

Joely Skye

Monster

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Monster

Joely Skye

Dedication

For my husband.

Chapter One

Joshua Mackay was hunting a monster by bicycle. In the park. On a Sunday afternoon.

And he'd lost sight of his quarry. Sweat soaked his clothes as he pumped his legs, taking the path's curves as quickly as possible. Which wasn't all that fast given that the family activity brigade was out in full force. He swiped a hand over his face and wished it wasn't ninety-degree weather. Salt stung his eyes and he squinted, looking ahead. Surely the monster hadn't escaped.

He'd been careful, perhaps so careful he hadn't actually poked a hole in the back wheel of the monster's bike. Surreptitious was all well and good, but not when it meant failure. He had thought to find Kiran Brunner with a flat tire by now.

Perhaps the monster was even more talented than Josh had been led to believe. Kir made men forget him, or bent them to his will. Most spectacularly, he had once convinced a man to shoot himself in the head. Fortunately, Josh carried a bicycle pump, not a gun. He might be compelled to brain himself with a pump but he didn't think it would be fatal.

He biked here every day in the summer. The monster that was, not Josh who preferred air-conditioning over smoggy heat. Baking in the sun was hell and even if evil belonged there, Josh didn't. Besides, Josh didn't believe in evil so much as capability and Kir, as his files named him, was capable of murder.

Not that you could tell by the photos and videos Josh had studied over the past month. There the boy's expression was mostly grim, occasionally sullen. Wide-spaced eyes, a mobile mouth and defined cheekbones made Kir's dark gaze profoundly disturbing. And beautiful, in a wild way.

Kir had become his obsession since Josh had taken this job. His contact wanted Kir alive. To study. To track down the other dangerous Minders who could invade and destroy people's minds. So Josh prepared to meet this beautiful monster on a warm, green summer day.

Speak of the devil. There he was, walking his crippled bike down the asphalt path.

Josh slowed while adrenaline spilled out of his nerves and fed his blood. The next few minutes were critical. As planned, his brakes squeaked in warning. He didn't want to startle Kir, who was a jumpy kind of guy. Went with the psi territory and, no doubt, with being on the agency's most-wanted list. A potent combination.

As Josh approached, Kir jerked to a stop and whipped his head around. Hands clenched the bike's handlebars while his entire body stiffened. *Casual*, Josh warned himself. He stood, straddling his bike, leaving enough distance not to crowd the jittery boy.

Josh wiped his face again, giving the monster time to get used to his presence. He hadn't planned to be sweating like a pig when he finally talked to Kir, but it couldn't be helped.

"Flat?" Josh glanced at Kir's back wheel.

"Yeah." Kir's tone implied, *what of it?*

"I've got a repair kit."

Kir didn't respond, just watched Josh warily.

Josh shrugged. "If you want to borrow it. Otherwise I'll be on my way." He sat back on his seat and lifted one foot to the pedal.

Kir stared, unblinking, but just before Josh was about to push off, Kir said, "Okay." The one word came out a little breathlessly. "Thanks,"

he added with a halfhearted grin. The boy wasn't used to smiling and the awkward effort surprised Josh.

"Sure." Josh walked his bike off the path.

"Where's the kit?" Kir asked. Josh had the impression he was trying not to sound suspicious.

"Here." Josh unzipped the pouch under his bicycle seat. There he carried the repair kit, a pump and a garage-door opener—access to the safe house. Safe for him. Not so safe for Kir.

Josh handed over the cheap kit and Kir took it with a jerk.

"Thanks," he mumbled.

"You can keep it. Do you have your own pump?" Josh knew he didn't.

"No. But if you're in a hurry..."

Josh leaned against a tree. "I'm not." He kept his smile on low beam. "I can wait. You can use mine."

Kir held his gaze for a moment, going wide-eyed.

Oh, baby, don't tell me you're easy. This was the monster the agency had hunted for over a year?

"Thanks," Kir repeated. A man of few words. A *monster* of few words, Josh reminded himself. It was all well and good to get into his role here but he shouldn't forget Kir was a twenty-two-year-old psychotic Minder.

Kir crouched down and went to work while Josh eyed him. Just as well the boy wore loose clothing. Josh didn't need the distraction right now. Dark eyes and faux naiveté were bad enough. Not that Josh pursued youth or inexperience but he had an unrewarding protective streak that was easily aroused.

Rather than openly admire the boy's body, he watched the families walk, bike and skate past on the all-purpose asphalt path. Kir came here every day and Josh had chosen to catch him on Sunday when the crowd could explain his own presence and make him less of a perceived threat.

A couple of minutes later Kir rose with a sheepish expression. "I never get flats. I don't know what happened today."

“Glass, maybe.”

He frowned. “I don’t think so. I didn’t see any.”

“Would you like to use the pump?” Josh brandished his.

“Thanks.”

“You sure are polite. That’s the fourth time you’ve thanked me.”

Kir ducked his head endearingly and Josh wondered if he were being played. Fine, let the boy think he was in control and Josh was charmed by his artless act. Josh passed the pump and made finger contact.

Shivering, Kir pulled away. Psis often didn’t like to be touched, but the boy’s expression conveyed surprise, not recoil. He crouched down quickly, though not before Josh observed a flush.

This is like taking candy from a baby. “I hardly ever use this park, though I live nearby.”

Kir glanced at him. “I come here all the time. When it’s cooler, I run.”

“I’m not surprised. You have runner’s legs.”

Instead of acknowledging the compliment, Kir concentrated on attaching the pump to the tire.

“Actually, I’m glad I stopped,” continued Josh. “The sun is getting to me. I’m heading home for a drink soon.”

Kir worked the pump furiously and Josh waited, giving the boy time to absorb what was happening. When he was done, Kir rose and wiped his face on the sleeve of his T-shirt.

“I hope you have lots of water,” said Josh.

“Uh, some.” Kir stood on the balls of his feet, ready to spring. Under normal circumstances, Josh would never move on someone so skittish.

“Come back to my place and hydrate yourself.” Josh kept his words light.

Kir stared, as if he were a deer caught in headlights, and Josh was annoyed that a part of him felt bad. Either the monster was a very good actor, or he really couldn’t decide whether or not to accept the invitation.

“Can I have my pump?” Josh held out his hand.

“Oh. Yeah.”

This time Josh didn't force the finger contact. He just took the pump and attached it to his bike. Kir watched as Josh slung a leg over the bicycle's bar. “Coming?” he asked, as if it were no big deal.

Kir blinked. “Okay.”

“Follow me.” Josh set off and didn't look back.

As he sped up, he wondered if he'd played it too cool. For a real hookup, he would have pushed harder to make Kir know he was wanted. But in this situation, the less Josh appeared to care, the better. The boy had good reason to be suspicious. The agency had been hunting him for a year now and he'd had some close calls. The failures had inspired the agency to use an outsider to lure the monster back to his cage. A gay outsider who might connect to the boy who occasionally had anonymous sex with men.

Josh braked at the stop sign and only then glanced back to see Kir hot on his trail. Good.

“Just down the road.” Josh left the bike path and entered suburbia. There they rode side by side. Kir gazed with open admiration at the upscale houses they passed, which amused Josh, or would have if he wasn't wound so tight. The endgame was in sight.

Josh led Kir to the two-story, five-bedroom house he'd become acquainted with this past week.

“Wow. Is this yours?” Kir was impressed.

“Yup,” Josh lied. “Accountants know how to pay their bills.” He turned away from the boy's admiration and thumbed the garage-door opener. The white double door folded up into the garage's ceiling.

“Come on in,” said Josh.

Kir hung back as Josh wheeled his bike in beside the black SUV taking up half of the garage.

“I'm ready for air conditioning. You?”

“Okay.” Kir took a deep breath and followed Josh, parking his bike. They entered the house and, once the door shut behind them, Josh breathed a little more easily. The boy didn’t know it, but he was locked in.

“Water? Juice? Something stronger?” Josh asked as he walked to the kitchen. Kir trailed behind him.

“Water, please.”

Josh turned to see Kir wince, as if he thought he sounded stupid. Somehow, Josh hadn’t expected the boy to be naive.

Kir gave a sharp shake of the head. “Sorry, I’m just not used to...”

“Getting picked up during the day?” Josh let his smile widen. Kir jerked his shoulders in an attempt to shrug. While he fidgeted, Josh pulled down two glasses from the cupboard and filled them with water.

“There’s a first time for everything.” Josh didn’t touch Kir’s fingers as he handed him the glass. It was too close to the end. This cat and mouse game left him with a bad taste in his mouth. Monster or not, Kir was too easily played. The files had led Josh to expect some sophistication, especially about sex.

Kir gulped down the entire glass at once. *Too fast.* Josh resisted the impulse to shake his head at Kir. God, with a little show of interest, of *concern*, anyone could have brought this boy in.

“Thanks.” Kir swiped his mouth.

“I think you should stop thanking me,” Josh said gently.

Kir’s face softened, as if he thought Josh was about to seduce him. When Josh didn’t do anything, Kir’s expression clouded. He pointed to Josh’s full glass of water. “I thought you were thirsty.”

