth. As Jonathon opened wider to accept him, a moan passing from Jonathon's mouth to his, Kazuhiro forgot all thoughts of it being unclean. All he wanted was to feel and taste more of him.

With Kazuhiro kissing him with equal passion, Jonathon turned them both so he could walk backward toward the futon.

Kazuhiro slowed the kiss, reluctantly drawing his lips away, and only doing so to see to opening Jonathon's trousers. Now he fully understood why Westerners shared their mouths. There was such intensity to the closeness, the intimacy of sharing and feeling each breath.

Jonathon dipped his head down to catch Kazuhiro's gaze, grinning at him. "Why are you smiling?"

Kazuhiro hooked his fingers over the top of Jonathon's trousers and met his gaze. "You've taught me something new, and I'm enjoying it."

Jonathon laid his hands over Kazuhiro's and pushed them down, making him lower the trousers. "Sometimes sharing cultures is a good thing."

"I'll agree in this regard."

As the trousers reached Jonathon's thighs, Kazuhiro lost all thought. Jonathon's hair around his cock...even it was golden. He didn't know why he thought it wouldn't be, but it still surprised him. As for the cock itself, it was a beautifully formed piece of flesh. The foreskin still covered the flair of the head. He gently pulled it back, caressing down the full hard length, and back up over the foreskin again to the head, smoothing the clear drops of pre-cum across the tip.

Jonathon's head fell back with a soft moan. Kazuhiro glanced up at him. Jonathon looked as though pleasure was overcoming him. He'd noticed it that afternoon, how when he drew close, when he touched him, Jonathon's responses were so strong. The wantonness only made him desire Jonathon more.

Kazuhiro watched him bend to remove the trousers, admiring how his muscles shifted and stretched. How was it that this stunning man from so very far away had come to him, and was now bare before him, ready to give his body to him? It left him in a state of wonder, but it was probably better that he not think on how Jonathon had truly come to him. If he did, his dark thoughts would return.

Jonathon straightened, and Kazuhiro moved behind him. He touched the base of Jonathon's neck and drew his fingers down the center of Jonathon's back in a feathery caress. He brushed over the rounded curves of Jonathon's ass. Kazuhiro slid his hand forward on Jonathon's hip. Jonathon stepped back, nestling his ass against Kazuhiro's cock.

Simply feeling the hot, hard rod against his ass was enough to make Jonathon moan. He tipped his head back, turning it to nuzzle Kazuhiro's cheek. Fingers wrapped tight around his cock, rough calluses from years of handling a sword gave a pleasant scratching sensation against his sensitive skin. Kazuhiro's warm breath washed against his cheek, and through his desire Jonathon heard a single word, "Kneel."

Without question or thought, Jonathon eased down to his knees on the futon. He expected Kazuhiro to drop behind him, but instead, the samurai lord walked a few paces away to a low chest. After retrieving something from inside, he turned to walk back to him. Jonathon watched the kimono floating around Kazuhiro nude body with each step, then noticed a glass vial – thick liquid moving inside – in Kazuhiro's hand.

Kazuhiro knelt behind him. There was a soft clink of the stopper being removed, and an instant later, cool oil was running down Jonathon's crack and over his hole. Kazuhiro's fingers followed, rubbing through it. Jonathon spread his knees further apart and lowered down to his elbows, doing all his could with his body to show Kazuhiro he wanted him. A low, appreciative

groan came from Kazuhiro as he pushed a finger into him.

Jonathon dropped his forehead to the futon. His breathing was already quick. His heart pounded, and warm throbbing pulsed through his cock. Drops leaked from it to drip beneath him. This was what he'd wanted, how he'd hoped and wished Kazuhiro would be. No rough fumbling. No driving into him for frantic copulation to meet an end. Kazuhiro was taking his time to ensure both their pleasure. As two fingers stretched him, Jonathon gripped the futon in both fists. He let out a high, needy moan. He had to have Kazuhiro's cock soon.

Kazuhiro heard all Jonathon wanted in the single moan. He drew his fingers out of him and oiled his cock. He pressed the tip to Jonathon's hole, pushing for entrance. Kazuhiro watched Jonathon's body stretch to accept him, squeezing his cock head. He closed his eyes and fought to control his breathing and body's urges as more of his cock became buried in Jonathon's heat.

He started thrusting. On each push, he was rewarded with moans and hushed needful noises from Jonathon. He could feel Jonathon's muscles tightening and loosening. Jonathon started rocking back on him, moving faster than he was thrusting into him, unabashed in his desperation for pleasure. Sensing Jonathon's pleasure was rising, Kazuhiro stopped and pulled out of him.

A shocked and distraught gasp left Jonathon. He snapped his head around to see him, ready to beg for Kazuhiro's cock, but Kazuhiro pushed on his hip, guiding him to roll to his back and lie down.

Jonathon quickly followed Kazuhiro's direction. Once on his back, he slid down the futon toward him and pulled his legs back, holding them in place with his hands under his knees. He lifted his head slightly to better see Kazuhiro, and the sight of Kazuhiro's hard, finely muscled body framed in the soft, elegant silk kimono only increased Jonathon's desperation to join their bodies again. It seemed even more sensual to him that Kazuhiro hadn't removed it.

Kazuhiro gripped Jonathon's hips and tugged him closer. His cock lined with Jonathon's hole, he sank into him again.

Jonathon tipped his head back, moaning loud and long. Kazuhiro gazed down at him, drinking in how Jonathon reveled in the pleasure. After entering him the first time, feeling Jonathon move, hearing his moans, he needed to look at Jonathon's face and see him when his climax claimed him. He knew it wouldn't be much longer. Fluid leaked from Jonathon's cock to roll off his abdomen and down his side.

Kazuhiro shifted his angle, aiming for the hidden spot inside all men that held so much pleasure. Jonathon sucked in a sharp breath, the fingers of one hand clenching the linens in a fist. Kazuhiro took Jonathon's cock in hand, stroking it firm and quick.

Jonathon's release hit him hard and fast. He groaned hard, his body shuddered as his cum left him, splashing across his chest and stomach.

A moan of admiration sounded in Kazuhiro's throat at the beauty of Jonathon lost in pleasure. He breathed in the salt and bitter scent of the thick, white fluid, then his own climax was on him.

Jonathon opened his eyes, watching ecstasy light Kazuhiro's features, feeling the gentle pulse of Kazuhiro's cock spilling cum inside him. He'd craved this for so long, to have a lover like Kazuhiro; kind, strong, skilled, intelligent, beautiful. His throat and chest constricted as he remembered why he was here. To do this with Kazuhiro was to earn his trust only to betray it. At least, that was his original purpose. Tonight, his only purpose was to be with a man who he'd felt drawn to the instant he saw him.

Kazuhiro eased out of him. He shifted around him and settled down to his back beside him. Jonathon rolled toward him, snuggling into Kazuhiro's side and laying his head on him. A single amused laugh left Kazuhiro, but he still held Jonathon with one arm around him. Jonathon smiled to himself. Such affection after lovemaking seemed to not be a usual habit for Kazuhiro, but it spoke volumes about Kazuhiro's character that he'd put their differences aside and was open to *his* needs.

Jonathon closed his eyes. There were so many things about Kazuhiro he didn't know, many things about his ways he didn't understand. But he did understand how others could be loyal to him and be ready to serve him until their death. Honor, pride, strength, compassion; that was Kazuhiro. To simply

be close to such qualities was enough to make him willing to give up his own freedom.

JONATHON WALKED down the hall toward Kazuhiro's chambers. His heart raced, his stomach churned with nerves. He wanted desperately to have this conversation with Kazuhiro, and at the same moment, he wished he could avoid it. After the time they'd spent together the night before...and that morning when Kazuhiro took him again, he feared what he was about to tell him would shatter the trust they'd built. He knew he couldn't delay any longer. If he did, it was certain all trust would be lost between them.

He wondered what this would mean for himself. Kazuhiro's death had meant his freedom. Providing he lived long enough to collect it. But he came to a conclusion in the quiet of the morning, as he lay watching the rising sun illuminate the garden, still feeling Kazuhiro's presence around him though Kazuhiro had already left for the day. What would be the point of freedom in body, when his mind and heart would forever be imprisoned by guilt?

He didn't know what the future would be for him and Kazuhiro, if there would be any future at all. What he did know was of all the men he'd ever known, none were as noble as Kazuhiro, and he'd rather be damned than take the life of so magnificent a man. Then to even consider doing so to appease the whims of one so lowly as Barrett disgusted him to the point of nausea.

Jonathon reached Kazuhiro's chambers. He stared at the closed door. It was quiet inside, but he was certain Kazuhiro was there. He'd seen him return, but Kazuhiro had hardly dismounted his horse before a servant rushed up to him with a message. It seemed important because Kazuhiro took it and hastened inside.

Jonathon drew in a deep breath and lifted his hand to knock. He hoped he wasn't interrupting him, but he couldn't wait any longer to speak with him. Before he could knock on the doorframe, Kazuhiro's voice came from in the room, "Enter, Jonathon-san."

For all his worry and concern, a smile came to him at hearing Kazuhiro say his given name. He slid the door open, seeing Kazuhiro on the other side

of the room seated before the open doors to the garden.

Kazuhiro paused in reading a letter, looking up to him with a smile. “Is there a reason why you’re lurking outside and not coming in?”

Jonathon stepped into the room, closing the door. He started toward him. “I was collecting my courage.”

Kazuhiro’s gaze moved down Jonathon’s body. “Your courage was unbound this morning and last night.”

Jonathon kneeled across from him, sitting on his heels. “It was easy to be courageous in that way with you.”

“Have I made you feel you can’t be so in other ways?”

Jonathon’s nervousness returned full force and silenced him. He lowered his gaze, unable to continue looking into Kazuhiro’s eyes. He opened his hand, which clenched the velvet pouch. He pulled the dark green bottle out of it and set it before Kazuhiro.

Kazuhiro stared at it, silent. All humor faded from his expression.

“Do you know what that is?” Jonathon asked.

Kazuhiro looked away from the bottle, his gaze focused out to the garden. “I have a suspicion.”

“It’s poison. Arsenic. That’s why I’m here. Barrett sent me to kill you.” Jonathon dropped his gaze again, his voice softening. “I have so much to tell you, starting with how I really came to be under Barrett’s control. What I said before, about knowing his nephew, that was true. Only, I didn’t give you the full details.

“I met the younger Barrett, Edgar, in a secret club where men go to be together. You see where I’m from, men are persecuted for wanting to share their body with another man, so we do so in secret to avoid arrest, scorn, and humiliation. I loathe going to such places, but I was so lonely. Sex would happen. I knew that. But it was the comfort of another person, a touch, a caress, the warmth of a body that I craved.

“Edgar...” Jonathon shook his head, “there were many things I didn’t care for with him, but company was thin that night, so I accepted his. We went to a private room, and he began undressing me. Roughly. When I asked him to be gentler, he shoved me to the bed. I began to struggle. Both of us fell off the

bed to the floor. Before I could recover, he punched me in the face. He pinned me to the floor by my throat, choking me as he hit me.

“I thought I was going to die. That’s when I saw the knife sticking out of his boot. I caught it, jamming it up toward him. The blade sank into his side. He threw himself off me, screaming, and I sprang up and fled the room...only to run into an officer, as the club had been uncovered. I was arrested and charged with more crimes than I can remember, or that I’d committed.

“While in prison, the elder Barrett came to see me, the wretch who’d taken advantage of his nephew. Though, as Barrett had stood outside the bars of my cell, a devious light in his eyes told me he had no concern for his nephew. Barrett was looking for a very specific tool for his plan against you, and I fit what he needed. With a little influence and a lot of money, Barrett got the charges dropped against me as we’d come to an agreement, my freedom in exchange for your life.”

As Jonathon finished, silence like a suffocating fog fell between them. Long seconds ticked by. He wished Kazuhiro would at least look at him. He scrambled through his thoughts for something to say, and only one thing came forth. “I’m sorry. I should have told you last night. Actually, I should’ve told you the moment we met.”

Kazuhiro spoke, his voice low. “Why didn’t you?”

“I...” Jonathon stopped. How could he say the truth? He couldn’t. If there was any trust in Kazuhiro’s heart toward him, that would surely break it. But Kazuhiro spoke what he feared to say himself.

“You needed time to decide if you were going to kill me.”

Jonathon swallowed and took a breath. “Yes.”

“Now you’ve made your decision?”

Jonathon gasped, shocked that Kazuhiro could think he would even still consider harming him. “Yes, of course. That’s why I’m here telling you everything.”

Kazuhiro slowly turned his head, looking into Jonathon’s eyes. “How do I know this isn’t a ploy?”

Jonathon shook his head in confusion. “How could it be?”

“By your claims of telling the truth to not lose my trust, you could hope to

gain further trust in which you could then have a greater advantage in taking my life.”

Jonathon’s mouth dropped open, the hurt that Kazuhiro could think him capable of such deceit making him speechless. His gaze dropped to the poison. Warranted, though, Kazuhiro’s thoughts may be.

He met Kazuhiro’s gaze. “I have no other agendas. I know there’s nothing I can say to make you believe otherwise. All I can offer is my word that your life will never be in danger from me.”

“And what of your freedom? If I live, Barrett won’t return you to your country, so what will you do?”

“I don’t need him to return to America. Yes, the arrangement was for his freeing me I would do this task, then he’d bring me back to live my life, but if I could make it to Hyogo Port where other American trade ships may be, I don’t think a captain would turn down one of his own countrymen in need. I certainly couldn’t return to San Francisco, but there was little left for me there. But, if I could have anything, I would rather...” Jonathon paused. How could he say this to him after all he’d told him? The trust between them was so delicate at this moment. To make any request of Kazuhiro could be more than the fragile trust could bear.

“Speak what you want,” Kazuhiro prompted.

Jonathon took a breath, letting the words rush out on his exhale. “I would rather stay here with you.”

The heavy silence returned. After several moments, Kazuhiro looked back to the letter he’d been reading when Jonathon came in. He folded it and tucked it in his kimono, then stood and turned to walk into his bedchamber. “I have to dress. I’ll be leaving soon.”

Jonathon shoved to his feet and moved to follow him. “Where are you going?”

Kazuhiro shot him a sharp glance over his shoulder that warned to not question him.

Despite the look, Jonathon pressed on. “Will you be returning tonight?”

“Forces greater than I will determine that.”

Jonathon’s chest tightened at the ominous words. He reached toward him,

resting his hand on Kazuhiro's arm, a small measure of relief washing through him that Kazuhiro didn't pull away. "Let me go with you."

"I have my men chosen for this mission."

All relief vanished. The truth behind Kazuhiro's words being he was going with men he knew he could trust. He felt selfish for even thinking it, but he had one more thing to ask. "What of my request? To stay with you?"

Kazuhiro stood silent for a long moment. Without looking at him, he said, "You had time to make your decision. I need time to make mine."

Jonathon slowly drew his hand back from him. He nodded, doing his best to understand, trying to think of any words, anyway, that could sway Kazuhiro to give him his trust, but to do so wouldn't be fair. Kazuhiro more than had right to make his decision without him trying to add bias.

But there was one thing he had to do.

Jonathon stepped around Kazuhiro. As he looked into Kazuhiro's eyes, he saw for as stern as Kazuhiro was attempting to be, there was hurt in his gaze. Jonathon lifted both hands, hoping Kazuhiro wouldn't back away from his touch. Kazuhiro didn't. He laid his hands gently on the sides of Kazuhiro's face and leaned toward him, touching their lips together in a tender, chaste kiss.

He ended the kiss, but kept his lips near Kazuhiro's. His voice came hushed, desperate. "Wherever you're going, please, *please* be careful."

He caressed both of Kazuhiro's cheeks as he stepped back. His gaze lowered, he walked from the room.

Kazuhiro stood motionless. He listened to the door slide open and shut again. He closed his eyes tight, fighting for control over new and unexpected emotions.

JONATHON MOVED through the dark and quiet courtyard. He looked up to a sky so black, each star burned with white luminescence. The nearly full moon was high, casting a silver glow from the heavens to earth. It was well past midnight, and Kazuhiro still hadn't returned.

From the words Kazuhiro spoke, it sounded as though he was going into

danger, but when he saw him leave, Kazuhiro didn't look like a man about to go into battle. Fresh from the bath, his hair perfectly set in the topknot, wearing fine clothing bearing his house seal of the two cranes, he looked like the noble lord he was. More so, he looked like a nobleman prepared for a night of pleasure in the city. Kazuhiro also wore his swords, but like all samurai, he always did.

Jonathon leaned back on a tree. He knew when he accepted Barrett's offer that he was making the wrong choice. If he were truly a courageous man, he would've accepted his fate and the hangman's noose instead. Cowardice and selfishness brought him here. He'd tried to right those wrong intentions with honesty, but the truth came too late. He didn't know what fate Kazuhiro would decide for him, but no matter what it was, he would accept it. This time, he wouldn't run.

"Addison-san, what are you doing out here?"

Jonathon turned toward the voice. Kita walked toward him. He replied in Japanese to the young samurai. "Admiring the night. Why are you out so late?"

Kita stopped in front of him. "I was on guard duty. Are you waiting for Lord Takezaki to return?"

A ghost of a smile came to Jonathon's lips. "Yes. That's the truth of why I'm out here."

Kita nodded, his gaze turning toward the gates leading out of the estate. "I understand. I won't be able to rest until he returns either. I implored him to take me with him tonight, but he said he needed strong men here."

Jonathon's heart started to pound quicker, fear for Kazuhiro spurring it. "Where exactly did he go?"

Kita looked at him. "He didn't tell you?"

Jonathon shook his head.

Kita shifted his stance, seeming suddenly uncomfortable. "Then I've already said too much. If he didn't confide in you-"

"It was to not worry me," Jonathon interrupted. He had to get the truth from Kita. "He and I, we've become...close. But I still worry. It would comfort me greatly if you told me."

Kita's voice quieted. "I don't think knowing the truth would bring you comfort."

Jonathon took a step closer to him, trying to express his desperation in his eyes and voice. "Please, tell me."

Kita stayed silent for a moment, then lifted his gaze to meet Jonathon's. "He's leading an attack on some of the Shogun's men."

Jonathon's heart stumbled in its heavy pound. His breathing stopped.

"A few days ago, the Shogun's men attacked and killed Ito Hidemasa," Kita continued. "He was a minor lord, and mostly a lord only in title, as his lands and wealth are minimal. He was a good man, but a poor leader, and that cost his clan a great deal. He released many of his retainers, and Lord Takezaki took many in. But Ito-san was a harmless old man. He *did* speak out in support for the Emperor, but he had no means to support him. His death was unnecessary, and it seems his life was taken for no other reason than an opportunity to kill a sympathizer of the Emperor."

"His son, Hidetoshi, sent a message to Lord Takezaki asking for his assistance in obtaining revenge. The Ito and Takezaki have been allies for several generations, and Hidetoshi was a lover to Lord Takezaki."

Jonathon tensed at the last statement. He tried to quell the jealousy that sprang up in him at hearing of Kazuhiro running to the aid of a former lover.

"It's not surprising with the history between their families that Lord Takezaki would avenge Ito-san. It's the honorable thing to do. By the pace the men who killed Ito-san were traveling, they would arrive in Kyoto today. Lord Takezaki believed that like most men who have been traveling and who have shed blood, they would visit the pleasure district tonight, and it's there he plans to attack. But since it was a covert attack on Ito-san, Lord Takezaki plans to respond in the same way to try and avoid inciting more bloodshed. He doesn't want this incident to further fuel the rebellion. He and the other men are under the guise of seeking their own enjoyable night, hoping to find them, and when they do..."

Kita didn't need to finish the sentence for Jonathon to know what would happen, and he couldn't let Kazuhiro face it alone. "We have to go to him."

"We can't. He said-"

“I don’t care what he said!”

Kita startled, his eyes wide.

Jonathon took a deep breath to gather what few shreds of calm he had. He needed to remember where he was, how things were done. “I understand and respect Lord Takezaki’s wishes, but we have to help him.”

Kita shook his head. “He ordered me to stay here.”

“Yes, for guard duty. But you said your watch is over now. You’ve been relieved by another, correct?”

“Yes, but...”

“So your time is yours now. What’s to stop you from going to the pleasure district yourself for a night of enjoyment?”

“I would still ask Lord Takezaki’s permission to ensure he had no further need of me.”

“But he’s not here, and where he’s at, he *does* need you. I know you’re torn between following your orders, but you’ve done your duty as Lord Takezaki requested. And isn’t your greatest duty above all others to protect him?”

Jonathon could see struggle and internal battle over what to do in Kita’s expression. He felt terrible doing this to him, but there was no one else who he could even hope to convince to take him to Kazuhiro.

Kita spoke slowly. “I’m sorry, Addison-san, I can’t-”

Jonathon turned from him, walking away. “I understand, Kita-san. I’m sure I can find the pleasure district on my own.”

Kita hastened after him. “You can’t go alone.”

“I don’t have a choice.”

Jonathon heard Kita swear under his breath, then the footsteps that were trailing him stopped.

“You can’t go in those clothes. Any samurai who’s against foreigners will kill you on sight.”

Jonathon stopped and looked back to him.

Kita scowled, but turned toward the mansion.

Jonathon knew to follow without Kita directly expressing it. Entering the home behind him, he realized Kita must have a room there rather than sleeping

in the barracks, showing his favored position with Kazuhiro.

Kita slid open a door and went inside. Jonathon stepped in after him.

Already digging in a chest, Kita pulled out a faded green kimono, along with flowing black hakama trousers. Next he retrieved an obi and a pair of sandals. He closed the chest, laying the clothing atop it, and started toward the door. “Dress quickly.”

As Kita stepped out of the room, Jonathon stood still and stared at the clothes. He wasn’t even entirely sure how to wear everything, but he had little choice. He stripped, and picked up the kimono. In another time, he would’ve enjoyed the slide of the silk over his skin. Now, he was donning these clothes for a purpose. He folded it over in front as he’d seen it worn, but when he tried to wrap the obi around his waist, he fumbled with the long sash, trying to manage getting it around, not twisting it, and keeping the kimono closed in front.

The door slid open, Kita reappearing with a long and short sword in hand. He paused long enough to take in Jonathon, then shook his head at him. Without a word, he took the obi from him and helped him finish dressing. He grabbed the swords and pushed them through the sash. “You might not know how to use them, but you can’t go into the city unarmed and this will help with the disguise that you’re a samurai.”

Jonathon rested his hand on the hilt of the katana. “I think I can manage with them well enough.”

Kita let out a snort to express his lack of confidence. He opened the chest again and pulled out a wide, conical shaped straw hat. He placed it on Jonathon’s head, tying it beneath his chin. “Keep your head down and don’t talk to anyone, even in Japanese. Your pronunciation will tell everyone what you are.”

Jonathon adjusted the hat and nodded, picking up the sandals.

Kita strode quickly toward the door. “Stay close. We have to go out the back. If we try through the front gates, the guards will never let you out.”

Kita led him to the garden, where they both stepped into their sandals. Keeping to the edge and shadows, waiting for a patrolling guard to pass by, Kita guided him to a small gate built into the wall and bolted with a rusty

latch. They waited in silence. Jonathon could tell Kita was listening. In a single quick movement, Kita wrenched the latch free, opening the gate just enough to slip through to the alley beyond.

Jonathon no sooner closed the gate than Kita sprang into a run. He rushed to catch up to him, jogging only a couple paces behind him, one hand on the swords to both steady them and feel the reassurance of them on his hip. He felt clumsy in the sandals, the clothing awkward to him, but he pushed it aside to focus on keeping pace with Kita as he weaved down narrow, dark alleys. Kita turned down one, darted down another, guiding him through what Jonathon thought was a veritable labyrinth in trying to avoid main streets.

These backstreets showed none of the beauty of Kyoto. The buildings closed in around them. They dodged around baskets, barrels, and refuse. Only the moon and the occasional weak lantern lit their way. The soft, steady falls of their sandaled feet sounded in the night.

Jonathon's breathing came heavy, his lungs burned for more air than he was giving them. He could feel fatigue beginning to weigh down his legs, and wondered how much longer they were going to run. Kita didn't seem the least bit fatigued or winded, proof of his years of training to be an exceptional warrior.

The silence broke with the distant sound of voices. Ahead, Jonathon saw the alley met with a wide street. Lanterns in red dyed rice paper hung at the end of it. Kita slowed his pace to a walk, and true to Jonathon's suspicion, the young samurai seemed unfazed from the run other than a light sheen of sweat on his brow.

As they reached the end of the alley, Kita put out his arm, stopping him from coming too close. He peered up one way, the other, then with a nod, dropped his arm and stepped out to the street.

Jonathon followed, doing his best to keep his head lowered so as to hide his face, but sounds of revelry broke his willpower. He looked up as a samurai passed by, a large bottle slung over his shoulder with his finger looped through a straw rope around the neck. From the way the samurai wavered with each step, Jonathon felt it was a good guess to say the bottle held *sake*, rice wine, which he'd tasted for the first time the night before with Kazuhiro.

Raucous laughter came from the teahouses, which sold more *sake* than tea at this hour. The scents of noodles and fried vegetables drifted out the doorways. As they passed one doorway, the curtain pushed aside, Jonathon's gaze was drawn in by the sound of delicate music. On a small stage, a beautiful woman, her face white with rice powder, her lips deep crimson, danced with two brightly colored fans, while another woman worked the strings of a samisen.

They came upon yet another building, where women sat in a large window behind wooden bars. The kimono fell off the shoulder of one woman. The red paint on another's bottom lip was smeared down to her chin. One more had a purple bruise around her eye. They all looked tired and haggard. One called out to Kita in a lifeless voice, offering her services.

Jonathon's heart went out to the women. Keeping his voice hushed, he said, "I thought geishas were supposed to be elegant and respected."

"Those are not geishas. Just common whores. And I told you to keep your head down."

Jonathon dropped his head...and ran into Kita's back. "If I'm to keep my head down, you can't stop without warning."

Kita replied in a harsh whisper, "Lord Takezaki."

Jonathon snapped his head up, peering over Kita's shoulder. Kazuhiro and five of his samurai stood outside an opulent teahouse. Their gazes were focused up the street, where a band of six loud and laughing samurai were coming out of a brothel.

Kazuhiro and his men started toward them. Kita jumped into a quick walk as if to catch up. Jonathon moved with equal speed.

As they two groups met, Kazuhiro moved into the path of one swaying samurai, allowing the other to bump into him. He spun, shoving the man back, shouting about the offense. The samurai yelled back. One in the group pushed another. Chaos began to break out in a matter of a few heartbeats. The sound of swords sliding free filled the night. Steel shone in the moonlight.

Kita broke into a full run. Jonathon surged past him, his gaze locked on Kazuhiro.

Kazuhiro snapped his sword up, blocking a strike from the offending

samurai. The samurai swung his sword around to attack Kazuhiro's other side. Kazuhiro twisted and blocked again. One of Kazuhiro's men cried out, crumpling to the ground with his hand over his abdomen, blood already covering it. The samurai who'd brought him down spun toward Kazuhiro, lunging at his back.

"Kazuhiro! Behind you!" Jonathon shouted.

Kazuhiro whipped around at the sound of Jonathon's voice, the movement saving him from getting a sword in his back, but the attacker's blade sliced across the top of his left arm. He leaped back. Kazuhiro's thoughts raced too fast, too strong, for him to notice the pain. Jonathon-san. He couldn't be here. But the voice...

Kazuhiro's reflexes reacted faster than his mind, his arms rising to save him from another strike. His mind fell back into the battle. All thoughts gone save for those of the fight. In an instant, he saw both his opponents closing in on him. His men were held back with their own enemies, fighting hard. He would have to defeat the two samurai on his own.

Both rushed him. Kazuhiro swept to the side, avoiding the sword of one, knocking aside the sword of the other with his blade. The action of stopping one, gave the second the little time needed to make another attack. In a flash through his mind, Kazuhiro saw there was no way to win. They were fast, skilled, and though individually he could defeat them, together they were using each other as a distraction to create openings.

The first samurai came at him. Kazuhiro leaped to meet him, knowing it would leave his back exposed. But if he was to die, he would take one of them with him.

Kazuhiro caught his opponent's sword with his, steel sliding against steel. He directed the other samurai's blade to the side, aiming the point of his at the attacker's chest. As his sword met flesh and bone, he waited for the blow to his back.

A grunt of pain sounded behind him. He snapped his head around. Shock stole his breath. Jonathon faced off against the second samurai, whose chest was soaked with blood from a deep gash. Jonathon clenched the long sword in both hands, but his grip was wrong and weak, his stance unstable. He must've

caught the samurai by surprise, but it wouldn't be enough to save Jonathon now that the samurai was on guard. Kazuhiro saw the other was ready to attack again.

He yanked his sword from his enemy and whirled around just as Jonathon's opponent made his move. Catching Jonathon around the waist with one arm, he spun him away, putting himself between Jonathon and the samurai's sword. He blocked the strike, and as he did, two of his men appeared, driving his opponent back and finishing him.

Kazuhiro quickly surveyed the area. His men were all standing, save for Akai-san. He didn't need to look closer to know Akai was gone. He closed his eyes, giving a moment of mourning and silently promising to hold a funeral fitting of Akai's bravery. He saw injuries on two of his other men, but they weren't life threatening. He also saw Kita standing beside Nakano-san, the older samurai shaking his head at the younger.

Kazuhiro turned, looking at Jonathon, who was also taking in the death. Jonathon glanced up, and he gazed into the blue eyes. What was he doing here? It was obvious Kita had brought him. He noticed the hat, now behind Jonathon's head, as it must've blown back from running. Jonathon was sweaty, dirty, as though he'd run the entire way, and he was wearing...

Kazuhiro looked down Jonathon's body at the kimono, the swords, the hakama, the sandals. Jonathon had clearly come to find him, to help him. And Jonathon had saved him.

Kazuhiro stepped close to him, touching Jonathon's hand with a brush of his fingers. "Are you hurt?"

Jonathon shook his head, his gaze going to Kazuhiro left arm and the slashed, blood-soaked sleeve of his kimono. "But you are."

"I'd be hurt worse if you hadn't come." A grin tipped up one corner of his lips. "Even if I have a feeling you manipulated Kita to bring you."

As if knowing his lord had spoken his name, Kita rushed up to Kazuhiro's side. He dropped to the ground, fully prostrating himself before Kazuhiro. "My lord, please forgive me for disobeying your orders."

"Stand up, Kita-san. Blood's covering the ground, and seeing you covered in it is far more offensive to me than your actions."

Kita scrambled to his feet, whispering Kazuhiro's name before falling speechless.

Kazuhiro smiled at him. "You did well. But now I'm going to give you another order and see that you obey exactly. Escort Jonathon-san home safely."

Kita bowed deeply to him again. "Yes, Takezaki-sama."

Jonathon laid his hand on Kazuhiro's uninjured arm. "Can't I stay?"

Kazuhiro shook his head. "Authorities will be here soon to question about what happened. You need to leave quickly or your presence will complicate things." He reached over Jonathon's shoulder and pulled the hat up, pushing it down on Jonathon's head. "Go with Kita-san. I'll return to you soon."

Jonathon couldn't contain his smile, brought by the joy of Kazuhiro's words, *I'll return to you soon*. He wanted to throw his arms around him, to feel Kazuhiro's warm, solid body and know he was truly all right. But he knew such a display of open emotion and affection would be considered unseemly by those watching, and he didn't want to embarrass Kazuhiro.

Jonathon nodded and stepped around him, passing close enough to at least brush against him. As he approached the other men, they all bowed to him. He was stunned by their display of respect and returned their bows. He neared Nakano. The samurai looked into his eyes, then bent forward in a stiff bow. Jonathon's shock froze him for a moment. He came out of it and bowed to the older samurai. As he straightened, he gave Nakano a smile, but the older samurai's expression remained stoic, though not as hard as before.

As Jonathon followed Kita, he glanced back and saw Kazuhiro watching him with a smile.

SITTING ON the veranda in the garden, feeling the night weakening with dawn drawing closer, Jonathon continued to wait for Kazuhiro. When he and Kita had arrived back at the mansion, he washed and soaked in the tub, hoping Kazuhiro would arrive while he was in it. But he didn't. He wondered what was taking so long. Worry began to invade his heart that Kazuhiro could've been attacked again.

“Jonathon-san.”

Jonathon snapped his head around, his gaze shooting up to meet Kazuhiro’s eyes. Kazuhiro had moved in such silent grace, he hadn’t heard him approach. He still wore the same blood stained kimono and looked fresh from fight. He must’ve arrived home and came directly to him.

Jonathon sprang to his feet and flung his arms around him. Kazuhiro laughed softly, and Jonathon knew it was both out of amusement at his unhindered affection and out of happiness. “You’re safe.”

“You assured that before.”

Jonathon leaned back from him to meet his eyes. “I know, but I was beginning to worry.” He looked toward Kazuhiro’s injured arm. “We still need to take care of your wound.”

“I had it tended before I came home.”

Silence fell over them, but where before its weight had been almost more than Jonathon could bear, now he could feel their closeness in it.

Kazuhiro brushed his thumb along Jonathon’s cheek. He leaned toward him, touching his lips gently to Jonathon’s.

Emotion rushed through Jonathon. Kazuhiro had initiated a kiss. To have Kazuhiro do such a thing, and especially after their words that afternoon, meant more to him than words existed to describe. He opened his mouth for Kazuhiro’s tongue, sucking on it, caressing it, with his own.

As the kiss ended, Kazuhiro spoke softly. “I still need to bathe. Come with me.”

Jonathon walked at his side as Kazuhiro turned to go in. Kazuhiro collected clothing, and Jonathon noticed he tucked the vial of oil among the clothes. All fatigue in his body was forgotten.

In the bath, Kazuhiro placed the clothes on a shelf. As he started untying the obi, Jonathon moved in front of him and took over in loosening it. Gently, he removed Kazuhiro’s clothing, noticing the gash on his arm had been neatly sewn. When he pulled the loincloth away, he saw Kazuhiro’s cock was half filled and fast on its way to being fully hard.

Kazuhiro reached up to undo the binding for his topknot.

Jonathon caught his hands. “Let me.”

Kazuhiro lowered his hands in acceptance.

Jonathon led him to the small stool, standing behind him as Kazuhiro sat. He unbound the topknot, Kazuhiro's hair spilling down to past his shoulders. It was the first he'd seen him with it down, and with how Kazuhiro folded his hair in the particular style of topknot he wore, Jonathon had no idea it was so long.

Jonathon combed his fingers through the silken, ebony strands. "Your hair is beautiful."

A pleasure filled groan sounded low in Kazuhiro's throat. "I thought the same the first time I saw you. I'd never seen hair so golden."

Jonathon picked up a bucket filled with warm water. "Shall I wash you?"

Kazuhiro smiled. "Only if you undress, as well."

Jonathon quickly shed his clothes. As he lifted the bucket again, Kazuhiro closed his eyes and tipped his head back. Jonathon poured the water slowly over Kazuhiro's head, watching as his hair became saturated. Rivulets rolled down Kazuhiro's body around the curves of muscle. He ran his fingers through Kazuhiro's hair, and poured another bucket over him.

Taking up a cloth and rice bran soap, he began going over Kazuhiro's body. He kneeled close to him, kissing, licking, touching, every part of him he washed. Kazuhiro's face, neck, shoulders, back, chest, abdomen, Jonathon sought to explore all of him. Throughout it all, hushed moans left Kazuhiro.

Jonathon glanced down at Kazuhiro's hard cock, waiting for its turn in the ritual. Kazuhiro had incredible patience to not rush him, but he also thought Kazuhiro was enjoying this just as much. And to Jonathon, it was more than foreplay. It was connecting with Kazuhiro again.

Jonathon ran the cloth down Kazuhiro's thighs, over his feet. He pushed Kazuhiro's knees wider apart, his gaze focused on the solid rod and soft sac hanging beneath. He poured a stream of water over it, earning a louder groan from Kazuhiro. Setting the bucket aside, he leaned forward, his lips a fraction from touching the head, letting his breath caress it. He could tell Kazuhiro's breathing had quickened in anticipation with the rise and fall of his chest. Clear drops filled the slit. Jonathon drew his tongue slowly over the pre-cum.

Kazuhiro settled his hand in Jonathon's hair on the back of his head.

Jonathon knew the gesture was of affection, but it was also a sign to how much Kazuhiro wanted in his mouth. Kazuhiro stood, the tip of his cock brushing Jonathon's lips as he rose. Jonathon took just the tip in, sucking at it while licking at the slit.

Kazuhiro's fingers tightened in Jonathon's hair. He pushed his hips forward, asking with his body for Jonathon to take more of his cock. Jonathon opened wider, allowing him to slide his cock in deep.

Jonathon sucked up to the head again, then back down the shaft. He took hold of Kazuhiro's hips, jerking him forward. Kazuhiro placed his other hand on Jonathon's head, holding it gently with both, and rocked his hips, his cock gliding in and out of Jonathon's mouth.

Jonathon tasted the salt of pre-cum and moaned around Kazuhiro's cock. He felt Kazuhiro shudder, saw his abdomen clench and release. He sucked harder on him, wanting Kazuhiro to spill his fluid in his mouth, but Kazuhiro drew his hips back until his cock slipped out of Jonathon's mouth. He gripped Jonathon's arm and pulled him to his feet, turning him to face the tub.

Jonathon gripped the edge, bending forward and spreading his legs wide. Kazuhiro stepped away from him, but returned quickly. He wrapped one arm around Jonathon's waist, pressing his body close as he eased two oiled fingers into him. Jonathon groaned between clenched teeth. The pleasure of Kazuhiro's touch making it so he could only focus on him.

Kazuhiro thrust his fingers in him a few times, but his own need to be inside him took over. He pulled his fingers away and put his oil slicked cock at Jonathon's hole. As he pressed it in, Jonathon pushed back, taking it deeper faster. Kazuhiro grabbed a fistful of Jonathon's hair and tugged his head back as he sank fully into him, pleasure overwhelming him at having his cock wrapped in Jonathon's tightness and heat.

Pushing, thrusting, grinding against each other, they set a frantic, urgent pace.

Jonathon moaned each time their bodies slammed together. Along with holding him by the hair, Kazuhiro had a firm grip on his hip, as if Kazuhiro needed to feel his body and keep him close. He felt the same way. After the danger of the night and his fear he'd never have Kazuhiro like this again, to

feel Kazuhiro's strong body, knowing he was safe, compounded his pleasure.

Kazuhiro's muscles tightened. A breathless moan left him, and he thrust faster. He released Jonathon's hip to take his cock in hand. A few strokes was all Jonathon needed. He bucked against Kazuhiro, moaning loud as he came.

Kazuhiro drove into him hard, adding his voice to Jonathon's as his cock pulsed and throbbed, shooting his release deep into his golden-haired lover.

Kazuhiro rested inside him, his eyes closed, savoring the feel of Jonathon's body rising and falling beneath him in quick breaths. After a few long moments, he stood straight and took a step back, easing his softening cock out of him.

Jonathon turned to him, wrapping his arms around him as he delivered a languid kiss. He rested his forehead on Kazuhiro's. "Shall we get in the bath?"

Kazuhiro nodded. "Briefly, or I may fall asleep in it."

Jonathon gave him another gentle kiss. "You survived a sword fight tonight. I certainly won't lose you in a bath."

Kazuhiro smiled and climbed into the tall tub. As he settled in the water, Jonathon sat next to him, resting his head on Kazuhiro's shoulder. Kazuhiro wrapped one arm around him, burying his nose in Jonathon's hair.

"Why did you come to me tonight?" Kazuhiro whispered.

"I feared for your safety. After I learned the truth from Kita, I had to come to you. I didn't know how much help I could be, but I couldn't know you were going into danger and not be there with you."

Kazuhiro tipped his head back on the tub's edge, a heavy and tired sigh leaving him. "You continue to surprise me."

"Is that good or bad?"

"I haven't decided."

Jonathon lifted his head, looking at him. "Is that the only thing you're undecided about?"

Kazuhiro stayed quiet for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was soft. "Why do you want to stay with me? Why wouldn't you want to go home to your own people? Your own ways?"

"I like your ways. And I have no one back home who cares that I'm gone. No one who's waiting for me to return." Jonathon brushed Kazuhiro's cheek

with his thumb. “And I want to stay with you because after just a few short days, I find myself caring for you so very much.”

Kazuhiro closed his eyes as if he were holding off inner pain. “I want you to be safe, and things are only going to grow more dangerous here.” His voice hushed more. “I could never forgive myself if something happened to you. It would be better if some of my men escorted you to Hyogo Port.”

Jonathon sat up and shifted around until he was straddling Kazuhiro’s lap. “How can I get on a ship and travel thousands of miles away knowing I’m leaving you behind to face everything alone? That upsets me more than the thought of any danger here. And haven’t I already proven I can take care of myself?”

“To some regard.”

Jonathon blinked, startled by his response. “What do you mean?”

A half smirk curved one corner of Kazuhiro’s lips. “You fight terribly with a Japanese sword.”

A laugh broke from Jonathon, easing some of the tension. “But if I stay, you can teach me to use one better.” He brought his lips closer to Kazuhiro’s, whispering, “Do you really want me to go?”

“No.”

“Then will you let me stay with you?”

Another sigh left Kazuhiro. “Yes. Even if I don’t know if it’s the right thing to do.”

“It will be. There’s just one thing that concerns me.”

“What?”

“Barrett. When he finds out you’re still alive and I’m with you, he could send someone else to kill you.”

“Then we’ll have to eliminate that threat.”

“I agree, and I have a plan, but it’ll still require a trip to Hyogo Port. One thing about Barrett, he’s underestimated me, looking at me only for what he saw on the surface and judging me based on my *personal* preferences.”

Kazuhiro ran his fingers through Jonathon’s hair, enjoying the soft slide of it between his fingers. “Your beauty makes it seem as though you’re soft, delicate, but you’re like a sword in a gilded scabbard. The real strength is

inside.”

Jonathon gently cupped Kazuhiro’s face in both hands. “Then if that’s what you believe, don’t think of sending me away. Let me stand and fight at your side, to share in your beliefs and what you care for.”

Kazuhiro’s voice hushed. “You should know, you may be on the losing side.”

Jonathon cocked his head in confusion. “Why do you say that?”

“Even if the Emperor is placed back in full power, he’ll also eventually bend to the outsiders’ will – despite his promises – and sell our country to them. There are many among us, besides the Shogun, who see the profit to be gained from allowing others in.” He drew his fingers down Jonathon’s cheek, neck, to the center of his chest. “I’m not so extreme in my beliefs that I feel we shouldn’t associate at all with the outside world. There’s a lot we can learn from each other. I *do* see the value in that. I only want to ensure we as a country, as a people, don’t lose ourselves.”

“But if you believe if the Emperor is placed back in power, that he’ll do the same as the Shogun, why would you still fight?”

“Because I’m not fighting for him. The Emperor has yet to prove himself, but the Shogun has already shown what kind of man he is, and it’s one who’s not worthy of his position. I’ll fight for what I believe in, and that’s to remind others to not forget who we are. I would rather fight knowing I’ll lose, than stand back and do nothing. Apathy is one of the worst traits a man can have.”

Jonathon nodded. Simply listening to Kazuhiro’s words invigorated him. He’d never been around anyone who stood so strongly, so bravely, for what they believed in. “Hearing you explain it makes me want to stay by you even more.” He paused, one thing still nagging at his mind. “But, if my presence could complicate things between you and Ito Hidetoshi...”

One of Kazuhiro’s slender eyebrows lifted in a look of amusement. “Jealousy is also not a becoming trait.”

“I’m hardly jealous.”

Kazuhiro continued to stare at him, clearly not believing him.

Jonathon huffed. “Maybe there’s a trace of jealousy, but I mainly want to know where I stand.”

“Exactly where you are now.” Kazuhiro wrapped his arms around Jonathon’s lower back and pulled him forward so his hard cock was tucked behind Jonathon’s ass, resting between the cheeks. “My actions tonight were less aiding a former lover than they were seeking justice for the wrongful killing of an old family friend.”

Jonathon looped his arms loosely around Kazuhiro’s neck. “I understand. I didn’t mean to seem jealous, but after what Kita told me of the situation and how things were between us earlier, I couldn’t help but wonder.”

“Kita-san talks too much. I’ve told him that more than once, and it looks like I’ll need to tell him again.”

“Don’t be upset at him. I’m grateful he told me what he did. If he hadn’t, I may have just stayed here waiting for you, and then who knows what could’ve happened. And it *did* take some convincing on my part to get him to take me to you.”

Kazuhiro made a grumbling noise of agreement. “I’ll grant him a reprieve this time, but more because of him putting you in a kimono than of his assistance.”

Smiling, Jonathon rocked his hips so his fully filled cock rubbed against Kazuhiro’s abdomen. “So you enjoyed seeing me dressed like that?”

Kazuhiro gripped Jonathon ass in both hands. “Very much. Though, you’re deserving of something finer than his secondhand clothing.” He lifted his hips, his cock-head touching Jonathon’s hole. “Which is why I’m having a few kimonos specially made for you.”

Jonathon pulled his head back to better look into his eyes. “You are?”

Kazuhiro nodded. “From the best kimono maker in Kyoto. I ordered it all this evening before going to the pleasure district.”

Jonathon playfully splashed water at him. “Then you’d already decided you were going to let me stay with you!”

Kazuhiro laughed. “Yes, but after your rash actions tonight, I thought it might be best to send you back to America before you got yourself killed.”

Jonathon gasped in pretending offense. “You’re cruel to me.”

Still grinning, Kazuhiro moved one hand off Jonathon’s ass to grip his own cock, pressing it more firmly to Jonathon’s hole. “Do you not like it?”

Jonathon sat back, pushing his ass down until the broad head penetrated him. His eyes slowly closed. He sank further down Kazuhiro's cock, moaning soft and low. "I do. So very much."

He touched his lips to Kazuhiro's, joy rushing through him in knowing he would get to stay in the arms of his samurai.

JONATHON PACED the inn's small room. He'd left the door leading out to the inn open, and also opened the second door going outside to a garden. Sweat dampened his skin, but he wasn't sure if it was from the summer heat, or nerves at waiting for this confrontation. He stopped before the door to the outside, gazing at the garden.

He couldn't begin to predict how this meeting would go. The last place Barrett would expect him would be Hyogo Port, and he was certain when he'd sent his message to Barrett's ship, the man's jaw had to drop. He wondered if Barrett would even meet him. He hadn't replied back. It could be Barrett was so infuriated that he was alive, he would ignore his plea to give him safe passage back to America after not being able to take Kazuhiro's life.

But that wasn't the type of man Barrett was. He *would* be infuriated, and that fury would bring Barrett here to kill him on his own.

"You pathetic, worthless bastard."

Jonathon tensed at the snarling voice. He glanced over his shoulder, locking his gaze with Barrett's condemning one.

Barrett marched into the room, slamming the sliding door closed so hard, it bounced off the frame to be left slightly open. He stopped inches from Jonathon's face. "You're a little piece of shit, and I should've known better than to think you could do this job!"

Jonathon flinched at the spittle flying from Barrett's lips and took a step back. "I just couldn't do it."

"Of course you couldn't! You're weak, like all of *your* kind, and you lost yourself in sinful ways."

Jonathon snorted, carrying a sardonic tone as he spoke. "Yes, because me sharing my body with another man is much more sinful than plotting murder

or profiting off war.”

Barrett stepped close to Jonathon again. “And look at yourself.” He flicked his hand at the light blue kimono Jonathon wore. “You’re even dressed like the heathens. I should’ve gone with my gut that you couldn’t be trusted. I’ve come to the conclusion my nephew’s story was the true one, that you lured him to that place of debauchery and then tried to rob him. You’re a manipulator and a deceiver. You disgust me.”

On his final word, Barrett lashed out, backhanding Jonathon across the cheek.

The force of the hit knocked Jonathon to the side. He closed his eyes against the pain. He moved his hand toward the wakizashi on his hip and snapped upright, unsheathing the short sword in a single, fluid movement, landing the tip at Barrett’s throat. He glared into Barrett’s eyes. “I won’t deny I have those qualities. They’re what brought you here, after all.”

A harsh laugh left Barrett. “You don’t have what it takes to kill me. You didn’t even have it when my nephew was forcing himself on you, as you claimed, but then I’m sure you enjoyed that.”

“You can think what you want about me. You have since the moment you saw me. But even if you think I’m not capable of driving this sword through your throat, what are your thoughts on them?”

As he finished, Kazuhiro stepped through the outer door, Nakano and Kita following him. Through the door from the inn came Tanaka and Kawada. All surrounded Barrett. Kazuhiro stood at Jonathon’s side.

Barrett snapped his gaze back to Jonathon. “You traitorous son of a bitch!”

“That’s your point of view,” Jonathon said. “Mine is that I’m standing for what I believe in.”

“What you believe in? You’re betraying one of your own!”

“First, other than race and country, there are *no* connections between you and me. And second, what I believe is to not propagate and profit from war. You don’t even have a side you care more for, one who you believe is in the right. All you care is that your pockets keep getting fatter with every gun you sell and every bullet that’s shot.”

“Listen to you, suddenly so righteous. Did you discover your new morality

when your legs were wrapped around him?”

Jonathon clenched the sword. “Kazuhiro-sama, you better take over before I open his throat.”

Kazuhiro laid his hand on Jonathon’s arm, bringing the sword down. He spoke in English to Barrett. “You have two paths before you, Barrett. Leave and never return, and you’ll live. Or stay and you’ll die.”

Barrett’s lips curled in disgust. “Do you think I believe that you’re going to let me walk out of here?”

“Yes.”

Barrett stared at Kazuhiro. His gaze darted to the other samurai, then back to Kazuhiro. “Why would you?”

“Because I’m not you. I give even my enemies a fair chance. That’s why I came here to give you a warning to leave. If you don’t, it’s certain you’ll die. If not by my hand or those of my men, then by those of another daimyo. Word is traveling very quickly that you’ve been selling weapons to mutual enemies while trying to keep your dealings secret to each.”

Barrett attempted to take a step toward Kazuhiro, but the hiss of swords being pulled free stopped him. “What difference does it make? If they’re not getting guns from me, they’re getting them from someone else.”

“True, but no one likes to know that while you’ve been so graciously helping them gain an advantage in arms, you’ve been doing the same to their enemy. Suddenly that advantage means nothing and now the probability of their own death has increased. They feel betrayed. If you continue your business, with each daimyo you meet, you’ll never know if he’s meeting with you to buy arms, or to correct the insult you’ve committed.”

Barrett glared at Kazuhiro in silent contempt.

Jonathon could see Barrett trembled slightly, but whether it was from fear or rage, he wasn’t sure. If he had to hazard a guess, he would say rage. He was sure Barrett couldn’t see through his righteous indignation to the truth in Kazuhiro’s words.

Kazuhiro stepped closer to Barrett, his expression hardening, his eyes becoming colder. His voice lowered to a threatening timbre. “Make your decision now, or I’ll make it for you.”

Barrett visibly swallowed. "I'll leave."

Kazuhiro gave a derisive snort. "As I expected. To men like you, there's nothing more important than money, except your own life, and if you're to enjoy your precious wealth, you have to live."

Barrett looked back to him. "If you think my leaving changes anything, you're wrong. Another guns merchant will take my place."

"I'm well aware of that. You're not the first arms dealer to come to Japan, you won't be the last. You are, however, the most vile, and seeing you go is victory enough. My men and I will escort you to your ship."

"I don't need your damn protection!"

"It's not to protect you. It's to see that you hold to your word and to watch you sail away. But first..."

Kazuhiro struck with such speed, Jonathon almost didn't catch the movement until Kazuhiro's fist slammed into Barrett's face.

Barrett toppled to the floor, hands over his nose, blood seeping between his fingers.

Kazuhiro stood over him. "That was for Jonathon-san. If you touch him again, speak to him, or look at him, it'll only be your soulless carcass returning to America."

Jonathon couldn't help but feel a burst of pride at Kazuhiro defending him. He tried to not look too satisfied, but saw even the stoic Nakano had a small smirk.

Kazuhiro nodded toward Barrett. Tanaka and Kawada grabbed Barrett and hauled him to his feet. Kazuhiro started toward the door leading out to the inn.

Barrett balked and tried to pull free of Tanaka's and Kawada's hold. "You can't drag me through the streets like this! I'll be..."

"Disgraced?" Kazuhiro finished. "That's the point."

Jonathon disregarded any attempt at not looking satisfied and allowed a large smile to spread over his features. He glanced to Kazuhiro, who looked at him at the same moment. He took in Kazuhiro's soft smile, the affection in his eyes, and knew then that when he had been confronted with two paths not so long ago, he'd without doubt chosen correctly.

KAZUHIRO WALKED quickly down the hall on his way to his chambers. They'd arrived back in Kyoto that afternoon, and nearly as soon as he dismounted, he was riding out again after receiving a message from Saigo wanting to have dinner with him and learn what had happened with Barrett.

He hadn't wanted to be bothered with the meeting. He'd hoped to spend a long evening with Jonathon after their journey, but the meeting served its purpose in more ways than informing Saigo of the incident. It also allowed him to inform his ally that he would be leaving Kyoto soon to return to his home and lands.

It'd been a long time since he'd been home, so it was true he needed to return to see how things fared. He received regular updates, but especially with Ito's murder, it was best if he made his presence known there again. And, he wanted to bring Jonathon to his family home. The thought of him there, spending their days together in peace, filled him with sense of happiness and serenity that he hadn't felt in a very long time.

He reached his rooms and slid open the door, closing it behind him while looking for Jonathon. Jonathon was nowhere in sight, but the door to the garden was open. Kazuhiro crossed the room, stepped half outside, and stopped, his movements halted by the beautiful vision before him.

Jonathon leaned back on a post, the black night sky and brilliant white stars behind him. He wore not just one of the kimonos Kazuhiro had bought for him, but all three of them, so he was layered in the fine silk. Kazuhiro knew the clothing had been delivered while they were in Hyogo Port, along with a few other gifts he'd gotten Jonathon, but he hadn't gotten to inspect them before giving them to him. It seemed Jonathon had found them and must be pleased with them.

And they looked stunning on him. Their beauty complimented Jonathon's just as he envisioned they would. Of the first that Jonathon wore closest to his body, he'd bought it to be an autumn kimono for him. The base colors of red and orange were accented by maple leaves and blossoms, all reminiscent of fall season.

Over it, Jonathon had pulled on the kimono of black, stitched with white to

mimic the very stars that shone so brightly behind Jonathon at that moment, and bearing a white chrysanthemum on the left. This kimono he'd intended for his eyes and his alone. To him, there was something immensely sensual to have Jonathon's fair skin wrapped in black silk. The way this kimono draped off Jonathon's left shoulder, exposing the autumn kimono beneath, Jonathon holding it gently in his graceful fingers, compounded that sensuality.

Lastly, Jonathon was draped in the kimono in shades of gold, colored with soft blossoms and leafed branches. He'd selected the colors for this one because he felt the color would complement Jonathon's golden hair, and the delicate blossoms, his beauty.

Around his neck, Jonathon wore the strings of gold with a large silvery pearl in the center, dotted with beads of red jade and gold. Jonathon had removed the gold earrings and replaced them with the ones he'd bought him of deep green jade, carved to look like a blossom. In the center of each was a large, round red jade, and trailing from them were beads of silver down to another ball of red jade.

Kazuhiro leaned back on the doorframe, wanting to admire Jonathon, to keep forever in his mind how he looked at that moment. Jonathon's expression was serious, and he knew Jonathon's thoughts were of him, probably worrying about him and wondering when he'd return. Even clothed in the soft patterns and silk, he could see the inner strength, the pride, in Jonathon's gaze, and he knew however many days were left in his life, he wanted each of them to be spent with Jonathon.

As if sensing he was there, Jonathon looked toward him. The serious expression faded under a bright smile, and not even the darkness of the night could dim the brilliance of his blue eyes. Kazuhiro found himself smiling back at him without thinking of it.

Jonathon started toward him. "I'm happy you're home."

Kazuhiro pushed off the doorframe and walked to meet him. "So am I." As soon as Jonathon was close enough to touch, he laid his hands on him, running them up and down Jonathon's arms, feeling the slide of silk beneath his palms. "Do you like your gifts?"

Jonathon placed his hands on Kazuhiro's waist. "I love them. How do I

look in them?”

“You make them look beautiful.” Kazuhiro grinned and leaned closer to him, his lips nearly touching Jonathon’s. “Even if I hadn’t intended for you to wear all of them at once.”

Jonathon laughed softly. “But I loved each of them so much, I couldn’t decide which I wanted you to see me in first.”

“You made a good choice.” Kazuhiro caressed the Jonathon’s bare chest, his gaze following where his fingers traveled over Jonathon’s skin. “And it’ll build anticipation as I take each one off you.”

“I like the sound of that.” Jonathon dipped his head slightly, searching for Kazuhiro’s gaze. “Did things go well with Saigo-san?”

Kazuhiro nodded. “He thought I should’ve killed Barrett, but he also said I handled the situation with great honor and I should be proud. I think it was because of that he wasn’t upset when I told him I’d soon be leaving Kyoto.”

Jonathon pulled in a startled breath. “Leaving? For where? You know I’ll go with you.”

Kazuhiro chuckled low in his throat. “I do know that, even if I asked you not to. And it’s nothing to be concerned over. I’m returning home, and you’ll be going with me. That’s one of the reasons I’m leaving. I want to take you to my family home and lands.”

Jonathon’s smile returned. He wrapped his arms around him and looked into Kazuhiro’s eyes. He knew how meaningful it was that Kazuhiro wanted to take him to his ancestral home. Part of him had feared when the time came for Kazuhiro to return there, that he would leave him in Kyoto. Even though Kazuhiro told him he could stay at his side, he understood how some daimyo and samurai had boundaries. But it seemed from Kazuhiro’s words, there would be no such boundaries between them.

Jonathon stroked lightly up and down the back of Kazuhiro’s neck. “You truly mean that?”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t. When I told you that you could stay with me, I meant it. And to stay with me means to go where I go.”

Jonathon lowered his gaze. “But I know that’s not wholly true. There’ll still be things you do and places you go that I can’t.”

“Now *that* is what’s not true.”

Jonathon looked up to Kazuhiro’s eyes again. “What about meetings like tonight?”

“This was the last of those. My friends and allies about you now. While some aren’t certain they’re ready to accept you, all trust my judgment, including Saigo. He actually wants to meet you before we leave.”

Jonathon closed his eyes, giving himself a moment to feel the joy rising inside him.

Kazuhiro pulled him closer. He nuzzled Jonathon’s cheek, whispering, “You look very happy.”

“I am.” Jonathon caressed Kazuhiro’s cheek with the backs of his fingers. “It may be strange of me, but here, with you, I feel more at home than I have anywhere in a very long time. I know I’m an outsider, and I’ll probably always be viewed that way, but I feel that I’m where I belong.”

A warm smile graced Kazuhiro’s lips. “You’re not an outsider. You may have come from a different land, but even before arriving here you had your arms open to our culture and you’ve embraced it since. You’re one of us.” He brushed his thumb across Jonathon’s bottom lip. “And you’re also mine.”

Jonathon’s breath fled at Kazuhiro’s declaration. He could only express himself in one way. He pressed his lips to Kazuhiro’s, kissing him deeply, putting all his passion and happiness into it.

Kazuhiro tightened his arms around him, returning the kiss with equal emotion. Jonathon sucked Kazuhiro’s tongue into his mouth, and as he released it, Kazuhiro did the same to his.

The kiss came to a slow end with both of them smiling.

Jonathon gave him a light, tender kiss. “You’ve done so well for someone who wasn’t sure he wanted to be kissed.”

“Yes, I’m happy I decided to be open to that aspect of you rather than you speaking my language.”

Jonathon laughed and attempted to halfheartedly push Kazuhiro away. “I thought I’ve gotten much better in the past couple weeks.”

“You have. Your swordsmanship, however...”

Jonathon gasped, but Kazuhiro brought their lips together, smoothing over

Jonathon's pretended offense with a smiling kiss.

With each second, the kiss grew more heated. Kazuhiro drew back from Jonathon's lips, but only to cover his neck in kisses, licks, and gentle bites.

Jonathon let his head fall back to give more of his neck to him. He loved how bold Kazuhiro had become with his kissing. When they made love now, it was as though Kazuhiro wanted to kiss and taste all of him. He felt Kazuhiro guiding the gold kimono off his shoulder and brought his head forward. "We should go in."

Kazuhiro managed to speak between kisses, "Why?"

"The guards will see us."

Kazuhiro grinned against Jonathon's neck as he pulled the kimono down, letting it fall in a soft rustle of silk. "I don't think this is a secret. The doors are very thin and you're very loud."

Laughter slipped from Jonathon's throat. He broke from Kazuhiro's hold and scooped the kimono off the veranda. He walked backward inside, beckoning with his index finger for Kazuhiro to follow. When he saw Kazuhiro move forward, he turned and went to the bedchamber.

He stopped at the large chest, and as he carefully folded the kimono, Kazuhiro bumped into him from behind. Jonathon smiled and pressed into him more.

Kazuhiro buried his nose in Jonathon's hair, his eyes closing at the softness brushing his face. He curled his fingers around the black kimono at the neck and drew it off Jonathon's shoulders.

Jonathon placed the gold kimono on the chest so his hands were free to let the black one slide off. It slipped to the floor, but before he could bend to pick it up, Kazuhiro's hands were untying the obi holding the last kimono closed, as it was also the only one he'd worn a sash with.

As the obi floated to the floor, Kazuhiro slipped his hand between the folds of silk, parting the kimono further, and found no barrier between his touch and Jonathon's bare cock. He brought his lips closer to Jonathon's ear. "You forgot a loincloth...again."

Jonathon glanced at him out the corner of his eye. "I did, didn't I?"

Kazuhiro shook his head at him. "You need to get comfortable wearing

one.”

“I don’t know why. The only one who’ll know I’m not wearing one is you, and I think it’s to your benefit that I don’t.”

“With that reasoning, I agree.”

Kazuhiro wrapped his fingers around Jonathon’s solid shaft. As he started stroking it, Jonathon leaned back on him, soft moans passing over his parted lips. He tipped his head back to Kazuhiro’s shoulder and turned his head toward him, kissing Kazuhiro’s cheek and neck.

Kazuhiro ran his other hand up Jonathon’s body, the feel of lean muscle beneath his touch arousing him further. He caressed the length of Jonathon’s throat, and at reaching his jaw, he leaned over him more and closed their mouths together in a long, slow kiss.

The warmth and softness of Kazuhiro’s tongue made Jonathon want more of him. He turned fully toward him, but Kazuhiro stopped him from embracing him by dragging the red kimono off his shoulders. The slide of the supple silk over his skin evoked a low moan of pleasure from Jonathon. As it fell free of his body, he reached to untie Kazuhiro’s obi.

Kazuhiro gently caught his hands. He flicked his gaze toward the futon, then back to Jonathon. “Lie down. I want to look at you while I undress.”

Jonathon kissed him softly once more, then turned for the futon. He knelt onto it, going to his hands, sliding down to his elbows and leaving his ass raised for Kazuhiro’s view before moving all the way to his stomach and rolling to his back. A sensual smile curved his lips, with a hint of satisfaction, at seeing the lust burning in Kazuhiro’s gaze.

Kazuhiro’s hands moved seemingly of their own as he removed his clothes, his full attention on Jonathon spread out before him. He’d thought Jonathon was beautiful wrapped in silk. He was even more so bare, wearing only the strings of gold and jewels about his neck and the earrings. The last of his clothing discarded, Kazuhiro moved toward him. He knelt between Jonathon’s legs and brought his body over him.

Jonathon reached up with both hands, laying them on the sides of Kazuhiro’s face, looking into his eyes. Warm emotion flowed through him at what he saw in Kazuhiro’s gaze. He whispered Kazuhiro’s name, and the soft

utterance brought Kazuhiro down to him, their lips meeting in the softest of kisses. It reaffirmed to Jonathon what he'd seen in Kazuhiro's eyes; their future together, where he knew each day of their lives would be ones of honor and love.

THE END

Author bio: S.J. Frost resides in Ohio with her family and pets. Her short stories have been featured in several romance and erotica anthologies, and her gay erotic romance novels are published at MLR Press.

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OFFICE POLITICS

by Elizabeth Lister

Photo Description



The two young men lean in, eyes closed and mouths slightly open. The dark haired boy stands just a few inches shorter than the other but moves in first, his head tilted just so in order to capture the blond man's mouth in a tender kiss.

Request Letter



Dear Author,

I've known Mikhos for years, we work together as security agents at a university, but during a student protest someone shouted that security always targeted gay students. The comment hurt, I am gay & out at work, what I wasn't expecting was for Mikhos to yell back "Oh do we really?" then pull me to him & kiss the stuffing out of me in front of the students, teachers, our coworkers... & his girlfriend, who happened to be bringing him lunch at the time. I don't know what happens after... I'm still looking for my socks that got knocked off during his kiss.

Sincerely,

Owen

General Information



genre: contemporary

tags: doctor/patient role play; friends-to-lovers; security guards; improvised dildo; sweet; out-for-you

word count: 6,429

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OFFICE POLITICS

by Elizabeth Lister

YESTERDAY'S PROTEST knocked us for a loop. Me especially. Not that we didn't deal with protests on an almost weekly basis here at the U of A. But this one hit close to home. The students were protesting the lack of support for a Gay/Straight Alliance group at the University. One such group existed, but they were so often being hit with roadblocks or stalling tactics by the administration that it was a constant struggle to get any event going or properly advertised.

As part of the University Security Team, Mikhos and I were charged with protecting the campus and ensuring that the protest didn't get out of hand. So, even though I stood behind everything about which they were protesting, I had to represent the administration. My job was crucial to my well-being. I couldn't afford to switch sides and sacrifice a good salaried position with benefits.

Mikhos understood how conflicted I felt yesterday. We'd worked at this job together for almost a year now. He knew I was gay. Hell, everyone at work knew it. I wasn't exactly inconspicuous. I often acted loud and flamboyant. He seemed to like it when I huffed off in a queenly rage over an underdone bagel in the cafeteria. I liked to make him laugh. Sometimes I purposely overdid it just to hear that musical sound. You could say I had a bit of a crush. Sometimes I caught him looking at me in a way I didn't really understand, and some part of me reacted. But he was off limits – straight, had a girlfriend, in every way the All American Boy. I wasn't about to get my heart crushed going after a lost cause.

So I made the best of our friendship. I took what I could get, and I took it gladly. So many straight men acted standoffish or intimidated around obviously gay men. Not Mikhos. He liked me for who I was.

But, yesterday, something changed in our relationship. While we policed the protest, some kid accused University Security (us) of always targeting gay students. I bit my tongue to keep quiet, figuring silence to be the best response.

But Mikhos yelled back “Oh, do we really?”. Before I could even process *that*, he pulled me to him and kissed the stuffing out of me in front of the students, teachers, our coworkers... *and* his girlfriend, who happened to be bringing him lunch at the time. To say I was shocked would be an understatement. To say I’d become slightly aroused would be another one. To say I wouldn’t be reliving that moment for the next ten years would be bullshit.

He totally ignored me for the remainder of the protest. I stood there, my mind a whirling mess, my hard-on obvious in my security uniform, and my hormones awash with confusion. We managed to get through it. Then Mikhos gave me a hasty “Later” and took off, his face red with shame, embarrassment or whatever.

Later that afternoon, as I approached our small office to collect my things for the journey home, I heard voices arguing: A man’s voice and a woman’s – Mikhos and his girlfriend, Claire. I stopped dead, listening.

“It’s not like you gave him a peck on the lips, Mikhos. That was a full on kiss. I can’t remember the last time you kissed *me* like that.”

There was a long, silent pause.

“So, what’s going on? Is there something you’ve been keeping from me?”

“Claire, it’s complicated.” He sounded stressed and annoyed.

“It’s not that complicated. You either like women or you like men. Do you like men, Mikhos? ’Cause it sure looks like you do.” She was furious, it seemed. Her voice sounded shrill and defensive.

“Why does it have to be one or the other?”

“Because the people who say they like both are just after all they can get, that’s all. They’re sex-crazed and indecisive.”

Her comment made me angry and somewhat surprised. Were there still people who believed that, in this day and age?

“Is that really what you think?”

“Mikhos. Do you like men?”

“I like Tyson. And, yeah, he’s a man.”

“Very loose definition, but okay. So, where does that leave us?”

“I don’t know.” he said, his voice tired and resigned.

“Well, I do. You can’t have it both ways. If you want him, you can’t have me.”

More silence, while I tried not to hyperventilate too loudly in the hall.

“Mikhos?” she said, in a demanding tone.

“Goodbye, Claire.”

And suddenly Mikhos came into the hallway. He glanced at me, hesitated for a brief moment, then pushed past me, striding furiously down the hallway.

After a few moments, Claire exited the office. When she saw me, she laughed. “There goes your man, Loverboy. Just watch out. He doesn’t seem to know what he wants.”

She walked haughtily by me. I stood there, stunned, trying to process everything I’d heard.

She was obviously jumping to conclusions. Yes, it had been a scorching, powerful kiss, but I still believed that Mikhos had done it as part of a plan to avert the protest. She cornered him, he confessed to liking me, and she took that as a threat to their relationship. Women were like that. They’d take the tiniest thing and blow it up out of all proportion. I knew he didn’t like me in a sexual way. We’d been friends for too long for that to be the case.

THE NEXT day, I got to the office a bit early. Ian and Jonah were pleased to see me and I told them to take off since I knew Mikhos would arrive shortly.

“Any action overnight?” I asked.

Jonah shook his head. “Just a couple of girls who wanted escorts to the parking lot. That’s it.”

“Cool.”

Ian seemed to want to say something, but he looked at Jonah and Jonah shook his head quickly.

“What?” I asked.

“Um...we heard there was a little action at the protest yesterday.” Ian mumbled.

I blushed. I knew what he meant.

“Ha ha.” I said. “Well Mikhos’ little stunt worked. It defused the situation.

So we can all forget about it now.”

“Mikhos is really devoted to his job, I’ll give him that.” Jonah said, laughing.

“Let’s hope *you* can forget about it.” Ian teased gently. “From what I heard it was quite the kiss.”

I rolled my eyes. “Get out of here.”

After they left I sat at my desk and started working on some overdue paperwork. The Security office was small, dark and dingy. There were desk lamps and a couple of dim overhead lights. Half the time I felt like I was in an interrogation room. My mind wandered as I worked on the brainless task. What if Mikhos really did have physical feelings for me? The kiss had been intense and seemed sincere. What if he actually found me attractive?

