



The Hustler Prince

A Torquere Press Single Shot by Lee Benoit

For T.G.

The coffee perked just as Doria tapped on the windowpane with one blunt fingernail. She never stood on ceremony (or the stoop), never waited for an invitation to coffee, and never wasted time on superficial greetings. A buss on the cheek and she was through the door, bringing a gust of smoky autumn air with her; a gurgle of coffee into the mug Martín had set out for himself and she was perched on a tall stool at the counter, rummaging in her backpack for the cream she must have stopped for on the way.

“Damn you and your lactose intolerance, Tino,” she grumbled equably, pulling out a slightly dented cardboard carton. “And put on a shirt before I start getting ideas.”

Groggily, Martín turned to leave the kitchen and comply but Doria called him back. “Would you *look* at this?” Frisbee-style, she pitched a folded newspaper at him, which he caught against his bare stomach. He unfolded it on the counter as he reached for a mug to replace the one Doria had hijacked. Martín glanced at the big photo on the front page above the fold and dropped the mug onto the scarred linoleum countertop with a dull thud. The sudden knot in his chest made it hard to breathe. He spun around to face his friend.

“It’s him, isn’t it?”

“Sure looks like him.”

“Oh, my. Oh, Doria. He really did it!”

Doria retrieved Martín’s mug and filled it with coffee. She put her arm around his waist and looked up into his startled green eyes. “I thought the little bastard was joking.” Doria always swore in crisis situations. Martín never did.

The picture in the newspaper was of a crowd of men at a detention facility at Guantánamo Bay, a cross section of the desperadoes and fringe dwellers who’d risked everything – not that most had much to lose – to leave Cuba during that crazy summer and fall. Fidel, taking the path of least resistance while publicly insisting he was thumbing his nose at *yanqui* hegemony, had simply failed to stanch the off-island flow of the undesirable, the redundant, the – not to put too fine a point on it – the poor, the dark, the queer. The irony of this glimpse into certain perversities of Cuba’s great egalitarian experiment seemed lost upon the redoubtable *jefe*.

Martín took a gulp of coffee. It was much too hot and burned his mouth. He put one hand over Doria’s to keep her close, set down the coffee, and took up the paper again. Left of center, a young man aimed a dazzling grin at the camera, bright brown eyes squinted closed with mirth. His hand rested flat over his heart, two fingers extended, in a salute Martín recognized. Martín made a conscious effort to force a breath deep into his lungs. The face, its dark eyes and white smile, the deliberately placed hand, the compact body, all belonged to Alexei. Martín had been trying to forget Alexei for four months. “Ay, *nene*,” he whispered raggedly to the youth’s image. “You followed me! You tried to come to me.”

Doria wriggled out of Martín’s grip to pace around the tiny kitchen. “We *have* to get him here. You *can’t* let him *languish* in that *prison*. You *know* what it’s *like*. Think what could *happen* to him!” She knew, though not as well as Martín did, what had happened to Alexei before.

Doria’s emphatic inflection brought him out of his reverie. He chuckled. “Such a drama queen.” Doria swatted his flannel-clad ass. “He’ll be all right. He’s pretty savvy, remember?” Martín wished he believed his own confident tone.

Doria cocked an eyebrow at him. “Oh, I *remember*. You’re right,” she conceded. “But you *still* have to get him here.”

Martín thought about that. “Alexei was a fling, Doria, a trick, a holiday romance.” Bring him here? He couldn’t possibly.

“That’s not what *he* thinks.” Doria jabbed her thumb at the smiling face in the newspaper.

And just like that, Martín admitted it wasn’t what *he* thought, either.

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Martín remembered arriving in Cuba early that summer. Doria was to present a paper at an economic development conference, and Martín was exploring research possibilities concerning the Cuban medical system. They had landed in Havana on a June afternoon so hot they had to set their shoulders against the wall of heat and shove just to make it across the tarmac from the plane to the terminal. When their obviously off-island accents transformed the customs official’s indifference to perverse bureaucratic stubbornness, Martín responded with a convincing display of imperious *yanquismo*: “We are the invited guests of the Universidad in Santiago. Professor Rubén Gallego is expecting us on the next flight, and you, *compañero*, will be called upon to explain any delay.”

Doria was struck dumb – an unprecedented state of affairs – by her best friend’s performance and the custom’s official’s grudging compliance. Martín had never looked like a *yanqui* to her before. Back home, he stood out because he was so obviously *not* a Yank. His dark hair framed his face in tight waves, his neat moustache and beard set off his warm skin, and those green eyes of his were almost shocking, magnified as they were behind chic rimless glasses. He could pass for Cuban, Doria often said, until he opened his mouth. The customs agent noticed only the New Jersey *boricua* accent, even though all he could have said about it was that it wasn’t any variety of Cuban. The moment they were out of eye and earshot of the cowed customs agent, she linked her arm in his and camped an adoring gaze with her wide blue eyes. Laughing at her, Martín didn’t notice a young man detach himself from the throng of greeters and greeted, taxi operators and luggage minders. Martín missed him gliding toward them until they heard his voice.

“Taxi? Tour of Old Havana? Beaches? Bars? I’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

“We’re not leaving the terminal,” Martín answered tightly.

“Connecting to Varadero? Isla de la Juventud?”

Doria bridled at the kid’s assumption that any newly arrived non-Cubans must be engines of the tourist economy. “Santiago,” she volunteered before Martín’s elbow to her ribs warned her to be discreet.

“My home!” The young man beamed as if he had invented the eastern port city for the sole delight of Doria and Martín. Martín turned abruptly and squired Doria towards the street exit. Outside, he maneuvered her through the crowded taxi stand, across the street, and towards a small *cafetería*, little more than a couple of stools teetering near a wooden counter. Coffee and cigarettes were the only provender. Martín held up a mute two

fingers, helped Doria to perch on a stool, and leaned back against the counter, his elbows resting on the stained wood, his eyes scanning the busy street.

Doria waited until the coffee arrived, grimaced at its aggressive sweetness, and ventured, “You were rude to that boy, partner.”

“He’s a hustler. I was being firm, not rude. The rules are different here.”

“This is you in macho drag? Not sure I like it. Anyway, you’ve never been here before.”

“But I know how things are. People are desperate. We’re targets.”

“And you’re paranoid.” Three years of friendship made it easy for them to let the matter drop, especially amidst the thrills of Cuban domestic air travel.

In Santiago, Doria was much occupied with her conference as Martín sought entrée into the diffuse Cuban medical system. It was an endeavor that required much shuttling back and forth to various ministries and not a little ass-kissing. He returned each evening, grumpy and tense, to the empty university dormitory where he and Doria were housed. One afternoon, after a particularly fruitless visit to a ministry whose purpose Martín had already forgotten – so ineffectually was its mandate fulfilled – he trudged up the hill to the dorm, saluted the Angolan medical students who were the denizens of the dorm next door, and pulled up short at the steps to his and Doria’s residence. She was standing gripping the handlebars of one of Santiago’s ubiquitous but jealously-guarded and therefore impossible-to-get Chinese bicycles. She was grinning, and she wasn’t alone. The airport hustler from Havana was standing next to her holding up a second bike, his arm chummily circling Doria’s waist.

“Tino! Look who I found!” Doria exclaimed, and only a really good friend would have registered the don’t-you-dare-make-a-scene note in her voice. “Well, he found me, didn’t you, *nene*? Turns out he was working on a degree here a couple of years ago and still has friends on campus. We ran into each other at lunch. Look what he found for us.” Martín shot a pursed-lipped scowl at Doria, then turned the full force of a bad day and a very bad feeling upon the young man at her side. How had he followed them from Havana?

Looking directly at him turned out to be a very bad idea.

He looked about ten years younger than Martín, maybe early twenties. His brown skin covered a compact body smooth with the musculature of one who did physical labor. His hair was very short, throwing his exquisite bone structure into relief. High cheekbones shadowed a strong square jaw, which framed full dark lips that were right that minute mocking Martín with a smug, very white grin. The grin crinkled his dark-brown eyes, knitting together long, feathery top and bottom lashes. Martín shot Doria a helpless look, and was exasperated to discover on her face the twin of the boy’s expression. Doria had clearly switched allegiances, adopting this boy and all the trouble Martín knew he’d bring.

“What is your name?” Martín demanded.

“Alexei.” The boy gave his name like a gift.

Over the heaving beat of his heart he barely heard Doria and the boy planning a route for a ride back down to the city. He recovered just in time to insist Doria ride with him and not the stranger.

They maneuvered the heavy bikes down steep hills, avoiding belching diesel trucks and death wish taxis. Doria’s arms were around Martín’s waist, and her small breasts and pointed chin were pressed against his spine. Having her close felt good, as always, but Martín’s attention was captured by the image of Alexei pedaling a few meters ahead, his singlet-clad back a sharp wedge between the planes of his shoulders and the swell of his butt.

“*Way* cuter than Ben,” came Doria’s voice in his ear.

“Ben wasn’t a hustler,” Martín ground out, knowing in his heart it wasn’t true. He spared a thought for his erstwhile lover. The love of his life, as was. Martín had been sure the fates were involved in his meeting Ben, in Ben returning his interest. Their spheres wouldn’t have intersected otherwise, with Martín in his cozy anthropology department with his doting, avuncular advisor, Ben pushing hard but making it look easy in his law program. Ben would never have been caught dead in the gay bars, and it would never have occurred to Martín to venture into the places Ben found diverting, like Ben’s father’s (and grandfather’s and great-grandfather’s) club. No, he’d thought at the time that the University president’s reception was a bolt from the blue. Students were invited to convince hidebound trustees of the vitality of the new generation. Ben had been invited as a matter of course, Martín, as evidence of the university’s magnanimity.

Martín had fixed on Ben as soon as he walked in, self-assured and aggressively casual. That Ben returned his interest was no small surprise. That Ben took him home that night was a revelation. Martín gave it up for Ben. They’d stayed together for years; well after Martín had finished his degree, and into their first professional posts. It was when Ben was closing in on his first big promotion that Martín had started to notice him cooling off. His wit, always cutting, had been aimed at Martín more and more often. Sex, never as mutual as Martín would have liked, though he’d never even tried to find words to admit it even to himself, became harder, crueler. When Martín refused Ben for the first time in six years, Ben had spat out the word “slumming” and Martín had known the truth of their relationship. He’d been Ben’s wild oat, his walk on the wild side, his “fuck you” to family and tradition and duty. But now he had something to lose; senior partners hinting his “lifestyle” could jeopardize his ambitions. He’d had something to lose, all right, and he lost Martín. Decisively. He had broken Martín’s heart.

“Ben wasn’t a hustler,” he repeated, but it wasn’t true. Ben had rolled him like a pool hall mark and no mistake. Doria snorted against his shoulder, and he felt compelled to add, “This kid’ll probably run five scams on us before sundown, starting with these bikes. You haven’t been in town with me, Doria. There’s a black market for everything, even cooking oil. Yesterday, there was practically a riot on the docks when an Italian ship was

rumored to have pasta for sale. Everyone's hustling, taking risks, since the Soviet disintegration."

"Maybe I haven't seen it like you have, O man of the people, but things aren't so cushy up in my ivory tower, either. Have you *seen* what the students eat? They'll lose their places at school if they're caught with contraband, so they have to eat what the state can give. Coffee. Bread. *Sometimes*, butter or cheese. Whatever that freaky canned meat is. This kid may be running a dozen scams, but not on us, Tino. He can help you get what you need. And he can show us the city. I'm sick to *death* of the edifying entertainments the conference organizers think do foreigners good. One more reverent bolero or long-winded speech about the triumphs of the revolution, and I'll *hurl*. I *promise*." Doria punctuated her words with a squeeze or two, which Martín had to admit were very, very comforting.

He'd been on edge since arriving, experiencing a culture shock he hadn't anticipated. After all, he spoke the language, knew the customs and history, and had a firm academic grasp of the geopolitical issues in play. Doria had arrived in Cuba expecting everything to be unfamiliar, knowing she had very little sense of things on the ground, and wide-open to anyone and everyone to help her find her feet. Flighty? Naïve? Impulsive? She was all those things and more. But she was also the smartest person Martín knew, and the only person he trusted implicitly and completely. So why wasn't he trusting her instincts now? She wouldn't set him up for a fall. Not intentionally, a part of him cautioned. She loved him. He felt Doria lift her head from its resting place between his shoulder blades. Then her voice found his ear: "Would you *look* at that *ass*?" In spite of himself, Martín had to chuckle.

Alexei led them through the center of the city, past glossy monuments to the revolution and crumbling vestiges of an older era. They pulled up in a residential neighborhood like many others that marched in ranks down the sides of the bowl that held the Bahía de Santiago de Cuba, the low, narrow façades of its houses all of a piece down each block and almost flush with the pitted street. Martín held the bike steady between his legs while Alexei helped Doria swing off. The young man touched her respectfully, like a brother, and Martín felt himself warming to the lad. Martín took his shoulder bag from Doria – she had carried it with hers on the way down – and turned to face the young man, who was giving him the same crinkly-eyed smile he'd offered up on campus. His heart twisted, and he looked at Doria, who was beaming at him. She knew he was weakening, the cow. She also knew Alexei was interested in one of them, and it wasn't her.