“I am.” Josh drank—the drug had been in Kir’s glass, not in the water. The boy’s frown remained. Josh wondered, in an idle, theoretical way, if Kir would realize Josh had duped him and exact revenge before passing out. The agency had stressed how easily Kir could damage Josh’s mind. Maybe the drug wasn’t strong enough for the boy.

The boy. Josh felt like a shit. Perhaps Kir had manipulated him into guilt without his realizing it. This was Kir's talent, using words to convince people they were acting on their own cognizance.

But Josh was unharmed while Kir staggered and reached for the table. Today Josh had done damage, not Kir.

"You okay?" Josh made no move to help.

"Yes." Kir's confusion belied his word. He stared intently at the table's edge, trying to pull himself together. "I..." Realization dawned though Horton, Josh's contact, had sworn the drug wouldn't allow it. "Oh." Kir blinked up at Josh. "You?" Disappointment gave way to something else—determination. Kir's gaze intensified, even as his body trembled against the drug, and Josh couldn't look away.

"Don't let them hurt me." Kir's face drained of color and he fell forward.

Josh moved quickly. The least he could do was break the boy's fall. Bending his knees, he caught Kir and scooped him up. He wasn't light for his height, but he wasn't tall either, and Josh was strong.

The boy smelled good, young, fresh. *What a waste.* Kir should be out with friends on the weekend, not trying—and failing—to escape the agency. Josh carried him to the couch. Laid him down. In his forced sleep the boy looked incredibly innocent—long eyelashes, smooth face with just a hint of the day's stubble.

But Josh knew about innocence. It wasn't always pure. He dialed his contact. "He's here," he said. "He's out."

Chapter Two

Five minutes later, the man Josh knew as Thompson walked through the front door with a duffel bag in one hand. Thompson was the muscle—big, strong and practical, with an incongruously kind face. Josh neither liked nor trusted him.

“It’s done,” said Josh, for lack of anything better to say.

Thompson grunted. “We haven’t much time. Did he drink the whole dose?”

“Yes.” Josh pointed to the couch.

Thompson strode over, grinned down at Kir and shook his head. “Sleeping like a baby. Well, not for long, eh?”

Josh didn’t like the comment, then wondered why he cared. His work here was done.

Thompson pulled an envelope out of his bag and threw it on the coffee table. “That’s for you. Get out.”

“Where’s Snow?” Josh had a bad feeling about leaving Kir with Thompson. Snow was Kir’s handler. Or had been, in the days when Kir was manageable. Surely that meant Snow would protect Kir to some extent.

Thompson walked back to Josh and gazed down at him, as if to assess how serious he was. Or perhaps to intimidate. “I told them you were soft. They said it didn’t matter.”

“I just don’t want him hurt.”

Thompson laughed. “Where’d you get that idea from? Kir?”

Josh frowned. He didn’t think so.

Thompson jabbed his thumb backwards. "He'll want to hurt you. You just betrayed him, remember?" When Josh didn't react, Thompson lost interest in the conversation. "I don't have time for this." He returned to Kir's side and got to work.

He taped Kir's mouth shut, pulled a black hood over his head and threw the boy over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Thompson walked down the hall to the soundproof room which protected people from Kir's poisonous words.

Josh's heart beat too fast and it wasn't the rush of a job well done. Thompson's heavy, slow tread, Kir's arms hanging down, the black hood bobbing against Thompson's back—it all disturbed him, though he'd known restraint was absolutely necessary.

For God's sakes, Kir was psi—a Minder—who needed to be brought under control. Still, pressure built in Josh's chest and he blew out air, as if that would relieve his distress.

Horton wanted Josh out as quickly as possible; had some concerns about contamination by the mutant. But Josh could check on Kir at a distance, to make sure he was okay. Josh walked into the den and flipped on the screen that showed the soundproof room.

Kir's body, naked and slack, hung over some kind of contraption.

"Fuck!" he swore at the screen. What, exactly, had he just accomplished? The agency had appeared completely neutral on the subject of Kir's sexuality and his contact had assured Josh he wasn't about to become involved in some kind of gay witch hunt. Psi was the overwhelming issue. Dangerous. Murderous.

Josh stared at the unconscious nude body. He swung away from the screen and marched down the hall, shoving open the door so it slammed against the wall. "What the fuck are you doing?" he demanded of Thompson.

Closer now, he could see Kir's feet were shackled and he stood spread-eagled, or would have if he were conscious. As it was, he half lay

over a vaulting horse similar to one Josh had used in elementary school many years ago.

Thompson barely glanced at Josh as he handcuffed Kir's wrists to poles on either side of the vault.

"Getting ready to spank him?" Josh asked harshly.

"Could be," mused Thompson as he finished the job. Kir's hands were raised above his head. This was not a position of comfort. "There, all done, and before the patient awakes, which is critical..." Thompson turned, "...do yourself a favor and get out of here before you hurt yourself."

Josh swallowed. "I did not bring him in to be stripped and shackled."

"We do what is necessary." Thompson spoke matter-of-factly. "Kir needs to be kept away from his magic. Otherwise he might convince me to shoot myself in the head, or something."

"And wouldn't that be a shame," Josh ground out. "Look, asshole, this isn't how you treat prisoners, and I don't give a fuck what they can do."

Thompson's mouth twisted into a cynical smile. "Yeah? Interesting."

Kir groaned through the tape and hood.

Thompson smiled. "Heh, just in time. Sleeping beauty is about to awake."

The boy stiffened.

"You worked fast on this one, Kir," said Thompson cheerfully. "Congratulations. I think you've just signed his death warrant."

"What are you talking about?" Josh loathed Thompson's manner.

Thompson turned away, placing a hand on Kir's naked shoulder. Kir twitched it off as best he could but Thompson pressed down until Kir came alive. His entire body bucked while he screamed. Having the scream muffled, if not strangled, by the tape around his mouth, made the noise that much worse.

"That's enough." But Thompson ignored Josh and Kir continued to struggle.

"There, there." Thompson touched Kir's arm, making the boy wilder.

Josh stepped closer. "Back off," he warned Thompson.

Thompson raised his eyebrows. "Or?" He went to touch Kir again and Josh landed a kick on the man's solar plexus, hard enough to wind without doing damage. Thompson ended up on his ass.

"You're an idiot." He rubbed his stomach. His words were soft, but his tone furious. A muscle jumped in his jaw as he reached for the sidearm Josh knew Thompson carried. Before he could cock the gun, Josh kicked it out of his hand and it flew across the room.

"This is torture. It's illegal. I do not hand over my targets so people can *play* with them."

Thompson shook his head. "The only damage Kir has so far sustained was from the drug you gave him. He needs to be restrained for everyone's safety. I was testing those restraints."

"Testing." Josh's sarcasm was heavy, overwrought.

"He'd kill you in a blink of an eye."

"I expect a certain standard of behavior, not this bullshit."

Thompson rolled his eyes. "You're not even a government agent. You're freelance and this is the crap we get."

"You mean, crap like integrity? That's just too fucking bad for you." Josh had to control his rage or he'd start shaking. "I'm going to wait here until Snow arrives."

"Snow, huh?" Thompson's eyelids drooped in something akin to disgust. Then he glanced over at Kir. "Look, our little tête-à-tête is calming you down, eh Kir?"

Kir didn't move.

Thompson kept talking in his odd, cheerful way, as if Josh's actions were not to be taken seriously. "Our mutual friend here—who set you up,

Kir, in case you hadn't figured that out—is having second thoughts. Quick work on your part, I have to say.”

In the silence that followed, Josh listened to Kir breathe noisily, as if he couldn't get enough air. “He's suffocating.”

“Don't worry. He's just having a panic attack. He might pass out, but he never gets asphyxiated. I know how to look after him.”

“For God's sakes,” Josh muttered.

“You want to take that tape off his mouth?”

“No.” He wasn't stupid, he just expected professional behavior. After this debacle he was going to avoid any and all work with Horton and the agency.

“Go ahead,” said Thompson as if Josh hadn't spoken. “Kir will be anxious to thank you.”

Josh walked over to where he'd kicked the gun, picked it up and pointed it at Thompson. “Let's leave Kir alone for a few moments. That way you can't torment him.”

Thompson laughed. “Don't tell me you're in love with him, too.”

“I am not ‘in love’ with him.”

“I don't see it myself, but I like women.”

“How nice for you.” Josh waved him toward the door but Thompson stepped deeper into the room. Angry enough to shoot a limb, Josh removed the safety and faced Thompson full on. “Wrong way.”

“Yeah.”

“You think I won't shoot?”

Kir made a strangled noise while Thompson stared straight at Josh. “I think you won't shoot,” he said quietly. Thompson's gaze shifted to the right.

Josh felt air move just before something hammered down on the back of his head. Pain smashed through his vision and he dropped the gun. Stupid, he thought as he fell without quite losing consciousness. He'd known Thompson didn't work alone.

His vision grayed out, then in, then out. He was vaguely aware of another person in the room, as well as a strange, low noise. It took a moment to realize he was groaning. Agony echoed through his head and he couldn't think.

"What the hell is going on?" said the new voice.

"He's trying to save Kir." Thompson this time.