Not the most muscular guy on the planet, I had a slim swimmers’ physique that a lot of guys seemed to like. The dirty-blond hair that I kept in a shaggy, deliberately unkempt style, was arguably my best feature, although my blue eyes had gotten many compliments as well. One guy had compared me to Justin on the American ‘Queer as Folk’ TV series, but I don’t know if I’d go that far. I was moderately attractive, to some gay men. Whether I was even remotely attractive to one particular, seemingly straight man, I had no idea. But I needed to find out.

I’d gotten a good start on the files by the time Mikhos arrived.

“Hey,” he said shortly.

“Hi.” I said, gazing at him with barely concealed curiosity. “How are you?”

“Fine.” he muttered.

He stashed his messenger bag by the other desk and took off his jacket. After he hung it up he came slowly over to my desk.

“Look, Tyson, I’m sorry about yesterday. I shouldn’t have done that. I know I stepped over a line.”

I laughed nervously, but I was a little disappointed. He already regretted it. “It’s okay. It wasn’t so bad.”

His eyes met mine finally. Something passed between us, but he looked away too soon. He cleared his throat. “So...what’s on our agenda for today?”

“Blowjob?” I said before I could think it through. *God, I’m an idiot!* I laughed awkwardly. “Sorry. I make bad jokes when I’m nervous.”

He stared at me, looking rather pale. “Why are you nervous?”

I shrugged. “Because...because...I feel like something’s changed. But I’m not really sure what...and maybe it’s just me.”

I made myself look into his eyes. Had he felt something during that kiss as well?

We regarded each other silently for a long time, the tension in the room substantial. Finally, he sighed, looking down at the desk. “It wasn’t just you, Tyson. But...I don’t know what to do now.” he said, his voice shaky and hesitant.

My breath sped up. Was he admitting what I suspected? I got up, walking carefully around my desk, until I stood near him. “Um, well...you could kiss me again...if you want to.” Did I really say that? I stared at him, waiting.

He nodded. “I want to.” His eyes met mine. “But I don’t think I can move.”

I laughed suddenly, at his, our, awkwardness. This was so ridiculous, but so amazing at the same time. I moved closer. He stood a couple of inches taller than me, so I had to look up at him. “Are you sure?”

His eyes blazed green fire into mine. “Yes.” he said very quietly.

“Then kiss me.”

His breath hitched. His hand came around the back of my head, fingers slipping into my short hair, as he bent his mouth to mine.

When our lips touched this time, I swear to God a tiny flame ignited somewhere inside me. I opened my lips and he kissed me deeper. That little flame grew quickly into something bigger, wilder and less contained.

I grabbed his hips and pressed against him. The kiss became even more enthusiastic. His hand slid down my back to my ass. He squeezed it, pulling me closer. My breaths came quick and hard.

He broke away from me finally, gasping and trembling, his need for this taking us both by surprise. We stared at each other, astonished, as we tried to catch our breath.

“Holy shit.” I said.

“Is this okay?” he said nervously. “I mean, I don’t want to push you into anything.”

Instead of answering his question, I kept my eyes locked on his as I took the hand that was on my ass and placed it over the rock hard bulge in my pants. His fingers wrapped around my clothed erection eagerly. I moaned a little bit.

His mouth dropped open. He rubbed me firmly and swore. “Jesus...it’s been so long...”

I closed my eyes briefly at the pleasure this gave me, then opened them. “Since what?” I asked, my voice husky and lust-filled.

He blushed. “Since I touched another guy’s dick...”

What? I stared at him for a moment. “Mikhos, you are just full of surprises, aren’t you? You’ve done this before?”

He nodded. “A few times. In high school.”

I ran my hand down the front of his shirt and found his own cock straining against his uniform pants. “Why did you stop?”

He gasped. He grabbed my hand, pressing it against him. “I thought I was supposed to have a girlfriend.”

“Take off your shirt.”

He did as I’d asked while I quickly unbuttoned mine and let it drop.

“You can have anything you want, Mikhos.” I said.

“I want...I want to fuck you, Tyson. Right now.” His green eyes flamed wildly in the dim light of the small basement office. And, let me tell you, these words coming out of Mikhos’ mouth sent me into heart palpitations.

I concealed my eagerness and nodded. “Good. Because that’s what I was going to suggest.”

And suddenly things began to move very quickly. He spun me around and bent me over my own desk, his hands fumbling with my belt.

“Oh, fuck yes...Mikhos, I’ve wanted you to do this for a very long time.” I panted, my whole body on edge for something I never thought would happen.

He pulled my pants down roughly and I felt his warm hands on my smooth behind. “Oh, Jesus, Tyson, you have the most perfect ass...worth waiting for...”

He squeezed with both hands and spread my cheeks, making me gasp and curse.

“I can’t believe this is happening. I can’t believe this is happening.” I murmured, my head swinging back and forth in amazement.

Then one of his hands left me and came down hard on my ass cheek. It made a loud sound in the small room.

I yelped as the desire surged.

“I’m sorry – shit, did I hurt you?” He said anxiously, smoothing the stinging skin with his hand.

“No, fuck it, do it again, Mikhos...” I panted desperately.

He made a sound of both need and surprise, and then he spanked me again. And again.

I growled. This was the hottest fucking thing I’d ever experienced. “Oh my god. Oh my god.”

Then I thought of something. I reached over the desk and pulled the side drawer open, grabbing a condom from my stash. I handed it back to him. “Here, use this.”

“Thanks.”

I heard the sounds of metal clanging and a zipper being tugged down. He fumbled for a moment with the condom, then his smooth, hard cock pressed against my butt cheek. I pushed my ass out, spreading my legs for him.

“Do it!” I hissed. “Do it now...” I craned my head around to see him.

His eyes were green fire, his mouth open. He licked his lips and then spat into his hand, readying me clumsily and eagerly. He moaned in excitement as he grabbed his dick and pressed the head against my hole.

I closed my eyes, opening for him, for my friend and now lover. He pushed into me slowly and gently, even though I knew he felt as desperate as I did. He made sounds of intense pleasure as he sank into me.

My mouth opened with a deep groan as I felt him fill me. I gasped my pleasure as his cock settled deep inside.

“Tyson...” he said, his voice near. He bent over me, his hands on the desk either side of me, his mouth at my ear. “I can’t believe how good you feel...”

“You feel pretty good too, Mikhos.” Which was an incredible fucking

understatement. His long, thick cock felt amazing. I stretched my arms out, grasping the edge of the desk.

“So, these boys in high school...did you fuck them, or just play with their dicks?” I think I already knew the answer. His technique, although perhaps a bit rusty, spoke of some experience in this realm.

“I fucked some of them. But it was a long time ago.”

I moaned as he moved slowly in and out of me, taking his time and prolonging the pleasure. “So you’ve just been fucking girls since?”

“Yeah. But girls are...I don’t know...they’re not like this...” he said as he roughly smacked my ass and plunged his cock to the hilt in me, causing me to yelp and groan. “God, I miss this...”

“Maybe you were just with the *wrong* girls.” I muttered, hoping that wasn’t the case. *Why am I even suggesting this? Shut up, Tyson.*

“Can we stop talking about girls? I don’t want to think about that. I want to enjoy this. I want to enjoy *you*, Tyson.”

I moaned as his beautiful cock stroked my spot like he was born to do it. “Dammit, Mikhos, you are such a fucking tease! All this time and I thought you were just a really nice, hot straight guy I’d never have.”

“You’ve got me. If you want me.” he said, one hand coming up and stroking down my arm and over my sweat-streaked back.

I arched up, pushing back against him. “I want you. I want you.”

He moaned and fucked me harder. He fucked me so hard the desk started to rock. But I didn’t care. We weren’t quiet, and I hoped to hell the hall outside the office was deserted as it usually was at this hour.

After a little while longer he said he couldn’t hold back anymore. Soon, he trembled and came inside me, collapsing over me with a groan and a cry as his pleasure took him.

When he recovered, he pulled out and leaned over me, breathing hard for several moments. Then he slid an arm beneath me and stood me up, turning me around to face him. I shook my sweaty hair out of my face and stared into his now-sated green eyes, wondering what he was going to do. He looked at me for a long moment, while he fastened his pants. When he’d finished, he kissed me sweetly on the lips. Then he dropped to his knees.

I grabbed the edge of the desk as he took my desperate cock in his mouth.

“Jesus! Oh my God...” I moaned as he went to work on my dick like an athlete who’d been benched for far too long. His finger slid along my crack and pushed up inside me as I struggled to stay upright. The sensations of his wet, hot mouth around my cock, his finger in my ass, and the look of his tousled brown head bobbing over me were too much. I was going to come.

“Mikhos...” I panted, unable to say much else. I hoped there was a warning tone in my voice. “Mikhos...”

He glanced up at me, and the look in those green eyes pushed me over the edge. My mouth opened in a silent cry as my cock pulsed in his sweet mouth. Our gaze remained locked as I came and came and came. Finally my eyes closed of their own volition as I just about fainted from the joy of it.

He sucked me dry. When my cock slid out of his mouth I moaned in protest. I opened my eyes. He picked up his shirt and started to button it, staring at me with a dazed and still hungry look. He came over and helped me pull up my pants. Then he passed me my shirt. I buttoned it and tucked it in, wondering what the standard conversation was for after your platonic friend of almost a year fucks the shit out of you and swallows your jizz for the first time.

“Um, thanks...” I said, for lack of anything better.

He laughed. “I don’t feel so nervous anymore.”

“No kidding.” I said. “Now *I’m* the nervous one.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m trying to think of a way to kidnap you and keep you in my apartment.” I said quietly.

“Why don’t I just come over?”

“Tonight?”

He nodded.

“Okay...” I said, a little smile forming on my face. He smiled back, blushing and clearing his throat.

“I guess we should get to work. Hopefully everything’s okay out there.”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah.”

Although frankly, I wouldn’t have cared if the entire University had

burned down while we'd been busy.

SO, ALL OF a sudden, I seemed to be going out with Mikhos. And getting well and truly fucked by Mikhos. And sucking Mikhos' cock like a madman. Because he drove me wild. All this time I'd not let myself fantasize or even think about the possibility of my handsome friend doing these things to me, because I'd thought it a futile hope. Now that it had manifested in reality, it turned out better than any fantasy I'd ever had about anyone.

For two weeks we did nothing but fuck and talk. It was as if all this time we'd been holding each other at arms length, acting like good friends but not really knowing that much about each other. None of the important stuff anyway. Like deep fears and secret ambitions. Or what we really thought about all kinds of important topics. We'd been presenting the other person with the image of ourselves that we wanted to show, while keeping our true feelings hidden. Now, everything was out in the open. And the sex. The sex was a dream.

"Now, Mikhos, now now now..." I panted desperately, moving up on all fours and presenting my ass to him.

"Where's the lube?"

"Fuck the lube, just use spit. Like you did in the office...that was so hot..."

"Okay, okay..." His voice sounded high and excited as he readied me.

"Please! Fuck me..." I begged him.

He groaned and swore as he got the condom on and pushed into me quickly. "Oh...fuck. Me. Tyson, you feel amazing. Why did I wait so long for this?"

"Oh, yeah, that feels so good...so good!" I groaned, pushing back against him roughly.

"Easy...don't make me come too soon." He warned breathlessly.

"I want you to come, baby. I want you to lose control."

"Arghhh, stay still, I'm gonna..."

"Do it, baby!" I yelled, moving back and forth, pushing him to the brink and then over it, delighting in his unrestrained cries of pleasure as he lost

himself to me.

When he finished he got me off with his mouth, just like that first time. The man knew how to suck cock. I'd give him that. I'd venture to say he'd had a bit more experience in high school than he'd owned up to.

MIKHOS CAME down with a wicked case of the flu about a month after we began our relationship. I could tell how bad he felt when he answered the phone.

"Hello..." he said, his voice faint and hollow-sounding.

"Hi. Jeeze, are you sick?"

"I've got a cold."

"Mikhos, you sound terrible."

"It's just a cold."

"I'm coming over."

He answered the door in his pajamas, wrapped up in a blanket that dragged on the floor. His face looked so pale I thought he might faint.

I made him go to bed. I brewed some Chai tea for him and heated up some soup.

He protested that I was treating him like a baby. He said he was a grown man who could take care of himself.

"Bullshit. Everyone needs someone when they're sick."

"Anyway, I'm glad you're here." he admitted.

"I'm glad I'm here too."

His fever came and went for a few days. I stayed with him through the course of his illness, nursing the big lug and making sure he stayed hydrated. I gave him an occasional blowjob for good measure, to get those curative endorphins flowing. He was so grateful for all I did for him, it was really quite hilarious.

"Didn't Claire look after you when you got sick?" I asked eventually, since it seemed like such a new experience for him. We were sitting on the sofa in his living room, watching Big Bang Theory reruns.

He laughed and then had a coughing fit. When it ended he said, "Claire?"

No. She'd pretty much ignore me till I got better. Said she didn't want to catch it herself."

I stared at him. "Nice."

He shrugged. "I mean, she had her good points."

"Yeah, she did have nice tits. I'll give her that."

He laughed.

I looked down at my hands. "Do you ever miss her?" *Do I really want to know?*

He tilted my chin up so I'd look at him. "Why would I miss her when I have you? You're so much nicer. And cuter. You give way better head, *and* you let me fuck you in the ass."

I grinned and rolled my eyes. "Cute."

He smiled. "Wanna cuddle? I'm feeling a lot better."

He was sitting on the couch in his pajamas, and I could see a rather obvious tent in his pants.

"Apparently. But I think I'd better examine you first to make sure you are indeed on the mend. Take off your clothes and lie down on your bed."

He raised his eyebrows. I raised mine.

He stood up and made his way to the bedroom. I followed. I watched as he stripped slowly and then lay down on the blue coverlet.

"Mr. Andenakos, you appear to have a large erection. Is that a manifestation of your illness?" I asked cheekily, staring down at his prone form.

"I can't seem to get rid of it. But all of my other symptoms are gone." he said, his green eyes gazing into mine with a mischievous glint. *Oh yeah. My man wants to play doctor.*

I cleared my throat. "You are a fine specimen, Mr. Andenakos. I'd better conduct a thorough physical to determine the cause of your, ahem, problem."

I saw the hint of a smile on his face, although he tried to remain serious. "Thank you, Doctor Rogers." he said.

I sat down on the bed beside him. "First I'd better examine the extent of the problem." I said, my eyes on his straining cock.

"Yes, Doctor." I heard the excitement in his voice. I had a feeling he

would be a very good patient.

“Just lie still, please.” I said. I reached out and touched the tip of his cock where moisture had pooled slightly. “Mm hmm. Just as I thought.” I collected it on my finger and brought it to my lips.

He watched, transfixed, as I licked the wetness off my finger with a thoughtful look. “It’s a little too acidic. May be a sign of a nutritional deficiency. But we’ll address that later.”

He watched as I stretched my hand out and wrapped it around him, getting a feel for his substantial size and girth. “You’re very large, Mr. Andenakos. And extremely hard. Does this happen often?”

He nodded, his breathing quickening. “It’s been happening very often recently. Started about a month ago.”

I nodded, smiling in spite of wanting to maintain a professional demeanor. “And how do you usually resolve this issue?”

“I usually fuck my boyfriend, Dr. Rogers.”

“I see. Well, since he isn’t here right now, what do you propose we do about it?” I stroked him gently up and down while gazing innocently into his bright green eyes.

“I could fuck *you*, Dr. Rogers.”

“Or I could fuck *you*, Mr. Andenakos.” I said rather boldly. “I find in these situations that turning the tables on the patient holds the best chance of recovery.”

He went pale again, and for a moment I wondered if I’d overstepped a boundary. We’d never actually talked about ‘turning the tables’ so to speak. I knew he was okay with a couple of fingers up his ass, because that was one of the first things I’d done to him. But was he ready for my cock? I waited breathlessly for his answer.

“Okay” he said quietly. “If you think it’s best.”

I tried to keep my demeanor professional, while inwardly performing a very lewd and ridiculous happy dance. I nodded sagely. “In these circumstances, it’s just about guaranteed to work. But we need to do some preparations first. I’ll need to get my instruments.”

His eyes widened but I gave him a reassuring smile. I went and got a

towel, and laid it under him with his help. Then I collected a bottle of lube, and went in search of something around his apartment that was the size and shape for what I needed. When I chanced on a round-handled ladies' hairbrush in the bathroom, I grinned. It looked very new and barely used. Perfect. I cleaned it thoroughly and brought it into the bedroom, throwing it down beside him.

"Shit. That's Claire's. She kept it here for when she'd...sleep over."

I nodded. "That's what I figured. It's ideally suited to my purposes."

"Huh?" He looked confused.

He watched in dawning comprehension as I coated the round plastic handle with lube.

"Oh my god...you're not gonna put that -"

"Knees up and spread, Mr. Andenakos."

He gazed wide-eyed at the brush, then at me, the thought of having his ex-girlfriend's brush up his virgin ass making him nervous.

"But..."

I raised my eyebrows again. "Are you questioning the treatment method?"

He shook his head slowly.

"Then bend your knees and spread your legs."

"Yes, Doctor" he gasped, obeying me as a fine pink blush spread over his cheeks.

"When I pay a home visit, I have to do a bit of improvising I'm afraid. But this should work quite nicely. It's the perfect size and there's no chance of losing it up inside you. Safety first, of course." I winked at him as I pressed the lubed tip of the handle against his hole. "Take a deep breath and relax." I instructed.

He did so, acting so much like an obedient patient it was blowing my mind. I had to make this good for him. I pushed gently on the brush, delighting when he opened for me and I was able to slide it in a little bit. He groaned and clutched the bedspread. "Oh my god, Tyson. I mean, Dr. Rogers."

"Does that feel good, Mr. Andenakos? We can stop if it's painful."

"No, don't stop. I mean, it's not painful. It feels good" he panted. "If Claire knew what you were doing with her brush..." he laughed softly.

I grinned, twisting the handle around gently as he moaned in pleasure. “Can you take a bit more?”

“Yes. I mean, I think so.”

“This sometimes helps.” I said, wrapping my hand around his cock as I pushed the brush handle in further. He groaned loudly as a drop of moisture oozed from the tip of his straining member.

“Oh! Yes!”

“Mr. Andenakos, you’re very accommodating. With this kind of attitude you’re bound to experience a full recovery by the time we’re done here.”

He made the most delicious noises as I stroked his cock and moved the brush handle in and out of his ass. When I could tell he was close, I took the brush handle out of him and stood up.

“I think you’re ready for the remainder of the procedure.” I said, stripping my jeans, boxer briefs and shirt off in record time.

“Yes, Doctor. Please hurry. I need to come.”

My own cock stood proud and eager as I covered it with a condom and lubed it up. This was such a huge turn on. I couldn’t wait to get inside him.

I positioned myself between his legs and spread his cheeks. I gazed into his eyes as I pressed the head of my cock against his entrance. “Open for me, Mr. Andenakos. Let me in and I’ll fucking cure you of this business,” I panted, my voice deep with lust.

His mouth dropped open as his eyes closed. He seemed to consciously relax. We both groaned as the head went in.

“Oh...my...Jesus...” I moaned.

“Oh, fuck!” he swore. “Oh, yeah...”

All pretense of medical play suddenly flew out the window as my dick sheathed itself within him in an ecstatically short amount of time. “Mikhos, Mikhos, Mikhos...” was all I could say suddenly as the feelings overwhelmed me.

“Oh my god, Tyson, it feels soooo good...” he gasped.

Seeing him there below me, feeling my cock deep within him, and knowing that I was probably the only one who’d ever done this to him, caused the excitement to surge within me. I had to get him off before I came myself.

“Okay, baby, just relax. I’m gonna make you come in no time flat.” I murmured.

“Oh my god, please...please...”

I started moving gently, aiming for that spot inside him I knew would put him over the edge. “Stroke your cock for me, Mikhos. I want to see you.”

His hand came down and he grasped himself, pulling back and forth in the rhythm he knew by heart. Just as he began I must have found his sweet spot, because he threw his head back and groaned louder than ever.

“Is that the spot? Is that it?” I murmured, hitting it again and again until, with a garbled cry, he shot streams of white jizz all over himself. It seemed to go on forever and by the time he finished, I started.

“Oh, Mikhos!!! Oh, fuck yeah! Fuck!!!” I yelled as I shot my own load inside him. “Oh my fucking God. You are such a good patient!!!”

As I came down from the high of orgasm I heard his laughter at my final words. I collapsed on top of him, groaning with satisfaction.

We breathed together as we recovered, enjoying the sated glow that comes after mutually rewarding orgasms.

Finally, I raised myself up on one elbow. “Well, Mr. Andenakos? How do you feel now?”

He grinned. “Wonderful, Dr. Rogers. Your skills are considerable. I think you’ve cured me. For the moment anyway.”

I grinned back at him. “Well, I’ll just have to remain nearby in case of a relapse.”

SEVERAL MONTHS later, Mikhos and I went for a stroll by the river, holding hands in the face of numerous stares from passersby, but luckily, no comments. Things had improved in this small city, and most of the time, two men holding hands were barely more than an unusual sighting.

A gorgeous, sunny day, we enjoyed the reprieve from work and other commitments to spend time together. I wore a pair of loose khaki cargo shorts with an orange tank top and my boater at a jaunty angle. Mikhos had on his oldest pair of jeans, flip flops, and a purple short-sleeved button-up. He used to

dress in browns and greys but I'd pushed him to expand his color palette. Now he felt comfortable in a whole range of bright hues. We both wore Oakley sunglasses and looked pretty damn impressive strolling amidst the effluvia of elderly suburbia, if I did say so myself.

Things had progressed quickly between us after that first crazy fuck session in the office. We'd taken the friendship we'd developed over months into a whole new direction, and it paid off. I had never been with someone like Mikhos before – so thoughtful and considerate, and downright gentlemanly, I couldn't believe it half the time. I'd taken to calling him 'Old Man' because he acted like someone's grandfather, opening doors, pulling out chairs, always taking others' needs into consideration. Only a year older than me, the nickname didn't really make sense, but then it *did*. And I liked it. He was my old man, Mikhos, and I'd never let him forget it.

"Hey, look at the geese!" I said cheerfully, pointing them out to him.

He nodded. "There's a ton of them. I should have brought my camera."

We ended up sitting on the grass at the water's edge, looking out at the sailboats and windsurfers and enjoying the gentle breeze that wafted over the marina. It felt good to be outside, with Mikhos, with nothing else to do but enjoy his company.

"Hey, Pretty Boy" he said, putting his hand on my back and caressing me gently. Since there were no people nearby we didn't feel self-conscious about a little physical affection.

He'd started calling me Pretty Boy after a few weeks of dating. I still felt amazed that he found me attractive at all since I'd assumed he was straight for so damn long.

"What, Old Man?"

"Have you ever been to Nova Scotia?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Nah. I've only ever been to the West Coast and that was a while ago. Why?"

He looked out at the river. "My mom grew up in Liverpool, this little town on the South Shore. We used to go summers when I was little. I miss it."

I turned to him, seeing the yearning look in his eyes as he looked at the boats. "You wanna go?"

His eyes found mine. The greenness of them always struck me. “Yeah.” he said simply.

“For a visit or to stay?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Someday, I might want to move there.” He leaned close. I kissed him quickly.

“It’s so fucking beautiful, you have no idea. I want to show you how beautiful it is.” he said with a smile.

“So show me.” I said.

“You’d come with me?”

“For a visit or to stay?” I repeated very quietly.

He moved closer, touching his lips gently to my own in a soft slow kiss that threatened to become deeper. But he pulled back before that happened. “To stay, Pretty Boy. What would I do there without *you*?”

I grinned, grabbing his chin and kissing him with a sudden wild passion. “What indeed, Old Man? What indeed...”

We laughed and tussled in the sunny green grass as our future spread out before us like waves across the ocean.

THE END

Author bio: Elizabeth Lister is a stay-at-home mom who enjoys reading and writing naughty stories. She has a B.A. in Psychology and a Certificate in Dramatic Scriptwriting. She lives in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada with her husband and two children.

She can be found online at the following web places:

[Website](#)

[Modern Erotic Romance Facebook](#)

[Modern Erotic Romance blog](#)

[Kink Exposed blog](#)

Her books are available here, [MLR Press](#), and also at Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and All Romance E-Books.

OUR SONG

by Nicole Dennis

Photo Inspiration



Story Prompt

Do you remember first time we met, hon? I'd had been having 'music block' for months, couldn't write new songs for my band. Then you knocked my hotel room with room service and I just fell, right then. Since then, all my songs were about you. Even if we must kept things secret because of my contract.

~ Ami

General Information

genre: contemporary

tags: musicians/rock stars; blue collar; coming out; in the closet; sweet-no sex

word count: 4,442

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OUR SONG

by Nicole Dennis

CHAPTER 1

STRUMMING THE Taylor Hawaiian Koa wood acoustic guitar, Xavier Roxie blew out the waiting breath of concern while he stared out the window and downtown Manhattan below the penthouse luxury apartment. During the time he played, the sun sank between the buildings, lit the sky with a variety of gorgeous colors before it disappeared from his sight. Then the sky changed to the deep blue velvet and all the buildings turned on their lights to block out the stars. Soon, his own image reflected in the window. In between the notes of his guitar, he heard the gentle movements of his lover as he entered their home after working, and moving around, doing whatever he did to keep their daily life in order.

Xavier knew he was the chaotic disorderly one of their duo, while his boyfriend was almost OCD fanatical in his cleanliness. Except when it came to this one room, his music room. Here, he could be anything he needed or wanted that the fickle muse required.

Five years ago, his muse wanted nothing to do with him. He couldn't write a lyric worth a damn. Not one decent note came to his fingers. It came to the point when he left this apartment and went to a hotel suite for a change of venue and sight. He hoped it would work its magic on the muse and put a spark back in his music.

It ended up not being the change of space, but one man. A quiet, unassuming hotel service attendant, Ryan Thomas, who delivered room service to his hotel room. With dark brown hair falling in soft waves across his face and brilliant hazel eyes staring at him from lush lashes, Ryan looked upon him as if he was an ordinary man and not a Grammy-award winning singer/songwriter. It felt strange to X to be seen as only Xavier the man and not Xavier Roxie the singer.

Still, it took some convincing on Xavier's end to get Ryan to return to his room after his shift ended. He insisted they would only talk, nothing more. At

least for their first meeting.

When Ryan returned, they did sit across from each other on the sofa, shared a bottle of delicious Merlot, deep purple grapes, soft brie and crackers, and talked. The night ended, becoming one of the best in his entire life. They talked for hours, late into the early morning. They both fell asleep on the sofa for a few short hours, Xavier waking when Ryan pressed a soft kiss to his cheek and whispered he needed to leave for home and another shift at the hotel. Xavier requested him to stop in again after his shift and laughing with pleasure, Ryan agreed before walking out of the room.

This went on between them for an entire week. One of the most memorable, remarkable weeks he could remember.

Three days in, his muse broke wide open and songs poured into his mind with a feverish need. His pencil fairly flew across the once empty pages of sheet music, filled the blank lines with melodies, chord changes, and arrangements. While his fingers strummed the guitar or poked the black and white keys of the baby grand piano he asked to be moved into his suite.

His muse went wild.

He kept most of the new songs to lead sheets, which specified the essential elements of each new song that popped into his head – the melody, the lyrics, and harmony complete with its chord symbols above the staff. Later on, he knew he would fill in the chord voicings, voice leading, bass lines, and other aspects of the accompaniment. Often he didn't create them until he was in the recording studio with his accompanied band, sound guy, and producer to clear up and find the right sound for each song.

Still, even with these basic bare bones he could tell these new songs all held a similar feeling and conveyed the same emotions. They were all about the beginnings of a friendship, a new love, the bright shining feeling this created in one's heart and mind. They were all about Ryan.

Two months after their first meeting, still writing more songs than he ever did before, Xavier invited Ryan to his bed for the first time. He never took so long to get another man in his bed before, often most of his so-called relationships ending before the two-month mark, but everything felt different with Ryan. He felt different with Ryan.

Even in bed, Ryan mentioned how he loved being with him, not the well-known singer, but the man behind the music. He often requested Xavier to grab his guitar and sing his latest song to him in between lovemaking. He got a kick out of whenever his music got a passionate response out of Ryan.

Now, five years later, they were still together. Lovers, boyfriends, and Xavier wanted more. Only, he couldn't offer more to this wonderful man.

For the last ten years of his singing career, he was kept within the tight, oppressive wing of his religious, conservative manager, who ended up being secretly homophobic. Something Xavier didn't know when he first signed with the man. If he knew, Xavier would have run the other way.

All that changed earlier this morning when he signed a contract with a new managing company with the express request he could finally 'come out' to the public and his fans. His former manager insisted on the damn secrecy, which he hated the entire time. Especially after he met the one man he could find himself loving and living with for the rest of his life.

Taking this monumental step without discussing the repercussions with Ryan was not the best decision, but he needed to make a choice today and either re-sign with the bastard manager or accept the new company's offer. When they guaranteed he could 'come out' and they would stand next to him, cover him against any harsh press, and work with his website and forum IT gurus to get the news out. He wouldn't say anything yet, but would at his upcoming concert.

"Shit, thinking of the concert. Need to get this song down on paper, doofus," he told himself, used Ryan's affectionate nickname for him since he was often stupid when it came to relationship things when he was lost in his music, and stared at the guitar. His gaze moved to the fresh music sheets where he jotted down the notes for the new song. A song about him, Ryan and their love. This one different than the earlier ones by being a little more explicit about who he loved.

Strumming and finger picking the six-string guitar, Xavier hummed along with the powerful dreadnought tones with deep lows and crisp highs. Overall, the Taylor provided the power and articulation across the entire tonal spectrum which he loved. It allowed for clear lines and crisp driving rhythms which he

loved for his powerful, driving attacks on the strings. As his humming changed to words, his voice on perfect pitch and tone to match with the guitar.

Soft applause interrupted the silence when he stopped picking, and he heard, “Going to become yet another fan favorite.”

He knew the voice. It belonged to Ryan.

CHAPTER 2

TURNING HIS head, Xavier smiled at the sight of his lover standing in the doorway. He braced his forearms on the guitar and leaned forward. A honey blond lock fell across his forehead and twitched across his eyes until he pushed it away. “Hey there, didn’t hear you come in. How long were you standing there?”

“Long enough to remain in awe of your talent,” Ryan said as he entered the music room they created to house the eight guitars and baby grand piano. On the walls and shelves were all of the awards and presentations Xavier received throughout his career.

“You can do the same with your watercolor paintings. I still say you should do more with them. It’s your gift and passion,” Xavier said.

Ryan kicked a bare foot lightly against one of the piano’s legs and shoved hands in his jeans. “Nah, those are for me to work through the past and emotions. None of them are good enough for a gallery.”

“Something you always insist on telling me, though I don’t believe it.”

“Please don’t turn this into anything more than a simple hobby, X. I’m a little tired. I’ve had a long day and would like to relax.”

Tapping his thumb a few times on the side of the guitar, Xavier listened to his lover’s request and nodded. “I thought you didn’t have a shift today.”

“I didn’t, but since I changed positions from room service to waiter for the restaurant and bar/lounge, I accepted the extra shift at the hotel. I didn’t want to sit around this empty place today, waiting while you were gone.”

“Wait... Two positions?”

“I shift between the restaurant and the lounge where I’m needed. I worked

the lunch and mid-day rush at the restaurant and then moved to cover the bar during happy hour and early bird gatherings. It's great for the tips. I make more at this than I did with room service."

"Why didn't you tell me about this sooner? I had no idea you accepted these new positions, though you were talking about leaving the room service area for something else. Even if it is the reason why we're here, together. Congratulations, baby." Setting the guitar aside, Xavier rose to his feet and rushed to Ryan. Wrapping his arms around his lover, Xavier lifted the slightly smaller man off his feet in a large hug. He captured Ryan's lips in an enthusiastic kiss.

Throwing his arms around Xavier's neck, Ryan hugged and held him back. He rested his face against Xavier's shoulder. "It only happened last week, but you've been preoccupied with the new CD, the upcoming concert and tour, and something else nagging you."

"Still... This is a huge part of you. Just because I'm so busy, doesn't mean I can't stop for a half hour or whatever to hug and congratulate you. Even take you out for a congratulatory dinner or something."

"Doesn't matter now. You know. We're good." Ryan shrugged. "You need to concentrate on the CD and I'm here to support you."

"Hearing that makes me sound selfish. A spoiled rock star."

"Nah, you're not selfish or spoiled. Only very intense when you're concentrating on a new CD. This is the third one I've gone through with you and I'm learning what I need to do and not do around you while this process is happening."

"You're doing a wonderful job. This recording is going smoother than the others." Xavier leaned in and kissed him. "On the other hand, I want to support you in the same way."

Ryan smiled. "You always do. You're here when I come home from the hotel."

"Not always."

"When it matters. Hey... Hey... Stop putting yourself down. Not on the agenda tonight." Ryan pressed his fingers to Xavier's lips.

"Ahh..."

“No! Not on the agenda. Got it?”

Smiling, Xavier kissed Ryan’s fingers.

“What are you doing home? I thought you were busy in the recording studio. If I knew you were home, I wouldn’t have taken so long a shift or at least I would have come in here sooner. I didn’t know you were home until I heard your guitar singing out its beautiful tone.”

“I came home around mid-afternoon and sat here, picking and strumming on this guitar while watching the sun disappear behind the skyline. I haven’t been home for long. Come over here and sit down with me. There’s a few things I need to tell you about,” Xavier said as he stepped back, took Ryan’s hand in his, and led him to the loveseat. He sat down and patted the cushion.

“Damn, this sounds serious. What’s happening, X? Everything going okay with the new CD. The songs sound awesome and glorious whenever you sing them here, to me,” Ryan inquired while he sat down and leaned against one of the side cushions.

“The recording is going great. It’s one of my best CD’s and going beyond the other sounds I created on the first four albums. This is definitely some of my best work.”

“Then what is it? What’s troubling you? I can see it in your gaze,” Ryan said, tilting forward and brushed his thumb under one of Xavier’s navy blue eyes. “Something’s bothered you the last few nights, not cuddling me, or initiating sex. It’s unlike you.”

“I needed to make some decisions and with them on my mind, I couldn’t give you everything. I’m sorry if you felt neglected.”

Pulling back, Ryan waved a hand to dismiss the idea. “Never. Just holding you close made me feel close to you.”

Pushing his fingers through Ryan’s hair, Xavier pressed his forehead to Ryan’s smooth forehead and closed his eyes.

Ryan placed his hands on Xavier’s shoulders and started a light massage. “X, you’re carrying a damn steel rod in your muscles. Turn around and let me give you a halfway decent massage.”

Xavier spun and settled back for Ryan to work on his muscles.

“Damn. Knots the size of lemons and worse. What tied you up like this?”

Talk to me.”

“A decision to change my public life. I fired my old management guy and signed a contract with a new company today.”

“That’s one hell of a decision. You made no mention of this to me about it.”

“I couldn’t. I’m sorry to keep this from you, Ry.”

“You know I would have been a sounding board or something to help take some of the strain off your shoulders, you big idiot.” Ryan slugged Xavier’s shoulder and went back to the massage. “Still, I understand the reasoning behind it. It’s a part of you. What made you finally take the step to change managers? I know you were talking about it off and on for the last couple of years, especially whenever we wanted to go out without a damn disguise for you.”

“It was either time to let him go or re-sign a new contract with him. Since you knew how much I was ticked at him, I went looking for other management companies out there and this particular one gave me one hell of a deal. Nothing the old one could come close to matching.”

“Okay, X. What aren’t you saying? What’s hot in this new contract?”

“They’re behind my decision one hundred percent to come out to my fans.”

Leaning to the side, drawing Xavier around to make sure their gazes met, Ryan lifted one of his eyebrows in question. “Hold on a moment. Come out? You mean come out to public you’re gay? Is this the kind of come out you mean?”

Almost lying across Ryan’s lap, Xavier smiled at Ryan’s continued repetition of his choice. He knew this would stun his lover. “Could it mean anything else?”

Ryan smacked his shoulder.

“Ow,” Xavier teased.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Xavier shrugged. “You know me – strong and silent.”

“Except when a damn guitar is in your hands, you doofus.” Ryan brushed a hand across the back of Xavier’s hand with a chuckle. “You’re so damn good

at expressing your emotions and moods in lyrics, but normal talk with you is like trying to wring water out of stone. It doesn't work." Ryan smacked his shoulder again. "Holy shit, X."

Capturing Ryan's hand in his, Xavier brought it to his lips to kiss Ryan's knuckles. "You knew I was always better with a song than regular words. Especially after living all this time with me."

"Along with how you insist on tossing your damn boxers on the floor instead of in the hamper," Ryan teased.

Xavier laughed.

"Drives me nuts."

"Nuts with love for me." Xavier waggled his eyebrows with pure torment.

Ryan went to smack him again, but Xavier captured his hand again for another kiss. This time on the sensitive palm. His tongue brushed against the calluses Ryan bore from his work. "You're such a doofus."

"I know." Xavier pressed Ryan's knuckles against his cheek and rubbed them.

"What made you decide to do this? It's a big damn decision."

Sighing, Xavier released Ryan's hand and dropped completely on Ryan's lap. He felt Ryan drag gentle fingers through his hair, tugged it away from his face, and soothed him.

"Tell me, X. I want to know."

"I wanted to do this since we moved in together. I'm tired of being forced into ridiculous publicity stunts and shots with some random woman I don't give a shit about because my old manager was a homophobe. It was his issue, not mine, and I was tired of paying for his problems. I was tired of the foolish disguises I needed to wear whenever we wanted to go out to dinner or a movie or whatever. I was tired of forcing you to pay for his issues."

"I didn't care about it as long as we were together. I had you in private, in heart, and I was content."

Xavier looked up at his lover's face and smiled. "You're too open and kind for your own good sometimes, babe. No one should be forced to live in such a fashion. Not when we have a choice in this world." He shook his head on Ryan's lap. "No, I couldn't do this to us any longer. I wanted us free from

those chains.”

“Again, still, this is one hell of a leap for you. To come out and proud to everyone. When were you planning on doing this?”

“The concert.”

“The concert? The one you’re having in two weeks?”

“Why wait any longer?”

“Well... I... Shit,” Ryan finished.

Xavier chuckled and sat up. He twirled a finger around a lock of his hair.

“Uh-oh,” Ryan said, tugged Xavier’s hand down. “That’s your nervous tick. What is it?”

“I’m uhh... the song you heard me working on is about us.”

Ryan lifted an eyebrow. “Umm. All your songs are about us, you doofus. What makes this one different? Not that I’m complaining. I love being your muse.”

“Truly about us, I was going to sing it there.”

“A public way to declare your love and status.”

“There’s no other decent way to do it. I won’t hide behind a newspaper or magazine article while it breaks. I prefer to be upfront and in person if the shit hits the fan. The announcement at the concert will go with the update on the website and forums. Then the new manager and I will get to work on some publicity spots to go with the announcement. I mean to do this right all the way.”

“Wow. I’m damn proud of you,” Ryan said, reaching out and clasping Xavier’s hand.

“The only thing I’m wondering about is what this decision would mean for you. Will your job be affected?”

“My boss knows I’m gay along with most of my co-workers. They can’t fire me for it because it’s against the law. My family and friends knew about my being gay for years.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Never came up because of the contract you had. I figured why I should tell you and add an additional burden. I knew you would make the decision when you felt the right time.”

“You waited quiet all this time for me.”

“I would wait forever.” Ryan leaned forward and pressed his lips to Xavier’s. “There is no one else for my heart. Not from the moment you opened the door of the suite.”

Clasping a hand around the back of Ryan’s neck, Xavier tugged him closer to deepen their kiss. When he was about to roll and stretch them across the length of the loveseat, Ryan pressed a hand against his chest.

“No, take me in our bed. Where we belong, will always belong,” he said.

Smiling, Xavier rose and tugged Ryan to his feet, and they went together to their bedroom. The rest of the night drifted away with sounds of their lovemaking.

CHAPTER 3

TWO WEEKS later, dressed in a simple striped shirt with sleeves rolled to his elbows and tight jeans, Xavier paced across the wing of the stage. The wait irritated him. He needed to let the various stagehands change out the instruments and amplifiers to acoustic between the sets. It was his fault for insisting on the change of instruments and the pause in the concert. He paused long enough to pull a long sip of cool water to soothe his throat.

As always the first set of the concert went fantastic. The crowd was on high and into the music. Then venue was on the small side and intimate. His truest fans were sitting in the seats waiting for him to continue the concert.

It was time for him to change up the concert. He would give them new music. A special song of his heart.

Strong arms wrapped around his waist from behind and he felt Ryan press against his back. Xavier lowered his head and covered Ryan’s clasped hands with his own.

“Nervous?”

“For the first time in my life as a singer, yes.”

“You’re strong. You can sing our song.”

“Once I do this, there is no turning back for us. We can’t hide our love and

relationship in the shadows.”

“I’m standing right next to you, Xavier. My heart is with you on the stage.”

Spinning slow in Ryan’s arms, Xavier crooked a finger under Ryan’s chin and lifted it. He stared deep into Ryan’s beautiful, loving gaze. “Whatever did I do to deserve your steady, unwavering love and support these last five years?”

“You opened the door.”

“To my heart.”

“I’ll keep it safe.” Ryan placed his fingers against Xavier’s chest. “Now. Go sing our song and reveal the truth. It’s time for us to come out of the shadows.”

Dipping down, Xavier captured Ryan’s lips for a long, deep kiss. “I love you, Ryan Thomas.”

“I love you, doofus.”

Chuckling, Xavier turned and sauntered toward the stage. He took the headset microphone from one of the stagehands and set it in place.

“Did everyone miss me?” he called out to the crowd as the spotlight hit him.

The crowd erupted with applause and cheers as they saw him return to the stage, knowing there would be more music. They all watched as he picked up the beautiful acoustic guitar, slung the strap over his shoulder, and strolled downstage to where the lone stool waited for him.

“I take it that means yes,” Xavier teased while he settled on the stool and positioned the guitar. He set one foot on a higher step than the other to brace the guitar and his weight. “Okay. Ready to indulge me in this change to acoustic? You know this is how I love to premiere new songs to everyone. Test them out on some of my favorite guinea pigs.”

More cheers and roars greeted his announcement.

“This first one is for someone special in my life. My lover and boyfriend, Ryan, who inspired me to write about our love and life. I hope everyone else can relate to the lyrics. Here is the new one, *My Lover*.” Xavier started strumming the first few notes before the crowd reacted to the simple

announcement.

As his powerful voice lifted over the single guitar of the first verse, the rest of the band joined in the song. Looking away from the crowd, Xavier stared at Ryan while he sang to him, sang about their love, about their dreams, and everything in his soul.

When the song drifted away over the crowd, Xavier looked down at the guitar before lifting his gaze to face the crowd. They were on their feet, stomped and applauded their powerful response to the song. He glanced at Ryan, who smiled and waved his hands in triumphant joy. It was at that perfect moment he knew it would be all right and continued to play on this joyous, reveling night.

THE END

Author bio: Ever the quiet one growing up, Nicole Dennis often slid away from reality and curled up with a book to slip into the worlds of her favorite authors. Since then, she's had a fascination with fantasy, paranormal and the never-ending appeal and beauty of romance. It seems only natural all of these loves would come together in her writing from simple stories for her dolls until the summer when her aunt introduced her to romance novels. What a world that opened.

It's been non-stop since that hot New Jersey summer. It's only gotten worse (in a good way). Now she's created a personal library full of novels filled with dragons, fairies, vampires, shapeshifters of all kinds, and romance. Always she returned to romance. Still, there were these characters in her head, worlds wanting to be built on paper, and stories wanting to be told and she began writing them down whether during or after class. She continues to this day. Only recently has it begun to become fruitful, spreading out to let others read and enter her worlds, meet her characters, and see what she sees. No matter what she writes, her stories of romance with their twists of paranormal, fantasy, and erotica will always have their Happily Ever Afters.

She currently works in a quiet office in Central Florida, where she also makes her home, and enjoys the down time to slip into her characters and worlds to escape reality from time to time. At home, she becomes human slave to two crazy cats— an angelic red tabby and a semi-demonic black-orange calico.

She loves to hear from readers and fans, so don't be shy. Find her on the 'net or send an email. Find her at the following links:

[Facebook](#)

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[Goodreads Member](#)

[Goodreads Group: Q&A with Nicole Dennis](#)

PILLOW TALK

by J.H. Knight

Photo Description



Two young men sleeping on a bed together. Fully clothed and lying on top of the covers, the one in back sleeps on the other's back with his arm tucked around his midsection, hugging him in sleep.

Request Letter



Dear Author,

This photo shows two young men asleep in bed together. Sweetness, trust, absolute comfort with each other. So are they just friends or what?

Sincerely,

Jenna

General Information



genre: contemporary

tags: college boys; gay for you; friends to lovers; fluff/sweet; young adults

word count: 22,560

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PILLOW TALK

by J.H. Knight

SMACKING HIS dry lips together, his tongue feeling like he'd licked the carpet in his sleep, Scott wasn't quite ready to blink open his crusty eyes. He silently began piecing together the night before. Copious amounts of alcohol, loud music, the apartment full of friends and more than a few friendly strangers. He vaguely remembered a quick hand-job in the bathroom from some guy Jimmy had introduced him to, but the rest was a blur.

When he felt safe that his head wasn't on the verge of exploding, Scott opened one eye. The warmth against his back and the comfortable weight of an arm slung over his waist told him he wasn't alone, but the familiar little snore against his ear was what made him smile and dare to lift his head.

Jimmy. The man was wrapped around him from behind, their jean-clad legs tangled together, t-shirts twisted, socks half-kicked off. They wound up like that too often for Scott to be surprised. "Wake up, dipshit, you're drooling on my shoulder." Scott nudged back against his best friend, but Jimmy just tightened his arm and snuffled into Scott's hair. "Christ," he muttered to himself with a huff of laughter, trying to disentangle from the other man.

They had been best friends and roommates for over four years, inseparable since being randomly assigned to a dorm room together. They both got their bachelor's degrees and when Jimmy started med school less than a year ago, Scott started his PhD program and the two of them got this little place off campus together. It was small, but clean and cheap.

Voice rough from sleep, and probably more than a few hits off the bong that was passed around the night before, Jimmy muttered, "Time is it?"

Scott was just getting himself up, glancing at the clock, "Nearly noon," he said over his shoulder, running a hand through his sandy-blond hair.

"What time is Ruby getting in?"

"Plane lands in an hour."

Spreading out on the bed and stretching his long, strong arms over his broad shoulders, "We should've told her to come out on Monday so we

could've recovered from last night." Jimmy grumbled, his words nearly lost on a yawn. If Scott let himself think about it— and he never did let himself think about it— he'd have to admit that Jimmy was picture perfect, straight out of a magazine perfect.

Still sitting on the side of the bed with his elbows resting on his knees, Scott looked like he might roll over and go back to sleep, only grunting in agreement with Jimmy's comment.

"Get your big gay ass moving, sweet cheeks." Jimmy told him, finally getting to his feet and stretching again.

He shot Jimmy an affronted look as the man came to stand in front of him, "My ass may be gay, but it is *not* big." Giving a backhanded tap to Jimmy's stomach where his shirt was riding up. "It's one of my best features." Scott added petulantly.

"So I've been told, princess. Now, let's see the damage out there before we go get little sis."

Scott snorted another laugh but he stood up, shifting his clothes and straightening himself out before tripping over one of Jimmy's enormous shoes that were abandoned in the floor. "I don't know how you can call her that considering you hit on her the first time you met her."

"I did not! I was just being friendly." Jimmy defended. It was an old argument, one that they laughed over every time Ruby's name was even mentioned. "You'd already told her all sorts of shit about me; I was just living up to her expectations. She would've been offended if I hadn't pretended to try."

"Right..."

"And you lied to the girl."

"Lied, my ass." Scott was already making his way past the mountain that was his best friend, Jimmy topping him by a few inches and several more pounds of muscle.

"Yes, lied. I don't mark notches in my bedpost."

Scott arched a brow, "Since getting out of high school." he added as they made their way to the living room.

"Yeah, well. You made it sound like I still do that. I've...matured since

then.”

Scott couldn't help but laugh, shaking his head, “Yes, we're both pillars of maturity and decorum.”

“Practically saints.” Jimmy agreed, dropping his arm around Scott's shoulder.

They both stopped as if they'd walked into a wall. Their tiny living room/dining room/kitchenette was buried under a pile of beer cans, pizza boxes, and clothing.

“It looks like a strip club exploded in here.” Jimmy was great for stating the obvious.

“Maybe... Maybe it's not as bad as it looks. I mean...”

Taking an optimistic sniff, Jimmy said hopefully, “I don't smell anything too foul at least.”

As they began throwing everything into two giant trash bags— one for recycle and one for unidentifiable filth— Scott turned to Jimmy in alarm, “Did what's-her-name sleep over?”

“Who's what's-her-name?”

“Sharon...Cheryl... whatever her name was.”

“Oh, Christ,” Jimmy muttered, stalking down the hall to his own bedroom. When he returned a moment later he was laughing. “She slept over, but, uh, so did Benny and Mark...”

Scott was grinning at him, “Jesus, maybe you should marry her. She's the girl version of *you*.”

“Makes my head hurt to think of the logistics of what went on in my room last night. There's barely enough room for me in that bed.”

Pausing as he dropped another beer can into the recycle bag, Scott narrowed his eyes, “I know,” he said pointedly, “I've walked in on more than one of your little love-ins on the couch. Or *my* bed.”

“Well...your bed is bigger.” Jimmy told him as they resumed their slap and dash cleaning, “And it's not like I don't invite you to join us...” he added with a winning smile.

“One of these days I'm gonna take you up on it just to see the look of shock on your face. I bet your dick would shrink to the size of a peanut.” They

were both laughing, Scott picking up a stray pair of pink satin panties and flinging them at Jimmy.

“They’d look better on you, sweetheart.” Teasing Scott and tossing them back at him. When Scott’s face flushed a pink to match the panties, Jimmy’s grin turned evil, “Oh-*ho*! Have we found a kink for baby?”

“No.” he said firmly, adding the panties to a pile of lost and found clothing on the couch. “They’re just...soft.”

“One of the nice things about girls,” Jimmy told him, “You should try it sometime, just to see.”

“Yeah, well.”

Jimmy stopped in mid-motion then, staring at his friend, “*What?*”

Looking guilty, Scott continued what he was doing, unable to make eye contact, “Not one of my finer moments, okay?”

“Okay, but we’re resuming this conversation in the car.” Glancing at his watch, Jimmy looked around the room as if deciding it wasn’t great but it would do, “We better hit the road; we’re gonna be late as it is.”

“Better get your room cleared out first.” Scott reminded him, heading to his own room to find his keys and phone.

IT TOOK a few minutes to take out the trash and make sure the apartment was free of vagrants, but they were finally trapped in the small confines of Scott’s little hybrid and pulling out onto the main road toward I-5. Jimmy was scrunched up in the front seat next to Scott, fiddling with the settings and trying to make room for his (in Scott’s opinion) excessively long legs. “If you hate my car so much, why didn’t you drive?”

“Yours gets better gas mileage.” Jimmy muttered, hitting the wrong button and ending up nearly flat on his back, his knees still up against the dash.

Scott took pity on him, laughing as he stopped at a traffic light and leaning over the man, finding the right switch and gliding the man’s seat back to a comfortable position for him. “You say that like it’s just random luck, like we don’t *choose* our cars, like it’s luck of the draw or something. You could’ve picked a car that was easy on gas and the environment but you *chose* a car that

was all...testosterone...*look at my giant dick with wheels* instead. “

Jimmy snorted and batted the back of Scott’s head as they turned at the corner, “My car is *hot*.”

“It is,” Scott agreed, not adding that he wagered Jimmy’s dick was pretty damn hot too.

“And, you’re just avoiding our predetermined topic of discussion by insulting my hot car.”

Scott scowled and gripped the wheel a little tighter, “I am not. It was a perfectly valid point.”

“The one about you having slept with a girl?” Jimmy asked, one cheek dimpling as he flashed his brightest smile.

Huffing and rolling his eyes, “Once, okay? One time in high school, that’s it. And Epic Fail doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

“And...” Jimmy prompted, reaching a hand over, fingers playing in Scott’s hair as he drove.

“You really are a bastard, ya know that?”

“My mother would disagree.”

“Fine. We dated for over a year and I kept telling her we should wait, she was too young, if we got caught...the church wouldn’t approve—” Scott had to stop for Jimmy’s burst of laughter there.

“The *church*? You used *God* as a reason not to sleep with a girl?”

“Yeah, well. He made me this way; I figured I could turn the joke on Him.”

“Fair enough,” Jimmy agreed, still snickering, his hand having dropped to Scott’s shoulder, a comforting weight, warm and secure there. “So, what happened?”

“I don’t know, at a certain point, telling her we were too young didn’t really cut it, ya know? I think she was the only virgin left in our class. And, she kinda realized that using my unshakable faith wasn’t really an option since I hadn’t been to services since we’d started dating...” Having to pause for a breath, Scott went on, feeling a little ashamed still, despite the fact that it was over five years ago, “Homecoming, I got us a hotel room, got myself good and drunk, bought some condoms and...”

“And...?” Scott mumbled something under his breath, his face flushing to a deep crimson on his pale skin. Jimmy seemed to sense that he was struggling and his grip on Scott’s shoulder tightened a little, fingers stroking his neck, “You don’t have to tell me if you really don’t wanna, bro. It’s all good.”

Maybe it was the sincerity in Jimmy’s voice, the lack of teasing that was always there, but Scott swallowed hard and raised his head a little, still focused on the road, but glancing at his friend, “No, it’s just... Do you have any idea how hard it is to... With a virgin, I mean, when you’re only half-hard at *best*?”

Jimmy was truly a good friend because he did his very best—really!—not to laugh at that, his grin killing him as it tried to escape. “No, I, uh, can’t say that I do, but...I can imagine...”

Stopping at the next light, Scott rested his forehead on the steering wheel, “Or how humiliating it is for a *guy* to fake an orgasm.”

“I...no, I don’t know what that’s like.” He couldn’t help it. He really tried. But the laughter just burst out of him. “That must’ve sucked.” he added, trying to regain his sobriety as Scott looked at him with a hint of bitterness in his amber colored eyes.

“It did.” he told Jimmy, glaring at the road ahead as the light changed. “Rhonda was the first person I came out to because I couldn’t let her think it was *her* when it was actually *me*. Well, more to the point, that she wasn’t Martin Rhodes who was the tight end on our football team. And, I swear to God, Jimmy, you make a tight end joke now, I’m dropping you off on the side of the freeway.” Scott warned as he merged onto said freeway.

“I wasn’t gonna make a joke.” Jimmy told him, reaching again to try and comfort his friend.

“Seriously? You didn’t have a joke ready?”

“Three, actually,” Jimmy confessed, his smile not as cocky as usual, but just as disarming, “But I wasn’t gonna use them.”

“Three in as many seconds? I’m impressed...”

“You should be. At my quick wit *and* my restraint.”

“Agreed. Good man.” Scott told him, only a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

“Who was next?” Jimmy asked, seemingly out of the blue.

“Next what? Just the one girl; I told ya that.”

“No, who’d you come out to next?”

“Oh, Ruby and Ma the next day. Ruby just cocked her little head and smiled and said, ‘Figured,’ and Ma hugged me and told me she was proud of me for finally telling her.”

“That’s it?”

“I think she’d wondered for a while, I mean, yeah, I had a girlfriend and played football and baseball and all that, but I took ballroom dance and watched Golden Girl reruns with her too...”

Feeling like it was safe to laugh again, Jimmy let himself, “That would’ve been a toss-up.” he said, grinning again as they started the winding curves into the airport.

“Not really; I got into sports for the locker room.” Scott’s phone buzzed in his pocket as he was trying to merge into the arrivals lane. “Can ya get that for me?” he asked, lifting his hips up a little so Jimmy could fit his hand into Scott’s impossibly tight jean pocket.

“Do I get to feel ya up too?” the other man teased as he dug out Scott’s phone.

“Maybe later, doll.” Scott drawled, rolling his eyes as he scanned the signs for Ruby’s airline.

“It’s baby sis, she says— and I quote— *‘You’re late, asshole. I hope you’re at least getting laid.’* Want me to respond to that?” Jimmy asked, beaming and already thumbing a message back.

“Oh, Christ, what did you say?”

“I told her I was blowing you in the parking deck but we’d be there in a minute.”

“Asshole,” Scott said under a laugh, rolling his eyes again.

“So, what’s the deal with her and this guy?”

“Engaged and planning to tie the knot this summer. I think Ma’s hoping I can talk her out of it while she’s here.”

“She’s not even twenty-one, I can’t blame your mother.”

“Almost twenty-two, but Ma’s a little gunshy about marriage in general, so...”

“Well, marry a lying sack of shit and that’s bound to happen.”

“Too true.”

Scott’s phone buzzed again and Jimmy flipped it open without hesitation, laughing out loud after reading the message, “She says it’s about damn time I gave you some. She also called me a prick tease.”

“You are a prick tease, bitch.”

“You love it. Also, I could say the same to you. You weren’t even willing to give me a hand that one time...”

“Oh, God, that again? You were shitfaced, falling over and about to pass out.”

“Yeah, see? I actually did need a hand.”

Scott pulled up to the lane for picking up arrivals and looked at Jimmy, “I’d never take advantage of you and you know it.” He was totally serious, but Jimmy, of course, made a joke.

Batting his eyelashes at Scott, the man asked, “Even if I begged you to, angel?”

Scott was saved from having to respond when Ruby knocked on the window, the two men getting out and greeting her.

“FUCKING HELL, I’ve been here over a half hour,” Ruby told Jimmy as the man squeezed the air from her lungs, hugging her tightly. “Did you two have to get rid of last night’s himbos and bimbos?” she asked, grinning against Jimmy’s shoulder as he lifted her off the ground.

“Yeah, but for once neither of the himbos were for Scott.” Jimmy told her, setting her down again and ruffling her hair like she was still in grade school.

Ruby could probably pass for grade school if she didn’t open her mouth. Her petite frame only came to Scott’s shoulder and somewhere in the middle of Jimmy’s chest. Her blonde hair was a natural mass of ringlets that shined like spun gold when the sun hit. “Did you finally start playing for the other team or just switch hitting?” she asked, beaming up into Jimmy’s face.

“Neither. Until your brother makes an honest man outta me, I’m sticking with the ladies.” Jimmy told her, laughing with her as he ran his hands down

her sides, flirting and playful as always, “You look incredible, by the way.”

Narrowing his eyes, Scott reached a hand up and smacked Jimmy on the back of his head, “Hands off, Don Juan.”

Jimmy hopped back a little and reached to smooth his dark hair down where Scott had just tapped him, “Well, if I can’t have *you*...”

It was Ruby’s turn to give him a playful slap then, “Did you just call me your second choice, shit head?”

“I’ll get your luggage.” Jimmy said, laughing as he backed away from the two siblings.

“Hello, gorgeous,” Scott said with affection as he scooped his sister into his arms and swung her around. “God, it’s been too long.” he added, squeezing her good before setting her down again.

“I didn’t tell ya to move two thousand miles from home...” she murmured, giving him a small kiss on the cheek before rubbing the bright red lipstick print off with her thumb.

“Yeah, well, Seattle has two things going for it that Rouses Point *doesn’t*. Less than a foot of snow a year and more than one gay guy.”

“And me!” Jimmy added from the back of the car, stuffing Ruby’s large suitcase into the trunk.

“Yes, and Jimmy. Though, sometimes I can’t decide if that goes under the plus or minus side.”

“You love me and you know it.” Jimmy told him, knowing it was true and that it went both ways.

“More often than not.” Scott agreed, but he was beaming at the man as Jimmy walked back to them and slung his arm around Scott’s shoulder.

“More like always.” Jimmy countered, dropping a little kiss into Scott’s hair before giving him a small shove to get into the car.

“You two really should just get married, Jesus.” Ruby muttered, rolling her eyes at the two as she clamored into the backseat of Scott’s tiny car.

“If we make it through June without it getting pushed to the November ballot, I’ll marry ya, baby.” Jimmy told him, laughing as he scrunched himself back into the car.

“We could do the Pride pub crawl for our honeymoon.”

“You two do the Pride pub crawls every year anyway.” Ruby pointed out, and Scott could hear the amusement in her tone. “Gayest straight man on the planet.” she added, patting Jimmy on the top of his head.

“That’s right,” Jimmy agreed, “I’m as happy as they come.”

Ruby’s little giggle sounded like a very unladylike snort, “Don’t you mean you’re happy as long as you come?”

“That too.”

“OKAY, MOM,” Jimmy said into his phone, pacing around the small living room where Scott and Ruby watched him from the couch, “No, I will. Yes, I promise. Yes, okay, yes, do that. No he won’t mind, I swear.” He rolled his eyes and made a little talking motion with his hand as he moved into the kitchenette, rattling a small pot on the stove, “Mom, okay, but I gotta go or dinner’s gonna burn. Love you too. Yes. Yeah, okay. Yeah. Tell dad hi for me. Okay. Yes, I’ll tell her too. Okay, bye mom, boiling over here, gotta go!” And he snapped his phone shut, turning the ringer off. “Oh, my God, I swear she likes you better than me.” he told Scott as he came back into the living room.

“Of course she does. I never took her six thousand dollar show dog and dyed it purple.” Scott agreed, laughing as he stretched out on the couch, Ruby flipping channels and curled up next to him. “Or borrowed her Versace micro dress for a Halloween costume.”

“The dog was for the costume too. I don’t think I should get dinged twice for that...”

“Whatever you say, baby, but I’m pretty sure she doesn’t see it that way.”

Jimmy made a frustrated growling noise in his throat as he flopped down on the other end of the couch, putting Ruby between himself and Scott. “She wants me to tell you hello, Rubes. And *you*,” reaching over the girl and tugging lightly at Scott’s hair, “She told me to tell you we’re spending the first two weeks of summer with them.”

Scott let his head fall back and relaxed into Jimmy’s touch, turning his face to see the man. “Sounds good. Palm trees and a private pool. Guy could get used to that.”

“She’s springing for the tickets too, said she’d message you on Facebook about the details.”

“Gotta love the way she spoils us.”

“No, she spoils *you*. Before we moved in together, I had to buy my own ride home every break. And, tell me again when you added my *mother* to your Facebook?”

“When she sent me a request...”

“Good Christ.”

“Such a pain in the ass when your best friend gets along with your family, isn’t it?” Scott asked with a bright grin, glancing between Jimmy and Ruby, the girl now curled up against Jimmy with her feet in Scott’s lap.

“Yeah, well. I’m adding your mom on mine, see how you like it.”

“You’ll have to make her an account first.” Ruby muttered, “Now shut up so I can watch *The Voice*. I can’t hear a damn thing over you two hens.”

Jimmy tugged at her hair for that, but he quieted down for her, reaching back across the couch to Scott, finding the man’s neck and gently kneading it, an absentminded touch, his hands, his body always seeming to gravitate toward Scott.

Sighing and leaning a little closer into the touch, Scott didn’t take his eyes off the screen, didn’t move his hands from Ruby’s little feet in his lap, but he let himself smile at the familial picture they made, loving the way they all fell into rhythm together, the way Jimmy was the same day or night, regardless of who else was around.

After another hour of television and a few beers, Ruby was yawning and stretching, sitting up from between the two men. “Okay, am I on the couch or one of your rooms this time?” she asked, already getting to her feet so she could get changed for bed, feeling the jetlag more than she would like to admit.

“You can have my room, lovey, I’ll bunk with Scott.”

“Figures.” she said, rolling her eyes fondly as she leaned down to drop a kiss on Jimmy’s forehead and then Scott’s. “I was pissed the first time I woke up on this piece of shit couch and found *your* bed empty...”

“His bed is always empty. He can’t fit another person in there with him

and he doesn't like to sleep alone."

"Good excuse, I'll have to remember that." she told them, laughing as she gathered her things and headed for the bathroom.

Jimmy waited until she had turned down the hall before flopping over and resting his head in Scott's lap. "You didn't even mention the fiancé thing."

"Yeah, but neither did she, maybe she's not all that serious?"

"Or maybe she's waiting to see if you say something..."

"Christ, I don't even know what to tell her. I met Roger and he seems like a nice guy, but..."

"But, she's still a baby, even if she talks like a sailor and runs around with an *Abortion on demand and without apology* button on her field jacket."

"Exactly. And, like...I don't know, hell, I'm older than her and I don't feel ready for that kind of thing, ya know?"

"Yeah, I hear ya." Scott started to shift under Jimmy, readying to get up, "I'm too tired to go to bed, Scott, carry me." Jimmy whined playfully, batting his long dark lashes at his friend.

"Lose about fifty pounds and six inches, then ask me to do that for ya."

"*Hey*, this is all muscle."

"Which is heavier than fat, or haven't you gotten that far in your book learnin', doc?"

Jimmy stuck his tongue out at Scott, but he sat up, groaning a little. "You're mean."

"Tough love. You need anything outta your room before Ruby stakes her claim?"

"Nah, I'm good."

"You're wearing underwear this time?"

"Yes, mother."

"Don't '*yes, mother*' me. That was an alarming way to wake up."

"By alarming, I hope you mean tempting as hell." Jimmy told him, his grin firmly in place, straight white teeth and all, as he dropped his arm over Scott's shoulder and steered him towards the bedroom.

"Yes, yes, tempting as hell. Lucky me to have a best friend that's God's gift. I can't imagine how I seem to forget it so often."

“You just block it out so you don’t have to pine for me.”

“That must be it.” Scott answered dryly, shutting the door behind them as they made their way to bed. They both stripped off their clothes quickly, backs to each other. Scott caught a glance of Jimmy’s bare shoulders as the man tossed his shirt to the floor, but he closed his eyes for a moment to erase the image.

“I get to be the big spoon tonight.” Jimmy told him, already slipping under the covers, plumping a pillow.

“You always get to be the big spoon.” Scott grumbled, pulling on a pair of sleep pants and cinching the waist in a little with the drawstring.

“That’s because I *am* bigger. You are, by nature, the little spoon. It’s not my fault; blame genetics.”

“That’s like saying because I’m short, I have to be a bottom.” Scowling playfully, Scott climbed into bed, snuggling up with Jimmy.

“No, you’re a bottom because you like taking it up the ass.”

“How do you know?”

“Thin walls. You think I don’t hear you? ‘*Yes, God, fuck me harder*’ tends to carry when the apartment is quiet...”

Scott felt his face flush with the heat of embarrassment, “Oh, God.”

Jimmy’s soft breath moved through Scott’s hair, his laughter gentle as he tightened his arms around his friend. “It’s alright, princess, better you than me.”

“Don’t knock it till ya try it.”

“Fair point,” Jimmy murmured, his tone thoughtful. “Hey, how come you never wanted to try anything with me?” he asked suddenly, whispering in the darkened room as the shadows from the lights outside played against the walls.

“I...” Scott was lost for an answer for a moment, not sure how to respond. In truth, the first time he set eyes on Jimmy he wanted to be pressed up against a wall by the guy, but then they got to know each other, and he realized the man was a few notches past straight, but also the best friend he could have hoped for and anything more seemed like a useless fantasy compared to what he got from Jimmy every day.

Turning so he could face his friend, Scott tangled their feet together under

the covers, slipping a hand over Jimmy's hip. "I don't know, it's like..." Taking a breath as he chose his words, "I think of you in a totally non-sexual way, ya know? Like... I love you, we take care of each other, always there for each other, but... It's like a dog, I mean... Some people love their dogs more than the people in their lives, but they don't think of them in that light."

"Well, some people— "

"Oh, Jesus, you're such a sicko."

"I didn't say I would!"

Both of them laughing, Scott put his hand over Jimmy's mouth, "Shh, Ruby's trying to sleep."

Jimmy nudged Scott's hand until the man let it slip from his mouth, the two looking at each other in the shadows, "So, you're telling me I'm like your *dog*?"

"Only in that non-sexual love way." Scott answered seriously even as Jimmy was biting back his grin. The man looked at him for a long moment and Scott knew he should prepare himself for something, just not sure what. He could feel Jimmy's bare chest against his own, feel the rise and fall as Jimmy took a breath. The man's arms tightened around him slightly before Jimmy let his smile shine through and leaned forward, licking Scott's cheek. "You are so gross."

"Woof."

Scott turned back over then, laughing with Jimmy. "Better knock it off or you're getting kibble for breakfast."

WAKING SLOWLY and pressing back slightly against the nudge of a warm morning erection through layers of flannel and cotton, Scott was still half-asleep, his own cock stirring as he nestled closer to Jimmy, letting himself pretend it was still a dream. The soft moan and grinding of Jimmy's hips had Scott fully awake, though, his eyes popping open as he tried to shift away from the man. He knew Jimmy was still asleep and couldn't allow himself to enjoy it anymore.

Jimmy's arms tightened around Scott, pulling him closer again, "C'mere,"

he muttered, talking in his sleep, voice a warm rumble against the back of Scott's neck. As Jimmy's hand started to drift lower over Scott's stomach, a small bolt of panic rose in his throat, wanting to let the man continue, and at the same time knowing how awkward things could turn if he did. No matter how much Jimmy joked and teased and flirted, he knew the man was straight and—in Scott's experience—straight guys could get weird after dipping a toe or two in the gay end of the pool.

Stopping the progress of Jimmy's hand, Scott held his wrist, shifting his elbow back into Jimmy's ribs at the same time, "Wake up, I think Ruby's burning the kitchen down," he whispered, sniffing into the air and coming away with the scent of scorched meat-substitute.

Jimmy seemed to wake up then, sliding his hand back a little, lacing his fingers with Scott's, "Oh, Jesus, how in the name of God did you two survive? Your mother worked fifteen hours a day and neither one of you can boil water without setting off the smoke alarm."

"Sandwiches." Scott told him, pulling away with a laugh, trying to will his own erection down.

"She's not still on that vegan kick is she?"

"Far as I know. Meat is still murder, according to Ruby."

"Delicious and nutritious murder." Jimmy offered, running his hand through his hair that was sticking out at odd angles, making him look boyish and unassuming.

They made their way out of bed, elbows bumping each other, shoulders brushing, as they walked together into the kitchen. "What did you do?" Scott asked his sister, looking around the small kitchen where it seemed every dish they owned was out and dirty.