"The house of my teacher," Alexei said in the kind of English he could only have learned from an East German exile.

Martín answered in Spanish. "Why are we here?"

Alexei switched to Spanish with a little shake of his head. "You are an anthropologist, yes? You wish to study the realities of our unique medical system?" He glanced at Doria, who nodded in confirmation. "Profe can tell you about the antibiotics crisis, and the AIDS quarantines." Alexei paused, glanced at Doria as if for approval, then smiled

brightly. “And he slaughtered a duck this afternoon.” The implication was that Martín and Doria were expected, respected, and under absolute obligation to enter and be gracious. So they did, Doria barely containing her eagerness, Martín barely leavening his skepticism.

Alexei’s former professor was a physician in his early fifties, upright and trim and handsome in a comfortable-slipper way that Martín could see snagged Doria’s interest. He smiled to himself; Doria might tumble the good doctor a time or two, but her heart would stay firmly where it was: mostly in her control, a little in Martín’s gentle grasp; a year ago, Martín had joyfully ceded a bit of his share to Doria’s little son. The man introduced himself as Arsenio Rubio, and welcomed them into a courtyard overgrown with plants, overrun with a few chickens and ducks and one pig – apparently its pen had suffered a rupture a few days before – and furnished with a very old, dark and heavy dining table and chairs. The rest of the house ringed the courtyard in a square that abutted the adjacent houses, sometimes with nothing more than a head-high wall. The house had seen better days – there were slates missing from the roof, Martín could tell by the shafting pattern of light, and some of the lovely elaborate flooring tiles were cracked or missing altogether, as was a fair measure of window glass. Still, by virtue of its rich colonial-style appointments, the house conveyed an old-world if down-at-heels elegance, and its sole inhabitant reinforced this charm with his own, in considerable force.

Alexei seemed very much at home in the doctor’s house, helping himself to rum and offering it around in aqua-and-silver highball glasses that wouldn’t look out of place in Cary Grant’s hand, fetching a knife, carving the duck. Was Alexei the good doctor’s lover? It occurred to Martín that “sugar daddy” was a particularly apt epithet on an island built by King Cane. It occurred to Martín also to wonder why he cared what attachments the lad trailed. As it happened, Alexei was helping his former teacher shore up his crumbling castle using materials “found” or traded for on the shadow market.

“Profe,” as Alexei addressed Doctor Rubio, showed Martín and Doria framed photos of his family, some of which were very old. It seemed this house, by contrast and despite its extremely lived-in air, was a newish acquisition.

“You don’t live here alone, do you?” Martín marveled, not for the first time, at Doria’s ability to make herself understood in Spanish. He teased her that her good accent, bad grammar approach was uniquely effective at exciting pity and amusement in others and was therefore a cynical bid to bind people to her. And somehow, even where words or constructions escaped her, the force of her personality demanded understanding.

Martín remembered the first time he’d seen Doria on their northeastern campus; what a shock she’d been with her wild red hair and almost laughably bright clothes, her extravagant gestures and obstinacy. He’d been slightly intimidated by her breezy intimacy until he realized it was designed to keep people at an emotional distance. Once one knew her, was admitted into her confidence, Doria was, paradoxically, more restrained in her approach, rather than less. Doria, for her part, had fallen directly in love with Martín, belatedly checked her gaydar, and initiated a collegial, superficial friendship. So it was that after it became clear there were no romantic possibilities for

them, Martín set about wooing her. Three years later, he had to admit he had never felt better loved by anyone, nor had he imagined the completeness and depth of his own feelings. Doria and Martín were a perfect couple, almost. Their intimacy, delicately sidestepping sex as it did, was seamless and more complete than most marriages. They did not collaborate on research in the strictest sense, but the fingerprints of the one were all over the projects of the other. Inspiration, trusted critic, public champion, standby date, late-night therapist: all their roles merged, as academics are prone to let their work bleed all over the rest of their lives. Martín was the only person who knew who the father of Doria's baby was, and Doria was the only person who knew that Martín's church deacon father had died without breaking the years-long silence that had followed Martín's disclosure of his sexuality.

"I've lived here only a year," Doctor Rubio told Doria, "and yes, I live alone." With a rueful shake of his head, he continued. "I left Cuba eighteen months ago, but I only got as far as the base. When I chose to return, I was given this house, but my family chose not to relocate from Camagüey."

"You have children?" Doria wanted to know.

"I have four, but my wife moved in with her parents when I left, and, as I said, has chosen to stay there."

"The state took his house away," Alexei paused for a beat then seemed to realized he must elaborate for the sake of his American friends. "To punish him for leaving."

"And they gave him this one to reward him for coming back?" Martín was only barely not laughing, but Alexei and the doctor were stone-faced.

"Why did you leave like that?" Doria pressed. "In a little boat, in the middle of the night?" she added whimsically. "Couldn't you emigrate legally? I thought prominent professionals didn't have so much trouble."

"Doria, remember brain drain. Cuba needs to hold on to its doctors," Martín reminded her.

"Profe couldn't leave legally because of his dissent."

"Dissenters are leaving easily, though, aren't they? I've read Fidel's practically holding the door open himself."

"I criticized the state policies about AIDS, challenged the official statistics on prevalence and incidence. As a doctor, I had evidence to present and" – here he made a slight dismissive gesture – "some small credibility." The doctor drummed his hands loudly on the table, dismissing the topic and ending the meal all at once. But now Martín saw why Alexei had brought him here. He wasn't just a street hustler or a trawler after foreign currency or connections. Martín glanced at the young man with new eyes. Alexei was looking right back at him, unblinking and unsmiling, but with heat. He held his hand out to Doria and gallantly led her from the table.

“Come, *mi enemiga querida*, and I will show you how we dance in Cuba!”

Martín, ignoring Doctor Rubio’s protests, rose and helped clear the table. In the dark, tiny kitchen alcove, he helped wash up in a basin that had been set out earlier against Doctor Rubio’s well-founded worry that the running water wouldn’t last out the day. Martín and the doctor talked in quiet tones of the AIDS quarantines, and the lowering prospect of children dying from preventable infections or from lack of antibiotics once the stockpiled inventory from the USSR was exhausted. They arranged to meet again the next day.

As elated as Martín was about the first ray of hope for his research since arriving in Cuba, and as compelling as the doctor’s evidence was, Martín’s attention was divided. Across the courtyard, Alexei put a vinyl record on an old turntable and began to lead Doria in a mambo, then a rumba, and finally salsa after salsa. As he always did, Martín admired Doria’s easy, untaught grace, and smiled indulgently at her willful refusal to follow Alexei’s lead. Her hair and clothes flew wildly, her eyes were glittering, and her mouth was open on a laugh that went on and on. A glance at Doctor Rubio, who had come to lean on the other side of the jamb drying his hands, confirmed Martín’s conjecture about the man’s interest in his friend.

Martín shifted his attention from Doria to Alexei. His curiosity was piqued. The boy danced really, really well, evidently luxuriating in his lithe youthfulness, visibly enjoying the erotic conversation of the dance. Maybe he’d give the boy a tumble after all. Casual sex wasn’t his wont, but maybe it was time to tear a page from Doria’s book of breezy, friendly sexuality. The research project was proving more stressful and difficult than Martín had anticipated. Maybe a holiday romance was just what he needed. And perhaps the boy could continue to be useful to him. He had followed Martín and Doria from Havana, hadn’t he? And he hadn’t done it to perpetrate a scam, but to do his small part to connect them with those who sought to correct the entrenched inadequacies of the stumbling regime. Martín felt his cynical detachment receding beyond his reach. His lips quirked in a self-mocking smile. This delicious, arrogant, streetwise kid was wearing down his resistance without even seeming to try.

The music stopped. Alexei and Doria broke apart. Alexei turned to change the record, and Doria fanned her face and neck and took a generous swig from her tumbler of rum. Spotting his opening, Doctor Rubio levered himself away from the door jamb with a murmured, “Excuse me,” and an avuncular squeeze for Martín’s shoulder, and walked with endearing hesitancy over to Doria. She turned toward him with a delighted smile and took both his hands in hers. Martín watched them join in a *danzón*.

Martín saw a pair of glints in Doria’s eyes, and he knew enough about her to accord each one a healthy respect. One, she directed at Dr. Arsenio, and Martín chuckled inwardly; the good doctor didn’t have a chance. The second glint touched Martín, but didn’t fix there. It traveled elliptically between Martín and Alexei, nudging them gently but inexorably into each others’ orbits. Martín could feel the boy’s planetesimal gravity, and knew the boy felt his, because they began, unbidden, to drift closer together.

Suddenly, Alexei was before him, extending one hand and smiling. Martín didn't respond for a few long moments, and instead remained leaning in the kitchen doorway. He let all his mistrust, all his past hurts, his anger, scud across his face. The boy wanted something, he knew, but the evening's events had confused Martín as to what, exactly, that something might be. Alexei regarded him steadily. In the end, Martín decided to trust Doria's judgment if not his own. He hoped that the most Alexei wanted was his professional involvement in the medical crises and a little fun besides. Slowly, Martín reached out his hand and closed it on Alexei's. Alexei beamed, raising his eyes toward the ceiling as if in thanks for a prayer answered. He lowered his eyes back to Martín's, and laid his free hand palm flat, two fingers extended over his heart in what could be a peace sign or a victory sign, or a two-fingered obscenity learned from any number of European tourists. The gesture was accompanied by that heart-stopping grin. Martín, fearing his heart was in danger from that grin and its owner, began to dance.

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"I'm sorry, Professor Balfour, but there's really nothing we can do from here. The Navy administers the base, and the decision to release inmates stateside is a military one." The bureaucrat was young, harried, and making an inept show of sympathy. Martín sat to one side, Doria's son on his lap. The boy was playing sleepily with Martín's wristwatch. INS was their third stop in five hours, and Martín and Trebor were both drooping and cranky. Doria seemed barely winded.

"To whom should we be speaking, then? We would like to sponsor our friend. We have institutional resources to apply. We want to shorten his stay at the base and bring him here." Doria's script was getting a good workout today.

"Even if the authorities decide to release him instead of repatriating him, they won't accept individual sponsorship. It's not normal immigration. The Guantánamo *barceros* are being treated as refugees. You'll just have to wait and see whether your friend is granted asylum, and then see where they send him. They're usually just arbitrarily assigned a stateside destination based on where the sponsoring agencies are located."

"Well, can we get a list of those, anyway? Or a list of refugees and their destination assignments?"

"I'm sorry. There's no information sharing at that level between the DOD and INS. I can't give you anything, and I expect they won't."

"Thank you, Ms. Harris." Doria bounced up, shook the woman's hand. "You've been as helpful as I expected." Martín rose and mutely shook the woman's hand, smiling as kindly as he could manage to soften Doria's sarcasm. He shifted Trebor onto his shoulder, tugged the little boy's coat on, and followed Doria, who was pacing furiously on the sidewalk.

"I'm going to *bomb* something, Tino!" Doria's outburst, as usual, had the paradoxical effect of calming Martín's roiling emotions. Martín drove Doria's rattletrap car back to

his place, where she ensconced the sleeping Trebor on the sofa, covered with an afghan Martín's mother had crocheted, the only ugly thing in the little rented house.

"Aren't you *furious*?" Doria hissed over tea in the kitchen – it was late afternoon and even Doria lowered her caffeine intake after a certain hour. "They're holding all these people almost incommunicado, drowning them in their fucking alphabet soup – INS, DOD, kiss my ass." She bid fair to keep muttering for quite a while.

"*Tranquillate, mi amor*," Martín soothed, and went to check the mail. He'd had two letters from Alexei since his arrival at the naval base, and now each day's mail inspired a gelid clutching of his guts. Today he was rewarded with a filmy airmail envelope that looked like it had circumnavigated the globe in a navy's pocket. Martín's name and address were carefully centered on it in Alexei's now-familiar upright cursive. It was postmarked Miami.

"Doria!" he called softly, mindful of the sleeping toddler. She didn't answer; he dashed back to the kitchen. He slapped the letter down next to her teacup and saucer – no mugs at teatime. She took it up and peered at it closely.

"Miami," she observed matter-of-factly.

"Doria!! He's done it! He's made it." Martín was aware his voice was starting to shake.

"So read the letter, Tino. Let's see *how* he's done it."

Martín read the letter. It was short and hurried. "He'll be in Miami a matter of hours – he's probably already gone." Martín flipped over the envelope to look at the date on the postmark – five days ago. "He's being processed as a refugee, and they'll give him a choice of two destinations in the states. He doesn't know which ones yet, but he'll get as close as he can. Looks like we wasted all our time today."