"Ah. Kir is nothing, if not resourceful."

As Josh's pain softened, he realized someone was groping him, emptying pockets, finding two knives and his cell phone.

"He had your gun, Thom."

"Yeah." Thompson sounded rather grumpy.

A boot tip prodded Josh's chest. With some effort, Josh opened his eyes. A man with blond, shaggy hair looked down. Snow. Kir's handler. Josh had thought the man's arrival would improve the situation.

"Hello. Kir, darling, did you fall for a brunette with freckles? How quaint."

Josh turned over and tried to rise, but fell on his face.

"Isn't that cute? He's trying to get up." Snow's tone changed as he addressed Thompson again. "You could have avoided this mess by escorting him off the premises."

"I didn't have time and he wouldn't leave. Kept yammering on about professional standards."

Snow sighed. "Some men have no sense of self-preservation."

This time, Josh managed to get on his hands and knees. He wanted to stand, dammit. A boot connected with his ribs and his entire body rocked with pain as he rolled onto his back.

Okay, he managed to think through the nausea, this is not the time to struggle. Go limp. Act half-dead. Helpless. That's what Snow wants.

Snow crouched beside him and brushed hair off Josh's sweaty forehead with one dry, cool finger. "You weren't supposed to see Kir like this. You were supposed to bring him in and say, bye-bye."

Josh experimentally opened one eye.

“We don’t like outsiders to observe the inner workings of the agency.”

Snow appeared more amused than annoyed, which alarmed Josh.

“But you have,” Snow continued. “So you might as well see everything. Sometimes we enjoy an audience. Isn’t that right, Kir?”

Josh wasn’t sure if the desire to vomit was physical or emotional. All he knew was he wanted to get the fuck out of here.

Snow rose and moved away. “All this distraction, Kir, when I’ve looked forward to seeing you after our time apart. You’ve been away from home a year. How are you, love?”

Kir didn’t move, but a tremor ran through his body. Josh was beginning to understand why Kir killed the men who hunted him, the men who were supposed to bring him in to Snow.

“Thom, tie up Sir Galahad in case he tries to rescue our dear boy.” He slapped Kir’s buttock. “It’s time you came in. A little rebellion and killing are fine. One needs to stretch one’s wings. But enough is enough.”

Kir reacted with the shakes and Snow looked upon him with a fondness Josh found repulsive.

“I don’t have more cuffs,” said Thompson.

“Use rope, whatever. Just do it right.” Snow indicated a cupboard and Thompson dutifully pulled down a piece of rope. “Truss him up so he can watch. I want audience, not interference. Afterwards I’ll reward Kir and let him do what he wants to this good man who risked life and limb today to bring in the rogue Minder. The agency will be very grateful.” Snow cast a look a false regret Josh’s way. “It’s unfortunate Kir has such a powerful temper.”

Thompson methodically bound Josh’s wrists and ankles so he was hog-tied. Though he could have sat up on his own, he allowed Thompson to prop him against the wall. Best to act helpless when he’d just managed to slide a knife out of Thompson’s boot and up his own sleeve.

“Done?” asked Snow.

“Yeah.” Thompson sounded bored. “Can I go?”

“What? You don’t want to watch the show?”

“Not particularly.”

“Shut the door on your way out.” Snow turned back to Kir. “We didn’t need him anyway, did we? He doesn’t appreciate you the way Josh and I do. I can see you’ve kept yourself in good physical shape. Not that I can speak for your emotional state. We’ll have to explore that.”

Kir just hung there, breathing loudly under the black hood. Maybe this was one long panic attack for him.

“Okay. First things first,” continued Snow. “Let’s administer the good drug. The one that calms you down and tells you to listen to me.”

Kir’s groan made Snow smile.

“So feisty. I’ve missed you.” He touched the inside of Kir’s elbow.

Kir jerked.

“Shhh, it won’t hurt. I promise. I know you’ve been through a tough time, always hiding, always making people ignore you. Well, except for Josh here who gave your bike a flat so he could lead you home. We decided to hire a freelancer since you so easily identify any agent who comes after you. And this ex-marine appeared to have all the right qualifications. Well, except for competence.”

Kir bucked again. Josh began to feel he wasn’t quite in the room. He was elsewhere, watching a horror show. Not involved. He never had been. Though slowly and unobtrusively he sawed away at the rope with his borrowed knife. The most important thing in his life right now was that knife and the fraying rope. Snow must not notice them.

Fortunately, Snow was more interested in Kir’s noises and actions. Like a capable nurse, he tied a plastic band around Kir’s arm and waited for the bucking to subside. When it did, he jabbed the needle. Kir tried to twist, but Snow kept a lock on Kir’s tense, unwilling arm.

“Stay still so the inside of your elbow isn’t one enormous bruise, Kir.” Snow pressed the needle home and withdrew it. “I have to give you

credit, love. You fight to the bitter end, no matter how hopeless the cause. A bit stupid, but a certain amount of spirit is appealing. Don't you think, Josh?"

Josh met his gaze because he wanted Snow to look at his face, not his wrists and ankles.

"Actually, you look rather disgusted and slightly green," Snow observed. "Don't you like to watch?"

"No." The word was barely audible, caught as it was in Josh's thick throat.

"Kir, Josh doesn't like how I'm treating you. And to think, you are his gift. To me." Snow stroked Kir's arms and the boy trembled. "Nice muscles. I see you've been working out. Lifting weights?" He traced Kir's biceps and moved his fingers slowly over the vibrating skin, lingering in sensitive areas, under the arm, at the neck, circling a nipple.

Kir whimpered and Josh continued to cut his ropes, now working on his ankles.

Snow stopped touching and pulled off Kir's black hood. The boy's face was sheet-white, eyes wild with terror. He pulled air through his nose as if he couldn't get enough. Liquid tracked down his cheek.

"Aw. Always so emotional. Don't cry, Kir." Snow leaned forward to kiss the corner of one eye, but Kir turned away. Snow tsked, tsked, then crooned, "Don't fight me anymore. Come back to me now."

Kir wouldn't look at him. Snow sighed and brought both hands to Kir's head, forcing him to gaze into Snow's eyes.

The rope around Josh's ankles was difficult to cut because of the angle of the knife and the need to hide his movements. But he was going to make it. He just needed a little more time.

"I'm glad this drug works so quickly. It's better when we can talk. And kiss." With that, Snow ripped the tape off Kir's mouth and Kir grunted in pain. Again, Snow caught Kir's face between his two palms

and this time Kir struggled. "Calm, calm," said Snow soothingly while Kir gulped air and was anything but.

"I am so very happy to see you again." Snow rubbed his thumbs back and forth across Kir's cheeks.

"Can't. Breathe," Kir gasped.

"Let me help you." Snow's voice was soft and sincere. Kir continued to pull in long breaths, while Snow brought his open mouth to Kir's and kissed him, forcing Kir's lips to meld with his own. Kir tried to move away and couldn't, pinned by cuffs and shackles and Snow's own strength. Josh worked on his ankles. The fucking rope was thick and plastic, but he was getting close.

Snow's kiss was thorough and oppressive and unending. Minutes passed while Snow kissed invasively. One hand reached around the back of Kir's head and dug deep into his thick hair, holding Kir in place, while the other hand roamed the shuddering body. The struggle was painful to watch but it slowly abated until Kir began to moan in distress. His body gradually became limp under Snow's kisses and caresses.

Only then did Snow tamp down the kiss and pull back. "Remember now?" he said softly. "I take the fight right out of you."

Kir panted, as if exhausted.

Snow smiled. "Can't talk? Maybe that's for the best." He traced a tear down Kir's cheek and stroked his jaw while Kir labored to breathe. "See, that wasn't so bad. Just like old times, no? Submission. It's the only way." Snow brought his mouth back for another forced exchange of saliva and just before their mouths touched, Kir went stiff, reared up in the amount of space allowed him, and head-butted Snow for all he was worth.

Josh flinched at the crack. Snow staggered back, reeling. He pressed a palm to his forehead and managed not to fall over as he leaned against the wall. Snow took a couple of minutes to recover, then looked at Kir.

“You stupid little fuck.” His voice was vicious. “Is it pain you want?” Snow glanced at Josh who remained expressionless, hands and wrists in position, then returned his furious gaze to Kir.

Kir smiled back sleepily. “How did I do that? I’m on the good meds.”

“Shut up.” Snow walked over and slammed a fist into Kir’s face. His head whipped back. Kir’s body went slack.

“Maybe it’s time to visit your backside, eh?” Snow let the sentence hang there in the room while Kir stiffened, his face turning white again.

Snow’s smile turned ugly. “Honestly, what did you think? But that’s the problem, you don’t think, you just act. You need to leave the thinking to me.”

Kir shook his head.

“Good boy.” Snow patted Kir’s shoulder. “No words. That’s the first step. But I do have to punish you. You’ve been quite naughty. I won’t rip you, though God knows you deserve it. I’ll play with your asshole and soften you up.”

Snow grabbed Kir’s hair, pulling his neck back at a painful angle so he could stare down at him. “You want me to fuck you.”