"Breakfast. Kind of." Her own brow creased as she looked around the disaster area. "It's kinda burnt, but, um..." Pointing with the oven mitt she had been using to wave the smoke out the little kitchen window, "Soy bacon, egg-substitute scramble, whole wheat toast...that's probably not edible anymore, though." She poked the black toast with a fingertip, a corner of it chipping off under the slight pressure.

"Probably?" Jimmy teased, coming around and dropping a kiss to the top

of Ruby's head as he reached over her into the cupboard and pulled out a box of cereal. "You have other talents, Rubes. Explore them. Cooking, not so much."

"See if I try to do something nice for you again." Ruby told him, reaching for a bowl to join him in the cereal. "Walked to the store, lugged groceries in, washed dishes before I could even cook, made a healthy breakfast..."

"I'm pretty sure that much carbon can't be considered part of a healthy diet..." Scott told her, laughing as he got out juice and the soy milk for Ruby, joining them.

"Lots of people take charcoal caps every day." Jimmy offered helpfully, his mouth full, milk dripping down his chin.

Scott leaned over and swiped the milk from Jimmy's face with a napkin, not even realizing he'd done it, but Ruby watched, her brow arching as she observed the two going through their morning rituals. Jimmy poured cereal for Scott, Scott poured orange juice into a glass for Jimmy who pulled out the morning newspaper and handed Scott the world news section while Jimmy rummaged for the sports, setting sale papers in the middle so they could look at them together.

"Could you pass me the—" Scott didn't have to finish because Jimmy was already passing the little sugar bowl over to him without even looking up from the paper.

"Sacramento lost by three last night." Jimmy announced, still scanning the paper.

"How much did you lose?"

"Only a twenty, but it's still annoying. I hate it when Gary wins; he's such an arrogant prick."

"Hello pot, meet kettle..."

Jimmy put his paper down to shoot Scott a glare for that, "There's a difference between some well-earned gloating and doing a chicken dance while sticking a twenty dollar bill to your forehead."

Laughing, Scott conceded, "Fair enough. You're an arrogant prick when you win but Gary is a prize A jackass."

"Yeah, alright, that sounds more accurate." Jimmy was laughing with him

as he got up to put his own bowl and Scott's into the sink. "Who gets first shower?" he asked, rinsing the dishes and leaving them in the soapy water.

"Had mine." Ruby told them, the first thing she'd said for several moments, still watching her brother and his best friend.

"Just you and me, sweetheart." Jimmy told Scott, doing the worst Humphrey Bogart impression of all time. The man had come to stand behind Scott and was rubbing his shoulders lightly as he looked at the paper Scott still held.

Scott's head dropped back, resting on Jimmy's stomach as he looked up at his friend, "Who're you supposed to be this morning? The Godfather?"

Jimmy narrowed his eyes playfully, "Just for that, I'm not gonna let you share my shower."

Scott tried to look wounded, but he laughed instead, "Just save me some hot water."

"Not a chance. You want hot water, you better join me."

"You just said I couldn't..."

Jimmy considered for a moment, "And that is your punishment. A cold, lonely shower."

Scott just shook his head and laughed as Jimmy gave a little pat to his shoulder and trotted off down the hall.

Ruby watched her brother for another long moment, waiting for the sound of running water to come from down the hall. "Hey, um, Scott?"

Setting his paper aside, Scott got up to get a cup of coffee, casting a curious glance at his sister.

"Are you sure...I mean, I know Jimmy likes to...but..."

"Spit it out Ruby, you're gonna develop a stammer."

"Well, I mean..." She scrunched up her nose and tilted her head, as if trying to choose her words carefully then just blurted her question out, "You sure Jimmy's like, really *really* straight?"

He had to laugh. Scott had been hearing that same question since the first time Jimmy pulled Scott down into his lap in the commons and planted a sloppy kiss to his cheek. For a while there he thought he'd never get another date as long as he hung out with Jimmy; everyone assuming they were a

couple. “I’m pretty sure the entire cheer squad can’t be wrong.”

“There are guys on your cheer squad...” Ruby pointed out, both of them laughing that time.

“The female portion of our cheer team.”

Helping clean up the breakfast debacle, Ruby shook her head a little, looking a lot like her brother in the moment, “If you say so, but... Do you guys really take showers together? I mean...”

Snorting a laugh, “Sometimes, but only if we’re both in a hurry. It’s not as hot as it sounds.”

“I just think he— ”

“He just likes to play around, and he likes to shock people. Hell, his own mother wonders. She even asked me the first time I met her.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, she pulled me aside and said, ‘I’m so glad my son has a friend like you now.’ Emphasis on the word friend. Then she asked how long we’d been together. I had to swear up and down that it wasn’t like that and we really weren’t euphemism friends. I still don’t think she fully believes me.”

“Well, I can’t blame her, I mean...”

As if Ruby had called Jimmy out to illustrate her point, the man sauntered in with only a white towel slung low on his hips, his body glistening with water, skin flushed a rosy-golden hue from the warmth of his shower. His hair hung straighter when it was damp and it fell into his eyes, hiding them and at the same time showing off his square jaw and Roman nose. Scott had to bite his own lip, trying not to think about the fact that the man looked like a wet dream as he settled back against him, with Jimmy stepping up behind Scott and wrapping his arms around his waist.

“I changed my mind.” Jimmy told him in a playful, husky rumble.

“Decided to vote Republican just to piss off your parents?” Scott asked, laughing, “Becoming a nurse instead of a doctor? You’ve been lying to me all these years and you’re really a cat person?”

Jimmy grinned as he leaned in and laid a soft bite against Scott’s neck. The sensation sent a wave of shivers over the surface of Scott’s skin, but he suppressed it like he always did. “About your shower. I left you some hot

water after all.”

“My hero.” Scott drawled, nudging Jimmy with an elbow until the man let him go. He held his hands in front of himself as he walked down the hall, trying to hide the slight tent of his sleep pants.

COMING OUT of his shower, Scott paused in the hall, he could hear Jimmy and Ruby talking from the living room, the two of them laughing about something— probably a joke Jimmy had just made about Scott.

“Seriously, though, you’re gonna give your brother an ulcer over Roger.”

“I only told Ma I was gonna marry him because she still...”

“Treats you like a baby?” Jimmy asked, Scott biting his lip around a smile as he eavesdropped.

“Exactly. I mean, Jesus, while I was packing to come out here, she actually stood at the foot of my bed and said, ‘*you’re not really going to wear that, are you?*’ Like...I’m not even capable of dressing myself or something.”

“She’s your mom, kiddo, it’s probably a hard habit to break.”

“I know, but it’s fucking annoying.”

Jimmy’s laugh drifted through the apartment and Scott was sure the man was pulling Ruby into a hug, “Time to move out on your own, sweetie.”

Ruby’s sigh was heavy, “I know. I like the free rent, though.”

“Not really free if you’re crazy because of it.”

“There is that.”

Scott was about to turn and go into his bedroom when Jimmy called out, “You don’t have to hide in the hall, darling; we’re not swapping secrets about you!”

He thought about pretending he didn’t hear, but that was pointless. Coming around the corner with a guilty smile, Scott asked, “So you’re not actually engaged?”

Ruby rolled her eyes, “You think I’m an idiot?”

“I was starting to wonder.” He teased, squeezing himself down onto the couch between Jimmy and his sister, forcing them to move for him. “So Ma’s getting on your nerves and, rather than get a job and move out, you decided to

make up an engagement to...what? Get on her nerves right back?"

Pausing for a moment, Ruby laughed, "Basically. I guess it worked."

"Too well. Ma's probably putting a hit out on Roger as we speak."

Reaching around Scott's shoulder, Jimmy tugged at the girl's hair, "That's okay, little Ruby is worth life and limb."

Scott pressed a kiss to her temple, earning a faint blush from his sister and then an elbow to his ribs, "Don't I know it."

IT RAINED for most of her visit, Seattle deciding to show its true colors for a few days with angry looking gray clouds and drizzle hovering over emerald green. That didn't stop them from long drives to the peninsula or walks along the waterfront. Ruby flirted with the fish throwers in the market and gave her coins to street performers. She got pulled up on stage when Scott and Jimmy took her to a little burlesque hall and lied, telling the manager it was her birthday. She giggled and blushed and then swore a blue streak at them when she sat back down at their table.

"That is going on YouTube as we speak." Jimmy told her, laughing himself stupid as he leaned away from her, trying to hit send before she could take his phone from him.

Smacking his shoulder and ordering a double from the waiter, "Dinner's on you."

"Don't pout, it's not pretty."

Scott was laughing so hard watching them, he had tears in his eyes, "You two better knock it off or they're gonna kick us out. We just got our privileges back."

Ruby stopped trying to get the phone from Jimmy, asking, "Privileges?"

Nodding as he motioned for another drink himself, Scott laughed, "Jimmy got us banned for a whole year."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"It wasn't *just* me!"

"You're the one that did the little table dance..."

"At your request."

“I didn’t tell you to take your pants down.”

Sitting up a little straighter, Jimmy gave an indignant huff, “I had more clothes on than the dancers.”

Giggling as she leaned against her brother, “Oh, Jesus, why didn’t *that* end up on YouTube.”

Scott beamed at her, “It did. *Someone* reported it and it was removed.”

THE NEXT day, Scott and Jimmy stood outside Scott’s car, hugging Ruby and making sure she had her boarding pass, her ID, and all the other little things the girl was prone to forget. “Love you, sis.” Scott told her, hugging her tightly. “Don’t go six months without another visit again. Hate that.” His lips were pursed like he was working himself up for a good pout, but he kissed her cheek and held her another minute.

“Same to you. Come home this summer, don’t make Ma come all the way out here again. She misses having you home, okay?”

“Promise,” he whispered, letting her go so Jimmy could give her a little kiss and a good hug too.

“Take care of my dumb ass brother,” she told Jimmy, kissing the man’s cheek, “Don’t— ” Stopping herself from what she was going to say, Ruby hugged Jimmy tighter, “Don’t let him get his heart broken.”

“You can count on it.” Jimmy smiled at her, giving her one more squeeze before letting her go.

They stood and watched her for another moment, Scott leaning against the car, pressing against Jimmy’s side as the man wrapped an arm around him. All their friends, but Jimmy especially, knew what Ruby meant to Scott, how close he was to her, how much he loved her and how hard it always was when he had to say goodbye to her.

“Alright, Little Boy Blue. You get to pick the movie tonight, even one of those old black and whites I pretend to hate. And if you’re really good and don’t cry, I’ll stop and get you a lolly on the way home.”

Scott pinched him for that, but he laughed. “I don’t want a lollipop, I want— ”

“White chocolate raspberry truffle ice cream. And cuddles. I know.”

“And pizza.”

“I know that too.” Jimmy told him, smiling down at Scott before ruffling his hair, “Let me get back into your clown car and we can hit the video store.”

“You got a deal, Bozo.” Scott teased, barely dodging Jimmy’s hand as it reached out to smack him.

“HURRY UP, you’re gonna miss the beginning!” The room was small enough that Scott really didn’t have to yell, but he did anyway, bouncing on the couch a little, a throw blanket over his lap and a pint of ice cream chilling his fingers.

Pulling the pizza out of the oven and grabbing some napkins and a cutter, Jimmy told him, “Hey, it’s not my fault you wanted this fancy Tuscan chicken take and bake shit. I was just gonna order delivery.” There was already beer and soda on the coffee table, popcorn and chips. Jimmy teased Scott for being a comfort eater all the time and tonight was no different, “Don’t let yourself get fat, baby. I’m taking you to the gym tomorrow.”

“I am not *fat*. You keep saying that and I’m gonna get a complex. Once a month binging isn’t going to hurt me.”

Jimmy opened his mouth to protest that comment but Scott shut him up with a sharp shush as the credits started to play across the screen, Scott looking like he might start to clap when Cary Grant’s name flashed across. “Did I tell you he was my first star crush?”

“No shit? I thought it was Ricky Martin.”

Scott shook his head, setting the ice cream down and reaching for a slice of pizza as Jimmy spread the blanket out over both their laps, “Nah, he was later, like, junior high or so. But Cary Grant... When I was really little, like, I don’t know, six or so, Ma would let me stay up on the weekend with her and watch the late show and they always played these old movies. First time I saw Cary Grant I couldn’t decide if I wanted to be just like him or kiss him.”

Teasing, “Lucky for me ya got a type, I guess.”

“You, sir, are no Cary Grant.” Scott told him sternly, taking a huge bite of his pizza.

“I’m hurt.” Jimmy sniffed, looking playfully affronted.

“You are not.”

“No, really. That is probably the meanest thing you’ve ever said to me. No Cary Grant. One of these days I’ll show you how Cary Grant I can be.”

“If it’s as good as your Bogart, I’m in for a real treat. Or a real laugh, at any rate.”

Jimmy flicked his ear, but he settled down, leaning back to watch the film, knowing it was one of Scott’s favorites.

Scott was glad the movie had started and they were focused on something else. He let his gaze drift to the side every time Jimmy leaned forward and was grateful he didn’t have to admit aloud that Jimmy had always reminded him a little of the man on the screen. Maybe just around the eyes. And the mouth. And hair. And the shoulders. And, well, the whole build really. If Cary Grant had spent half his life working his abs until they looked they were carved out of stone. Damn it.

They fell asleep before the second film was even over, Jimmy leaning back against the arm of the couch, Scott sleeping soundly, curled up on the man’s chest.

WITH ONLY one weekend left of their break, Jimmy decided they needed to spend some quality time at a few of their favorite bars before burying themselves under course books again.

The two got ready in their separate bedrooms, but Jimmy was ready before Scott, as usual. The man wore tight black jeans and a dark blue button-down as he leaned against the frame of Scott’s door, watching him pull his faded Levi’s on. Scott jumped and whipped around when he heard a wolf whistle. “Jesus, wear squeaky shoes or something; you scared the shit outta me.”

Jimmy laughed, grinning, “I’d say I’m sorry, but...”

“Yeah, yeah.” Scott rolled his eyes, buttoning up his jeans and pulling on an old Smiths t-shirt that was two sizes too small, but clung nicely.

“You look like you’re planning on getting laid tonight.” Jimmy told him, still watching while Scott found his Chucks from under his bed and pulled

those on too.

He could feel his cheeks pinkening a little, glancing up at Jimmy from tying his shoes. "Maybe." Scott told him, "At least a blowjob..."

"As long as I'm the one you come home with." Jimmy joked, stepping into the room finally, reaching over to Scott's nightstand and pulling the drawer open. "And as long as you're safe." he added, still teasing even as he grabbed a strip of condoms out and tossed them to Scott.

"Same to you, sweetheart."

THEY WERE both staggering drunk, just after two in the morning, as they stumbled their way up the three steps that led to their door. It was a short cab ride home, but Scott was sure the driver was glad to be rid of them, laughing at Jimmy who was grinning and waving after the sound of gravel spitting up from under the tires of the cab.

They'd started in a small pub, shooting some pool and playing some darts, then went down the road to another that had better music and stronger drinks, and then ended up at Scott's favorite dance club. Instead of finding some friends there like they normally would, Scott and Jimmy stuck together, dancing under the flashing lights and pounding rhythm.

Jimmy kept Scott pressed against him the entire time, his hips grinding, hands even more adventurous than normal. It was the alcohol, Scott told himself, and the fact that they were both letting off a little steam before buckling back down to full time courses and part time jobs.

"You know what would be really good?" Scott said, kicking his shoes off as he groped for the light switch on the wall.

"Sex?" Jimmy asked him, a hint of laughter in his voice even as he wrapped his arms around Scott's hips and ground against him from behind like they were still on the dance floor. Scott could feel the hard length of the man pressed against him and it made his own pulse quicken.

"Yes. Always." Scott told him, laughing, trying to keep his voice light and, at the same time, trying to pull away from Jimmy. "But, I was thinking more like a really good cheeseburger. And fries. From Dick's. Why didn't we make

the cabby stop at Dick's?"

"Because we're idiots. "

It didn't matter that Scott was trying to pull away because the man was glued to his back. It was like wearing a really big, warm Jimmy-suit. With hands that kept traveling south. "That we are." he agreed, laughing as he caught one of Jimmy's wrists, fingers encircling and holding firmly to keep him from drifting any lower.

"Hey," An actual giggle from Jimmy told Scott that he was plastered, "I have a dick..."

"Yes."

"You have a dick..."

"...Yes."

"So, between us..."

Laughing as he caught the lame joke, "Our dicks don't serve the best fries on the planet."

Jimmy's hold tightened on him and Scott had to catch his breath, his heartbeat kicking out a tattoo against his ribcage. It turned to a heavy thud when Jimmy's touch became more meaningful, the air in the room feeling charged as Scott picked up on the intention behind the small strokes of the man's fingers and the heavy press of Jimmy's cock against his ass. Every muscle in his body tightened when Jimmy whispered against his ear, "Let's go to bed, Scott."

"I, uh..." It was a bad idea. Beyond bad ideas. It was quickly nose-diving into Tragic Disaster and Scott knew it. He knew that pressing back against Jimmy was a mistake, knew that if he let go of Jimmy's hands and let them drift over his lean body and skim the planes and hollows of his stomach and hips, that he would regret it sooner or later. He knew that by morning Jimmy wouldn't look at him the same way anymore, knew that whatever the man said, whatever excuses they chose to accept and whatever joke they tried to make out of it, it would all come to a horrible, ugly end. They would never be able to sit down and watch a movie or fall asleep together again, they would never be able to tease and call each other sweetheart or darling or whatever other idiotic endearments they shared.

So, despite the fact that his cock was rigid against his button fly and despite the fact that it had been months since he'd gotten anything more than a blowjob, Scott cleared his throat and tried again to pull away. "I think we should get some food and some aspirin and some water in us first." He tried to make his voice steady, but it cracked a little, his throat closing around the words as if his body was disagreeing and not willing to let his mouth mess it up for the rest of him.

The apartment was still dim, just the entryway light glowing softly from the door and Scott stubbed his toe on the coffee table as he took another step with Jimmy right on his heel. "Shit," he muttered, falling down onto the couch. Jimmy stood for a moment, his body silhouetted and Scott cursed himself for thinking so clearly, for turning down this chance, probably the only real one he'd ever get with Jimmy.

"Couch it is." Jimmy said, ignoring Scott's comment about water and food. He leaned closer, arm sliding over the back of the couch and Scott thought he could identify with rabbits that have been hunted by cats. Jimmy was all sleek and smooth, hand gliding closer, body shifting and inching toward him.

His mouth went dry, having to swallow hard before he choked. Looking down at his foot, "My toe hurts." he said feebly, grasping for anything that might distract Jimmy.

"Want me to kiss it better?" Jimmy offered with a bright grin, his breath brushing against Scott's skin, the tip of the man's nose just touching his cheek. Jimmy had moved quickly, stealthily, as Scott was looking away and now the man was right against him, rising up on his knees and pushing Scott back onto the arm of the couch. "Or we could kiss other stuff..." he suggested, still sounding playful as he leaned in again, dipping his head, his eyes gleaming in the reflection of moonlight coming through the living room window.

For a split second or ten, Scott was tempted. He felt his body relax just a notch, his hips rocking up against Jimmy and his hands sliding up Jimmy's broad chest, feeling the muscles and the smooth skin where the man's shirt was open just below his collarbone. They'd touched each other before, sat close, wrapped around each other, but never like this. Scott had never rested

beneath Jimmy; wanting to spread his thighs and grind against the man like this. He'd never seen such a vulnerable expression on Jimmy's face; part predatory and part disbelief, all of it shadowed with a hint of fear. It was the fear that reined Scott in. He didn't know what exactly put that look in Jimmy's eyes, but he knew what his own fears were and they weren't worth the risk for a drunken tumble in the dark.

Scott forced himself to say, "Or we could get some water and pass out."

Pausing for a beat too long, too many emotions thundering over Jimmy's face for Scott to catch them all, Jimmy sat back, "Yeah, probably a good idea." he said, shifting back onto his heels, running his palms down his thighs before climbing to his feet.

Jimmy went to the kitchen to get some water, taking longer than he normally would, and Scott took the opportunity to pretend to pass out. Jimmy slept in his own bed.

SOMETIME NEAR dawn, Scott drifted into a restless sleep. He'd been awake for hours, his neck stiff, head pounding, afraid to even shift on the couch, as if he could hide where he was if he was just quiet enough.

When he awoke, the first thing he noticed was a blanket draped over him. Opening his eyes slowly, he glanced around the quiet apartment. No sign of Jimmy. His eyes focused on a glass of water in front of him on the coffee table, two little ibuprofen tablets next to it and a small sticky note with one word written in Jimmy's bold block letters: Gym.

Scott sighed. What went on the night before was still bothering Jimmy or he would have been woken up to the man crawling on him and snuffling into his hair and tickling his ribs. Or he would've woken up over the man's shoulder while being fireman-carried to his bed and dumped in an untidy heap and told the couch would kill him.

His chest felt tight and his head was throbbing as he sat up, wrapping the blanket around his shoulders and wishing he could curl up next to his best friend. He took the pills and drank the entire glass of water in two big gulps, but he couldn't force himself to stand up.

Still sitting in the darkened room nearly an hour later, Scott was letting his emotions roil through him, worrying a lip between his teeth and wishing he could fix it all, or turn back time twenty four hours and change the course of their night.

Hearing keys in the door and a quiet thud as Jimmy's gym bag hit the floor, Scott turned to look at him. The man smiled, same bright grin, but it didn't quite meet Jimmy's eyes.

"You look like shit." he told Scott, coming in and pulling the curtains back to let some light in. "Should get some food in you..." he added, walking into the small kitchen and pulling out a skillet, turning on the coffee pot.

"You look like you feel fine." Scott muttered, stretching and groaning as he stood, still trying to read Jimmy's mood. He *seemed* fine, seemed like everything was back into place, but it still felt a little off to Scott.

"Felt like a walking headache when I got up, but I sweat it out at the gym. Good as new." Jimmy told him, offering a triumphant grin. "I'd have pulled your ass with me, but you looked pretty dead to the world." he added quietly.

"I was, yeah." Scott agreed, coming around the little island that divided the kitchen from the living room, watching as Jimmy cracked two eggs into the skillet and reached for the bread, popping two slices into the toaster.

"You need protein," Jimmy told him, adding with a nod to the coffee pot, "and caffeine."

Scott snorted a laugh, "Doctor's orders?"

"That's right," Jimmy nodded again, still smiling but not adding a stupid joke about the delivery method of the protein or giving Scott a nudge with his elbow.

He served the eggs up with the toast, and got down a coffee cup for Scott. "I'm gonna hit the shower while you eat, then we can figure out what to do with the rest of the day." Jimmy told him, reaching a hand out to ruffle Scott's hair. He beamed at Jimmy for that, feeling like they were getting over the little divide that the previous night had created.

"You got it, doc." Still smiling, Scott poured himself a cup of coffee, watching Jimmy pad barefoot across the floor, his gym shorts hanging low on his hips, tank top hugging his torso and riding up a little on one side. He had to

force himself to turn his back on the man, pushing down all the thoughts that wanted to run wild through him.

WITHIN A couple of weeks they were back into the swing of things. Everything had worked itself out between them, Scott and Jimmy falling easily back into their patterns of life together. Scott tried not to notice that Jimmy spent fewer nights sharing his bed, but that was the only difference and he figured he could live with it.

Working as a busboy at the small café down the street wasn't the best job, but the hours were easy on his schedule and the tips were a nice addition to the minimal wages he made as a TA helping useless undergrads muddle their way through world history. Jimmy was working as an orderly a few hours a week down at the hospital, his father insisting that his son see the hospital from the bottom up just as he had. They, at least, footed the bill for his schooling, and Jimmy's mother sent him money every month to help, but Jimmy swore up and down that the deposits in his bank account didn't start showing up until he'd introduced his family to Scott.

Scott was taking his apron off and hanging it on the little hook behind the kitchen door, glad his day was over, glad it was Thursday night and that meant no class and no shifts for three days. He could sleep in, correct the nightmare stack of papers for the professor he worked with, study quietly, get his own paper finished, and maybe even have a little fun.

"See ya, Rachel," he said to the barista behind the counter, glancing at the front door when he heard the chimes ring out as it opened. Jimmy was there, still wearing his scrubs from the hospital, and looking like he needed a few days off just as badly as Scott did.

Grinning as he ambled in, running a hand through the mess of dark, wavy hair that was falling into his eyes, "My timing is perfect, I can see." Jimmy told him as he gave Scott a little pat on his ass and walked over to the counter, offering Rachel a wolfish grin as he leaned in a little, "Double tall— "

"Latte, make the little heart with the foam. I know..." she told him, shaking her head with a laugh as she went to work at the espresso machine.

“You’re lucky I haven’t cleaned up yet or you’d be getting burnt coffee and an old cookie.” she added, pouring the steamed milk into the paper cup as the espresso finished brewing.

“I’ll take your old cookies anytime.” Jimmy told her, waggling his eyebrows at her. The man flirted with everyone he encountered, and seemed to favor Rachel because she flirted right back.

“My cookies are hot and fresh, I’ll have you know.”

“I’ll have to sample those sometime...”

Rachel cast a glance at Scott who was watching the two, looking amused and rolling his eyes at their banter. “You wish,” she informed him, adding with a grin, “And my fiancé might not appreciate that...”

“No shit? He finally popped the question?”

Rachel bit her lip around another grin, nodding as she showed off her small diamond ring, “Last weekend.”

“About damn time.” Jimmy told her, laughing as he leaned in, kissing her cheek, “Congratulations, sweetheart.”

“Thanks, Jimmy.” Still smiling, she swirled the foam over the top of his latte, making two hearts this time and sprinkling it with nutmeg and cinnamon before sliding the cup across to him, letting him look before he snapped a lid over it.

“Can’t believe you didn’t tell me.” he accused Scott.

“Just found out this afternoon, jeez.”

“Fine, you’re forgiven.”

They batted at each other and laughed, Rachel watching them as they headed for the door, “Have a good weekend, guys!” she called happily as they went out into the warm spring evening.

SCOTT WAS settled on the floor with four different books opened on the coffee table next to his laptop, making notes on his paper as he drew seemingly unrelated information together to form a coherent point. It took him a moment to hear the soft knock on their front door. Getting to his feet, he opened it and paused for a minute. Standing there with a backpack slung over

one shoulder was a man he'd never seen before. Hot didn't really cover it. The guy was easily as tall as Jimmy and nearly as broad, but his hair was golden blond and cut short, eyes a piercing blue.

"Um..." Scott couldn't think for a moment, "Hi?"

The guy's grin was brilliant, a slight flush painting his high cheekbones, "Hey, uh, Jimmy around?"

"Oh, he just ran to the store, should be back in a minute if you wanna wait." Scott offered, his feet automatically shifting back to let the stranger in.

"Cool, thanks," Stepping in close enough to brush against Scott, "I'm Rob, by the way." The man offered a hand for Scott to shake and he took it, fingers strong and warm as they wrapped around Scott's.

"Good to meet ya, I... I'm Scott." He felt like an idiot, coming off like he never encountered new people. "Have a seat."

Rob just smiled again, his eyes raking over Scott for a beat before striding casually to the couch and settling down on it.

"Can I get ya anything?"

"Nah, I'm good. I mean, really just here to drop off some books Jimmy let me borrow, but I have a question about our notes, so..."

"Gotcha," Scott stood for a moment, not wanting to ignore the guy and go back to his paper, at the same time not sure what to do with himself. Leaning over a little, Rob glanced at Scott's document and grimaced. "Masters or Doctorate?" he asked.

"Doctorate, but I just started the program, I keep changing my mind on which fields..." Scott trailed off, settling on the other end of the couch, running nervous fingers through his hair.

Rob just nodded, leaning a little closer to Scott as he shifted to get comfortable. "How long have you and Jimmy been roommates?" he asked.

"Since freshman year." At the look of surprise on Rob's face, Scott asked, "How long have you known Jimmy?"

"About a year now, got a couple classes together, shoot some hoops together every now and then."

Scott took that in, surprised that Jimmy had never mentioned the man, given that Jimmy introduced him to anyone with a hard on who wasn't

completely straight. He noticed the way Rob looked him over again, feeling a little awkward suddenly as he realized that if they were at a club, they'd be nodding and heading to the bathroom together about now.

"Hey, listen," Rob said, edging in another fraction of an inch, "What are you doing tomorrow night?" he asked, arching a brow as his lips turned up in a half-smile.

"Uh...just..."

"No, I mean, you wanna go out? Get some dinner and maybe hit the dance floor or somethin'?"

Scott knew his mouth was hanging open slightly and snapped it shut, nodding as his cheeks flushed, "Sure, sounds good."

"I mean...I'm not wrong, yeah?"

"No, I..."

Rob laughed then, "Can't believe Jimmy didn't tell me he had a hot roommate."

The man himself walked in the door then, stopping dead as he looked over at the couch and saw Rob and Scott there.

"Yeah, he's full of surprises." Scott said, eyes narrowing a little.

"SO, WHERE'S he taking you?" Jimmy asked, fidgeting with a pen, looking at one of his text books but not seeming to pay much attention.

Things were awkward after Rob left the afternoon before, Jimmy totally unsettled by the visit and even more uncomfortable after Scott told him they had plans to go out. Scott had never seen his normally unflappable friend so flustered and edgy.

"Not sure," Scott told him, walking in from his bedroom as he pulled a light blue sweater over his head. "Dinner somewhere, maybe go out dancing after."

"Fabulous," Jimmy muttered and Scott couldn't help but sigh.

"If I'm lucky." Scott said from behind Jimmy, a little annoyed that the man wouldn't even look at him. He wasn't sure, but he didn't think Jimmy had looked him in the eye since Rob had dropped off the books and left. "Look,

Jimmy,” Scott wanted to turn the man around and shake him by the shoulders, “Is there something... I mean...is there something *wrong* with Rob? Closet meth-head or...into scat, or...?”

Jimmy finally did look at him, laughing despite his mood, “God, I hope so.” he told Scott, flashing a grin that held all his charms but didn’t warm his face up or catch in his eyes like normal. He started to say something else but paused, sighing and looking serious, “He’s a good guy; you go have fun, sweet pea.”

“Okay, you just seem...”

“Just stressed out; got a lotta work to get done before Monday is all. Go, have a good time.”

“Sure, but— ”

Scott was cut off by a knock at the door, turning his head to look at it as if he were considering not answering.

“Go,” Jimmy told him sternly, “Take condoms and keep it down if you bring him back here.” He laughed again, but he’d turned away from Scott and was staring at his gross anatomy book again.

His arguments died on his lips and he went to the door. Rob was there, looking incredible in a Hugo Boss leather jacket and tight t-shirt tucked into even tighter black Levi’s. Scott’s mouth went a little dry, but he grinned, “Hey,”

“Hey yourself,” Rob said, handing Scott a six pack of imported beer. “You didn’t strike me as the kind of guy that would appreciate flowers, so...” They both laughed, Scott blushing furiously as he took the small case.

“Thanks,” he murmured, leaning close with one hand on the cardboard carrier as he brushed a small kiss against Rob’s cheek, “I’ll go fill a vase with ice,” he joked lamely, turning the corner into the small kitchen and putting the beer in the fridge.

Jimmy turned to glance at Rob, offering him a smile and an almost-wave, “Don’t keep him out past midnight and mind your manners.” he teased.

“Yes sir, I’ll even keep my hands to myself.” Rob joined in the joke, waiting just inside the door while Scott grabbed his keys and tucked his wallet into the back pocket of his jeans.

“See that ya do,” Jimmy said with another game laugh, adding in a dark mutter that only Scott could hear as he passed, “I know where to hide the body.”

ROB ADMITTED he didn't even own a car, having decided when he first moved to the city that he would take advantage of the public transportation. Scott drove and, on the way to the restaurant, explained that he needed a car because he and Jimmy sometimes volunteered for the local gay and lesbian center, delivering food and other necessities to house-bound community members in the area. They also liked taking short trips out to the peninsula or down the coast or to the Oregon beaches. He told Rob about the ski trip they'd taken in January, about the visit they were planning down to Palm Springs as soon as the semester was over, about Ruby's visit and how well Jimmy got along with his mother and sister.

Scott hadn't realized how much he'd talked about Jimmy until half way through dinner when Rob asked, “So, you and Jimmy, are you two...?”

Scott laughed, shaking his head, “No, he's straight, just friends.”

“But you wish he weren't?” Rob's tone was light and friendly and he didn't seem bothered by the idea, more curious than anything.

At a loss for a moment, Scott nearly stammered his response, “No, uh, it's not that. I mean, Christ, he's my best friend, ya know? Sometimes I'm glad he's straight so we don't have to worry about messing things up.” Laughing at himself and his own backwards logic, “Does that even make sense?”

Rob nodded, smiling as he took a sip from the wine their waiter had just poured, “It does, but...I don't know, I guess I always figured if I were going to settle down with someone, my partner would be my best friend too.”

Lifting his glass to that, “In a perfect world.” Scott said. Taking a sip, his eyes held Rob's for a long moment. The man was attractive enough to make him feel warm all over, funny in just the right ways, and seemed genuine and friendly. Rob was so right on so many levels that it made Scott's palms sweat, but through all the laughs and all the small flirts and innuendoes, he still found himself wishing it was Jimmy sitting across from him. Despite the fact that the

man would have ended up in a bathroom stall with one of the waitresses before the end of the meal.

In the end, they decided to skip dancing and went instead to one of the old theaters that was running a classic film festival for the weekend. They shared popcorn and talked about their favorite films while they waited for the lights to go down. Rob slid his arm around Scott's shoulder and they relaxed together in the soft velvet seats.

Everything went well and when Scott dropped Rob off at his front door, he thought for sure he would be invited in. Instead, they exchanged a clumsy kiss that led to a few gropes and a breathless goodnight. As Scott turned to go, Rob asked him, "Next weekend? Maybe we can go down to Alki or something? Picnic on the beach..."

Biting his lip around his grin, Scott just nodded as he turned to go back to his car.

"YOU'RE HOME early." Jimmy told him, arching his brows at Scott as the man walked through the door. "It couldn't have gone that bad..."

As he kicked off his shoes and dropped his keys on a small table by the door, Scott told him, "It didn't go bad at all." Sticking his tongue out playfully at Jimmy.

"Oh. So, what'd you guys do?"

"Dinner and a movie." Scott was already stripping his sweater off and unbuttoning his jeans as he wandered through the apartment. "We're gonna get together next weekend." he added, Jimmy watching intently as he dropped his clothes in a trail between the living room and bedroom, down to just boxers and a t-shirt before he disappeared around the corner.

When Scott came back into the living room, he was cinching some flannel pajama bottoms around his tight waist, "You get your work done?" Scott asked, coming up behind Jimmy, his hands landing on the man's shoulders, kneading the muscles there.

"Mostly, yeah," Jimmy sighed, not quite resting back against Scott as he normally would. "So, what'd ya think of Rob?" he asked, his tone just hinting

at annoyance when he said the other man's name.

"He's nice," Scott told him honestly, noncommittal, "Cute..." Jimmy's jaw muscle worked a tense rhythm as if he was trying to stop himself from saying something. Laughing a little, not noticing Jimmy's discomfort, Scott added, "Funny as hell too. I'm surprised you never had him over before."

Saving his document and shutting down his laptop, all Jimmy said was, "Yeah, well." Scott thought the man would lean back into him then, relax a little, but instead, Jimmy was on his feet, pushing his chair back so abruptly it nearly knocked Scott over. "I'm gonna go for a run," he told Scott, turning and heading down the hall, leaving Scott dumbfounded, standing in the middle of their little apartment.

It was well past midnight when Scott finally gave up waiting for Jimmy to return and went to bed. He didn't fall asleep, hearing the front door open and then shut again, a quiet click as the lock was set into place. He thought about getting up then, going to check on his friend, but decided that maybe whatever was going on with Jimmy was something the man needed to work through on his own.

Scott curled himself around the pillow Jimmy usually used and listened to the sound of the shower running down the hall, closed his eyes when he saw the shadow of his friend in his doorway. He didn't turn over to look at Jimmy, didn't say a word, but he pulled the covers back and scooted over to one side of his bed. Jimmy didn't hesitate, just padded softly across the floor and slid into bed behind Scott. Wrapping his arms tightly around the man, Jimmy pressed a soft kiss to the back of Scott's head, nestling close to him. They drifted off like that, in familiarity and warmth and in the comfort of knowing that some things can never change.

"WINE TASTING? And jazz."

"Um. Experimental Jazz. Whatever that is."

"Seriously?"

Scott couldn't help but laugh at Jimmy's expression, the man crinkling his nose and pulling a face as if he'd just been asked to clean up dog shit with his

bare hands. "I had the same reaction," he admitted, "I hope I hid it better..." he added with another laugh.

"Rob's seduction technique is severely lacking if that's typical of your dates."

"It's not..." Scott started to deny it and then couldn't. Thinking back over the last few weeks, he'd have to admit that-- while the company was nice-- the activities weren't exactly fun. Or even interesting. "Well, okay, it is pretty typical, but... You should come anyway. And bring one of your girls."

"I don't think I know any girls that boring."

"Get her liquored up first." Scott offered with a grin.

"Not enough liquor in the world, bro."

Walking up close to Jimmy, Scott wrapped his arm around the man's shoulder, beaming and batting his eyelashes just as Jimmy liked to do to him, "For me?"

Rolling his eyes as if their roles had suddenly reversed, Jimmy patted Scott's head, "Anything for you, princess. Just don't invite me to go antiquing or some shit." Scott knew he shouldn't have glanced away because Jimmy let out a loud bark of laughter, "You've already gone antiquing, haven't you." he accused, expression triumphant.

"He was looking for a birthday present for his mother, so that totally doesn't count."

"Did you two pick out stuff you liked that wasn't right for her?" At the guilty look on Scott's face, Jimmy picked up his left hand, examining the fingers one by one.

"What are you doing?"

"Double checking I hadn't missed an engagement ring."

"Asshole."

"Antiquer."

"That's not even a word." Scott told him, finally pulling away with a laugh, "And, I like antiques. I just don't feel the need to scrounge through dusty old second hand stores in forgotten old towns all day to find them. Or feel the need to furnish an entire house with them."

"Does he know that your dream house has a game room complete with a

wall size TV screen, foosball table, and a miniature golf course?"

"That's *your* dream house."

"Yeah, but that's when you agreed to be my roommate forever." Jimmy told him, waggling his eyebrows.

"Only if you have an indoor pool too."

"Deal."

"So you'll go Friday night?"

Sighing like it was an enormous sacrifice, Jimmy looked to the ceiling, "Fine, but I'm not subjecting a girl to that. I'd hate for anyone to think it was *my* idea of a good time."

"Nobody that knows you for more than three minutes would think that."

CINCHING HIS belt in a notch and smoothing down the front of his dark jeans, Scott glanced at himself in the mirror. He wore a pink pinstripe button down under a light grey sweater and dress shoes that Rob had insisted he buy one afternoon. Scott hated the shoes, preferring sneakers even in formalwear, but, even he had to acknowledge that he looked a little more grown up in shiny black leather.

Jimmy had decided to bring a date after all, telling Scott that he might as well get laid if he could shake the headache he was sure to have by the end of the night. He knew it was absurd, but he couldn't help a small pang of jealousy over who the man had asked out.

Tina reminded Scott of a Barbie Doll with real breasts and a law degree. She was smart, funny, and looked like she'd been airbrushed to perfection. She was the kind of girl most mothers would dream of for a daughter-in-law and, if Scott were honest with himself, she was a good match for Jimmy. They'd only dated casually, but Scott could see it turning into something more if either of them decided they had enough time for a real relationship. The idea made Scott a little nauseous.

"You about ready, gorgeous?"

Scott jumped when he heard Jimmy's voice behind him, "Every damn time, Christ." He was about to offer another complaint, but when he turned to

look at Jimmy, his breath caught in his chest. The man stood in front of him in an honest to God suit. Charcoal gray, over a crisp white shirt, hand painted silk tie knotted in a classic Windsor.

“What?” Jimmy asked at the expression on Scott’s face, looking down at himself, “My fly down or something?”

“No, just...” *You look good enough to eat.* “Just never seen you dressed up is all.”

“That can’t be true. My cousin’s wedding? I was in a *tux* for that.”

“I was so hung over I barely remembered to wear shoes for that. You could’ve been in boxers and a bow tie and I wouldn’t have noticed.”

Jimmy laughed at the memory, nodding, “Hell of a bachelor party, though.”

“The bits I can remember...”

Another laugh, “True. We gotta get going, though. You ready?”

Looking Jimmy over again, “Maybe I should put on some slacks? Or...?”

“You look good, I only put this on ’cause I know Tina.” Waving his hand vaguely, as if he didn’t know the words to describe the woman, “She’s gonna be all...”

Nodding, understanding exactly what Jimmy meant, he followed the man to the door.

AS JIMMY walked up the path to Tina’s door, Scott climbed into the backseat of the man’s car, watching through the window as Jimmy offered his arm to the girl. Her hair was done up in a sophisticated knot, loose tendrils curling around her face. Jimmy was right to wear a suit. Tina was wearing a little black dress that exposed one shoulder, clung to every curve of her body, and looked like it cost about as much as Scott’s car. Her heels were at least four inches high and it put her right at Jimmy’s shoulder. They looked perfect together.

As he felt the jealousy burning up inside him, Scott tried to remember they were on their way to pick up his own date.

Jimmy got the door for her and Tina slid inside the Charger. “Scott,” she

said, looking over her shoulder with a sweet smile for him, “Could you tell Jimmy that he’s supposed to bring me a little something when he asks me out on short notice and takes me to something my own grandparents wouldn’t find exciting.”

He couldn’t help but laugh, Tina’s teasing grin and easy nature one of her many fine qualities. “I’d try but I think he’s a hopeless case.”

“I concur. Maybe I should withhold sex as a reminder.”

“That might work.” he agreed, laughing with her as Jimmy got in.

“What might work?” Jimmy asked, looking between the two.

“Earplugs,” she told Jimmy seriously, “for tonight. Scott and I were trying to decide how best to get through it.” Tina flashed Scott a wink and another grin from the front seat. Even as she slipped her hand over Jimmy’s knee, he had to admit he liked the girl.

Scott had texted Rob when they were close to his apartment and the man was waiting on the curb for them. He greeted Tina with a gracious smile and took her hand as she got out and let him into the back seat. “Jimmy, how did you bribe this gorgeous woman into a mercy date with you?” Rob teased as he leaned in to kiss Scott, grinning against his mouth.

“He doesn’t know it yet, but he’s going to donate his sperm to my sister and her partner. They’re looking for someone tall, dark, handsome, and well educated.”

“And you accused him of not bringing anything.” Scott joked, assuming Tina was teasing too.

“He didn’t bring anything for *me*.” she pointed out, shifting in her seat a little and adding, “But it would more than make up for it if he gave me a little niece or nephew...”

Jimmy had only laughed when she first said it, but now he was glancing at her in a mild terror, eyes wide, “What, seriously?”

“Yes.” Sounding more like a lawyer than the girl they occasionally hung out with, “They’re open to letting the donor have visitation or, if the three parties could come to an agreement, co-custody. They’re also open to total secrecy as to the donor’s identity if that’s preferred by the man. By *you*, hopefully.”

Jimmy looked on the verge of hysteria and Scott was too shocked to comment, but Rob was near giddy. “My God, we should hang out together more often. I like her.”

Finding his voice, Jimmy asked, “You want *me* to knock your *sister* up?”

“No. I want you to donate some sperm so it can knock my sister’s partner up. Carol doesn’t want to carry the baby, but Stacy does.”

“Right. Okay. Right.” Nodding and looking stunned, Jimmy turned the corner, navigating the narrow streets out of Rob’s neighborhood and heading into downtown. “Right.” He wasn’t really answering anything or talking to anyone. Scott could tell he was trying to wrap his head around the idea.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Tina said, still smiling as she checked her makeup in the mirror, “Just wanted to throw it out there, give you some time to digest it.”

“I think he’d have an easier time digesting a hand grenade. Just sayin’.” Scott told her. Tina laughed, but he really wasn’t joking.

“What he said.” Jimmy muttered, taking a deep breath and tightening his grip on the wheel.

Laughing again, “It’s not like you need to decide tonight, or even this month. I wanted to let you know so you could think about it, talk it over with—” She stopped herself there, but glanced at Scott in the mirror. “With the family or whatever.”

“Right.” Jimmy said again, “Okay. I’ll... Okay, right. Think about it. I’ll consult my balls and get back to you when they climb back out.”

Leaning over close to Scott, Rob whispered, “He looks a little... Think he’s still okay to drive?”

“For now. I think after the wine tasting we might need to carry him back to the car, though.”

JIMMY SURPRISED them all and didn’t touch a drop of alcohol the entire night. It took him nearly an hour, but he finally managed to say something other than *right* and *okay* and in the end they had a good time. Tina was her charming self, as if she hadn’t asked the end-all-be-all of favors on their way

to the restaurant. She pulled Scott aside at one point and confided in him that she'd done it on purpose, had wanted Scott to be there when she asked and knew it could be months before the three of them were together again. Something about that warmed Scott up inside and he'd smiled at her, kissing her cheek.

Not even Rob seemed to enjoy the music and offered sincere apologies as they left at the end of the night, Jimmy telling him they should have just gone out in the alley and listened to the cats in heat for free.

Scott walked Rob to his door and kissed him goodnight. Jimmy and Tina were waiting for him since Rob had said he had to be up early and needed to get to bed. Scott was starting to wonder if things would ever progress between them beyond a few handjobs and some—admittedly mind blowing—frottage.

At Tina's house, the woman let him out of the back seat and gave him a warm hug, the kind he got from his sister, and told him she needed to talk to Jimmy for a few minutes. He nodded and got back in the car, watching the two of them disappear behind her front door.

A half hour later, after updating his Facebook and checking his email from his phone, Scott started to feel the twist of jealousy rising in him again. It wasn't the first time, and probably wouldn't be the last, that Jimmy asked him to wait while he got himself a quickie, but it was making his blood boil more than usual. By the time Jimmy got back in the car, looking a little more disheveled than he had on his way out of the car, Scott was in a full pout.

"Sorry that took so long." Jimmy told him, starting the car again and putting on his seatbelt.

"Have a nice *talk*?" Scott asked, sounding like a petulant child.

"Not exactly." Jimmy told him, not seeming to catch Scott's tone.

"I'll bet."

He did catch the sullen note in Scott's voice that time, glancing at him, "What— Oh," managing to laugh and sound grim at the same time, "Hell no. I might never have sex again after tonight."

Snorting, "Odds are against that." Scott told him, but the knot that had tied itself in his stomach loosened, "You two seriously didn't...?"

"I don't think I could've gotten it up if she'd given me a lap dance."

Jimmy told him, shaking his head as he turned on the wipers, a light rain starting to smatter the windshield. “She just wanted to talk.”

“Oh. About the baby thing?”

“Among other things, yeah.”

Furrowing his brow, curious, “What other things?”

“Just...” Sighing like it was too much effort to think, Jimmy trailed off, “Stuff.” He finally said, showing Scott how distracted he was by grinding his gears as he shifted.

Scott left him to his thoughts the rest of the way home.

DESPITE THE fact that Jimmy was spending more nights in his own bed, Scott had expected the soft squeak of his door and the shift of blankets after they’d said their goodnights. He didn’t even have to move over, having left Jimmy plenty of space and a free pillow.

“Wanna talk about it?” he asked as Jimmy slid in behind him, taking up his usual position with his arms around Scott’s waist.

Sighing, pressing his face to the back of Scott’s neck, “Not really.” Jimmy murmured, holding him closer than usual.

“Okay,” Scott whispered into the dark, pulling the covers up higher and then resting his hand over Jimmy’s, knowing the man would keep him up all night talking even if he said he didn’t want to.

After a long moment, Jimmy took in a deep breath, his words falling on the exhale, “It’s a lot to think about.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean...a baby? Seriously? Who in their right mind looks at me and goes, *‘that guy would make a great father.’*?”

“I think you’d make a great father.” Scott told him honestly.

“I still think with my dick.”

Laughing and lacing his fingers with Jimmy’s, “I doubt that changes just because you’re a dad. We all think with our dicks till they don’t work anymore.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Jimmy, it all boils down to whether or not you wanna be involved with putting another person on the planet. Tina said you could be anonymous as far as the kid goes.”

“Wouldn’t feel right about that. I mean...it works for a lot of people and a lot of happy families are made because of guys that are fine with that and I think that’s great, but...”

“But it doesn’t work for you. And that’s okay.”

“Is it? I feel like a selfish shit telling them no. Like, just because I’m not ready to be a father I don’t want them to be mothers or something.”

“You’re not their only option, just their first choice. Kinda flattering, really.”

“Yeah, flattering.” Jimmy said flatly, sighing again, “What would you do? If they’d asked you?”

“Be grateful no one asked me to have sex with them to do it.”

Jimmy bit his ear lightly, “Seriously, jerkoff, would you do it?”

“I jerkoff regularly.”

Laughing, Jimmy turned Scott onto his back and pinned him down, “You’re such a douche.” he told Scott, laughing, “First grownup conversation I try to have with you and you’re making jokes.”

“And you’re laughing for the first time in hours.”

Jimmy kissed him for that. Just a light press of his lips against Scott’s cheek, a small breath and a smile. “Still wanna know your answer.” he told Scott, settling back again and tugging Scott against him.

“I don’t know. Might be kinda cool. Like being an uncle with a little more...responsibility, I guess.”

“Mom and dad always wanted a house full.” Jimmy whispered, sounding more serious again. “After Liam died, though...”

Scott knew Jimmy had a younger brother that died in infancy, SIDS the first assumption, later finding out it was acid reflux and the baby stopped breathing in his sleep one night. “I’d probably feel the same way.”

“Me too. I mean...so much can go wrong ya know? A fall on the playground and they break their neck, or let the wrong person babysit just *once*. Or put him to bed and he never wakes up...”

“Or he gets bumps and bruises and skinned knees and the flu like every other kid on the planet and then finds a cure for cancer...”

“I’m not even into my residency.” Letting out a heavy breath, Jimmy rested his chin on Scott’s shoulder, their cheeks touching.

“True. And it’s not like this is your only shot at having kids. Or theirs.”

“So you think I shouldn’t?”

Laughing softly, still talking quietly, “I think you should do whatever you think is best for you right now. It’s not like some old one night stand showed up and handed you a kid. This is a *choice*, not something that’s happened to you.”

“What if I say no and they go with someone else and get an ugly baby?” Jimmy joked, Scott able to feel the man’s smile against his cheek.

“Tragic.”

“Maybe we should get a dog.”

“Instead of a kid?”

“Or for the kid? I don’t know, Christ.”

“I don’t need a dog. I have you, remember?”

Laughing for that, Jimmy growled and nipped at Scott’s neck, “We’re getting a dog.”

“Okay then.”

Scott smiled to himself, thinking how odd life was, the ups and downs and the in-betweens all seeming a little better with Jimmy to share them with.

“YOU’RE STUCK with me for life now, you know that, right?” Scott asked him.

Three days after telling Carol and Stacy he’d need more time—possibly a lifetime—to think about their offer, Jimmy stood next to Scott in their living room, looking down at the two puppies playing at their feet. “Twelve to fifteen years, actually.” Jimmy told him, Scott looking horrified.

“Just long enough to really get attached? That’s...”

Laughing, Jimmy put an arm around Scott’s shoulder, “Didn’t you have a dog when you were a kid? They don’t live forever.”

“We had a cat that liked to jump me from dark corners. Seriously, though? Fifteen years? That’s it?”

“Well, maybe a little longer, but...” Jimmy trailed off, pressing a kiss to Scott’s temple.

“And, there’s *two* of them so they don’t get lonely. What happens when one of them...” Dropping his voice to a whisper as if the puppies could hear him, “*dies*? Won’t the other one get all...depressed?” Scott was already feeling a little depressed at the idea.

“We’ll get him a grief counselor, baby. “

“But...”

Laughing again, Jimmy looked at Scott for a long moment, sobering after a pause, “That really freaks you out, doesn’t it?”

“Well... I mean. Why get all attached to something you know is just gonna *die* on ya?” Again, whispering the one word.

Pulling Scott into a hug, Jimmy wrapped his arms around him, kissing his temple, “It’s that whole cliché, ya know? Better to have loved and lost and all that. Fifteen years of happy companionship and then saying goodbye is better than never getting puppy kisses, I promise.” Just then one of the teacup beagles whined at their feet, tugging with puppy teeth at Scott’s cuff. “Cheer up, they think you’re upset.”

“I *am* upset.” Scott said as he pulled back, but he laughed with the words, stooping down to pick the puppy up, cradling it while it licked his face. “Two dogs. They get your room. It’s already an animal shelter.”

Grinning, Jimmy told him, “I assure you, these are the first dogs ever to cross my threshold.”

SCOTT HAD expected the puppies to keep them up all night, having been warned at the vet that it might take a few weeks for them to adapt. Instead, Hercules and Persephone (Jimmy picked the dogs and Scott picked the names) slept soundly but Jimmy woke in the small hours with a shout that sounded wounded, jolting Scott out of a sound sleep.

Jimmy was scrambling on the bed and grabbing at Scott, saying, “No,

no...Goddamn it, come on!" He was crushing Scott against his chest like a ragdoll and Scott was trying to shake the man awake at the same time.

"Hey, it's okay, wake up, Jimmy. Wake up, it's okay."

Another small shout and Jimmy was panting for breath like he'd run ten miles up hill, his body shivering with a sheen of sweat covering his skin. "It's okay," Scott soothed, stroking the man's shoulders and back, trying to lean Jimmy back down onto the pillows.

"Jesus," Jimmy muttered, drawing in a ragged breath, "Fuck... You okay?" he asked, his voice cracking a little.

"Yeah, fine. What happened?"

"Just...shit. Never had a nightmare so...Shit. C'mere," Rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands like he was trying to push out the memory of his dream, Jimmy leaned back against the headboard, Scott shifting closer and wrapping his arms around the man's waist. Jimmy took another deep breath and pulled Scott as close as he could.

Slipping his feet between Jimmy's, "Tell me," The whispered command warming Jimmy's bare chest as Scott pressed a kiss after the words.

"Just...I was down in a morgue, but I was working on someone, using paddles and tryin' to get them back, I guess. A nurse was next to me and she kept saying, '*Dr. Sinclair, it's too late. It's too late, you have to stop. You're too late.*' And I looked down and it was— I just...Jesus." Taking another labored breath, Jimmy pressed his face into the top of Scott's head, his hold tightening as he muttered, "Just a bad dream."

"It's okay, probably just stress and school." Scott whispered, "Want me to get you some water or somethin'?"

Settling down further on the bed and keeping a firm hold on Scott, "No, just...don't go anywhere."

SCOTT SLID his phone into his back pocket while Jimmy tossed a tennis ball across the park for the puppies to chase after and fight over.

"What's up?" the man asked, looking over at Scott, reading his expression.

"Nothin', just...Rob invited me to dinner tonight."

“That’s a bad thing?”

“No, just, um...his folks are in town and they’ll be there too.”

“He’s asked you to *meet his parents*?” Jimmy sounded as incredulous as Scott felt.

“Guess so. I mean, I think just as friends? But...”

“He’s not out to his family?”

“No, he is, but, I mean, come on. We’ve only been hanging out for a couple months, it’s not like we’re...”

“You are, you just didn’t realize it.”

“No. I mean...ya think?”

Just then Persephone tackled Hercules, the two of them fighting for the ball, growling and yipping playfully at each other in the late afternoon sun.

Jimmy snorted a laugh, at Scott or the dogs, Scott wasn’t sure. “I think you’re gonna be married within a year and you won’t know it till you’re signing the paperwork.” Jimmy told him, strolling over to the puppies and getting the ball from between them.

“Well, I mean, he did say ‘*no pressure*’ and—”

“And you and I both know that means pressure.” Jimmy pointed out, the sun catching the golden highlights in his hair, making his natural tan look even more bronze.

“You know Rob, I think when he says no pressure, he actually means it.” Scott narrowed his eyes when Jimmy started humming the wedding march.

“HOW’D IT go?” Jimmy was lying on the floor with both of their tiny puppies crawling all over him, licking his face and nipping at his fingers. Scott dropped down beside them and picked up Hercules.

“Fine,” Scott said over an excited tail wag and a lick to his own chin. “His roommates and a couple of his other friends were there too. It wasn’t a big deal at all.”

Jimmy flashed on oddly relieved expression then leaned up on his elbows, grinning wickedly, “So this was your engagement party?”

“I hate you.” Scott told him, trying to sound serious even as he stretched

out next to Jimmy, laughing as the tender attack from Hercules and Persephone continued.

“I’m offended I wasn’t invited.” Jimmy continued to tease, sliding his arm out to let Scott rest his head on.

“If I ever get married, I’m banning you from it.”

“Afraid you’ll take one look at me all dressed up and change your mind?”

“Afraid you’ll scare away my intended, more like.”

“Because I’m so incredibly hot.” Jimmy joked, grinning into the top of Scott’s hair.

Laughing and giving Jimmy a little squeeze as Hercules crawled over them and scrabbled towards the water dish, “Yes, that’s it exactly.” After a moment, Scott lifted his head, “Shouldn’t you be cramming for finals?”

Groaning, Jimmy flopped back like he’d been shot, “Starting tomorrow, yeah. Monica and Rob and Becky organized a study group. We’re locking ourselves up at Monica’s and not coming out till Monday morning.

“Oh.” Scott tried not to sound disappointed even as he shifted closer to Jimmy. He was used to Jimmy being mostly unavailable the weekends before exams, but he usually at least saw him for an hour or two every day.

“I promise to call every day.” Jimmy told him, his voice lilting with half a tease. “And the puppies will keep you company.”

“Yeah.” He hadn’t meant to sigh, but it came out anyway. The funny part was, Rob was going to be locked away in the same group and Scott hadn’t even given that a thought. “I gotta study too, but— ”

“But you’ll be studying over pizza and beer with a Firefly marathon on in the background.”

Sighing again, “Yeah.”

“I’m jealous, baby cakes.” Jimmy told him, kissing the top of Scott’s head, “But if I don’t pass exams with flying colors, my old man is gonna disown me.”

Laughing at that, “Your old man doesn’t think the sun rises till you get out of bed in the morning. He just knows what you’re capable of so he pushes you harder than you’d like.”

“Or he was a slave driver in a past life.”

Snorting at that, “Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t daddy buy you that car? You’re one pampered slave.”

“That was probably more mom than dad.”

“Right, and she did it because she loves *me* more than you.”

“That’s right,” Jimmy agreed jokingly, laughing, “She told me your ass was too fine for vinyl seats.”

“Those were her exact words, I’m sure.”

“You know it. I think she’s secretly in love with you.”

“Her practically adopted gay son? Twisted old woman.”

“You didn’t know she was so kinky, did ya?”

Scott let out a loud laugh then, rolling so he was on top of Jimmy, pinning him down, “You’re a sick man, Jimmy.”

Shifting and flipping Scott onto his back with a thud, “And strong, too.”

Persephone and Hercules charged back in at that moment, watching the two wrestle, Hercules tilting his head and Persephone looking like she was trying to decide which of them to defend, ending up with a whiny little bark instead.

“You’re scaring the kids, sunshine.” Scott told him, still laughing as he squirmed under Jimmy, his cock thickening slightly against the weight of Jimmy’s body.

Jimmy paused for a moment, looking down into Scott’s face, his expression unreadable as he leaned a little closer. Scott could feel a sudden tension around them, not uncomfortable, but heavy and deep, like a storm rising off the coast, sending electric shocks through him.

“Guess we better take ’em for their walk.” Jimmy said finally, his voice a little rough as he started to pull back. “Wanna go down to Green Lake or...” the man asked, rising up and getting to his feet.

“Dog park so they can come off the leashes.”

“Yeah, I just hate that little poodle that tries to scare Seph.”

Sitting up and tugging his t-shirt down, “Hasn’t worked. Last time she nearly took that dog’s tail off.”

“True. I guess we should let ’em have their showdown.”

“That’s right, can’t teach them to run away from bullies.” Scott joked,

finally standing up, slipping his boat shoes on, not even bothering with socks.

SUNDAY NIGHT, Scott was exhausted but he was as prepared as he was ever going to be for Monday's finals. His papers that were due had been sent in two whole hours before the deadlines and he knew more about East Asian history than he'd ever wanted to.

Jimmy was still locked in his study group, but he was true to his word and had called every night. They didn't talk about anything important, but Jimmy made him laugh when he insisted Scott put him on speaker so the puppies wouldn't forget him.

It was the last thing he thought about before he drifted off.

TWO WEEKS later, they had both survived finals. Jimmy said he was sure he bombed, but Scott knew that was Jimmy-code for, "I owned it." Academics being the one area where the man showed any sense of modesty and Scott decided early on it was probably good for him.

"You and Rob are comin' tonight, yeah?" Jimmy asked, his head popping around the corner of Scott's doorframe.

"God, I wish," he muttered, flopping back on his bed, having just been thinking about the fact that he and Rob had sort of transitioned into friends and he hadn't had anyone's hand but his own on his cock in far too long.

"What?"

"Nothing. Coming where?"

"Sharon's; she's throwing a finals-are-over-summer-is-here-let's-blow-what's-left-of-our-braincells party."

"Just the med school crowd?" Scott asked, crinkling his nose as he sat back up.

"You say that like we're lepers or something."

Laughing, Scott told him, "No, but you all stand around for the first hour gossiping about each other and bitching about your course load, then get shitfaced and start pairing off for meaningless drunken sex."

“Since when is meaningless drunken sex a downside?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You implied it...”

“Maybe I can come late and just show up for the sex?”

“You’re practically engaged, none of that for you.”

Shaking his head, Scott stood up and turned Jimmy around to push him out of his room, “I’m very much *not* engaged. But I might swing by and have a couple drinks tonight.”

“Good enough. See ya then, pumpkin.”

“Yes, see ya then, pop tart.”

Jimmy turned, laughing, “Pop tart?”

“I’m a pumpkin and you can’t be a pop tart?”

“I’m sure there’s a joke in there about popping tarts somewhere...”

“Oh God.” Laughing, Scott leaned in and gave Jimmy a small kiss on the cheek, then pushed him out again. “Gimme fifteen minutes and we can take the pups for a walk before we go.”

AFTER A long afternoon at the park and a quick stop for hamburgers on the way home, Scott told Jimmy he was taking a nap before heading off to Sharon’s. Jimmy called him an old man and reminded him to put the baby gate up for the puppies in his room before leaving.

Scott didn’t really need to sleep or do anything in particular; he just didn’t feel like being around a crowd of people. He did eventually go to the party, but Jimmy was nowhere to be seen and Rob was ensconced in a conversation with three or four guys Scott didn’t know, so he said hi to a few people, made a quick round and went back home again.

He took the puppies for a long walk and made sure they were settled happily before finally climbing into bed alone. He hated to admit it, but he missed Jimmy and wished the man were with him, but he couldn’t bring himself to send a text telling him as much. Instead, he called his sister and talked with her until he was falling asleep on the phone.

WET HEAT and a slick tongue stroking over the head of his cock. It had to be a dream. Scott's stomach tightened, his shaft rigid as it slid down deeper into the warmth. His own voice shook him awake, groaning loudly as his hips started to rock, body curling around the sensation, his knees pressed against a bare chest, his hand finding thick hair on the top of a head rather than his own erection. "Oh, Jesus," he muttered, another moan catching in his throat as awareness shot through him. It wasn't a dream and he wasn't alone. Jimmy was wrapped around him, one strong arm draped over his hip, one large hand folded around the base of his cock, stroking in rhythm with his mouth as he started to suck harder. Scott wanted to tell the man to stop, tell him that it was going to ruin everything. He wanted to tell Jimmy all his fears and get him to see reason, but the words spilling out of his mouth were, "Jimmy...don't stop. Oh, Jesus, *Jimmy*, never stop..." And the man's name felt right, whispered into the darkness of his bedroom, whispered into the air and shadows that held them safe as his climax raced through him. "Yes...*please*, Jimmy." He didn't have any words after that, only a choked cry that ripped from his chest as he came, deep and hard, in his best friend's mouth.

Still shuddering as his release washed through him, Scott didn't want to open his eyes. He kept them tightly shut, afraid to find Jimmy's face, afraid of what he might see there. Disgust? Regret? He didn't know, but it was enough to keep him still and quiet.

He didn't protest as Jimmy pulled back, tugging his pajama bottoms and shorts the rest of the way off. He still didn't open his eyes as the man shifted, fitting himself between Scott's legs, warm hands running down his thighs, pulling Scott closer.

"Look at me, Scott," He could feel Jimmy's erection pressed against his stomach, hear the trepidation in Jimmy's voice as he said Scott's name. "Baby, open your eyes," The words were whispered against Scott's cheek, Jimmy's breath soft against his skin as the man nuzzled against his jaw. "Please, Scott, open your eyes."

That undid Scott and he forced his eyes open, able to see Jimmy above him in the sliver of light peeking in through the curtains. No regret and

certainly no disgust, but for the first time he could see in his friend's eyes a look of uncertainty mingled with a palpable want, as if Jimmy's desire had a life of its own, a will of its own.

Jimmy was rising up a little, leaning over to Scott's nightstand. His voice was steady, but Scott could tell his hands were shaking just slightly, "If you don't want this," Jimmy told him, the words a quiet rumble in the night, "You're gonna have to say it."

Scott could hear the crinkle of a foil packet, the sharp snick of a cap being flipped open with a thumb, and he knew what was coming. Jimmy was sitting back on his knees, one tender hand stroking against the sharp jut of his hipbone as the other slipped between his thighs, fingers slick and warm, gentle, as they played against his entrance.

"I do," The words surprised both of them, Scott could tell. His murmured consent drew a sharp breath from Jimmy even as the man slipped the tip of his finger inside, pushing slowly in. Scott groaned, reaching his hands for the man, finding solid shoulders and holding on as Jimmy started to prepare him.

Leaning closer, Jimmy's body sheltering Scott from the realities of what they were doing, another finger invaded, pushing deep and sure as Jimmy's mouth found Scott's. Soft, full lips pressed against Scott's own, tasting himself there as Jimmy's tongue slid into his mouth, parted his lips further. Some small corner of Scott's mind registered that it was the first time Jimmy had ever *really* kissed him and it felt even more intimate than coming in the man's mouth. Their breaths mingled, salty and sweet flavors passing back and forth between them, the two finding their own rhythm together just as they always had before. For a moment, it felt like Jimmy was trying to climb inside Scott's skin, possess him, build a home there as the kiss intensified, Jimmy holding Scott firmly, another finger pushing inside him, opening him up.

When they broke, they were both breathless with need, Scott only able to swallow hard and nod in answer to the question in Jimmy's eyes.

The cool air hit his chest as Jimmy pulled back, Scott watching the man's face as Jimmy quickly tore open a condom wrapper with his teeth, covering himself without hesitation.

Eyes drifting shut for just a moment, Scott could feel Jimmy's capable

hands running down his thighs, hooking behind his knees and drawing them up higher, resting them over broad shoulders. He let Jimmy move him, guide him into place, but he looked up again at the sound of Jimmy's voice. "Wanted you for so long, Scott," the man whispered, and the admission took Scott's breath from him.

Another nod from Scott, acknowledging what Jimmy had said, and, being honest with himself, agreeing. He wanted to respond, wanted to tell his friend all the times he'd hoped for this, but his voice was hiding, keeping all his secret wishes locked inside. All he had was the feeling of Jimmy's palm resting against his chest, as if the man were feeling the rhythm of Scott's heartbeat. He had to trust Jimmy's ability to read all the answers in his face as the man slowly pushed in.

Neither of them could speak after that, lost to all coherent thought as Jimmy pulled back and pushed a little deeper. Scott groaned again, taking in a deep breath as he willed himself to relax around Jimmy's thick cock. He could see the tension in Jimmy's face, knew the man was holding back and all he could do was dig his fingers into the muscles of Jimmy's chest and try to pull him deeper, grinding himself down against the man.

Whether Jimmy's control broke or he could see in Scott's face that it was time, Scott had no idea, but Jimmy offered a deep thrust then and both of their voices cracked the silence that had been holding them. *Yes* and *God* and *so good* were muttered like small prayers in choked voices that hoped for salvation as each solid drive of Jimmy's hips took them both closer to the edge.

Jimmy's hand slid down Scott's body, fingers wrapping around his cock, fully hard now, aching for another release. The man stroked him with a slick, firm grip, thumb circling the crown, rubbing frantically as his thrusts lost all restraint, headboard tapping out a sharp rhythm against the wall in a way that would have been comical if either of them had paused to think about it.

"Come for me, baby," Jimmy's voice was strained, tight in his throat, and the simple words, the pleading command, was all it took to push Scott over the edge. His hips bucked against the steady shift of Jimmy's palm, grinding down against the drive of the man's cock before spilling hotly across Jimmy's

fingers and against his own chest.

Two more sharp thrusts and Jimmy was buried deep inside, letting out a suffering cry that was all primal heat, groaning a curse as he came. “Fuck. Scott...” He didn’t say anything else for a long moment, collapsing down against Scott, pressing himself to Scott’s sticky belly as Scott let his legs fall from the man’s shoulders, wrapping his entire body around Jimmy, almost ashamed of the way he clung to the man as Jimmy slowly softened.

Letting his eyes slide shut, Scott tried not to think, tried not to worry about the potential repercussions. He wound his arms around Jimmy’s shoulders, fingers threading into the man’s dark hair, feet locking together around Jimmy’s waist as if he could keep the man still and close forever by simply holding on.

As his breath started to even out, his heart finding its rhythm again, Scott nearly drifted off to sleep, but Jimmy was rising up again, carefully pulling out and discarding the condom.

He wanted to tell the man no, wanted to hang on tighter and keep Jimmy where he was, but he just took a steadying breath and shifted, giving Jimmy space in case the man needed to run and hide now.

Maybe it was the pained expression that danced across Scott’s face, or maybe it was simply Jimmy’s instinct, but the man leaned in again, kissing each of Scott’s closed eyes, then his cheek, then his mouth. “You’re a mess,” he whispered, voice carrying a light tease, trying to mask all the things he wasn’t saying.

Scott could only smile, nodding his head as he let himself be shifted and tugged, Jimmy sliding over him, climbing up behind him and fitting Scott against himself. The sheet that had been kicked away was now being used to wipe the mess off Scott’s stomach and chest, Jimmy holding him close as he cleaned them haphazardly, pulling the blankets back up over them.

“If I’d known that was all it took to shut you up, I would have tried it years ago.” Jimmy was teasing again as he settled, but Scott could tell it was really a question as the man wrapped his arms around him.

“Shellshock.” Scott said, trying to laugh, but it was too close to the truth and they both knew it.