Doria shrugged, as Martín had expected. Things had worked out according to her wishes, even if there was no evidence whatsoever that her efforts had anything to do with their problem's resolution. Martín shook his head. "What am I going to do with him, Doria?"

"Fuck his brains out, for starters, then find him something to do. He'll need to study English if he's going to get re-certified as an engineer. We'll look into it tomorrow." Doria yawned elaborately and glided off to the living room to gather up her offspring for the ride home. When the phone rang, she picked up.

"Tino," she called sharply, "Tino!" He poked his head through the kitchen door and raised his eyebrows. "Social worker," Doria announced. "In Pittsburgh." She handed him the phone, then tugged him down into the armchair so she could perch on the arm and listen.

After ten minutes of "yes" and "I see" and "mm-hmm" and a variety of other affirmative noises, Martín hung up and sighed, leaning forward in the chair, elbows on his knees. Doria wriggled into the chair with him – it really wasn't big enough for two – and hugged

him from behind, waiting for him to speak. She'd always understood that, unlike her, Martín clammed up when upset and needed a moment, sometimes many moments, to compose his thoughts.

"He's there. Pittsburgh. But he has to stay for two months. Acculturation, they call it."

"What, like how to use money to pay for things instead of hustle and charm?"

Martín offered a wry grin. "Something like that. They'll get him into a job training program, too."

"Pfft. He doesn't need that. He's *got* training. Why didn't you get to talk to him?"

"He'll have phone privileges next week. It's a halfway house for refugees."

"Sounds like another prison. Like Gitmo without the scenery."

"Um, Doria? I think I have to go there. I think I want to see if he's all right." Strong wiry arms squeezed him hard.

"That's more like it, Tino. Stand by your man and all that. Gallop off to his rescue, lance at the ready."

Martín made an exasperated sound, patted Doria's hands for release, and slid forward in the chair. He turned and looked at his friend. "Will you look into programs for him? English? Recertification? Things like that? And will you make up the spare room for him?"

"Yes to the first, no to the second."

"I don't want him to feel obligated to me."

"You'd rather he felt rejected?"

"He should at least get to choose."

"He already *has* chosen, *tonto*. Where's that letter?"

It was in the pocket of his jeans. He had tucked it there when the phone rang, not wanting to leave it alone in the kitchen. He passed it over to Doria, who shook it open with a flourish.

Doria read with an exaggerated Cuban accent, translating as she did: "My heart is full knowing I am these few kilometers and one border nearer to you. The memory of your eyes was my sun at the base, the memory of your lips my moon. I am drawn to you, you are the – *eje*?" Doria faltered and looked a question at Martín, who blushed.

"Axis," he provided. Doria snorted and continued.

“You are the *axis* on which I turn, the pole to which I am drawn, your loyal magnet. You are the delta and the sea beyond, and I am a river rushing toward you, but never fast enough.” By now Martín had covered his tingling face with both hands, and was groaning low in his throat. Doria stopped reading, having dissolved into giggles.

“I think I’ve made my point,” she tittered. “Or he has. Shall I read on?”

“No!” Martín snatched the letter and slid it possessively back into his pocket. “Maybe the second bedroom is for me,” he conceded with a sigh. “I still don’t know what he wants from me, and I don’t know if I should trust him. There. Satisfied?”

Doria looked smug for a moment, then leaned forward and kissed Martín’s nose tenderly. “You’ll know soon enough, love. Go to him, see if your little magnet attracts or repels.”

Her hilarity bubbled forth afresh, and she was useless. She used her toes to lever him off the chair, then bounced up and headed for the second bedroom Martín used as a studio. Martín gathered what documents he thought he might need, threw a spare shirt and change of underwear into a daypack, along with a toothbrush and – after a moment’s consideration – a handful of condoms. He smiled, reminding himself to be grateful for them, remembering a time, several months ago, when an available condom was like El Dorado or the Northwest Passage or the G-spot; something rumored to exist but vainly sought.

* * * *

The day after Dr. Rubio's dinner party marked the proper beginning of Martín’s research efforts in Santiago-de-Cuba. The doctor spent the next morning introducing Martín – with great circumspection – to former (or current, but secret) patients who had stories to tell of the ways Cuban medicine had been undermined by the *bloqueo* now that the USSR couldn’t provide what was needed. Routine infections ran amok, prenatal care had gone spotty, and childhood diseases were reasserting themselves in the vacuum created by the disappearance of vaccines. Martín wasn’t interested in criticizing the embargo, or the Cuban government, for that matter. He was interested in how people coped with dramatic changes in their health status and outcomes. And he was interested in finding ways to help.

When the sun reached its height and there were no more interviews to conduct, Dr. Rubio took one of the cumbersome Chinese bikes and headed home. Doria had accepted his invitation to lunch on the leftovers from the night before, but the smile he tried to hide as he saluted Martín wasn’t about cold duck. Martín pedaled the other bike over to the Plaza de la Revolución, where Alexei was waiting for him with a taxi. While the taxi driver waited impatiently, Alexei brought the bike to a friend’s house to safeguard it. Then they whizzed away toward Baconao and its little beach coves.

Alexei had convinced Martín at the end of the night before that he should see some of what brought tourists to Cuba from Europe and Australia and all of Latin America. Sure, it wasn’t as glamorous as it once was, but the scruffy revolutionary charm it exuded now was not to be underestimated. Martín considered this thought writ small in his young

companion, a scruffy revolutionary charmer if ever there was one. They didn't touch in the cab, and barely spoke over the insistent blatting of the exhaust system. But they did look at each other, in brief, increasingly heated bursts, each look like a furnace receiving a bellows blast. It had been so long for Martín, and he was excited now that he'd given himself permission for a fling. The younger man's look was all solemn heat, no frivolity.

At the beach Alexei paid the cabbie with money Martín had passed him during the ride. He led Martín to a tattered palm-thatched umbrella lodged semi-permanently in the sand. Under it leaned one chair, which Alexei urged Martín to sit in. Then Alexei walked away, promising to return shortly. The look he gave Martín was full of mischief. For his part, Martín watched the young man's strong brown legs propel him over the heat-shimmered beach, each step raising and rounding that perfect ass. Martín slipped his shirt and trousers off, draping them over the chair so his back wouldn't stick to it, and sat. It didn't take long for Martín to finish appreciating the beach. It was small and lovely, white sand here, jeweled water there, a few people scattered about, some in the water, some on horseback – in short, indistinguishable from the remoter beaches of Puerto Rico. Martín lazed drowsily.

"Heh, baby!" A voice called in English, rousing Martín, who squinted painfully past the shade of the umbrella. Alexei was there, brandishing a pair of pop bottles. He'd taken off his shirt, too, and tucked it into the back pocket of his snug shorts, which evidently did double duty as swim trunks. He passed Martín a surprisingly icy *refresco* and moved under the parasol. Alexei perched on the arm of the chair, his arm extended along the high back. Martín, his heart thumping unexpectedly heavily, was barely breathing now that he was so close to Alexei's sun-speckled skin. As he settled back, Alexei rolled his sweating soda bottle over Martín's nipple, leaving drops of condensation clinging to the corona of hairs there. Martín gasped as his nipple tightened. Alexei's laugh rumbled seductively. The sound brought Martín's head around and he looked sharply into Alexei's eyes.

"Don't play the whore with me. We can have some fun, maybe even help each other, but I didn't come to Cuba for a rent boy." The vehemence in his tone surprised even him, and he watched Alexei react. The youth made a moue of concern, then shook his head slightly.

"I want you," he said simply. "I want to be with you, to make love with you" – he used the most delicate of terms – "and I don't want anything else from you."

"I don't know that."

"You can trust me." *Confía en mí.*

"How did you follow us from Havana? How did you find Doria at the university?"

"I bribed the customs agent," he said with a brief flash of that grin. "And I have ... connections in the university. I wanted to see you again because of what I felt for you."

All of a sudden he seemed painfully young to Martín, and vulnerable. In his relationships, Martín was accustomed to playing *eromenos* to another's *erastes*. The knowledge that he might be more experienced than his companion was exciting, though also discomfiting. Could he handle a boy of his own? Doria had been hinting broadly for ages that, at thirty-two, he'd better get used to the idea. "How could you feel anything for someone you spoke to for less than a minute? I wasn't even nice to you."

"You don't have to be nice to me, *papi*." Martín's breath hitched. Was the boy wheedling? Manipulating? Martín didn't think so.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty." Jesus wept!

"And you have experience?"

"Some."

"Tricking?"

"Some."

"Ever had a lover?"

"Not really. My friend Fredo and I used to fool around, but he's a queen."

Martín's lip quirked. "And what are you?"

"I'm your *nene*, *papi*."

"Come here." Their first kiss was a little awkward, with Alexei counterbalanced on the arm of the chair as he was, and Martín trying to compensate without touching the boy's bare brown chest. Alexei solved the problem in time for their second kiss by sliding off the chair's arm and into Martín's lap. His sudden solid weight made Martín grunt and tighten his arms around Alexei's waist, at first to steady him, but almost immediately to keep him close. The boy's skin was sun-hot, foxed with sunlight shafting through the ragged parasol. His lips opened to Martín, and as far as Martín was concerned, he need never move again. When Martín didn't take charge of the kiss, Alexei deepened it, running his tongue along Martín's lips, flicking against his teeth, finally curling around Martín's tongue. Martín hummed softly, tasting something delicious, and opened wider, gasping when he felt Alexei's teeth, almost too hard, on his lips, his chin, his throat. When Alexei reached his nipple, he stopped biting. He licked, first with the tip, then the flat of his tongue, rasping the sensitive crest like a cat at cream. The boy hummed electrically against Martín's nipple, then switched sides, not sparing any foreplay on the second nipple but drawing it hard into his mouth and settling in to suck. Freezing-hot darts prickled Martín's armpits and balls. He could barely stand it.

“*Ay, nene,*” he managed, his head collapsing against the hard back of the chair. “You are killing me! How much can we do here?” Normally Martín’s modesty prevented even the mildest public displays; handholding, kissing. Doria would be shocked.

Alexei pulled off his nipple with a deep lick. The tropical air outside Alexei’s mouth felt cool by comparison, and his nipple puckered tightly.

“Come to the water.” The beach was far from crowded, but there were people there, and Martín knew a pair of gay men frankly enjoying each other’s bodies would be greeted with sincere intolerance. But the blood-warm water, the tangy iodine smell of the sea, and the slick nearness of Alexei’s body conspired to draw Martín out of the shell he usually built around being gay, even in his relatively tolerant northeastern college town. They swam and splashed and used the noise and ordinariness of it to camouflage surreptitious submarine maneuvers. A hand, nails curled forward, grazed Martín’s thigh just at the hem of his shorts. Martín let his own hand skim Alexei’s taut smooth chest, but he didn’t let it linger there. His prodigious self-control was evaporating with the seawater on his skin. Alexei scissored Martín’s waist briefly with his strong legs. They swam some more. Finally, they hauled their bodies out of the surf; their gaits stumbling as they compensated for being suddenly heavier in the higher-pressured air. They drained their now warm, flattish sodas without sitting down. Each sported an erection which the other manfully avoided noticing.

“Where can we go?” Martín asked, trying to pass off his shallow rapid breathing as the result of the trot up the beach.

“I know a place.”

“Your place?” Martín still didn’t know where Alexei lived. Or with whom.

“The room of a friend.” Alexei mutely begged more kisses before hugging Martín tightly.

“Where can we get condoms?” It was a measure of Martín’s ingenuousness that he hadn’t packed condoms. He bet Doria had, but he’d die before he’d interrupt her tryst. He would have scoffed had she offered him any before he set out that morning.

“I know a place.” Alexei must have jinxed their prospects with his overconfidence. No chemist stocked condoms; most weren’t even open, having nothing to sell, the outmoded grilles locked down over doors and windows mute testament to economic collapse. Alexei dragged Martín to a park and after that a cafeteria, to see if there were friends to meet who might have a jiffy to sell or trade. But no. Besides the grittiness of salt and sand and the sog of his trunks under his pants, Martín was uneasy with the search for a condom as the focal activity of their afternoon together. “Not very romantic, is it, searching all of Santiago for a condom so we can fuck?” He deliberately used the unaccustomed vulgarity. The way it came out reflected his distaste.

“*Ay, baby*” – it sounded like “*vaay-bee*” in Alexei’s mouth – “you want to take me to dinner?”

Martín couldn't work out whether this was sarcasm or challenge, and he answered more defensively for his confusion. "Well, yes, if I could, I would. I would like to have a normal date with you."

"Date?" The younger man seemed genuinely bewildered. He stopped walking, seeming to think. He brightened. He grabbed Martín's hand. "Come on." They dashed to catch a belching, smoking bus, during which cramped ride Alexei prevented Martín from talking (lest he give himself away as less than Cuban) by keeping an insistent hand on Martín's ass, the crowd of passengers sufficient camouflage. Back in the center of the city, they retrieved the old black bicycle and, after ascertaining that the bike-minder had no condoms, made their way to Alexei's flat.