“No.” The word was hoarse. In this position, Kir’s throat was extended and the swallow obvious. Snow pressed a hand against that long column.

“Did you just try to force me away?”

“No!”

“Because I’m strong, remember? Stronger than your words.” Snow’s gaze didn’t leave Kir’s face as he squeezed the boy’s vulnerable throat. “I’m going to fuck you hard. And despite all these denials, you will come. Because you love it up the ass, even if you can’t admit it. You’re such a mess you don’t even know what you want.” Kir’s tears had started again. “After that, you’ll obey me. If you don’t, we’ll go through it all again. Clear?”

The boy trembled.

Snow rounded the vaulting horse, finally turning away from his audience, and Josh moved. Four long strides—they seemed to take forever—as he crossed to Snow. Then Josh was behind him, jamming an arm under Snow’s chin, setting the knife against his throat, cutting skin. He wanted blood, badly.

Snow froze, swearing under his breath.

“Move your hands and you are dead,” Josh promised. “I may be freelance, but I am not unskilled.”

“Wow. I’m impressed. Are you this susceptible, or were you primed?”

Josh ignored the question. “*Now*.” The word vibrated with emotion. Josh couldn’t quite stay calm, but he didn’t care as long as the knife remained at Snow’s throat. “We are going to slowly walk over to the wall, and you’ll put your hands up so they’re nice and safe.”

“Yes. Of course,” said Snow.

“Kill him now, Josh,” shouted Kir, his voice hysterical and compelling. Josh pressed the knife deeper. Blood began to flow. He checked himself, unsure.

Snow elbowed him, going for his own weapon, and Josh made the decision to kill. The knife slipped. Josh slid in just above the collarbone, pushed up, slicing through cartilage. The throat opened, blood spurted and Josh shoved the body away as it fell. His head roared and, for a moment, he couldn’t think with the noise of it.

He backed up. The world moved in slow motion as he tried to process what he’d witnessed and what he’d done. And why? Kir’s words echoed in his head. But Snow had gone for his weapon and Snow would have killed him.

Still, he was in a room with a psi who could open his mouth and force Josh to act against himself. Who was restrained but not muzzled. Slowly Josh turned to face the beautiful, abused monster. Kir had twisted his neck to watch Snow die and now he watched Josh, his expression blank, his face drained of color. Josh needed to get away

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before Kir spoke. But Kir's words came at him and all he could do was brace himself for their impact.

"You must help me escape."

Chapter Three

Kir and Josh stared at each other for a very long time. The boy's face was almost gray, except for the purpling bruises on his left cheek and forehead.

Josh's thoughts danced about, as if they could evade the power of Kir's words. Words that could pounce on Josh's mind and twist him to shreds. Josh wanted to flee but Kir's dark gaze held him until Josh realized Kir's expression held no expectations. The boy simply endured.

In the end, Josh couldn't bear to see Kir bound like this, caged in this room. It felt all wrong. Josh could not walk away.

"Let me get those shackles off you."

Kir exhaled one long breath of relief. "The key's on the side table."

"Side table. Right." Josh went and picked it up. Just before he reached Kir, he stopped. He had to say something about the role he'd played in Kir's capture. "Look. I didn't know you'd end up like this."

"No? You thought Snow was going to, what? Treat me like a human being and not his beast? He's my handler, you know."

It hurt to look into Kir's melting brown eyes. Josh bent over to work on the first cuff, avoiding Kir's gaze. "This is all going into my report and it's going to go back to the agency and it's going to go high."

"Go high?" demanded Kir, amusement lacing his slight hysteria. "They won't listen to you. They *are* high. Untouchable."

"My contact has connections." Though Horton wouldn't necessarily use them.

“So does Snow’s boss. Your report will go exactly nowhere. Believe me, my welfare—or yours for that matter—is the last thing the agency cares about.”

“Christ.” Josh released Kir’s right wrist and gazed at the scraped, bruised skin. “We should treat that.”

“Never mind.” Kir laid his freed hand on Josh’s forearm. It was an odd, forced gesture. Josh glanced from Kir to his hand and back to Kir again. “Josh, right?”

He nodded.

Kir swallowed. A fine sheen of sweat broke out on his face. “You have to help me escape the agency.”

“You’ve said that before.”

“Yes.” Kir looked like he was about to pass out. “I get repetitive and weak when Snow drugs me. When I need to be clear. Sorry.”

Josh didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t hand Kir over to another Snow. But he also had a responsibility to society at large.

“Escape,” repeated Kir, his dark gaze potent. He gripped Josh’s arm hard enough to bruise.

“Okay,” said Josh without thinking. He stared at Kir, then at the key in his hand. He wasn’t quite sure what he was doing, though it was obvious Kir needed his help.

“Josh?”

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?”

“I don’t know. I don’t like it here.” Such stupid words coming out of his mouth. What was the matter with him? He always knew what to do. One of the reasons he was good at his job. He made a decision and went with it.

Josh rubbed a thumb against his temple. He’d lost his train of thought, but Kir was still bound to the fucking vault horse and Kir had to escape this loathsome place.

“So you’ll help me escape?”

Josh eyed Kir suspiciously. But it was a question, not a directive.

“Yes.” Josh immediately felt better at this decision. “I will.”

“Thank you.” Kir’s complexion had become alarmingly gray.

“Are *you* okay?”

“It’s been a shitty day, all in all.”

“Do you want to unlock your left arm yourself?” Josh’s proximity seemed to unnerve the boy. He jumped every time Josh inadvertently touched him. But when Josh handed over the key, Kir’s hand shook so badly he couldn’t free himself.

Josh retrieved the key. “I’ll do it.”

By the time Josh was working on Kir’s ankles, Kir’s teeth were chattering.

“Are you going to be sick?” asked Josh.

“I think I’m in shock,” Kir managed to stutter.

Once Kir’s limbs were free he sank down beside the vault, unable to do more than wrap his arms around his legs and rock back and forth.

Josh walked over to pick Kir’s clothes off the floor, then crouched down beside him. “Kir?”

Kir looked at him but the boy seemed far away, in pain.

“You need to get dressed. Someone from the agency could come here at any time. And we still have Thompson to deal with.”

Kir nodded and took the clothes with shaking hands. He fumbled with his boxers, barely able to get one leg through.

Josh wondered if Kir was having some kind of fit. “Do you want me to help you?”

“You won’t hurt me, right?” Unlike earlier, Kir’s gaze was diffuse and his voice fainter. The plea made Josh wonder about Kir’s fabled powers. As far as he could see the boy was vulnerable and helpless.

“No. I won’t hurt you.”

“Thanks.”

“For God’s sakes, don’t thank me,” Josh said harshly and Kir stared at him in a strange kind of wonder.

Shock, Josh told himself. Kir flinched at Josh’s touch, but Josh got him dressed. Kir went back to huddling on the floor when Josh stood.

“I need to take care of Thompson before we leave.” Josh armed himself, somehow feeling better able to deal with Thompson than this psi-boy who’d been, in times past, raped into submission.

As Josh slowly eased his way into the rest of the house, he soon discovered Thompson was gone. After double-checking that the house was empty of anyone but Kir and himself, Josh stood in the living room, trying to connect the dots. He was, by and large, considered clever. Right now he felt stupid.

Perhaps Thompson had allowed Josh to lift a knife off him. At the time Josh couldn’t believe his good luck but now he had to wonder. With Thompson gone, he and Kir were free to leave, which was too good to be true, yet absolutely necessary.

Josh rubbed his forehead, as if that would bring clarity. It didn’t. Panic threatened. He took a deep, calming breath and clamped down on his whirling thoughts. When all else failed, it was time to turn to instinct.

Today instinct screamed at him to help Kir escape. With that decision made, he grabbed a blanket from one of the bedrooms and returned to Kir who hadn’t moved.

Josh wrapped him up. Cold and pale, Kir didn’t react to Josh’s touch.

“Thompson left,” Josh said. “Isn’t that strange? It doesn’t fit with what I understood of his character.”

Although Kir looked at him, he didn’t seem to hear, lost as he was in his own hell. Josh picked him up, carried him to the garage and placed him in the passenger side of the SUV. Getting behind the wheel, Josh drove to his own car, a nondescript vehicle parked a couple of blocks away. They transferred to the Mazda, Kir stumbling from one vehicle to the other.

After Josh put on Kir's seat belt he settled into the corner of the seat, as far away from Josh as possible, watching without, Josh felt, seeing. The boy's face was ashen with exhaustion, his bruises a stark, brutal contrast.

If nothing else, the boy was too sick to manipulate. That thought set Josh at ease. "Where exactly should we go? I haven't run before."

Kir actually paid attention to the question. "East. I know someone in Atlanta."

As good a place as any, Josh figured. By the time they reached the highway, Kir was sound asleep.

* * *

Kir woke disoriented. His head was killing him, perhaps literally. He didn't have an unlimited ability to use his "magic", as Thompson had called it. Minding took its toll.

He'd forced Josh to run with him and he wasn't at all certain he'd been clever to do so. Except he had been in no shape to run alone. They'd have caught him in some state of collapse, and life with the agency would have started up again.

Josh glanced over and jabbed a thumb backwards. "Drink."