“Well,” Jimmy whispered, pressing his lips just behind Scott’s ear, “I thought about serenading you, or sending you roses and a love poem, but you would’ve accused me of being high.”

Scott did laugh then, agreeing, “Yeah, I would’ve.”

“Guess you were right; an ambush blowjob isn’t very Cary Grant.”

Scott turned a little, his head resting half on Jimmy’s arm, half on the pillows, “Oh, God, I’d like to think it is...” He could just make out Jimmy’s wicked grin at the words.

“Yeah? You think Cary Grant gave good head?”

“Christ, I hope so.” Scott turned back around then, pressing himself comfortably against Jimmy, their bodies fitting together seamlessly. “Speaking of, I mean, I know I was dead asleep when you got started, but...”

“I practiced.”

Turning his head again, not surprised at the flair of jealousy sparking in him, “With *who*?”

Jimmy laughed again, kissing the tip of Scott’s nose, “Not ‘who’, more like ‘what’.” he told Scott.

“Do I even wanna know?”

“Probably not,” Jimmy answered, the two of them laughing now, unguarded. Scott could feel Jimmy’s grin as the man pressed another kiss against his bare shoulder.

“So...are you...I mean... Are you into guys now? Or...bi or...?”

Jimmy’s arms tightened around Scott, as if he were trying to get closer, his tone serious, “Nope. Guys don’t do a damn thing for me. Hell, even girls lately... It’s just... You.”

He let the honesty of that statement sink in, felt the weight of Jimmy’s words, but after a moment, Scott found himself sniggering, “You’re telling me you’re Scott-o-sexual now?”

The huff of laughter sent a warm draft over Scott’s bare skin, Jimmy pinching his side and grinning as he bit Scott’s ear, “That’s right, dollbaby, I had to make up a whole new orientation because of you.”

“Oh God, if it catches on we’ll have to add a new letter to the LGBTQ.” The two of them laughing again, Jimmy lacing their fingers together over

Scott's stomach, "Pretty soon it'll be the whole damn alphabet."

"Better not catch on; you're *mine*." Jimmy told him, sliding his bare feet between Scott's.

"This from the man that's screwed half the city..." Scott was teasing, covering the flutter he felt in his stomach at Jimmy's words, wanting to believe them, at the same time knowing Jimmy was all over the map when it came to sex.

"Well, you screwed the other half, so I figure we're even."

They fell silent for a moment, cuddled together like always, comfortable with each other in a way they maybe never had been before. Scott broke the moment by asking, "How long?"

"Hm?"

"You said you'd wanted me for so long... How long?"

Jimmy buried his face against the back of Scott's neck, as if he were hiding from his own answer. "Years."

Scott stared into the dark room for a beat, shocked silent, before he turned in Jimmy's arms, "No shit?"

Jimmy just shook his head, readjusting his hold on Scott enough to let the man turn into his arms, pulling until Scott's head rested on his shoulder. "No shit," he whispered, pressing his forehead to Scott's. "Christ, I... I chased down everything in a skirt thinking...thinking it was just a phase or that it was because you were the first gay guy I ever really got to know, thinking maybe one of the girls would stick, but..."

"And all those vapid twinkles you threw at me?"

Closing his eyes and swallowing hard, Jimmy murmured, "I knew they *wouldn't* stick."

Reaching a hand up, Scott stroked his fingers through Jimmy's hair, "Is that why you never introduced me to Rob?" Finally realizing what was bothering Jimmy all along.

Jimmy just nodded at first, pulling back and brushing a kiss to Scott's crown, "The guy is a fucking *prince*." he told Scott, half a laugh catching on the words, "Christ, I wanted to hate him, tried to find some...flaw, but the more I got to know him the more I knew he'd be great for you and..."

Scott was grinning, he couldn't help himself, "You jealous little prick."

"I'd say guilty, but little and prick don't really work in the same sentence where I'm concerned..." They were both laughing again, pressing closer as Jimmy's hand skimmed down Scott's back, cupping his ass, rocking his hips into him.

"Jackass," Scott murmured, the word sounding like an endearment on his sigh as he wrapped his leg around Jimmy's hip. They moved together slowly for a moment, both of them starting to grow hard again when Scott stopped suddenly, "Shit, *Rob*."

"So not the name I want to hear when I'm doing this..." Jimmy's voice was light and playful, but Scott could tell the man was unsettled, the path of Jimmy's hand having halted abruptly.

"No, I mean... I should probably tell him. We haven't been... Well, not lately, anyway, but we're kind of dating."

"Feel like ya cheated on him?" Jimmy asked, letting out a small whisper of breath against Scott's hair.

"Well, no, not really, I mean, we never said we were...*exclusive* or anything, and we never even--"

Interrupting, Jimmy asked, "Do you wanna be? Exclusive and all with him, I mean?"

Scott had to think for a moment, getting the words. It was too long, he could tell by the way Jimmy pulled back and worried his bottom lip between his teeth, looking like he was ready to get out of bed. "No. It would serve you right for waiting *years*, but...no. He *is* a great guy, you were right about that, but..." His voice dropped to a whisper, pulling Jimmy close again, "I always wished he was you."

One corner of Jimmy's mouth curved into a cocky grin, "Good." he said, closing in against Scott again. "And, I *did* try, you just always turned me down."

"I always thought you were joking or...just being bi-curious. Wasn't worth risking everything just to satisfy a whim, ya know?"

"Yeah, I know. That's why I waited so long, princess."

Scott rolled his eyes at that, laughing, "Does that make you my knight in

shining armor?”

“Yes,” Jimmy said seriously, “With an *enormous* joust.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Scott shook his head, hiding his face against Jimmy’s chest as they rolled and played together, laughing more, “You’re hopeless.”

“You love it.”

Sighing again, “Yeah. Damn it.”

They were quiet for another few minutes, fingers tenderly exploring each other in a way they’d never let themselves before, bodies pressed tightly together. Scott had to ask, “What about Tina?”

Jimmy pulled back to see his face, “What about her?”

“I mean... When I asked where you were last night, Monica said you two were off somewhere.”

“Yeah, we were. Talking about *you*.” Jimmy told him, smiling as he leaned in to nuzzle against Scott’s ear, whispering, “She’s been telling me for a while now... That night she dropped her bomb on me and we went inside to talk for a while?”

“Yeah?”

“She was telling me I needed to get off my ass or I was gonna lose you.”

“I thought she was blowing you.” Scott laughed, feeling like an idiot.

“Last night she pulled me off so I wouldn’t get wasted and told me it was time for drastic measures and I’d better figure something out before it was too late.”

Scott tilted his head so Jimmy could kiss him again, then pressed his lips to the man’s throat, breath warm and soft as he whispered around a smile, “Remind me to thank her.”

“Send a gift; she’s partial to high end jewelry.”

SLEEPING MORE soundly than he had in weeks, Scott rested peacefully in Jimmy’s arms. The first sound that woke him was a small murmur against his ear, “Someone’s at the door, baby.” Jimmy was whispering to him, the two of them still groggy and tousled from the night before.

Groaning, Scott opened his eyes, blinking at the clock. He’d slept through

his alarm and it was now after nine in the morning. “Christ,” he said, stretching a little and shifting to get out of bed.

“They’ll go away if we ignore it long enough...” Jimmy told him, a Cheshire cat grin on his face.

“Yeah, but...if that’s who I think it is, I should probably deal with it.”

“Rob?”

Scott just nodded as he pulled on a t-shirt and found a pair of boxers on the floor.

Stumbling into the living room, Scott answered the door to find Rob smiling happily at him. Normally, Scott would have leaned in to kiss him, but instead stood in the doorway looking guilty. “Hey, um...”

Rob paused in the motion of coming in, looked Scott up and down and then grinned, arching a brow, “You look like a man that’s been thoroughly fucked.”

Pausing, not sure how to respond to that, Scott finally said, “It’s not like that...I mean...it *is*, but...”

Jimmy appeared at his shoulder then, standing close, one arm wrapping around Scott’s waist, “It’s totally like that. I’m sorry, man.”

Scott didn’t expect the laugh from Rob, “You are not, you shit.”

“Yeah, I’m totally not.” Jimmy told him, laughing with the man.

“It’s cool. I knew from the first date that you two...well, anyway, it’s cool. Glad it finally worked out for ya.”

Looking as dumbfounded as he felt, Scott just stood there a moment, finally asking, “You sure? I mean...I didn’t mean for anything to...didn’t think it ever *would* happen, ya know?”

Another laugh from Rob, “You’re the only one that didn’t, then. And, we weren’t really...ya know?”

“Yeah, I know,”

“It’s all good.” Rob flipped his sunglasses down from the top of his head, covering his eyes and lifting his light brows over the frames, “Guess I’ll have to go down to the beach and see what I can find.” he teased, looking between Jimmy and Scott.

Glancing at the clock, Jimmy told him, “You’re in luck; volleyball is

probably just getting good.”

Rob looked serious for a moment, as if he were considering something important, breaking into a blinding smile after a beat, “Those boys *do* get thirsty. Might stop on the way and get a few bottled waters. Wouldn’t want anyone getting dehydrated.” Slapping Jimmy on the shoulder and smiling just for Scott, Rob turned, hopping down the steps and out into the sun.

As Jimmy reached to close the door behind Rob, he told Scott, “See? Goddamn prince.”

“Since he’s so great, should I run after him?” Scott asked, reaching for the doorknob around Jimmy. Strong arms wrapped around Scott, Jimmy turning him and pressing him against the door, grinning as he leaned close.

“Don’t even think about it.”

Epilogue

“WHAT ARE you doing?”

Jimmy was searching through the diaper bag, brow furrowed, “Is Bippy Bear in here?”

Carol laughed, “No, he’s in the other bag, we wouldn’t forget it again, I swear.”

“Not that I don’t believe you,” Jimmy picked up the other bag from the backseat, grinning when he pulled the little bear out, Jake clapping as if his father had just performed a magic trick. “But I’m never having another night like that again.”

Feeling a tug at his shirt, Jimmy turned, having extracted Jake from his car seat, one bag slung over his shoulder, the other sitting by the car. Cassy was there, her hands already muddy, Hermione—Persephone’s puppy-- squirming in her arms, “Daddy, Scott says I have to take a bath before dinner.”

“It’s either that or hose you down in the back yard, princess.”

Rolling her eyes as only a six year old could, Cassandra huffed her frustration, “I can just wash my hands.”

Trying to be stern, Jimmy passed Jake off to Scott, the baby grinning at him and pulling at Scott’s hair with pudgy fingers, “Bath, dinner, movie. In

that order.”

Dropping her voice to a whisper, Stacy told Scott, “She’s been like that for two weeks.”

Nodding, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her argue with anyone.” Scott told her, watching Jimmy try to reason with the little girl.

“According to her teacher, it’s pretty normal for her age, but...”

“But you’re really looking forward to a couple weeks off?”

Looking over at Carol, her smile bright and her eyes tired, “Let’s just say I hope they stocked the bar well on the cruise ship.”

“Go give your mommies a kiss, sweetheart.” Jimmy was smiling down at his daughter like she was an angel and Scott knew her new argumentative nature and his urge to give her the world could be a recipe for disaster, but he couldn’t help grinning at the man.

Carol and Stacy hugged the kids, smothering them in kisses and reminding Jimmy of the new alarm code at their house so they could water the plants and feed the fish before they raced each other to get in the car, laughing and looking suddenly fifteen years younger.

When Jimmy had told them that he wanted to wait until he was done with his residency before considering kids, they had been disappointed, but after several discussions and a lot of thought, the three of them had decided to wait and see if the man was ready then. They knew they could get a donor and go forward without him, but they liked Jimmy and Scott and they liked the idea of sharing family responsibilities with people they trusted. Now their children had four loving parents and two houses to grow up in.

Setting Hermione down in the grass and reaching up to Jimmy, Cassy said, “Carry me, Daddy.” The man complied, as always, beaming as she wrapped her little arms around his neck. “Can we have ice cream?”

“Not before dinner.” he told her, kissing her soft cheek and giving her a little bounce. Scott shifted Jake to his other hip, his free arm wrapping around Jimmy’s waist. “But I happen to know Scott’s got a pint of your favorite hidden in the back of the freezer.”

Pinching his side, Scott narrowed his eyes, “Traitor.”

TURNING OFF the lights as he walked through the house, Scott found Jimmy hovering in Cassy's door, the man silhouetted in the moonlight, watching his daughter sleep. Standing up on his toes so he could rest his chin on Jimmy's shoulder, Scott whispered, "You coming to bed or just gonna keep watch all night?"

Leaning back a little, Jimmy pulled Scott's arm around him, "She's growing up so fast."

"I know," he agreed, laughing softly, teasing, "And all but about ten minutes of it is captured on video."

"Yeah, well." Turning, Jimmy pressed a kiss to the corner of Scott's mouth, smiling for a beat and then looking serious, cupping Scott's jaw, "I coulda missed out on all this."

"Me too," Lifting his face and drinking in Jimmy's expression, Scott smiled, kissing the man again, letting it deepen at the end with a small slide of his tongue.

Sighing into the kiss, Jimmy's fingers laced into Scott's hair, his arm snaking around Scott's waist, "Time for bed, husband."

THE END

Author bio: J.H. Knight hates writing bios and doesn't even fill out the little blurb about herself on Goodreads. Most of her time is spent saying things like, "Not until your homework is done." When not driving/chasing/educating her children, she's usually curled up reading one of her favorite authors or telling herself she's really going to finish that novel she started writing. Really!

PLAYING WITH FIRE

by Jennivie Wirries

Photo Inspiration



Story Prompt

The fire in front of me was nothing compared to the heat coming off of Jesse as he pressed into my back. Damn Fool! I had told him to stay back--I had this! But No--not him, the son of a bitch had to push his way in and now the only thing standing between him and the ravenous whore that this fire was turning out to be was me...and I was so fucking tired. I heard Rick shout and move in behind the two of us--great, just great! Now not only was my current boyfriend in danger but my ex-lover was as well. Jesus--maybe I should just throw myself into the flames and call it a day!

~ Sammy2006

General Information

genre: contemporary

tags: ménage; firemen; open relationship; memories of first time; poly-mmm; established couples; friends-to-lovers; in the closet; orgy; trouble-in-paradise

content warnings: infidelity

word count: 7,204

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PLAYING WITH FIRE

by Jennivie Wirries

BRYCE LOADED the last of the equipment into the fire truck, stepped back to close the door, and collided with one of the new recruits. “Sorry!” he said, squatting to help the man pick up his paperwork scattered across the floor.

“Ah, don’t worry about it. I should have been watching where I was going.” The recruit held his hand out to Bryce, who took it. “Devon Lead, certified klutz.” Devon was built, with soft brown eyes and hair that matched. The man’s smile turned into a grin and Bryce realized he was caught staring, still holding onto his hand.

Bryce let go and cleared his throat. “Uh, sorry. McGaffey, Bryce McGaffey.” Looking up at the sound of boots coming toward them, Bryce saw his boyfriend, Kaleb, stop to stare at the man. Bryce sighed and kept stacking the papers even though the recruit had stopped bothering with it, preferring instead to gaze at Kaleb’s piercing baby blues and spiked dirty blonde hair.

It wasn’t anything he hadn’t seen dozens of times. Plus Devon was attractive and he looked like he could mess someone up if provoked, which was a trait Kaleb often sought. His partner was probably noting that and adding him to his list of people to bang. Bryce had been on that list. Breaking his rule of never sleeping with someone twice, not only did Kaleb choose to keep Bryce around, he invited him to live in his apartment. He claimed it was because he fell in love with him; while he had believed it at first, Bryce wasn’t so sure of that anymore. The way he saw it, Kaleb was lonely and afraid to admit that he didn’t know how to love someone.

Bryce looked back and forth between the two of them, about to say something to break the uncomfortable silence, when the bell went off. The whole crew scrambled to respond to the emergency.

JUST BEFORE Kaleb turned his key in the lock, Bryce reached down and squeezed him through his pants. Groaning, he damn near busted the door down

to get into their apartment. He couldn't wait to strip and fuck his man raw under the spray of hot water in the shower.

As they stepped over the threshold, Bryce wiped the grime from Kaleb's mouth and kissed him softly, wrapping his arms around him. He seemed to be in a romantic mood today, leisurely peeling off his shirt and brushing his fingertips lightly over Kaleb's skin.

But Kaleb needed release now. He had endured a full shift trying to avoid looking at new recruit Devon Lead, the one man, besides Bryce, Kaleb had loved. After an interrupted jerk off session to keep himself from jumping the man, there was no time for gentle and slow. Slamming Bryce against the wall, he kicked the door shut and began tearing out of his own clothing, dropping it into the bin by the front door.

"Come on, Bryce. Keep up. I'm naked already."

Bryce hurriedly undressed while Kaleb began stroking himself in anticipation of the sex act in his near future. Once he was free of the odorous clothes, Bryce leaned in and kissed him with a nip of his teeth.

Cupping Bryce's member and then grasping it, he used his partner's cock like a leash and gently tugged his man to the bathroom.

Reaching in to start the shower, he kept a firm hold on Bryce. Kaleb pulled his boyfriend with him as he stepped in. Bryce started to wash him, smoothing his hands over his chest and shoulders, but Kaleb was impatient. He let go of Bryce's member and grabbed both of his wrists, backing him into the tiles.

"I need you... now," Kaleb said, and spun Bryce around, pinning his arms overhead. He stepped in close and poked his dick in between Bryce's legs. "Shit, yeah," he groaned, sliding between them a few times to get himself good and hard.

The whole time Bryce had not spoken. Now he said quietly, "I saw that civilian looking at you."

Why did he want to talk now? Kaleb kept at it while he replied. "You mean that lady with the overdone makeup and teased out hair? Yeah, she was into me, winked at me and shit."

"Not the woman. Her husband."

"Well, how do you know they weren't looking at you?" Kaleb chuckled

and slapped his lover's muscular ass.

Bryce snorted. "Trust me. I know they were both looking at you. No one looks at me like that." He shook his head, voice getting huskier. "Took all I had to not kiss you just to show them whose man you are."

Didn't he know yet he was a walking wet dream? With his tousled dark waves and haunting eyes, dimpled cheeks and fit body, to Kaleb, Bryce was perfect. He sighed, slightly exasperated they were having this kind of conversation. Again. "Everyone knows whose man you are, Bryce."

"He didn't," Bryce muttered.

"Everyone that matters." That wasn't true, though. Most of the station didn't, or at least if they did know, they weren't letting on that they had figured it out. Devon didn't know. "Anyway... you're mine. Now, less talking, more screwing."

Obediently, Bryce stepped his legs further apart and tilted his hips, raising his ass for a pounding.

"Good man." Letting Bryce's hands go, Kaleb took the waterproof lube from the shelf. He slicked Bryce, pushing his finger inside, working in slow circles, then put a generous amount on himself. Kaleb pressed the head of his shaft inside his lover, just enough to make Bryce gasp -- he loved that sound -- then shoved home.

Both men shouted as their bodies came together with a loud, wet slap. Usually Kaleb gave him a moment to adjust and breathe before the railing began. Not this time. As soon as he was in to the hilt, Kaleb pulled back and slammed into him, again and again, every surge harder than the last.

It wasn't long before he was right on the edge. He slowed, trying to prolong the pleasure for as long as he could, while his partner moaned steadily. When Kaleb was almost ready to come, he held back, instead reaching around to grab Bryce's thick, pulsating cock, running his hand up and down the shaft. On cue, Bryce's moaning increased and muscles squeezed around Kaleb's shaft.

"Shit, baby!" he shouted as he felt Bryce jerk, shout, and come. He started his thrusting again, long slow strokes as Bryce shuddered and groaned. Speeding up, with all Bryce's heat and tightness gripping him like a fist, Kaleb

shot hard.

Afterward, he hugged Bryce to his chest and gently moved within him, kissing his neck and shoulders. He slid in and out as the motion grew smoother with his ejaculate coating Bryce's insides.

Surprisingly, this was the part that was bliss for Kaleb. Moments like these were the only instance he let the tender side of himself show. The rest of the time, he was demanding and harsh. Knowing that didn't keep him from acting that way.

BARELY STOPPING to dry off, the pair flopped onto the bed, kissing one last time with muttered good nights. They rolled onto their sides, facing away from one another, just as they did whenever they slept.

Bryce rolled over to pull the blanket up over Kaleb and waited until his breathing became deep and relaxed. Once he was sure his lover was asleep, he sat up, pulling his knees to his chest and running a hand through his damp hair with a sigh. Sex energized him. He'd be up at least another hour, if not more.

Though it was difficult to be in a relationship with a firefighter, it was easier to be with someone in the same profession. They understood. Sure the others tried to, but no one could really comprehend the trials and pressures firefighters faced unless they were one of them.

His wife hadn't been able to deal with it. Going to sleep as soon as he got home, squeezing as much rest in as possible before the next shift, missing holidays, birthdays, important events. Always crafting apologies that fell on deaf ears. She wanted a hero for a husband, but wasn't happy with the sacrifices involved.

Bryce had hoped to get in good at the station, then they could start a family. But neither of them realized that if you planned to be a fireman, you had to kiss your loved ones and normal life goodbye for several months, up to two years in some programs. Training was extensive, exhausting, demanding, and your fellow trainees became brothers. Even Bryce had found his place in a family of men who had originally lived to torment him. He became one of the boys, close friends with nearly the entire crew. Kaleb, who had taken him

under his wing, most of all.

The divorce hadn't been a surprise to anyone. What had thrown everyone for a loop was when Bryce moved in with Kaleb. Somewhere between the slow crumbling of his marriage and the divorce proceedings, he'd fallen in love with the man.

Now though, Bryce and Kaleb spent their days off separately, coming to together for a shower and fuck, rarely anything else. He sighed deeply, studying his lover's back and powerful shoulders. They had drifted so far apart lately.

They didn't make love. Not anymore. The brief moments of softness and sensuality occurred right after Kaleb came or when Bryce began to pleasure him. During foreplay, Kaleb always urged him to do everything harder, faster, deeper, tighter. Guidance was sexy, but not all the time. God damn it, he wished he could work his man how he wanted to. Explore his body and learn its surfaces. Kaleb wouldn't have it and he wouldn't talk about it either. Bryce had learned early on that was an argument he would never win, so he stayed silent. It ate him alive. Did Kaleb not trust him? Was that why his partner wouldn't allow gentle caresses? Did he think it was too sissy or something? Everyone needed love, to be cared for, nurtured, and pampered once in a while. Had something happened to his boyfriend that had caused his distrust? Every night before he went to bed he would wonder these things, then remember and be thankful for all he had. Sometimes, though, he craved more.

Bryce was pulled into a dream soon after he finally settled in and closed his eyes.

Bryce looked everywhere for his partner during rest period, but Kaleb was nowhere to be found. Feeling hornier than he ever had, after watching the new batch of trainees strip and shower together, Bryce curbed the need to touch himself by picking up after the training session. As he rolled up hoses and re-housed the civilian dummies, he kept picturing their lithe, muscular bodies, their laughter, the smack of a naked ass. When he was a trainee he didn't dare look at his peers in the shower. Sometimes he even bathed alone in the women's stall to keep himself on track. He had a wife at home to think of. But no longer. Now he was with Kaleb. Technically, that meant he could do

whatever the hell he pleased with whoever he wanted, so long as he didn't break their agreement of never sleeping with the same person twice. He had barely used the privilege, finding he was more of a one-man kind of guy.

"We saw you looking at us." One of the trainees came around the corner, in a towel, looking Bryce up and down.

Bryce turned away, blushing. He thought he had been discreet enough. Seemed not. This was a dangerous situation. Some of other gay men from the station were disciplined for less. "Yeah, I.... Sorry about that. Won't happen again." He pivoted to leave and ran right into the bare chest of another man.

Bryce jumped back, and yet another voice behind him said, "We've been watching you, too, McGaffey." The man in front of him stepped closer and unbuttoned Bryce's shirt, rubbing his hands over Bryce's chest. A warm breath tickled his neck from behind, and a large erection pressed to his ass.

"Oh!" They thought he was fair game? "I can't. I have-"

"A boyfriend?" the one at his ear said, as another man started on Bryce's pants.

"Yes, I have a boyfriend."

The first trainee said, "And that boyfriend of yours has had us."

Solid point. Kaleb wouldn't have even thought twice if the trainees had come after him, in fact he would have expected it.

His neck was nibbled and blown on. The guy working on his pants pulled them down and licked his growing erection. Suddenly, several arms encased him and lowered him to the bench.

The first trainee's hand slowly glided up and down his shaft, starting out as a whisper of a touch, gently pulling him toward pleasure instead of the sudden shock of over-stimulation he was used to. Dropping Bryce's dick, the trainee lifted Bryce's ass up in the air, spreading his legs at the same time. Dipping his head, he took a long lick from the base of Bryce's spine to his rim, circling it and lapping, prodding with his tongue. Bryce groaned and squirmed. The trainee continued upward, over his balls, dragging up his shaft; ending with taking him into his mouth, one plunge all the way to the back of his throat. The man pulled off and repeated the process, several more times. Every pass the same leisurely speed, with more and more focus on his

entrance. It drove Bryce wild.

In the way of dreams, suddenly it seemed as if all the other trainees had stepped up at once. A mouth closed over his nipple, another wetly traced his abs. All of the men were touching one another, making all manner of noises from sighs to grunts. Bryce reached out and grabbed two available dicks to stroke. The trainee he had bumped into leaned down and softly kissed him. Bryce's body arched and he moaned into the man's mouth.

"Is this it, Bryce? Is this what you need?" Bryce somehow knew the other man didn't mean multiple partners, but the gentle manner they were caressing and kissing him.

After the upstroke of the tongue completed its circuit, Bryce's straining member was pulled into a warm mouth. Unable to keep from digging his feet into his current partner's back, he bucked and crammed his cock farther down the throat of the one who spoke. "Ungh..." Around pants and moans, he managed a "Yes. Oh God, yes."

Rewarding Bryce with several pumps on his cock, the first trainee squeezed it painfully hard and let go. All of the others backed away as one. "Tell Kaleb."

Too stunned to reply at first, Bryce reached down to put the man's hand back on him and looked to the others pleading, "Please. Please don't stop. Not now."

"Promise you will tell him."

Could he do that? He needed them to touch him; he'd say anything to get them to keep at it. "I will. I promise." Immediately, all of the hands and moist mouths returned to his skin.

The one with the talented tongue repositioned, and gently pushed his cock deep into Bryce. Every inch gliding in made him cry out in ecstasy. Standing at his head and leaning all the way down, the one who had kissed him sucked his shaft into his mouth. Bryce returned the favor, taking the erection bobbing in front of his face down his own throat. A man mounted the fellow Bryce was sucking and hammered him front behind, his heavy sac hitting Bryce with each pump. The body connected to the cock between his lips rocked forward and moaned, sending vibrations through Bryce. Trainee number four groaned and

thrust his wet member into Bryce's fist. After finding a slow but steady rhythm, the foursome moaned in unison, giving and taking pleasure from one another.

It reminded him of the way Legos fit together. Bryce chuckled at the image of Lego pieces getting it on and ...

Waking, Bryce rolled to his side, throwing an arm over his partner. He would tell Kaleb soon, or he would continue to be miserable. What if Kaleb didn't understand and felt inadequate or, even worse, told Bryce to go fuck himself and showed him the door?

TODAY WAS the day Kaleb's resolve would weaken. He knew that because of the way his hands kept moving to smooth over the front of his slacks and the way he licked his lips when the man came into view. Ever since his ex-lover, Devon Lead, started working at his station, Kaleb had been avoiding him. Mostly for Bryce's sake and to uphold the sanctity of their rule, he'd made sure not to look at Devon, or spy on him in the showers, or sit anywhere near him at meals. That had apparently been the wrong thing to do; now he wanted him so badly he could rip the man apart. It had been a long while since he had received a pounding and he knew Devon was good for it. Bryce, much as he loved him, didn't have it in him.

Ever since that first day at the training facility, Kaleb had been obsessed with Bryce. Though Bryce was deceptively strong, none of the trainees or instructors thought he would make it, but he'd been determined. Bryce had been younger than any of the rest of the trainees and the guys all gave him shit for it. Told him to go home to his mommy and the like. While he never flinched at that, Kaleb noticed a flash of some emotion. Grief, regret? As it turned out, Bryce's mom had died in a fire when he was younger. He blamed himself for getting out of the house along with his sister and their dog. Their mother was right behind them and he was too scared to go back in when she didn't emerge. The firemen on the scene later told him he'd done a good job saving his family, and there was probably nothing he could have done. Bryce didn't believe them. He'd let the family down. His dad told him it was his fault she didn't get out alive. That was his driving force for becoming a fireman.

Jokes and jabs only strengthened his resolve.

Bryce knew how to handle a hose. Beyond the initial feeling that he had to protect this kid from the older trainees, and be his friend, that was what drew Kaleb in. Those hands working the hose made Kaleb's cock spring to attention, every time. Problem was, the guy he was fantasizing about had a wife. The relationship was strained, though Bryce loved her dearly.

Kaleb had caught Bryce looking at their fellow firefighters in training more than once. He always looked away quickly, but his neck flushed with color and he excused himself. The fact that Bryce had experimented with men came out when they'd gone for drinks one night. Nothing serious, a mutual jerk-off with a roommate, and a party where a group of guys watched porn together that turned into more of a hands-on event.

Kaleb had also done similar things in college. By then, he'd known without a shadow of a doubt that he wanted a man in his bed, not a woman. Bryce, though, didn't know what he was or what he wanted. He'd married just out of high school and he'd only been with one other person before that. The idea of being the one to show Bryce his true self appealed to Kaleb. Not wanting to destroy the man's life, he watched and waited, all the while growing closer to him.

Once training was over, as his marriage started to crumble, Bryce became distant and distracted. Then Kaleb walked into the showers to find him sitting with his knees drawn up, hanging his head, weeping under the cascading water. How long had he been sitting there? Kaleb sat down next to him, in his civilian clothes, and wrapped an arm around him. Bryce leaned into him and sighed. They sat in companionable silence until Bryce finally felt like speaking.

"She's done it," he said hoarsely. "Filed for a divorce days ago. Didn't even bother to tell me until I called her on break. I knew it was coming but... Made love this morning. She let me think --" His voice cracked and he couldn't seem to continue.

Kaleb pulled him closer, and they stayed like that another few minutes before he tugged Bryce to his feet and urged him to get dry and tell the chief he was ill.

“I can’t go home,” Bryce said forlornly. “The house is hers and I can’t -- No. I’ll just stay here.”

“Shift is almost over now.” Luckily there hadn’t been any calls their crew was required for, because Bryce was not in tiptop shape and Kaleb wasn’t doing much better. “Go to the common room. I’ll find you when it’s over.”

When Kaleb got to the common room, Bryce wasn’t there. He either hadn’t gone at all or had given up hope that Kaleb would show; he might have gone home despite his insistence he could never return. Before leaving to go back to his apartment, though, Kaleb checked the bunks and found Bryce sprawled on top of one.

Smoothing back his hair, Kaleb kissed his forehead. Always a light sleeper, Bryce’s eyes opened instantly. Kaleb sat on the edge of the bed, studying him.

Bryce broke the silence first. “I care about you a lot, Kaleb. Sorry, though. I never meant to lead you on or anything. I’m not --”

“Gay?” Kaleb shrugged. “Only one way to find out.” He reached his hand out to Bryce and it hovered there between them. Bryce chewed his lip. It was too soon, Kaleb thought. Had he blown any chance with his fantasy by approaching him while he was vulnerable? Disappointed, Kaleb began to let his hand fall. Surprising them both, Bryce hooked it with his finger, bashfully looking away.

Leading him to the bathroom, Kaleb locked the door behind them. As soon as he had him alone, Kaleb let go of his carefully constructed control and let his hands wander. He kissed Bryce softly, gently stroked him through his clothes, then pulled his pants down and gave him the slowest blowjob he could. He gently penetrated him with his fingers. The noises the man made were almost too much. Kaleb yearned to get inside him, dominate him, but he was afraid of frightening the virgin.

“You liked it,” he said when Bryce’s panting had receded. It wasn’t a question. Kaleb knew the truth, now he wanted to hear Bryce admit he’d enjoyed a man’s mouth on his lips, on his cock, fingers thrust into his ass.

Nodding vigorously, Bryce groaned and reached for Kaleb. “It was weird. I mean, different, but good.”

Kaleb smirked and wrapped his arms around him murmuring, “I pronounce you gay or, at the very least bisexual.”

That first time had been about testing the waters, he hadn’t even given himself an orgasm. Their next few encounters Kaleb had been attentive and loving, but then his true nature took over. Bryce had to feel deceived.

Devon Lead-Me-Into-Temptation, as he was known in college, walked across the room again and Kaleb threw off all thoughts of Bryce. Springing into action, he brushed against Devon on his way to the bathroom and with a quick glance back, held the door open. That was as clear an invitation as he was going to give. Devon darted his eyes around, checking to see if they were being watched, and headed toward the bathroom.

COMING INTO the station’s kitchen, Kaleb found Bryce drying dishes. He stepped up behind him and squeezed his boyfriend’s shoulder.

“So... something kinda happened between me and Devon.”

“Really? Which one is that?” Bryce’s eyes narrowed as he furiously dried an already dry plate. “Oh, I remember. The recruit you eye-banged the other day.”

Okay, he deserved that. “Bryce, I love you.”

Bryce’s voice took on a puzzled tone. “I love you too.”

“I’m so sorry.” Bryce stiffened. Kaleb shook his head, removed his hand to grip the counter, and sighed. “You see, I know Devon, and he has always had this power over me -- just like you,” he added quickly. “And he and I...”

Bryce smiled knowingly. “So you’ve messed around before? It happens.” He continued stacking the dishes, clattering them together with less care than before.

Kaleb hesitated a moment. He could let it go at that, kiss the back of Bryce’s neck, go about his duties, and let Bryce think Kaleb hadn’t broken their most important rule. But he knew he would eventually blurt it out during an inopportune moment, like after Bryce said “I love you” or “I’m coming”, and then it would be much worse. Taking a deep breath, he admitted the ugly truth: He was a cheater. “I had sex with him twice this week, and we dated for

a while in college.”

Bryce set the dish in his hands down. His mouth opened and shut, lips drawing into a tight line as he spun around to face him. Kaleb’s breath caught at the passionate anger in those deep blue eyes, overlaid with sadness. They captivated him every time, and God, when he finally came --

“Kaleb?” Bryce said softly, bringing him back to the present situation. “How seri-”

“Very. We were very serious.”

The next words out of Bryce’s mouth were not what he was expecting. “Well... invite him for dinner.” Bryce’s voice was calm, but his hands were shaking.

“You can’t mean that.”

Bryce went back to drying dishes and stacking them, not looking at Kaleb at all. “I do.”

“I’m really sorry. I fucked up, royally. I won’t see him again.” If he could force himself not to feel. He’d certainly try because he couldn’t lose Bryce. What was he thinking, letting old feelings resurface, jeopardizing their relationship and putting Bryce through this? The man had dealt with enough. “Bry, I’ll make it up to you.”

“No. I mean, yes, you will make it up to me. But you won’t avoid him, and you will invite him over.” Bryce glared at Kaleb, eyes flashing and jaw clenched. Kaleb could almost hear him thinking, “My turn.”

SITTING DOWN to dinner with the two of them a few nights later, Kaleb felt like an outcast in his own home. His lover and ex-lover chatted like they were old friends. They had so much in common. His mind drifted to his first time with each of them. So different from one another. One soft and timid, one hard and demanding. As a lover, Kaleb had become the latter.

Kaleb snapped back to attention at the sound of Bryce’s laughter. What had he missed? Bryce got up from the table and went to stand behind Devon, wrapping his arm around the man’s chest and then whispering in his ear. Devon’s eyes got wide and he glanced uneasily at Kaleb, who quickly looked

at his plate, pushing the untouched food around with his fork.

Stepping back so that Devon could get out of his chair, Bryce grabbed the other man's hand and led him toward the bedroom.

It was only fair, Kaleb told himself. He'd broken the rules.

Knocking back a few beers, Kaleb steeled himself to hear sounds of pleasure emanating from the bedroom. If Devon was working him over like he did Kaleb, Bryce should be shouting by now, but all he could make out was heavy breathing and soft murmured words. It was impossible not to imagine what the two of them might be doing to each other. Admitting to himself that he was jealous left a bitter taste in his mouth that the beer couldn't wash away.

Curiosity eventually won out, and he crept toward the room. He cracked open the door just wide enough to slip through, then stopped and stared at the pair on the bed.

The tenderness between them was awe-inspiring. Devon had never been that loving with Kaleb, even when he'd claimed to love him. He took and gave his sex hardcore, rough. Nothing soft or sweet about him. Kissing Bryce lightly from his mouth all the way down his body, Devon swept his long fingers over Kaleb's lover like he cherished him. Why hadn't he felt that way about Kaleb?

Rather than join in, as he desperately wanted to, he stood transfixed as Bryce's eyes shone that brilliant blue. He felt like a trespasser, violating the serene moment they were sharing in Kaleb and Bryce's bed. His breath caught in his throat and he took a step back, planning to leave the couple alone. Then Bryce looked up, directly at Kaleb, and reached for him, pleading.

Devon pulled his head up from between Bryce's legs and rasped, "Take his hand, Kaleb." Kaleb crossed the room and took Bryce's hand in his, unsure of what to do or say.

"Hey." Bryce said quietly. He smiled, appearing to be completely sated.

Kaleb's lips lifted into a cautious smile. "Hey." Sitting down on the bed, he kissed the palm he held. Bryce's fingers curled under his chin. Kaleb sucked each of Bryce's fingers, and licked up his arm from wrist to shoulder. He kissed him softly at first, then with gathering passion, sliding his hand to the back of Bryce's head, tugging on the dark strands. While Kaleb kissed his

lover, Devon coaxed Bryce to what must have been his third or fourth climax, if the state of the sheets and the puddle on his stomach were anything to go by. Bryce was never that responsive with Kaleb. He was elated for his partner that he'd finally been awakened, but he wasn't the one that had brought him pleasure. Devon had.

Maybe all this time it wasn't Bryce with the deficiencies and difficulties. What if it was him? The way the other two were touching one another.... Bryce and Kaleb didn't behave like that. He didn't want to be touched that way, but he hadn't thought about what his lover needed. God, he was a selfish bastard.

"Your turn," Bryce said.

He blinked in surprise. This was punishment for breaking the rules, right? It started out that way. After what he'd pulled he thought Bryce might leave him. They were both smiling softly at him and Bryce kissed him tenderly.

"I'm sorry," Kaleb blurted out, stroking Bryce's cheek lovingly. "I really, truly am."

"I know you are." Bryce kissed Kaleb's palm.

Devon cleared his throat. "I can go if you two need privacy."

"Can you just give us a minute?" Kaleb said, not looking up from the flushed face of his lover as Devon pulled on his pants and left the room.

Bryce removed Kaleb's hand from his face but didn't let go of it. "Expected you to come in here a lot sooner. I was pretty scared... at first."

"Didn't want to interrupt and, anyway, I deserved to be left out." When Bryce didn't comment on that, he realized how close he had been to losing him.

"I think I understand now, why you did something with him, again. It was still wrong, though," Bryce added quietly.

"We've been drifting, Bry, but I know that's no excuse. I was selfish and wasn't thinking straight."

"You know, I started out doing this to get back at you because I was really hurt. I wondered what this guy had that you would risk ruining us over."

Kaleb shook his head. "I should have told you who he was to me."

"Yes." Bryce chewed his lip in thought. "You still love him, don't you?"

Kaleb stared at his boyfriend, completely caught off guard. "I...." Did he?

Had he ever stopped caring about the man? The only reason he hadn't tried to contact him was because he thought Devon wanted some distance from him. They'd been excellent friends before they started having sex. Yeah, he still cared about him. Maybe even loved him. Kaleb shrugged and answered honestly. "I'm not really sure, Bry. I care about him. I worried and wondered how he was doing. I suppose that is some form of love. It doesn't take away from what I feel for you."

Bryce nodded and squeezed his hand. "I think I like him too. I've been watching him on the job, and we've had a few conversations. He's a pretty great guy."

"And he makes you come like a fountain," Kaleb bitterly added.

"Heh. Yeah, there is that too." Bryce smiled. Kaleb winced and looked away from the way his lover's eyes lit up. "Oh, hey. Kay...? He turned Kaleb's head to meet his eyes. "You could do the same. You used to, in the beginning. Remember?"

"Not like that, I didn't."

"You could learn," Devon said. Neither of them had noticed their guest re-entering the room. How much had he heard? "I care about you too, Kaleb."

Kaleb glanced in his ex's direction and his mouth dropped open. Devon strode across the room, magnificently naked and hard as steel. He groaned remembering how Devon felt inside of him. The sound of Bryce's moan brought Kaleb's eyes back to him, and he saw Bryce's cock miraculously twitch to life again.

"And, Bryce," Devon continued as he climbed onto the bed with them, "you're great. I know what Kaleb sees in you. I like you a lot."

Turning to gauge Bryce's reaction to all of this, Kaleb kissed him lightly. "Baby?"

In answer, Bryce grabbed Devon's hand, yanking him down on top of himself. "Kiss him," Bryce said to Kaleb, jerking his head toward Devon.

Was this a test? Kaleb was surely going to fail if it was, because he couldn't resist the hungry look Devon gave him. Twining an arm around his neck, Kaleb crushed his lips to Devon's.

BRYCE WAS reading in their bed, or trying to at least. While Bryce had been on food shopping detail, Kaleb had gone out on a call and not come back before their shift ended. Now he prayed his man and the rest of the crew were okay. Reading had seemed like a good way to get his mind off of the thousand scenarios involving Kaleb's death, but it wasn't working.

The front door opened and Bryce threw back the blanket to go greet him. He stopped, perching on the side of the bed. After a true emergency, Kaleb usually needed to be alone. When he was ready he would come to Bryce. Hearing the heavy thud of a uniform hitting the floor, he expected Kaleb to take a shower and maybe watch television until his mind stopped spinning.

"Bry...."

At the sound of Kaleb's voice, Bryce jumped and then laughed in relief. Kaleb moved toward him, his hair disheveled, reeking of smoke and sweat, still half dressed. Automatically, Bryce thought he was about to get nailed hardcore. His boyfriend was usually meticulous about keeping strong odors contained at the front door and washing off the remains. If he was bypassing a shower, he really needed to get laid.

Kaleb settled next to Bryce, reached for his hand and held it to his lips. His hands were shaking as he turned toward Bryce. The haunted cast to his lover's gaze alarmed Bryce. What happened to Kaleb tonight that would cause the shadows in his eyes?

"Kay, what -- it wasn't...?"

Bryce swallowed a hard lump in his throat. Had something happened to Devon? Over the past few weeks they'd all grown closer, even going out as a threesome. Devon had become the lone exception to their golden rule. He really liked the guy, maybe even more than liked.

Shaking his head and kissing Bryce's fingertips, Kaleb said, "Devon is fine." Before Bryce could say anything else, Kaleb dropped Bryce's hand and threw his arms around him, squeezing tightly.

Bryce rubbed Kaleb's back and kissed his neck. "Whatever it is we'll get through it." Kaleb loosened his hold and Bryce moved back up the bed, laying back and holding his arms out for his boyfriend. Kaleb hesitated a moment, as

unused to cuddling as Bryce was.

“Let me hold you?” Bryce asked. Kaleb nodded tiredly and climbed up on the bed, resting his head on Bryce’s chest. Sifting his fingers through Kaleb’s hair, he murmured, “Just rest. You’re safe now.”

Kaleb shifted, propped himself up on his elbow, and looked down at him in silence. Bryce smiled softly, wondering what he was thinking. Very slowly, Kaleb lowered his head and brushed a kiss on Bryce’s lips, then against his forehead. He nudged Bryce’s mouth open with his own and filled it with his tongue. Bryce groaned, meeting him stroke for stroke, grabbing the back of his head, and kissing Kaleb breathless.

Abruptly, Kaleb broke contact and sat up to do away with the rest of his clothes. Bryce did the same, tossing his sleeping shorts across the room, and got on his hands and knees in front of his lover. Kaleb’s arms looped around him and lips trailed from his tailbone up to the nape of his neck.

“Not this time,” Kaleb said softly at his ear, and rolled Bryce to his back. He kissed him again and moved down Bryce’s body until he came to his stomach. His hands ran up and down Bryce’s sides as his mouth circled Bryce’s navel and continued lower.

Kaleb’s lips dragged up his shaft, ending with a wet kiss to the tip. “Oh... mmm.” Bryce moaned as his cock jumped at the sensation. Kaleb did it again. Slow glide up, sloppy kiss.

“Lube,” Kaleb said. Bryce rummaged into the bedside table drawer and handed the bottle to him.

Now the gentleness would end and the pounding would commence, Bryce thought. But just like his very first encounter with Kaleb, his man’s lubed finger caressed him, stroking back and forth, around in circles, and then pushed in. Bryce gasped. Kaleb was still preparing Bryce for a hard fuck, though at least he was being tender about it. That was a vast improvement.

Crawling up the bed to kiss Bryce, Kaleb gently rocked his finger inside of him. Okay, that was new. Another digit worked its way in, rubbing against his sensitive spot. Bryce’s whole body undulated in pleasure. He cried out just as Kaleb moved down to wrap his lips around Bryce’s cock, pressing his fingers deeper, scissoring them, stretching Bryce.

God, he didn't know it could be like this with him. "Now, Kay," Bryce panted. Kaleb backed off, then brought Bryce close to orgasm again with the thrusting of his fingers and the wet suction of his mouth. Just when Bryce thought he couldn't take anymore, Kaleb pulled back with a wicked grin.

Groaning in frustration, Bryce tried to grasp Kaleb's cock as the man moved away. Kaleb swept his fingertips across Bryce's cheeks and traced his lips, before dipping his head for another sweet kiss. This was what Bryce needed from his boyfriend, to see the loving side of Kaleb he had missed so much. Both of them tender, both of them capable of total surrender.

Kaleb straddled him, and Bryce let out a long breath, closing his eyes, and awaited the welcome invasion. But when Kaleb continued to sit astride him and the head of his cock was engulfed in slick heat instead, Bryce's eyes popped open in shock. He studied Kaleb's expression, full of questions. His sensual smile seemed to answer every single one of them.

"I understand now." Kaleb said. "I'll be more gentle with you ... More loving."

Smiling, Bryce said, "You don't always have to. I'm not fragile, I can take it. And it's not like I don't like it," he chuckled.

Kaleb frowned. "But you need ..."

Bryce sat up, holding Kaleb around the waist. "What I need is you, all of you." He lifted his hand to smooth back Kaleb's sooty hair. "Not just that hard exterior everyone else sees, and not just your softer side that I've been missing for so long."

Hoping his lover really did get it, Bryce wrapped his arms around Kaleb and sealed their lips together.

With a ragged moan, Kaleb fully impaled himself on Bryce's cock. Bryce hissed in a breath. He was inside his lover for the first time. So hot, so tight.... Bryce kissed Kaleb frantically and thrust his hips up into him. Breaking away to breathe he moaned, "Yes. Oh, Kay... Holy shit!"

"Bryce," Kaleb said kissing him, holding Bryce's face in his hands. "Bry, I love you." Their eyes met and Bryce exploded deep inside his partner.

"That's it, baby." Kaleb slowly lifted off of him, once his cries had died down. Whispering in his ear, "Come for me, again," Kaleb sat back down on

his cock. Bryce saw stars.

THE END

Author bio: Jennivie Wirries has lived in the same town on the outskirts of Detroit almost her entire life, having been born there, and currently residing only miles from where she grew up. A stay at home mom of a three year-old-son, in her spare time she writes, dances, reads, draws, watches movies and Anime, role plays online, or engages in other activities that unleash her creativity. Writing is something that Jennivie has always been passionate about and she used it to cope with problems she faced over the course of her life. Her summers as a youth were spent perusing library shelves and reading some of the works that influence her writing today. In recent years, her biggest achievements have been finishing the Nanowrimo.org challenge to write a novel in a month (two years running), committing to writing something every single day, getting published in a few anthologies, and recently being featured for a day on her favorite blog, [My Home Away from Home](#).

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PLAYING WITH SHADOWS

by Sasha L. Miller

Photo Description



Boy holding an apple, button-down shirt pushed off the shoulders, boxers showing above low-slung, belted, dark-colored jeans.

Request Letter



Dear Author,

He was told that everything happened for a reason, that there were things out there that watched your every move. He just never thought that the people telling him this were telling the truth. Until he happened to glimpse something out of the corner of his eye, something that he couldn't explain.

And now there are things in the shadows, things that want him. And he's not sure if he can hold out any longer. If only he hadn't picked up that apple on that fateful day, then the ones in the shadows would not have noticed his presence.

Sincerely,

Tori

General Information



genre: fantasy

tags: adventure; sweet (no sex); magic users; priest/cleric; corrupted priests/clerics; potential sacrifice

word count: 20,674

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PLAYING WITH SHADOWS

by Sasha L. Miller

EIGHT MONTHS left. Corin turned to lie on his stomach, burying his face in the straw pillow. It smelled stale, exactly like it had when he'd first arrived at the monastery. The pallet he was trying to sleep on was thinner, letting the cold of the stone beneath it leach up through the thin layer of blanket and straw.

It wasn't supposed to be pleasant, Corin reminded himself. The year's service was supposed to teach humility and respect for the priests, not be a pleasant vacation from home. The only things it had taught Corin so far were that he hated being cold and hated being hungry and he hated all of the priests.

Well, most of the priests. He couldn't bring himself to hate Rafferty, even if Rafferty was the one who'd dragged him to the monastery. He'd hated Rafferty to begin with—and easily. Corin's village was usually skipped when the priests made their yearly rounds to check to make sure the villages surrounding the monastery were sending in their young men and women.

It didn't matter that Corin's father was dead three years, leaving his mother and four sisters dependent on him working to survive. He didn't know how they were doing without him, and it made him angry all over again to think of it. He should have been there, not here. He should have been working for them, not for a bunch of stupid priests who thought they were god's gift to the world.

Flipping again, Corin laid flat on his back, staring up into the dark of the tiny room. He could hear the two men he shared with; Alan was breathing even and steady, fast asleep, and Mavir was snorting quietly in his sleep. If he were home and unable to sleep, Corin would go for a walk until his mind shut off. Unfortunately, it was forbidden to walk the monastery after dark, so he was stuck here, listening to Alan and Mavir sleep and listening to his own thoughts until they drove him mad.

Scowling, Corin tugged the thin blanket up over his shoulder, hoping to regain some of the warmth he'd lost in his tossing and turning. It was an

exercise in futility; there was no getting warm, not unless he tried crawling in with Mavir or Alan, and he doubted they'd be happy with that. They never seemed cold, despite having the same thin pallet and blankets that Corin did.

It didn't matter, Corin told himself, finally giving up. Sitting up, he pulled the blanket around his shoulders and shuffled back to lean against the wall behind him. The room was oppressively dark with absolutely no light to see by. They weren't allowed candles on the grounds it would encourage them to be up during the night. Add to that the lack of windows in their room—it was tucked inside the monastery, far from any exterior walls—and Corin couldn't see anything at all.

A shiver crept down his spine, and Corin shifted uneasily. It was only the cold, Corin told himself, pulling the blanket tighter around his shoulders. The room seemed warmer, but that was only because he was no longer lying on the stone. Despite those assurances, Corin sat as still as he could until the feeling passed, slipping away as quickly as it came and leaving him feeling colder than ever.

He really needed to start sleeping more, Corin decided, but he made no move to lie back down. Staring into the darkness, Corin debated breaking the rules and leaving. He wasn't sure he could make it to the door without tripping, though; the stones were uneven and hard to navigate in the daytime, let alone when he couldn't see a damn thing. There would be no leaving if he woke Alan or Mavir.

Corin didn't really want to venture into the monastery in any case. It was a spooky place when he was allowed to walk about; he couldn't imagine it would be any better in the dark of night. He was better off staying there, pretending to sleep and thinking too much. He wanted to go home. He missed his family, everything from his mother's scolding when he did something she considered stupid to Elisa's fretting about what ribbon to put in her hair to attract the attention of the baker's boy.

Shifting against the wall, Corin tried to distract himself. His thoughts immediately slipped to Rafferty. He didn't often see Rafferty since he was one of the priests who was sent out often on one errand or another. He saw him enough to know that the other priests didn't seem to like Rafferty much,

though Corin hadn't figured out why. Rafferty did everything the rest of the priests did, didn't seem to slack in his duties.

He was nicer to them and maybe that was why the other priests didn't care for him? He never seemed mean or to take joy in ordering Corin or the other servants to do some arduous task that didn't really need doing. Honestly, who needed to scrub all of the walls on a weekly basis? Stone walls, at that. Rafferty only ever asked them to do normal things, like scrubbing floors that were actually dirty.

If Corin were being honest, it wasn't any of that which had changed his mind on Rafferty. It had been the day he'd been up on the roof. One of the other priests had ordered Corin to the roof to sweep away stray leaves and dirt for some sort of ceremony they were doing. Corin had had the roof half done, going nice and slow to enjoy the sunlight for the first time since he'd been dragged to the monastery when he'd seen Rafferty.

Rafferty had been standing at the top of one of the towers, his priesthood cloak discarded. He was wearing a white shirt that billowed gently in the wind, and he'd been staring out across the kingdom, a melancholy look on his face. He'd looked so sad and lonely up there, all alone, and Corin had made the mistake of letting it get to him. Rafferty hadn't seen him, and Corin had hastily gotten back to work. When he'd finished, Rafferty was gone, but Corin hadn't been able to look at him the same way since.

He should hate Rafferty, he really should, but Corin didn't. He looked as lonely and alone as Corin felt, trapped in the monastery with no way to leave. Corin would be arrested if he left before the year was up, and then he'd never see his family again. Rafferty ... Corin didn't know much about the priesthood, but he expected it wasn't easy to walk away from. At least Corin would get to leave after a year; Rafferty would be stuck there forever.

Yawning, Corin shifted, sliding down the wall without relinquishing his hold on the blanket. He let his head touch the pillow and then shut his eyes again, hoping to fall asleep before he worked his head into further circles.

Eight months left. He could do this.

CORIN GROANED but obediently pushed himself upright as light flooded through his tiny room. Alan was out the door before Corin could do more than blink and yawn, and Mavir followed slowly, not giving Corin a second glance. Corin ignored them in kind, dragging himself off the pallet and to his feet. It felt like he hadn't slept a wink, but Corin made himself move anyway. He'd feel more awake after breakfast. Hopefully.

The dining hall was packed with servants. Breakfast was cold leftovers from the previous night since no one was allowed to be up before the sun. Thankfully, there was plenty of hot tea since that didn't take much to make. It was cheap tea, weak and watery, but better than nothing. Corin helped himself to a cup of tea and a hunk of stale bread and then found himself a seat, waiting for the priest in charge of them to come with the day's assignments.

Hopefully, it would be something easy, Corin thought, slumping in his chair tiredly. He doubted he'd be that lucky, however. He never was. Corin had finished his breakfast and was drinking his second cup of tea when two priests entered the room. The low chatter from the rest of the servants immediately died down, and Corin tried not to stare. Neither of the two priests were the man who usually directed them. Corin immediately recognized Rafferty, but he didn't know the name of the other priest, only that he was one of the higher-ranking priests who barely deigned to acknowledge Corin and his peers existed.

"If I call your name, please come with us," Rafferty said, his voice carrying across the quiet room. He listed off five names, none of which Corin recognized. Corin watched, curious, as the five stood, setting aside cups and leaving the room behind Rafferty and the other priest. That was highly unusual, but Corin supposed they probably had some special project that those people were best to work on.

The dining hall filled with chatter again, and Corin ignored it, partly because he was tired and not feeling particularly friendly and partly because the main topic of conversation was a discussion on whether so-and-so had actually seen the shadows move and whether the stories the priests told about the demon shadows were at all true.

It was a load of crock in Corin's opinion. It wasn't a popular opinion, as

he'd found out his second day there when he'd made the mistake of laughing at Karli, who was adamant she'd seen the shadows moving in odd ways one evening. A few others had come forward with stories about the shadows, but Corin hadn't believed them any more than he'd believed Karli. It was stupid, the idea of shadows coming to life.

The priests hadn't helped. Their weekly sermons tended to focus on nebulous demons ready to snatch the souls of any servant who was tempted to disobey the priests. They harped on fate and doing one's duties, and Corin was sick of it. Unfortunately, most of his peers were sucked in, and Corin's continued derision had alienated them thoroughly.

It didn't make any sense. If it were true that demons lurked in the shadows, wouldn't everyone see them, not only Karli and a few others? Corin didn't trust a word the priests said, either. They were more interested in keeping themselves happy and well-pampered and were more than willing to use the idea of "demons in the shadows" to keep the servants doing what they were told.

Corin finished his tea and resisted the urge to rest his head on the table in front of him. He might not be able to get up again if he did that. The priest who normally handed out duties arrived then, keeping Corin from giving in anyway.

He ended up assigned to kitchen duties, which wasn't terrible. The cook kept a pot of tea on at all times for everyone simply because there was so much running around involved in kitchen work. Corin ended up on dish duty, which kept him in one place and didn't take half as much energy as fetching would have. Corin wasn't sure he could have spent the day running back and forth getting firewood and water.

Corin was still exhausted by the time they broke for dinner. His hands were long wrinkled, numb from both the cold water and the constant use. The priests ate an hour before the servants, and the servants ate after, before being immediately ushered off to their rooms for the evening. Corin sat down heavily in the dining hall, ignoring the way he was ignored. He started eating slowly, noting that the five who'd been selected that morning were back.

"No, nothing special," the young man closest to Corin was saying to Karli.

“We had to clean a library with them breathing down our necks. I swear, they made each of us clean off the desk since none of us could do it right or something.”

Corin rolled his eyes, not surprised by that. He stopped paying attention then, more inclined to eat than to listen to the stupid conversations around him. After dinner, the priests escorted them back to their rooms, and Corin wasted no time in stretching out on his bedding, falling asleep quickly despite the cold discomfort of the thin pallet.

He woke up thrashing at some point later, his heart racing and fear thrumming in his veins. A nightmare, Corin realized after a moment, his breathing loud and ragged in the quiet of the room. He hadn't woken Alan or Mavir, judging by their breathing. Corin took a few deep breaths, trying to remember the dream, but to no avail. The room was too warm again, and Corin stilled, feeling completely unsettled as he stared towards the ceiling.

There was nothing in the room, Corin thought. It was a by-product of his nightmare. Alan and Mavir were the only company he had, sleeping quietly nearby. Forcing himself to move, Corin flipped, letting a gust of cool air under his blanket. Lying flat on his stomach, Corin buried his face in his stale-smelling pillow and tried to go back to sleep. The uneasiness slipped away after a few moments, and Corin fell back asleep, determinedly thinking about nothing at all.

CORIN PAUSED in the act of lifting his cup of tea to his mouth, staring when Rafferty and the other priest appeared at the door to the dining hall again. This was the third day they'd shown, selecting five of them to go clean a library. It was the same library each day, and none of the gossip Corin had overheard made it make any more sense.

Probably the priests were being finicky, Corin thought as Rafferty listed out names again. Corin didn't breathe again until Rafferty listed the last name. He wasn't picked, which was a good thing. He wasn't looking forward to whatever scrutiny the priests were putting them under—

Corin's thoughts stumbled to a halt when Rafferty looked right at him, a

pensive look furrowing his brow. He turned away in the next second, and Corin stared after him, wondering what that was about. Rafferty hadn't given him a spare look since he'd dropped Corin off at the monastery. Setting down his cup of tea, Corin tried not to worry. Rafferty probably didn't remember Corin and couldn't place why Corin looked familiar. There was no other reason for Rafferty to be giving him such a strange look.

He didn't get a chance to think about it any further as the normal priest came in then and started handing out assignments. Corin was assigned with a handful of others to cleaning the great hall where the priests held their sermons each week. Corin ended up scrubbing the dais where the head priest stood and lectured.

It wasn't a difficult job. The dais was made of smooth, polished wood that required very little in the way of actual scrubbing. He took his time doing it, not eager to move onto the stone portions of the floor. The dais was large, covering as much floor as the tiny room he slept in. A podium, carved out of dark gray stone, was set directly in the center of the dais. There were cubbies on the side facing away from the audience area of the room, Corin noted. They were empty, but dusty, as though they hadn't been cleaned or used in a while.

A semi-circle of tall candelabras stood behind the podium. They'd be lit during the ceremony that opened the sermon, and the candles were left to burn afterwards. The wall behind the dais was decorated with tapestries that depicted famous scenes from the priests' teachings: lightning striking out against dark clouds, a man standing tall against a shadowy monster, light wreathing a man dressed in priests' robes.

Sliding his bucket along the dais towards the nearest candelabra, Corin started washing it. He glanced back over the hall, unsurprised to see the rest of his group working as slowly as he was. They were chatting though, and Corin stifled another wave of homesickness. He wanted someone to talk to, but no one here would give him the time of day. He deserved that, he supposed, for being so dismissive of Karli.

Eight months. That wasn't too long, right? So why did it feel like he was never going to leave? Corin rolled his eyes at himself— that was about as dramatic as Karli and her shadows. Corin turned to focus his attention on the

candelabra again, only to have his eye caught by a flash of red. An apple, bright and ripe, sat on the edge of one of the cubbies of the podium.

Corin swore it hadn't been there before. He'd looked in the podium—it had been all dust and nothing else. Corin glanced back out into the sermon hall, but no one was close enough to have snuck up and put it there without his noticing. He wasn't concentrating that much on cleaning. Looking back at the podium, Corin frowned pensively at the apple. His stomach flipped uneasily, and he turned back to the candelabra, focusing on running his rag through the grooves and designs decorating it.

There was something wrong, Corin decided, but he didn't know what, and he didn't know what to do about it. He wasn't touching that apple, though. Nothing good could come of that. Corin turned and glanced at the podium again. The apple was still there, sitting innocuously at the edge of the shelf. He'd leave the podium to last, Corin decided, and then wash around the apple if he had to.

Maybe it had been there before? How much attention had he really been paying to the podium earlier? Maybe he'd looked at the bottom shelf and decided the top shelf was empty as well? Corin glanced at the podium again—the apple wasn't on the edge of the shelf like he'd thought, but six inches back, shadowed by the sides of the podium.

He was being as bad as Karli's dramatics again, Corin thought, rising to his knees to reach higher on the candelabra he was cleaning. The apple was probably some priest's breakfast snack. Except apples weren't in season, Corin's traitorous mind told him. How would a perfectly ripe apple exist this far away from fall? Corin's stomach flipped again, and a chill raced down his spine. He stared resolutely at the candelabra, refusing to give into the urge to check if the apple was still there.

The sound of footsteps on the dais brought Corin's head around, and he stared at Rafferty for a moment before turning to check the podium. The cubbies were completely empty again, and Corin's stomach settled, the uneasiness disappearing as suddenly as it had come. What in the world was going on?

"Come with me, please," Rafferty said, breaking into Corin's thoughts. He

looked grim, and Corin wondered if he'd done something wrong. He'd been doing what he was told, cleaning the dais. Scrambling to his feet, Corin dropped his rag into his bucket and obediently headed after Rafferty, his mind racing.

The apple had been there. He knew it had been there, even if it hadn't been there when he'd started cleaning the dais. Running a hand through his hair in agitation, Corin didn't pay any attention as Rafferty led him out of the sermon hall. Maybe he had been seeing things. It wasn't as though he'd been sleeping well lately. There was every chance that his lack of sleep was playing games in his head.

Rafferty stopped suddenly, and Corin barely stopped himself before he ran into Rafferty's back. Rafferty pulled out a key and unlocked the door in front of him and then pushed the door open. He stepped inside, holding the door for Corin. He shut the door firmly, and Corin clearly heard the lock slide home, leaving him once more feeling unsettled.

That feeling didn't abate as Rafferty started chanting softly, rhythmically, and Corin took a few steps further into the room, away from Rafferty, as though that would do him any good if Rafferty were about to kill him or do something dire to him. Rafferty didn't look particularly murderous, Corin admitted, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched Rafferty chant at the door.

Rafferty was handsome, Corin admitted to himself. He had bright, golden blond hair that was tied back at the nape of his neck. His eyes were hazel, bright and sharp as he chanted. He had a strong chin and high cheekbones, and Corin was staring. Turning away, Corin stared at the room, trying to distract himself. Nothing about this felt right—from the apple to Rafferty's chanting at the door.

The room was small and smelled of soap and dust. It had two large windows overlooking the fields below. A small writing desk was set against one wall with a matching chair. A shabby blue rug marked a circle across the stone floor. Other than that, the room was empty, sparse and quiet.

When Rafferty stopped chanting, Corin turned back towards the door where Rafferty stood. He looked pensive again, not happy, and Corin crossed

his arms, waiting for whatever bad news Rafferty had. It was obvious he had something to say to Corin, and it wasn't going to be happy, judging from the expression on his face.

"Have a seat, please," Rafferty said quietly. He gestured towards the chair by the writing desk, and Corin obediently crossed the room, sitting down. His stomach sank. He wasn't allowed to contact home, but what if something had happened to his mother or one of his sisters? Surely they'd tell him that, and what else would Rafferty pull him away from everyone else to tell him? The chanting was still strange, though.

"I need your help," Rafferty said, his voice still quiet as he walked over to the windows. He touched a finger to one of the panes of glass and started chanting again. The windows turned darker, as though they had a sheer black curtain covering them. Corin stared, but he wasn't seeing things. The windows were definitely darker, as was the room.

Rafferty turned, and his eyes seemed too bright for the dimness of the room. He stared at Corin for a moment, as though expecting Corin to say something, but Corin stayed quiet. Rafferty had definitely turned the windows darker, but that was unnatural. How had he done that? Was it related to the apple? Was Corin asleep and dreaming?

"Do you know why you're here?" Rafferty asked. Corin couldn't read his expression, shaded as he was in the darkened room.

"To learn humility and respect," Corin recited, obediently repeating the words that were drilled into them every week. "To serve the priests. You."

"No," Rafferty said, shaking his head. His too-bright eyes were pinned to Corin, and Corin fought the urge to squirm under the weight of Rafferty's gaze. "You've noticed the shadows."

"The shadows?" Corin repeated, unable to keep the skepticism from his voice. "There are shadows everywhere."

"Don't be an idiot," Rafferty said, scowling at Corin. "You're too strong not to have noticed."

"Strong?" Corin repeated, wondering if Rafferty was feeling all right. Perhaps he'd fallen ill and was hallucinating, dragging Corin into his strange visions?

“Strong.” Rafferty sighed, the pensive look slipping over his face. “Everyone has some measure of spirit energy; you have a great deal of it, more than some of our highest priests. Priests are taught to shield against the shadows, like I did there,” Rafferty gestured towards the door, “but since you don’t know how, the shadows will have been following you, trying to get close to you.”

“You mean the demons in the shadows?” Corin asked, furrowing his brow. Maybe the priests had learned he was skeptical of that line and were trying to scare him into believing? Rafferty, with whatever he had done to the windows and door, could probably try to fool him with his tricks. The apple, too, maybe?

“Yes,” Rafferty said. “You don’t believe a word I’m saying.”

Corin hesitated and then shrugged. He was pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to say that.

“They’re real,” Rafferty said quietly, his eyes sliding half-shut. He looked eerie, his face mostly shadowed and his eyes still glowing slightly. He continued quietly, his voice a raspy whisper in the quiet of the little room. “They’re very real, and they want to be free of the shadows.”

Corin shifted in his seat uneasily then stood, crossing over to the window still draped in darkness. Rafferty watched him, not saying anything as Corin approached the window. Corin touched the glass, surprised to find it felt normal despite the dark tint to it. “What is this?”

“No one can see in,” Rafferty said. “It blocks anyone on the other side from seeing into the room.”

“Wouldn’t that attract attention?” Corin asked. He’d be curious if he looked at a window and saw darkness where it wasn’t supposed to be.

“The room looks normal from the outside; they can’t see us, is all,” Rafferty clarified, his eyes opening fully again. They were glowing, Corin noted, and he swallowed hard, wondering what that meant.

“You don’t want anyone to know we’re talking?” Corin guessed because he couldn’t think of any other reason for Rafferty to block the windows. He’d probably done something similar to the door if that was the case.

“No,” Rafferty said. “If they knew I was speaking with you...” Rafferty

trailed off, frowning. “But you don’t believe me, so why would you believe...”

“Believe what?” Corin asked, not liking the ambiguity of Rafferty’s statement. It sounded like there would be bad consequences if they were caught talking, but Rafferty hadn’t said anything that Corin would consider worthy of punishment.

“They’re going to kill you,” Rafferty said, his tone completely matter-of-fact. Corin stared at him, wondering if he’d misheard. “I need your help to stop it.”

“What? Why?” Corin asked, his brow furrowing. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It happens every year,” Rafferty said. He turned to face Corin squarely, holding out his hand. “The demons are bound to do no harm and to stay in the shadows, but the binding needs to be renewed every year.”

“How do they renew the binding?” Corin asked, suddenly sure he didn’t want to know the answer to that, but he couldn’t keep from asking.

“It takes spirit energy,” Rafferty said, and Corin connected the dots.

“Which I have a lot of,” Corin said, feeling light-headed all of a sudden. “But—if it’s done every year, why hasn’t anyone noticed? Everyone here is a gossip; they wouldn’t keep it a secret.”

“No one but the priests know,” Rafferty said, stepping forward and grabbing one of Corin’s hands. Corin stepped back, trying to tug his hand free, but Rafferty didn’t let him. “Stop.” Corin stopped, uncertain, and that uneasy feeling washed over him again. “Can you feel that?”

Corin hesitated, but nodded, startled when the uneasy feeling morphed into something warm and hot snaking across his skin and straight to his cock. Ripping his hand away, Corin took a step back, hoping the darkness of the room hid the way his cheeks were turning red.

“What was that?” Corin asked, the words tumbling from his lips unbidden.

“Um,” Rafferty said, shaking his head as though to clear it. “Energy. I didn’t— It wasn’t supposed to do that.”

“Right,” Corin said, crossing his arms and making a note to never touch Rafferty again. Casting about for a change of subject, Corin asked, “How does

no one know?”

“They drug the wine at dinner,” Rafferty said. “Make sure everyone sleeps through it. In the morning, when someone’s missing, they declare they’ve run off and set the authorities to find them. There are always one or two runaways a year, and no one thinks anything of it.”