Curiosity warred with excitement as Martín pedaled, Alexei's only slightly lighter weight balanced on the handlebars, his strong, lithe legs drawn up clear of the spokes. He shouted directions back at Martín, which Martín followed, sweat springing out everywhere from his forehead to the small of his back. He could even feel runnels of it trickling from behind his knees down his straining calves. "I must be getting old." The thought was unwelcome, and Martín quashed it ruthlessly.

Their destination, when they reached it, was a blasted, anonymous apartment block on the northern outskirts of the city, way past the new glitzy Pan-American athletic complex. Alexei gallantly shouldered the bike and preceded Martín up four flights of stairs, their concrete latticework crumbling in places, like wet sugar. The place evoked the post-revolution Soviet-influenced building boom as completely as Dr. Rubio's similarly disintegrating place evoked the post-colonial era by its grace. At an anonymous door, Alexei entered, rolling the bike through and propping it against a wall. "Mami," he called, "¡Soy yo!" No answer. "¿Papi? Vladi?" This last sounded to Martín's English-accustomed ears like "Bloody," but he worked it out when a young man peered around a grubby partition. The rooms inside were as charmless as the exterior promised, their only redeeming quality large, dust-rimed windows that faced the city toward the bay. One couldn't see the bay, however, for the phalanx of intervening apartment blocks (distinguishable only by their idiosyncratic disintegrations, like twins whose wrinkles make them easier to tell apart as they age), and without it the vista was not impressive.

"Hey, 'mano, how's it going?" The younger man swung round the door and barreled into Alexei, embracing him firmly. "Where you been?" His voice was lazily inflected, like the street accent of Santiago, but was colored with enough irony to signal greater than average education.

"With *profe*," Alexei answered, then introduced Martín.

Martín would never have guessed this boy was flesh of Alexei's flesh until the younger boy smiled. Vladímir was as tall as Martín, his slender frame willowy with his height, with *dulce-de-leche* skin and doe-eyes. The grin, which he flashed as readily as his brother, was identical, however, right down to the crinkle and twinkle that visited their eyes. "El baroncito," Alexei called him and "Mami's favorite," earning a cuff from his brother which Alexei dodged easily by interposing Martín between them. Vladi pulled his

punch, looking a mite sheepish – Martín was, after all, older and if he was a distinguished American scholar as Alexei said, then he deserved respect. Tough as they appeared, these boys had been “raised right,” as Doria often joked about Martín.

“We’ve been to the beach, and need to wash up. Is there water?”

“Some. You can use the barrel. There’s still plenty there.”

“Nah, I’ll use the barrel. Martín can have the shower.”

“No.” He barely stopped himself calling Alexei “*nene*” in front of his brother. “We can both use the stored water.” Martín knew enough about water shortages from his research trips to Africa to understand the necessity of collecting water in a rooftop cistern for later use. He knew, also, that both kitchen and bathroom would have a 55-gallon drum full of water stored against a low or empty cistern or the inevitable gaps in municipal supply.

Vladi caught the drift. “If you both wash in water from the barrel you can both rinse in the running water.” His grin, so like his elder brother’s, was impish. Alexei cocked a raven-feather eyebrow at Martín. Martín assented with a nod and a murmured, “Amen.”

“Nobody home?”

“Shopping.” Interesting euphemism, Martín thought, having just cycled through the city’s less-than-bustling commercial districts. Vladi left them at the door to the bathroom and went to find towels.

“Beautiful, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” Martín murmured, watching the long legs and graceful back recede down the hallway.

“I can hear you, you know, *papi*,” sang the insolent voice, accompanied by a fluttering wave.

“Is he...?”

“You have to ask?”

The bathroom was a concrete cube with a showerhead set in one wall, a drain in the floor, no sink or toilet, and a rusty metal bench for their clothes and towels. One corner was dominated by a battered blue-painted drum as high as Martín’s waist. Alexei stripped off in a trice, no artifice, just the sudden naked fact of him in the clammy concrete box. He lifted the lid off the drum, his biceps and shoulders bunching invitingly. Martín struggled out of his trousers, peeled off his sweaty shirt, and stood before Alexei in the sad wreck of his swim trunks, sweat-dark and clinging. He was aware his abdomen was convulsing rapidly, trying to force air into his lungs. This vital function was further challenged by Alexei hooking one brown finger into the waistband of Martín’s trunks and pulling him towards his naked body. Martín, thus captured, took a long look at Alexei’s body,

compact and spare as a wrestler's, uniformly, richly nutmeg-dark and nearly hairless. The young cock looked exposed and eager, but nothing like vulnerable. Thicker than Martín's, and easily as long, it was filling, starting to defy gravity. The round, taut balls were already so tightly drawn up that Martín had to look for them. With a smile, a slightly, purposefully, slutty smile, Alexei slid both thumbs into Martín's trunks, pulling the damp trunks down and down, rasping over Martín's salt-stiffened pubic hair, stopping short of freeing his cock, trapping his balls.

"Show me, *papi*." Martín's heart thudded once, heavily, then started to race, speeding his breath. He replaced Alexei's thumbs with his own, slid the trunks down as smoothly as he could despite the wet fabric catching and pulling the hairs of his legs, and stepped out of them, kicking them unceremoniously away. Then Alexei was in his face, seeking a kiss. Martín obliged, keeping the rest of the boy's body at bay with a hand on his belly.

"No, *nene*," he teased. "You show me." And he gently spun Alexei around, one hand at his shoulder, the other at his hip. He placed Alexei's hands on the rim of the water barrel and ran a caressing hand down his spine from nape to small.

"Now, spread for me, *bonito*." Martín had *never* spoken like this to a lover. It was the way Ben had spoken to him so often, but despite that his balls surged when he said the words, infused with quiet command. Alexei must have responded to the tone, for he complied, bracing his legs apart on the gritty concrete, tilting his hips almost imperceptibly, minutely raising his perfect buttocks. Martín retrieved a rag that was draped over the rim of the barrel, wrung it out, and cast about until he spotted a cake of black glycerin soap gummed to the bench where they'd laid their clothes. The lather from the soap was a lovely purplish color and Martín spread it meditatively over Alexei's shoulders and back. He swept sudsy hands down to the round butt, then over the hollows the braced legs made at the hips, down the outsides of the thighs, and finally up and inward. Alexei was breathing hard as Martín stroked soap-slick fingers along the insides of his thighs, in, in toward the center of everything.

Now, in a sick flash, Martín felt what must be the only imperfection on Alexei's body: a series of puckered scars, small and smooth, long healed, on his inner thighs and, yes, in the crease under his cheeks where they met his legs and yes, in the cleft between, so very close to the delicate pucker that had been Martín's objective. Martín's heart squeezed, and his throat tightened so it was hard to spin even the thinnest thread of breath. But, to Martín's shame, he was too high on his unaccustomed dominance to interrupt the bath with impertinent questions. He tried to ignore the obscene smoothness of the scars and grazed his fingernails up, up to cup the tight, round balls. They were heavier than he expected and more mobile than they looked tucked up so demurely. Captivated by their lushness, Martín gave a slow, gentle tug, his soapy thumb tracing the seam between them ... and encountered two more raised round scars. They had the horrifying slickness of burn scars. He gasped a sob then, but he didn't think Alexei heard it over his own moan, the first sound he'd made since his introduction to the barrel.

"Uuuuuy, *papi*."

Martín's own body was so hot it was almost a shock to seal his chest and belly to Alexei's water-cooled skin. He lifted the boy back against himself, pressing his palms against the peaks of Alexei's nipples, adding soap-and-water sheen to the coffee-bean gloss of them. "*Ay, nene*, kiss me." And the boy craned his neck and turned his head, straining to make contact with his ripe, soft lips. Martín never felt him take it, but suddenly the soap was in Alexei's hand, moving up and down Martín's own belly, raising sudsy whorls in the hair there.

The door scraped harshly on the rough concrete of the floor, and Vladímir was there, grinning over a short stack of towels. Martín sprang back from Alexei's body, splashing water on the floor, covering his crotch with one hand.

Vladímir laughed delightedly. "You won't hide *that* with just one hand, *papi*. Better let my brother help you." Alexei flicked water at his brother.

"*Oye*, Vladi, go tell La Pina we'll want dinner. For two," he added sharply when he saw Martín open his mouth to invite the younger boy to join them. And Vladímir turned, not nearly fast enough for Martín's comfort, and banged out of the room.

"Doesn't he know how to knock?" Martín's inner prude demanded.

Alexei laughed delightedly. "And miss a chance to see the distinguished *yanqui* doctor naked? I'd forget my manners, too!" And he doubled over, ribs convulsing, as he laughed at the look on Martín's face. Without thinking, Martín snapped the washrag playfully on Alexei's exposed bum.

And Alexei whirled, fists up, eyes wide. He flew at Martín, grabbed hold of his upper arms, thumbs digging in painfully between muscle fibers, and bent him forcefully backward. Martín felt the rim of the barrel digging in at his kidneys. He tried vainly to catch Alexei's eyes. When he couldn't, he began to panic.

"*Nene*?" He sucked in a ragged breath to shout for Vladímir.

Alexei abruptly released his arms and backed away. He staggered back and all but fell onto the aluminum bench, wincing as his bare butt made contact. He was breathing in gusts, his hands tucked under his thighs, head down, like a chastised schoolboy. He didn't look up, so Martín went down on his knees in front of Alexei. He raised his hands to put them on Alexei's knees, but stopped short without lowering them. He knew the unfinished gesture looked silly, but he didn't know what to do. He asked, very softly, "*Nene*, are you all right now? Do you need your brother?" The drooping head, round and shorn and so very young, shook emphatically.

"Vladi doesn't know."

"Know what, *nene*?" And then it dawned like a day that threatens snow, flat and grey and inevitable. "The scars?"

"You saw?"

“Felt.”

“They are my shame.”

“What? How can you say that?” The bent head straightened. The look Alexei darted him sank deep into Martín’s heart and brought a flush to his face. He was thinking like an American. A young, naïve American, arrogant in his assumptions of safety. He dropped his eyes, and his hands, to his own bare knees.

“Vladi knows I was detained, but nothing else. I can’t bear him to know.”

“When did this happen?”

“When Fyodor defected. My eldest brother,” he explained. “Three years ago.”

Martín said nothing, not sure whether he wanted Alexei to continue.

“The CDR reported that Fyodor was gone. Because of my father, they were interested. So they took me. They wanted answers from my father, but couldn’t take him without embarrassment. They don’t take women, not often, anyway, and so *mami* was safe. And Vladi was still young. Not *too* young, though, as they told me over and over with their fucking machines fastened to my balls. Their fucking cocks in my ass.” The breath he took had a sob behind it, but his eyes were bleak and his mouth was hard. Martín could scarcely believe he’d been kissing that mouth a few minutes ago.

“Do they still threaten you?”

“Sometimes they come up to me or Vladi on the street, ask if we hear from Fyodor. I don’t mind for myself, but Vladi doesn’t understand what they can do.”

“Maybe he should.”

“No!” Martín, who had been on the verge of touching Alexei’s knees again, sat back helplessly. “Vladi doesn’t need to know any of it. He will get out before he is threatened again.”

“You have plans?” There had been rumors that young men were leaving Cuba by boat.

“No.” But Alexei’s voice was flat and his eyes evasive. Was he protecting Martín now?

“Let’s finish washing up,” Martín said, slapping his hands wetly against his thighs, pushing himself up. He extended his hand to Alexei, who took it readily enough. “I’m sorry I slapped you, *nene*. I wish I’d known. I was only playing.”

“I know, *mi amor*. It’s that ... unexpectedly like that ... I ...”

And Martín was there. Hands on Alexei’s shoulders, down his arms, around his waist, pulling him close. He held Alexei’s head to the curve of his neck, an apology; his other hand held their hips together, a promise.

“Why don’t you leave?” he whispered. But Alexei didn’t answer. Martín wished he hadn’t asked. He already knew Alexei wouldn’t leave Vladímir to face detention and interrogation.

“Let’s not talk about it any more.” Martín nodded and leaned in to kiss, sealing the bargain. Alexei opened to Martín’s delicate pressure and it seemed to Martín that purity and innocence were concentrated in that velvet generosity. “Hungry?”

“For you.”

“La Pina will have dinner for us in an hour or so. Let’s go.”

The rest of the bath was peremptory, the only dash of excitement the rinse, which Martín had expected to be tepid, but was freezing. Alexei roared, and Martín spent the next few minutes scrubbing his stippled skin with a rough towel and warmed up watching Alexei stretch under the spray, suds chasing down his body to puddle around his feet.

They dressed, Martín borrowing a very fine old dress shirt just this side of threadbare, but keeping his still-damp trousers, wearing them without underwear, his shoes without socks. He had forgotten how nothing dried in the tropics.