Kir dragged his body up and halfway over his seat to reach the stash of water bottles in the back seat. With unquenchable thirst, he gulped, grateful it was dusk and the bright light of day wouldn't hurt his tired eyes. Everything about him was tired.

God, he'd been out for hours. "How's the gas? I need a pit stop."

"We can stop." Josh looked at him with real concern, or perhaps concern manufactured by Kir. Josh had no reason to care. *Pathetic, to force someone to care about you.* For a moment Kir feared his self-loathing would rear up and grab him by the throat and he'd be unable to breathe.

Instead, he rinsed his mouth with water, leaned far out the window and spat. As if water would get the taste of Snow out of his mouth.

"I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't woken soon," said Josh. "Your deathlike trance is rather disconcerting. Now you're getting some color back."

"Today set me back some." Let Josh believe all of Kir's weakness was due to Snow. Let Josh forget that Kir could manipulate him. Let Josh never know that manipulation cost Kir physically.

"I was thinking of taking you to the hospital."

Kir shivered. "I'm glad you didn't. I'm fine, really."

Josh looked dubious.

"I've been worse." Kir attempted a game smile.

"God." Josh shook his head. No doubt about it. Josh's pity was working in Kir's favor.

"I'm sorry I can't spell you."

"You're sick."

"Yeah, but I don't know how to drive either."

"I know," said Josh.

"The files."

"Yeah."

"What else do the files say about me?"

Josh didn't answer right away. If Kir had been stronger and if Josh wasn't already confused enough by Kir's work, he might have insisted on an answer. Because knowing what the enemy knew would be valuable. But he needed Josh to keep his head on straight and that meant no more magic for now.

Josh pulled off the highway. Then, to Kir's surprise, Josh answered his question. Kir wasn't used to answers freely given. Of course, he wasn't used to spending time with anyone either.

"The file says you have a sister." Josh sounded curious.

Maddie. His destination. Kir tried to keep his voice level. If they knew anything about Maddie's current status, he might as well be dead. "Do they say anything about her?"

"Only that she disappeared when you were twelve."

That hurt still, but he didn't want Josh to know. "Anything else?"

"No, except there was a picture," Josh said. "Out of date, no doubt. She doesn't look like you."

"She's my half-sister. Her father was a redhead. I was conceived in India when my mother thought dragging my sister around to different wisemen would solve her problems."

"You never heard from your sister again?"

Yes. "No." Kir sometimes he wished he hadn't. Maddie ran with the other Minders and they were cruel people. Well, so was he, as Josh would find out sooner or later. Just not yet.

They turned onto a side road and made their way to a gas station. As they pulled into the parking lot, Kir examined Josh. His profile was attractive—square chin, now stubbled, strong nose, firm lips. A man's man. Kir had been surprised when he'd picked up vibes on the bike trail. Then again, his radar was totally out of whack.

Josh stopped and pressed both hands against his eyes. The poor man was tired from the drive and from doing as Kir ordered.

"Thompson came in incredibly useful today. He gave me unmarked cash in an envelope, I borrowed his knife and he disappeared." Josh rubbed his forehead, unable to make sense of today's events, because of Kir whose magic was Josh's poison. Kir silently promised to manipulate Josh as little as possible. "Convenient, don't you think?"

"Very." Kir couldn't explain that his sister had primed Thompson to set Kir free if Snow were ever to trap him again. But he offered Josh an explanation, so Josh could let go of the conundrum. It helped that Kir spoke the truth. "Thompson actually despised Snow."

"I can understand that."

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“Can you? I don’t think you do understand. He despised Snow’s sexuality. If I’d been a woman, he’d have been fine.”

Chapter Four

“How old are you?” Josh knew the answer but banal conversation might help ease the tension in the car. While Josh had driven through the night, Kir had slept. He no longer seemed like the walking dead, just sickly and scared.

When he wasn’t sleeping, he watched Josh.

“Age?” prompted Josh, so he could think of something besides Kir’s unsettling gaze.

“Twenty-two, as I’m sure they told you. How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight.”

Kir looked him up and down. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

The question surprised Josh. He didn’t imagine Kir would be much interested in his love life. “Not at the moment. You?”

“Very funny.”

“Is it?”

“I’ve never had a boyfriend. Just couldn’t find the time. Too busy being a freak.”

Tension wafted off Kir.

“Actually, I lie. Snow was my boyfriend. But you killed him.” Kir was striving for flip, but the tremor in his voice ruined his attempt.

Josh drove silently, not sure how to handle that comment, and finally managed, “I think you can do better than Snow.”

“Limited opportunity. Snow brought me up.”

“Shit,” Josh muttered helplessly.

“How many boyfriends have you had?”

“Serious boyfriends?”

Kir shrugged. “However you count them. *I* don’t know.”

“Four serious relationships. Lots not.”

“How many not?”

“I don’t play the numbers game.” Josh had given out enough information.

Kir stared out the window. “Just curious what normal life is like. That’s all. I don’t generally get to talk to one of the masses.”

“I’m not sure I qualify as normal. Kir,” Josh redirected the conversation, “I think we better stop for food, though there are some bagels in the back.”

“I lost my appetite yesterday.”

“Eat to keep up your strength. You look like death warmed over.”

Kir obeyed. Again. The irony didn’t escape Josh. Kir was supposed to be scarily unmanageable yet he did as he was told. Maybe when he got his health back things would change.

“So, when will you use your magic on me?” Josh had meant the question to come out lightly, but the words didn’t allow it. In fact, he hadn’t a clue where those words had come from. He’d been thinking about bagels. His heartbeat got funny and he had an unusual panicky feeling.

“I thought I wouldn’t.” Kir slowly chewed his mouthful.

“You killed others who tried to bring you in.”

“You’re not bringing me in now, are you?”

Josh shook his head. He couldn’t. Not after yesterday.

They drove in silence for another half hour, until Josh pulled off the highway to buy gas and hamburgers. They ate in the car, Josh hungrily, Kir dutifully.

“Are you nice to your boyfriends?” Kir asked out of the blue. “I mean,” he laughed, embarrassed, “do you care about them or is it just, you know, physical?”

“Could we stop talking about my sex life?”

“Yeah, sure,” muttered Kir.

Josh glanced over. Kir’s face was unevenly flushed and he seemed younger than his twenty-two years. Josh sighed. “Why are you so curious?”

Kir fidgeted. “I know, the pickup was fake. But I keep thinking about it.”

“Oh.” Josh turned back to the road. Under other circumstances, he would have been gratified that a hot younger man wanted him. But yesterday, and the part he’d played in Kir’s capture, rather put a damper on things. “I think we’d better talk about where we’re going, instead.”

* * *

By the time Josh paid the motel owner and entered the dingy room, he felt like he was moving through molasses. He’d driven for more than twenty-four hours and his time was up. His limbs were exhausted and his eyes wanted to close, despite his fifth shitty cup of coffee for the day, this one from a machine. He wouldn’t have lasted another hour on the road.

Kir looked at the room in dismay.

“What’s wrong?” asked Josh.

“There’s only one bed.”

“That’s all they had. Sorry but I’m not searching for another motel. I’m too far gone. You can sleep on the floor if you’re bothered. I’m honestly too tired to do anything, even if that was my intent.”

“I know that.” Kir hunched over, as if Josh could never be attracted to him.

Josh dragged himself to the bathroom for a shower and crawled into bed. Vaguely aware that Kir was settling down on the floor, Josh fell deep asleep within minutes.

Much later, he woke to silence. The clock's red numbers showed three forty-seven a.m. For a moment he thought Kir had taken off. He couldn't see him on the floor and he certainly wasn't on the bed with him.

He turned over and saw the boy sitting crunched up in a chair watching Josh in the gray night. As if Josh were the cause of his vigil. Kir's dark eyes were black, his pupils large with lack of light.

Sitting in the chair was doing Kir no good, especially after his gray-faced day on the road. And while Josh wasn't his babysitter, he felt, after the run-in with Snow, responsible. Josh propped himself onto one elbow. "Hey."

Kir nodded, uncertain.

"There's enough room for two to sleep here."

Kir seemed to shrink.

"I'm not going to rape you."

"I know that," Kir rapped out, but his leg began to jig.

"Do you?"

"Yes."

Josh reached a hand out, palm up. "Okay, give me your hand."

"I don't like touch."

"Try it."

The boy scowled and Josh said, "It's just a hand."

Kir stared at it, as if mesmerized.

"We need to sleep," Josh explained. "If I'm going to help you, I'd like to do it properly. Trust me here."

Kir took a breath and leaned over, slamming his hand down on Josh's so hard it stung. Josh clasped his fingers around Kir's, watching him the entire time.

"Who's the last person to hug you?" asked Josh.

"Snow," Kir spat. "He liked hugging."

Kir's whole arm shook, yet he didn't pull away.

“Snow doesn’t count. Further back.”

Kir swallowed. “Men. Strangers who wanted sex.”

Josh wondered how Kir had managed, though maybe he’d been in better shape than now. “Any non-strangers?”

“My sister. Before they separated us.”

Josh remembered. “Madeline.”