“But...” Corin protested weakly because that made a certain amount of sense. “What happens if they don’t...” Corin trailed off, not able to say ‘kill me.’ It still seemed so fantastic and out of the realm of reality. Rafferty was deadly serious, though, and there had been that moment— Corin flushed again, trying to figure out what he was missing, where the joke was, what Rafferty really wanted.

“The demons will break free of the shadows,” Rafferty said. Corin gave him an incredulous look— how was that better than Corin’s dying? Not that Corin wanted to die, but letting demons loose was better how? “There’s another way.”

“What?” Corin asked, not sure he wanted to know. Nothing Rafferty had said so far had been good news, so who knew what he’d suggest as an alternative to Corin’s dying— if he was even telling the truth about that, which Corin still had doubts about.

“There are spells that can be cast instead,” Rafferty said, glancing at the windows and touching the darkened panes. “Like this, except they serve the same purpose as spilling your energy.”

“Why isn’t that done instead, then?” Corin asked, frowning.

“It takes more energy and more effort,” Rafferty said. He didn’t say anything more than that, but he didn’t have to. Corin had seen the priests in action. None of them seemed the type to expend more effort than they had to. But to go so far as to kill people instead of spell casting? “They’ve also been doing it this way for almost a century and aren’t willing to even try anything else.” There was frustration in Rafferty’s voice, and Corin bet he’d tried and failed to convince the other priests to try it his way.

“You need my help because I’ve got the energy to cast the spell?” Corin asked. He really should doubt this whole tale, but why would Rafferty lie to him? What did he have to gain from that? Corin hadn’t been imagining the

sensation when Rafferty had touched him and done whatever he'd done with his energy.

"Between you and me, we have the energy to cast the spell," Rafferty said, his face relaxing somewhat. "So you believe me now?"

Corin shrugged, looking away. "Weird things have happened. Demons in the shadows are as good an explanation as any."

"Weird things?" Rafferty asked, stepping closer. "Like what?"

"Um." Corin hesitated, but if anyone was going to believe it, it would be Rafferty. "I get these weird feelings sometimes, like when you first..." Corin held out his hand, not sure how to describe what Rafferty had done.

"When I first pulled your spirit energy out?" Rafferty finished for him, and that sounded incredibly creepy.

Corin nodded and made himself continue, ignoring the rest of the feelings Rafferty had instigated when he'd pulled Corin's spirit energy out. "Then there was the apple."

"Apple?" Rafferty asked intently, and Corin only barely kept himself from taking a step back at the intensity of Rafferty's stare.

"Right before you showed up in the sermon hall," Corin said slowly, not sure he should have been explaining how much he was possibly hallucinating. "It just appeared under the podium. I was sure there wasn't anything there. Then it moved back on the shelf, and when you showed up, it disappeared."

Rafferty didn't say anything, looking pensive again, and Corin decided he shouldn't have said anything about the apple. He probably sounded crazy, and how would demons in the shadows make an apple appear and move and disappear?

"I was probably imagining it," Corin said hastily. He didn't know what to think anymore. Was he crazy? Was Rafferty? He'd been dead set against the idea of shadow demons earlier that morning. Why was he now acting as if they were real?

"The priests conduct a test when the barrier against the shadows starts to fail to gauge the strength of the spirit energy of each person in the building," Rafferty said, and Corin stared at him uncertainly, not sure what that had to do with Corin's backtracking. "We pick five or so people and have them each

pick up a magical talisman.”

“Is that what you’ve been picking people for at breakfast?” Corin asked, connecting the dots.

Rafferty nodded, stepping away from the window and towards the door. Corin watched him uncertainly, but Rafferty turned after a few paces and headed back towards the window. He didn’t look happy, and Corin shifted in place, wishing he were back in the sermon hall cleaning candelabras. Well, perhaps not there, since the strange incident with the apple had happened there. The room he slept in wasn’t safe, either— that was where the strange feeling happened. Was there anywhere Corin would be safe?

“You’ve probably heard about it; that everyone is made to clean a certain desk in the room,” Rafferty said, breaking into Corin’s dismal thoughts. “The talisman is on the desk. It’s obscured, in the shape of an apple.”

“You think it’s related?” Corin asked, immediately feeling stupid for asking that. Of course Rafferty thought it was related. Why else would he have brought it up?

“The barrier must be failing more quickly than I thought,” Rafferty said quietly. He stopped pacing, coming to a stop by the window. Corin wasn’t sure if he was supposed to have heard that. Rafferty didn’t seem to expect an answer, staring out the darkened window as though all the answers were hidden somewhere in the landscape.

“What does that mean?” Corin asked, wiping his sweaty palms on the front of his trousers.

“They shouldn’t be able to move objects or manifest them, whichever it was. The barrier is weaker than I realized, which means we don’t have a lot of time,” Rafferty said, his brow furrowing in thought.

“So we have to... do the spell thing sooner?” Corin asked.

“It takes a few days to prepare for the ceremony,” Rafferty said. Corin jumped when Rafferty suddenly slammed his fist against the window pane. “Dammit!”

“What?” Corin asked, taking another step back. He nearly tripped over the writing chair behind him, barely managing to right himself before he fell.

“If Tennyson notices the barrier is failing, he’ll step up the testing,”

Rafferty said. “I’ve been keeping you out of the selection since you’re strong enough that they’ll stop looking, but if he steps up the testing, they’ll find you much more quickly.”

“Tennyson?” Corin asked, not placing the name. It was easier to focus on that instead of his impending death. If Rafferty was telling the truth and not spinning some elaborate lie. What would he gain from that, however? Rafferty didn’t strike him as deceitful, but what if he was an excellent actor?

“The head priest,” Rafferty clarified. “I’ll figure it out, don’t worry.”

Corin scowled because the way Rafferty said that, it sounded as if he was completely dismissing Corin, as though Corin couldn’t handle it. “What happens if I don’t trust you to handle it? I could run off for real.”

“Then they’ll kill someone else in your place,” Rafferty said flatly, scowling at him. “And next year, when your sister comes for her turn serving here, they’ll pick her. She’s almost as strong as you are.”

Moori was two years younger than he was. Rafferty wasn’t lying when he said she’d be required to serve the following year. So if he didn’t go along with Rafferty’s plan, the other priests would kill him. If he ran off, they’d kill someone else, and either way, Moori would die the following year. Clenching his fists, Corin glared at Rafferty. “Fine.”

“I didn’t mean—” Rafferty started, stepping towards Corin.

“Don’t you have preparations to be making?” Corin asked caustically, wondering if he could make a dramatic exit or if whatever Rafferty had done to the door would prevent him from leaving.

“Right,” Rafferty muttered. He gave Corin a look like he wanted to say something else, but in the end, he only turned away, stepping up to the window and touching it. The darkness slid away from the glass at Rafferty’s touch, dissipating in the air. Corin blinked at the sudden brightness.

Rafferty turned sharply on his heel, striding across the small room to the door. He paused with his hand on the knob, looking over his shoulder at Corin. “Don’t touch the apple.”

Corin nodded, vaguely unsettled, and then Rafferty was gone, opening the door and stepping into the hallway. Corin stared after him, his mind buzzing. Nothing made sense, and he had the feeling that it was only going to get

worse.

CORIN DIDN'T sleep well again that night, too keyed up with thoughts of his impending doom. It also didn't help that at some point around dinner, he'd realized that Rafferty had pulled his spirit energy out—like the demons did, at night, when no one else was awake. He'd spent a few hours fretting about whether they could drain him completely before finally falling into a fitful sleep.

He wasn't sure whether the demons had shown up; his dreams had been too chaotic for him to tell whether he was dreaming or awake the entire night. It certainly felt like he hadn't slept a wink, and even Alan had commented on how terrible Corin looked.

Corin made himself eat another spoonful of the tasteless porridge that was being served for breakfast. He wasn't particularly hungry, but he wasn't stupid enough to think skipping a meal would do anything other than make him feel worse. He glanced towards the door to the dining hall again, wondering when Rafferty would show with the head priest to pull more of them out.

He wouldn't be able to talk to Rafferty, not with another priest around, and Corin definitely didn't want to draw any attention to himself. Drawing attention to himself might cause another priest to see whatever it was that Rafferty saw that made him realize Corin had a lot of spirit energy.

If Rafferty wasn't leading him on, that was. Corin had no idea what to believe. Rafferty seemed sincere, seemed like he was telling the truth about the sacrifice. What if it wasn't true? What if he was working with the demons instead, trying to break them free? What if he wanted Corin's energy for his own purposes instead of to block the demons?

Corin didn't know, and he didn't know how to figure out if Rafferty was lying or not. If he went to another priest and Rafferty had been telling the truth, then Corin would probably be killed sooner rather than later. If he didn't, and Rafferty had been lying... Well, who knew what would happen then. Besides Rafferty, that was.

As though summoned by his thoughts, Rafferty chose that moment to

appear in the doorway. Corin hastily jerked his gaze away, back to his bowl of porridge and cup of tea. His cheeks had to be red, and Corin hoped no one noticed because he didn't have an explanation for that.

Rafferty listed off seven names— Corin's omitted, as he'd promised. Corin frowned, wondering why they'd picked more people that day. Corin glanced at the doorway again, somewhat startled to meet Rafferty's gaze. He looked as tired as Corin felt; his face was cheerless and listless. Even his robe was mussed and wrinkled, as though he'd slept in it and had only just woken.

Looking away, Corin forced himself to eat more quickly. If Rafferty and the high priest— Tennyson, Corin recalled from his conversation with Rafferty the previous day— were there, then it wouldn't be long before the priest in charge of them came to hand out assignments.

Corin ended up assigned to clearing off the roof again. The priest who ordered him up there didn't say what for, as he had last time, but why else would he be cleaning the roof if not for a ceremony? At least the task left him unsupervised and alone, which would let him take it nice and slow and maybe even catch a nap in a sunlit corner. It wouldn't be particularly comfortable considering the roof wasn't especially padded, but it was better than nothing.

The roof was accessible from four points throughout the monastery. A narrow set of stairs wound upwards through the monastery to each access. Corin climbed up slowly, taking his time and trying not to speculate what kind of ceremony the priests would be conducting on the roof within the next few days. It was an exercise in futility, especially as his mind had already decided that it was going to be the ceremony where he'd be sacrificed to beat back the demons.

What would they do with his body? What had they done with the bodies of previous sacrifices? Maybe they were eaten whole by the demons. Sacrifice of body and energy, perhaps. Corin shook his head, trying to dislodge the unpleasant thoughts as he reached the top of the stairs. Shoving open the door, Corin stepped outside into the sunlight.

There were clouds in the sky, scattered, white and fluffy. It was chilly, the last remnants of winter clinging to the breeze that scattered Corin's hair across his face. Shoving it out of his eyes, Corin stepped out onto the roof and pulled

the access door shut behind him. It was a strange roof— most roofs were slanted to let rain and snow slide off them instead of building up. This roof was flat, likely because it was needed for ceremony space.

It required more upkeep, but it wasn't like the priests cared since they weren't the ones sweeping away snow or leaves. There was a low wall around the edges of the roof, barely reaching up to Corin's knee. It was slotted every foot or so to give rain and melted snow someplace to go. The roof itself was made up of interlocking octagon-shaped tiles. Corin didn't understand how that worked without leaking, but he also didn't care, so long as it worked.

The roof didn't look so terrible, Corin thought, rolling his eyes. There were a few dead leaves here and there, but not so much that it warranted another sweeping. He shouldn't have been surprised. The priests were always giving them tasks that didn't actually need to be done. No wonder no one questioned that a handful of them were being made to clean the same room over and over again.

Maybe that was why they kept making Corin and the others redo tasks that hadn't yet been undone. To make it seem less strange when they tested everyone in the same way. Or maybe to keep them all busy, Corin conceded. There were more servants than the priests or monastery warranted, but letting them have a day off now and again— sermon days didn't count— wouldn't teach them humility and austerity.

Half-heartedly pushing a few leaves towards the edge of the roof with his broom, Corin paused when he caught sight of something glowing. Frowning, Corin circled around the glowing spot on the roof. One of the octagon-shaped tiles was emitting a faint green light, only barely visible when he shadowed it with the broom.

Corin swept over the tile a few times with the broom, but the tile still glowed. It didn't do anything else, and Corin stared at it, perplexed. It hadn't done that the last time he'd been up there. He was sure of that; it had been cloudy that day. A glowing tile would have stuck out like a sore thumb.

Letting the broom fall to the rooftop, Corin circled around the tile so that it was in his shadow and he could see the faint glow again. Curious, he inched closer. The tile continued to glow and continued to do nothing. Giving into his

curiosity, Corin knelt on the rooftop, keeping a very small distance between the tile and himself. Was this like Rafferty's magic when he'd turned the glass dark? Corin hesitated and then reached out and tentatively touched the glowing tile.

Nothing happened. Corin sighed, sitting back. What had he expected? For it to reach out and bite him? He desperately needed to get more sleep before he got any more stupid. Maybe he should take a nap before he started cleaning off the roof. That sounded like a good idea. The towers on each end of the monastery provided nice quiet corners out of the wind that were ideal for taking a nap.

Corin pushed himself to his feet slowly, yawning. A cloud passed over the sun, slowly blocking out the sunlight, and Corin made a face, glancing up at the sky and willing the cloud to move quickly so he could have the sun back. Looking back down at the roof, Corin froze, his eyes widening.

More than the single tile were aglow. It was one of a handful that glowed at the center of a circle of glowing tiles—a circle that Corin was standing in the middle of. Scrambling back, Corin removed himself from the circle as quickly as he could. He didn't know what the circle was for, but circles and ceremonies and demons didn't make for a good combination.

The minute he was out of the circle, the tiles all stopped glowing. Corin took a ragged breath, staring at the rooftop for a long moment. He was going crazy. Corin debated a moment and then took a step forward. The tiles slowly started to glow again, and Corin hastily took a step back.

Something else to ask Rafferty about, Corin decided, wondering when he'd get the chance. He didn't cross paths with Rafferty normally. He mostly saw Rafferty from a distance. Rafferty might seek him out, or he might not, considering the way they'd left things the previous day. No, Rafferty would probably only come to get him once everything was ready for his spell casting.

Rubbing a hand across his face, Corin eyed the broom. He'd left it in the center of the circle of glowing tiles. He was too awake to sleep now, but was he willing to venture into the circle to fetch the broom and get to work clearing the rooftop? It was that or return to the supply closet and fetch another. He'd have to sweep off that section of the roof at some point, anyway.

Corin glanced up at the sky again, noting that the cloud blocking the sun was nearly past. He'd wait until the sun came out again. If he couldn't see the glowing tiles, they weren't there, right? At least they didn't seem harmful, but Corin couldn't shake the idea that the glowing tiles were a prelude to his potential sacrifice, no matter how innocuous the glowing tiles seemed.

He cleared the roof relatively quickly then retreated to the farthest tower on the roof, even though it wasn't in the sunlight and would get cold quickly. Tucking himself into the corner where the tower met the roof, Corin closed his eyes and did his best to ignore the chill seeping through the stone behind him.

Corin woke suddenly with a fright, flailing wildly. He landed a solid blow to the shadow hovering above him, subsiding when the shadow yelped in pain. Blinking a few times to clear his vision, Corin stared wide-eyed at Rafferty. The sun was much lower in the sky, Corin noticed. He'd slept clear through the afternoon and almost into the evening, and he shuddered, wondering what would have happened if he'd been out and about after night fell.

He was getting as superstitious and paranoid as the rest of the servants, Corin thought and then remembered it was for good reason.

"Sorry," Corin mumbled as Rafferty stepped back, holding one hand to the shoulder where Corin had thumped him.

"It's fine," Rafferty said, though he still looked faintly surprised Corin had hit him. "Are you all right? You seemed to be having a nightmare."

Corin frowned, trying to remember, but the only thing he could recall was waking up and hitting Rafferty. "I don't remember."

Rafferty nodded, his brow furrowing pensively. "Come on, we need to get inside."

Corin took the hand Rafferty offered, stumbling to his feet awkwardly. He ached from sleeping sitting up. He was also very, very cold. Hunching his shoulders against the breeze— even colder now than it had been earlier— Corin snatched up the broom and followed Rafferty towards the nearest door to the monastery.

"Why are you here?" Corin asked and cringed because that sounded terrible, like he didn't want to see Rafferty. "I mean, how did you know I was up there?"

“Armin mentioned you were working on the roof, and I noticed you weren’t at dinner,” Rafferty said, his voice echoing oddly in the stairwell. “It’s not safe out at night.”

“Is it safe inside at night?” Corin asked sourly, wondering if there was any difference.

“Safer,” Rafferty said, shrugging one shoulder. The stairs were dimly lit through small windows along the stairwell, and Rafferty was only a shadowy form in front of Corin. “You missed dinner, but there’s nothing to be done about that now.”

Corin didn’t reply to that; there was nothing to say. If it was past dinner, then he needed to go to his room for the night. After sleeping all afternoon, there was no way he was going to sleep, which meant he was going to lie awake in the pitch black, listening to Alan and Mavir sleep and waiting for the demons to show up and pull out more of his energy.

“I had questions,” Corin blurted out as they reached the first landing. The stairs took a sharp turn left, and Rafferty paused, glancing down the stairs before turning to Corin.

“About...” Rafferty began but trailed off, not completing his sentence. His eyes narrowed, but not at Corin, and he abruptly started down the stairs again. “Follow me.”

Corin glanced over his shoulder, but there was nothing there. He didn’t even feel like he did when the shadows were around. Rafferty was taking the stairs much more quickly, and Corin hastened to catch up to him. About halfway down the tower, Rafferty stopped abruptly and opened a door, revealing a hallway. It was lit, unlike the lower levels where Corin’s room was. Candles were set in holders every six feet or so, supplementing the dim twilight that spilled in from the windows along one side of the hall.

“Quickly,” Rafferty said, an edge to his voice that Corin didn’t like. Rafferty walked swiftly down the hall, half a stride from outright running. Corin followed, not looking around worriedly only because he had to push himself to keep up with Rafferty.

They passed a handful of small, narrow hallways before Rafferty finally turned down one. It was narrower and darker than the main hallway. There

were candles lining the walls, but they were more widely spaced and seemed to throw less light. Rafferty didn't pause, heading down the hallway at the same fast clip. Corin's stomach flipped uneasily as they moved further into the gloomy hallway.

Rafferty didn't seem to notice, and Corin crossed his arms defensively over his chest, trying not to think about what was lurking in the shadows. Rafferty stopped suddenly, looking up and down the hallway once before lifting his hand to the door in front of him. He held his palm an inch away from the door. Corin watched, but nothing happened.

Dropping his hand, Rafferty opened the door and stepped into a dark room. Corin hesitated but then scowled at himself. He wasn't afraid of the dark, and he wasn't going to start being afraid now— even if there were things in the dark to be afraid of.

Rafferty shut the door behind him and ignited a flash of green light around the doorframe. It was the same color as the tiles on the roof had been, and Corin stepped away from the light, startled. It faded quickly, gone before Corin blinked, and Rafferty brushed by Corin into the depths of the room. Corin could hear him shuffling things around, but there wasn't enough light to see what he was doing.

The unease was gone, Corin realized, shifting his weight from one foot to another while he waited for Rafferty to do or say something. Across the room, Rafferty lit a candle. Flickering light revealed the room to be a bedroom. It was about the size of the room Corin shared, but much nicer. Instead of a pallet, there was a real bed frame. There were multiple blankets stacked on the bed, and the pillow looked like it had five times the filling that Corin's did.

A dark colored rug covered most of the floor. It was circular in shape, the color impossible to tell in the dim light from the candle. Rafferty was standing at a wide writing desk, lighting a second candle by holding it to the flame of the first. The top of the desk was covered in scraps of paper and books that were stuffed with yet more pages.

The room had a window, too, Corin saw. It was covered by a dark curtain that blocked any hint of light from outside. Not that there would be much light, Corin thought, and he tried not to worry about how he'd get to his room after

Rafferty answered his questions. He'd deal with that when he had to.

"What questions did you have?" Rafferty asked, setting the second candle back into its holder.

"How do you know I have a lot of spirit energy?" Corin asked, trying to remember what the other question was. He could ask Rafferty about the glowing tiles on the roof, but that hadn't been the question he'd thought of earlier.

"I can see it," Rafferty said, as though that made perfect sense. He stepped away from the writing desk, crossing the room to the bureau that was tucked against the bed. "Make yourself comfortable. You're going to be here a while."

Corin hesitated, then obstinately crossed the room to the bed and sat down there instead of the chair by the writing desk. It brought him closer to Rafferty, but the mattress was thick and soft, and Corin wanted the comfort. "Why can you see it?"

"This isn't the monastery where I was inducted," Rafferty said, pulling open one of middle drawers on the bureau and rooting around inside it. "I studied at a cathedral in Thoen. They taught us how to use spirit energy in more than the few ways they use it here."

"So you cast a spell to see it?" Corin interpreted. "And that's why you know the other spell to seal the demons?"

"Right," Rafferty said, straightening. He tossed something— a small bag— at Corin, and Corin reached up and caught it reflexively. "Help yourself."

Corin pulled open the drawstrings on the bag somewhat warily. He rolled his eyes at himself when he realized it was filled with small bits of dried fruit. Deciding it was better not to look a gift horse in the mouth and ask why Rafferty had food in his dresser drawers, Corin said, "Thanks."

"You'll have to spend tonight here," Rafferty said, shutting the drawer. "It's too dark to walk the hallways now."

It was warmer in Rafferty's room, Corin thought, and he wouldn't have to listen to Mavir's snores. He was still wary of Rafferty's intentions, but he doubted Rafferty would kill him before whatever it was he needed Corin's

help for.

“The demons can’t get in here, so you’ll be fine,” Rafferty continued, sitting down on the other end of the bed. “What else did you want to know?”

“How can the demons not get in here?” Corin asked, though in retrospect, that was probably obvious. Magic. It did explain why the uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach had disappeared when he’d walked through the doorway.

“It’s another spell. It takes a lot of time and energy to set, which is why it can’t be done everywhere,” Rafferty said, offering a faint smile that was barely visible in the candlelight from across the room. “If we don’t end up arrested, I can show you some of the spells. You should be able to use them with the amount of energy you have.”

“Why don’t the other priests here know the spells you do?” Corin asked, curious. “I mean, you learned in the city, but why don’t they ask you to show them? Especially the one where you can see energy. That seems like it would be a lot easier than an apple.”

“They don’t care,” Rafferty said flatly. “If they cared about casting better spells, they’d do what I suggested without me having to sneak around and do it behind their backs.”

“Oh.” That made a certain amount of sense, Corin supposed. He ate some of the dried fruit slowly, trying not to scarf it down rudely. He was hungry for the first time in a while. Maybe having the demons trapped outside the room helped his appetite?

“I’m sorry,” Rafferty said, abruptly breaking the silence. Corin froze, wondering what Rafferty was apologizing for— and if he was apologizing in advance. “About yesterday. I shouldn’t have brought your sister into it.”

“If it’s true, it’s true,” Corin said, shrugging. He snuck a glance at Rafferty, flushing when he realized Rafferty was staring at him. “I could’ve handled it better.”

“You handled it pretty well, considering everything I dumped on you,” Rafferty said, and Corin’s heart twisted at the melancholy look that stole across Rafferty’s face. “I wish I could do it without your help.”

“At least you’re asking,” Corin said, shrugging awkwardly. “They weren’t going to ask before they sacrificed me.” He ate another bit of dried fruit before

he could say anything as stupid as that.

“True enough,” Rafferty said, but his voice was hollow, as though he didn’t quite believe what he was saying. “Did you want to know anything else?”

“Um.” Corin frowned in thought, trying to remember what else he’d wanted to know that morning. “Oh, right. When I can feel the demons, that’s them pulling out my energy?”

“Yes and no,” Rafferty said, sliding down the bed closer to where Corin was sitting. “Hold out your hand.”

Corin did so with only a small amount of hesitation, his cheeks heating when he remembered what happened the last time Rafferty had taken his hand. Rafferty didn’t touch him but held his hand out over Corin’s so that there was about an inch of space separating them. He frowned in concentration, his brow furrowing, and Corin almost jumped as the uneasy, unsettled feeling flooded through him.

“Your energy reacts when there’s a demon nearby,” Rafferty said, his voice quiet and almost lyrical when he spoke. “It’s pulled to the surface, and the sensation you feel is that reaction. They’re not pulling your energy out of you, but they’re pulling it to the surface, so to speak.”

“So they can’t take it?” Corin asked, dropping his voice to match Rafferty’s.

“Not as they are now,” Rafferty said, sitting up straight and dropping his hand to his lap. “In a few more days they might be strong enough. We’ll do the binding spell before then.”

“When?” Corin asked, ignoring the way his voice wavered on the question. A few days? That didn’t sound good, and what if Rafferty underestimated? Corin didn’t really want to know what it would be like when the demons could actually take his energy instead of only attracting it.

“Tomorrow night, if I can manage it,” Rafferty said, running a hand through his hair. “The following morning, if not.”

Corin nodded, hoping that was soon enough. He set aside the bag of dried fruit, not hungry any longer. “What happens when you cast the spell? What do I have to do for it?”

Rafferty hesitated then stood. He unfastened his priest's cloak, swinging it off his shoulders and dropping it on the bed. He was wearing trousers and a thin, white shirt beneath it, and Corin swallowed hard, his mind immediately remembering the rush of heat Rafferty had kicked off with his touch the previous day.

Corin watched as Rafferty crossed the room again, turning when he reached the far wall. He knelt next to the rug, rolling it up and across the room. The floor was glowing faintly, barely visible even in the dim light of the room. It was nothing like the pattern on the roof, which seemed to have been a random selection of tiles.

The pattern on the floor of Rafferty's room was done completely in shapes. Jagged slashes, random swirls, and interconnecting lines were all contained within a thin circle that glowed more brightly than the rest of the... whatever it was.

"It's a spell circle. You'll stand on one side," Rafferty gestured to a blank spot close to the window, "and I will stand here." Rafferty hesitated then stood, dusting his hands off on the front of his trousers. "We'll both have to cut ourselves to open a path to our energy. Then I'll cast the spell, and that will be it."

"How much of a cut?" Corin asked, frowning. Rafferty held up his hand, spacing his thumb and forefinger a few inches apart.

"It won't have to be deep," Rafferty said, crossing the room to the writing desk. He skirted around the circle, taking care to not step on the lines of the circle despite how much space they took up. It stretched nearly from one side of the room to the other. Corin made himself look away, but the room was still filled with the unearthly glow. Would he ever get used to it? Then again, hopefully he wouldn't have to.

"What happens after the spell is cast?" Corin asked. "It'll have to be renewed still, right?"

Rafferty nodded, picking up one of the candles. He blew out the other, but the light in the room didn't seem to dim. "The head priest can't argue with me after I prove that the spell works. It will need to be cast each year or so, but casting the spell is better than what they do now."

Corin accepted that, wondering why it seemed like Rafferty wasn't telling him something. It all seemed logical, and Rafferty didn't seem shifty or like he was trying too hard to sell Corin a lie. He was matter-of-fact about the ceremony, about the demons, and about the priests. He was probably reading too much into it all, Corin decided. The lack of sleep, not eating well, having to suddenly reconcile that demons were real... well, it was no wonder he felt off kilter.

Rafferty set the candle down on top of the bureau, the light highlighting the melancholy look on his face. It was the same look he'd had when Corin had seen him that one time on the roof when Rafferty had been standing at the top of one of the towers. It was a sad look, more wrenching than the look Moori had worn when the miller's son had broken her heart last summer.

"Why are you sad?" Corin asked, the words coming out before he could think twice about asking such a personal question.

Rafferty stepped back, out of the immediate range of the candlelight. He didn't answer, and Corin regretted saying anything. Why would Rafferty confide in him? He'd barely been speaking to Corin for two days and only because he had to. If Corin didn't have the energy that Rafferty needed, Rafferty would have been ignoring him as he had the previous few months. That thought hurt, but Corin tried to ignore it.

"It's a long story," Rafferty said, his voice quiet. He sounded exhausted, his voice flat, as if he was tired. He skirted around the bureau, a shadowy shape in the candlelight as he moved over to the rug. He unrolled it slowly, covering the glowing spell circle again. Once he reached the other side, he paused, still kneeling on the edge of the rug.

Corin bit his lip, wishing again that he'd kept his mouth shut. Nothing good ever came from opening his mouth. He should have known that by now; it was what had gotten him in trouble at home, more often than not, and it was what had gotten him in trouble when he'd first arrived at the monastery, too.

"I grew up around here," Rafferty said, climbing to his feet. He brushed off the knees of his trousers, walking across the rug towards the bed where Corin sat. "It's a little village to the west of here, though I haven't been back in a few years."

Corin bit back his curiosity, waiting for Rafferty to continue. Why had Rafferty been sent to the city to be trained, if he was local? Maybe it was standard practice, Corin decided. It wasn't as though he was well versed in how priests were trained.

"I had a sister," Rafferty said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. He was looking at the rug, and the candle on the bureau highlighted the profile of his face. Corin curled his fingers around the edge of the bed, swallowing hard. Had. Rafferty had had a sister. "We were both tapped to come to the monastery the same year, even though I was a year younger than her.

"It was obvious from the start they wanted me as a priest. I didn't care one way or the other; it was become a priest or go back and work a farm for the rest of my life. Catria encouraged me to go with the priests. She thought I would be happier here, that I'd never have to worry about being fed if we had a bad crop year. So I did."

"What happened?" Corin asked quietly, almost dreading the answer.

"She had more spirit energy than I did. I had enough that they decided I would make a good priest, but she had enough to bind the demons," Rafferty said. His voice was hollow and he sat tensely, as though he expected Corin to scold him. "I don't know if they didn't realize she was my sister, but they told me the day after, showed me the secret, told me no one would think twice about the story about her running off."

"Oh, god," Corin breathed, wondering if the priests had really been that stupid. No wonder they'd sent Rafferty to the city. "Why did they let you live?"

"I didn't tell them," Rafferty said, his head dropping. "I pitched a fit over them killing her, but they assumed it was only because they'd killed her, not because she was my sister. I don't know how they didn't know or how they never figured it out, but it probably saved me. If they'd known... they probably would have killed me, too, and said Catria and I had run off together."

"And they won't listen to you now, either," Corin said, connecting the dots. The priests didn't like Rafferty because he was threatening how they did things— and had since the beginning. "I'm sorry."

"I'm going to fix it," Rafferty said fiercely. "I'm going to make sure they don't do it again. No one believed me when I told them what they do out here. They hide it so well, and no one in the city who is strong enough to realize what they're doing is willing to travel out here to see for themselves."

"What if they don't listen?" Corin asked, digging his fingers into the mattress. "What if they ignore you and continue to do it their way?"

"I'll make them listen," Rafferty said darkly. He sat up abruptly, glancing at Corin. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be putting you in the same position they put me."

"My sister is safe at home," Corin said, shaking his head. "It's not the same thing."

"It's blackmail. You help me, or both of you die. How is that any better?" Rafferty asked bitterly, his mouth turning down.

"You're not trying to kill me," Corin said, rolling his eyes. He knew Rafferty didn't see it. It was too dark, and Rafferty wasn't looking at him in any case. "You're trying to keep me from dying, which I do appreciate. I'm sorry I've been... hesitant."

Rafferty snorted, finally lifting his head to look at Corin. "You've had good reason."

"I'd help, even if I wouldn't die if I didn't," Corin said. He reached out and set his hand on Rafferty's shoulder, hoping to comfort or reassure Rafferty in some small way. Heat shot down his arm, unsettlingly close to the way Rafferty's touch had seared through him the previous day. Rafferty jumped, and Corin pulled his hand back, his face heating. "Why does that keep happening?"

"I don't know," Rafferty said, lifting his hand to touch his shoulder where Corin had touched him. "I've never had that happen before."

"Me neither," Corin said. He needed to keep his hands to himself so it didn't happen again. Crossing his arms, Corin stared at the rug, wondering if the ceremony would be as simple as Rafferty described. Probably. Rafferty did seem to know what he was doing, and Corin believed his story about his sister. It made sense, and Rafferty hadn't been faking his heartbreak.

"You can share the bed with me," Rafferty said abruptly, and Corin's

fading flush flared back to life. Surely Rafferty didn't mean what Corin thought he'd meant. "You can't go back to your room now, and I'm not going to make you sleep on the floor."

Corin nodded. He didn't feel tired, but Rafferty hadn't slept the afternoon away. He'd probably been working on the casting circle all day, and he'd need his rest, especially if he was going to get the spell casting done for the following evening.

Standing, Corin pulled off his boots one at a time and tucked them next to the foot of the bed so neither he nor Rafferty would trip over them in the morning. Rafferty was pulling off his boots as well; they were tall, knee-high affairs that were in much better condition than Corin's ankle boots. Corin climbed into the bed, ignoring the part of his mind that insisted on focusing on the way Rafferty's touch affected him and wondering if Rafferty's gold-blond hair was as soft as it looked and whether his mouth was as malleable—

Corin cut that thought short, tucking himself against the wall and leaving plenty of room for Rafferty to lie down without touching him. Rafferty joined him a second later, sliding under the blankets and carefully arranging them so they covered both Corin and himself. It was a little uncomfortable, tucked against the wall on a third of the bed, but it was leaps and bounds above the thin pallet in his room or the hard stone of the castle roof.

There would also be no wandering demons, Corin realized. He was sharing a comfortable bed, safe from demons and away from Mavir's snores... and he was too awake to take advantage of it. Rafferty sat up to snuff the candle and then lay back down, settling down quickly. He didn't say anything, and Corin debated briefly whether he should wish Rafferty a good night's sleep before deciding to keep quiet.

Rafferty seemed to fall asleep quickly, his breathing evening out into a slow, steady pattern. He didn't snore, which was nice, but it didn't help Corin fall asleep. He stared at the ceiling, slowly relaxing as Rafferty continued to stay still and quiet and asleep. What would happen after they bound the demons again? Somehow, Corin didn't think it was going to go the way Rafferty obviously assumed it would. The priests wouldn't take kindly to his interfering in their established ceremony again.

Would they kill him anyway? Possibly, though if Rafferty used up Corin's spirit energy in the ceremony, it wasn't as though it would do them any good. Perhaps they'd kill someone else? No, probably not. The demons would be bound; there would be no reason for them to kill anyone else to bind them. At minimum, they'd probably send Rafferty away again and make Corin's remaining months at the monastery miserable.

It would be worth it. Not only because Corin wouldn't die, though that was a decided plus. He could warn Moori and convince her to move away to somewhere they used Rafferty's method to seal the demons. He'd also be able to help Rafferty, and Corin couldn't help but think that a plus, even though it was stupid to think of it that way.

Shifting slowly, so as to not wake Rafferty, Corin rolled onto his side. The room was pitch black, like his room often was, but it was a comfortable darkness. It didn't chill him, didn't make him worry if he'd wake in the morning. It was also warmer, which probably helped with that perception.

Pillowing his head on his arm, Corin ignored the way his head was buzzing. He wasn't going to worry about the ceremony or the priests or the demons or Rafferty. It wouldn't do any good— he was still going to help Rafferty no matter the drawbacks. It was probably stupid to put all of his faith into a single person, but all the worrying in the world wasn't going to make Corin change his mind.

CORIN WAS woken up by light. It wasn't a lot of light, barely enough to paint the room in a faint glow. He was in Rafferty's room, Corin remembered, flushing when he realized that he and Rafferty were much, much closer than they had been the previous evening. Corin tended to sleep curled up, not sprawled across the bed; Rafferty seemed to do much the same. At some point during the night, however, they'd shifted together, and Corin pressed against Rafferty in a number of places.

Flushing, Corin froze, not sure what to do. Any sudden moves would wake Rafferty, for sure, and Corin didn't want to do that. He wasn't feeling that strange surge of heat that he had the last two times he'd touched Rafferty,

Corin realized. That, more than anything, was odd. Shifting slowly back, Corin rolled over on his back, putting a bare inch between himself and Rafferty despite wanting to shut his eyes and pretend he was curled up with Rafferty.

Rafferty groaned, reaching up and pulling the blankets higher over his shoulder. He managed to hit Corin's arm with his elbow in the process, and he froze, his eyes snapping open. "Oh."

Corin smothered a smile, amused by the startled expression on Rafferty's face. "Morning."

Rafferty grunted, his eyes slipping half closed. He looked like he wanted nothing more than to go back to sleep, but after a moment, he shoved the blankets away, letting cold air sneak under them. He slid out of bed, stumbling a bit but catching his balance on the bureau.

"You need to get down to the dining hall before you're missed," Rafferty said, mumbling the words tiredly. "I'll pull you out of dinner tonight to do something for me, and we can do the ceremony then."

"My roommates will already have noticed I'm gone," Corin said, sliding out of bed and moving to grab his boots. "I won't tell them I was here, though."

Rafferty nodded, watching Corin for a moment. He had a strange expression on his face, but in the next second it cleared. Corin pulled on his boots quickly, nearly tripping over his feet when he stood before the left one was fully on.

"Um, I'll see you tonight, then," Corin said, hesitating a moment. Rafferty only nodded though, turning towards his bureau with a clear dismissal. Corin lingered a moment more, then turned and left the room. The hallway was empty, thankfully, and Corin hurried down it, not really wanting to explain what he was doing in there.

The hallway was much less spooky than it had been the previous night when Rafferty had led him down it just barely before full dark. Sunlight spilled down it from the windows at the main corridor, and it was hard to remember that there were shadow demons and sacrifices and binding ceremonies in the works in the face of the bright, cheerful weather.

Corin made it downstairs without running into anyone. It was about the

time the servants were allowed to leave their rooms. They usually didn't see any of the priests until a while after that. Corin was willing to bet they were still sleeping, taking their time in waking up. He reached the dining room without incident as well. It was half-full, and no one seemed to notice when he slipped in and headed for the sidebar to grab some breakfast.

Settling in the back corner of the room, Corin started eating that morning's breakfast. It was some sort of tasteless stew, probably leftovers from the previous night's dinner, but it filled Corin's stomach well enough. He was starving, having eaten only Rafferty's dried fruit the previous evening. The dining hall filled slowly, and Corin stifled his nerves. Only Alan and Mavir had likely noticed he hadn't made it to his room, and he didn't think either of them would care enough to make a big deal out of it. They liked ignoring him; Corin liked ignoring them.

Corin fetched a second bowl of the stew when he'd finished his first and ate it more slowly while he waited for Rafferty and Tennyson to show up and select the people they were going to test that day. Alan gave him a curious look from across the room, elbowing Mavir and gesturing in Corin's direction. Mavir shrugged, apparently unconcerned, and it seemed that was that.

Stifling a sigh, Corin glanced towards the door when Rafferty and Tennyson entered. Rafferty looked deeply unhappy about something, and Corin frowned, wondering what had happened. Rafferty had been tired that morning, but not upset. Corin set down his half-empty bowl as Rafferty started listing off names. His stomach flipped worriedly, and a knot of dread settled firmly in the pit of his stomach when Rafferty spoke his name, the last of nine people selected.

Corin's blood ran cold. Rafferty had said he'd keep Corin away from the testing. Why had he been selected? Rafferty wouldn't have changed his mind, not with the plan to do the ceremony later that day. So someone else had picked him— maybe Tennyson? But why? Corin hadn't done anything suspicious, unless staying in Rafferty's room for the night was suspicious. Even then, Corin would have sworn no one had seen him leave.

Standing, Corin nearly tripped over the bench he'd been sitting on. He picked up his half-full bowl and cup of tea, heading over to the sidebar to

deposit them for collection by whomever would be assigned to dishes duty. Then he followed the eight others who had been selected from the room. Rafferty didn't look at him, but he wouldn't want to raise suspicions now.

He didn't know the names of anyone else in the group. They all looked familiar, but Corin had never been good with names. There were a lot of people who hadn't talked to him, so he'd never got a chance to learn names. The test probably didn't matter, Corin decided. They'd mark him as having a lot of spirit energy, but if their ceremony to bind the demons was anything like Rafferty's, it would take a few days to properly prepare for it.

At which point, the demons would be bound, and hopefully, they wouldn't kill Corin anyway.

Tennyson led them to a corner of the monastery where Corin had never been before. Not unusual, Corin wasn't familiar with a lot of the monastery, and one stone wall or stone hall looked a lot like another. The library was a good size, about four times the size of Rafferty's room. Books lined three of the walls, and there was a set of four desks in the center of the room. The tops of three of the desks were completely clear.

The last desk held stacks of papers, a few books, an ornate lantern, and a single, ripe apple. The apple seemed to glow softly, and the glow faded and strengthened slowly, casting a dark, dark shadow below the apple. Corin swallowed hard, fighting the urge to throw up. He forced himself to step into the room, hiding behind the rest of the servants as Tennyson turned to address them.

Rafferty frowned at the apple, and Corin hoped he could get away with not touching it. He might actually throw up then, which was a waste of a perfectly adequate breakfast. He also hoped Rafferty wasn't frowning at the apple because it was something different than what he'd told Corin. He'd only said it was a test to sort out who had the most spirit energy.

He'd also told Corin not to touch the apple. Corin glanced at it again, discomfited all over again that it seemed to be glowing with the same green color he'd seen on the roof. He blinked, and it looked like an ordinary apple again, and the urge to throw up was suddenly much less pressing.

Corin really, really wanted this to be over already. He was tired of feeling

on edge, tired of the way the demons seemed to be playing with him. The circle on the roof, the visits at night, the strange way the apple appeared in the sermon hall and now, the apple's visual fluctuation. He wanted them locked away, tucked back into the shadows where he couldn't sense them.

"I want all of these books dusted," Tennyson said, gesturing to the walls. "You, clean the desks." Tennyson pointed to a slight girl with a dark braid running halfway down her back. "There are cleaning rags in that corner."

Corin followed the rest of the group towards the cleaning rags, fishing one out of the bucket without much attention. He watched surreptitiously as the girl crossed to the desks, only belatedly heading towards a bookshelf to make himself look busy. Tennyson was watching the girl like a hawk, his gaze fixed on her every move as she wiped down the empty desks under his eye.

"You had better move everything," Tennyson said, making it sound as though there would be dire consequences if she didn't.

Corin started dusting the spines of the books in front of him, trying to make himself look busy while he watched. Rafferty was standing nearby as well, though he was staring at the floor, a thoughtful frown on his face. He was glowing slightly, Corin realized, dropping the book he was holding. He bent quickly to pick it up, wondering what Rafferty was doing.

It wasn't a green glow, Corin realized, wondering if that had any significance. The circle on Rafferty's bedroom floor hadn't been green either, unlike the apple and the circle on the roof. What did that mean? Was it just because it was Rafferty's energy? Corin shelved the book again, turning in time to see the girl pick up the apple. She wiped down the part of the desk where the apple had sat, then set it back down, apparently unaffected.

It still looked like a normal apple, Corin noted, pulling another book off the shelf to dust. It hadn't reacted at all, but would it? Corin didn't know. He shelved the book again as Tennyson started shouting at the girl that she was doing it all wrong and ordered her to swap with one of the morons dusting books. She scurried off, and a young man about Corin's age with wheat blond hair and a wide, squashed nose headed over to the desk.

Corin swallowed and stopped watching. He kept dusting, pretending nothing strange was going on while Tennyson shouted at each of them in turn

until finally only Corin was left to try and clean off the desks. Rafferty was still glowing, and Corin wondered why he could see that and no one else seemed to— especially Tennyson, since he was also a priest.

Crossing the room with no small amount of trepidation, Corin glanced at Tennyson. He was watching Corin as intently as he had everyone before Corin, but there was a bit of a smirk turning his lips that Corin didn't like. He bit his lip but started cleaning off the desk, shifting papers and books first. He left the apple for last, wiping down around it. He wanted to look at Rafferty, but there was no way Tennyson wouldn't see him do that.

He also couldn't not pick up the apple. That would be even more suspicious. Taking a deep breath, Corin reached out and wrapped his hand around the apple.

Nothing happened.

Corin almost dropped the apple in surprise, but managed to fumble into setting it down. He wiped the spot of desk under it and then looked up at Tennyson.

Tennyson wasn't looking at him anymore. He was glaring at Rafferty, who wasn't glowing any longer. Corin glanced between them and then glanced past them towards the girl who had cleaned the desk first. She shrugged, rolling her eyes before turning back to the bookcase she was working on. It was such a normal reaction that Corin almost laughed.

“Move everything to another desk and start again,” Tennyson snapped, making Corin jump and drop his rag.

Corin nodded, not willing to argue with that tone of voice. Not that he would have argued in any case; it would have been suspicious to argue with a priest, even if he was asking Corin to do something stupid like clean a desk for the twentieth time that week.

Starting with the papers and books, Corin slowly moved everything from one desk to another, creating neat stacks and arranging everything just so, before finally turning back to the desk for the apple. Nothing had happened before, so nothing should happen again, right? Rafferty wasn't glowing anymore, though, and the queasy feeling Corin had felt before had come back.

He couldn't hesitate. If he hesitated, Tennyson would find it odd, and that

could jeopardize Rafferty's plan. Corin didn't doubt that Tennyson would assume Rafferty had warned him, since he had to know Rafferty didn't approve of the sacrificing part of binding the demons.

Corin reached out and picked up the apple for the second time. He barely kept from gasping as a cold, unpleasant shock traveled up his arm. He fumbled the apple again, and it tumbled from his grasp. It rolled across the top of the desk to fall at Tennyson's feet. Corin's entire arm felt numb, and he shook it. His heart raced, and he looked up at Tennyson, unsurprised to see a look of smug satisfaction on Tennyson's face.

"Clean off the desk," Tennyson said, leaning down to pick up the apple. He didn't seem to suffer the same reaction Corin had, handling it as though it were nothing but a real apple. It was glowing faintly green again, and Corin really, really wanted to throw up and cut off his arm and be anywhere but standing in this room with Tennyson and who knew how many demons, all out for his blood.

Moving stiffly, Corin wiped down the surface of the desk, then stepped back, waiting for something more from Tennyson.

"Good enough," Tennyson said after a moment of inspection. Purely for show, Corin was sure of it. "You're all dismissed. Get back to your regular duties."

Corin hesitated before turning away from the desk and heading across the room to deposit his rag into the bucket where he'd gotten it. It tumbled from his nerveless fingers, falling in among the other rags, and Corin wanted to go find someplace to hide away, someplace bright and warm and quiet and alone. If he hadn't known about the apple, if it weren't for Rafferty, he seriously contemplate running away from the monastery, consequences be damned.

"Rafferty, a word," Tennyson said, his voice cutting through the chatter around Corin. He didn't sound happy, and Corin turned, unable not to. Rafferty was halfway to the door, and Tennyson was scowling at his back.

Corin hesitated, but there was nothing he could gain by staying, for either Rafferty or himself. Rafferty nodded sharply, turning back towards Tennyson. He caught Corin's eye as he turned, but he didn't pause, looking determined and not at all worried.

He could handle Tennyson, Corin decided, filing out of the room with the rest of the servants. Rafferty wasn't stupid; he had to know Tennyson wasn't happy, that whatever blocking he'd tried to do had been found out, that Tennyson knew Corin was the best one for a sacrifice. He'd figure something out; all Corin had to do was stay clear of it and not drink the wine.

Knowing that and feeling it were two different things, however. Corin's stomach still wouldn't settle, and he had the uncomfortable feeling that someone was watching him, even after he left the library and headed back to the main parts of the monastery. Taking a deep breath to try and dispel the sensation, Corin wished fervently that the day would pass quickly, and he could get the ceremony done with and go back to feeling normal again.

THE DAY passed unbearably slowly. Corin ended up in the kitchen again, running errands for the cook, which helped keep him busy, but not busy enough that he stopped worrying. He didn't see Rafferty, didn't hear anything about it, and nothing seemed to have changed. Corin didn't feel right, however. He felt shaky, as if he'd been sick for weeks and was only now getting better. His stomach turned every time he smelled food, and he kept dropping things and tripping over his own feet.

His arm felt fine at least, Corin thought, debating whether to skip going to the dining hall for dinner. The idea of eating anything was unpleasant, and sitting among a crowd of chattering people wasn't appealing either. He'd almost decided to head back to his room when he remembered Rafferty's instructions from that morning. Rafferty was supposed to pull him out of the hall so they could do the binding.

Stifling a sigh, Corin trudged towards the dining hall. He could find a seat by the door, Corin decided, and wait for Rafferty there. Dinner, like breakfast, was typically served with tea. Maybe a cup of that would soothe his stomach, though Corin highly doubted it. He was sure it was some sort of lingering reaction to touching the apple, and Corin didn't want to know what was in the apple that had caused it.

He did want to know how Rafferty had blocked it the first time Corin had

touched the apple. He probably shouldn't want to know anything about his spirit energy or how to use it. It was dangerous and was too closely related to the demons, but it couldn't be all bad, could it? Rafferty seemed to be using it for good, and Corin wondered what all it could do and how it worked. Maybe when everything was over with, he could ask Rafferty to teach him.

Entering the dining hall, Corin paused barely inside the doorway. The dining hall was much brighter than it usually was. There were extra candles scattered throughout the room, burning brightly. The room was warmer than usual, and everyone seemed louder as well. Corin frowned, rubbing his head. The scent of spiced meat was heavy in the air, and Corin turned to stare at the food tables.

They never got meat, not unless it was cooked to death and spread thin through a stew or soup. There were platters of meat, however, alongside fruits and vegetables, rolls, and what looked to be some sort of dessert cakes. On either end of the serving tables sat a cask of wine, and Corin's blood ran cold. They drug the wine at dinner, wasn't that what Rafferty had said? It hadn't made sense—they never got wine, only tea—but now there was wine, which meant they were planning to kill him later that night.

Where was Rafferty? Did he know? Suddenly, Tennyson pulling Rafferty back seemed much more sinister, and Corin hoped like hell that Rafferty was all right. Corin forced himself to walk over to one of the dining tables, sitting down without bothering to get anything to eat or drink. Rafferty had said the wine was spiked, but what was to keep them from spiking everything, just in case? There was no tea to be had, either, and Corin was positive he'd throw up anything he tried to eat.

The uneasy feeling snaked up his spine, and Corin rested his arms on the table, then pillowed his head on top of his arms. He had to wait, to see if Rafferty showed up. If he didn't... Corin swallowed hard, ignoring the hubbub around him. If Rafferty didn't show, Corin would have to go find him. He'd check Rafferty's room, and if Rafferty wasn't there, he'd run. He had to at least warn Moori and keep her safe.

Shutting his eyes, Corin focused on breathing, trying his best to ignore the chatter in the hall—louder than normal, likely because of the special drink and

food— and the sour, uneasy sensation in the pit of his stomach that had been with him all day. It was stronger than ever, and Corin didn't know what that meant, only that he was sure it meant nothing good.

Corin jumped, his heart leaping into his throat when someone rested a hand on his shoulder. Hope surged through him— Rafferty?— but immediately died when he turned to find a priest he didn't recognize standing behind him.

“Are you not going to eat?” The priest asked, the very picture of concern.

His touch made Corin's skin crawl in the exact same way the demons did when they visited his room at night, and Corin scrambled to stand, managing to mumble, “Sick,” before dashing from the hall. He could hear the priest behind him, and Corin stopped right outside the doors, bending over and heaving, his stomach rebelling at the very idea of the man near him.

The priest stopped behind him, making a noise of disgust as Corin threw up into the hallway. Corin ignored him, breathing hard and trying to figure out a way to get the priest to stop following him. He doubted the priest would let him walk away unsupervised, not when Corin was the star for their binding ceremony. They wouldn't want to chance him slipping away and running off, especially after Rafferty had been caught trying to help him earlier.

“Some wine will settle your stomach,” the priest said soothingly, coming closer when Corin stopped heaving.

“I think I'd rather have tea,” Corin mumbled, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He straightened slowly, not sure he was completely done throwing up, especially if the priest took it to mind to touch him again. Why was his touch so different from Rafferty's?

“All right,” the priest said, and Corin's nausea redoubled when the man's eyes glowed an unearthly green. Corin swallowed hard, covering his mouth with his hand as though that would keep him from throwing up again. The priest took a hasty step back at the warning sign, and Corin dropped his hand, breathing slowly and shallowly.

The glow abruptly disappeared, and Corin's stomach settled almost immediately. He still felt queasy, but not as though throwing up was imminent. Maybe there was a demon in the priest, Corin thought, his blood

running cold again. That was the only reason he could think of that would explain why the priest's proximity affected him and why the man glowed.

"Come, sit down," the priest coaxed, stepping back to give Corin a clear path back to the dining room. "I'll have someone bring you some tea."

Drugged tea, Corin was positive about that. He had to get away, but there was no way he'd be able to slip away from the dining hall and no way he'd be able to get out of drinking the tea. His best chance was here, Corin realized. The corridor outside the dining hall was empty of everyone except him and the priest. Everyone else was in the dining hall either enjoying the spoils or watching to make sure everyone drank the wine or something else that was drugged.

The priest was the only barrier, Corin realized, but how could he get past the man without drawing attention? Could he do something with his spirit energy like Rafferty could? Doubtful, Corin thought dismally. Rafferty had been trained to use his; Corin hadn't even known his had existed for more than a few days.

"Are you all right?" The priest asked, jolting Corin from his thoughts. He looked vaguely concerned, as though he thought Corin was going to throw up again.

Corin shook his head, taking a step back and trying to think. He had to get past the man, had to get to Rafferty's room to see if he was there. He would have been better off running away from the monastery, Corin knew, but he couldn't give up on Rafferty, not after everything Rafferty had done for him. Not after hearing how the priests had murdered Rafferty's sister.

The priest stepped in, a frown furrowing his brow. He reached out, as though he was going to touch Corin. Corin panicked, throwing a punch at the priest before he thought about it. His fist sunk into the man's nose, and Corin's stomach turned at the touch. Corin scrambled back, wide-eyed as the priest's nose started pouring blood. His hand hurt, Corin registered distantly, and he turned and ran, not wanting to see what would happen if he stayed.

He didn't hear shouting or footsteps, but Corin didn't look back to be certain, just ran as fast as he could down the corridor towards the staircase he knew would take him up. He flung himself into the stairwell and threw himself

up the stairs, taking them as quickly as he could. Not quickly enough, he felt, but he didn't feel anyone behind him.

The stairwell was shadowy and getting darker with every second. Unease crawled across every inch of Corin's skin, and he was willing to bet the darkness in the stairwell wasn't because the sun was going down. It was pitch black by the time Corin reached the floor where Rafferty's room was, and Corin desperately hoped Rafferty was there because he was sure he wasn't going back down if Rafferty wasn't.

Sprinting down the corridor towards Rafferty's room, Corin's heavy breathing was loud in his ears. It was dark here, too. Candles were lit, but much more sparsely than they had been the previous night. The candles went out as Corin ran by them, but he didn't dare pause, hoping he was remembering the corridors and rooms correctly. He turned sharply down the hallway he thought was correct, slowing as he ran out of breath.

The door to Rafferty's room was glowing, and Corin stumbled to a stop, staring wide-eyed at the green glow. Green wasn't the color of Rafferty's magic, and the marks on the door had a decidedly unpleasant aura to them. Corin glanced back, panic flaring when he saw the corridor behind him was completely, utterly dark. No candles remained lit, and there was no light visible from the windows at the end of the hall. The sun wasn't down yet; there should still have been light.

Corin grabbed the doorknob to Rafferty's room, trying it before he remembered that Rafferty locked it and the strange glow on the door had to mean something. It turned easily under his hand, though, with a shock shooting through him not unlike the one that had shot through him when he'd picked up the apple in the library. Pushing the door open, Corin all but fell into the room and then slammed the door behind him as though it would keep the demons out.

Rafferty surged to his feet from where he'd been sitting on the bed, almost tripping over the rug that he'd rolled out of the way. The pattern on the floor, glowing faintly white, was much more elaborate than it had been that morning. He all but sprinted across the room to Corin, grabbing him by the shoulders.

"Are you all right?" Rafferty demanded, and Corin shook his head, not

sure he could speak yet. His breath was still coming fast and hard, but Rafferty's touch was soothing, warm and burning away the fear and cold and queasiness that the priest's touch had inspired.

"It's tonight," Corin finally managed to say, not liking the strain in his voice, and Rafferty nodded, squeezing Corin's shoulders before letting him go. "I hit a priest and ran up here."

"I'm sorry," Rafferty said, looking away from Corin. "I would have come, but they locked me in to keep me from interfering."

"Not your fault," Corin said, running a hand through his hair and glancing at the circle on the floor. His heartbeat kicked up a notch, but it wasn't panic or fear. "Can— is it ready?"

Rafferty nodded, stepping back and letting Corin see the circle. "I'd say you don't have to—"

"It's fine," Corin said quietly, glancing at the door. "I want to. Even if they weren't going to kill me, I would."

Rafferty looked startled at that, but then he ducked his head. "I'm sorry you don't have the choice." He stepped away from Corin before Corin could reply, turning towards the door. He pressed his hand against it and began chanting slowly. The door slowly faded away, turning into more wall, until it looked as though there had never been an opening there to begin with.

"That will keep everyone out," Rafferty said, as though Corin needed that explanation. "If at any point you want me to stop—"

"Stop it," Corin snapped, fed up with Rafferty's sudden hesitation. "I'm doing this, and you don't need to coddle me about it. What are my other choices? Stop and be sacrificed? Stop and let Moori be sacrificed next year? I wasn't lying, either, when I said I'd do it even if they weren't trying to kill me tonight. No one else deserves to die."

"It might get unpleasant," Rafferty said, biting his lip briefly before looking at the circle. "I've never done this before, and I don't know what exactly will happen."

"Okay," Corin said, crossing his arms stubbornly. "Don't stop it, even if I say to."

"Are you sure?" Rafferty asked, and Corin didn't yell at him more only

because he looked so miserable asking.

“Positive,” Corin said. He didn’t have a choice, and that helped his resolve. He also trusted Rafferty. Rafferty’s touch never felt wrong or made him uneasy. The priests’ did, and their magic seemed so wrong, unlike Rafferty’s, and that had to mean something.

“Stand there,” Rafferty said, gesturing to the blank part of the circle near the window. “Walk around the glyphs until you reach that spot, then step over the line.”

Corin nodded, following Rafferty’s directions. He had only barely reached the far side of the circle when a loud thump came from the wall where the door had been. Corin jumped, startled, and nearly stepped over the circle in the wrong spot. Rafferty glanced at the wall wide-eyed, but then shook his head.

“They won’t get in,” Rafferty said, but he moved quickly, crossing the room to the writing desk. He picked up two daggers, walking over to Corin and handing him one. He crossed the room, jumping slightly when the wall thumped again, the floor reverberating with the force of the impact.

“Will it take long?” Corin asked, glancing at the wall again.

“Fifteen minutes, maybe,” Rafferty said. “Step in. When I cut my arm, I need you to cut yours. You don’t need to do anything else—and don’t step out of the circle until the light fades, all right?”

Corin nodded, stepping into the circle. A warm, pleasant rush of energy surged across his skin, erasing the last traces of uneasiness from the priest’s touch. Rafferty stepped in opposite him, and Corin watched him take a deep breath. Light flared up from the edge of the circle, reaching towards the ceiling. It glowed white, obscuring the view of Rafferty’s room outside the circle.

Rafferty started chanting then, and Corin watched him carefully, waiting for his cue. Rafferty continued chanting, speaking the words slowly and clearly, and Corin wondered what language it was. He listened carefully, curious, but none of it made any sense to him. A few moments in, Rafferty lifted his arm. His dagger shone with the glow of the circle’s light, and he drew the dagger across his palm.

Blood dripped to the circle, and the glow flared brighter. Corin took a deep

breath and dragged his dagger across his left palm as he'd seen Rafferty do. The dagger was sharper than he'd realized, and he cut more deeply than he'd intended. Corin turned his hand to let the blood fall to the circle, surprised when the circle turned a gentle, calming blue.

Rafferty continued to chant, and Corin started feeling dizzy and light-headed. He set his feet more firmly. He didn't want to screw it up by passing out. The floor shook, and for a moment Corin thought he had fallen, but everything settled in the next second. The circle's light flared even brighter, then, as Rafferty shouted a final word, abruptly died out and away.

Someone screamed nearby, and Corin fell to his knees, feeling weak and unsteady. Rafferty was on his knees across the circle, and the wall behind Rafferty, where the door had been, was completely missing. There was a priest passed out on the far side of the circle's edge, and Corin braced himself, expecting to feel the cold wash of the demons' presence.

Nothing happened, and Corin took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. His hand was still bleeding, but it was sluggish and slow and not important. Rafferty struggled to his feet slowly, wavering there a moment before stepping out of the circle. Corin thought about following suit, but he stayed where he was, not feeling any particular rush to stand.

Rafferty stepped over to where the priest was laying and knelt down, pressing a hand against the man's neck. He wasn't breathing, Corin realized. He wasn't moving at all, and Corin's stomach sank. Had they killed him? Rafferty didn't look surprised, standing after a moment and turning to Corin. He crossed the room slowly, stepping into the circle as if it didn't exist. Corin glanced down and realized it didn't actually exist anymore. The outside edge of the circle was burned into the floor, but the rest of the marks were gone.

"Here," Rafferty said, holding out a hand to Corin. Corin took it, letting Rafferty help him to his feet. Rafferty's touch didn't feel like anything for once. Corin stood still for a long moment, not letting go of Rafferty's hand, wholly because he thought he might fall over without the support.

"Is he dead?" Corin asked, and Rafferty winced, which was as much confirmation as Corin needed.

"Come on, sit down," Rafferty said, and Corin's heart sank. Rafferty had

known it would kill the man. He'd known. Why hadn't he said anything?

"Are they all dead?" Corin asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer to that. If they weren't, Corin was dead. They'd kill him in retribution, if nothing else.

"No," Rafferty said firmly, leading Corin over to the bed. Corin sat down heavily, tensing when Rafferty sat down next to him. "I wasn't entirely honest with you, and I'm sorry."

"Hah," Corin said bitterly, unable to muster enough energy for more emotion.

"I didn't have time to explain everything," Rafferty said quietly. He was sitting stiffly, tensely, as though he expected Corin to lash out at him. "It's more complicated..."

"Tell me," Corin snapped, twisting so he could stare Rafferty down. Rafferty ducked his head, his hair falling in his face. When had it come unbound? Corin shook that thought away, wishing he didn't feel so tired so he could properly yell at Rafferty.

"The shadow demons are a problem across the country," Rafferty said slowly, curling his hands together in his lap. "That's why there are so many spells to combat them. What most people don't know is that the shadow demons have to be summoned. They don't get to this world on their own. Someone has to call them."

"Why would they?" Corin asked, his eyes widening. Why would anyone subject themselves to the feeling the shadow demons caused?

"Why else? Power," Rafferty said bitterly, pushing his hair out of his face. "Most of the priests have a lot of spirit energy, like you and me. Some don't have as much, which means they can't cast as many or as powerful spells."

"So summoning the demons somehow gives them more power?" Corin interpreted, his blood running cold. That was even worse than the priests sacrificing people to keep the demons bound.

"Right," Rafferty said. "But it comes at a price."

"A price they don't pay," Corin said. How many people had the priests killed to keep their power?

"No, they pay it as well, though I don't suppose they think of it that way,"

Rafferty said quietly, gesturing to the dead man on the floor. “Demon energy slowly erodes the spirit energy of the person using it. When there’s no more spirit energy, a demon takes over.”

Corin’s blood ran cold as he remembered the way the priest’s eyes had glowed in the corridor outside the dining hall. “Oh, god.”

“The sacrifices are to keep the demons bound, in a sense,” Rafferty said, his voice hollow. “Without it, the demons have more power here and don’t have to work with the priests or do their bidding.”

“What did we do?” Corin asked, glancing at the dead priest again. He was still dead, and Corin looked away again. He was dead before the demon had been expelled, Corin told himself.

“Banished the demons. All of them,” Rafferty said, running a hand through his hair and looking pensive. “The entire monastery was using their power, some more than others. Unfortunately, there’s no way to save the men who let the demons in fully. They’re gone.”

“And the rest of them?” Corin asked, glancing at the missing wall. No one was there, and he wondered what the priests were doing. Were they staying away in case they were also killed?

“They’ll be ill for weeks until they recover,” Rafferty said. “They’ll also be arrested and placed in jail. It’s against the highest laws to summon demons, and everyone here was complicit.”

“Did you really have a sister?” Corin asked, too tired to keep the question back when he thought of it. “Or was that just a ploy to get me to play along?”

Rafferty jerked as if he’d been slapped, but then he shook his head, speaking so quietly that Corin barely heard him. “I did. They killed her.”

“Oh,” Corin said, feeling like an ass.

“They sent me away when I raised a fuss, thinking no one would believe me when I told him what was going on here,” Rafferty said, his voice flat and toneless. He wasn’t looking at Corin, but staring at the hole in the wall, and why did Corin want to comfort him? Rafferty had lied to him. “They believed me, but the priests here were clever enough to hide everything whenever anyone came looking. I have no idea how, considering how many demons they’ve summoned, but there was no evidence. They sent me back to get it.”

“Wait, just to get evidence?” Corin asked, frowning.

Rafferty nodded. “I’ve been here for six months, but they kept sending me out to surrounding villages to ensure they were complying and sending in everyone who was eligible to the monastery. I didn’t have the chance to collect anything until the last few weeks. I wasn’t supposed to do this— partly because I don’t have the energy on my own to do this.”

“Why did you?” Corin asked. His head was spinning, and he had the feeling he was missing something.

“I overheard Tennyson talking to one of the other priests,” Rafferty said, glancing at Corin. His face was shadowed in the fading light from the window, but his gaze was strong. “They planned to force me into the sacrifice, to get me using the demon magic so they could convert me to using it and protecting them. Between that and the way the binding was failing, I knew I didn’t have time to wait for reinforcements.”

“You had to use me,” Corin said, and that made a certain amount of sense. He had the energy, and Rafferty hadn’t had the time to wait for another source. “Why lie?”

“It was simpler,” Rafferty said, shaking his head. “Maybe I should have told you everything, but you didn’t even believe in demons when I approached you.”

Corin flushed, remembering his skepticism when Rafferty had talked to him in the little writing room. It seemed like months had passed since then, not mere days. “Right,” Corin said awkwardly. “Sorry.”

Rafferty snorted. “You have nothing to apologize for. I’m sorry I had to drag you into this.”

“I don’t mind,” Corin said quietly, shrugging. “I liked the... non-demon parts of it.”

“Really?” Rafferty asked. He stood, and Corin watched him curiously as he fumbled around on the top of the bureau. He eventually managed to light a candle, sending flickering light across the room. He sat down heavily, turning back to Corin. “I initially thought you’d make a good priest, but I wasn’t going to suggest it after everything you’ve done here.”

“A priest?” Corin asked, his eyes widening. “Why?”

“It’s an offer they make to anyone who has a lot of spirit energy,” Rafferty said, shrugging. “I didn’t think you’d be interested after everything the priests put you through here. If you are interested in using your spirit energy, there’s no better place to learn.”

“Oh,” Corin said, not able to think of a better reply than that. “How many priests use the demons?”

“I can’t say,” Rafferty said, frowning. “More than should, but we’re trying to find them all and banish the demons. It’s difficult because the higher-level users can hide it easily since the demons are hidden in their bodies. Then there are the remote monasteries like this one, which can become completely corrupted.”

“You can’t just feel them?” Corin asked, wondering if the uneasy, nauseous feeling he felt was all in his head.

“Feel them?” Rafferty repeated, his brow furrowing. “What do you mean?”

“When they get close,” Corin said, shrugging. “I always feel it, like they’re pulling my energy to the surface? I could feel it whenever he got too close and even when he wasn’t.”

“Oh,” Rafferty said, looking surprised. He hesitated and then asked, “Can you see the energy, too?”

“See it? The glow, you mean?” Corin asked, wondering what that meant. “But the circle and... glyphs?” Corin paused at the unfamiliar word. “They were made of it, right?”

“I painted them down,” Rafferty said, and the way he was staring at Corin was discomfiting. “You can really see energy?”

“I guess?” Corin said, shifting nervously where he sat. “Why?”

“It’s rare,” Rafferty said. “Really, really rare.”

“Oh,” Corin said, ducking his head a little. He wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that. “What does that mean?”

“Not much,” Rafferty said. He smiled faintly, turning to look at the priest on the floor. “Did you see him glow?”

“I don’t know,” Corin said. “I never saw anything glow before that first day when you told me about everything and made the windows dark. Then the

roof glowed and the apple glowed and the priest in the dining hall glowed. They were all different colors.”

“You didn’t believe in it before,” Rafferty said, as though that explained it. “You wouldn’t have seen it until you believed it was there.”

“Okay,” Corin accepted, because weirder things had happened. “What happens now?”

“Um,” Rafferty said, his brow furrowing in thought. “I sent a missive a week ago requesting assistance. That should show up in a few days. They’ll help sort everything out and take care of arresting the priests here who don’t flee. I’ll probably send everyone home since there’s no point in keeping everyone here when there are no priests to serve.”

“Even me?” Corin asked, quietly. He wasn’t sure what he wanted. Home sounded good. He missed his family and wanted to see his sisters. There would be no demons, no priests, no one wanting to kill him. There would also be no Rafferty, and no chance to learn more about his spirit energy, and both of those were stupid, stupid reasons to want to stay.

“I should report you,” Rafferty said and then hastily continued at Corin’s alarmed look. “Your capabilities. I should report those to the priesthood. They’d be very interested in recruiting you, between your amount of energy and your sensitivity to demons.”

“Oh,” Corin said. He supposed that made sense. “What happens then?”

“I said should,” Rafferty said, smiling a crooked smile that didn’t look very happy in the candlelight. “Not that I would. If you want to go home, I won’t say a word.”

“Why?” Corin asked. “Won’t that get you in trouble?”

“I’d have to tell them about your energy, but not about your sensitivity. They wouldn’t force you to join the priesthood, and I can pretty easily convince them that you don’t want anything more to do with priests after everything you’ve been through,” Rafferty said, shrugging. He looked away again, looking unhappy and tired and strained.

“What if I do?” Corin asked quietly, hoping he wouldn’t regret this in the morning. “I mean, with conditions.”

“Conditions?” Rafferty repeated, looking at Corin again. He looked away

quickly, and Corin hesitated, not entirely sure he was doing the right thing.

“I’d have to be trained, right?” Corin asked. He didn’t know the first thing about using his spirit energy, so that was a given. “But then they’d probably put me to finding and banishing demons, because I’m sensitive to them?”

“Probably,” Rafferty agreed, giving him a puzzled look. “Why?”