“Uuuuy, papi. *Que bonito eres.*”

“Thank you for the shirt.” Martín felt almost shy, glowing a little at Vladi teasing him like a brother. Doria was family, and for sure Doria teased him, but not like a sister. Doria teased like a lover you never got to fuck.

Martín looked at Alexei, fiercely handsome in silk shirt, tailored trousers, sleek euro-loafers. He looked easy and free and sexy. No visible scars. Martín caught Alexei’s eye, raised an interrogative eyebrow. Alexei shook negatively, then rolled his eyes and shrugged. No one was back from “shopping,” if he didn’t eat with them, Vladi wouldn’t eat at all.

“Come on, ‘*manito*,’” Alexei sighed. Vladi kissed his brother’s cheek in exaggerated gratitude, but nodded sincerely at his true benefactor, who colored and waved a long-fingered hand dismissively. The young beauty bounded down the dingy hallway to change, pulling off his tired singlet as he went.

And so it was that three instead of two made their way to the older part of the city, leaving the bike behind. Three instead of two endured the disapproving ministrations of La Pina. Evidently an old school friend of Vladímir and Alexei’s mother, La Pina battled the *bloqueo* with pressure cooker and skillet. The meal she served was nothing short of amazing, considering how short were supplies. La Pina said nothing, but even Martín could tell she would give the boys’ mother an earful about their American friend. Their white American friend. Their gay American friend (women of a certain age always seemed to *know*). Their dangerous American friend. Her *paladar* was a risk, but an acceptable one for the Deutschmarks and colorful Canadian dollars it brought in. But feeding an American, taking his limp green notes? Too much. Her graciousness never

faltered, but was definitely brittle around the edges by the time she cut the cake, ingeniously baked in the miraculous *olla* and served with harsh sweet coffee.

Their dinner conversation was stiltedly first-date-like, all about music and books and the places Martín had been. There was a lot they couldn't say in front of La Pina, and more that couldn't be said to Vladi. But it was all there, like an unwelcome fourth diner rounding out the company.

After supper, they walked Vladi home. Martín asked the questions he had swallowed at supper. Alexei had been allowed to take a degree from the university after his detention, but only because his father was the party-faithful Dr. Gallego, Doria's sponsor for the conference. Although the connection made sense, Martín was still surprised. Vladi, it had been made clear, would be allowed to emigrate if he won a place at a foreign university. Alexei, despite his degree, was effectively barred from working as an engineer. He was a natural hustler, popular and successful because his discretion assured the safety of those he fenced and traded and under-the-tabled with, and everyone knew it meant the difference between the Party's tolerance of his father's heterodox family and its active hostility. "Life or death, you know, *papi*?" Martín believed it without a doubt.

Vladi let them into the dark flat with his key. "*Espérate, papi*," he said when he saw no one was yet home. He scampered down the hallway and was back in a flash brandishing one foil-wrapped condom between upraised fingers. He passed it ostentatiously to Martín, kissed him goodbye, and embraced his brother. Martín and Alexei headed out on the bike, Vladi's knowing smirk following them down the unlit stairs.

"Where are we going now?" Martín asked.

"To a place I know. *Un confesionario*. We can be alone." He used the word *solos* but Martín heard the word *juntos*. *Together*. He shuddered deliciously, and decided not to pursue the strange idea that their assignation would take place in a confessional. They rode without speaking, Alexei pedaling this time, Martín perched behind him holding on tight. The rolling play of muscle under the silky shirt gave Martín chills.

The divertingly named confessional had, as it happened, more in common with La Pina's *paladar* than with any fixture of Roman Catholicism. A middle-aged woman in a housecoat and plastic slippers unlocked a gate, then led them through a door and immediately into a small bedroom at the front of the house. She spoke hardly at all, and slap-slapped away when Alexei spoke in undertones. As far as Martín could see, no money changed hands, and yet this was very clearly a place of business, home-based though it was. The *bloqueo* had made all Cubans entrepreneurs, he reflected with a rueful shake of his head. Alexei misinterpreted the gesture.

"It's nothing special, I know, but it is private, and no one will know."

"It would be bad for you if anyone knew about us?"

"Yes. I must be careful until Vladi is safely away. Then, who knows?" There was the grin, and it was as if a lamp had been kindled in Martín's heart. He stepped closer, but

hesitated as the proprietress returned with a tray on which a sweating glass pitcher of water, two highball glasses, and a demitasse chattered discreetly.

She left, and Martín stood awkwardly, then just as awkwardly sat down on the bed, which sagged weakly almost to the floor. He made to stand again but Alexei rescued the moment by sitting on the bed beside him and drawing him close to kiss. It was one of those endless, drunken kisses, though there had been nothing but water to drink with supper. Martín was almost surprised when he finally opened his eyes to see Alexei blinking back at him, so lost had he been. By unspoken agreement, they separated and undressed, the process seductively charged by the location and that kiss.

Bare and aroused, they approached each other again, falling upon the bed. Knees and elbows bumping, limbs tangling, there was little of finesse in their embracing. The bed was a double, but the hammocky sag of it prevented much rolling around, and trying to lie side by side slid them into each other, their cocks nosing each other, eyes flying wide at the slack shock of their balls suddenly nestling together. Alexei groaned, a high, needy sound, and fisted his hand around both their cocks. Martín thought he'd faint. The waxen give of Alexei's penis against his own took his breath, and the near-painful grip of strong bony fingers all but sent him over. He wrapped his hand around Alexei's to stop him moving and just concentrated on breathing into Alexei's neck and shoulder. The thick funk of their musk didn't help him calm down at all.

"In, out, in, out," he whispered to himself, tutoring his ragged breath. Then he laughed. In, out, in, out - sounded brilliant. He kissed a line up Alexei's neck and jaw, settling in to suck and nibble those lovely soft lips. They were like the petals of some deep-sea succulent. At any moment, if he bit just a little harder, they would burst forth with a saline gush. The thought was so tempting Martín decided he'd better distract himself, so he moved down, in the process pulling his cock from Alexei's uncompromising grasp.

In the water at the beach and in the bathing room at Alexei's flat Martín had been unable to get a proper grip on Alexei's coffee-bean nipples. But now they were dry, and Martín pinched them, running his palms up Alexei's ribs to cup the gentle swell of his tits, his thumb and forefinger massaging inward, converging on their prize. Martín tugged Alexei under him and settled between his legs, the lewd jut of Alexei's erection insistent against Martín's belly. Martín milked Alexei's nipples with slow, deep, symmetrical pulls, and Alexei arched his spine, shoving that perfect cock into the flesh of Martín's stomach. He purred against Alexei's collarbone and introduced his fingernails.

Alexei yelped and bucked. "*¡Papi, no! ¡Papi, si si si!*" Martín smiled. And started to suck. The taut little nipples were already hard, but the feeling of them pebbled against Martín's tongue drove him wild, and he hummed his pleasure, causing Alexei to squirm fetchingly.

"Want you, *nene*. Need you now." He reached for his trousers, where the condom was.

"*Papi*, let me," Alexei's voice rasped. He stretched over to the chair that held their clothes, flattening his nipples across his chest, erect and glimmering from Martín's

mouth. He grabbed the trousers and also the demitasse from the tray the woman had brought. He tossed the trousers to Martín so he could retrieve the condom from one of the pockets, and dipped two fingers into the tiny porcelain cup. His fingers emerged dripping with cooking oil, warmed for them by the taciturn chatelaine. Martín felt another laugh bubbling up. It had been years since he'd found it acceptable to use corn oil to corn hole.

Alexei, oblivious to this, drew his legs up and traced circles around his asshole with the oil, a golden droplet disappearing right inside. He looked so ready, so fuckable, that when he spiraled two fingertips inward, scissoring them so Martín could see the shadowed pinkness between them, Martín moaned and crawled forward, the condom packet in his teeth, to grind his hips into Alexei's. His cockroot and balls slid easily in the slickness Alexei had made for them. Martín made a game of humping, first letting his cock slide up along Alexei's own, next tilting his hips so the next thrust burrowed under, between the cheeks of Alexei's ass, the knob rubbing teasingly over Alexei's hole and Alexei's fingers.

"Fuck me, *papi*," Alexei pulled his fingers out with a sound like a kiss and slowly, never taking his eyes off Martín's, raised his legs, hooking his knees over his elbows. He was breathing evenly and Martín could almost hear him counting his breaths. He was scared. He was frightened. The proud erection faltered a bit. Martín shook his head slightly. There was no way he would force his cock into this boy, knowing what he knew. Martín took the condom packet out of his mouth and tore it open. He never took his eyes away from Alexei's. He stretched the condom over Alexei's crown and slowly, with very firm pressure, rolled it down. By the time he made one last swooping pass to spread the oil, Alexei was straining, his legs splayed, his arms reaching for Martín.

"But, Martín," it was the first time Alexei had used his given name except to introduce him to someone.

Martín smiled and shook his head. "Shhhh. Tonight I am yours. Make me your own."

He raised up into a squat, feeling the muscles of his buttocks draw his hole open. His hand gripped Alexei's cock and held it steady. He positioned himself above Alexei and sank down. He rotated his hips so his ring made a crazy orbit around Alexei's cockhead. His ring clenched, spasmed, then relaxed as he pressed. Oh, how Martín loved this breathless first moment of penetration! With an oiled shove, the impossible pressure gave way to engulfment. The flared crown squeezed in and Martín took a shuddering breath to acclimate himself. He was blissfully stretched, gloriously open.

"Breathe, *nene*," he reminded his lover. Alexei nodded wordlessly. Martín could tell it was all he could do not to come on the spot. He wondered, perversely, if Alexei had ever fucked a man. Fucked anyone, for that matter. He decided to be cruel. He grinned and, in one fluid motion, took in the entire length of Alexei's cock, shifting from a squat to a kneeling position as he did. He hugged Alexei's hips with his knees and rocked heavily. The younger man's eyes looked wild and his strong square hands were fisted in the thin, pillowed sheets. He tried to thrust but Martín ground down hard. He rocked until he felt the

press of his ass distend Alexei's balls. The man actually whimpered under him. He wouldn't last long.

Neither would Martín, truth be told.

He was rocking, not thrusting, so the thick pressure of Alexei's cock inside him was relentless. Every tilt of his hips brought the hard shaft to bear on his prostate, and he could feel his balls filling to the point of pain. His own cock, unbearably hard, vainly sought satisfaction against Martín's flexed abs.

Alexei, still inarticulate, planted his heels on the bed beside Martín's thighs and pressed up. Martín cried out at being unexpectedly lifted off the bed. The cock inside him surged deeper, into tender terra incognita. Martín strangled a cry. Alexei came down and up again, hunting his release. Martín gave up holding off and simply held on, lowering his body to wrap his arm around Alexei's waist. Now his cock was trapped, squashed mercilessly, and pumping hard. His balls drew up so sharply he feared they'd end up inside his body. He cried out and came. It was painful, as if he were being vacuumed out. And it was bliss, as Alexei froze in mid-arc, his eyes squeezed shut, his teeth bared in a raw parody of his easy grin, and his cock throbbed, shocking Martín's burning hole with each deep pulse.

Sweaty arms and legs came around Martín and Alexei's cock slid out of him wetly. His ring beat in the same frantic rhythm as his heart.

He was astonished that Alexei could talk when he himself could barely breathe, but there were words on the gusts of breath near his ears. "*Uuuuy, papi. My little whore. Beautiful little slut. Mi amor, mi vida. Next time you won't be so scared to fuck me, si?*"

Bless me, Father, for I have spent.

* * * *

Martín had never been to Pittsburgh and predictably got lost trying to find the halfway house in the early morning half-light. He had stopped for gas six times on the seven-hour drive, terrified Doria's crappy old car would run out. The gas gauge was broken. The heater worked, but the shrieking whine it made as it weakly heated one side of the car put Martín's nerves so on edge he preferred to shiver. Around the time he reached the George Washington Bridge he'd lost sight of the reasons driving was better than taking the train. He was so cold and irritated by the time he finally crossed the Allegheny and found the converted tenement he had to mind his manners most consciously, teeth clenched so they would neither chatter nor allow to escape the sort of invective Doria would have flung at the officious little man who answered the door.

"Sir," Martín said as silkily as he dared, "I have traveled six hundred miles to meet with Mr. Alcedo. Your colleague who phoned told me nothing of visiting days. I would appreciate very much your assistance in this matter."

The man jabbered resistance, citing rules and supervisors and agency policy. Martín understood why Doria trotted out her tone of imperious demand upon first contact with this patently North American variety of bureaucrat. Channeling Doria, Martín cut off the nasty fellow's speech.

"Perhaps I haven't made myself clear. I am a Fellow of the Global Institute for Public Health and Mr. Alcedo is a research associate. It is imperative I see him today." He brushed menacingly close to the man and started to mount the stairs. "I will be sure to commend you to your superiors," he flung back down with a venomous flair Doria would have relished.