A sheen of liquid covered Kir’s eyes. Josh tugged on his arm gently to encourage Kir to come to the bed.

They stared at each other across the darkness.

“Be brave, Kir. You need to sleep.”

“I can’t.” The two words were a plea.

Josh tugged again.

Very carefully, Kir climbed down from the chair and into the bed. Josh backed up to give the boy more space. Kir’s movement was awkward, but he got under the covers and lay down at the very edge. Josh allowed a body’s width between them so he wouldn’t crowd Kir. Across the space their hands remained linked. He liked Kir’s hand. It was blunter than his and slightly wider. Colder, too. The boy had become chilled, sitting in that chair.

“Close your eyes,” Josh said.

“I don’t think I can.”

“It’s easy.”

“Nothing is easy.”

Josh saw the telltale glisten of tears. As if stillness could hide their existence, Kir didn’t move.

“You’ve been through too much.”

The tears ran and Kir made no noise at all. With anyone else, Josh would have pulled them close, but he merely held that hand.

After a while Kir mumbled, “I can’t sleep here with you. I don’t know why I thought I could. I want to. Sitting, I think too much, and the floor’s

uncomfortable.” He wiped his face. “And you’re nice. I’m not used to nice people.”

“Just lie there, see what happens. It has to be better than that chair.”

“I can’t get Snow out of my head,” he rasped, his panic rising. “He was always touching me.”

“Did you ever touch Snow?”

“No! Not for years.”

Josh let go of his hand. “Touch my face.”

“Your face?” repeated Kir, incredulous. But he froze and his breathing got loud.

“If you want,” Josh added. “I won’t touch you.”

It took Kir a while to move, but eventually his palm came down on Josh’s cheek. The hand shook, but stayed.

“Sorry I haven’t shaved.”

“I like your face.” Kir sounded shy.

Josh smiled.

Kir palmed Josh’s jaw and neck, then stroked his shoulder before trailing fingers down Josh’s arm until they clasped hands again.

Kir breathed more easily.

“I’m going back to sleep now.” Josh could no longer keep his eyes open. He half-expected Kir to retreat to the chair but Kir was gripping his hand as Josh fell asleep.

When he woke in the morning’s light, Josh was facing the wall. It took him a moment to remember why he was in this cheap room that smelled faintly of smoke and cleaning agents.

He was on the run with Kir.

That idea was too strange to process. He wouldn’t run with a Minder. They were genetic monsters. Even frightened ones like Kir. *Especially* frightened ones.

Very slowly Josh turned around. Kir was on the bed, backed up to the edge. He'd pulled himself into a quasi-fetal position. His knees almost touched Josh.

Josh didn't know what Kir's files were missing, but they were obviously missing too much. That Snow was a rapist. That Kir was terrified.

His long eyelashes were swept down, resting below his eyes. For some reason that made Josh's chest ache. As desire washed through him, Josh closed his own eyes for a moment. It was so wrong to want Kir, especially under these circumstances but Kir's stark beauty invited seduction.

The boy's eyes flew open and his body tensed up. In one movement, he pushed himself up and off the bed to standing. Josh had the impression Kir didn't recognize him.

"Hey Kir," he said softly.

Familiarity lit Kir's eyes. "Josh." He uttered the name with relief, which Josh found gratifying.

Josh slowly sat up. "That's right."

Kir eyed the bed with some uncertainty.

"We were tired," Josh explained. "We slept."

"Yeah, I know." Kir nodded a few more times. He seemed embarrassed as he rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not used to spending this much time with one person. It's kind of weird."

Kir's loneliness cut Josh. Kir must have seen something of it on his face because he ducked away and padded off to the bathroom.

After he disappeared behind the door, Josh glanced around the room and took stock of the situation. He was immediately assailed with doubts about the wisdom of what he was doing. If nothing else, he was setting himself up for a very long prison sentence. Yet, there was no way in hell he could hand Kir over to the agency. After Snow it was simply impossible.

Murderous. The word shocked him as it came into his mind unbidden, as if the memory of Kir's violent history had been hidden by fog. How could he have forgotten Kir was wanted for murder?

Maybe they were lies, the files, the videos he'd watched. Everything. The boy seemed too vulnerable, nothing like the sullen version they had on file. People had hurt Kir when they shouldn't have.

Still.

Josh's head began to throb as he circled around these thoughts again, unable to bring any kind of coherence to them. He had to sit down. *Vulnerable. Murderous. Minder. Snow.*

"It's after nine," said Kir, emerging from the shower. Josh looked up at him. "We'd better—" Kir stopped. "What's wrong, Josh?"

Josh pressed the heels of both hands to his temples, as if that would create order in his head. Nothing made sense anymore.

"Josh, no," cried Kir in dismay.

Josh locked fingers over his forehead. "What am I doing?" he asked himself.

Kir knelt at his feet. "Look at me."

Josh did. Though he might drown in those eyes, he didn't want any harm to come to Kir.

"Why am I on the most-wanted list, Josh?"

"You killed agents," he said tonelessly.

"Two agents. They were going to take me to Snow, if they didn't kill me first."

Josh remembered. Last year, Kir had used his magic to elude the agency. "You got one of them to kill his partner and himself."

"They gave me no choice." A pleading note had entered Kir's voice, but it didn't erase Josh's fear, or confusion.

"What is my fate, Kir?"

"I like you."

Josh dropped his hands and laughed. “You *like* me? What the fuck does that mean?”

Kir looked away, uncertain, and suddenly, despite Josh’s head pain, the other portrait of Kir snapped into place. The lost abused boy. The beauty.

Snow’s blow to Josh’s head, as well as twenty-four hours of driving, had done little for Josh in the way of clear thinking.

Very tentatively, Kir laid a hand on Josh’s arm. The boy lifted his face, ready to speak. But instead, he closed his mouth and laid his forehead on Josh’s knee.

Josh ran a hand over the thick, unruly hair and Kir breathed a sob of emotion.

“My head hurts like hell, Kir, and I don’t know why.”

“I’m sorry,” Kir whispered.

“It’s not your fault.”

“I don’t like the killing.” Kir spoke to Josh’s feet. “That’s my problem. I don’t like the magic, either, but I use it when I have to.”

“Kir.”

Kir raised his face. His eyes were dry but pooling with emotion. Josh could lose himself in those liquid brown eyes.

“I am going way out on a limb for you,” said Josh. “So don’t lie to me and don’t use your magic on me.”

Kir started kissing Josh’s palm. Josh, shaking him off, stood. “What are you doing? You could barely share a bed with me last night.”

“I was scared.”

“And you’re not now?”

“No.”

“Why not? Nothing you say or do makes sense.” Josh’s voice rose and his head throbbed.

Kir stared, his gaze became more intense, and suddenly Josh understood that he was under Kir’s sway. “*Don’t*,” he yelled at the boy.

Kir flinched but he didn't look away. "You will help me get to Atlanta because you *know* I only kill in self-defense."

Josh stared at a silent Kir and couldn't remember what they'd been talking about. All he knew was the conversation had been heated, which wasn't good for Kir. The boy was always so pale. Josh feared Kir might faint. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Kir appeared drained, almost defeated. He swayed before sitting on the edge of the bed. Pointing to the bathroom, he said, "Your turn."

"Right." Josh walked into the dingy tiled room. At least his head felt all right. He'd been worried yesterday's long drive would give him a killer headache.

When Josh came back out, Kir was still sitting on the bed, unmoving, hollow-eyed despite a night's sleep.

"Ready to go?" Kir asked.

Josh nodded.

Chapter Five

Wrung out after manipulating Josh, Kir slept in the car for most of the day. He'd hoped not to work on Josh again. It made Kir sick to hurt Josh, who had eased him to sleep last night. Kir didn't know the last time someone had held his hand.

He needed to leave Josh whole.

Through his eyelashes, Kir watched Josh drive steadily over the endless highway. Their time together was almost over. Maddie was coming for Kir and he would never expose Josh to other Minders. Josh was good and kind and had the clearest gray eyes Kir had ever seen.

And would see no more. In another world, he would stay with Josh, not with a sister Kir didn't fully trust. But he was here and now, and he did not belong with Josh who deserved better than a Minder who used him.

Josh glanced over. "You awake there?"

Kir opened his eyes in answer.

"At least your color is back. Why do you always look so sick?"

Because I'm using you.

Josh waited for an answer and Kir shrugged. He could not explain anything, couldn't even express his gratitude, couldn't say, *I will die if the agency gets their hands on me again.*

"Well, I'm glad you're better now."

"Thanks," Kir mumbled. They drove through the rest of the day silently.

By the time they were ensconced in their next dingy motel room for the night, Kir had recovered. Knowing it would be over by tomorrow evening—he would slip away from Josh who would later thank God Kir was out of his life—made him restless.

Josh showered while Kir zipped through channels with the remote. Nothing caught his interest. When Josh came out of the bathroom, he walked over and stared down at Kir, as if ready to talk.

Kir didn't want to talk. He sat on the edge of the bed, bouncing slightly, wondering if Josh see right through him, see the poison as well as the desire.

"Can you turn off the TV?"

"Sure." Kir did.