“I ... I don’t think I’d trust just anyone to teach me,” Corin said slowly. “I’ve only ever met one priest who wasn’t after my energy for something evil, and how would I know that anyone else is being straightforward?”

“I wasn’t straightforward with you,” Rafferty pointed out. “What are you suggesting?”

“I’d do it,” Corin said, shifting nervously and hoping Rafferty didn’t laugh in his face. “But only if you trained me. I want to know how to use it, and I don’t want anyone else to be sacrificed. If I can help, I want to.”

Rafferty was silent for a moment before he nodded. “I can probably convince them to let me train you, especially if I say the other option is you walking away. With your sensitivity, they’d probably accept any terms.”

“I don’t want you to if you don’t want to,” Corin said, fumbling over the words when it occurred to him that maybe Rafferty wouldn’t be keen on having him around any longer.

“Oh, no, it’s fine; I don’t mind,” Rafferty said quickly, turning towards Corin quickly. “I’m not the best teacher.”

“I think you’ll be the best teacher,” Corin said quietly and flushed because he hadn’t meant to say that aloud.

“You give me too much credit,” Rafferty said quietly. “I will do my best.”

“That’s all I want,” Corin said then stood up, only wobbling a little. “We should probably go make sure everyone else is okay?”

“Good idea,” Rafferty said, standing. He wavered, nearly falling, and Corin moved to catch him automatically. Rafferty grabbed his arms for balance, and Corin instinctively slid an arm around Rafferty’s waist to steady him, putting Rafferty much closer than Corin had anticipated. Corin froze, sure his face was going to catch fire.

Rafferty didn’t move away, even though he was steady on his feet, and Corin couldn’t make himself move. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d

been this close to someone who hadn't been a relative— at least a year— and it was Rafferty, who felt warm and smelled of oranges and cloves, and there had to be a reason Rafferty's touch went straight to his cock, right?

Corin wasn't sure which of them moved— maybe it was him, maybe it was Rafferty, or perhaps it was both— but in the next breath, Rafferty's lips were sliding against his. Corin's breath hitched in his throat, and he shut his eyes, returning the slow, gentle kiss as warmth spread through his chest. He tightened his grip around Rafferty's waist, pulling him closer and drawing the kiss deeper, not wanting the moment to end. It did, unfortunately, but Rafferty didn't pull away, instead leaning against Corin easily as though he belonged in Corin's arms.

“Are you sure?” Rafferty asked quietly. His back was to the candle, casting his face completely into shadow so Corin couldn't gauge his expression.

Acting on instinct instead, Corin didn't reply verbally but kissed Rafferty again, hard and sure this time, not pulling back until both he and Rafferty were breathless. Rafferty's fingers dug into his arms, but he returned the kiss full measure, leaving Corin dizzy and no small amount aroused.

“If I had the energy, I'd show you just how sure I am,” Corin said, making Rafferty laugh quietly.

“That's not...” Rafferty paused, twisting free of Corin's arms. “You're not agreeing to the priesthood because of me, are you?”

“Not entirely,” Corin said, being honest. “I do want to help.”

“Okay,” Rafferty said, accepting that. He held out his hand to Corin, and Corin took it, remembering the first time Rafferty had touched him. It didn't feel at all the same this time, and Corin let Rafferty lead him from the room, nervous but hopeful about what they'd find in the future.

THE END

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THE PORTRAIT OF HIS SUBLIMITY

by Cay McKat

Photo Description



A shirtless man in jeans, his torso and arms covered in tattoos.

Request Letter



Dear Author,

I am addicted to ink. Getting it done gives me more satisfaction than sex, or the stuff I have been getting lately anyway. I am not sure if it is the fact that I am a masochist, or the hunk of a tattoo artist I have been going to for the last year. Either way, I may be covered head to toe by the end. The tattoo guy is an artist with a capital A. Dark, brooding, moody, and oh so hot. He is definitely an Alpha male too. But there is no way I am a submissive, or am I? Could I maybe find what I need another way?

Sincerely,

Taylor Law

General Information



genre: contemporary

tags: BDSM; tattoos; soul searching; oral sex; flogging; comfort; feeling from afar; slow burn-UST

content warnings: pain play, not graphic

word count: 31,235

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THE PORTRAIT OF HIS SUBLIMITY

by Cay McKat

IT FELT like a sting right through his core every time. After a year, one would've thought the novelty had worn off already, but it hadn't. Instead Ty found himself just as eager and impatient every time he stepped inside the door. And every time he was close to drooling, because that man was just too good looking to be true. Or perhaps it was just Ty's overactive hormones talking, because he didn't have a tendency to go drooling over *anyone*.

"Well hello again," the man said and grinned while leaning against the counter. The tattoo magazine he had in front of him, spread open and taking a whole lot of space from the shining clean countertop was soon forgotten when his eyes trained over Ty's arms. "Ready for another session?"

Ty nodded, trying to look anything but obvious, but he was sure he failed. "I think the old ones are pretty well healed already."

The man, *the* man, the one consuming every shred of a thought drifting through Ty's mind nodded as well, looking all professional while he gestured Ty to follow him to the room in the back, pulling the curtain out of the way and waiting just long enough for Ty to step inside the small space before he yanked the curtain back in place. "Let me think... We finished your midsection last time, right?"

"Yeah." And that was as far as Ty had given himself permission to go, because he wasn't exactly sure if he wanted the tattoos, or the one doing the ink-work. But there he was again, now rapidly thinking of new areas to get covered with ink, because he really only had a few left un-covered. "The shoulders are still left." Except for the lower parts, but Ty wasn't quite ready for those yet.

The one holding the needle most of the time nodded and gestured Ty to get rid of his shirt. "Highlights on the arms too, right?" he asked. Ty nodded, already pulling off his shirt. Shoulders and some lining on his arms. That was it. Then he would stop this. "Yep.... And then I think I'm done."

Liar.

“Whatever works for you,” the man said.

Ty stood still like he'd done dozens of times already, his back towards the man that was like a voiceless keeper of his every hidden daydream. Chase. That was the name. One Ty knew but had never said out loud, because it wasn't through an actual introduction he had heard the name but simply something he had overheard at the shop. Not Howard or Richard or Harold. No...Chase. Like sex on your tongue when you spelled it slow enough. Not that Ty had done that, because he wasn't that pathetic. Only pathetic enough to go all hot and bothered every time he heard the machine go off. But that was only because the sting of those needles on his skin was better than any other thing he'd experienced recently. It made his skin quiver and created a twisted smile on his face, one Chase had commented on once. He'd said he had now officially found a reason to keep tattooing though it sometimes killed his back and made his eyes burn. And Ty had asked what that reason was, and Chase had replied with a wicked grin, saying that it was the first time he'd seen anyone close to climaxing because of getting inked above the waistline.

Ty hadn't pointed out how true that was.

“Relax your shoulders,” Chase said, his voice low and gruff, low enough to reach Ty's consciousness as a soft purr though there was nothing soft about it. Nothing soft about the man either. His eyes were dark enough to pierce through Ty every time he was foolish enough to look straight at them. Dark hair, almost black, and wild as if Chase had just walked in from a blizzard. Chase always wore long sleeved shirts but the back of his hands were covered in tattoos; thin lines and words written with such delicacy Ty couldn't make sense of any of them. But he'd seen them and seeing them made him wonder if there was a spot of skin on that body that wasn't covered with ink. Chase's neck was clean though, only one long strip of black ink building from his back, following the shape of his spine and reaching his hairline. But that was all Ty had seen. And he sure as hell had wanted to see a lot more.

The sudden wave of warmth brushing against his back told Ty that Chase had just stepped closer. “Relax your shoulders.” Nothing soft now. Ty closed his eyes and forced his breathing to remain calm though his insides were shaking hard enough to raise the stats on Richter's Scale. The warmth

vanished, leaving Ty's skin cold and shivering. He heard Chase rustle around behind him, probably searching for a marker. "I don't like to repeat myself."

"I'm sorry." How the hell did a common line of conversation manage to make Ty feel like someone had just licked the inside of his skin?

"It's cool...we're all allowed to make some mistakes," Chase said, absently, before his hand brushed over Ty's shoulder. Tapping the left one, telling Ty to fix his posture. And in all honesty, Chase could be hitting him with a two-by-four and Ty would be just as heated. Ty argued over himself, thinking if he could get through this just once without walking back home with an aching hard-on, but he was pretty sure that wasn't going to happen. Because as soon as he felt the first nothing but clinical touch placed on his shoulder blade, his eyes were closed already and he wanted to gasp.

"Would this be okay?" Chase asked and plainly drew a few lines with his hand against Ty's skin. Nothing erotic there, absolutely nothing. And still Ty felt like he was leaking already.

The area which Chase was displaying was as good as any other, because Ty trusted the guy enough to know he wouldn't go over-board with his art. No excess tattooing, no hasty handwork and no drunken customers. Three ground rules Chase had laid on the table the first time Ty had stepped inside that shop. "Yeah, that'll work."

Ty heard the quiet 'snap' when Chase pulled off the cork from the marker, getting ready to draw the lines. He always went free-hand, had done so since the first time. He took forever to clean the skin, took even longer to draw the picture but Ty wasn't complaining, because the work was brilliant. Beautiful. Even the thickest black lines he now had covering his body were almost graceful and if that required Chase to drive Ty crazy with the anticipation, then so be it.

Chase wiped Ty's skin with gauze wetted with an antiseptic liquid before he again tapped Ty's left shoulder. "Relax."

Shit.

"Sorry," Ty said and shook his shoulders, forcing the muscles to relax. Apparently his posture was straight enough, both shoulders on equal height, because the next touch he felt wasn't a tap but a firm grip on his left upper

arm. “Now don’t move.”

Oh God...why did that sound like something said in the darkness of a bedroom instead of a simple request to hold still since moving now would make the whole thing a little more impossible to follow through.

The marker slid across Ty’s skin without any hesitation. Chase drew one line after another, short pieces of one picture that was bound to be symmetrical. The hand holding Ty’s arm was like a continuous echo of what that marker was doing on his back, and Ty felt himself getting sucked into familiar sensations. He always felt like he was looking at himself from outside his own body when he stood here, always with this man, always doing what he was doing now. It had been like that since day one and it had never changed. Not even when more and more of his pecs and abs and sides had been tattooed. All along it had felt just like it felt now, and this was close to as intoxicating as the feel of the multiple needles diving inside his skin over and over and over again.

“Take a look.” Ty opened his eyes, without even realizing he’d shut them in the first place. His head hung loose, almost bowing and the muscles on his neck felt too weak when he picked up his head and turned to look over his shoulder. He was met with a pair of midnight blue eyes, ones looking at him as if the man knew exactly what was going on inside his head.

Ty turned towards the mirror that was placed on the wall to his left, getting caught in the reflection looking back at him; his body facing the mirror while Chase stood facing him, eyes on Ty instead of on the reflection. Two men, not that much difference in their sizes. Chase was a little taller and perhaps a little bulgier. Chase was dark, his skin a few shades darker than Ty’s, and Ty’s hair was a lot lighter with its color but still pretty dark. His eyes though...his were the lightest shade of blue while Chase’s were probably as close to black as they could get. Midnight blue. Ty had seen that shade on fabric samples and on rags of clothing, but those shades were off. The one he felt looking at him now was the exact color of the darkest hours of the darkest night.

Even when Ty turned and looked over his shoulder to see the drawings on his shoulders, he could feel those eyes looking at *him*, not at the picture. And what he was seeing was just as perfect as everything else the man had done to

his body. *On* his body.

“Wow...how the hell do you make them so symmetrical?” Ty muttered and grabbed his shoulder as if he could pull it out of the way. The lines covering space on his skin were a perfect match to the ones Chase had done before, continuing from the previous ones as if they’d been done at the same session. Four marker-made lines swirled over both of his shoulders, stretching towards shoulder blades and barely reaching the ultimate goal.

Chase ignored the question and turned towards the mirror. “I can make them longer if you want. But it works better this way if you want something done to your whole back. Easier to create the whole picture if your spine is left undone and so on.”

Ty was pretty sure his spine was getting undone that very second because it sure as hell felt a little wobbly when he listened to Chase. No doubt the guy liked to have things his way, and so far Ty hadn’t had a problem with that. After all, Chase was the artist, not Ty, and he trusted whatever whim Chase might have because so far the work had been topnotch.

“No...this is good.” Chase gestured towards the chair in which Ty had sat many, many times before, and Ty listened to sounds coming from behind him while he positioned himself astride the chair.

“You can lean against the backrest but try and keep your shoulders relaxed. I’d hate to completely fuck up the picture just ’cos you’re too tense.”

Right...no being too tense. Gotcha.

Ty rested his hands against his denim covered thighs, leaning his chest against the chair and every second he spent waiting was like an interlude to what was going to happen. Because he knew what was going to happen. While Chase washed his hands, cleaned his skin and took out the machine, the one-use needles, the ink and gauzes and antiseptic liquid, Ty’s skin became more and more sensitive. His whole body became overly responsive to the slightest whiff of air against his naked back. The anticipating was like foreplay, getting his system ready and warmed before the actual race. And the race always finished with a big bang, because nothing was better than going through the accelerating burn and seeing the end result on his skin.

Hands covered with sterile gloves stroked the skin on Ty’s upper back

with wetted gauze before he heard the machine go off. And his eyes were closed already when the man now sitting on a stool behind him moved a little closer and placed his hand against Ty's shoulder. "Ready for some pain?"

Ty leaned against the touch, something he did every time without being able to hold back. "Yes."

TY REALIZED he had become a junkie. The necessary two week wait was like ice spreading through his body, because he was literally aching to get back to the shop. Chase was very firm with his own rules, and one of those rules was that the time given to the skin to heal had to be a minimum of two weeks. If he happened to think the previous work wasn't healed well enough, he'd make his customers wait longer. Ty was lucky his healed quickly.

He wasn't, however, happy that he had actually given himself time to think about his next installment of tattoo art. The more he thought about it, the more nervous he got. It wasn't the pain he feared because pain he could handle. Pain he yearned, lusted over and dwelled on the sensation. It was what the pain brought and since this time Chase was going to be a little closer to Ty's hidden parts, Ty was a little more self-aware than usual.

Chase sat on the stool, one he preferred over any chair because it enabled him to move around the room thanks to five wheels attached to the foot of the stool. "Do I need to do some shaving before I get started?" Again very professional but Ty could literally feel his blood rush towards his face.

"No, I got that...taken care of," he muttered and opened the button of his jeans. Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea after all. Perhaps getting his lower abs tattooed as well wasn't the brightest thought that had crossed his mind, and now that his fingers stumbled with the zipper and revealed the still uncovered skin, he was very certain of this being the worst possible idea.

Chase looked down, his eyes wandering on Ty's naked skin. He cocked his brow and glanced at Ty while gesturing him to move closer. "So I see..."

Ty held his eyes away from the guy who now had his hands within few inches of Ty's groin. He looked at the wall instead. Poster, adds, notes. Timetables, prices, pictures. Words written with scrubby handwriting and

black ink. And all the while the guy seemed to move closer though Ty was pretty sure they were both still.

“So how low do you want me to go?” Chase asked, and that was about the point where Ty swallowed the first time. Chase didn’t seem to notice, because he kept talking while his fingers pushed the jeans lower and tapped the skin only a breath away from Ty’s pulsing...member. “I can go here if you want but personally I think keeping it above strategic areas is a little less risky. You know...for now.”

Oh holy mother of...

“Above sounds great.” It was a miracle he wasn’t panting now and that he actually managed to say a word. Chase’s hands worked like they had worked every single time; expertly, professionally, avoiding any unnecessary movements but he still took his time. And that time seemed longer than ever before though the area he was working on was much smaller now.

Ty was unfocused enough to glance down, suddenly not thinking at all, and what he saw made his mind turn into a stumbling puddle of scattered words. Chase sat on his stool, his other hand pulling the open zipper out of the way while the other worked on wiping the skin with wetted gauze. One wipe, then another. Slow, deliberately agonizing, brushes that no longer had anything to do with cleaning the skin and as soon as he looked up, met Ty’s fluttering gaze, it became crystal clear he knew exactly what was going on in Ty’s mind.

“I’m gonna participate in a tattoo exhibition next month,” Chase said while still looking at Ty. He tossed the gauze aside and took the marker, never looking away and his words made no sense to Ty, but it wasn’t as if he could actually open his mouth and speak *now*. “I need someone to work on while I’m there.”

Chase’s eyes finally left Ty’s when he concentrated on his actual work instead of turning Ty into a mess of shivering flesh. “Interested?”

Huh?

“What?” Ty mumbled. His abs trembled involuntarily when the marker made contact with his skin, the first line drifting into a wild frenzy. Ty bit his lip when Chase glared up at him, frowning and his expression far from soft.

“Wiggling is not accepted.”

“I wasn’t wiggling,” Ty muttered but somehow his body did the unconscious muscle spasms again when Chase’s hand came to rest against the side of his hip. “Keep still.”

“Sorry.” Ty managed to stay still, but only with some serious case of self-suffocating and crippling his own body by threatening to chop off his feet if they started shuffling like they were about to do. Chase gave him a moment to collect himself before the marker was on his skin again, drawing lines that continued from the previous ones. Again small pieces of one whole image, and those small pieces felt like silent kisses against Ty’s skin. With just a goddamn marker the guy had him close to panting. Except that he wasn’t even breathing, and Chase pointed this out while he was moving to make the identical lines on the other side of Ty’s hips. “Your face looks a lot better when it’s not blue. Breathe.”

Ty let out a fast blow of contaminated air, feeling a little lightheaded and dizzy and his breathing wasn’t settling though he tried his hardest. It was nearly impossible to breathe at all when Chase’s hand was still pulling Ty’s jeans out of the way, close to pulling them away completely and therefore close to exposing what little was left hidden of Ty’s aching and increasingly hardening shaft. And just when Ty swallowed for the second time, almost pleading for the guy to either stop or fast forward to the point where he would rip off everything and get it on, Chase pulled back and gestured towards the mirror.

Ty looked at his reflection, this time turning towards the mirror very slowly because he was afraid any rapid movement might blow his testicles to another galaxy. He still couldn’t quite understand how Chase managed to make something as simple as tribal lines look like they were painted with water-colors on to a white sheet. Very harmonic, very delicate. Almost poetic though they were far from it. And Ty knew they would eventually look even better, because a red marker did nothing to him, whereas black ink did multiple things.

Six lines lunged towards his shaft, three on both sides of his hips. The lines were fairly narrow, but the farthest ones swirled just above his hipbones so Ty

knew they would hurt, and not necessarily in a good way.

“You approve?” Chase asked, already standing up and heading for his desk that was filled with items Ty couldn’t even recognize. But he wasn’t interested in what was on that table because he was too mesmerized with what he was seeing in the mirror. It wasn’t just the lines or the fact that it was going to hurt like hell.

Ty hadn’t allowed anyone this close to his body in a long, *long* time. It had taken him a while to get over his past relationship, one that had lasted for three years and had ended with bitter feelings and even more bitter verbal abuse, and even after he had managed to get over that he had kept his distance. Except here. And here he wasn’t sure what he was doing because while he knew he liked the pain, he was beginning to wonder if he possibly liked other things too.

“Hey?”

Ty’s eyes shot up at the man standing behind him now, the one who was a few inches taller than him and perhaps a little wider by his shoulders, but who somehow seemed to conquer Ty without doing a thing. Their eyes met through the mirror again, one set firmly hooked on another, and for a moment Ty completely forgot he was standing in a tattoo shop in broad daylight with his jeans wide open and his cock barely hidden, because all that seemed irrelevant. He might as well be in a pitch black room with no one but Chase, because that was how he felt now. And feeling that way was surprisingly easy.

“They’re good.”

“Oh...just good? Clearly I haven’t done myself justice if that’s all you’ve got to say,” Chase grunted, obviously not satisfied with the response. And since Ty had given him high praise so far, could he blame the guy? But he was somehow unable to say anything else now, because words were bound to fail him. Suddenly he was sucked inside something he couldn’t name and it had nothing to do with the fact that he was still feeling his lower parts a lot better than any other parts of his body.

Ty stepped towards the table placed on the other end of the small room. “Really good. Looks...really good.”

Yep...fail it is. But Chase didn’t comment on his decreased vocabulary

and he didn't make it his business to make sure Ty was okay though Ty wasn't sure if he was. Instead he got on the table and settled on his back when Chase gestured him to do so. And again he felt the ember of desire in his core when the familiar sounds filled the room; packages getting opened, water running, soft rustling of the towel and plastic packaging, things getting places on the table next to the one Ty was lying on.

"You need to pull your jeans lower," Chase said somewhere to Ty's right. And he did as told, yanking the denim lower on his hips, until his shaft was tucked inside a mass of hefty fabric, pointing slightly downwards and hopefully tucked so tightly it wouldn't start jumping up and down in the middle of it all. But the tingling was there and the tingling soon turned into full out burning when Chase pushed his stool next to the table and sat down while wiping Ty's skin once more and pulling on a clean pair of gloves. "Now...this is going to hurt."

Ty met eyes with the one now holding the machine, feeling stupidly nervous. For what, he didn't know.

"I'd be surprised if it didn't," he managed to say and the hint of amusement crossing Chase's face was so foreign Ty almost missed the moment Chase's hand landed on his hip, only slightly pressing against his skin, but still hard enough for the shivers to cover every spot of Ty's skin. "Ready?"

Ty nodded, afraid to speak. Afraid to move, afraid to even blink. But the sound that wasn't really even a sound but simply a breath of air escaped his lips the moment the needle made contact with his skin. And the sound that wasn't really even a sound, the one Ty hoped to be left unnoticed and certainly didn't want to do again, made Chase glance up and look at Ty with his other dark brow raised and a silent fire burning somewhere in the depth of his eyes. "Everything okay?"

"Yes." Oh God...was that his voice? Strained and weak, like a string that was stretched too thin. Ty emphasized his words by nodding and taking a deep breath. "Everything's fine. Go on."

Chase studied Ty for a moment, eyes narrowed and training through Ty's every feature before he looked back at his hands again and leaned a little

closer. The buzz that filled the silence was reassuring and terrifying at the same time. It had become almost more familiar than any other sound Ty had ever heard, because he begged to hear it over and over again. And as the needles once again hit his skin, breaking through the first layers, Ty felt sickeningly calm. It just wasn't normal for someone to feel like they were dreaming while wide awake because their skin was hurting and the tissue on their body had started bleeding. But he did feel that way, felt it every time. And just like before the sensation was like fuel to the flames, licking his body with invisible heat and torching his core so deep Ty could literally feel his stomach clenching.

He closed his eyes, breathing deep and trying to focus on anything other than how it was all feeling. Slowly, so goddamn slowly and profoundly, Chase drew one line, then the other before filling up the empty space between the two. And as Ty's skin slowly grew numb on the abrasive sensation, his body became aware of it on a whole different level. The sting turned into tiny sparks, ones that travelled through his skin and flesh and bones, filled his veins and seemed to cover him whole. Ty's hands formed loose fists next to his sides, and then fists that weren't so loose anymore.

Chase wiped the tattooed lines with wetted gauze, the machine buzzing in the background, drilling inside Ty's head and almost taking over everything else. "You okay there?"

"Yes." Yes, he was okay. He was better than okay. He was on cloud nine and climbing higher and higher, almost in heaven already. The next dive that was done by the stack of needles forced a smothered groan out of Ty, one that was hopefully silent enough to be unheard. Chase didn't stop what he was doing but his other hand, the one that was still firmly held against Ty's left hip and stretched the skin to make the line as sharp as possible, held on a little tighter, fingers digging in Ty's skin a little harder. And that was really all Ty needed to go all hard and pulsating.

There was nothing calm in his body now, not one single corner or a curve that wasn't pleading to be touched. By that hand, by that man. He didn't care how he'd get it as long as he did. Right there, drowning in a world that had no borders, no limits, he felt like he was soaring higher after every second that

passed him. The ache that had somehow kept hidden throughout the weeks and weeks he'd spent torturing his own body time and time again was no longer hidden, no longer kept secured. It was out there now, beating inside his flesh, driving through his shaft until no amount of fabric around his cock could've kept it in place. Ty felt the twitching, felt it against his own thigh and he knew Chase felt it too against his wrist that moved with grueling speed against Ty's sore manhood as the picture got completed line by line.

Chase's wrist rubbed the bulge that was no longer even hidden, the inside of his forearm pressed against Ty's thigh and only emphasizing the connection that wasn't really even there. But Ty felt it, and he was slowly unraveling the million layers of his own dark decay. No more silent breaths, no more stilled frames or quiet groans. Every invasion of those needles drilled right through his core, forcing out sounds that were no longer unheard or even sudden.

Ty was gasping, out loud and horrid. Pleading, begging without saying a word, but the climax that wasn't even that far away anymore sang with the voice of a thunder, breaking every sheltered shard in Ty's mind until nothing was left except the next slow line broken through his skin, the next hard touch of that hand that was now the only thing keeping him in place. More. Ty wanted more. He wanted something he didn't even know, something he couldn't recognize but the lust rolling inside him demanded something he wasn't getting now, something he had never had. Nothing he knew could settle the anxiety burning his whole being. Nothing. No one. Just this one. The pain. And the hand. And the man. Somehow Ty knew that, realized it even through his clouded mind and disorientated thoughts. There was something about this man, something Ty hadn't even been looking for but what he now knew he wanted. Needed.

Chase was working on Ty's other hip now, the needles drilling against his right hipbone and though the pain wasn't really the kind he normally whimpered over, he did that now. And his voice, much too high and very much too sharp to be recognized as his own, seemed to reach the man that still kept his hand on Ty's skin.

Fingers bit into his skin almost as painfully as the machine did, bound to leave small bruises and faint memories, and Ty trembled though he was still

pressed against the table. “Don’t move.”

Ty groaned, fighting to stay still against the table with his chest heaving and teeth biting into his lower lip. Closer, closer. Closer to the centre of his hips, closer to his shaft, closer. Closer than close and still not nearly close enough. No longer gasping but moaning, his voice shaky and almost voiceless, hands cribbing the sides of the table while he truly tried to stay in place, but he failed. And the moment his back begged to be arched high above the table, the buzzing ended, leaving Ty moaning for what felt like his whole entire life. “Stay still or I will stop.”

Ty opened his eyes, blinking with the overload of brightness that made him blind for a second. He focused his gaze on the man sitting next to him. Dark hair as tossed as ever, eyes that were even darker looking back at him and the flame that had been burning before was now flaming. It burned Ty’s skin like he had fire placed against him, like it was seeping through his tissue and turning his bones into ash. Chase wiped the last of what he’d created with wetted gauze, making Ty flinch and eventually earning Ty a displeased look from the man that usually looked a little less displeased. “Think you could stay in place now?”

No.

“Yes.”

“You’re sure about that? I don’t like it when someone breaks the rules.”

“I won’t,” Ty breathed, tensing his whole body while trying to stay still though it was almost humanly impossible. One firm push against that arm, against that wrist and he would’ve spilled all over himself. “I promise I won’t.”

Chase slid his hand across Ty’s skin, the gesture much more than one given by a tattoo artist to his costumer. Ty’s eyes slowly closed when Chase’s fingers brushed the lines that were finished already, and though he bit his lip and tensed his whole body while not willing to break any goddamn rule, he moaned loud enough for it to echo even in his own head.

Close. So goddamn close. And then the buzzing started again. No warning this time, just the painful collation between hard metal and soft skin and it was much worse this time after his skin had adjusted with the painless freedom.

And Ty was helplessly sinking with the wave of shock rushing through him.

He counted the seconds, somehow managing to stay coherent enough to realize the passing of time. And the further he got, the more of that picture was done. And the more that got done, the less there was left to do. And Ty was sure he couldn't finish before Chase would. He wanted to ask Chase to go on, ignore the plans and go right in for the skin below. He wanted to ask for more, wanted to beg and plead and cry and shake and rage. He wasn't done, he wasn't having what he needed. And by the time he felt the last small pieces getting painted on his skin, ones he knew to be the final ones, he was close to shouting out loud because he was so close. So fucking close but he couldn't get there. Not even if all he had to do was move, just once. Push against that wrist and he would get it.

"All done," Chase said and put the machine away. His hand quickly wiped off the last of the excess ink and blood too and Ty crawled closer to the finish. An inch. One more, just one more.

"Please...." Oh God...was he doing this? Eyes still closed and hands still cribbing the table and he wasn't even that still anymore. He couldn't be. Not when he'd lost the feel of his body, every bone too scattered to function, every inch of flesh too sore to be held anywhere.

"You want something?" Chase asked quietly, his hands no longer touching him but Ty could feel his touch lingering in the air just above his skin.

"Please, touch me."

"You want me to touch you?"

"Yes."

"Then you say it." Surely that wasn't really a breath of air he felt on his skin? Surely the guy wasn't being that evil? But Ty felt the warmth of Chase's breath before the warmth turned into a cool breeze against his sore skin. And that was almost enough to throw him over the edge. Not the sensation alone but the knowledge of Chase being that close.

"Please..."

"Say it."

"I want you to touch me." He'd say anything. He'd lie his teeth out and make a complete idiot out of himself. Anything. He'd do anything.

“Do you want to come?”

“Yes.” A moan now, one that broke into little pieces when another breeze washed over his skin and Ty bit his lip before he blurted out anything completely idiotic. He felt warmth placed over his skin again, and then he heard Chase move closer. Heading higher, his frame suddenly very vivid next to Ty. And his voice, the low and gruff temptation that held on to Ty, burying him deeper into the trepidation that just wasn't letting go, spoke right next to Ty when the man finally touched him. “You may.”

Not the bulge though that would've been the most obvious place for provocation. But Chase's hand never touched Ty's shaft, not even through the fabric. Instead his glove covered fingers brushed over the throbbing wounds pierced into Ty's skin, and the soreness that turned into open burn was enough to wash the relief over Ty.

Nothing holding him in place now. Not a hand, not a touch, no words or disappointed tones or eyes that seemed to see into the bottom of his soul. Ty was only partly aware of not being alone in the room when he came, his back high above the table and mouth wide open when a sound that wasn't even human rumbled out of him. And it felt so good. So fucking good. Like water poured from the sky after years and years of dryness. It filled him before it swept him clean. Empty. Spotless. Completely free of any earthly restraints until his mind was soaring above him, flying higher and higher in the bluest sky spread across the brightest day. Sunbeams and warm wind, blissful weightlessness that felt almost angelic. But then the freedom turned into shackles, ones that chained him back to his mind, into his body. Back on the table and in the room. No longer feeling spotless or empty but simply hollow. Nothing left. Even the twitching inside his jeans slowly faded and nothing was left except for Ty's fast breath. No other sounds. None.

Oh my God.

Ty swallowed and licked his dried lips, unwilling to open his eyes just yet and no one demanded him to do so, so he held still and tried to calm his body. His mind was humming, singing with joy almost but slowly the joy faded and it got replaced with less pleasant things. Things like regret and embarrassment. Things like self-accusations and ‘what the fuck are you doing’. Ty heard

Chase move with his stool, heard the gloves getting pulled off and tossed into the wastebasket.

When Chase spread a layer of thick moisturizer across the new lines and then covered them with cellophane before securing the plastic with some tape, Ty was pretty intact already. He felt something landing on his stomach and heard something scraping the floor as it came closer. “You okay there?”

Oh no...Chase was talking. Why did he have to talk?

Ty opened his eyes, again blinking before he stared up at the ceiling. “I’m okay.”

Not on cloud nine, though. Not even on cloud number one. From the corner of his eye he saw Chase stand up and gesture towards whatever had been placed on Ty’s belly. “Take your time. I’ll be in the shop.”

And then he left. And then Ty felt like the biggest moron in the whole universe. He looked down on himself and it wasn’t exactly relief he was feeling when he saw a stack of tissues crumbled against the hem of his t-shirt. And it was the wastebasket that had made the sound he’d heard before, because it was now tucked against the foot of the table.

Ty sat up, slowly, avoiding any sudden moves because his head was spinning. He was just as slow with his movements when he stood up and cleaned himself, the inside of his jeans that is, with the tissues provided by Chase. Ty tossed the tissues in the wastebasket and wavered for a second before he walked up to the small sink placed in one of the corners, washed his hands, dried them with excess focus before he felt even remotely sane enough to actually walk out and face his...tattoo artist. That’s it. Nothing more.

He glanced down at himself, making sure the button and the zipper were closed, before he stepped out of the back room. Chase leaned against the counter with a magazine spread in front of him, and for a moment it seemed as if he hadn’t even realized he had company. But then his eyes shot up at Ty, making a quick search and rescue over the guy who was barely composed enough to stand on his own feet. Ty wasn’t sure if he was supposed to say thank you or apologize. Actually...he wasn’t sure if he should say anything because whatever came to mind wasn’t really worth spitting out. But Chase didn’t even seem bothered, as if this was something the guy went through

every day. And perhaps it was.

And the thought alone was too much to comprehend. Not to mention a slap across Ty's face.

"So...I..." Yep. That was it. Ty looked around himself, as if his next statement was going to bounce off a wall or come walking in from the door. Chase however didn't seem to have any problems on the matter. "We'll call this one even. You can pay by assisting me at the exhibition."

Ty turned towards the guy standing behind the counter. Assisting? Was he serious?

"Are you serious?"

"Sure. You've been coming here for a while now and I don't need to prep you to do your goddamn job. So it would work out just wonderfully," Chase said and the smile he managed to plant on his face looked so absurd Ty wasn't even sure it could be described as a smile. It was more like a devilish grin. Only the horns were missing and Chase could've posed for the cover of 'Hell Today'.

Ty frowned. "You want me to assist you after...what just...um..."

"Well, *that* isn't required." Either Chase was stupid or he just didn't care. Ty on the other hand didn't have a habit of losing his fucking mind with someone he didn't even know.

"Look..." Chase said and reached below the counter. He searched for something for a moment, his hands working in cover before he pulled out a small brochure, grabbed a pen and scraped something in the corner of the front page. Then he passed the brochure over the counter towards Ty, dropping the pen into a small cup placed next to the cash register. "You think about it and gimme a call. If you don't want to do it, it's cool. Just let me know as soon as possible so that I can find someone else instead."

Ty stepped towards the counter, took the brochure and stared at the cover. A phone-number. No name, just numbers. Then he looked up at Chase, not sure if he should even consider the offer. "And what about payment if I decide to pass the offer?"

Chase leaned his forearms against the counter and glanced at Ty under his brows. "I'm sure we can come up with something."

Ty was still sore and the skin over his hips was screaming every time he moved and still he somehow managed to get horny. It was the teasing that made him want to whimper. The teasing and the fact that this man knew something about him no one else knew. Feeling insecure was suddenly the biggest turn on ever. And for some reason he knew Chase knew. And he also knew Chase wasn't at all as calm as he seemed to be. That just did absolutely nothing to ease the aching inside Ty. Instead it made his steps seem too heavy to be taken when he stepped towards the door. And those eyes never left his, not even to blink. Just as dark, just as dreadful.

IT HAD been a week. A full seven days and some hours on top and Ty hadn't even glanced at the brochure after he'd tossed it into his drawer. He had managed to go without thinking of the whole thing for less than twenty-four hours, and the only reason why he had been obsessively going through what had happened after that was the pain in his hips that had increased during the first day and then slowly faded until now the only reminder of the occasion was the excessive moisturizing and dead skin peeling off.

Ty had no problem facing the fact that he liked pain. Liking pain had never been an issue and it had never been a problem. He didn't, however, like being told what to do or ordered around. He hated feeling like someone actually had that kind of control over him, because in control was where he liked to be. That was why his last relationship had ended the way it had; no talking for weeks before the full explosion. His previous partner, Josh, hadn't exactly gotten his kicks from inflicting pain but he'd done it because he'd known what a thrill it was for Ty. But unlike Ty, Josh liked some role play. He liked to take control and create scenes. Unfortunately Ty wasn't feeling the combination, because out of the bedroom Josh wasn't really the most dominating person. And while Ty had tried and made an effort to get into the mood and enjoy the scene-play, he had failed beyond any human comprehension.

First he had been close to laughing – it was simply that funny. Then he had been bored and after waiting for some miracles to happen, he had been almost pissed enough to take the lead himself and toss Josh around the bedroom. Yes,

it didn't work. And he knew it wasn't Josh's fault and probably not his either but he just couldn't take the whole situation seriously. Not even when Josh had brought in a whip. Well...actually that had been the point when Ty had been pissed, because while he liked the pain, getting whipped while having his hands bound was the furthest thing he wanted when given by someone who organized his sock-drawer by color and brand after giving a fifteen minute demonstration on how a man's balance in life began with the balance inside his shoes.

Ty's drawer was a mess and he had even lost the handle at some point so he probably wasn't at all balanced.

They had ended up drifting apart in less than a week and the only reason why it had taken Ty forever to get over the relationship was that he wasn't sure if he had been so willing to end it because of the man he had been with, or because of the things Josh wanted and Ty wasn't able to give him. And now that he'd spent a full seven days and some hours on top of that thinking of how he had actually begged for a total stranger to rub him any way possible, he was starting to think that perhaps it was Josh he hadn't wanted and not the things the guy had required.

And since Ty didn't do begging and he didn't do panting his lungs out in a room that was the closest thing to clinical apart from his doctor's office, he was beginning to doubt his own mental wellbeing. He could get his fix from somewhere else. He could find another way to express himself and get his blood flowing. Only Ty wasn't sure if he wanted to. And he wasn't sure if it would feel as good anywhere else, because it wasn't just the job done to him that got him close to sedated. It was the man doing the job and Ty was finally screwed enough to actually admit that.

He didn't have a typical type he went for. He didn't care about the looks all that much and he didn't mind if the guy was softer around the edges. Josh had been blond, a cute man actually. One with dimples and a tendency to blush. Chase was the furthest thing from any blushing poster-boy. It wasn't his looks that appealed to Ty. It was the way he spoke with very little words but a whole lot of shades in his voice. It was the way he seemed to control the whole room without doing a thing. It was the way he could only glance at Ty and still

it felt like he could see everything. And Ty had to admit that there just was something incredibly enticing about the fact that for the past year Chase had seen and touched and felt every spot of Ty's naked upper body while Ty hadn't touched him once. Not even a handshake.

So now, after the seven days and some hours, Ty had finally taken out the brochure. He was mindlessly going through the pages without actually seeing anything. He could feel the numbers written on the cover against the tips of his fingers and the numbers seemed to lure him. Tempt him. *Make the call, make the call*, they seemed to whisper. And his other hand was already reaching towards his phone he had tossed on his coffee table after getting home from work. And even while at work, while booking orders and organizing the next meeting with his staff, his mind had wandered on things that had nothing to do with the recent developments in the IT-industry which was what he should've been focused on since that was his job.

Ty was sure he could memorize the numbers and just make the call some other time, but his fingers typed in the numbers and before he even realized he was already listening to the monotonic dial tone. The brochure forgotten, and Ty's every nerve seemed to sharpen when he heard Chase pick up the phone and mutter some inconsistent rumble as a greeting. Sounding very dozed, very sleepy. Ty glanced at the clock he had on his wall and frowned. "Did I interrupt your beauty sleep at five in the afternoon?"

Okay...perhaps introducing himself would've been better, but now that he was at his own home, on his couch with his own stuff scattered around him Ty felt so much less like a loose cannon. But he did counteract his slightly rude opening line by stating his identity which probably said nothing, since they had never officially introduced themselves. But Chase grunted, shuffling somewhere in the background. "I know who you are..."

Ty grinned at the sound of that gruff voice. Gruff and annoyed. "Yeah, well... Sorry to wake you but you did tell me to call."

"True..." Chase muttered and then he went quiet for a while, before Ty could hear him move around. Rustling, more shuffling. Silent coughing and cursing that wasn't all that quiet. Ty leaned against the backrest of his couch, a little puzzled because he still wasn't sure if making the call was a good idea

since that meant he had made his decision. And he wasn't at all certain with that decision.

"So what's it gonna be?" Chase asked after the silence had lasted for several minutes, during which Ty had been unable to continue the phone call and now he felt a bit foolish for hanging on the line for this long. "What would assisting entail?"

"Well...lemme see..." Chase was clearly getting dressed. Ty could hear zippers getting closed and fabric moving close to the phone. And for a short moment he imagined the whole nakedness that would entice him if he even got a peek of the man. "You'd be putting up the set with me at the exhibition. Other than that you don't need to do much more than sit still and let me work on you. I won't pay you for it but you'll get the work done for free."

Ty sank a little lower on his couch, weighing the words. Sit still and let Chase work on him. Ty was pretty sure they had demonstrated how close to impossible it was for him to do that. He heard a fast series of clicking sounds and then a low bang, like a door was closed. And the next thing he heard was silent sipping, and he could almost taste the coffee he imagined Chase having.

"So are you interested or not?"

"Yes."

"So you're coming?" Another sip and creaking of a door. Ty opened his mouth to say 'yes' but nothing came out. Not even a denial and that would've been the better option.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, I'm still here. I just don't..." *Know what the hell I'm doing.* "Yeah, I'll do it."

"Great. Great. That's good. I need you to come by, today if possible 'cos I need to show you the sketch."

"Oh." Ty hadn't planned on seeing the guy until...never. Now faced with the possibility of closing himself in to the shop again was like a curtain of terror over his mind. The man at the other end of the line questioned his quietness, asking if there was a problem.

As if he didn't know what the problem was.

"And what happened last week...that really isn't required. Though it might

increase the number of customers if I had someone bouncing like a pony on my table.”

“Yeah...I won’t be doing that again,” Ty muttered. He heard Chase chuckle, and a chuckle coming from a guy that didn’t even smile was just...wrong. “And I didn’t bounce like a pony.”

“Yeah you did. I can reconstruct the scene if you want.”

Ty’s hormones jumped all over the place. The guy wasn’t even trying to be seductive and still he was. Reconstructing the scene was probably the easiest thing to do because that wouldn’t require any excess preparations. Ty was slipping again, and he knew he was and still he didn’t end the call or tell the guy to fuck off with his plans on reconstructing and working on Ty. Instead he sank even lower against the cushions, now almost lying on the couch. “I don’t think that’s an idea worth accomplishing.”

“I think it is,” Chase said. The background was completely silent now and Ty regretted not turning on the TV or the stereo when he’d returned home. Hearing nothing but Chase’s voice and now not even that was like venom on his self-control. “Was it the pain that did it for you?”

Ty pondered the words. He could say no and make a complete fool out of himself, because Chase already knew that would be a lie. And still it wasn’t just the pain.

“Yes,” Ty said, closing his eyes and dropping whatever was left of his self-preservation. “And no.”

“So what else was it?” Now he was tempting, on purpose. Turning Ty into a wiggling mess without as much as working for it. “I think you know that one without asking.”

“True. But I’d still like to hear you say it.”

“Well don’t hold your breath ’cos I’m not going to.” Chase laughed, low and like gravel, every breath of laughter washing over Ty and making his gut ache again. “Feisty, huh?”

“Just self-assured.” It *was* easier to talk now, without seeing Chase and without any tantalizing buzzing around because without the sound Ty could almost convince himself he wasn’t going to be that easy. That he wasn’t going to fall again and that he could actually keep himself together instead of

becoming someone he could hardly recognize.

“You know...” Chase muttered and the line got filled with all kinds of rattle when the guy apparently repositioned himself. Ty tried to think about other options than Chase being back in bed, because thinking of that made it impossible to think of anything else. And anything else was better than the thought of Chase in between sheets, because anything else would be less dangerous to Ty’s sanity. “I’ve had people go all horny while getting tattooed. It’s actually quite normal if the ink is being done anywhere close to the genitals and that’s cool. If someone get’s their kicks while getting printed, who the hell am I to judge. But there are other ways of getting your fix, you know... Less expensive. And actually much more enjoyable too.”

Just the thought made Ty smile. “Yeah...well I don’t do that.”

“Do what? Spanking? Whipping?”

“Yeah, that. I don’t do it,” Ty went on, quickly cutting the line of suggestions because suddenly none of the things he had thought of as a waste of time while he was concerned, were a waste of time at all.

“You ever tried it?”

“Actually I have.”

“And judged by your definite opinion of not doing it, it didn’t go too well.”

“It was probably the most pitiful attempt to have any kind of interaction with another human being I have ever gone through.”

“That bad, huh?” Chase asked. Ty frowned, wondering why the hell he was even talking about the subject because Chase was just someone who did Ty’s tattoos. He wasn’t even a friend, not even a buddy. Just...nothing really. But still Ty talked, and he ended up telling the whole thing. Every amusing detail without even thinking if he shouldn’t spill so much to someone he knew nothing about. But by the time he had shared the whole story, very vividly explaining every embarrassing detail, Chase was laughing out loud and very clearly understanding why it had been as pitiful as it had.

“Oh hell...he stomped his foot?”

“Yes...three times. I counted because he stood on the bed while telling me to scream his name and he almost fell on the floor. But I didn’t laugh,” Ty said

and dropped his head against the back of the couch. “I think I just rolled my eyes. Or...yawned. He obviously didn’t like that.”

“Well it might be a bit hard to be all in control and dominating if your sub is close to falling asleep.”

“I wasn’t his sub.” The word was nasty even while said through the line. Ty didn’t like it, not one bit. “And he wasn’t my dom. *That* I never did.”

“Aha...so you don’t like to be told what to do, you don’t like to be ordered around, tied down or restricted in any way.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty accurate,” Ty agreed and enjoyed the flowing cascade of words skipping through the line. “Okay...then tell me why you creamed yourself on my table a week ago, only after I gave you permission to do so?”

Ty’s eyes snapped open, his sight focusing on the black TV screen and words he had just heard rumbled in his head. He had done that, hadn’t he?

You may.

Oh shit.

“Just like any other type of sex, BDSM happens between the ears, not between the legs. If your ex-partner thought he could make it all happen with lashing some whip, he was way off. But you should really give it another try with someone a little more...orientated.”

“And I suppose that someone is you?” Ty asked, now not only out of his mind but out of himself completely. No, he shouldn’t be giving into the temptation. No, he shouldn’t even be talking about it. He should end the call and ignore everything that had happened. Everything.

So why did he feel like standing on a ledge while he waited for Chase to answer?

“It could be. That’s up to you, really.” Ty stared at his TV, at his wall. His eyes trained over the room, over every book, every picture, every piece of furniture. He didn’t want to be given any options because he didn’t trust himself enough to make the right decisions. Not now. Not with this.

“We could’ve finished your picture a lot earlier,” Chase suddenly said. The sipping had ended a long time ago, and so had the shuffling. He seemed to be just as still as Ty was. “We could’ve had it done within a few months, but I liked knowing you’d keep coming back for more. And if you wanna get your

fix on my table then be my guest, I have no problem with that. But if you want pain, I can give it to you without the needle. And I can make it last a lot longer too.”

Ty couldn’t help but to get aroused all over again. Just the thought of unpleasant sensations transforming into sheer bliss by the hands of the man who had positively stolen every corner of Ty’s mind was like a nightmare, one Ty never wanted to wake from. And still he hesitated. He wasn’t a sub. He didn’t submit. He didn’t bow down to anyone, didn’t allow that kind of power to anyone. But just the fact that he was even considering the option was enough to tell him he probably didn’t know himself all that well after all.

“You said something about a sketch,” he said, changing the subject back into something less dangerous.

“Yeah...I’d do those highlights at the exhibition. But those should be drafted first so that you have an idea of what we’re doing. You think you could come by tonight?”

“Come by where?” Ty asked. He wasn’t going to do anything stupid. He wasn’t going to get hooked into the roof and spanked until his ass would scream ow! He wasn’t. Not tonight anyways. He would, however, do ‘his job’ like Chase liked to call it and he’d do it well. And then he might actually know what it was he was supposed to do with the rest of his shrinking sanity.

“I’m heading for work soon, so at the shop if you want. Might be kinda tight though, ’cos it’s gonna be busy. Or you could come by after I close up.”

Going by during open hours would be the safest option, considering the fact that it would be strictly business and Ty wouldn’t even have a chance of ‘bouncing like a pony’ since it was Friday and the shop was always packed on Fridays. He also had a feeling Chase had offered the chance to keep it strictly business, because Ty’s hesitance wasn’t exactly discreet. He could stop by, see the sketch and then that was it. No more teasing, no more playing around. No more excessive body work after the exhibition because the picture they had done would be finished. No need for him to go back.

No need except the one he felt somewhere inside, and that need was a lot stronger than any other.

“I’m kinda busy tonight...” Ty said, going through his schedule which

actually was pretty packed. The perfect reason to skip it all together. And of course Ty would rather skip the reason than the opportunity. “I won’t be there until eleven, maybe close to midnight.”

He was actually grinning while he waited for Chase’s response. The guy would have to wait for him. Sit still and wait until Ty would show up. How’s that for feisty?

“I think I can keep busy until you get there.” Chase finally said, loosening the knots that had somehow managed to tie themselves around Ty’s muscles. And then he heard the chuckling again and after that he heard silence that seemed to cocoon around his whole being. Chase’s voice was like a whisper straight against Ty’s ear. “Just don’t keep me waiting too long...I’m not a patient man.”

HE HAD thought he’d get to see a quickly drafted sketch on a piece of paper, but instead Chase had asked Ty to get rid of his shirt and started to draw straight on his skin. Faint lines of red marker formed an echo of the previous ones on Ty’s forearm while he sat in the chair next to Chase’s desk, his arm loosely on the desk and shirt tucked in a tight roll in his lap.

Highlights. Chase wanted highlights. More three-dimensional, more realistic. More ink, more stinging. More mental havoc and more motionless torture. Ty wasn’t sure how much more he could take before he would break. Wasn’t sure how far he could go before he would have to stop. Wasn’t sure how far he would go before he’d gone far enough. He didn’t even know what far enough meant, didn’t know how to get there or how to stay there until he’d feel good again.

The empty humming inside his head was like a hammer blow every time Chase’s hands touched his. Just one touch and Ty was full of bottomless hunger. He needed more of those hands, more of that touch. Needed it to be harder and fiercer. Needed it to push and pull him, further and further, faster and deeper and heavier and then force him into the freedom that somehow hovered over him every time he was with Chase. It was right there, Ty could feel it and still he didn’t know how to reach it.

“I want to try it,” Ty said, eyes held onto the creation being born into his skin. Chase drew narrow lines next to the old ones, the red color too bright against the black and too blood-like while swirling against Ty’s wrist. But the man didn’t respond, as if he wasn’t hearing what he wanted to hear. Ty turned his hand when gestured to do so, pressing the side of his palm against the desk. “I didn’t want it before. I never thought I could want it until I...couldn’t get enough of anything else.”

“Try, huh?” Chase said and tugged on Ty’s wrist when he turned the hand further. “What does that mean? You want me to put silk ribbons on your wrists and give you a little spanking while we fuck?”

Mocking, definitely. Ty looked up but wasn’t met with midnight blue eyes. Instead he saw the concentration and the drive, the same he had seen many times before. “No. I don’t want any sex games. I want...”

Ty looked back down again, his eyes now on the fingers holding the marker. Long and lean, short nails that were clean and even. Beautiful hands, really. Ones that could create the most beautiful pictures and the most tormenting pain. He knew that already without ever feeling it. Knew it and wanted it too.

“I want one scene. I want more than just pain ’cos pain is only skin deep, and that’s not enough anymore. It’s still good and I still want that too but I need something deeper.”

Chase made a few more lines before he took the marker off of Ty’s skin. The cap was soon back on, the marker on the desk and the man investigated the picture. “This is what I planned on doing. It looks a bit different with the marker but it’s gonna be in grey eventually.”

Ty imagined what was being told to him. Saw the lighter shades of grey and how it would make the tattoo look more alive. He moved his hand from the desk next to the pile of cloth he had in his lap and followed the lines with his fingertips. It would look great. It already did but it would become even better. Even more perfect. Even more like him, a deeper part of him. “Both arms, right?”

“Sure.”

Ty nodded and looked at Chase. “Sounds good.”

The one sitting on his stool opposite of Ty held his eyes for years and years before he rolled the stool closer and leaned his elbow against the desk. “I don’t play games. Not inside the bedroom or outside of it. If you’re looking for a thrill and want me to be your guinea pig, then I’m not interested.”

Ty shook his head. “Not what I’m looking for.”

Chase seemed to think of something while he kept completely quiet for one moment and then he moved even closer. Their knees were touching under the desk, just their knees and two layers of denim between their skins but it was still a connection, if only a faint one. But that small connection and the oceans deep tie between the two gazes was enough to hook Ty into those eyes. “You will have a safe-word and a word for slowing things down and you will use them if you feel I’m going too far. I need to trust you on this, because once we begin, I will be in total control and I don’t care how much you fight or scream. You will do what I tell you to do whether you like it or not. Understood?”

Total control.

Ty had been in places where other people had put pain on him, but never had he let go of control. Ever. It had always been his rules, his play, his decisions. Only his. Completely his. He’d have to let go now. Let go of the rules, of the control. Of himself. Of everything he knew and felt as himself and as the person he was because that person didn’t let go. Not of anything. But he wasn’t that person anymore, now was he? That person wouldn’t have begged to be touched by a stranger. That person wouldn’t have begged to be hurt.

Ty nodded but couldn’t bring himself to speak. His eyes dropped lower, back to those fingers and those hands, imagining how they would feel on his skin when given no boundaries. It did scare him and being scared wasn’t all that familiar to him either. But the fear felt good as well. Dragged tiny shards of anticipation through him until it somehow blended with the calmness he felt when he was around Chase. Like everything was okay. Like it all made sense.

“What are you thinking about?” Chase asked after Ty had held voiceless for a few long minutes. Nothing to say really and still there was so much. And Ty was sure he’d have to say it eventually because there was no point in pretending he was only looking for a good time and anyone would do. “I like

pain. And I like tattoos. The fact that I can get both from you isn't really the only reason why I've been coming here for the past year. And it wasn't just the pain that made me...bounce like a pony on your table. But you already knew that, didn't you?"

Ty lifted his gaze and met one just as ripped. "I think I figured you out by the third time you came here."

"Oh...I was that obvious, huh?"

Chase shrugged. "By the fifth time I started counting how many times you would bite your lip so that you wouldn't moan."

"I don't do that."

"Yeah you do. And I wish you wouldn't 'cos I've heard you moan and I wouldn't mind hearing it again."

Hello boner!

"Probably won't be an issue."

Chase grinned and with that small curl of his lips a flame lit up in his eyes, burning its way right to the centre of Ty's core. And the burn felt so good, almost heavenly. Fire flamed inside Ty, brighter and brighter by the second when Chase moved his stool around the desk and settled right next to Ty. A hand brushed his naked arm before rising higher, and the higher it got, the more length Ty's body seemed to gain. Like he was stretching towards the ceiling, trying to extend his body so that the touch would linger a little longer.

"We'll keep it simple... Your safe-word is red, okay? If you feel like I'm going too far, you will say it and I will stop. Immediately. I promise you that. If you need me to slow down, you say 'yellow', and I will stop what I am doing, give you a moment and move on to something else. But you can beg for anything...I like to hear you beg. 'Please' sounds very enticing while coming from your lips."

Chase rolled his stool even closer until he was almost pressed against Ty's side. And Ty wasn't even thinking of turning his head and looking at the man because that would've been pointless. His eyes were closed already and his head was too busy tilting towards his shoulder to give Chase's hand more room to roam over Ty's neck. Just fingertips, slow circles and even slower soundless words. And his body heard every one though his ears heard nothing.

And it was the emptiness in that space that made Ty's body crowded. Suddenly full of feelings that were safe and terrifying at the same time, pulling him away while pushing him towards the hand, the man.

The touch placed on top of his thigh was anything but soft. Ty could feel the weight of Chase's palm, the size of it, the shape. Not much larger than his but his was weak now. Powerless. Stripped once again and the feeling of covered nakedness felt odd and unfitting. Not him. Not like him. And still there were miles and miles of recognition blooming inside him, telling him this was the way it should be and he was only doing what he was supposed to. And no matter how far that hand went, the one now covering the whole of his neck and the one rising higher to lure his hips into the familiar ache, Ty's mind drifted away. Further and further, until his thinking seemed to be only a small black dot in the whiteness of his mind.

"Your limits, Ty. Those are the only ones you need to worry about 'cos those are the ones we'll follow. Do you know what they are?" Chase asked while his hand rose yet a little higher. Ty's breath came out a little gruff, his lips suddenly dry and his throat throbbing while he felt the weight of Chase's hand against the skin of his neck. He managed to shake his head before a word got out. "No."

"That's okay too," Chase muttered and slid his thumb higher, following the vein under Ty's skin. "We'll find them. And I'll push you further and further until you've gone as far as you can. And then I'll push you some more. And you will let me do that because you know you can stop it at any time."

Against his jaw now, higher. Against the dip under his lower lip, higher. "Don't you, Ty?"

"Yes." He mindlessly prayed for that finger to move a little higher, against his lips, between them. Inside his mouth. Inside him. But it never did, never came to invade him. Instead it held in place, right beneath his lip, the touch was barely there and it still printed Ty's whole body without doing much of anything. "I'd rather not have the scene before the exhibition, because you'll be sore and I don't think it's a good idea for you to be in any condition other than in your prime when you sit there and have people goggling at you. But I would like to have some...basic training."

“Sounds like a scene to me,” Ty muttered and used all the strength he had in him not to gasp when Chase’s finger stroked just the outline of his lip. “If you consider it to be one, then it is. You won’t be required to get naked and I won’t even touch you unless you ask me to. It’s simply about proving a point, nothing more.”

Proving a point. Ty was sure he didn’t want any points proven because his own were turning into mush while Chase was perfectly calm. But he did want to try it. Needed to try it because this not knowing was far worse than anything. “And I would still have my words?”

“Yes.”

Ty chewed the inside of his lower lip, suddenly so goddamn aware of everything again. But he soon nodded and looked at Chase. “Okay. Basic-training with no nakedness and no touching and I have my words.”

Chase grinned and his hands were no longer there, they were gone now. No longer touching, no longer holding. No longer conquering, claiming. But his expression was enough to screw up Ty’s head and the grin grew wider when Ty swallowed loud enough for someone in the other room to hear it.

“Stand up.”

Ty looked at the man who had sat next to him but who was standing now and Ty was immobile, unable to make his muscles function. Chase’s eyes looked at him with a shimmer, chastely and still so inviting. Willing his body to move, telling him that was what he was meant to do now. Numb and still electrified, Ty stood up and turned to face Chase. And as soon as he did, one hand took hold of his belt buckle, while the other rose back up. Lazy, like a predator playing with his prey, Chase entangled his fingers with Ty’s hair, burning Ty’s scalp and rushing his blood while their bodies came closer.

Fingers played with the buckle, pulled the belt out of its metal hoops. “You remember your words?”

“Yes.”

Fingers clung to the buckle, the belt hung loose against the front of Ty’s jeans. “Do you want to say either one?”

Breath against his lips, eyes still pierced into his. Fingers squeezing so tight there wasn’t a way for him to move. “No.”

The smile transforming Chase's features into something even more wicked was like a tidal wave against Ty's nerves, clenching each end until he was shivering beneath his skin. One firm yank, and Ty could feel his belt getting pulled out of each hoop. One after another, determined and reaching towards a goal Ty couldn't see, but his eyes became blind to anything other than the slow burn building hotter and hotter in Chase's eyes. The deep blue was now almost bottomless, like looking at a starless sky only seconds before the storm. Devouring him, calling out for him. And somehow the sharp command to turn around, didn't even make Ty blink, not even when the hand let go of his hair and he felt the end of his belt disappear. He did what he was told to do. Followed every word, every wordless demand Chase's hands made while they never let go of Ty's body when he turned towards the table.

"Hands behind your back."

They were senseless already, felt nothing, not even the touch that was placed around his wrists as soon as his hands were held against the small of his back. The belt, his own, black leather and soon decorating the lines and drawings on his skin, like poetry carved on skin. Yanked tighter, until Ty couldn't move his hands where they now were. And the momentary shame of panic and terror was noticed by the one standing behind him. A hand scraped through his hair, gentle this time, combed through his short hair before settling against the back of Ty's neck.

"Still remember your words?" His words. He had his words. No danger. No immediate danger.

Ty nodded, turning his head slightly over his shoulder. "I don't want to say them." It took more than he knew he had it in him to get the words out. His word was his, and it was lurking right on the tip of his tongue, getting ready to fly out. Only he didn't want to say it, didn't want to end what he was feeling because what he was feeling was beyond feeling at all. Not on his skin, not on his flesh. Somewhere deeper, somewhere that wasn't him at all. More and more, he wanted it all and still he couldn't get enough.

Chase's fingers ran down Ty's back, followed the shape of his spine while scratching his skin. "You will kneel on the floor for me now, Ty."

Kneel. Like a slave. Like a dog on the floor. Worthy of nothing, of no one.

Meaningless and worthless.

Ty's body recoiled from the haze he had slipped into, barely shifting the balance inside his mind. And Chase's hands were there to drown him all over again. Fingers dug into his skin, squeezed hard enough to hurt his bones. "I don't like to repeat myself."

Fingers in his hair again, others against his side. Tight, forceful. Not even pulling that much but simply keeping him in place when Chase pressed against him and his mouth was hot against the side of Ty's neck. "I want you to get on your knees and open your mouth, and then I want you to stay perfectly still while you wait for me to feed my cock into your mouth."

Ty's eyes fluttered while trying to focus his gaze into the wall in front of him. His whole body wavered when he tried to cling on to the last of what he knew of himself, desperate to say 'no' though he knew that was pointless. No amount of pleading would get him out and he wouldn't plead either. He didn't do that. He didn't. So why did his heart race and race when Chase's hand tucked tighter against his scalp, forcing his head to tilt back and almost lean against Chase's shoulder? Why did his body quiver and curl into a ball inside his skin when Chase's hand slid around him, squeezing his shape against Chase's?

It didn't take much for Chase to get Ty to turn around and for a moment he was faced with eyes just as fierce and determined and still he wanted to argue though he saw no way out. Except the most obvious, but he was beyond giving in and saying his word. Still his body refused to do as told, wouldn't move and go lower. Knees wouldn't bend, hands tried to move to push the man against him away until he realized he couldn't move his hands. Couldn't move at all. Not even when Chase let go of him, stepped back, only one step but that was enough for there to be empty space between them and that small spot of emptiness seemed to shout between Ty's ears.

"Down."

A silent battle that was bound to end in his defeat and Ty felt the first waves of nausea rock him to the bottom of his stomach when his knees buckled and he literally dropped to his knees. Not a good feeling now. No longer arousing or intriguing. Blank and cold, shivers in his spine and empty

humming inside his head. Out of himself, further than he'd wanted to go.

Ty's eyes lowered, down, down, down, until he was looking at the floor instead of the man he had standing in front of himself. He didn't want to see the satisfaction in those eyes, didn't want to see any grin or a smile or any possible reactions vivid in Chase's body. Almost closed now, as it became more and more clear how this still somehow felt good though he hated feeling how he was feeling. And the man who didn't even need to touch him to make him lose himself, crouched in front of Ty, one hand placed against his neck, while pushing up. Eventually tightening around his throat and forcing Ty to look up. But those eyes weren't even looking at him but his lips instead and Chase leaned closer before he spoke. And his words stroked every fiber like he had a way to penetrate Ty without even trying. "You hate it, don't you?"

Eyes looked up at him, no longer lingering on his lips with a concentration that was almost like a gentle touch. And there wasn't a hint of satisfaction in that gaze, not even a fraction. "Does it make you feel weak? Does it make you feel small and worthless? Like you're just a piece someone's gonna use?"

Ty bit the inside of his lip, refusing to answer. No answer was really needed because Chase knew how it made him feel. And the tightness only increased around his throat, not suffocating but simply making sure he knew where he was, tilting his head slightly further back. As if he could actually forget that he was kneeling in front of someone, *for* someone. It brought a different kind of blankness into him. Into his mind.

"Does it Ty?"

Swallowing arduously against the hand that still held him, and Ty was forced to reorganize his thinking, because his thinking was lacking any focus. "Yes."

"You feel weak?"

"Yes."

"Millions of people spend hours of their days on their knees..." Chase muttered while his hand moved higher, against Ty's jaw now. And his eyes were lower again, looking at the spot of skin where his thumb moved. Against Ty's skin, against his lip now. Screwing up his thinking, distorting his thoughts. "They eat on their knees. They pray on their knees. Does that make

them weak? Does that make them worthless?"

Ty tried to concentrate but he wasn't sure which he should be focused on; the voice or the touch. Both pulled him deeper into the dark haze he had managed to escape once already. No way out now. "No, it doesn't."

"So why would it make you any of those things either?" Chase asked while brushing his thumb across Ty's lips, once, twice. Slowly luring those lips to open and they did, invited the finger inside. "I told you to kneel for me. Nothing else. What I said I want to do is what I want, not what I'm going to do. So all you had to do was kneel."

Ty thought of answering, arguing, but he was unable to do so when the thumb was pressed against his tongue, inside his mouth now. And without even thinking he sucked it in, deeper into the warmth. And though he realized how very revealing it was, his throat gave in to the vibration rising from his chest, exposing the small sound of desire that was like a knife through his mind. Chase didn't really need any more weapons against Ty and he still gave him one more. And that sound brought the satisfaction into those eyes, like tiny sparks gleaming in the blueness of those beautiful eyes.

Chase grinned and leaned a little closer, bringing his mouth right next to Ty's ear while he pinned Ty's chin between the thumb buried in the heat of Ty's mouth and the remaining four fingers still held against his skin. "I think you haven't done this for anyone before...and I find it very arousing that you're doing it for me now. And I'll have you on your knees for me many, many times, and by the time I'm done, you'll realize that's exactly where you should be."

Ty was sure he kept quiet, but somehow a small gasp managed to roll out of him. And it wasn't the finger that made him feel like he was betraying his inner self, it was the voice spoken softly into his ear. And Chase murmured his approval right into the centre of Ty's consciousness while he pulled his finger out and brushed the moisture against Ty's lips.

"Feeling better now?"

"Yes." Holy shit...was that his voice? Ty followed Chase's movements with his eyes while the man returned to his position in front of Ty, still crouching and leveled as he was. "See...? Not hard at all."

THE WORK done on Ty's lower abs healed as planned. The wounds on his self-respect did not. They got new bandages every now and then, because every time he met Chase he felt good. Every time he was alone he felt like shit because then he was convinced he had lost his mind. It didn't help that Chase got him lured deeper and deeper into some fucked up dimension that was created by a low voice and tempting words that were really empty but held millions of promises and that world existed simply for the pleasure of one man.

And that man was not Ty.

He hated the feel of the floor under his knees. He hated the way his feet just gave in at some point while Chase kept looking at him and talking with a voice that was as soft as velvet and still sharp enough to cut through thick paper. He hated the restriction created by his own belt around his wrists. He was pretty sure Chase had actual cuffs or shackles but it was probably his dislike towards the gesture that made Chase use Ty's belt. And he did it all the time. Every time Ty was at the shop he ended up on the floor with his hands tied behind his back and Chase wasn't even remotely interested in how sick it made Ty feel. Physically ill.

Implant training. That was what Chase called it. Ty didn't care what it was, he still hated it. And still he ended on the floor every time. And still he hated the unfulfilled hunger even more, because he *did* grow hard while kneeling on the floor and that was even sicker than every other sensation he was having. And as if Chase had known how incredibly difficult it was for Ty to face up to getting his kicks out of something even more twisted than pain alone, the guy didn't even touch him. Just like he'd said. Not one single stroke and Ty wasn't expected to give any either. Chase seemed perfectly content with Ty on the floor without really anything to do.

Every conversation took place with Ty on his knees in the back of Chase's shop. Ty was starting to think he was going to end up spending the rest of his life in that position. And it went on and on, with nothing new added to the mixture and it was slowly driving Ty insane. How was this getting him

anywhere?

“Your hands feel okay?” Chase asked one evening when Ty had spent what felt like seven hours on the floor. Ty nodded and kept his eyes away from Chase while the man walked up to him, standing still for a moment before crouching behind him. “Move your fingers.”

Ty did, bored to death and a little aggravated too, and he only stopped when Chase’s fingers touched his. Other than taking his belt and tying it around Ty’s wrists, Chase hadn’t touched him in days. And now that he did, Ty yearned to feel more. On his skin, on his hair. On his body and core and soul and spine. All over. Only those hands left much too soon and Chase stood up. “Feels warm...I’d hate to drive you to the ER for lack of circulation.”

Ty fought the urge to roll his eyes while Chase walked back to his desk. “It’s not nearly tight enough for that to happen.”

Chase glanced at him while sitting down. “You want it tighter?”

“No,” Ty muttered and frowned while he wasn’t completely sure that was the truth. “I’m only saying that it could *be* a lot tighter and it probably wouldn’t even leave a mark let alone cause any difficulties in my blood flow.”

Chase leaned against the back of his chair and looked at Ty with a knowing beam in his eyes. His hand played with the pen he’d held in his hand even while testing the fucking circulation in Ty’s hands, playing with the tip and tapping it against the desk. “So you *want* marks on you?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“No...but that’s what you meant.”

“Oh...you read minds now?” Ty grunted. Very mature, yes. And Chase appreciated his childishness enough to grin with amusement written all over his face. “Someone’s having a bad day.”

Ty ignored the mock and looked at the man who seemed to be way too pleased with Ty’s bad mood. “I’m pretty sure I could pull my hands out if I tried hard enough, so no need to worry about my circulation.”

“So why won’t you?”

“What?”

“Why won’t you pull your hands out? You could. I wouldn’t beat you for doing it ’cos you’re down there out of your own free will. So why won’t you?”

Point taken.

Ty shut up, not sure if he even had an answer. He hadn't really even thought about getting out, though he knew he could. That just wasn't an option. No matter how shitty he felt, he'd feel even worse if he left now. So instead of doing much of anything, he held his eyes on Chase while the man dropped the pen on the desk and leaned his elbows against his knees while looking at Ty. "I know you feel pissed. I know you feel like you're wasting your time and that you could take a lot more than what I'm giving you. And you're probably right."

What?

Ty felt a wave of smothered panic inside him when Chase sat up straight and the expression on his face went from amused to absent. Bored. The change in his expression forced Ty to look up, really look up to the guy who wasn't even touching him now and still Ty felt every part of his body alarmed. Chase ran his eyes over Ty's body, every part that was visible, before his eyes returned to look into Ty's. "If you want marks and if you want pain, I'll be glad to show you a dozen clubs in the city with fifty men who'll be more than willing to whip your ass till you can't sit for a week."

The thought was thrilling and yet it left Ty's body completely cold. He'd dwell on the pain, would savor it and love every second of it. But he didn't want fifty men. He only wanted one.