There was the sound of feet on the landing above. "*¡Martín!*" And his boy was in his arms, bulky under untold layers of secondhand sweaters. Martín held him tightly and breathed in the sad, dusty smell of the place. He couldn't find any hint of Alexei's special scent.

"Upstairs," he said gruffly. The room, like everything in the halfway house, was grey, even though at a second look the curtains appeared to be yellow and the bedspread blue. Watery afternoon light grudgingly illuminated the mismatched furniture and one small vinyl bag stamped with the logo of the airline whose chartered flights bore Cuban refugees from Guantánamo to Miami. Alexei backed into the room and leaned against the cracked paint of the window sill.

"You got my letter?"

"All three of them."

"The director called you?"

"I suppose. She didn't say who she was."

And then they both were speaking at once. "You really have to stay here two months?" "I can't believe you came." "How are you really?" "I missed you so much." They both broke off, embarrassed. But they didn't touch.

"Come on," Martín offered. "Let's go out. I'll take you to dinner."

But Alexei was shaking his head. He approached Martín slowly and looked up at him, his eyes wide. "I don't want to go anywhere. Just, please, hold me, *papi*?"

"Oh, baby!" Martín sighed and enfolded Alexei. He didn't even try to blink back the tears that prickled his eyes. "What have they done to you, my own darling boy?"

Alexei shook his head against the wool of Martín's duffel coat. He didn't want to talk. The bed was in the corner, wedged between the spitting radiator and the uneven plaster of the wall. Martín let go of Alexei long enough to shrug out of his coat and scoot into the corner, his legs wide so Alexei could sit between them. Alexei crawled to him, tucking

his legs up over Martín's knee, resting his head heavily in the hollow below Martín's shoulder.

He drew an endless hitching breath and let it out forcefully. "I left Cuba not knowing if you would still want me. All these months"

Martín murmured, "Little slut, pretty little whore. What's not to want?" And Alexei's head came up, squinting into Martín's eyes. A chuckle rumbled in his chest, vocalized as a sigh of contentment, and he snuggled back down into Martín's arms again. They sat like that for a long time, until a knock broke their idyll.

"Mr. Al-cee-do! You aren't supposed to have visitors today, not until next Sunday."

They stiffened, but didn't answer. The man knocked again.

"Please Mr. Al-cee-do, your sponsorship depends on your compliance with Mission House's Refugee Acculturation Program."

They still said nothing, but Martín struggled to the edge of the bed and stood, nodding at Alexei, his coat, and his sorry little vinyl satchel.

"RAP is here to help, Mr. Al-cee-do. But we can only help those who help themselves."

That was it. Martín burst through the door, slamming it open against the hallway wall. "Mr. *Alcedo* will not require the *ministrations* of Mission House any further. He's coming with me." The little man gaped and spluttered about Alexei's freedom to leave, or more precisely, the lack thereof. Martín gestured Alexei before him, then followed down the stairs and out the door.

By some miracle, Doria's little car wheezed to life on the second try and they were off. Alexei was whooping in the front seat like a fan at the World Cup. Martín was dangerously close to hyperventilating.

* * * *

Martín's law-abiding lifetime had come to an end months before, of course, when he'd used his status as a foreigner to procure advantages for Alexei and his family. It had started simply enough, Martín flashing his United States passport to jump the lines at the meagerly-provisioned *tiendas*, uncomfortable with this privilege and keenly embarrassed to exercise it. He had bought clothes and shoes for Alexei's family at the fancy hotel boutiques whose thresholds only hotel guests or foreign passport-holders were permitted to cross. Vladímir had been so delighted with the gifts that Martín felt almost sheepish – the hotel stores were all flash; their merchandise was really cheap tourist trash. He had a brief vision of Vladi coiling sinuously through crowds of shoppers in New York or Boston or – licensing his fantasy wildly – Milan or Barcelona.

Barcelona! He didn't say a word of his idea to Alexei, but was boiling over with it by the time he saw Doria at the dorm that evening. She was leaving the next day – her

conference was over, and her stateside child care mosaic would crumble soon – so they were dressing up for a late supper with Doctor Rubio and Alexei and Vladi at another one of Santiago’s barely-licit *paladares*, not La Pina’s this time, but one Profe knew. Martín smiled, noticing he had adopted Alexei’s nickname for the clever, kind physician. He was not prepared for Doria’s reaction to his idea. With a shriek, she flew at him, kissing his cheek and staggering him so he was forced to sit gracelessly on the bed. The kissing was new, a delightful artifact of their time in Cuba.

Doria was looking at him proudly, as at a child who has learned to tie his shoes or mastered cursive writing. “You are fucking *brilliant*, Tino!” She beamed and kissed him again. “Let’s call *now*.”

Martín chuckled, relieved that she thought the idea had merit and gratified by her reaction. “Maybe we should finish dressing first.” They hurried through their preparations so they could visit the phone kiosk and still meet Profe and the boys on time. They tore down the hill into town; having settled into an easy rhythm of sharing the two bicycles with Profe and Alexei, they were used to doubling up, but tonight wove and shouted with childlike exuberance at each having a bike to ride. The phone center was even more choked with people than usual, it being a Saturday night. Martín raised his passport in front of his face, like a celebrity protecting his famous visage from paparazzi, and moved to the operator’s window.

“Why, Tino!” Doria exclaimed in her breathless version of a southern belle, “I do believe you have become the Ugly American!” She fluttered her eyelashes comically, but Martín grimaced nonetheless. He’d so much rather be an innocent abroad, but he supposed those days were over. They leaned on the counter near the phone they’d been assigned and waited while the operator tried to place their call. This could take a while, they knew, so they chatted about Doria’s travel arrangements which as usual were both enviably inexpensive and staggeringly complicated.

The phone by Martín’s elbow squawked and Doria made a grab for it. “Gil?” She shouted over the din in the kiosk. “Oh! Elena! You’ll never believe it... yes, we’re still in Santiago... yeah, I go back tomorrow... listen, Tino’s in love... I *know* ... it is about fucking time... anyway, we need a favor... can Tino and Gil hash it out?” She passed the receiver to Martín with a smirk and drew closer to listen.

By the time the connection fizzled without explanation a few minutes later, Martín and Doria were well on their way to getting Vladímir out of Cuba. Over supper at Profe’s *paladar* Martín could tell Doria was bursting with the news. But he’d insisted they wait to tell Alexei first, decide how best to tell their parents they’d be losing another son. And secretly Martín thrummed with the prospect of harvesting the success of his surprise.

Doria was bright and funny, only going maudlin after her third spiked coffee, leaning on Profe’s chest and sighing dramatically. “Wish I could stay. Wish you could come with me.” Martín knew the sheer impossibility of a long-term relationship with the affable doctor was part of its attraction to Doria. Martín, and now her son, were the only exceptions to her preference for solo flight. The *paladar*’s hostess was subtly nudging

them away from the table by removing the *cafetera* and scraping crumbs into her cupped palm. Time to go. Alexei suggested a nightclub that catered to European and Latin American tourists.

There was a modest but acrobatic version of a pre-revolutionary floor show, male and female dancers near to bare and glowing with sweat. There were the sincere boleros Doria reviled. There were regional folk songs sung to one guitar. There were even *oraciones* to *Santería loa* complete with throbbing drums and spectators drawn out of their seats and into a humping line led by a frenzied trumpet. The best, though, was the *pilón* that was brought out towards the end of the night. The giant wooden mortar and pestle were fixtures of pre-industrial cane fields. Haitian migrant laborers had developed a way to make the back-wracking work of pounding cane interesting. A lanky dancer from the floor show, still in red-and-white mambo drag, beckoned and Alexei bounced up, taking his hand. The dancers hooted and clapped, then faded into the wings. Alexei walked a slow circle around the knee-high *mortero*, running his hands up and down the long pole like a man having a slow wank, camping glances at the audience as he did so. This was an entirely new side of Alexei, and Martín was aware he was gaping. Doria and Doctor Rubio were laughing with delight.

The drummers began a slow rhythm and Alexei grasped the meter-long, thick *pilón*, rolling it between his palms, matching the roll with his hips and head, licking his lips. He hefted the pestle a few times, teasing it around the edge of the mortar, then, as the drums' throb sped, raised it high, fists above his head, and let it drop, rolling it wide and slow on contact. Martín felt the vibration skitter up his legs from the floor, settling in his balls and the base of his spine. The fact that Alexei's moves replicated their own dance was not lost on Martín.

The dance went on and on, faster, harder, sweat beading Alexei's face and darkening his shirt. The drums went crazy. Alexei's hips snapped in perfect synchrony. Martín shifted in his seat, but there was no escaping the pounding throb and Martín worried he'd embarrass himself when he stood to leave. As he watched, Alexei froze, the drums suddenly silenced, the merest quivering tension in those shining arms and braced legs betraying Alexei's effort. Finally, one, then another of the drummers feathered their drumheads slowly, with gentle fingertips. The two drummers brought Alexei down, full-body undulations slowing until final he stopped, leaning on the *pilón*, snuggling with it in an attitude of afterglow. The drums went silent, the lights went dark, and Martín took advantage of the moment to adjust his sit-up-and-beg cock, giving it a stern order to heel. Martín conceded to himself that this was a side of Alexei he'd seen, after all.

"Time to go," he announced the moment Alexei returned to their table, notes in a rainbow of colors and sporting a rogue's gallery of international leaders sticking out of his trouser pockets and waistband.

"I'll just go give Fredo his cut, then we can leave."

"Fredo, your ... friend? The one you told me about?" The one you used to fuck?

“*Sí, papi celoso*. You want to meet him?” The lad was hip to jealousy, it seemed. They said their good-nights to Doria and Profe, and headed backstage.

“*¡Uuuuuy, papi!* You look so fine! Why didn’t you tell me you were coming tonight? We could have planned something better!”

“Thought I’d show you instead.” Alexei shot a quelling glance at his friend. “Fredo, meet Doctor Martín Treviño.”

A long-fingered hand crossed the space between them. “*Encantado, Señor*.” The honey-colored eyes were hooded, the honorific withheld deliberately.

“*Igualmente*.” Martín crammed as much challenge as he could into the pleasantries.

Alexei passed Fredo a fistful of the crisper notes. “You’re too good to me, *papi*,” the man purred, looking Martín in the eye as he addressed Alexei.

“No time for a cock-fight, *mi amor*. Got plans. You come across any concrete or window glass, you tell me or Profe.” Alexei planted a kiss on the dancer’s cheek and turned to leave, wrapping his arm around Martín to shepherd him along.

“Ciao, *papi*, but if you leave now you’ll miss my big news.” Fredo pouted a little but seemed to know he had Alexei’s attention.

“So?”

“Spain. The Ministry of Culture’s sending us to tour Spain.”

“You’ll stay?” Alexei’s voice was low.

“I won’t be back,” Fredo confirmed. There was steel in the voice that had a minute ago been all *maricón* camp.

Alexei nodded. “Be careful.”

“You, too.” Martín watched as Fredo angled that long body in for a kiss, both younger men stiff with new boundaries, with endings.

And they left.

Martín didn’t say anything. Deep inside, he was glad that that man would be thousands of kilometers away when Martín left Alexei alone in Cuba. They had two weeks left before Martín was due back to teach a lucrative summer seminar. Alexei was quiet. They were heading toward their *confesionario*, but Martín’s needful excitement was banked for now.

“I made a call today, *nene*.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I have a friend, Gil. We were at college together. He runs a business program in Barcelona.”

“Oh?”

“The school sponsors students from former Soviet bloc countries to learn economics, management, entrepreneurship, that sort of thing.”

“Oh.”

“There’s a place there for Vladímir, if we can convince your parents.”

“Oh!”

That was more like it. “Do you think they’ll agree?”

“If they don’t, it won’t matter. Vladi is a man grown. He’ll go for it, for sure. Oh, *papi!*”

“This will change things for you here, no?”

“*Sí, papi.* Things will be different. Maybe one day I’ll turn up on your doorstep.”

Martín chuckled in what he hoped was a good-natured way. It was one thing to help Alexei out, pull a few strings so his brother could safely get an education abroad. It was another to think of this tough, savvy, delightful boy following him home like a stray puppy. Martín shrugged the thought away, ignoring the whispers in the back of his mind that reminded him of the rumors of young men jumping off jetties, swimming to sea, hoping to be fished out by the Coasties and detained at Guantánamo, a long shot better than the alternative; no shot at all.

In the *confesionario* that night Martín tried to kiss any memory of Fredo away. His kisses grew teeth, nipping and sucking subtle deep marks into the dark skin. Underneath him, Alexei twisted and bucked, his gasps verging on grunts. Martín held Alexei’s head, looked into his eyes, black but for the flicker of gold that reflected the spirit lamp. He couldn’t speak.

“I am for you, Martín.” Alexei *knew*. “He never held me the way you do.” He raised his hand and spread two fingers over his heart, the way he had that first night at Profe’s.