"Thanks." Josh settled down on the other bed. He'd made a point to get a room with two double beds this time, even though now Kir wanted to share sleeping space, and more. "Kir, we had better discuss our plans. Or lack thereof."

Briefly Kir closed his eyes and prepared himself to steer Josh away from this conversation. Because if Josh thought too hard he would realize—again—that his actions made no sense. At least for a law-abiding citizen who worked for the agency.

"We're doing good." *Weak answer.*

Josh shook his head. "Blind luck. Someone must be chasing us."

"We don't have to worry."

"Uh-huh. Why aren't you looking at me, Kir?"

Shit. Kir rummaged in the grocery bag and pulled out the bottle of wine he'd bought.

Josh sighed.

"You don't like wine?" Kir unscrewed the lid of the cheap wine and poured a glass. He raised the bottle towards Josh.

"I don't drink."

"Why not?" So much for distracting Josh with wine.

"I just don't like it. Besides, right now I want to think clearly."

"I don't," Kir muttered, lifting the motel's plastic glass to his lips.

"You know the agency has been pretty careless about you."

Kir looked at him over his glass, trying to figure out what would convince Josh to leave the subject alone.

"Speak, Kir," Josh demanded.

"Thompson helped us." That much he could say.

"Thompson *helped*?"

"Yeah. He owed me one."

Josh snorted in disbelief. "He wouldn't care if he owed you one, or not. He's a shit. No way did he help you."

Not without some encouragement, no. Maddie got to him. "So Thompson loses his job. Maybe he wanted out. Whatever. He let us get a good jump on them. By now, after three days drive, we could be almost anywhere in the country, no?"

Josh backed up to the headboard, stretching out his legs. "Doesn't sound right."

Kir gulped wine. He would not, he *would not*, push Josh. But he had to do something.

"Take it easy on the wine," Josh told him. "You were pretty shaky earlier today."

Kir downed the rest of his glass.

"I can see you're in the mood to listen to me," Josh drawled sarcastically. "Are you in a rush with that wine?"

"Sort of." A wave of intense emotion hit Kir, something like grief. He was going to miss this person who cared about how much wine he drank. Because that concern came from Josh himself, not Kir. "We'll separate in a day or two. I guess that will be a relief for you."

A frown settled on Josh's face. "I'm not sure. I don't know what I think of this misadventure of ours."

Kir poured himself more wine, looking for courage. "I was really happy when you invited me back to your house at the park."

"I'm sorry about that."

"I hadn't spoken to anyone for a long time, especially not someone who was interested in me." Kir darted a glance at Josh. "Were you interested in me?"

"Kir, come on." Josh's smile was lopsided. "I'd studied you for a month. Of course I was interested in you."

"That's not what I mean. I thought," Kir took a fortifying breath while his heart hammered at his admission, "you were attracted to me."

"You are attractive," Josh said matter-of-factly.

Kir waited for more, holding Josh's gaze. When he said nothing, Kir swallowed bitter disappointment. He could not possibly seduce Josh. Kir controlled minds, but did not wield charm. There were Minders who forced desire and sex upon normals, but long ago Kir had vowed never to sink to Snow's level. And to damage Josh was unthinkable.

Josh crossed his arms as if bracing himself. Subconsciously he knew what Kir could do. Breaking eye contact, Kir placed his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

"I think you're trying to distract me." Josh's voice was rich, soft, beautiful and Kir closed his eyes. "The question is why."

* * *

Josh hoped silence would prompt the boy to respond.

Abruptly, Kir stood, removing his shirt to reveal well-defined pecs and abs. Okay, not quite the desired response, though not without a certain appeal. However Snow had made certain Josh knew Kir had a great body and the thought of Snow had a rather dampening effect.

Kir looked at him for approval or encouragement. When Josh gave neither, his expression became almost mutinous and he pulled off his jeans.

Josh's cock hardened though he tried not to show he was affected. He was noticing all the wrong things—Kir's rounded shoulders, brown nipples and dark, curling chest hair.

Kir's expression turned stubborn and uncertain. A charming combination, alas.

"You could hardly hold hands last night," Josh pointed out.

"I'm calmer today. And you don't seem to mind me like some men do."

"Mind you?"

Kir's gaze slid away. "My jumpiness puts some people off."

"Your fear, you mean."

Kir glared. "Do you want me or not?"

"It's just not a good idea."

Kir looked at a loss. "Why not? Unless you're just looking for an excuse."

"I don't need an *excuse*, Kir."

"Nah. I'm a freak."

"You're on the run. You've been abused—"

"Abused! Just fuck off, man. I don't want your fucking pity." Kir shrank back into the chair and tried to pull his shirt back on. After several attempts his shaking hands balled the fabric up and he threw it away in disgust.

Okay, so Kir wasn't exactly an expert at seduction. Well, that was a good thing.

"When did you last have sex?" Josh asked.

Kir's gaze burned. "Doesn't matter."

Josh waited.

Finally Kir blurted, "Six months ago."

“What happened?”

“Met at a bar. I got drunk enough. Went to the toilets.”

“What did you do?”

“He fucked me.”

“Did you like it?”

Kir shrugged, shivering, perhaps from cold, perhaps from the conversation.

“Before that, when did you have sex?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Kir’s voice went a little high.

“It matters to me.”

Kir swung his gaze back to Josh. “Why?” he asked furiously. “What are you trying to prove? That I’m worthless? Trash?”

“I’m not trying to prove anything.” Josh gestured rather uselessly. “It can be good to talk, you know.” Though talk wasn’t on Josh’s mind. He wanted to show Kir good sex—when it wasn’t forced, or sordid.

Kir stretched out his feet and placed them on Josh’s bed. He stared at his toes. “I went back to some rich guy’s hotel room,” he said, as if by recounting these trysts he would change Josh’s mind. “He wanted me to suck him off but I wasn’t any good so I offered him my ass.”

“I think I see a pattern here. Are you offering me your ass?”

By now Kir’s teeth were chattering, but he nodded anyway.

“Christ, Kir, get warm at least. Get into bed.” Josh pointed to the other double bed. But Kir looked so forlorn Josh shifted over and lifted his blankets. “Get in here,” he said with some resignation.

Kir glanced up, hesitation and hope warring, and he dove in beside Josh.

“You’re breaking my heart a little here, Kiran.” Josh couldn’t help himself, he stroked the boy’s hair, his cheek. “Did you ever cuddle with any of your hookups?”

Kir talked to Josh’s ribs. “I don’t seem to attract cuddlers. I’ve only cuddled with two people in my life, that I can remember.” Kir moved

closer, so his face and forearms pressed against Josh's side, but he didn't reach across for a hug.

"Who?"

Kir groaned. "Don't ask. If we talk, we won't..."

"The thing is, I think we should talk, not fuck."

Kir shook his head vigorously and Josh stopped stroking Kir's hair.

"Do you want to be my psychologist? Is that it?" Kir asked. "Psychology won't solve my problems." This was patently true. "Or are you just looking for excuses?"

Josh burst out laughing. "I don't have to look for excuses, Kir. They're right here, shouting at me. We're in kind of a difficult spot. I'm having trouble forgetting it. You've got one doozy of a history—"

"That I want to forget."

"Sex isn't about forgetting."

"It can be."

Josh rubbed his forehead.

"I guess I'm tainted, eh?"

"Stop that," snapped Josh.

"Kind of off-putting to have sex with someone who's been with Snow for more than ten years." Kir vibrated beside him.

"Aw, shit." A sucker punch of emotion hit Josh in the gut and it wasn't desire. Unable to resist the urge to comfort, he slid down beside Kir and pulled the trembling boy into his arms. At the contact, Kir's breathing became uneven and Josh stroked his neck and back, murmuring reassurance. After a while, the boy seemed to relax a little, though he was still stiff in Josh's arms.

"You got too cold," Josh said. "Your fault for sitting around half-naked."

Kir snorted.

Josh kissed Kir's forehead. "How can you make love when you're panicked like this? I couldn't."

"I haven't made love." Kir spoke into Josh's shoulder. "But sometimes, when I had sex, I'd stop thinking. It was the greatest thing." He was panting, just a little. Josh's cock lay against Kir's stomach, Kir's against Josh's thigh. They wanted each other and they were both hard, despite the rather damping conversation. Josh hadn't meant to get in this deep. Despite his honorable intentions, it seemed cowardly to extricate himself right now.

"I'd stop thinking about Snow," Kir clarified. "Sex with someone besides Snow pushes him away. That's why I want it. And I like you," Kir added quickly. "You're *nice*. You have no idea how rare nice is."

Josh didn't know what to do. Though talk of Snow softened his desire.

Kir felt it. "I'm sorry. I say the wrong things."

Josh pulled back. "Hell, Kir, don't be sorry."

Kir leaned forward and awkwardly kissed him on the mouth, before ducking back against his shoulder.

Josh continued to caress the boy. Kir's skin vibrated slightly, but he didn't resist touch. Josh liked the firm muscle that lay just beneath.

"What are you thinking?" Kir asked.

Josh hesitated before answering. "You have a beautiful body and someone should learn to love it."

Silence.

"I wish we had more time," Josh admitted after a while. "But we don't and I kind of need to understand how Atlanta is going to save you."