He only needed one.

"Pain is not the issue, Ty. You don't need pain, and that wasn't what you wanted. It would be much too easy for you and I won't give it to you now. But if that's what you want, then all you have to do is say it and you're free to leave."

Why was he scared? Why did he feel his heart pound against his throat? Ty made an effort to shake his head but he couldn't do that. Couldn't do anything. Not move or speak or even breathe when he thought about walking out. When had that become the biggest of his obstacles?

"You wanna leave?" Chase asked. No longer even bored but completely blank. Ty saw nothing, and the nothingness was even worse than the bored expression. He shook his head this time, just a small movement but enough to

make the point clear. Chase tilted his head to the side, eyes narrowed while he looked at Ty. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

And he was. And he stayed still, paralyzed with fear until a small smile crept on to Chase’s lips and he seemed pleased with Ty’s response. Then Ty no longer felt afraid. And the feeling of relief was even scarier than the thought of leaving.

CHASE’S DAILY schedule became the extension of Ty’s. Ty worked for however long he had to while his own staff left from work as soon as the clock hit five, but he stayed longer. Shipping, phone calls, emails. Hardware that wasn’t working and needed to be fixed, programs that needed to be updated. Software that wasn’t working as it was supposed to and Ty usually made the best of it before sending it forwards. And if during the day he’d received a call or even a text from Chase, he’d end up spending the rest of his evening on the floor. And as twisted as it somehow was, Ty felt his day a little undone if he *didn’t* end up on the floor. Like he’d left out a part of his normal routine.

Chase wasn’t interested in anything more than tying him by his hands and telling him to get on the floor. And Ty was just as bored every time but he felt calm too. The time he spent kneeling became longer and longer, and while the time extended, the tightness of the belt around his wrists wavered. Sometimes it was tighter, sometimes looser. At times it was so tight Ty felt it as painful, but those times were very short and not nearly long enough. And then at times the belt was so loose Ty wouldn’t have even had to try to get his hands out, and that made him a bit worried, because during those times he held his hands perfectly still out of fear of losing the belt. As if that would’ve been the worst that could happen.

Chase kept his shop open now even though Ty was there. Before the doors had been locked and he’d done his drawings and sketches while Ty had been kneeling on the floor. Now the doors were open and people came in and out. Chase had promised he wouldn’t take anyone into the back room so no one would see Ty, and Ty was glad of that promise. He would yank his hands out

and rage his way back home if anyone saw him the way he was now. But no one came in. People booked for times, brought in pictures, asked for prices. Men, women, young and old. And Ty discovered that Chase wasn't any more polite with anyone else either. He was just as short-worded, just as close to snapping if someone happened to get on his nerves. He even refused to work on someone because the person was condescending or rude or just annoying. He also wanted to mold certain pictures, and Ty believed Chase had an eye for what would actually look good on skin and what would not.

While Ty spent hours and hours on the floor, he had nothing more to do than to investigate the room around him. He found Chase's way of organizing a little more than messy. There were papers everywhere. Sketches, drafts, notes. The only place that was spotless and in perfect order was the quilted table and the small metal table he used while tattooing. Everything else was placed on the other side of the room and it looked as if Chase's actual working section came from another world, because there was nothing excess in it. All of his tools were lined up, organized. Like no one had ever even touched any of them though Ty knew someone had. He waited for the exhibition, because that was the last time he'd get any ink done on his body. He had kept his promise and hadn't had any more work done on him. And he wouldn't, not after the highlights. And then it was done. He really didn't need anything more, and there wasn't all that much he would want either. Well...that was until he started seeing hazy sketches hanging from the notice-board above Chase's desk.

Just lines. Individual at first, but the next day he came by, there was a new line and then a new. And while the days went by and Ty's time spent on the floor grew from days into a week and then into another one, he saw those lines transforming into a picture. And the picture was eventually so beautiful, he wanted it done to him.

It was a tree. Sort of. A bonsai tree. Made out of sharp, black lines but somehow they all connected and created a delicate piece of handwork. Lace-like mist on white paper, lines that went from thick to too narrow for his eyes to see them from his position on the floor. He could see every branch, every leaf. Somehow Chase had managed to vividly draw even those while they

were still just lines. And Ty's decision of not getting any more done on him wavered, because he *wanted* that picture. Wanted it to be on his skin and not on anyone else's. But instead of saying it out loud he kept looking at the picture with a small smile on his lips, one he hardly realized he was wearing but one the other man noticed. And Ty held his thought to himself, not willing to say it out loud, but then again he didn't say much of anything anymore.

As the days went on, Ty became quieter and quieter. He was tired. Work was too hectic and took too much out of him and while his body felt good, his mind grew exhausted. Too heavy in some way, too clouded. Blurry and crowded with things he couldn't name but they were there nonetheless. And soon he was no longer all that aware of being on his knees for someone. He knew it but it became almost meaningless. Made no difference. He had been there so many times already, too many for him to keep track anymore. And getting down on his knees wasn't a battle anymore, because every time he went to the shop he knew what he was going to do. And he did it almost automatically now, no need for him to think what to do, because he did the same thing every night; as soon as his belt was off, Chase would tie his wrists and Ty would kneel. After the first time he hadn't even taken his shirt off, and Chase hadn't touched him other than at times testing the warmth of his hands. A continuous line of actions that repeated themselves every night. Time after time after time.

That was why Chase seemed a bit surprised when a week before the exhibition Ty wasn't at all still on the floor. He kept shifting his position as much as he could without completely falling over, moving his hands too because his shoulders were stiff from the hours of non-stopped working on his own personal work-computer earlier during the day. And then he did the unthinkable, said something he had forced himself not to say before.

"Please take off the belt," his words were kind of slow, like they were dragged out of him. The belt was actually so loose he could've easily pulled his hands out but he didn't even think of doing so. Instead he lifted his gaze from where it had lain on the floor for as long as he could remember, lifted his head too because it had become a feeble extension of his body, and looked at Chase. "My shoulders are hurting." And he blurted out a whole explanation on

how his day had been the worst in a long time and that he wasn't getting enough sleep and that he was really fucking tired.

Chase dropped the pen from his hand and stood up. "Just started hurting or have been hurting?" he asked while he came to Ty, again crouching behind him.

"A while now," Ty said, not aware that his answer didn't really fit the question but he was feeling a little dazed. And he was surprised how much he disliked the feel of leather disappearing from around his wrists. His skin felt naked, something misplaced and taken out of the right context. And he expected Chase to stand up and pass him the belt and then get back to his work, but instead the belt ended on the floor and Chase's hands ended on top of Ty's shoulders. "You should've said something earlier."

"I'm sorry," Ty mumbled and his eyes closed without him even realizing what he was saying or doing or how he silently sighed when Chase massaged his tensed muscles. It hurt, but differently. Every slow circle Chase's fingers made forced some of the tension out of Ty's shoulders, hurting the muscles and even his skin while his shirt got rubbed against his skin. But it felt good too, his joints singing high praises to those hands and loosening while Chase worked on his body differently this time.

Ty's hands folded on his lap while his head dipped lower and lower and his thoughts became even more fluffy and blurry while the time spent on the floor turned into time spent within the reach of those hands. And Chase went on and on, untying every knot while more silent sounds whispered out of Ty's mouth without him even realizing he was doing so. And when he no longer felt the tension or the pain of his muscles clenching in tight knots, those hands still kept moving but that was different too. They moved to his neck, from the shirt to bare skin, slow spirals creating pools and pools of whirls inside Ty. Twisting his thoughts, knitting them into tight balls that were so tangled he couldn't make any sense of them. He barely felt the hands leave his skin but he felt the touch return and he wanted Chase to go on. On and on and on and never stop. Wanted to say it out loud without even a thought of how far from his usual manners that would've been. But he missed his shot, because those hands left and Chase stood up and he took a few steps before standing in front

of Ty. “You wanna get up?”

“No.” Not thinking, clearly not thinking. Not looking either because his head was still hanging and he had to fight to get his eyes open. But once he did, and it seemed to take forever before that moment was there, everything looked too bright, too clear. All the edges too sharp and detailed. They didn’t fit the world he felt boiling inside his head. One filled with stuffed emptiness and blurred images that weren’t even real.

“You okay?” Chase asked and brushed his hand against Ty’s hair. He shivered with that one touch alone and was close to closing his eyes again but instead he looked up. Up at the man who had put him there. Just the first time and not even forcing but telling him to do it and he had. And now he was still there and Ty wasn’t sure if the floor was the only place Chase had put him into.

“Ty?”

He was looking at everything with eyes that were not his. Through understanding that didn’t fit his. No terror, though. Just a feeling of insecurity that really wasn’t his to feel.

The hand came back, under his chin now and tilting his head up and though it was done gently, as if Chase was afraid Ty might fall to pieces if handled too roughly, Ty’s eyes fluttered again, something buzzing inside his head like the machine he hadn’t heard in ages. No question, just a firm look and Ty found himself sinking into that gaze. Deeper and deeper, all over again. But all of him this time, nothing left where it really was.

“I need you to do something for me, Ty.”

Anything. I’ll do anything.

“I need you to stand up and sit on the table.” Chase’s expression softened, if only a little, when Ty frowned and was about to argue. “Everything’s okay, but your skin is ice cold, and you’re a little confused right now and I don’t want you to freak out within the next fifteen minutes so get up now and sit on the table, okay?”

Chase’s voice was oddly gentle, and the odd tone made Ty feel strangely at ease. And he didn’t even realize he was close to pulled up from the floor though he did feel his feet a little wobbly when he finally managed to stand up.

Chase reached for a sweater he'd thrown on his stool while Ty sat on the edge of the table and then Chase stood in front of Ty with a fully satisfied grin on his face. "Let me help put this on you."

"I don't –"

"Not negotiable. Hands up," Chase interrupted. Ty was rushing out of whatever haze he'd been in, but he did realize his skin *was* ice cold and he was tired too. And though he wanted to argue and he no longer felt clearly as hazed as he had a moment ago, he lifted his hands, allowing Chase to pretty much clothe him like a little child. And the sweater, black like everything else he'd seen Chase wear, smelled just like the man himself; musky and dark, a little spicy. And though Ty had thought they were almost the same size, the sweater felt like a pool of thick fabric around him. But it was warm. "Will you drink if I bring you a glass of water?"

"Are you actually asking for my opinion?" Ty muttered and looked at Chase. The man smiled and his smile did funny things to Ty's insides. Made them quiver and chant words like 'gorgeous' and 'perfect'. "Yes. But really I'm just trying to be polite. You'll drink it anyways, even if I have to force it down your throat."

Ty tried to grunt but he ended up nodding instead, still a little feeble and he was somehow breathless too, though he hadn't done anything. Chase got him a glass of water, and Ty couldn't follow his movements though he never even left the room. The sink was in the corner of the room as was the small cabinet with a scattered collection of dishes. And while Ty's fingers managed to wrap around the glass and he even managed to hold it without dropping it, Chase positioned himself next to Ty, astride the table, so that Ty was almost cradled between his thighs. And almost became fully when Chase brushed Ty's hair off his face and he dwelled on that touch, following it until he was close to pressing himself against the man. And Chase didn't leave his hair or his skin or any part of him and the coldness slowly melted off and left Ty just a bit dazed.

He turned his head, just slightly but enough to see Chase and what he saw was still the satisfaction but worry too. And he really wasn't feeling the combination especially coming from *this* man. "What the fuck just happened?"

Chase ran his fingers through Ty's hair while poking the glass with his other hand. "Drink."

Ty did, never leaving Chase's eyes and he hardly felt the water against his tongue. Chase looked so different now, much softer in some way though he still looked the same. His hair was just as much of a mess as ever, eyes just as dark. Brows that were always held low with a furrow in between looked the same and so did his lips that were never truly smiling though the man was. But the way he looked at Ty was different. Much more intense and still not one bit sensual. "You feel better now?"

"Answer my question."

"Clearly you feel better," Chase muttered and glanced at the belt that was still lying on the floor. His gaze hovered somewhere on the floor before he looked at Ty again. And he seemed to search through Ty's face, and Ty wasn't sure if he found whatever it was he was looking for. "I think what happened was...that you were too tired, and I'm sorry I didn't notice that. You haven't been fighting any longer. And I think you actually like staying on the floor. It can get a little consuming when you fall far enough. And it can be a bit confusing and I'm not really surprised you felt that way, because your reactions aren't really accurate when you're tired. You can easily let go if you're not completely intact."

"I did *not* let go," Ty muttered and took a sip of water. Chase wore one of his one-sided smiles, his hand against Ty's back now and somehow the small, circling movements his hand made seemed completely natural now. "I know you didn't. But you would have if I had pushed you a little further. No point in arguing 'cos you know it's true."

Ty held the glass with both of his hands now, hands low against his lap and so were his eyes. He didn't like the thought of letting go. Of himself especially. And still he knew Chase was right and that was very frightening.

"It's okay, Ty. When you get there, you can do it. It's safe to let go and eventually you need to do that, or else this is all pointless."

"Not that easy, you know."

"Actually it is. All you have to do is...let go." Chase brushed the side of Ty's face, gesturing him to turn to look at the man, and he did, a bit timid and

not at all sure of himself anymore. “I’ll be there and I’ll take care of you, so there really is nothing to be afraid of.”

“Promise?” And as soon as Ty said it, he wanted to take it back. He sounded much too scared, much too afraid. But then again he was. Afraid and scared and terrified. Lost in himself though he was almost intact now. But Chase simply nodded and poked at the glass again. “I promise.”

THE EXHIBITION was a hectic mess with what felt like fifty million people asking questions that even Ty found stupid and random. Does it hurt? Well *duh*. Does it bleed? Hello, it breaks your skin. Are those like actually real needles? Yes, someone actually asked that and Ty was surprised Chase was even trying to be polite while he answered. The one asking the question was a perky, twenty-something blond, her face picture perfect and eyes like small stars and she made it her business to hover at Chase’s booth *forever*, until it wasn’t just Chase that was getting sick of her being there.

Ty wouldn’t go as far as to say that he was jealous. No. He wasn’t, couldn’t be. But she was annoying, and she was so obvious with her stupid pick up lines and even stupider questions. By the times she had flashed her lashes for the sixtieth time and leaned against the small counter they had put up in the booth, with her breasts close to falling out of her halter-neck top, Ty was on the verge of telling her to fuck off before he’d fuck her off. But of course he didn’t. Because out of him and Chase, he was the polite one. And he managed to sit still and wait for Chase to get his tools ready and actually listen to her yak on and on and on about how much she had *always* wanted to get a real tattoo and how much she feared it would hurt – what a shocker – but when she fluttered her lashes some more and implied that she would gladly take any personal guidance into the world of body art, Ty wasn’t feeling at all polite.

“You know what,” he muttered and turned to look at her before Chase got a word in. “He’s actually kinda busy working on me, but you can leave your number and see if he calls you.”

Very discreet.

Her facial expression went from inviting to shocked and then she looked

beyond infuriated when she stared at Ty for a moment and went on looking at Chase, as if waiting for him to disagree. But Chase kept organizing his tools, obviously trying not to laugh while he was probably well aware of her eyes clinging on to him.

“Sorry, doll,” Chase said and flashed her with one of his smiles while lifting his eyes from the packages and gauzes he was organizing on the table next to Ty. “The guy has a point. I *am* pretty busy with guiding him into the world of body art.”

Even before her eyes widened and then ran over the very obvious traces of already being introduced to the world of body art literally written all over Ty, Ty felt his cheeks burn and then he knew he was blushing. And though he blushed very rarely, once he did, it was like a full face-mask. He turned to stare ahead, not looking at her but not willing to look at Chase either. But he did thank the guy for being as obvious as possible and Chase only found it funny. *Funny.*

“If you don’t want people to think you’re jealous, stop acting like it.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Yes, you were.”

“No, I was not.”

“Yes,” Chase said and sat on his stool beside Ty. “You were.”

“No. I was not. I was just worried her boobs might fall out and roll into your eyes and then you might actually cause some permanent damage with that thing,” Ty said and gestured towards the machine Chase had in his hand. But the man only grunted, rolling the stool closer. “In case you forgot, I already have.”

“No you haven’t... It’s not *damage*.” Ty dropped his eyes to the picture planted inside his skin, his fingers slightly brushing the lines swirling against his wrist. “If it was, I wouldn’t have come back.”

“You sure about that?” Chase asked. Ty looked at him, now for the first time after he’d found his new skin color and apparently it was still there because Chase cocked his brow and smirked. “Red suits you.”

Busted.

Ty was ready to respond with a few chosen words but then the machine

turned on, if only for a short moment when Chase tested the equipment and the buzzing, however quiet in the collection of sounds, swept Ty clean. Clean of everything. He didn't even feel the gauze clean the lines previously drawn into his skin, didn't hear whatever Chase said to him. All he could hear was the faint sound of that machine and the interlude of his favorite torture, the one he hadn't had in weeks.

Chase's hand brushed against his arm, but Ty hardly felt it. He was going numb already, too anxious to get it started but the touch that was placed against his bare shoulder woke him up. Chase looked at him with a knowing expression on his face and Ty felt his insides melt a little when Chase moved his hand from Ty's shoulder to his forearm, the touch never leaving Ty's skin. "Have you missed this?"

"Yes." He sounded too needy for his own good but he had missed it, too much. He'd missed the pain, the other worldly feeling it created and stole him into. Just a sting but it was so much more to him. And Chase probably understood, knew exactly what Ty was thinking, because he went as far as to follow the line of red marker on Ty's skin with his finger while looking at Ty with his eyes like two blue suns. Bright and deadly, giving life and killing at the same time. "I think I missed it too...though I can't get you bouncing like a pony here."

"I think you could," Ty muttered.

Chase ran his finger lower until it was right against Ty's wrist. One firm movement and his fingers were around Ty's hand. And he held on, tightly, implying something other than just holding on and Ty's blood rushed towards the lower section of his body. "Perhaps. But I'm pretty sure we will get kicked out if you start moaning in the middle of the work."

Ty glanced over his shoulder at the mass of people that were moving pass them. None of them seemed to realize what they were talking about. They couldn't hear, not through the mess of sounds and voices and noise that was becoming too intruding now. Ty wished they would've been anywhere else but there. Any place would've been better, as long as it would've been clean from any excess souls. He didn't need random people looking and talking. He only needed one.

“And just so you know...my eyes work perfectly well even with her boobs falling out,” Chase said, yanking Ty out of his thoughts with a whisper-like voice, squeezing a little tighter, and Ty barely manage to stay still. “I’m much too interested in other things.”

The way he looked at Ty gestured towards what he was interested in and Ty felt his insides leak with heated moisture. Suddenly the pain was irrelevant and so were the people and the noise and even the fact that Ty was sitting shirtless in the middle of hundreds and hundreds of people with the master of his own personal decay right next to him. He didn’t see any of it. Didn’t feel at all confused now, not at all like he was lost. And Chase’s hand, the one that had held on to Ty’s wrist like he wanted to print the skin with the shape of his palm, let go and moved higher. Slowly, as if he actually gave Ty time to move away but he was nailed on his chair, hooked into those eyes and the way that man looked at him. Like Chase was actually seeing him, unlike anyone had ever seen Ty before.

Hand against the side of Ty’s neck, thumb brushing his jaw and the man sitting next to him leaned closer. Breath against Ty’s cheek and his eyes closed even while he knew they weren’t alone. And then the warm air was against his ear, waking up millions of jingles in his mind. “I’ve seen you since day one. And I always knew what I saw.” A transparent echo of a kiss against Ty’s temple before the man pulled away.

Chase turned his eyes towards the mass of people gathering around, obviously much clearer about their surroundings than Ty was. “People tend to stay around and ask all kinds of things, so just say if it bothers you.”

Ty frowned, blinking a couple of times and turned to look at what Chase was seeing, there *were* a lot of people. And not one of them seemed to know how screwed up Ty was. “I’ll...manage.”

Chase was much more determined now. Not quite as slow as before and Ty wasn’t sure if he had imagined the slowness altogether because the work was done with the same talent and drive as before. But it hurt more. Burned deeper. And against everything Ty had done before, he tried to ignore the pain now. Tried to keep it on the surface only and not care. Not care about the pain or the buzzing or the hand that was squeezed around his wrist. Not give a shit

about how it captured him once again and held him in the cradle that was his only and no one else's; and one he could stay in until the world ended. But he failed. And while his efforts came tumbling down, the man he had wanted and then wanted some more and hated too at some point before falling even harder for him, only smiled and glanced up at Ty when he was indeed biting his lip. But the moan escaped, if only quiet and probably voiceless enough for Chase not to hear it, but it was still a defeat.

The crowd that had only passed by was now stopping next to the booth. Some made a few comments before moving along but some stayed in place and watched Chase work. And some stayed in place and asked questions. From Chase, thank God, because Ty was starting to slip again and he wasn't at all in a state that would've allowed him to be too responsive. But there was a woman, in her late forties judging from her voice and the way she looked, though Ty was only able to quickly glance at her, and she was asking questions that pretty soon required Ty to answer.

And he wanted to tell her to *leave* because he was too busy slowly losing his mind.

"Has he done all of your pictures?" she asked, leaning against the counter with a curious smile on her lips. She really didn't look like someone who was that into tattoos, but what the hell did Ty know. His staff probably had no idea half of his body was covered in ink.

"Yeah, he...has." Ty took a deep breath when Chase reached a tender spot a few inches beneath the crook of Ty's arm. "And it's only one picture."

"Oh...yes, it is. Sorry, I didn't notice. Very beautiful. Very well done," she said, smiling and Chase responded with a quick thank you before wiping excess ink from Ty's skin. And Ty hoped she would leave, just get going already and stop pestering him. But she stayed, and while others looked for a while and then moved along, she stayed in place and seemed to be very intrigued by what she was seeing. "Have you had any other tattoos on you or only the one he has made?"

"Just this."

"Did you two plan on making one big picture or did it just kind of evolve?" she went on. Ty closed his eyes, biting his lips again but the tuck on

his wrist was enough for him to release the hold of his lip and the moan rolled out. Not so quiet now, not so silent. And Chase rewarded him with a slow brush against the skin of his inner wrist. “Well, Ty...answer the lady.”

Oh...my...God... “We planned on...um...the big one...” He would definitely embarrass himself soon. It wasn’t just the pain that made him feel like he was walking on glass. It was Chase and it was the fact that while no one knew what he was doing, *he* knew. And he knew he was letting go, if not of himself but of something. And it *did* make him want to do it so that he knew Chase would enjoy it. And another moan just brushed out, escaped without him even realizing it when Chase turned his hand and went towards the lines on the crook of his arm. “Oh...shit...”

“I don’t have any tattoos myself but my son has plenty... I find it quite fascinating, really. And I must say it was very brave of you to trust this man enough to design the picture before having any other work done on you.” She chuckled and evidently talked to Chase. “No offense.”

“None taken... I guess we both got lucky,” Chase responded, much more friendly than usual. And his words warmed some hidden part of Ty, folding his secreted feelings even tighter. “Didn’t we, Ty?”

“Yes.”

“So will you be continuing the picture to cover his back also? I noticed that it is still left empty.” A question to Chase, clearly, and while Ty was glad she didn’t ask anything from him, he was growing a little restless when Chase’s answer seemed to take more and more time. His eyes opened, searching for Chase’s but he couldn’t reach the gaze that was held on Ty’s arm. “No.”

Just ‘no’. And that was true also because they had agreed to finish what they had started and then that was it. And it was Ty’s decision, not Chase’s and he had made it clear since the beginning. So why did it feel like shit now?

“Oh...” she gasped. “If I may ask, is there any special reason for that?”

Chase’s hand went to clean off the excess ink and his eyes looked up at Ty. And what Ty saw was foreign to him because there was something even darker in those eyes. Much too dreadful and deep for him to dive into. “Ty doesn’t want anything more. Just this.”

A simple fact but Ty felt as if it was an accusation. And he had no idea what he was really hearing because he felt as if there were things written between the lines and he just couldn't read them.

“Well, perhaps that is for the best. It looks just perfect the way it is,” she said, her smile again vivid in her voice. Chase's eyes held Ty's for one more moment before he went back to his work. “I think so too.”

The burn was back and so was the overwhelming blankness that swept away everything. And for the first time since it had all started over a year ago Ty wanted it to be gone. He was still looking at Chase though he didn't have much to look at. No eyes to meet, no lips to follow. Just the words that already haunted his mind though he'd just heard them. But he sank again, got lost. And he was forced to stay there, forced in place in the pitch black darkness by one hand and a stack of needles and one man and he couldn't find his way out anymore. No longer.

CHASE HAD ignored Ty's attempts to get all the stuff packed into the car later that day. He'd said Ty's arm, the left one since he'd only done the one now, wasn't fit for any actual work, and Ty had to wait by the car, close to fucking pouting, while Chase had carried everything to the car and packed his jeep so full, Ty was sure there was stuff they hadn't brought with them that morning. And the car wasn't really fit for the load, though Chase insisted that a classic could carry any amount of weight. Ty silently argued by saying that it wasn't a classic but five feet from antique. That had earned him a mean glare and fifteen minutes of not-talking.

The drive back took twice as long as their drive to the exhibition, because Chase had to stop by at a gas-station. Not to pump up his 'classic' but to refill his stash of goodies he had in the glove compartment. Ty waited in the car and made sense of the scenery while Chase did the shopping, and his wait extended to close to twenty minutes before Chase got back. A cup of take-away coffee was passed to Ty while Chase started the car and used his other hand and his teeth to yank open a bag of bacon chips.

“You want some?” Chase asked and looked over his shoulder to the road

spreading behind them while he wheeled the car to the road. Ty grimaced and took a sip of his coffee. “No, thanks. I think I’ll keep my arteries non-clogged.”

“Oh no...should I now feel guilty for drinking milk and eating baby lambs too?”

“No. But you should worry about what you’re stuffing inside yourself ’cos that’s not even food,” Ty said and grimaced ever more when he heard a loud crunch while Chase made a mush out of what he had just devoured inside his mouth. He’d done that before, chewing too loud just because he knew Ty hated it and what he was eating now smelled like dead cockroaches soaked in grease that had been used way too many times. Ty turned to look at Chase and crumbled his face out of nausea when he heard the sound again. “That’s disgusting.”

“Perhaps,” Chase shook his head as soon as his mouth was empty. “But it tastes *good* and nothing this good can be bad for you.”

“I think it’s the other way around... If it tastes good then it *is* bad for you.”

“My arteries are doing just fine, so don’t you worry.” Chase placed the bag between the seats and grinned while looking at Ty. “You sure you don’t want any?”

“You’d have to tie me first and force feed me to get me to swallow any of that crap.” Ty cursed silently when he saw the calculating shimmer in Chase eyes. He turned to look out of the window instead of looking at the man but he felt eyes on him. “I could do that, you know.”

“I’d be grateful if you didn’t.”

And then they said nothing, not either one of them. Ty finished his coffee and listened to the sounds filling the car while Chase destroyed his deadly snack. Those grease pork junks weren’t the only thing Chase liked to infect his body with. Ty now knew the guy had his coffee with five teaspoons of sugar – yes that was disgusting too. He didn’t give a damn about any nutrition guides or healthy living programs. And his comment about eating baby lambs was spot on, because he ate more meat in a week than Ty ate in a month. All that time spent on the floor had made Ty quite familiar with Chase’s habits and though most of them were distant compared to Ty’s, he knew he’d somehow

miss all of them once they were done. And they were bound to be, soon. Only his other arm left and then it would be over. And they had agreed not to push any more limits until Ty's picture was done, because Chase didn't want to risk damaging healing skin in the middle of their...limit pushing.

"We should wait for few weeks before we get on with the other one," Chase said after their mutual silence had lasted for good a ten minutes. Ty kept his eyes on the view outside; fields and houses and other cars. Small buildings and bigger ones, people walking on the side of the road. "No two week limit?"

"More like four."

Ty turned his head, eyes on Chase now and the cup was forgotten and so was the bag that was nearly empty. "Four?"

"It should be fully healed by then so I know if there's something to fix," Chase said. His eyes were on the road, his side profile just as haunting as any other and Ty wanted him to stop the fucking car and look at *him* instead of the road. "You haven't been worried about fixing anything afterwards before."

"Before I hadn't been distracted while working."

Ty glanced at the road and smothered whatever wings of delusional wishes he had fluttering inside him. Sure the crowd was a distraction. Had to be. And still he was silently hoping it wasn't the crowd Chase was talking about.

Ty had foolishly convinced himself that he could do this without investing anything in it. Well, he'd been wrong. And now he actually understood why Chase had made him spend hours on that fucking floor with nothing else to do. Pain *was* easy, everything else was not. And it was everything else that made the upcoming departure so hard. Ty had said 'no' to Chase's offer to do whatever had been done somewhere other than in the shop, but Ty had said that if he wasn't required to get butt-ass naked then the shop was fine. Now he regretted saying that, because he feared he'd never get to see Chase anywhere else and that the time that was slowly unraveling as the best he'd ever had was going to stay stained with outside sounds and echoes of footsteps from the next room, ones that were neither his nor Chase's. Not a place he could call his own, not a place he could call theirs. Not a place he could think of as something only they had shared though he now wanted something like that.

"I really do think I got lucky," Ty said, his mind drifted and partly gone.

Eyes still on the view ahead and he held it there. Fought the will to look at the one sitting behind the wheel. “And I think you were right...even if it had been damaged, I would’ve come back.”

At what point had he started caring, Ty didn’t know. But he did care now, and he had avoided caring for as long as he could remember. Perhaps the reason why Josh had been unable to get him to do what Josh had wanted wasn’t that he didn’t want to. Just that he had cared too little to do it. Or perhaps the reason was sitting next to him.

Between the ears, not between the legs.

Ty grinned, absently and far from amused. Chase didn’t even need to say a word now and he would’ve crawled in dirt to do whatever the man wanted. Just to get a chance to do anything. One time wasn’t enough. Wouldn’t be. And still Ty was unable to ask for more because he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to have anything other than his one scene. And wasn’t that just sad because he was sure he couldn’t get out if he went inside even just once.

TY TOOK his four weeks. And he found no peace from any of those days.

The tattoo healed. He shed his skin and took care of the scarring skin and admired the end result like he had done every time. And he was completely full of his own cinder, the one he kept pouring from his own mind and couldn’t get out.

Each day was a repetition of the one before. The same routines, the same people. Work became mindless, too blunt to be bothered with and sometimes he wondered if he’d even had anything done, because he couldn’t remember the first thing about the hours spent at the office. He met with friends, lived just like he had been living so far. And it felt completely off. Nothing fitted in anymore and nothing felt right.

He didn’t feel lonely. Just alone. And he didn’t feel any pain, not even the emotional type, though he knew that sometimes happened. He just felt numb. And while it all looked good and his friends seemed glad to have him around again, Ty didn’t bother to mention that the reason for his absence lately was gone too and he could now actually do what he wanted instead of what

someone else wanted him to do. Only he was starting to realize that those two things were the same. What someone else wanted was what he wanted. And he was unable to do what was wanted because he didn't know what that was. And when the four weeks period was coming to its end, and Ty was thinking if he should still wait a bit longer, he was still at the office when his phone went off and the sound alone told him who it was that was calling.

No 'Hi how are you' or any introductions. Just a simple 'hi' followed by his own.

"How's your arm?" Chase asked. Ty looked at his shirt covered arm that was stretched on top of the papers he had been going through and shrugged though there was no one to see him. "All healed. No need to fix anything."

"That's good." he heard a door close and then sounds of actual living. Cars and people, dogs barking. "I want you to come by tonight."

There wasn't even a hint of anything sexual in Chase's words but still Ty felt his skin shiver. "At the shop or –"

"My place." Oh...okay. Ty fell motionless. He could hardly feel his heartbeat though it had to be there. Chase's place. So it wasn't just kneeling on the floor. And it wasn't tattooing.

"I want you to work your schedule so that you can stay for the night. And I would pick you up 'cos you won't be able to drive afterwards." More sounds, louder. Chase was outside, on the street somewhere while twisting Ty's insides into knots. And he kept talking, like he wasn't talking about anything more defying than a shopping list. "No permanent damage and no bleeding. I won't break your skin and I won't break your bones but I will hurt you."

Ty searched his eyes through the room, as if he could find the solution of his monumental issues inside those walls. If he'd had to get up now and walk out, he would've stumbled on the floor, because his limbs were numb. Even his hands, even his fingers that were clinging on to the phone. But he could feel the familiar heat spread inside his flesh, like it had done so many times and would only increase by the second. "And I can still stop at any point?"

"Of course." The rattle on the line was created by dozens of sounds clashing against one another but Ty only heard the one talking to him with a voice that had the talent to strip him to the bone. Nothing left. Again there was

nothing left.

And then it was quiet. Through the phone Ty heard the jingling created by the small bell above the door at Chase's shop and he knew the guy was alone when his voice transformed into that gruff seduction. One that was unintentional but nevertheless fatal to Ty's self-preservation. "One scene, Ty. That's what you wanted and that's what I'm offering you. You wanna come or not?"

"Yes." Certainty and not a hint of hesitance. Only he'd preferred a bit more than just one time, but if that was all he'd get, then he'd take it. And he remained certain right until the point when he was in Chase's car and then in Chase's home. That was when he felt a little less sure of himself, because he wasn't at the shop anymore. Not in a place that was close to public and open enough for him to get out if he wanted to.

Chase's apartment was in an old industrial estate that had been turned into a residential building. The openness of the flat wasn't all that surprising judging by the exterior of the building. No walls, only the ones surrounding the apartment. Thick, angular beams divided the space into smaller sections. Even without any separating walls there was a bedroom and a living room and a kitchen. Even a study of some sort, if the amount of sketches and paper scattered around was anything to go by. But the color theme was just as murky as the man who lived in the place; dark and deep, black on top of other just as lifeless colors. Dark wood, dark fabrics. Not much brightness other than a few spots of color in pillows or curtains. And against everything Ty had seen so far, Chase wasn't all that unorganized. He actually held order in his home unlike what he seemed to do at the shop. Or perhaps it was just different here, because this was where he lived and the shop was just a place he worked at.

And the one living in that space studied Ty while he studied the space. And he felt every single second that went by, because each one made him a bit more detached from the world left outside Chase's doors. His home now. His rules, his command. His control, not Ty's.

And when Ty finally found enough courage to look at the man, he saw the human beast that was hidden inside. The one that had taken its time and spun its web around Ty so tightly he had no way of getting out now. No chit-chat.

No conversation mellowed with a cup of coffee. Ty could see how Chase obtained a different state of mind, one he had kept away so far but it was there now, and without even saying a word or moving he brought Ty down. Lower and lower until there wasn't any more space to lower himself into.

"You remember your words?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what they are."

Ty quickly licked his lips that had gone completely dry while he dropped his gym bag on the floor. He hadn't known what to take with him, but he was pretty sure he had a second set of clothes and a toothbrush. Hopefully. He could just as well have a gardening hose and three packs of playing cards because he'd been kind of all over the place when he had packed his stuff. Chase had recommended him to eat and rest, but for some odd reason Ty had only managed to pick at his food and just the thought of sitting in one place had been sickening.

"Red for stopping, yellow for slowing down."

"Good. And believe me, using those words is not a failure or a sign of weakness, so don't think you'll get punished or hurt worse for saying either one, okay?" Chase said, and Ty nodded while thinking if he could even remember those words later on. But then the heat was back in Chase's gaze and Ty could no longer even think, let alone say anything.

"Strip."

Five small letters and one word that was even smaller and it took so little space in the open air and still it managed to fill Ty completely. But while he thought he couldn't, not fully naked and bare and without any shelter, his hands worked, fingers moved and he got rid of his clothes. One piece after another while Chase stood still, fully clothed in his blacker than black armor created by jeans and boots and that goddamn long sleeved shirt that still covered his own drawings from Ty. And those eyes that had looked at Ty millions of times already, still kept looking and they held on to his without even glancing at his naked body when Ty was free from any fabric or leather belt or metal on buttons. And it was surprisingly easy to be naked, though he had thought he'd have a problem with it. There wasn't much Chase hadn't

seen before and whatever there was, was just another part of a human body. Skin and flesh. All the same if only in different wrappings at times.

The only time Ty felt at all awkward was when Chase moved, no longer in place and looking, but circling around him before standing behind Ty. And it was the lost eye connection that made Ty feel naked for the first time. The fact that he couldn't see someone seeing him. But he could feel the man, almost against his back and a warm breath against his shoulder. "Hands behind your back."

Not his belt this time, but shackles. Leather. Cold against his skin and tight around his wrists and Ty could see the truth since he hated these just as much as he hated his belt. They made him feel helpless, unable to do anything to protect himself and he still couldn't see how he no longer had to do the protecting. That was someone else's job now. Someone else would do it for him and keep him safe. He just didn't understand it, didn't see the simple gesture as a sign of trust though that's what it was.

"You feel okay?" Chase asked and ran his hands over Ty's naked arms. One done and the other still unfinished. The touch was reassuring, though somehow Ty knew it was the last one that would speak of tenderness in a long, long time. "Yes."

Against his neck now, just a slow stroke but enough to set his heart into a frantic race. "Close your eyes." Higher and higher, against his jaw now, then against his cheek and Ty's eyes fluttered shut, lids weighing what felt like tons and as soon as he did, those hands left and what he felt against his skin was something even softer. Cool and smooth, brushing across his face before it settled against his closed eyes.

Ty made an attempt to move when he felt the smoothness tighten and close around his head, but Chase pressed against his back. "You don't need to see, Ty. All you need to do is feel and trust me."

No place for argument and still Ty knew he could blurt out one word and it would all end. But he decided to feel instead. And trust. Because he did. Probably for the first time ever.

Ty nodded, not sure if that was noticed but he couldn't say anything and soon the feel of another body against his was gone. He felt a wave of air brush

his body, against his side, against his arm. No touch though, just air.

“On your knees.” And in the midst of all his internal battles and arguing over what was okay and what wasn’t and whether or not he could ever understand why someone would allow themselves to be this taken, Ty found following that order the easiest thing to do. No thinking, because he didn’t need to. Just obeying and moving, and his knees gave in and even with his hands behind his back and most of his coordination and balance gone he managed to kneel without stumbling and falling. And the reward for his obedience was instant; a stroke against his cheek and fingers combing through his hair, gently tilting his head back. “Very good, Ty.” The other hand joined in, settling just beneath Ty’s chin and pushing his head even further back, unraveling a small sigh from his lips. “You look perfect like that.”

Ty was sure he would’ve purred if he’d had the anatomy for such functions. But he did breathe a little easier and felt a little less timid and sitting on his heels was suddenly the only thing that made sense because that was the only thing he was made for. Right now. Right here. Thinking of any other actions seemed absurd and silly. Pointless. Waste of time.

“Do you remember what you do next?” Chase asked, combing through Ty’s hair once more before his hand left and only the one under Ty’s chin remained. And since Ty had found he had an amazing ability to memorize every little thing Chase had ever said, he didn’t respond with words but by opening his mouth and falling completely still, balancing on top of his heels. And Chase’s fingers brushed his skin, slowly drawing invisible ink inside his veins and making Ty’s mind reduce so far back he couldn’t remember a time he hadn’t been there.

The hand moved over his chin, thumb pushing against his lower lip and stroking the sharp edge of his teeth. “*Very good.*” And then the touch was gone and for a moment Ty thought he was left alone because it became so quiet. And the quietness seemed to last forever before he heard a quiet tinkling sound and then some shuffling and those sounds woke his body in a whole new way. Arousing and flushing, waking every part of him and making his senses and nerves even more sensitive. And then it wasn’t a finger that brushed his lips and soon it wasn’t only his own willpower that kept his mouth open.

Chase moved with the speed of an idler. Inch by inch, and there were many, and Ty could feel his own grow harder while his mouth got filled. The tip of Chase's cock pushed against the back of Ty's throat before pulling out just as slow. Over and over again, slowly driving Ty's head into a state of nonstop swirling and he wanted to close his mouth, around the shaft, tightly and lovingly and devour the taste and feel the shape. But all he could do was stay in place, still and immobile with his hands bound behind his back and his knees no longer even aware of how hard the floor was beneath him.

Chase pushed in, just as slow, but stayed inside for a little longer, blocking any airways and chances of swallowing the saliva that had leaked into Ty's mouth. And the moisture made the slide a little slicker after every slow thrust. One after another, just as deep, just as controlled. Like all they had was time. Like all they would ever do was this. And Ty found this the only place to be, even if the pulsing inside his own shaft was soon painfully fierce and he wanted to touch himself, wanted Chase to touch him.

Chase pulled out completely this time and trailed a strain of saliva with him, the wetness dripping against Ty's lip and his chin and eventually on his chest too. And the shaft didn't come back, not even if he stayed still and waited, in darkness with no way to see or move or say anything because he wasn't allowed to. In order to speak he would first have to close his mouth and that wasn't what he was supposed to do. Only then Chase's cock brushed his cheek, wet and slick and hot and Ty let out a strained gasp, one that seemed to shout in the silence. "Something you want, Ty?"

He nodded, barely, but still a movement and he hoped that wasn't too much. Chase conquered another irreversibly branded spot of Ty's consciousness by making another small movement, and his cock barely whispered against Ty's lower lip before it was gone. "You're allowed to speak."

Ty flustered even before he said anything, because the foreboding echo of his words was like a wall of shame against his mind. "Please let me suck you."

"You'd like that?"

Another nod and then a gasp that was a bit louder when Chase teased his mouth and pushed in just slightly before pulling out again. "You plead so

beautifully I could keep teasing just to hear you say it again.” But he didn’t. Instead he pushed his other hand against the back of Ty’s head, fingers in his hair and not even pulling closer but keeping him in place. And then he pushed inside with a quiet permission for Ty to do as he pleased and Ty was sure he was whimpering.

Since he was held by his hands and by his head, there wasn’t much he could do while Chase kept moving, but instead of being wide open, his lips closed around the shaft and his tongue danced against the smooth surface.

Without a way to see Chase’s face or his eyes or whether or not his lips were parted and perhaps dried for voicelessly gasping, Ty blocked out everything that didn’t feel important at the time. He ignored the slight discomfort in his knees and the way his thighs were burning at times. And he ignored the sting on his scalp when Chase’s fingers tangled with his hair, pushed aside the reflex that told him something was in his throat that shouldn’t have been there. It didn’t matter. None of it. Instead of any of those things he listened to even the most silent sounds, read the shift in the strength of Chase’s fingers, followed the movements of those hips and counted seconds and then again seconds to know when his mouth would be full again. Every silent sigh and guttural hiss and the trembles that revealed a lot more than any sound or touch or words or hands. Those became the base of his existence, the only map he knew how to follow, the only signs he knew how to read. And he sank into the blankness again, the one he had been in once before. Only this time he went so much further, almost down to the bottom and his mouth became the extension of Chase’s shaft, only another part of that flesh and one that was there only to serve and be used. And Ty was close to tears when he heard a hiss that wasn’t at all silent and the moan that followed that was like warm rain against his sore nerves. And the trembling that had been in the muscles around the flesh was shivering lower now, reflecting the vibration Ty created with his throat.

Chase pulled out before he came, and Ty was more than a little disappointed. But each hot spray that landed on his face and jaw and chest and some probably even on his hair bathed him in self-proclaimed glory, lighting Ty from within and never in his life had he been happier. More pleased. More

satisfied. It didn't matter that he was painfully hard and appeared to have no way out of his over-aroused state. He didn't need to come. Chase had and that was all that mattered. And the man who had probably pulled a few hairs out of Ty's head and whose erratic movements had hurt Ty's throat, now let go of him, again very slowly and controlled while his breathing settled and he seemed to regain his calmness. Ty missed the fingers as soon as they were gone, missed the feel of them against his scalp and the way they had held him in place.

He felt something soft wipe his cheeks and his chest, the last of what Chase had left on him getting removed, and while he missed even those small marks, he loved the touch of that softness. And the softness soon turned into something else, when he felt the warmth of Chase's breath on his face and the voice that had always smothered him whispered words that made a wave of anticipation rise inside Ty. "You're doing well, Ty. Very well. And you will continue doing well, because as long as you are here, you will do anything you can to please me. Won't you Ty?"

"Yes." To all questions, to all truths.

The hand returned into his hair and it hurt so much worse this time. "Now get up." And Ty was sure he wouldn't have needed to use his feet or his abs or any other part of his body because Chase literally pulled him up from the floor, causing Ty to moan when the burn spread across his scalp. But the man who had had his way so far and was going to have it for a long time, simply chuckled and steadied Ty while his legs were a little wobbly.

Few words, only a few, and Ty was sinking again. "Ready for pain, Ty?"

THE FACT that he'd lost the understanding of being completely naked was a little alarming. Especially since he was the only one, Chase was still fully clothed. When he chose to haul Ty somewhere, Ty imagined being in the centre of the open space, and he seemed perfectly calm again. He felt the shackles leave his left wrist while they hung on to his right and he wanted to come up with a word that would tell Chase to put them back. He needed them back.

“Hands up,” Chase said, cutting the line of thoughts and Ty raised his hands, palms up and slowly coming higher and higher while he waited to be told to stop moving. “Above your head.”

Oh...

Ty did as told and then he felt the leather band getting wrapped around his left wrist again. He felt relieved for one short moment before he tried lowering his arms and found he was unable to do so. Something held his hands up, something above his head. And he then realized he couldn't really move at all. No way to even take a step back, because he couldn't stretch his arms far enough.

“You can struggle if you like but the steel hook on the ceiling will probably win.”

Ty swallowed, closing his eyes behind the blindfold and forced himself to stay in place. This was what he wanted, and this was what he'd asked for. And what he'd wanted, Chase was now completing so perfectly, Ty was still humming.

The man didn't say a word. But Ty could feel him moving in slow circles around him; looking, seeing, witnessing. Chase's creation. Chase's piece of art. His masterpiece, not Ty's.

“You know what I like the most about pain?” Chase asked. His voice carried from somewhere to Ty's left and he moved his head on an instinct towards the source. Ty barely managed to shake his head and he wasn't sure if Chase could see because Ty's arm was probably blocking the view. But then the man was closer again and his hand slid against Ty's abs. Palm on skin, slowly rising higher over the lean muscles. “It's the moment when you realize that there is only one way out.”

Scratching now, short nails marking tender skin, tensing the muscles beneath the skin and firing bullets made of promises straight through Ty. “And that between you and that one way there is me. And you won't get out until I let you go.”

Higher and higher, until Ty felt Chase's palm leave his skin and all that was left were two fingers, and those two squeezed around Ty's right nipple. And he didn't even try to smother the moan that left his body when the grip

gradually tightened, tighter and tighter, until it stopped. And Ty trembled only when it was no longer there.

“When you creamed yourself on my table, did you have my prints on your skin the next day?” Chase asked, his fingers moving towards the other nipple. And Ty blurted out a hasty ‘yes’ before the touch was placed where it was headed. Playing now, round and round. “And did you like having my prints on you?”

Not even a thought of lying flew through Ty’s mind and again he said ‘yes’, only this time Chase squeezed Ty’s nipple the exact same time Ty spoke and his voice was nothing but a scream when it got out. And he was left shaky and feeble for one unforgivable moment after the grip was gone, his head heavy now and thoughts too hazy. And the man who clearly enjoyed what he was doing and what that did to Ty, stroked Ty’s cheek with the back of his fingers. And Ty was stupid enough to forget himself in that touch because the one placed against his nipple broke his voice and what little was left of his shout ricocheted from the walls.

It never ended. Ty was sure it went on and on because he lost his voice and some of his feeling too, and Chase kept talking with a quiet voice and spun his web tighter and tighter around Ty. Like he was tiptoeing on the surface of Ty’s awareness. Small steps, tiny, with weight of a feather and so slender Ty hardly felt it but the longer it lasted, the more flickering his mind became. Flashes, black and white and bright red and silver-like blue combining behind his closed lids and Ty was completely voiceless when Chase finally let go. Out of words, out of voice. Literally. He had none. Didn’t need any either. And still he managed to whimper when those fingers ran over his tender nipple, telling him he could still feel and that what he was feeling was so incredibly good Ty never wanted it to end.

The next touch took forever to reach his skin, and it wasn’t placed against his chest and it wasn’t caused by fingers. Tickling, cool and softness mixed with sharpness. Against his back, flickering against the dell between his shoulder blades. Not painful, hardly even there but it moved lower against Ty’s back, making his skin shiver and find new ways to plead.

“You know what this is?”

“No.” So he did have a voice after all, if only a quiet one and one hurting his throat as he spoke. “This is my favorite flogger. You know why it’s my favorite?”

“No.” A little louder now but hurting just as much. “It makes the most delicious sound when it hits sweaty skin.”

Ty was still coherent enough to feel a tide of awe and bite his lip before the strike landed. Right against his buttocks, every leather strip biting into his skin and the sound *was* delicious. And the feel of it was even better.

“Don’t you think?” Chase asked, absentmindedly and rubbed the tender spot on Ty’s skin. And all he managed to give as a response was a tangled moan, one that climbed from the sensations brought by that hand. Cool skin against his slightly burning one.

“I also think your skin looks perfect when it’s a little reddish.” Another strike, a little lower this time and Ty’s whole body twitched with the impact. And he couldn’t really say Chase was being gentle, because as more strikes landed on Ty’s skin, on his buttocks or precisely selected spots on the back of his thighs or on his upper back, each one felt a little harder than the one before. And Ty gave up on trying to anticipate and calculate the next strike or where it would land or how hard it would be, because he couldn’t do that anymore. He couldn’t think far enough to keep track, couldn’t even bite his lip anymore because if he had, he would’ve sank his teeth right through. No biting, no composure. None. Just one moan after another. Veils that seemed to last forever and Chase found momentum in each one.

Chase hummed his contentment with a voice that was like slick sand against Ty’s sore mind. Weighing on him and forcing him towards something he couldn’t even see, let alone understand. And Chase fed on the poverty of Ty’s self-control. Nothing of it left. Nothing. And still Chase managed to strip more of it away with each new strike.

Ty didn’t even know if he was hard or not. He had been but it just didn’t matter anymore. He tried to feel individual parts of his body, but could not. Nothing was separated anymore, just one lump of pulsating flesh and throbbing skin, endlessly. Forever. Everything squeezed into a space much too small, the air in his lungs too hot and too thin and too boiling. No sounds, only

the pain. The lash of the tool and Ty begged to hear something else but he didn't. No more speech, no more words. Just another strike and then another and another.

Ty's wrists were screaming, his arms begging to be lowered. His legs were shaking but Ty wasn't sure if it was because they grew tired or because he still tried to move out of the way though he knew he couldn't. And he didn't even want to.

More.

And more.

And more.

Not even the sound of the flogger anymore. No lashes, no silent whistle as the leather strands flew through the air. Just the collations of skin and leather and then again a palm against his beat surface. And it was the hand that raked the shakiest sounds out of Ty. The only thing telling him Chase was still there, because Ty couldn't even feel him anymore. Couldn't smell him, his skin or his hair. Couldn't hear his steps or his breath or his voice. Nothing. Just the hand that hurt even worse than the flogger and it became too much. Much too much.

"Please stop..." Ty dithered. Another strike. Another plea. And another and another. Quiet and then loud. Shaky and angry and hollow and proud. And the next touch of that tool was like a cut right through Ty's soul, clawing somewhere inside him with sharpness, burning the shards of the shape he knew as his own into a pile of stigmatized need.

"No more...I...please..." Begging. Tears burning in his eyes and even bigger ones pushing through his mind. Nothing around him. Nothing, just black and suddenly too cold and silent. No response, not a word. The flogger turned into a means instead of an aim, bringing him closer and closer to the bottom he was now abruptly terrified of. And the word, his, shouted in his head. Begged to be said when Ty felt like he was drowning, losing all air and all feeling and gravity, the pool he was sinking in full of snakes and venom. Biting, stinging, swirling around him, around his throat and his hands and his body. Killing him, poisoning every corner of him. And still he couldn't say it. Couldn't let it out, didn't want to say it. And the one who could let him go, let

him out, was suddenly talking again. Telling him it was okay and he was fine and he could do it. Just do it.

The strikes were gone. Every one of them. All gone. Slow strokes that made Ty moan took more and more of his skin, and the snakes turned into ropes and the ropes turned into silk. And soon there was nothing in the pool with him, until something shifted, threw him upside down and he felt like he was floating on top of warm water. His body halfway beneath the surface, his ears covered with water and every sound got smothered by the liquid. Transformed them into something strange and dreamlike, subdued and softer. He could hear his own heartbeat, his own breathing. Heard his thoughts that were like whispers now instead of that scream. And he felt weightless. Frail and fragile and warm, held though he couldn't quite feel anything holding him. No floor beneath his feet, no leather around his wrists. Nothing covering his eyes now and still he couldn't see.

And he never wanted to move again.

THE ROOM was completely silent. Only one light on and that wasn't anywhere near where he was sitting on the couch, wrapped inside a thick blanket. All that was exposed was his head and probably some part of his neck and his right hand but other than that he was secured in the warmth created by his own body and held in place by the blanket.

Ty remembered something had been asked of him but he couldn't remember what that something was. He wasn't sure if he had answered either and he only faintly remembered a touch being brought against his hand, inside his palm but that felt like years ago. He knew he had drunk water and he knew some moisturizer had been spread on the burning parts of his skin. And he knew that all of that was done by Chase, who was now sitting on his heels in front of Ty and the reason why Ty's right hand was uncovered, was that Chase was doing a really good job in rubbing some warmth back in to his skin.

"Feels better already...thank you." Ty's voice was quiet, a little frail and he was too tired to look away when Chase's eyes shot up at him. The man looked at Ty while his fingers still worked on Ty's skin and then he slowly let

go of the hand and gestured towards the other one. Ty tucked his right hand under the blanket and pushed out his left one and Chase took it in his and stroked the faint reddish rim running over Ty's wrist. "Does this hurt?"

Ty shook his head and moved his fingers when Chase told him to do so.

"How are you feeling?" Chase asked and massaged Ty's palm between his hands. "Any dizziness? Pain anywhere?"

"No." Ty watched as Chase investigated through each part of Ty's hand. His palm, his fingers, even the tips. "I didn't pass out, did I?"

Chase shook his head and moved back to Ty's wrist. "No, you didn't. But you were a bit...out of it at one point."

Ty nodded. He could buy into that because he still felt a little out of it. Like his head was full of cotton.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah...just a little weird." Ty tucked his hand under the blanket as soon as Chase let go, not because he wouldn't have wanted the man to touch him but because he was cold. And he felt like leaving his hand out in the open was a sign of his need to feel that touch a lot more.

Chase remained on the floor and didn't pry when Ty avoided his eyes. "Do you remember what happened?"

Did he? Ty frowned and pulled the blanket tighter around him while moving deeper into the dark, soft cushions. "I...do. I think. I remember you said something but I don't know what that was. And I don't know if I responded. And then...you...put something in my hand?"

"I asked you if you wanted to tell me your color, and no, you didn't respond." Chase's body tensed, his hand twitching upright, as if he was about to move but he held it in place instead. "So I put my hand into yours and asked you to squeeze it if you heard me."

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"And that's a good thing, right?" Ty asked, suddenly feeling stupid though he knew these things. He'd read about them and talked with people about them. Precautions, safewords without sound. But he couldn't think straight and everything he heard made sense only twenty seconds after he'd heard it. Chase

nodded and again he appeared to want to move. “Yeah, it’s a good thing. And you were okay but I ended it soon after anyways, ’cos I’m not sure how much you can take.”

Ty nodded again, eyes held on the fabric and his hands were squeezing the blanket against his body. His *naked* body. He was still without clothing while Chase had his. Why didn’t that feel any stranger?

“I remember I felt like I never wanted to move again. Just...” The softness of his brain tissue was slowly disappearing and he could feel every part of himself again. Even the sore parts. And he felt the burn in his eyes and that burn refused to evade though Ty wanted it gone. “Just...good. And happy.”

If he didn’t know he had cried already he would’ve been shocked and embarrassed. But he wasn’t. Small droplets blurred his vision and though none of them left his lids, he still knew they were there and so did the man sitting in front of him. And maybe it wasn’t about weakness or about fear or about feeling a little lost and alone and empty, but Ty couldn’t sit in place for one more second without feeling something touching him. That was all he needed. Just a touch. Just once, so that he could be sure he could still feel again and everything would be okay and not remain as tangled and unresolved as it all felt now.

“Can you please hold me?” Barely a whisper but Chase heard it, and he stood up on his knees and moved closer until he was able to touch. And Ty couldn’t understand how someone capable of destroying him so completely could touch so gently. Like he was the most fragile thing ever, made out of thinnest glass and meant to be handled with gloves made of silk.

Chase didn’t move to take off the blanket or to push his hands under it. He simply wrapped his arms around Ty’s body and gathered him closer until he was as held as he could ever be. Arms around him, like his were soon around Chase, disliking the cool air but loving the feel of that body, and his face found the crook of Chase’s neck and made a home out of the warmth and scent of that skin.

“You were beautiful,” Chase said quietly, his other hand moving a bit higher against Ty’s back and brushing the skin on his neck. “Just perfect.”

The amount of blissfulness washing over Ty was ridiculous but he took it

all in and soaked in the tranquility. And he could still feel and things that had seemed twisted and confused and so messed up before were starting to look clear again. Slow caresses by those hands and Ty felt he slowly regained all of his missing pieces.

“I’m really glad it was you,” he said when he felt Chase move. Not away from him though, but a little closer. And the man found enough leverage to brush a small kiss against Ty’s cheek before he pulled back. Eyes that were just as dark but not nearly as dreadful and they looked back at Ty with all the same secrets. “I’m glad too.”

No blindfolds now. No shackles. No rules, not Ty’s or Chase’s and no safewords or points of authority. Just the two of them and Ty wasn’t sure which one had given more. But he was sure he could give and he could take, and he wanted to be given. And to be taken too. And his hands, the ones that had been cold and a little feeble a while ago, moved higher until it was him who was touching the other man. And eventually it was him who moved and not Chase.

Just a breath, one and then another, and the distance was gone and the softness of those lips was only barely sweeter than the softness of that hair.

CHASE HAD told him to stay away from hot water, but of course Ty didn’t believe him. And while he was getting comfortable with a huge towel after his shower, he silently regretted ignoring the advice, because hot was bad. Very, *very*, bad. His skin didn’t like anything even resembling hot, though his skin was in a better condition than Ty had thought. No swelling and only faint bruising, and he realized Chase hadn’t been nearly as hard as he had thought.

The morning after wasn’t really a morning after because it had been four in the afternoon when Ty had woken up. After he had remembered everything and then gone through it all and then convinced Chase he was okay and intact and his mind wasn’t all that fucked up either, Ty’s first conclusion of the previous night had been a little less rational. Chase had stared at him like he was someone with no brain function when Ty had asked if he still had sperm in his hair. But luckily the guy hadn’t been offended when Ty had said he

wanted it *gone* if any of it was still there. And that was why he had rushed to the shower. And because he wanted to test out whether or not his body was working like it had worked before, he had gone against the advice and was now cursing because hot was very, *very*, bad.

Ty had discovered Chase's chivalrous tendencies somewhere in the middle of the night when they had moved from the couch to the bed and Ty had been the only one crawling under the blankets while Chase had stayed clothed and on top of the covers. No touching either and at the time Ty had been content with Chase there with him. Touching wasn't really needed in order for him to feel whole again and feeling whole felt a lot different now. No more of that empty humming inside him or the ache that had carved his bones for months. All gone. And Ty knew it wasn't just the scene that had swept it away, but the man as well.

Ty got dressed, pondering whether or not he could keep the shirt on but decided to take it off after all because the skin on his back was still sore. His buttocks weren't any better but Ty wasn't about to walk around naked, so pants would have to do. Slacks, loose enough so that Ty's skin wouldn't be crying out of misery and he managed to get out of the bathroom and back into the bedroom kind of space before the length of his absence grew too long. Chase only glanced at Ty and grinned while gesturing towards the table he stood next to. "Let me rub your back some more."

Ty almost told Chase he didn't need any rubbing and neither did he need any moisturizer but since his skin was probably red all over again and sore, he tossed the bag he had taken to the bathroom with him on the floor and walked up to Chase.

"You need me to rub your bum too?" Chase asked and stepped behind Ty. Ty rolled his eyes until he realized it wasn't a pathetic attempt to form a pick-up line. Chase just wanted his skin to get better. "No...I got that one done myself." Sure the lotion he had wasn't nearly as good as was the cooling substance Chase spread over Ty's shoulders, but perhaps it got the job done.

"So...I was thinking..." Chase said, his hand moving from Ty's right shoulder to his left one. "If you don't have anything planned, you could stay till tomorrow. Just precautions, you know. More recovery time."

Ty stared at the table, at the papers spread on it and pens and pictures drawn with those pens. He didn't really need any more recovery time. Sure he was tired but other than that he was okay. Thinking straight too and mind as clear as crystal. And he was sure Chase knew that. If he didn't, he wouldn't have offered the chance to stay. He would've told Ty he wasn't letting Ty leave until he was okay.

Yeah...the same exact secrets.

"Um...sure..I could stay." Ty felt the small, silly smile creep up his lips and it stayed there until he forced it to leave when Chase was done and Ty was at risk of exposing himself completely.

"Breakfast. Or...dinner. Or whatever you wanna call it, but food," Chase muttered and made his way to the kitchen while glancing at Ty. "Anything you *won't* eat?"

"I suppose you don't have anything slightly less fat absorbed than bacon chips?" Ty asked and held his eyes on the table for a while before he looked at the one now standing in the kitchen with his fridge door open and obviously going through the contents. Chase grinned and pushed the door shut while he turned to look at Ty. "Actually, I do. I even have those weird round things that come in juice containers sometimes."

Ty smirked. "Fruit?"

"Yeah, that's it. I even have *that*. Must be your lucky day." Chase started fixing up breakfast or whatever, leaving Ty with nothing but the view. And again there was that smile on his lips while he watched the man move in his kitchen. Lucky day, indeed.

Ty turned back towards the table, his hand already moving towards the papers when he stilled and glanced at Chase. "Do you mind?" he asked and gestured towards the papers. Chase shook his head and took a bowl off a shelf. "No...knock yourself out. They are mostly just sketches."

Ty indulged himself with work in progress and found it quite intriguing to see images turn from single lines into fully formed pictures. Tribal patterns mostly, but there were others too. Drawings that were probably not even meant to be tattoo designs. Landscapes and portraits and just papers full of colors and Ty found those the most interesting. But then his eyes caught a glimpse of a

pencil drawing, only a small stripe since the paper was buried underneath all the others. His hand moved layers of papers aside, sweeping slowly so that he wouldn't end up dropping everything on the floor. And then he stared at the picture for a while before he was able to even touch it.

It was clearly just a quick draft, but it could just as well be done. It was of a man, one on his knees and back towards the spectator. Bare back, all of him naked. Head slightly turned towards his right but face still hidden while facing the floor. But it wasn't really the position that made Ty's hand reach towards the paper. It wasn't the nakedness that made him pick up the paper and follow his fingers along the outlines. It was the delicate design on the man's back that made Ty's eyes run over the drawing. Again he saw every branch, though they were done with few strokes only, the shape was still the same. Just as noble and elevated and honest in some way, just like it had been on the notice-board in Chase's shop. No details really but it was the same tree and this time it was already printed on someone's skin. And that someone had lines of his own, faint and narrow, circling his arms that were loosely held against his sides. Ty knew those lines, knew those patterns because they were the ones he had on his arms. Each and every one of them.

"When did you make this?" he asked and turned to look at Chase and he brought up the drawing to show which one he was talking about. Chase quickly looked at Ty but his eyes stayed on the drawing for a little longer before he continued what he'd been doing. "A few months ago."

A few months.

Ty stayed still, looking at Chase instead of the paper in his hand. Few months. The sketches had started appearing in the shop only few *weeks* ago. Not months. This, however...

Ty looked at the paper again, his fingers following the lines again. Not just a man, *any* man. Ty could see his own shoulders and arms and back. And he saw that the man wasn't looking down. He was bowing. And Ty didn't need to wonder who he was bowing to.

"Did you make the tree for me?" he asked and placed the paper back on the table. His eyes still lingered on it and he didn't look away while he waited for Chase to answer. And he wasn't even surprised that the man didn't stay in

the kitchen but walked up to him instead. And he heard the ‘yes’ but he knew it before hearing it and he still looked at the picture instead of Chase.

“I have a confession to make,” Chase said and Ty’s eyes closed the second he felt a hand brush against his spine. From his waist up to his neck before going back down. “And that would be?”

“I lied.” Ty’s mind went through all possible scenarios of what that lie could be before Chase spoke again. “I guess I am a patient man.”

Ty turned to look at Chase, eyes open now and his mind fully there though the touch had the ability to send him somewhere else completely. Chase looked at the picture for a while before he looked at Ty. “If I wasn’t then I wouldn’t have waited for a year for my sub to wake up.”

There was a hint of challenge in Chase’s eyes, as if he was sure Ty was going to argue. But Ty didn’t. Why would he? “I’m glad you did.” And the one who had waited for a whole year waited a little more, and Ty got fed with things that were not at all fat absorbed. And later that day, somewhere closer to midnight, Ty saw the lines and words and paintings tattooed on Chase’s skin. In the dim light Ty made out what he could, read what he saw and planted each word into his brain as well as he could while those hands turned him into a living piece of art all over again. Hands that had broke him and then placed each missing piece back together. And his whole body was screaming but not out of pain this time, and he kept on reading, following the lines with his fingertips and silently whispering each word while he found new ones. On Chase’s arms, on his shoulders. None on his chest or abs or back. Few delicate ones almost laced on his sides and Ty memorized each one. They became his prayers, his vows. Spoken from skin to his lips and then on to the lips of another. Secrets, promises. Wishes and truths and fears. The most hidden ones and the ones he had known for a long time but hadn’t heard even in his own mind. Confessions of his own, and they too spoke of his heart.

And no words had ever tasted as good as did the ones spoken back to him, because those words were the same as his own.

THE END

Author bio: Cay McKat. While writing whatever comes to mind and at times even managing to make it available for people who are interested in reading it, this Scandinavian idealist devours one book after another in the solitude of her own home. Between work and family she finds her way to a world emerging only in her own head, one that is off-limits to anyone else but her. That world is the one that at times gets filled with heart-shaped patterns and cotton candy or thunderstorms—depending on her current mood. She severely dislikes summer but even more she dislikes spring. Fall is when she feels most at peace and winter is the time of year she sheds her skin—one new layer after each closed circle. An anti-social people-person who is always up for a chat, but quite often loses the line of conversation due to lack of concentration. If that should happen, she apologizes in advance. :)

PREDATORS

by Clancy Nacht

Photo Description



Tattooed Adam Levine naked but for his junk covered by two hands (It took two!)

Request Letter



Dear Author,

I'd love to hear the story about this man, and why he has so many tattoos. Are they from creating memories with his lover? Does he have a lover? I'd love to hear a bit about his story, and how he ended up posing for this picture. Who's hands are hiding the rest of him from view?

(I'd love to see turtleshell bondage in this, but no pain, or a slave-master type relationship...maybe coworkers to friends to lovers or something like that?)

Sincerely,

Krystle

General Information



genre: contemporary

tags: BDSM; shibari; rope bondage; tattoo; erotic tattooing; orgasm denial; erotic suspension; erotic marking

content warnings: shibari/Japanese rope bondage

word count: 3,768

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PREDATORS

by Clancy Nacht

HIS NAME wasn't Feral. It couldn't be. That wasn't the sort of name that you gave to a child. That was a name someone earned. How he'd earned it, Levi could well imagine.

Levi was a long way from his high rise, from his flat screen, from his douche nozzle friends and the Occupiers who seemed to think anyone gave a shit about them. Silly fools who still believed they lived in any kind of democracy. Perhaps Levi had sold his soul for his place in boardrooms and silk bedrooms, but while money couldn't buy happiness, it could buy a pretty good facsimile.

Or so he'd thought.

The streets grew darker, seemed slicker in this part of town, as if rain came down and stuck in the gutters. Oil slick. Sweaty. Grime so porous that it never let go.

Levi watched skeletons of buildings, burned out hovels and boarded up future sites of something fabulous and expensive. But for now, the streets belonged to another kind of one percent. A lower percent that only seemed to exist at night.

Levi didn't have to tell the driver where to go or where to stop. He never even told him to show up. The driver, and by extension, Feral, just knew when it was time for a visit.

Or maybe Feral was only controlling Levi and everyone else simply executed his orders.

Any and all could be true. It didn't much matter.

The black car stopped. Out of habit, Levi offered the man a tip and received a sneer for his trouble.

Levi let himself out of the car and looked up at the old familiar building. In daylight it should've been green and red with strange markings that were Hindi? Kanji? Cyrillic? They could've been in Aramaic for all Levi knew.

Every night when he was summoned, he tried to catch the address, tried to

recall the building. But he could never find it on his own.

Fat, warm droplets of rain pounded his head and spilled like runny eggs down his face and the back of his neck. He ran forward to the imposing red door. It opened for him as it always did, like it was left unlocked. On a street where even demons feared to tread, leaving an unlocked door was unthinkable. Yet once Levi was inside, he felt no fear.

There were no other residents in the building other than a few rats that clicked and skittered between the walls. Feral lived on the fifth floor regardless.

Patchouli wafted down the stairs as Levi walked up to meet the source. The scent reminded him of the first time he'd met Feral.

Levi was at one of those tiresome clubs that his friends always dragged him to. They well knew that he was gay and yet carried on as if he were supposed find something charming in their misogyny and mistreatment of women. In their minds being gay meant that he should hate women. There was a big difference between a lack of sexual interest and hate, but that was too fine a line for coked-up bond traders to make.

He went along for the free drinks, free drugs, and free blowjobs they all eventually wound up giving him. All-in-all it had seemed satisfying enough. Until that night.

In spite of his long, platinum blond hair and almost unnatural thinness and height, Feral somehow managed to occupy the shadows. Such ethereal beauty seemed more likely to be a ghost or a hallucination, but before long Feral focused on him.

His eyes were black like they were all pupil. He wore long, dark purple robes that night and smiled curiously when Levi sat beside him at the dark corner of the bar.

Somehow Feral's low, whispery voice penetrated the shouted conversations and booming bass of the club. Smoke wreathed him in a halo. Even now Levi couldn't remember agreeing to leave and yet he'd found himself here in this mysterious building, being led by the hand to the top floor.

The boards creaked under Levi's feet, bringing him back to the present. All the doors in the building were closed save one. Light flickered, unsteady

and warm.