Martín covered Alexei’s hand with his own. “And what’s this, then?”

“We are two. Together in my heart. I am yours.”

Understanding, Martín breathed, “And I am yours. Oh, *nene.*” Martín bent his head for another bruising kiss, but found all the ferocity drained away into another need. “Hold me? Oh, sweet one, hold me.”

And Alexei flipped them easily, no mean feat in the narrow sagging bed. He straddled Martín, sliding down his body to take Martín’s quivering prick into his mouth. Oh! His

hands were everywhere, calluses rough but touches gentle, deepening. His tongue felt thick and hot and very strong as it swept up Martín's shaft over and over, mouth dipping to suck the tight knob.

Martín stopped trying to be quiet. His voice was pushed out of him to accommodate the feelings Alexei made for him. Two hard thumbs pressed at his ring, demanding entry. Two thumbs spread him wide, and then those two thumbs stayed right where they were, holding him open for the blunt cock, proudly sporting the finest condom Western industry – and Doria – could provide.

His brain sent “Yes” and “So much” and “Alexei” and “Love” to his mouth, but along the way it all became a keening “oh oh oh oh!” Alexei's arms started to quake from the strain of holding himself up and Martín open, and those thumbs finally slid away, arms coming hard around Martín's shoulders, teeth threatening his throat, hips curling in and up, pushing Martín over, tumbling after with a shout.

They slept so hard they owed the Madam Confessor extra cash when they finally woke to another smoky, hazy Santiago dawn.

* * * *

Just outside Pittsburgh, Martín stopped to gas up and call home. Doria was, predictably, overjoyed at Martín taking leave of his senses. Martín was, also predictably, soothed by her over-the-top reaction. He was skeptical of her promises to square everything legally, but told himself there was nothing he could do about it until he was back on terra firma. Of course, terra firma and Martín were becoming more like strangers every day.

“*Papi?* How far to your house? Will we be there soon?”

“Not too soon, *nene*. Overnight, if we drive straight through.”

Alexei snapped his wrist up and down, clicking his fingers to show his astonishment. “So far! I thought I was close to you, in Pittsburgh.”

“You were. You chose well. But it's a big country, no?”

Alexei nodded. He shivered a little. “Cold, too.” He looked over at Martín with something like a plea in his eyes.

Martín unwrapped his muffler and drew off his mittens, passing them over. Alexei made only the most pro forma objections before slipping gratefully into both.

“We'll drive until dark, then we'll stop for the night. Are you hungry?”

“I can wait, *papi*. I had breakfast right before you rescued me. So romantic!”

Martín angled a wry look in Alexei's direction, unsure who was being teased, here. But he saw nothing but happy exhaustion in the espresso eyes.

They didn't talk much during the day, the engine noise and – when they could endure the cold no longer – the horror-movie scream of the heater, making it more trouble than it was worth. What would they say? Martín imagined all sorts of horrible repercussions from his rash behavior. It would be cruel to share those with Alexei. They couldn't be too much different from the fallout of Alexei's defection, after all.

When night fell they had crossed the Connecticut state line and Martín decided their twilight view of Manhattan was a high enough note on which to end their first day as fugitives. He pulled off I-84 near Danbury and found an anonymous-looking franchise motel. Key card in hand, he plunged them back into the suburban sprawl to find some supper. Not that he was hungry.

Alexei didn't say much as they waited for their food, though his shivering slowed by degrees and had stopped by the time they were dressing their salads. Martín's hands were still vibrating from the steering wheel, his eyes still flashing white divider lines, his brain still racing. He almost missed Alexei's soft question.

"Do you think they'll send me back, *papi*?"

"Oh, *nene*!" Where was his brash, grinning boy? He slid out of his side of the vinyl booth and shoved in next to Alexei, staring down the waitress's cocked eyebrow, daring her to say a word. She winked instead. He took Alexei's hand, held it tight. Damning himself for it, he couldn't lie.

You came to me! "We broke some pretty serious rules today."

I came for you! "Doria's trying to fix the legal side of things."

I won't let them take you! "I don't know what they'll do."

Everything will be all right. "We'll just have to wait and see."

I will never let you go! "I hope you can stay, in the States and with me."

I love you. "I love you."

Alexei practically melted against him. Martín was glad of his glasses; no one would notice his misty eyes as long as they didn't overflow. He squeezed Alexei's shoulders, noticing how bony they felt under all those layers.

"Eat, *nene*, then we'll go have a hot bath and sleep." He coaxed a few mouthfuls into his own dodgy stomach, paid the check, and ushered Alexei back out into the cold. The shivering started up almost immediately, and it was all Martín could do to release Alexei so he could drive back to the motel.

Martín filled the tub after scrubbing it first, because, well, you just never knew. Alexei sank into it with a moan of pleasure, but no trace of surprise. Martín let himself feel a twinge of regret for not having been there to witness his boy's first encounter with

abundant hot tap water. Alexei's eyelids were heavy, and his speech slurred with sleep. Martín washed him, kneeling by the edge of the tub the way his mother always had when he was little. Alexei pushed into the gentle fingertips washing his hair, his eyes closing. Martín rinsed Alexei with the clean spray from the showerhead, then wrapped him up in three scratchy, but clean motel towels. He dried Alexei in front of the heater, leaving him perched on the edge of the bed wrapped in the towels while he rummaged for clean clothes. He looked over at Alexei, bent double to scratch the dry skin on his shins and ankles, and retrieved the tiny bottle of complimentary hand lotion from the bathroom.

Martín knelt in front of Alexei, and tipped a small measure into his cupped palm. He pulled one ashy foot into his lap and began to rub the lotion in, using gentle pressure.

"Uuuuuy, *papi*," Alexei rumbled, nodding in the dry heat of the forced-air unit. One dark hand, thinner than Martín remembered, harder, ran slowly over and over Martín's hair, dry-callused fingers rasping his ear. He exhaled slowly, looking up at his lover. He kept rubbing, coaxing Alexei's skin back to its familiar burnt-sugar gloss.

"There you are," Martín crooned. "There's my beautiful boy. Such skin! I dreamed of this skin. I dreamed of you. I couldn't stop." He glanced up, but Alexei was looking away, tears tracking brightly down gaunt cheeks. Martín looked away, but kept stroking, kept up his litany of praises. He deepened his touches, instinct telling him he was doing more than moisturizing dry skin; he was drawing Alexei back into himself, repairing damage done by hardship and uncertainty. By the time Martín reached Alexei's thighs, Alexei's breathing had evened out, and the hand in Martín's hair had become two. Martín let his hands rest heavily on Alexei's legs, oily thumbs encouraging those legs to part. He leaned close, blowing gently on the warm skin, breathing in the deep-forest smell of Alexei's groin.

He turned his eyes up again, this time to be met by Alexei's dark, warm, slightly wary stare. "Let me, *nene*? Let me taste you?"

Those hands in his hair fisted hard, pulling him closer. "You want me, *papi*?" The words were bold, but the tone was breathless, almost broken.

Martín nodded, his hands pushing harder, sliding in between Alexei's knees. "Always, *nene*. Like no one else, ever." He dipped his head to the still-resting cock, kissing gently, almost chastely, honoring rather than arousing. "Why wouldn't I want you?" That had always been the one certain thing between them, the wanting.

"I feel like less than I was, *papi*."

Oh, *nene*! He found a bit of humor, offered it as a sly smile. "I don't know, *mi amor*, you feel like more every minute." He kept his mouth close to that lovely cock, letting his self-conscious chuckle dance over it, feeling its rising interest. He deployed his tongue. Oh! That taste! Under the motel soap there was heat and velvet darkness, which does have a taste. Alexei's taste. Martín hadn't forgotten it during their months apart, but he had lost the ability to call it up at will, to roll it across his tongue, press it behind his teeth. And

here it was, better than memory, so much better, that he gave a low open-throated cry and closed his lips around the taste, taking the cock with it.

Alexei rolled his hips up, his cock going fully hard in Martín's mouth and oh! Didn't he love that? The soft, yielding silk resolving itself into hard, demanding silk, the elusive flavor asserting itself, the richness of the musk sharpening. So much to love. Martín hummed; Alexei arched. Martín applied himself; Alexei rewarded his diligence. Martín swallowed convulsively even after Alexei finished coming, panting against his thigh as Alexei's cock slid from his mouth. Without a word, Martín finished rubbing lotion into Alexei's dry skin, paying special attention to places that didn't need it, like nipples and navel and nape of neck.

He finished at Alexei's mouth, massaging the last of the lotion into his hair, making it shine dully in the lamplight. He took a kiss, Alexei's lips sloppy with exhaustion.

"Better, *nene*?"

"Better than I dared hope, *papi*."

"Sleep now." But the words were unnecessary. Martín drew Alexei higher up on the bed, covering them both, and switched off the light.

* * * *

Doria – new baby showing sooner than Trebor had – met them at Martín's door the next evening with her usual energy, if not her usual grace. The embrace she launched had more in common with a swan on land than starlings flocking.

Alexei greeted Doria and her obvious pregnancy with the easy reverence with which men reared in macho Catholic cultures approach mothers. Martín added this to the list of mild regrets he associated with growing up stateside and Protestant.

They ate Thai takeout, Trebor peering owlishly at Alexei from his mother's eroded lap, giggling shyly at their clasped hands and moony glances. By the end of the meal he had migrated to Martín's more capacious lap and was trying out his tiny Spanish vocabulary on "Lexi."

Doria sipped her coffee ("Decaf," she had grumbled, "my only capitulation to maternity"), scraping a creamy droplet off her bottom lip with her teeth in an habitual gesture that struck Martín, as it always had, as too sexy for words. Alexei noticed him watching her and mimicked the gesture, grinning wickedly. Martín had never been so keen for Doria to go home.

But there were things to talk about.

"I called Ben," Doria said flatly. "We need him, now you've made like an eagle and carried off young Ganymede here."

“Ben, your ex?” Martín had mentioned Ben to Alexei, but dismissively, as a long-gone part of his past. The soft lips pursed, the smooth brow beetled, the hand in his squeezing and releasing, uncertainty warring with desire for reassurance.

Martín wanted to be furious. He *was* furious, but only because Doria was right.

“Ben is an immigration lawyer. Best in the state. He’s involved with my institute, but not my projects.” He looked Alexei in the eye. “He has no claim to me. I am yours.”

He was answered with a tentative smile. This was going to be hard. Damn.

Doria spoke up. “Look. Alexei. Ben is an asshole, he was rotten to Tino, but that was a long time ago. He can help us make sure you can stay in the States, stay with us. He thinks we can effect a transfer from the placement in Pittsburgh, make it retroactive. Then we can get you started with all that bureaucratic resettlement bullshit. I’ve got everything in the pipeline, all ready to go. But we need a good immigration lawyer. Ben’s the best, and we can afford him, since he’s on retainer with the Institute.”

Alexei nodded at Martín’s murmured translation. “Okay. But we see him together. Together, *si*?” For the first time since that newspaper photo all those months ago, Martín saw Alexei’s two fingers light over his heart.

“*Juntos*,” came Trebor’s little voice. Followed by, “*Siempre*.” *Always*. Martín thought it an excellent word for the little boy to know.

Doria beamed. Martín prayed.

* * * *

The trip downtown with Alexei was special.

“Hey, Dr. T!” the driver boomed as they mounted the step at Martín’s corner.

“Good morning, Dré.” Martín grasped the big man’s hand. The bus driver leaned over to ruffle Trebor’s spice-colored dreadlocks, giant belly straining his transit uniform.

“Hey, little man. How’s it hanging?” Trebor giggled and hid his face behind Martín’s hip. Martín fed three passes into the counter.

“Dré, this is Alexei, my...” My what? He cast a look down at Alexei, standing halfway up the bus steps.

“*Mi amor, mi vida*,” came the soft voice.

Dré chuckled, even that a loud sound from his enormous body. “A sweetheart, huh? Well, it’s about time, I say. Hey, Mrs. Vileika, lookit Dr. T., here. Got himself a sweetheart!”

The old lady beamed as Martín and Trebor made their way over to sit by her. He didn’t look to see if Alexei followed, sure his face was the color of passion fruit. When the

blood stopped rushing in his ears, he heard Alexei respond to Mrs. Vileika in Russian while Trebor was munching steadily on the jam-filled blini Mrs. Vileika had pressed on him, a wide jam smile superimposed on his real one.

Mrs. Vileika peered at him. “All the way from Cuba, this one? He learned to speak my language in school. Such a nice black man.” Martín tried not to laugh as she patted his hand. “You be happy, yes?” Martín nodded, though he wasn’t certain whether Mrs. Vileika intended to bless his future happiness, or to demand it in the present. Either way, he was pleased to acquiesce. Alexei chatted with the old lady in what Martín imagined was careful schoolboy Russian until it was time to wipe Trebor’s sticky lips and fingers and make their way off the bus, Dré’s farewell as huge and cheerful as his greeting had been. The broad plaza downtown had much in common with the pre-revolutionary plazas of Havana and Santiago, all of them having been constructed during the same Romanesque moment around the time of the Spanish American War. Ben’s office building, on the other hand, was all 1980s-boom glitz, with its glossy black granite face and stainless-steel lobby.