Before him on the ground were a cushion, a small basket filled with untreated hemp rope, and a single candle.

Feral never gave orders. He never gave ultimatums. He simply laid a task out for Levi to complete.

Levi removed his raincoat and a suit that probably could've paid for the entirety of the rundown building. He folded his clothes in a neat pile, leaving him completely naked but for the marks that Feral had left on his skin. Each came with a story, a permanent commemoration of the night that they had spent together. Levi traced the beautiful illustrations, the Sanskrit on his breast, the eagle below it.

The tiger on his right arm represented Feral. The stripes seemed to waver whenever Levi brooded on him. The eagle was meant to represent Levi. They were both in attack poses, but Feral said that they were not to fight one another, but themselves.

Taking a length of rope, Levi held it taut and brought it to the flame. Hemp rope naturally came with wisps and prickly pieces of twine that would not remain in place. The flame bit and burned them away. Levi rolled them slowly, running his fingers over the core to stop the burn and to ensure that the rope was smooth.

When Feral had first tied him, Levi protested that he should have silk ropes. Feral did not flinch or apologize. He simply dug out a length of silk rope. Holding it tight between two hands, he ran it quickly across Levi's bicep. The swift movement of the rope burned enough to make Levi hiss.

After dropping the silk rope, Feral picked up the rope he'd started with and did the same to Levi's other bicep. That rope felt silky as it brushed over his skin in the way he'd imagined silk would. Feral kissed him, tasting of cloves and red wine. "That is why, my love. I want to wrap you up and make you feel safe, not pain. Do you understand?"

Levi nodded.

Love. That word from anyone else in his shallow world would've elicited laughter, perhaps even disgust. Feral seemed to radiate it like only something wild could.

Levi remembered going camping with friends when he was just a boy. The other boys picked on him so he'd wandered off alone and gotten lost. Though he was scared, there was something calm and soothing about the breeze through the trees. Even the flashing predatory eyes that hunted him in the darkness seemed to do it with a dangerous love, a respect for Levi as prey and opponent but also as a being to which all was connected.

Feral could seem alien at times. He had a gift for languages, for music, art, and painting. In a wild fit of fantasy, Levi had wondered if Feral was a vampire, but he had a pulse. He kept food and a steady supply of wine. Who he was and what he did in the days and nights between their meetings, Levi wasn't sure he would ever know. Feral suggested that the mundane reality would break the fantasy.

"The grand romance is bigger than the banal reality. Belief is far more powerful and intriguing than truth."

Levi had so many stories he'd painted around Feral until he had finally given up. So what if Feral was a trust fund baby who owned all of this? What if he were the son of a dignitary who was only in town on occasion? Did Levi want to live with him? To fight over who did the dishes and took out the trash?

No. Not particularly. Who Levi was outside of this place was unimaginably sad. Who he was when he was here was supernatural, superhuman. If Feral knew who Levi was outside of this building, he never let on. Levi wasn't sure he could admit to the vainglorious creature he was in the real world. Out there he was what he had to be. In here, he could be who he was.

Another light flickered into being on the other side of the loft, illuminating Feral in a long, blood red kimono. He stood before a large, black metal suspension frame with hooks.

"Come," Feral said. He held out his pale hand and folded his long, spindly, red-nailed fingers one at a time to beckon Levi.

As Feral lit more candles and set them around an unmarked perimeter, Levi walked over to him, still holding the piece of rope he'd been working and meditating on.

"Are you ready, Levi?"

Levi nodded and knelt on the floor.

“Very good.”

On a side table was red wine and a pitcher of water. Feral would not allow Levi to drink more than droplets of wine from his fingers before and during his bondage. He did not want Levi to dehydrate.

The first time that Levi had been tied, Feral demonstrated the breaks in the complicated set of knots that he had executed over Levi’s body. They were strategically aligned so that Feral could quickly untie any portion of the piece to alleviate stress to joints or problems with circulation. These precautions made Levi feel a tenderness he hadn’t felt before for another person. The sheer consideration, the worry, the beads of sweat that broke out along Feral’s hairline as he executed what he called “the art” upon Levi made him feel not like he was restrained, but that he was being worshipped.

Already the rope was looping around him, holding him if not tight, then in place. They wound over his chest, squeezing gently around his nipples. They peeked out, excluded from the delicious friction of the rope, perked and begging for touch.

Feral’s fingers were soft and cool against Levi’s skin as he tied each knot, moving in a diamond shaped pattern, looping on one side to leave a break, then winding at the base of his cock and around his ball sack. Again, the most sensitive parts of him, those wanting the most touch, were excluded and grew flush and firm.

The ropes held him in place, growing slowly tighter and more certain. Levi started to squirm. Feral stopped.

“Do you need water?”

“No.”

Feral cracked a soft smile then drew his finger along Levi’s shaft. “You need this?”

Though Levi tried to restrain himself, just that simple touch sent a thrill through his entire body. He moaned and rocked against the bindings like he could get more.

“Soon.”

Soon. Levi’s skin itched to be touched. Air currents, barely perceptible

before, felt like they were buffeting the exposed parts of his body. Even Feral's sleeve brushing against Levi's nipple was enough to make him writhe. Still the ropes held him steady in a loving embrace.

Feral smiled and traced his finger along one of the pieces of rope that extended from his chest to his cock. The minor vibrations sent shockwaves through his body. Levi whined.

Still Feral was not finished. He tied a small knot that brushed against Levi's perineum and one that would rub against his hole. Two small knots on a thin rope, both so maddeningly perfect in their construction, so exquisite in their touch, yet so frustratingly inadequate on their own.

At last Feral started to string up the suspension frame. He set Levi gently onto his side. The tip of his cock almost touched the hardwood floor, but before he could try to roll forward, Feral had him looped in and started hoisting.

Each ankle was separately bound, leaving Feral the puppeteer to move Levi into elegant poses, each of which he photographed. In the extraordinarily low light, Levi was careful to remain still, even as he strained for more friction between shots.

Every pose that Feral put him in was artfully calculated so that Levi felt no particular pressure, just perfectly balanced and supported, like Feral could be in all places at once. All places but where Levi wanted him most.

Though he groaned and strained to get Feral to touch him while he was being moved, the man just gave a feline grin and fanned his fingers in the direction of Levi's cock, sending soft currents of air, too much and not enough at once. He rubbed lubricant into the knot by Levi's opening, letting it both wet and thrill the area.

Already Levi's ass opened and grasped at nothing, knowing what would come and practically begging.

"Last pose," Feral said. He took a sip of wine and then kissed Levi, sharing it. That sealed the promise. Not that Feral had ever lied or misled him on such matters, but there was an immense relief that Levi felt at the taste, always the first move before release.

A few more soft whirs of the shutter and then Levi was lowered to the

floor. Feral released only the sections of knots that he had to, freeing Levi's arms, but leaving the knots to tease his nipples. His legs were free, but the rope around the base of his cock remained.

Kneeling before Levi, Feral kissed the tip of his cock and let it trail precum over his cheek. He smiled up at Levi as he swirled his fingers through the lube and pressed them inside. "Do you want me?"

Levi felt like sobbing as he begged, "Please. I need it. Please."

Feral removed his obi, slipped easily from his kimono and then lay back. His pale hair floated around his head like a halo against the dark floor. He was practically hairless, just a small patch of curls at the base of his bright pink cock. It surged almost to his belly button, shiny and hard.

As he smoothed a condom over it, Levi straddled him. Feral released the portion of the ropes that kept the knots against his hole and perineum, then centered his cock while Levi slowly lowered himself onto it.

Even as wanton as his grasping hole was for Feral, the size and length made Levi feel overfull, like he might come apart at the seams. Feral released the bindings around Levi's chest, allowing him to get deeper, fuller breaths.

Those long, elegant fingers slipped over his nipples, finally soothing over the itching skin. He squeezed them tight between his fingers and pulled, forcing Levi to drop on top of him. Then Feral's arms wrapped around him, as tight and secure as the ropes had been. He levered his hips, taking Levi deeply.

The overwhelming sensation of being deprived for so long, then having every needy part of him touched at once made Levi explode nearly instantly. The ropes and Feral's stomach grew wet with his leavings.

Feral rolled them over and reached down between them to let loose the final bond, allowing Levi's cock to wither normally. Then Feral's thrusts became savage, deep and hard and fast until he twitched and groaned, finally releasing himself.

He remained there on top of Levi for a few minutes, just catching his breath. Then slowly he slipped out of him and cast aside the condom.

"Who are you, Feral? Who are you really?"

Feral smiled and kissed Levi's nose. "Someone who loves you too much to answer your questions."

The answer was typical and strangely comforting. Levi had the idea that if Feral ever gave him a straight answer, it would be the end of their affair.

So Feral asked the next question. "Are you hungry?"

"No."

Feral smiled and traced the shape of the eagle across Levi's chest. "Your eagle looks lonely."

Levi stretched back and smiled. "He has his tiger. Or are you proposing a threesome?"

"Never." The finality in Feral's tone brooked no argument. Though as far as Levi could tell no one was following him, he never felt the urge to allow someone else to touch him. Not since Feral. As if he could read Levi's thoughts, Feral said, "You are mine."

"Are you mine?"

Feral smiled and rolled off of Levi, neatly managing to regain his feet. He reached down for Levi. "I do not share my art with anyone else. This is just for us."

That wasn't precisely an answer, but it was as close to one as Levi was likely to get. He didn't press.

Feral picked up a candle and then led Levi to his bedroom. It was little more than a large pile of exquisite pillows next to a hookah and another bottle of red wine. There was also a silver bowl of figs. "There's lamb if you decide you are hungry."

Levi nodded. On the other side of the bed were two tattoo machines, a shader and a liner that Feral used to mark him. "I'll run out of skin eventually."

"You have a lot of skin before that happens." Feral sank onto the cushions and poured them each a glass of wine. "I think you need a shark."

"A shark?" Levi asked as he lay on his side on the cushions. Marks from the ropes still banded on his skin. Feral wouldn't begin marking until they had faded.

"To watch over you."

"Predators only watch you to eat you."

Feral laughed and took another sip of wine. "You only know a predator

has been watching you when you're about to be eaten. You have no idea what they do unless they have made themselves obvious."

The statement was odd enough to be mildly disturbing. "What do they do the rest of the time?"

"They wait until they're hungry enough." That odd smile again. "Until then, you still belong to them. You're protected by their greed. They will not allow any other predators to scoop you up. That makes you safe, see?"

Levi raised a brow. "Until they eat you."

"Is it so bad to be consumed by one who loves you so much as to protect you from all others?"

"But then they move on to the next."

Feral finished his glass of wine and set it next to the bottle. "That hardly matters. You're gone. What do you care?"

He had a point. A terrible point, but it was a terrible world. "Is that what you're doing with me? Watching me until you can consume me?"

Feral walked on his knees to the tattoo machines and started to toy with the inks. "You are too good a meal to have all at once. You're being savored."

Levi looked out the door to the camera mounted on the tripod. "A predator's whole life is about tracking their prey."

"Prey should be very honored." Feral met Levi's eyes and smiled. "They're the most loved of all of us."

Before Levi could protest, Feral turned on the machine. The buzzing filled the silence. Levi lay down. Feral turned him onto his side and moved his arm out of the way. At first the pins abrading his skin hurt, but the pain subsided into something dull and throbbing.

Levi extended his hand toward the hookah, and Feral stopped long enough to bring the pipe closer to him. He leaned in and kissed around the violated area.

"So when this is over, Feral, are you going to just stop sending for me?"

Feral leaned over so he could meet Levi's eyes and stroked the side of his face. "I will never stop sending for you. We will be old men playing this game, my love. Don't be so literal."

He kissed him tenderly, and then returned to filling in the shark.

A few hours and a couple of glasses of wine later, Levi stood against the wall so that Feral could take a few pictures of his work. “What do you do with all of these photographs?”

“Look at them when I miss you.”

“Oh. I thought you were going to do an art show or something.”

The idea seemed to amuse Feral. “Do you want to be exhibited?”

Levi blushed. “You could cover the face.”

“I do not share.” Feral wrapped his arms around Levi. “These are for me.”

Prey or not, Levi definitely felt watched and protected.

He also started to feel incredibly sleepy. Between the activity, the wine, and the low dose of opium, he couldn’t keep his head up.

In spite of his willowy thinness, Feral was able to lift Levi and carry him back to bed. Tenderly, he lay him down and curled up behind him. After a few beats of the overhead fan, Levi drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, he awoke to the alarm beside his own bed. Were it not for the soreness of his side, he might have thought it was all an incredible, wonderful dream.

He slipped from bed. Morning light poured in through his floor to ceiling windows. It was almost too bright with as heady as he still felt from his excesses the night before. He was tempted to go back to bed and call in, but his momentum propelled him to the bathroom.

Carefully stripping the bandages from his side, Levi saw the shark etched into his skin. Its eyes were glaring and dark. And he felt loved.

THE END

*Author bio: Clancy Nacht (Donna Clancy) has been writing for six years but only began publishing two years ago. She has published many works with Thursday Euclid including the popular m/m romances: **Black Gold** (Loose Id), **I’ll Be Your Man** (Loose Id), **Le Jazz Hot** (Loose Id), and **The WASPs** (Dreamspinner Press). They are known for spicy, over-the-top stories with a heart.*

Coming soon: Celibacy NOW on Loose Id, and the sequel to Black Gold!

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THE QUESTION GAME

by Wt Prater

Photo Description



A group of friends, one girl, five guys, stand against a wall waiting for the photo to be shot. The group is very different, but they are obviously very close. The nature of how they relate to one another, and what journeys their relationships have been through are just a few of the questions one might have looking at them.

Request Letter



Dear Author,

THIS IS THE GREATEST SHOW EVER~~ :D But I want to know what happens when the cameras aren't around. Write me a story about different types of gay men living in the same urban community: the conflicts, the flirtation, the ~drama~ You are free to (in fact ENCOURAGED to) break all the rules of romance: No HEA? No problem. Cheating? Bring it on! Experiments with girls? A-Okay with me. If you must focus on a main pairing I'd like to see a combination that defies stereotypes ... like a grizzly bear topped by a flaming queen~~ But everything else is up to you!

PS – For you sad people who have never seen 1 Girl 5 Gays, STOP. Watch. Immediately: [US](#) || [Canada](#) || [Everybody Else](#)

Sincerely,

Isa K

General Information



genre: contemporary

tags: friends-to-lovers; lovers-to-friends; hurt/comfort; friendship; connections; span of time; infidelity; marriage; death

word count: 12,770

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THE QUESTION GAME

by Wt Prater

YOU KNOW your sex life is boring when you start counting the tiles in the ceiling, or worse, the pimples on his back. And that, sadly, described mine even before Zach and I broke up. I was about to flip open one of the many books on his night stand and start reading when he finally came, which meant that I could stop acting like I was enjoying myself and get the fuck out of there.

But as he flopped onto the bed and turned over, he pulled me down into his embrace and because I am not a heartless prick, I lay with him while he went on and on about how much this meant to him. Meanwhile, I was playing ‘The Question Game’ in my head.

“What are you thinking about?” I heard him ask after a couple seconds of silence.

“Well, I— ” I started, but before I could speak more than a few words, he interrupted me, talking about this and that, nothing of which I cared about, until eventually, he talked himself to sleep.

I took the opportunity and left. Normally, I would have written a note but I didn’t figure he cared. Why? Because the only question he asked me, he never let me answer.

This is why I started playing ‘The Question Game’ with all my friends. The game is about give and take. It’s pretty simple: ask a question, and wait for an answer. There is no rhyme or reason for the game, except for curiosity. It’s how I could show that I was interested and cared about my friends. I wanted to know them, and love them. I didn’t know what kind of questions they would ask or where it would lead.

CHAPTER 1: First Things First, What a Boy Wants

AS JONATHAN Grant walked through their house, he had the wedding

invitation in one hand and his vodka straight up in the other. He admired and simultaneously hated all the pretty things he walked past that he and his partner, Ian, had collected over the past three years. As he walked around the living room, looking at the pictures of celebrations, and the souvenirs they had collected from their various trips, Jonathan found himself getting more upset.

On top of the mantle sat one of the biggest reminders of their differences and the time they had spent, or at this point Jonathan felt, wasted together: a silver picture frame. The frame was carved with the words 'I love you' in different languages and it contained a picture of the two of them on vacation in Hawaii for their two-year anniversary. Jonathan always stared at that picture, because it was so beautiful. The way his already brown skin contrasted with Ian's lily-white complexion so much more even after Ian had been in the sun for almost a week haunted Jonathan.

Other memorabilia surrounded him. Bowling trophies they had won together in their league. Pictures of their families and social circle. Black and white. One of them always stood out, whether they were with his friends or with Ian's.

But at this moment, in this emotion, Jonathan could not find himself anywhere in this place. He couldn't find any happy or good memories that he wanted to keep. How was that possible, after three years?

All his rage and anger had been building up and now, now it was surfacing because of this damn invitation. After three fucking years, why couldn't he get Ian to commit to him? The question he kept asking himself, *How much shit can one relationship take?* He had dealt with Ian spending all of their savings on a boat. A boat that Ian had lost interest in after three months, that they then had to sell for half the original cost. He had dealt with Ian cheating on him not once, but twice with different men. Jonathan had even suggested that they try having an open relationship, but Ian had declined.

And then Ian disappeared for three days, saying he was on a 'runaway weekend with Deanna'. What Ian didn't know was Deanna had called a day after Ian left, wondering where he was.

"Has he forgotten his spa day with me again?" she asked, sounding so heartbroken.

Jonathan had grown to love a lot about Ian. He had even grown to love his in-laws. But Ian was still dodging the bullet. Every time Jonathan brought up the 'Marriage' word, Ian jumped into the nearest book or car, whichever was closest and provided the quickest getaway.

Jonathan glanced at the invitation again, and felt his emotions once again go up on the spinning wheel. He was happy for Zach and Ann, and a little confused for them. And he was sad for himself, and angry and hurt about Ian. Of these emotions, he chose to go with the anger once again. He fixed himself another drink, and started to march to the exercise room where Ian was.

He thought, *Even Zach and Ann are getting married in six months, and they aren't even a "couple". So why not them? They lived in Washington DC, and it had been legal for over a year, and still nothing. Maybe if I threaten to leave him. No, I don't want a proposal as an ultimatum.*

Jon watched as Ian exercised on his stationary bike pedaling on and on but getting nowhere. He could relate to that. He stood there comparing Ian's small but built body to his larger frame, and got angry at yet another difference between them, another reason for them not to be together. *How opposite could two people be and stay together?* This was becoming a very serious question in his mind.

He watched through the glass door that separated the exercise room from the dining room, clutching his glass tightly, and the invitation to the wedding tighter still. He wanted to storm in there and tell Ian it was over. He was unhappy and tired of waiting. He wanted more than great sex and a fabulous house. He wanted a husband.

But he knew he shouldn't talk to Ian when he was this emotional, so he swallowed the rest of the drink and headed back to the living room to make another one. Knowing Ian's routine, he had almost completed his cycling for the day and would be moving on to his weight lifting routine. As Ian dismounted the bike he glanced at Jonathan through the glass, forgot to remove his other foot from the pedal, and landed hard upon his ankle.

Jonathan thought he heard a crunching noise even before the scream. He turned around and threw the glass door open and found Ian had somehow twisted his ankle and his foot so much so that he could not move. Running to

him, he wanted to help but was afraid to touch him. He knew Ian well enough to know that when he was in pain, he became a drama queen. The slightest scratch or cut became a reason to visit the emergency room. Jonathan both loved and hated that, mostly because it was the only time Jonathan got to see Ian's softer side, and really feel that he was needed.

Ian was still on the bike, cradling one ankle while his other foot appeared still caught in the protective cuff. Jonathan went to him, and tried to figure out how he could help. Ian had tears running down his cheeks as he tried not to move any more than he had to. As Jonathan looked at the foot trapped in the cuff, he started to move toward Ian's foot. But as he moved, Ian screamed.

"Please don't touch me, Jon. Oh God, please don't!" Ian partly moaned, and partly screamed, with tears streaming down his face.

"What can I do?" Jon asked, still shocked by the sight and unsure of how to help.

"I don't know. Call Juan, he's a nurse. He'll know. Please hurry." With tears still streaming down his face, Ian tried to move into a more comfortable position and screamed more. Jon ran to the phone in the kitchen and called Juan.

CHAPTER 2: It Only Takes a Couple Seconds and A Commitment

THE APARTMENT was a wreck. Empty pizza boxes and bottles of 'chick beer' were all over the floor. A pile of unopened mail lay on the table next to the door. And on top, the only opened envelope was the invitation to Zach and Ann's wedding six months away— another reminder that he was all alone, again.

Juan Martinez sat wrapping and unwrapping the black leather belt around his knuckles, praying that God would give him the strength to do what he felt he needed to do. *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* played in the background, just something he put on whenever he wanted noise or comfort. This had been *their* movie. They had watched it so many times they had to buy a new copy of it.

So, why had he left this DVD? Juan wondered. In the six years they had been together, Phillip never forgot anything (which was part of the problem). When he moved out and took *all* his stuff, including the piano Juan had bought for him for their second anniversary, why had he left this DVD? At first, Juan thought that maybe he had forgotten the DVDs, but he had taken *Waiting to Exhale* and *Beethoven*, his two other favorite movies.

As Madea flashed her gun on the TV and went on another rant about Helen getting her half, tears rolled down Juan's face. He thought about the time they both dressed as Madea for Halloween and then went to a church party.

"*Haaaleluuuujjaaahh*," they spent all night greeting everyone. Another tear rolled quickly down his face.

He looked around the room and for the first time realized all the picture frames had his ex's picture torn out of them. He got up and went to the fireplace to closely examine one of the frames. Catching his own reflection, his wiry black chin stubble made him look a little scary. And dark black circles contrasted his otherwise smooth light brown Hispanic skin. He looked like he hadn't sleep for weeks, which was not far from the truth.

He looked at the other frames and saw that every picture was torn this way. He should have been grateful that he didn't have to look at that face again, but instead he grew angrier and more sad. He felt as if he had been deserted. Juan looked over the letter Phillip had left, a list of the things that were wrong with Juan and their relationship.

The letter reminded him of the speech his father had given him when he left home. About God not approving of his *homosexualité* and until he repented, God was not there for him. Juan had tried and tried to reconnect with his beliefs, but every time he tried, his father's words used a bullhorn to repeat them in his head. His father had listed all the things that were wrong with Juan and all the ways he needed to improve before God would even consider taking him back. And this list, like the list Phillip left, was overwhelming and compiled to defeat. Juan felt exhausted.

After six years of doing everything together as one being, Juan didn't feel that he could be alone. Worse than that, he was afraid of trying. That is why he decided on the belt. Good, thick leather, long enough to get the job done. He

hated the way he was leaving things; that he hadn't said "I love you" to his friends the last time he had seen them. And he couldn't call them up out of the blue; they would know something was up.

So he left a note on the computer screen that said simply, "Thank you, my friends. I love you a lot. Please be strong."

Better to do it now, quick and simple. Just a little commitment, a high set beam, a chair, and a belt. Tears rolled down as he stepped up onto the chair and threw the belt over the beam. Lost in his thoughts, he barely noticed his phone was vibrating. As it continued to vibrate in his pocket his mind wandered and he began to ask himself, *What if this is God calling me?* He toyed with the idea of not answering it. But he didn't want to take the chance. He pulled it out of his pocket and flipped it open without checking the caller id.

"Help." It sounded like Jonathan, but very shaky.

"Jonny? Is that you? Are you okay?" Juan asked concerned as he stepped down from the chair. "Is Ian okay?"

"Please come quick. Ian... His ankle... I'm scared... He keeps screaming..." Jonathan said very quickly.

"I'll be right there." Juan said, as he hung up the phone, grabbed his jacket, and started to rush out the door. He glanced back and thought, *I'll be back to finish this.*

CHAPTER 3: A Threesome Uncoupled

"DOES THE amount of semen a partner produces matter to you?"

This was the question that greeted Yerza Xanakus as he entered the bar.

His jaw dropped. It wasn't the question, or the company. It was the fact that they were out in public, in a straight bar, crowded with people. Several of which looked like they were ready to lynch "some faggots." Yerza looked at the faces in the group: his boyfriend of less than three weeks, Phillip Cassidy; his quiet best friend, Ann Nichols; his friend, Santos Ferris; his best fag hag, Deanna Polito, and two other guys Yerza didn't know.

“Are you crazy, Santos?” Yerza asked, still not believing that he had asked that so loudly and in public, with his boyfriend sitting beside him, and who knows who was listening. Yerza was not conservative by any stretch of the imagination. In fact with his full beard built body and flannel shirt he either got confused for a hippie or a lumberjack. Regardless, this is not the kind of stuff he was used to discussing in public, and definitely not in a straight bar. Santos on the other hand sported his usual style of unkempt. It looked as though his hair hadn’t been washed in a week, he reeked of patchouli and his clothes appeared to have been dug out of the hamper. And there was very little that embarrassed him.

Deanna, despite her tight bun of hair and her Armani dress, was never one to back down from a raunchy conversation. She glanced at Yerza, and said, “Oh Phillip...” then asked the question again. Phillip sat there, shifting his wide eye stare between Deanna, Yerza, and Santos. In the dead center of the group, he sat quietly looking uncomfortable in his starched white shirt and corporate khakis. Before he could open his mouth to say anything, Santos answered, loud and proud.

“I like explosions, volcanoes of jizz all over the place! Sex is supposed to be crazy! Sex is sex. It’s not called a fucking public library reading session.” With each word he spoke, he seemed to get louder. As he finished, he snorted and then sipped on his fruity drink, and pushed his greasy black hair back, so it didn’t cover his eyes.

Within a few minutes and a few questions, the area that they were in seemed to clear out, except for the three girls giggling in the corner who were listening to their every word, and the man at the table that was busy scribbling as Deanna and Santos asked more questions.

“During sex, how do you want to be talked to?” Deanna asked.

“OH, FUCK me harder,” Yerza growled as Phillip took him from behind. As their flesh hit, and reverberated off the walls, both of them moaned louder. Phillip reached around and grabbed Yerza’s nipples, twisting them softly.

“You want me, baby? You want me to fuck you harder?” Phillip asked.

“Oh, yeah, fuck. Yeah.” Yerza said as he lowered his head into the couch

cushion. He pushed as Phillip moved slightly and hit his prostate even harder. "Fuck me harder!" he shouted.

And for a few moments, their grunts and moans began a crescendo in the air once again.

"Guys, hurry up. You're killing my sleep here. I got..." Matt rubbed his head, and glanced at the clock, 4 a.m., "less than four hours here. And I've got tux fittings in the morning. Can you guys cum already and shut the hell up?" He covered his head once again with the pillow.

Phillip glanced up from the couch and turned to the right. This was the first time he had noticed that the apartment had virtually no dividing walls and that the room Matt was in had a doorframe, but no door. There was not even a curtain dividing the two rooms.

Yerza, used to Matt's complaining kept his rhythm and worked for his orgasm. Phillip, however, in frustration, pulled out and flopped down on the couch. Yerza pulled the condom off his partner's dick and started giving him a blow job. "Yerz, stop, dude. It's over." Phillip said, flat-lining his voice, letting Yerza know, for his part it was indeed over. As Yerza sat down beside him, he continued to masturbate.

"Can I get some alone time with you?" Phillip asked, as he glanced at Matt, unsure of whether or not the douche could hear him. "I mean I know that we've only been dating four weeks..."

"Three weeks." Yerza corrected, softly.

"... And I don't have the right to ask this, but *how the hell do you ever masturbate?* In private, I mean, because this is the third time this week, he's interrupted us and cock blocked."

"I know. But I'm not shy. I don't care if he's listening or even watching. When I need to blow, I blow. Regardless." Yerza said as he continued pulling the foreskin up and over the head of his shaft, and then pushing it back down.

"I can't do that. So, I guess..." Phillip said, feeling around on the floor for his pants and underwear. "I guess, call me when you're alone. And he won't be home for a while." He said as he pulled his pants up and reached for his keys. He stopped by the door and slipped on his shoes.

"Good night," Matt called from the bedroom.

As Phillip opened the door, he was nearly run over by two men moving a couch.

“What the fuck?!?” Yerza exclaimed as he slipped into his boxer briefs, and headed for the door. “Matt, something’s up at Juan’s place. They’re moving out furniture.” He shouted as he exited, and Matt jumped out of bed.

CHAPTER 4: Come Forth, My Son

SHORTLY AFTER his parents had shown up unexpectedly and discovered his suicide attempt, Juan was forcibly moved out of his apartment back into his childhood home. And of course because of his father’s beliefs he was forced to attend church “to revive his injured relationship with God.”

Juan entered the confessional and knelt as he crossed himself. “Forgive me, father, for I have sinned. It has been two years since my last confession.”

“Begin your confession,” the priest said.

“Are you familiar with Humpty Dumpty, Father?”

“I beg your pardon,” he said.

“Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.

All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty together again.”

Nothing. Silence from the other side of the confessional.

“My father is my Humpty Dumpty. He is the one who is broken and then decided to break me.” Juan sat silently, and tapped his fingers on the screen dividing them, trying to figure out what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it. As the tears rolled down his cheeks, he quickly wiped them away.

“My son, what is it you wish to confess?” The priest prodded, uncomfortably tugging at his collar as the heat on his side of the confessional reached intolerable.

“At the age of 14, my father sat me down and asked me which girls I had a crush on. In my memory, I listed half the girls in my class, while my father sat across from me scribbling down names. The next day, he contacted the parents of every one of those girls, and while I only heard rumors of what was said, he

had begged every one of those girls to go on a date with me, and try to prove that I was not a... homosexual.

“Every girl had said no. Why had they said no? Because in home economics class I had sewn better, or cooked better, or something better, and they were jealous. Jealous because most girls were afraid at the age of 14, that I, Juan Martinez, was a better girl than they were. My dad beat me that night, and told me to enroll in Shop from now on. No more theatre, or choir, because these things were making me more... homosexual.

“It never occurred to him that it was something deeper, and that as much as he didn’t want a queer son, I didn’t want to be a faggot. I didn’t want to get my books kicked around. I didn’t want to be tortured every day in gym. I didn’t want to want boys. I just did. And I fought admitting that. And when Santos kissed me in the bushes, I punched him in the nose. And after Jonathan jacked me off, I refused to talk to him for months. And after I had sex for the first time, I was convinced I was going straight to Hell for all eternity. I kicked my boyfriend out and spent two weeks studying the Bible, and refusing to leave my apartment. I don’t want to just go messing around with anyone. I don’t want something casual, I want something real. And for that, I am a sinner. I will die and go to Hell because I want love. I want to be in love and I want to find someone who loves me. And even bigger than that, I want to show love. I want to find a way to make a difference. *Is it wrong for me to want some love and to want to make a difference?*”

Juan pulled his knees to his chest and sat rocking. “What I don’t get is why? Why is it a sin to love? To find ways to enjoy our body that feels natural and good? I don’t understand a God who gives us so much freedom, and then says if we use it, we’re going to Hell. Can you explain that, Father?”

“No...” The priest said slowly, and then continued as if in a trance as he spoke, “but my question to you, Juan, is this... Who told you, you were wrong to want love? Who showed you scriptures in accordance with that? The bible is a weapon; it is a sword that is mighty. But many wield it incorrectly. They use it to justify their hatred, not to prove their love. They use it to make themselves a Pharisee, not to humble themselves as well. You were created divinely as YOU. And when judgment comes, I believe, showing love, true

love, will stand supreme. Until then, suffer as a warrior of the true God. True to your beliefs, and your study of the Scripture.”

As the Father spoke, Juan felt himself filled with hope and light. The Father finished the confession, giving his final words of Love, and as he left the confessional, Juan sat there grateful for once that he had listened to his parents and gone to church.

CHAPTER 5: The Fifth Anniversary

“I WANT to brake up.” That was all the e-mail said. Dr. Bradley Harbuck looked at his computer again, shaking his head in disbelief. After five years strong, this was how his lover, Jean Paul, ended their relationship, a misspelled sentence. And Bradley crumpled into his chair. He looked around the hotel room he had rented for the night. With the chartered airplane for the night, the champagne chilling in ice, and the rose petals on the bed, he had spent more money and planning than he cared to think about on this evening, only to receive a misspelled e-mail informing him of the demise of his marriage.

“*Don’t I deserve more than this?*” He asked out loud to the air wafting around the room. He stepped out onto the balcony and looked below. As the cars streamed by twenty floors down, he thought ever so briefly about jumping, but he could never do that. He loved his life.

He continued to look down and found himself lost in a memory of him and Jean Paul.

He had been staying in the exact same hotel and had called for room service. It was getting late, and he was a bit hungry. Not feeling like going out, he ordered in. And when room service arrived, Jean Paul entered his room, and Bradley’s heart stopped. Okay, maybe it didn’t stop. But for the first time in a long time, Bradley was definitively hard in all the right places.

Jean Paul put the tray down on the table, and asked if there was anything else Bradley needed. Bradley responded “That sounds like a line from a really bad porno.”

Both men were eyeing each other, waiting for the other to make the first

move.

Jean Paul headed toward the door, stating that “Company policies prohibit any kind of relationship with a guest staying at the property.”

Bradley replied, “That doesn’t stop the two of us from fucking in the shower until the water turns cold.”

Then not caring about policy, they not only felt the water get cold but warmed the sheets up as well. But by the time they finished, they both realized they wanted more than just a fuck. Bradley checked out the next morning, and got a room across the street, so there was no fear, for either of them.

Within a week, Bradley was in love, and Jean Paul saw a way out of Paris, where he had lived all his life. Since Bradley was already a U.S. citizen he helped Jean Paul get his residency and they had been together ever since.

“I want to brake up.” Laying on the desk next to the computer was the brand new five-hundred-dollar phone that Jean Paul had wanted. Bradley had bought it as an anniversary present for him, and had just gotten the service switched over, so Jean Paul could use it immediately. The phone began to vibrate, a new text had come in.

Bradley picked up the phone and read “*Broken up with the bf yet? Get over here soon and fuck me!*” Bradley’s hand shook as he dialed the number.

“Hello. Hello. Didya meanta call me? Whatever.” The guy on the other end of the phone snorted and hung up. Bradley recognized the voice immediately, as he realized he had been played for months. Bradley glanced down, after pacing the room and ending on the balcony. He still had the phone in his hand. He held it over the balcony, over the traffic gathering below, and watched it drop into street, only wishing he could do the same with Jean Paul.

CHAPTER 6: Measuring Six Inches or More

RYAN MERPHIES arrived at Black Tie Affair at nine o’clock exactly. Matt Hunter was, as usual, fifteen minutes late. The two were supposed to be trying on tuxedos for Zach and Ann’s wedding. After the initial introductions were done, Matt unbuttoned his white shirt, slipped off his pants, and threw both the

shirt and his khakis on a chair. Ryan quickly followed suit with his shirt and jeans. With both men stripped down to their boxers, they stood there quietly and waited. As Bill Loosely, the owner, slid back and forth between the two of them, trying various designs and lengths of coats, and measurements of pants, the two stood there growing more and more aware of their near nakedness.

This was not an uncomfortable situation for Matt, twenty four and in the best shape of his life. He loved showing off his meticulously worked out body and his every other week tanning salon skin. As Bill pulled this off, or tried this on, Matt stood, glancing in the mirror, checking himself out, and more importantly this “boy” who stood blushing to his right.

Ryan, however, had never been comfortable in his own skin in all of his twenty-two years. He had always seen himself as too skinny, his muscles tightly wrapping around his bones, and leaving no room for growth and because of his red hair, which no one else in his family had, he couldn’t tan without burning. So, inevitably he had ended up with freckles that dotted all over his body.

He crossed his arms to cover his nipples that were hard due to the slight breeze that appeared from nowhere. As Bill tried one thing after another, Ryan tried to stretch each piece of clothing to cover as much of his body as possible. Standing there in just his boxers and socks, he felt on display with or without Matt watching him and it certainly didn’t help that Matt was so comfortable with his nakedness.

Matt, trying to alleviate the tension, started talking to Ryan.

“So, how do you know Zach and Ann?” he asked, while putting on a tight white shirt.

Ryan glanced at him, blushed once again, and looked away. “Zach is my... uh... brother.”

“Really? I didn’t know he had any family this close?” Matt said, grinning slightly at Ryan’s reaction to his body.

“We don’t really, uhm, talk... a lot. We have different mothers, so... we...” and Ryan almost whispers this part. “We don’t really get along very well.”

“How many years difference between you two?” Matt asked, pulling the shirt back off.

“Thirteen years.” Ryan answered, just above a whisper.

“Wow. Is that weird? Having a brother that much older than you?”

“Not really. We’ve never really known each other.” Ryan looked up from the floor as he answered. Then asked Matt, “How long have you guys known each other?”

Matt thought a moment, and said “A few years. I think I met him when I was volunteering for Pride or something.”

“All right, boys. I got a few more jackets I want to try on you in the back, but I have to dig them out, so let’s break. And I’ll be back shortly, okay.” Bill said, breaking his silence only to leave the room.

Ryan quickly slipped his t-shirt over his head and slouched to the nearest chair.

“*Why do you do that?*” Matt asked, crossing the room and sitting beside Ryan.

“Do what?” Ryan asked, looking deeply into Matt’s eyes for the first time.

“I don’t know. You look so uncomfortable with yourself. And I don’t understand why.”

“What do you mean?” Ryan asked, still staring into Matt’s eyes.

“Come here” Matt said, while he stood and pulled Ryan to his feet.

He started to pull off Ryan’s shirt, but Ryan held it in place.

“Trust me, please.” There was something in his eyes that made Ryan do so.

Matt pulled off Ryan’s shirt and stood him in front of the mirror. Ryan refused to look up from the floor.

“Look at yourself. Look at your body. It’s beautiful.” Ryan glanced up, not to look at his own body, but to look into Matt’s eyes again.

As Matt stood behind him, Ryan felt dizzy with his closeness. “I’ve never... thought...”

Ryan started to crumble, but Matt caught him in his arms and as he did, he kissed him slightly on the neck. “Is this okay?” He whispered in Ryan’s ear.

Ryan nodded and leaned into Matt, letting him have all control. Matt’s hands roamed Ryan’s body, pinching his nipples playfully. Ryan hissed in pleasure. Matt scratched his nails down Ryan’s stomach and was delighted to

see the marks on his skin.

Ryan had never let someone touch him like this. His head began to swim, as the lower parts of him hardened and thickened. He became very aware as he started to escape his boxers. But he didn't want to move, and he definitely didn't want Matt to stop.

"Can we go somewhere a little more private?" Ryan whispered, between his grunts and moans, as Matt continued to hold him and touch him and bite his shoulders in a primal act of seduction.

"One of the private fitting rooms work?" Matt asked, as he continued to hit every spot he could reach.

"Yeah." He answered, as Matt picked him up and carried him behind one of the curtains separating the rooms.

"Matt, I've never..." Ryan started to say.

"That's okay. We'll go slow." Matt countered.

"Do you have... stuff?" Ryan asked, his skin going red again.

"I was tested recently, and I'm clean." Matt groaned into Ryan's ear, and then laid him down on the bench in the fitting room. As he did, he began licking all the places he couldn't reach before, and Ryan lost himself in the sensations.

OUTSIDE THE fitting room, in a pair of crumpled khakis in the corner, a cell phone vibrated three times and then went silent. The phone rang again three times then silence. Then the message icon popped up. Message from: Harbuck's Office.

CHAPTER 7: Seventh Grade Bullies

SANTOS FERRIS was never a popular kid. He was mousy and had big ears. He got picked on a lot because of his bizarre fashion sense that mostly consisted of outfits that no one else on earth would wear, and because he never knew when to shut his mouth. Even in the face of a fight, he would continue to

snort and talk shit. However that boldness also won over friendships.

On their way to check out a possible caterer for the wedding, Santos and Dean were walking along having a conversation and not really paying attention to anything else.

“I love your scarf,” Santos said, rubbing the smooth silk bright yellow and green that Dan had tied around his neck, and tucked into his purple button down shirt.

“Thanks. I have a whole collection of them,” Dean said and then changed the subject. “So what’s going on with you and the frenchie?”

Santos responded “Well I finally told him how I felt about the doctor keeping him in the closet. And he kissed me.”

Dean stopped and asked, “do you mean like kissed you like ‘come give granny a kiss’ or do you mean like Brokeback mountain?”

Santos smiled grandly, “BBM totally, with all its hotness. But that was a few days ago. I finally broke down and texted him last night before lying down in bed, thinking about him, and voila his number calls my phone... and, so I called him back...” Santos was saying, as four men approached.

“Sup, faggot?” one of the men asked, his bald head gleaming in the streetlight. His eyes were glazed over, as if he were on something, and his mouth held a sneer that could haunt. “You and your boyfriend heading some place fancy? Cuz you both look so pretty.” He continued, laughing afterward.

“No, just going to meet some friends,” Santos said, as he started to edge around the four men, who were purposely blocking the path.

“We were hoping for a little service,” another man spoke, as he grabbed his crotch and smirked, his face half hidden in darkness, but the other half looked burned. “I heard a rumor. That queers give the best head.”

“I give lousy head.” Santos retorted. “My teeth get in the way.”

“I guess I wanna find out for myself,” the man said as he grabbed Santos’ arm, and the bald man who had also spoken grabbed the other. The four men looked at one another with knowing looks, and the other two went to grab Dean. They started to half carry half drag Santos into a side alley.

And then it happened. It began so quickly, with kicks and punches flying so quickly it was hard to see who was doing what to whom. The two holding

Santos barely had time to turn around before Dean kicked one in the head, and the other in the side. And down they went, as Santos elbowed both of them in the face.

“Good thing we took those karate lessons.” Santos said, as he kneed one of the other guys in the stomach, and the man fell to the ground. The fourth man seeing his friends lying on the ground in pain, ran as quickly as he could down the alley.

Dean stood there, posed, ready to hurt any of the men that got up if they tried to start anything again.

“Let’s boogie. Before dude comes back with more friends,” Dean said, noting that the four men had almost identical jackets on indicating they were a part of a fraternity or something like it.

“Wait a minute,” Santos said, as he turned one of the guys over, so that the jacket shone in the light. Santos recognized the insignia right away. “This guy went to my high school. That’s the same jacket the football team wore.”

“Are you telling me that we just bashed half of the football team?”

“Yep.”

“Fuck yeah.” Dean shouted as he headed toward the bar where they were meeting their friends.

“Those bastards terrified me all throughout high school. *Ain’t Karma a Bitch?*” Santos said, grinning and finding his friend.

CHAPTER 8: Longing for a date at Eight

ZACHERY MERFRIES stood waiting by the door staring at his watch. His belly rumbled as he stood there, getting more and more angry. They were supposed to be there at 8:00. Where the hell were they? He crossed the room to confirm on the computer, once more, what time the email stated.

It was 8:20. *What the fuck?!?* he thought, as he started to unpack another box. He felt weird living in someone else’s house. After eight years of having his own apartment, his own space, he had finally consented to moving in with his best friend and soon to be wife. *Wow, I’ll have a wife.* This thought filled

him with hope and terror in equal shares.

It wasn't an easy decision, but he knew it was the right one. Ann Nichols was his soul mate, of that he was sure. *But what if the marriage changes our friendship*, he asked himself. He thought of all they had been through together, fights with families, break ups, and the death of both of their moms, and he knew that this move was the only move to make. Well, the moving in part too, but that had been a rash decision after his final fight with Dean.

Oh, how he wished he could wash that fight out of his brain, and never think of it again. But alas, some comments can never be taken back. His mind played them on repeat.

“You are too big for anyone to love. And you're selfish. No one will ever love you like I do. Because you're ugly and huge.” Dean had said and then threatened him if he left. Dean was always passionate, but only when he was really angry, was he ever hateful. And rather than find out if Dean would truly hit him, Zach left him that night and moved in with Ann. They already shared a business, and had been best friends for over ten years. Surely, they could live together and get married.

When Ann first brought up the idea, she was joking with Zach and a group of friends. But as time went by and both Zach and Ann thought about it, the idea made sense. Sure, it was untraditional for a bisexual woman and a gay man to get married, but it definitively wasn't unheard of. They loved each other and wanted to celebrate their commitment, so why not.

They decided to get married on Halloween, in a small ceremony with just their closest friends. But when their parents heard this, they refused to let them. Zach's father, the prestigious doctor, offered (and insisted) they have a big church wedding, with everything included. Ann acted angry but inside she rejoiced because she had always wanted a big wedding.

Zach was so lost in his thoughts that he missed the first knock at the door. But the second round of thudding broke his thoughts, and he raced to the door. He looked through the peep hole and almost under his breath said, “Finally.”

He opened the door, and there stood the delivery man.

“That will be \$24.56,” said the man with beautiful grey eyes and long shaggy brown hair that was captured under his backwards ball cap. Zach stared

at him for a moment and then dug into his back pocket for his wallet. Turning around and searching the room, he saw it sitting on top of the desk beside his laptop.

“One sec, please.” He said, trying to hold the door open and grab his wallet at the same time.

“Sure,” the man answered in a slight New Jersey accent. “What happened to the lady that used to live here? Shorter gal, fiery red hair, real skinny?” He asked.

Zach stopped for a moment. “You mean, Ann? She still lives here. I’m her...” And he stopped and thought for a moment, trying to figure to what role he wanted to admit to here. There was... Roommate. Best friend. Fiancé. Husband.

“She’s an awesome chick. We partied a couple of times together, but she always seemed more interested in making out with chicks than being with some fella. I mean, I got much love for Bi-Bi-Babes, but you know.”

Zach found himself slightly charmed by the pizza man’s ramblings.

“Well, Ann is nothing if not unpredictable. I am her gay roommate.” Zach threw himself out there, and hoped that the pizza man would take the signal.

“That’s cool.” The pizza man said, as he took the money that Zach was offering. Leaning against the doorframe, the man removed his cap and brushed his hand through his hair.

“*Can I ask you a question?*” He asked and then licked his lips.

Zach stood there, waiting, hoping against hope that the man was looking for the right way to seduce him, carefully choosing the right words. “Sure.”

The man paused, licked his lips again, and spoke softly.

“What is the easiest way to Woodbury from here?” The pizza man asked.

Zach give him directions and then closed the door. *Tonight is gonna be a long night, but at least I’ve got company*, he thought as he opened the pizza box and pulled out a giant slice of supreme pizza.

ANN GOT up fifteen minutes earlier than her alarm. She didn't have to be awake until 7:00. Because her brain refused to shut up, she crawled out of bed at 6:45 after an hour of just lying there playing with her hair. She showered then slipped on her usual uniform, which was a pair of jeans and a firefly t-shirt. She hurriedly pulled her curly and fiercely red hair back into a french braid that ended near the small of her back. Slipping her keys into her pocket, she locked the front door and headed to work. Jumping into her Jeep, she turned on the ignition and turned up the CD player which blasted out some Ani.

She was excited about planning the wedding. She had never thought she would ever get to the point where she wanted to be a Missus anybody. But Zach, her best friend and business partner, had made an off-hand comment one day that they should just get married and to hell with the rest of the world. They laughed but she immediately responded...in a more serious tone, *why not?* It made sense, they balanced each other out. They both held the same belief that mono was a four lettered word that would have no place in their lives. The fact that they didn't have or want any type of sexual relationship didn't matter. Sure, they were cuddle buddies on occasion and always there with a hug or ready to give a much needed massage...but other than that, intimacy would never a part of the picture.

They announced the news on April 1st, and found as they told friends and family they laughed at first, thinking it was a joke. But it was not a punch line, no joke at all. She wasn't worried about her decision but her mind seemed constantly distracted by the fact that her friends were always unavailable.

Now, here she was. Two weeks before she was set to get married, but she felt like something was off. And that thing, whatever it was had plagued her mind for days. She glanced in her rearview mirror and held her hazel-eyed stare for a moment too long nearly rear ending the midsize Honda in front of her. She made it safely to work and right as she was about to enter the airport, her cell phone rang. It was Leslie, one of her two self-proclaimed MIA best friends. "Hey Annie, how're you feeling today?"

"Feeling like I'm heading into work." She liked Leslie just fine, but there was a bond between her and Zach that Leslie couldn't understand and was

therefore jealous of. Because of that, she tried too hard, and Ann sometimes found it grating. What Ann wanted more than anything was to talk to Zach about how she was feeling. Normally, she would call him, or just drop by and spend a couple of hours organizing the what and why of her emotions. But this time she found she couldn't. She was sure he was dealing with his own anxieties so she didn't want or need to burden him with hers as well.

"Hey Annie, what do you think about me dying my hair red?" Ann took a moment to imagine her five-foot-one friend with her usual brown shoulder-length hair and superimposed it with red. Although they had no physical traits in common, because they had spent so much time together people often assumed they were sisters. The mere thought of sharing physical traits on top of that made Ann cringe.

"No. Absolutely not. I thought you were thinking about doing it blonde. Why the change?" As soon as Leslie started to answer, the call-waiting beeped in. "Hold on, I have another call coming in."

Leslie squeaked out, "Wait! Can we get together tonight, to talk?"

"Yeah sure. Meet me at Nine Lives at nine or so. I think I'm gonna need to get drunk tonight."

Once she clicked over, she was instantly met with Naomi's harassed voice. "Oh my god, I need the night off from the kids, and the hubby has agreed to watch them for a few hours. Can we meet tonight? Maybe have a coffee and talk?" It seemed a bit of a coincidence to hear from both of them like this.

They were both so busy in their separate lives that neither of them had spoken to her in almost two weeks. She wanted to be angry because they both had stated on Facebook they had received their wedding invitations months ago, but yet neither had contacted her. They both knew the festivities were drawing near, and hoped they were coming.

So plans were set to go out and get drunk at Nine Lives, her favorite lesbian bar. While the original plan was to get together with Naomi and Leslie to talk, Ann was secretly hoping to get completely smashed and end up in the arms of a beautiful woman and not the porcelain god. She opened the shop in a rush and her day began.

The Kettle Black started as Zach's idea. A coffee shop at the airport

seemed a viable setup from the get-go, but as the planning got more detailed it stopped being just Zach's and started to become theirs. In helping him to build his dream, she became invested in making it a success. Instead of jumping through hoops and having Zach sign away his firstborn child to the bank, Ann became the financial backer for the business. Even when it struggled in the beginning she never regretted her decision. Her day flew by as travelers fueled up with sugary treats and coffee concoctions at regular intervals. Before she knew it, she was closing up shop and heading home to change into something a little more alluring.

She was pulling into the parking garage next to the bar at 8:45 when she spotted Deanna at the bookstore across the street. Because she was early, she ran across to say hi and see how Deanna was. As soon as they started talking, Deanna started getting very emotional about a new guy she was dating. Ann figured she needed a drink and invited her to the bar to get drunk with her.

Ann sat down at the end of the bar and pulled Deanna into the seat next to her. Then she let Deanna vent for the next ten minutes. She kept glancing at the door every few minutes to see if Naomi and Leslie had shown up. At 9:15, she called Leslie's cell phone and heard the phone ring right behind her. Apparently, Naomi and Leslie had gotten there earlier than her and had gotten a booth out of the way so Ann hadn't seen them.

The way Naomi and Leslie were chatting when Ann approached the table, one casually observing would have thought that they were old friends, the way of quick exchange and private jokes already taking place. Which was bizarre in the pure and simple fact that their beliefs and personalities were so drastically different. Leslie was a full out tree hugger who followed the Pagan path and Naomi was as conservative as a fundamentalist Christian as you could get. They had their heads close together talking so intently that after standing there a moment waiting to be acknowledged, Ann finally cleared her throat to announce her presence.

"Oh, hey Ann," Naomi said as she moved out of the booth to give Ann a hug, and Leslie did the same. As she slipped back into the booth, Leslie moved to the same side as Naomi, so that Ann was forced to sit awkwardly across from them, as if they were prepared to do some serious in-depth questioning,

or she was being interviewed for a job she didn't want.

As she sat down across from them, Naomi and Leslie had a conversation with their eyes. As if they had questions and answers to questions that they didn't want to reveal. They looked from one another to their drinks and alternatively at her several times before she finally interrupted their increasingly awkward silence. "Ok guys, what's up? It's obvious you have been planning this? What's going on?"

Leslie spoke first, in a squeaking obviously nervous voice, "How serious are you about marrying Zach? I mean, we know you are serious, but how serious are you?" She asked looking at the table between them.

"You're kidding right?" Ann asked incredulously, trying to understand where this was leading. "I'm marrying my best friend in two weeks. Why are you asking this?"

"Because," Naomi chimed in, "we are worried that you are making the wrong decision. I mean, we both realize it is your life, but are you sure you want to throw it away—"

"Wait a minute, throw it away? What do you mean 'throw it away'? Ann asked, anger now edging her voice.

"We didn't mean, throw it away." Leslie said, quietly, glancing around. "It's just that Zach is a user, and we're afraid he's using you. I mean, look at how the business expenses are sure piling up."

"Wait a minute, Naomi. How do you know about the business? Leslie, did you—"

Leslie rubbed her hands together and spoke in a quiet voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to break your confidence. We just started talking and..."

"Are you serious? Are you fucking— I can't even believe that you would—" Ann interrupted herself.

"Listen, Ann, I didn't mean to hurt you, but I'm scared for you, for what this marriage might mean to both of you. But mostly you. You have invested everything into making his dreams come true, and what has he done for you? Nothing. I'm afraid you will lose your house, your car, everything, and he's a selfish ass." Leslie spoke, trying to look in Ann's eyes.

"Ok, stop. You don't know what the hell you are talking about." Ann

replied, glaring at Leslie.

“I know enough. You’re scared and you’re compromising yourself and your dreams for him.” Leslie answered.

Ann couldn’t find the right words to respond. Her mind was filled with anger over the attack that her two supposed friends had launched, completely blindsiding her.

“Zach is gay, Ann. And that is never gonna change. And 20 years from now, you’re gonna look back on your life and realize you wasted a majority of your life married to a gay man who has wasted you and your life on him and his ambitions. Is that what you want?” Leslie asked.

Naomi took over.” Not to mention the fact, that he can’t be that gay, if he’s marrying you. Something’s gonna have to be kept secret, so guess who becomes the dirty little mistress?

“What are you talking about, Naomi?” Ann asked, looking at her as if he head was screwed on backward.

“He can’t fight for Gay Rights as a Gay man if he’s married to you, can he? What sense would that make?” Naomi responded completely believing her own words.

“Naomi, you honestly don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. Neither of you do.” Ann remarked

“Ok, what’s going on at this table?” Deanna asked, sliding into the booth with her arm around Ann. “It’s gotta be more interesting than Horace hitting on lesbians!” She said laughingly.

“I’m just being told by two of my supposed best friends that not only do they not support my decision to marry Zach, but that they think he is an evil lecherous gay man set out to ruin me and my future.” She answered, snorting through her anger.

“Wow. It’s a little judgmental over here. Ya know what? Fuck em. It’s your life. Do whatever the hell you want with or without their support,” Deanna said as she tossed back her drink.

Ann, shaking with the rage, contemplated picking up a chair and beating some sense into the two across the table from her. Instead maintaining her dignity and fighting to not scream, she pushed her way out of the booth and

out the door of Nine Lives.

CHAPTER 10: The Ten p.m. Flight

THE KETTLE Black was a cute little coffee shop in the center of the airport. It smelled of strong espresso and sugar sweets, both of which it had in abundance. Behind the counter, Ann was so deep in thought as she set up the display of freshly baked cakes that had come in that morning she failed to notice the man approach the counter and stare at the menu for a moment.

When she finally stopped staring at the carrot cake that she was debating on taking a slice of, she looked up, and despite his relaxed appearance, all of her muscles tightened as she realized she had no idea of how long he had been standing there waiting, and that was very unlike her.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to keep you waiting Phillip. I guess, I—” And before she could finish, he cut her off.

“Ann, honey don’t worry about it. I’ve been here only a minute or so, and I was still trying to decide what I want. I’m meeting the guys here anyhow, and it seems as though they are taking their time getting here. So, no hurry.”

“So, they tried to jump us, but Dean... in his big, burly voice was like, I don’t think so— Hey, Phillip, how you doing hot stuff?” Santos, asked and scooped Phillip up into his arms. Phillip held his breath, and returned the hug.

“I was just telling Ian about the other night, in front of the club.”

“Yeah, have you got to the part where you and Dean save the world from giant crocodiles bent on world dominance? You are so full of bullshit, Santos.” Phillip replied, rubbing his hand in Santo’s hair as a playful gesture and then wiping his hand on his pants.

Ann interjected here, “Hey, guys, get you something?”

“Sorry,” Phillip said, turning back to her, “Can I have a triple shot espresso? No froth, please.”

“Same,” answered Ian and Santos at the same time.

“Long night, boys?” Phillip looked back and forth between them and realized they were holding hands.

Everything clicked. Phillip glared at Ian and then at Santos. “Are you fucking kidding me? What about you and Jean Paul? And you and Jonathan? Has the world ended and no one told me?”

At that point, Jean Paul walked up. “Something about the world ending? I wanna go to that, whatever it is.” He said, glancing first at Phillip, who he hugged slightly, then turning toward Ian and Santos. “What is this?” He said glancing at their hands.

Phillip began to back up, ready for Jean Paul to start swinging at the couple. But instead, Jean Paul grabbed Santos’ hair and pulled him into a kiss, and then, did the same thing with Ian. Phillip had never seen anything that hot outside of a porno and his jeans started to get a little tighter. Ann nearly dropped their shots, as her mouth dropped, and she stared at the four of them.

“I’m so sorry,” Phillip mouthed to her, but she was so lost in this fantasy in front of her that she continued to stare until Jean Paul tapped on the counter.

“Hey Ann, may I have an iced Chai, please?” He asked, glancing at the boys as they moved to a secluded corner of the shop.

“Oh my God, Ann, I am so sorry.” Leslie said, before Ann had even noticed that Leslie was standing behind the man. “I had no idea that everything was gonna come out like that.”

Jean Paul stood there, waiting for his drink looking at the girl who seemed to have come from nowhere. She was plucky, but gave off a strange jibe. She was oddly shaped, as her shoulders seemed closely attached to her ears, and she stood just over five feet.

“I think Zach is a wonderful guy, I really do. I just don’t think that marrying a gay guy is the right move for you,” she said, all in one breath.

And as Ann’s face changed shades, and she fought to remain composed although it was obviously she was about to explode, Jean Paul spoke up. “I’m sorry, but who the fuck are you?”

Leslie, shocked look on face, turned toward Jean Paul. “Excuse me?” she asked, almost whispering in rage.

“Are you the Lord God, whom I’ve been worshipping all these years? Because you are absolutely not how I envisioned you. Who are you to fucking tell anyone who they should or shouldn’t mate?”

“Do I know you? Is there a reason you’re talking to me right now?” she asked, snarling at him.

“You may not know me, but I definitely know you. You’re the type that shits all over everyone’s happiness to divine your own. You’re the fly in the ointment, Lilith of the Eden. You’re the voice of reason, except that your reasoning is based on insanity. Go away, and leave this woman to her happiness. Shoo- shoo, little fly.”

“I’m here to talk to my friend. Not you.” Leslie said simply, turning back to Ann, who was trying not to laugh.

“I think he said it all. Goodbye, Leslie.” Ann said, handing the drink to Jean Paul, and whispering, “It’s on the house,” as he handed her money.

“Then keep it as an early wedding present.” He winked and walked to his group.

“Just so we’re clear, I’m not coming to your wedding,” Leslie said as she started to walk out of the shop.

“Just so we’re clear, you’re uninvited.” Ann snapped back.

Ann moved around the corner and closed the door in Leslie’s face and glanced at the clock, 9:55. “Gents, just so you know we close at 10 pm. But I’ve got to clean, so if you want to hang out, you can.”

“Oh, crap.” All four started to stand and move.

“What time does his flight get in?” Jean Paul asked.

“Ten o’clock,” Santos answered.

And just as they reached for the doorknob, the door swung open and there stood Bradley, staring at Jean Paul.

Ann, bounced toward him, and called out, “Brad!” as she grabbed him tight. And after that she glanced at Jean Paul, and asked, “*Do you guys know each other?*”

CHAPTER 11: The Eleventh Hour

THE FIRST ambulance passed the church around noon, just as Zach and Ann were walking through the rehearsal. Three police cars followed soon after.

Being a worry-wart, Zach said a quick prayer for whomever was involved, hoping and praying that they would survive what disaster had befallen them. He thought about his circle of friends and family and hoped that none of them were involved. When Jonathan, Ryan, and Matt showed up so they could walk through their parts as groomsmen, Zach breathed a sigh of relief. But where was Juan, Jonathan's boyfriend? He put the thought to the back of his mind until after rehearsal, when he would have more time to talk to him.

Ann, on the other hand, seemed completely distracted and kept missing her cues.

The service was to be a simple one, but she kept getting confused on the slightest things. Yerza, who was stepping in as her Best Man because Leslie had dropped out, kept trying to talk to her. But while she was physically present, her mind was elsewhere.

Finally, Zach asked for a break and pulled Ann outside for an "air break" since she had quit smoking and no longer needed "smoke breaks"

"Ok, what is going on?" he asked, bluntly and pushing back his anger. Ann looked away, into the park across the street.

"Nothing," she mumbled.

"I'm calling bullshit on that one. Ann..." he said, waiting for her to look at him.

She didn't.

"Ann, please look at me," he said, trying to keep the tears at bay. She glanced at him and looked away quickly.

"Ann, *do you want to marry me?* I mean, really? Because the last few days, you could have been in Alaska and been closer. And a lot warmer." He remarked, trying to smile.

"Of course, Zach. I love you with all my heart. But—" She stopped herself.

"But what? You've got to tell me." As he wiped one tear away.

"Well, there are some things you need to know..." And with that she started telling him everything that had happened with Leslie and Naomi and all the things that had been said.

Zach, sat down and listened to everything Ann said, not only her retelling

of Naomi's and Leslie's words, but how they had affected her.

When he finally opened his mouth, the only thing he could think to say was "I am so sorry, darling." And with that Ann knew that she was right to tell him everything and knew more than ever that she was ready to marry him.

"So, *do I need to answer any of the charges brought against me?*" He asked, with complete sincerity.

"Do you want to?" She returned the question.

"Ann, you know me, and you know my heart. I want everything and anything for you that you want for yourself, and so much more. I have never and will never hold you back from your dreams. I will always push you into them."

"I know that."

"I accept you as you are, and the only time I will ever change you is if you ask me to. I will help you honor yourself, love yourself, and become whoever you want to be. Always."

"You. With the poetry." She giggled.

Zach smiled. "So, let's do this."

Ann nodded and started inside.

Ryan was waiting inside the door to the church. "Zach, hey man, you may want to head to the hospital."

Zach looked confused.

Ryan ushered him down one of the rows and sat him down. Ann sat beside him, gripping his shoulder.

"Apparently Juan and Dean were on their way here, and they were hit by a car. The hospital wouldn't give Jonathan much, but luckily, he and Juan's parents are on good terms, so they called him. Both of them are in the ICU. Dad was already at the hospital, following up with some patients, so have him paged when you get there.

CHAPTER 12: Around the clock, and back at Twelve

THE TEARS had been fairly steady for the last few days for Zach. In less than

12 hours, he was set to get married. And while that idea held great joy for him, he could not enjoy those thoughts because two of his “chosen family” lay in hospital beds on the razor edge of death. He had not asked and didn’t want to know what injuries went where. He knew what he needed to know, that things were very fragile right now.

He sat holding Dean’s hand for an hour and then went to Juan’s bedside and did the same. It was the only thing that he could do right now. He couldn’t enter the church, knowing how he felt about God right now. And deep inside, he knew that it wasn’t His fault, but Zach’s anger was close to consuming him.

JONATHAN LOOKED at Juan, and realized that he could lose the love of his life and all he could think was, *I should be wearing black, instead of this tuxedo*. He blamed himself for being impatient and leaving without Juan. *Please baby, come back to me*, he thought, laying his head next to Juan’s.

“You never did explain to me how the two of you hooked up,” Ian said as he entered the doorway of the room.

“Get out.” Jonathan said angrily, grabbing a tissue to blow his nose.

“I heard through the grapevine, and thought you might—”

“I don’t need anything from you.”

“Just like old times.” Ian replied with a laugh.

“What?” Jonathan responded surprised.

“You never needed anything. Always a solitary island. So strong. So alone.”

“What are you talking about? That was you, not me.”

“Maybe it was both of us. Maybe that’s why we never meshed.”

“Maybe.” Jonathan looked at Juan and brushed his cheek.

“Juan was good for you. You two always needed each other. I think, anyway.” Ian looked at Jonathan one more time and left the room.

“You see, Juan, now we even have Ian’s approval. So you can’t leave.” And Jonathan laid his head back next to Juan’s.

MATT SAT in the chair in Dr. Harbuck's office. He had been waiting for the doctor for almost thirty minutes, but he understood he was busy. So he sat, tapping out a tune on his knee, and waited.

Dr. Harbuck entered the office in a hurry, sat down quickly and remained silent for a minute or two.

"Ok, Doc, what's up? I mean, I know that something's wrong. I can feel it. So, just tell me. What is it?"

"You have Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome."

"AIDS? I have AIDS? You mean, I have HIV, right?"

"No, your HIV has progressed to the final stage, meaning you have—"

"Ok, I get it."

"When was the last time you saw a doctor?"

"Five years ago."

"And have you been sexually active in that time?"

"Yes."

"Then the first thing I suggest is that you contact anyone and everyone you've been with, in the last 5 years and tell them to get tested."

There was a knock at the door.

"Here's a pad of paper and a pen to get you started. Give me one moment." As Dr. Harbuck got up and answered the door.

"Yes?"

"Hey, Dad. Sorry to bother you but with everything going on, I left my wallet in my bag at the church, and I was wondering if I could borrow some money to get Zach and me some lunch." Ryan stood there looking at his father for a moment.

"Sorry, sure. Sure." Bradley answered. "Give me a second." He walked over to his desk.

As he did, Matt got up and walked to the door. "Here's a twenty, and uummmm, I have AIDS," He said and shut the door.

ANN PACED in the room, white dress flowing behind her. She glanced at herself, her red hair, speckled with purple flowers, and she had to admit, she

looked beautiful. The worry lines around her eyes however did not help. Not that that would stop them. She picked up her cell phone, and glanced at the screen again.

It said simply: “He’s gone.”

She would have cried, but she didn’t know either of them that well. She knew that Zach, on the other hand, was very close to them both. And to have lost either of them, especially in such a meaningless way, he was probably not doing well. The only times she had seen him in the last few days, his cheeks had the well-worn indentations of many tears.

Everyone had asked him if he wanted to delay the wedding, but he had refused that option. Too many people coming from far away. Rescheduling would inconvenience too many. And besides, there was always something. Right? He tried to joke but was no master actor in hiding his pain.

THREE HOURS before the wedding, as he was getting ready to head back to the hospital just to check up one more time, he got the call.

Congrats, one friend is out of the ICU, Unfortunately the other... didn’t make it.

Didn’t make it what? Didn’t make it to the Super Bowl? Didn’t make it across the street? Zach just sat with his head in his lap for a while. And then he got up, loaded the car, and headed to the church to get married. Because he had to. Because he wanted it. He needed some happy right now.

As he walked down the aisle and saw all his friends there, he allowed himself to cry just a bit. Phillip and Yerza had gone out and bought tons of scarves, and everyone had one on, in remembrance. And Zach thought they all looked ridiculous with their brightly colored scarves, but it was incredibly sweet. Deanna and her new boyfriend, Enver, were sitting in the second row, next to the threesome, Ian, Jean Paul, and Santos, who were giggling, watching Zach cross to his brother, Ryan, and dad, Bradley. They both hugged him tightly. Matt stood awkwardly, now that everyone knew. Ryan reached out to Matt and grabbed his hand and then pulled him into a hug.

The audience rose as Ann walked down the aisle, glowing as an angel. She

seemed to glide along, beautiful and regal, and ready to head into the future. She stopped beside Yerza, who handed her a long beautiful white scarf that had red, purple, and blue roses stitched in it. Ann said a prayer as she wrapped it around her waist.

“May those who are special to me always bloom with my care, love, and patience. May I always remember that I am unique and beautiful. And may I always be able to help my husband feel supported, encouraged, and loved as he is, and what he is to become.”

And with that the ceremony began.

GO TOWARD the light. *Why should I?* I asked myself. Again with all the questions. I can't help myself. I was always a curious boy. I wanted to know about life after death. I guess I got to find out. And when I get the chance, I'm gonna ask a billion and one questions. Because without the yearning of knowledge, I can never grow. Although, whether or not I'm growing now is yet another question.

I am proud of what I did in my life. I'm glad it didn't end the way I thought it would. I'm glad that I always questioned myself, although that is probably what led to my death. I was sure I had forgotten something, so Jonathan left without me. And then when I was walking along with Juan, I realized what it was. I had forgotten the rings, why the hell Ann had trusted me with them still didn't make sense. I remembered right as we were about to cross the street. And I looked up, and I saw the driver lose control, and I tried to save Juan by shoving him out of the way. I hope I helped. I just hope I helped.

JUAN OPENED his eyes, slightly, the bright light hurting after several days of dark. The first thing he saw as he turned his head was Jonathan's face mere inches away. He leaned in carefully, barely moving his neck and kissed Jonathan lightly upon the lips. Jonathan's eyes fluttered opened and the shock consumed his face.

“Oh baby. I was so scared. I was so scared.” He said as he tried to hold back tears but couldn’t.

“How long have I been out?” Juan asked, looking around the room for a clock.

“Almost two days.” Jonathan answered grabbing Juan’s hand and gripping it tightly. “They were afraid you would never wake from the coma, but, thank the gods...”

“Another question for you...” Juan said as he indicated that he needed some water. Jonathan brought the cup to Juan’s mouth and helped him to the straw. After Jonathan put the cup down Juan put his hand on the side of Jonathan’s face, and asked, “Jonathan Grant, *will you marry me?*”

Jonathan had waited so long for this moment he couldn’t speak, he just nodded his head. *YES!*

THE END

Author bio: Wt Prater currently resides in Nashville, TN with life partner, and their BDSM cat. The works of Wt Prater vary from poetry and prose, to play scripts, and more recently, short stories and novels. Believing in the importance of supporting the GLBT community, Wt Prater strives to include a GLBT character as lead or support in EVERY SINGLE WORK that is produced. Although paranormal is a favored genre, there are plans for works in almost every genre including: mystery, sci-fi, erotic, paranormal, and of course, updating the blog every day. Visit us at [Just Write and SO Gay](#)

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