There had been a time when Martín would have been buzzed into Ben’s office without even being announced, but today he waited with his little entourage to be greeted and escorted in, like a stranger. Or, Martín thought in a comforting flash, like a client. However, if he thought for a moment Ben’s interest had nothing about it but the professional, his first words eliminated that hope.

“Look at you three!” Ben’s plummy tones rang in the reception area of his downtown law office, ricocheting off the marble and steel so that Martín had to make a conscious effort not to duck. “Such the little nuclear unit! Poster boys for The Gay Family.”

Ben stood too close, as always, his hand swallowing Martín’s hand and his presence swallowing the rest of him. Martín forced himself not to squeeze Trebor’s little hand for reassurance, relaxed by force of will. Ben’s sneering condescension had, to Martín’s dismay, deflated the cushion of bonhomie and confidence he’d ridden on the trip into town, the cozy feelings bolstered by the indulgent glances and warm comments of their fellow travelers aboard public transportation. Martín was used to people noticing Trebor’s tawny skin, cinnamon hair, and wide blue eyes, and got a kick out of strangers’ assumptions that he was the boy’s father.

“And this must be your Alexei!” Ben was all loom and bluster – the attitude Doria referred to as his “Pinstriped Daddy” mode. He said “your Alexei” in exactly the tone a parent might use for the phrase “little friend.” Uncomfortable as he was, Martín remembered to be grateful that Doria had agreed to cover his afternoon classes today in exchange for him looking after Trebor. Her interactions with Ben tended towards the incendiary.

Alexei offered Ben his hand with a shadow of his customary grin. Ben kept hold of Alexei’s hand as he led them to the smaller of two plush conference rooms. Alexei sat with Trebor in his lap, which gave Ben the opening he’d sought.

“So, from Castro’s engineer to Doria’s au pair, is it? I’m delighted he finds you worth the sacrifice, Tino.”

Martín bridled, at the nickname and even more at Ben’s implication. “You know he’s neither of those things, Ben,” Martín ground out. “And if he finds me worth any trouble at all, I’m intelligent enough to be grateful.” He winced as he saw Alexei notice the tension and lean closer, protective.

“Still, Tino, you’re looking quite the paterfamilias today. Even dressing the part, down-at-heel don with your elbow patches. All that’s missing is a pipe – or a cigar, to honor the Cuban theme!” Ben tilted his head back and laughed too loudly, his gelled blond hair quivering, the pink flesh of his neck folding over the high, tight collar and tie.

Martín sighed. If nothing else, he understood Ben. Ben was not jealous, not exactly, but he was thrown off by Martín’s involvement with Alexei, just as he always had been by Martín’s friendship with Doria. He’d wanted to possess Martín completely, and today that appeared to extend to Martín’s very history. Martín found he wasn’t in any mood to be defined.

Alexei spoke up, his hand on Trebor’s springy locks. “Is he going to help us, Martín? I don’t like the way he speaks to you.”

Ben’s laugh cut off and he answered Alexei in English. “Yes, Alexei, I am going to help you. You’re how I give back.” He laughed again, the sound lower, nastier than before.

“That’s it, Ben! Alexei’s a well-educated professional, a braver man than you’ll ever have to be, and my lover. Save your white-man’s burden crap for your board of directors. Do you know what it took for me to come here? Have you any idea how furious I was when Doria told me she’d called you? I hate that I need you for this, but I know that I do. If you won’t help, let us work with one of your partners, but don’t let our past stop you from doing the right thing. Be a good guy, Ben, and for once don’t count the cost.” Martín was breathing hard, fearing he’d ruined Alexei’s chances to stay. Trebor’s blue eyes were wider than ever; his Tino shouting was something new.

Ben smiled, showing a little too much tooth. “Pretty speech, Tino. Did you practice it on the way over?” He waved away Martín’s indignation. “Your boy’s papers are already filed.” He cocked an eyebrow in Alexei’s direction and pressed an intercom button in the console at the head of the table. “Meghan, the Alcedo file, please.” He sat back, drawing a slim envelope from his breast pocket and passing it over. “Press releases,” he explained. “Announcing my campaign for state Attorney General. And my engagement to marry my firm’s founder’s daughter. You’re among the first hundred to know.”

“I never knew you,” Martín murmured, barely audible even to himself.

“That’s the idea, lover. Consider it my bill. Though I must say, I will regret not having the opportunity to ... play ... with your new toy. You always did share so well.”

* * * *

Martín was still breathing tightly, shaking a little, when they stepped out of Ben's office building into the bright, cold sunshine. He had one of Trebor's hands in his and reached his free hand out to Alexei, pulling him close, the thick envelope of legal documents crinkling between them. He'd never felt possessive of a lover before. The joy in a liaison, he'd always thought, lay in belonging to someone.

But right there, on an island amidst the eddying and swirling pedestrian traffic, he surprised himself. He claimed his Alexei. Hands twined, he kissed Alexei, chastely at first, and then not so. He was lost in it. Until their day at the beach in Cuba, Martín had never kissed a man in public, never initiated public affection. He was high on it and oh! Alexei was kissing back, all warm lips and cold nose and hot, hot tongue. Martín came back to the world to find Trebor bouncing on the end of his hand.

"S cold, Tino. Let's go home."

Martín laughed out loud and gave Alexei's hand a squeeze before releasing it, looking deep into the molasses eyes.

"Clever lad, Treb. Yes, we'll go home now."

Doria would never believe any of this.

* * * *

Supper time that evening brought news of Dr. Rubio, whose carefully worded letter to Doria could not conceal his delight over her pregnancy. As with Trebor, Doria was close-lipped about the paternity of the new baby, but Martín, of course, knew Dr. Rubio had cause for elation. There was e-mail from Vladi, as well, the lad evidently taking Barcelona – and its denizens – by storm. There was a holiday mood around the table.

Celebratory-supper washing-up done, Trebor and Doria safely home, Martín turned his attention to finishing what he'd started on that downtown street.

He walked slowly through the little house, switching off lights, locking doors, checking windows. Alexei had arrived almost literally with nothing, and had been living here just over a month, but as he moved through the living room, Martín marveled at how the man's presence had changed this place. Little things, like the *tostonera* occupying pride of place on the countertop instead of being shoved far back in the drawer, and bigger things, like the way Alexei's sharp, green ocean smell pooled everywhere, had made this tatty rented house Martín's home. He wandered to the bathroom, where that beloved scent was most recent, and brushed his teeth. He made his way to the bedroom, where Alexei's smell was strongest, smelled permanent.

Martín felt a flutter through his belly. He was nervous. Why? He wondered about that for a moment. Tonight he would ask from Alexei the thing his lover had been offering all along. Martín would simply, finally, accept the gift. The quaver in his gut reminded him that he could make his love's scars worse, fail to erase the damage that had been done. That fear had ridden him for months in Cuba, haunted him during their separation, and

stood between them now. Martín wanted to force it aside, but feared his resolve would falter.

The subject of his musings wandered in, bare and proud, with a mug of tea for each of them and a heated smile for Martín. Desire zipped through him and he followed Alexei toward the bed, eager as a puppy.

Alexei carefully set the steaming mugs on the night table and settled onto the bed. Martín set aside his fears just as carefully.

“I think you will take me tonight, yes?” Alexei asked in his special English. He rolled to lie on his stomach and folded his arms into a bridge across the pillow. The offer was unequivocal, but then, it always had been. Martín heard a sound escape his throat, an appreciative purr, he hoped, but more likely a possessive growl. He followed Alexei into the bed, cuddling into his side, running his hand up and down the deep spine, making circles at the sensitive crest of Alexei’s ass.

“If you will have me, love. If I have not squandered your invitation.”

“I am yours.” Alexei spread his legs, drawing his knees up just enough to open himself to Martín’s skating fingers.

“Oh!” Martín gasped, then chuckled. “You’re all ready for me.” He dipped his head so he could see Alexei’s wicked grin. He took a quick, hard kiss. “Sure of me, weren’t you?” he finished, wonder in his voice.

“I always am.” Smug creature!

Martín wanted desperately to see Alexei’s face as he fucked him, but didn’t ask him to turn over. This must be on Alexei’s terms. He slid one hand under Alexei’s hip, fingers digging into the sizzle spot he loved just beside the hard bone. With his other hand, he held his cockhead in place, lightly pressing the entrance to Alexei’s body. Alexei’s ring clenched and relaxed against his cock. Martín pressed against those little rhythmic kisses, heat blooming across his shoulders and down his arms, tingling in his hands as he forced slowness.

Alexei pressed back, moaning “*papi*” and “*mi amor*” and “*más más más.*”

The sight of Alexei stretched around the widest point of Martín’s cock was literally stunning, and Martín felt his mind slip. There were no more words, and he eased deeper on a rumbling groan that went on and on. The fevered clutch of Alexei’s channel was satiny, superheated even against the heat of his cock. Martín couldn’t feel the scars. When he was seated as deeply as he could go, he stopped and tried to breathe. Alexei’s scent sharpened and spread as his body threw off heat and sweat. He glowed. And then he rocked back, hard, taking Martín deeper.

Martín screamed and rammed forward, meeting Alexei’s thrust. He moved now, with no control at all, desperate. He dropped forward, covering Alexei’s whole body, pushing his

hands between Alexei and the bed. He reared up, dragging Alexei with him, so that they were both on their knees, Alexei's ass on Martín's thighs. He heard Alexei cry out at the new angle, and dropped one hand down to Alexei's cock. His strokes were graceless and rough, not even in time with his equally graceless, rough thrusts. Alexei ground down, the pressure on Martín's balls almost painful. Martín froze, everything going tiny and dark and tight and quiet for one endless moment before he was flying apart, flung so widely he'd need a new map to find his way back to himself.

He didn't hear or see or even feel Alexei come over his hand, but came back to a simulacrum of awareness with that seaside smell in his nostrils and his teeth around muscle at the base of Alexei's neck, on the way to his shoulder. He lowered them to the bed, both of them sucking in air like pearl divers, and covered them with the heavy quilt. Over and over he licked the spot he'd bitten, the mark not so easy to see against the dark skin, but vivid on his tongue.

His cock was softening, but Alexei snugged back tight, holding him in. Martín wriggled. "Turn over, *nene*, I want to kiss you."

At that request, Alexei rolled, both of them whimpering at the loss of connection, hurrying to establish another, kissing long and slow and sloppy.

"I bit you!" Martín's voice was incredulous between wet slides against Alexei's lips.

Alexei grinned. "You're a wolf. *Mi lobo*."

"Did I hurt you?" Not just with my teeth?

"You made it all better."

Oh...

Martín hiccupped a little sob, let Alexei see the tears filling his eyes. "Oh, *nene*, I'm so glad you're home!" So glad you're *my* home.

Alexei licked at Martín's eyelids and started moving his body again, slick and warm and pliant.

Martín chuckled ruefully. "Let an old wolf sleep a bit before you demand more. Greedy boy!"

The power of suggestion must have trumped the momentum of a youthful libido, because the only answer Martín got was a sigh, a snuffle, and a snore.

* * * *

"Something's different," Doria observed the next morning, beaming at the presence of cream in his fridge. She loved that Alexei took his coffee the same way she did, sweet

and light – “Makes up for the decaf,” she allowed. Her favorite things about Alexei and his didn’t always coincide.

Martín blushed but didn’t answer.

“You fucked him.”

“None of your business,” he tried, without much conviction.

“Tino, you *dog!*” Doria chuckled and beamed brighter.

“Wolf, evidently,” he muttered under his breath.

Doria squinted, uncomprehending, and waved his comment away like a mosquito. “Proud of you, Tino.”

“Me, too,” he whispered and leaned over the counter to kiss her.

“*Ay, papi*, my eyes!” A freshly showered Alexei staggered in, holding his head in mock horror at finding them in mid-smooch. Martín cast his eyes heavenward in gratitude that Alexei had pulled on a pair of sweats before coming into the kitchen.

“Shit, doesn’t anybody wear a damn shirt in this house?” Doria grouched and tilted her cheek for Alexei’s kiss.

Martín laughed, took a quick, deep kiss from Alexei and danced off to shower.

An hour later, Martín introduced Alexei to the director of the professional recertification program for refugees. Feeling bolder than a *santero*’s prayer, Martín shared another slow kiss with Alexei, setting Alexei’s middle-aged Belarussian classmates giggling. He followed Doria out into the winter cold, where she linked arms with him and directed their steps toward the Institute. She looked up at him, sharp nose reddened with the chill.

“Not much like the first time we walked away from him, is it?”

Martín let the memory of that steamy afternoon warm him. He smiled. “No, honey,” he replied. “Not much.” Not like walking away at all.

End

The Hustler Prince

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