More silence.

Finally, Kir said, "You want me to talk, right?"

"Yes." Josh kept the doubt out of his voice. He was pretty sure Kir wasn't going to talk about Atlanta.

"Snow started kissing me when I was ten."

Hell. Josh pulled Kir closer.

Kir spoke quickly, a little breathless. “He’d kiss me and open my mouth with his and tongue me and I’d sit on his lap while his cock—though I didn’t realize it at the beginning—pushed against my buttocks. The first time I didn’t know what to do and it seemed to last forever and I felt kind of weak after. It was punishment. Because I was supposed to convince some old guy to give Snow money, but the guy resisted which meant my magic—as you call it—would hurt him. So I didn’t.”

Josh kissed Kir’s wet eyes, his forehead, his smooth, newly shaved cheeks. Soft, pure kisses.

“I kind of liked it, too,” Kir recalled. “Even if it was disgusting. Because no one touched me by then. I was such a freak and they’d separated me from my sister before she ran away. Snow asked me afterwards, did I like it, and I said, yes, and he said, he knew I would. After that, he’d invite me to climb on his lap at the end of every session. I always did and he’d hug and kiss me until I felt kind of sick.”

Josh stroked the shivering boy and made soothing noises while Kir clung to him, his heart racing. With his shakes, Kir’s touches were tentative and clumsy at first. But after a while the movements became smooth and Kir was bold enough to slip a hand under Josh’s T-shirt.

“I like your skin,” said Kir.

“Thank you.”

“I guess that sounds stupid.”

“No.” Still holding Kir, Josh asked, “Why are we going to Atlanta? You try to distract me every time I ask that question.”

Kir slid down and kissed Josh’s stomach.

“Kir,” Josh warned.

Kir stared at Josh’s chest. Josh could see the sweep of his long, dark eyelashes.

“Well?” pushed Josh when Kir didn’t answer.

“I could tell you not to ask me questions.”

Josh felt a little cold. “You could, could you?”

Kir balled one fist. "But I don't want to. It's better if you don't know when they catch up with you." He raised his face to look at Josh, his expression pleading for understanding.

"If you don't trust me, Kir, why are you in my bed?"

"Come on. You know what they're like. They'll drag that knowledge from you."

Kir's hand traveled up Josh's torso until his thumb touched Josh's nipple. Josh trapped that hand.

"Believe it or not, I'm trying to protect you, Josh."

"But how are you going to protect yourself?"

A shadow crossed Kir's face.

"Do you have somewhere to go?"

"Yes."

"Your sister," Josh guessed.

Kir didn't answer. He just stared, his eyes dark and unblinking.

"She'll be able to help you?"

"I think so."

"That's not as strong an answer as I'd hoped. They didn't have much information on her in your file."

"She's my best bet," insisted Kir.

"Okay." But the subject had brought back some of Kir's shakiness and Josh didn't understand why. "You don't trust her." His heart sank for Kir. "Isn't there anyone you can trust?"

Kir moved so he crouched over Josh, one hand on his shoulder, while he lay the other hand on Josh's cheek. Kir gazed down at him without speaking. Yet Josh felt that Kir was saying, *you*.

Josh slowly brought Kir's face to his and kissed him, closed mouth, lips soft, tentative. They breathed each other in.

Kir's tongue traced one corner of Josh's mouth. Digging his hand into Kir's hair, Josh pulled him down and took over the kiss, stroking Kir's

tongue, tasting wine. Kir threw a leg over Josh's hip, struggling to get closer.

They kissed. Kir's fingers dug into Josh's biceps, as if he feared Josh would rise and leave. Between Kir's grip and his hungry mouth, Josh was losing control. He wanted to flip Kir on his stomach and fuck. Abruptly Josh broke off, turning so he was above Kir.

Kir gazed up in confusion.

"Hey." Josh cupped his cheek. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm here. Just give me a minute."

Kir dashed a hand across his eyes. He was breathing hard again. Josh placed a palm on the boy's chest to feel Kir's heart pounding. His eyes opened to search Josh's face.

"What did I do wrong?" Kir asked. "I wish I had time to learn about you."

"Hell, you did nothing wrong. That's not the problem," Josh assured him. Kir lowered his gaze, eyelashes blocking Josh's view, but not before he'd seen the hurt.

Air baled out of Josh's lungs and his jaw tightened, but he couldn't back off. He slid his hand over Kir's stomach, under the boxer's elastic and wrapped his fingers around Kir's cock. He gasped.

"Okay?" Josh squeezed lightly. The boy was painfully hard.

Kir nodded.

As Josh touched Kir's wet slit, Kir reacted by lifting his ass off the bed. In one quick movement, Josh divested Kir of his boxers, running hands down Kir's strong thighs and calves. Kir jerked one leg still caught in the fabric and Josh grabbed the ankle.

"Stay still," he ordered and Kir's eyes widened. "You don't have to take me so seriously," Josh added more softly. "I'm just getting these out of the way." As the boxers hit the floor, Kir laughed a little shakily.

Josh ran a hand back up Kir's calf, thigh and caught Kir's cock again. He was thick and lovely, with curling black hair and a full sac.

"You're beautiful." A line formed between Kir's eyes, as if he was baffled by the compliment, so Josh crawled over to kiss him lightly on the lips before trailing kisses down his neck.

"Want a hickey?"

"What?" asked Kir.

Had the boy never laughed in bed? Probably not.

Josh's tongue found Kir's erect nipple and caught it between his teeth.

"Oh God." Kir shuddered and Josh played with his other nipple, then made his way down, dipping his tongue in Kir's navel before he came to his cock.

Josh licked him clean and took him to the back of his throat.

"Josh," Kir whimpered.

Josh didn't answer as Kir hardened to steel. He didn't think Kir's cock could take in more blood. Cupping Kir's sac, Josh began his strokes but before he developed a rhythm, Kir spurted. The boy was fast. As Kir pulsed, Josh made love with his mouth. He swallowed, enjoying the taste of Kir—salty, no sourness.

Kir. Who was his target. They were hiding out in a cheap motel room.

What the fuck am I doing? Josh raised his face. On elbows, Kir gazed back, anxious, this side of cowering, and Josh's gut twisted, remembering Kir's ugly past. Josh had miscalculated, despite his best intentions to be generous, to show affection.

He sat back on his haunches and opened his arms. Kir hesitated, then bulldozed into Josh, almost knocking him off the bed. Kir's arms came around his neck and under his armpit in a convulsive embrace. They rocked together silently. Josh's throat tightened, his eyes stung.

"Nothing like this before," Kir declared fiercely into Josh's neck. "You remember this is new to me."

"Okay." Josh tried to gentle Kir's body.

"Nothing. *Nothing* like this."

“Hush, babe,” murmured Josh. Kir relaxed in his arms and Josh kissed the top of his head.

Kir spoke into his ear. “I’m glad you want me, too.”

Not sure what to say, Josh shivered as Kir licked his neck. Kir disentangled himself from Josh and slid fingers down his chest. Josh’s face heated up. He caught Kir’s hand against his stomach. “That was about you, Kir. Stop now.”

“You are the best person I’ve ever met.” Kir’s fervor embarrassed Josh.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Kir’s eyes shone, as if he had complete faith in anything Josh could ever do and Josh found himself blushing.

“I don’t want to stop. You know that. Right?” Kir searched Josh’s face, vibrating as he waited for a signal to continue. Josh released Kir’s hand.

Josh’s dick bucked when Kir touched its head. A drop of liquid seeped out. Kir’s thumb swept it up and he licked off precum. He smiled at Josh, the sweetest smile, as if pleased by the taste of Josh.

“You’re turning me on,” Josh admitted, stating the obvious.

“I’m glad.” Placing hands on Josh’s thighs, Kir bent down.

He licked Josh’s head then took Josh deep, as Josh had done to him. It was awkward but pleasant. Kind of hot, actually, if only because Kir was so eager. He cupped Josh’s balls. There was uncertainty in Kir’s touch but not quite inexperience. Josh stroked behind Kir’s ear, caressed his neck, gave him encouragement.

“You’re so good,” said Josh. “So lovely.”

Kir looked up at that, his eyes black with desire. “Take me.”

Josh frowned.

“I want it, especially if you’ll hold me.” Kir reached into a drawer and pulled out a box of condoms. Well, someone had been prepared, certainly not Josh who watched Kir rip open the square packet, slide a condom

down Josh's length and apply a generous helping of lube. The entire prep time, Josh didn't move, immobilized.

Kir turned. Of their own accord, Josh's hands lifted to palm Kir's ass and thighs, stroking the young, firm skin, dusted with lovely dark hair. He leaned forward and kissed Kir's spine, up and down the column, tracing the small dips and rises, tasting Kir's sweat.

"Sure?" Josh said.

Kir took one of Josh's hands and brought it to rest on his hard, slick cock.

With his free hand, Josh traced a finger down Kir's spine, between the cheeks. He thought Kir might jump but he moaned when Josh gently circled the muscle. He wanted Kir ready so Josh grabbed the lube and came back for some finger play. Kir pushed back against him and Josh slid a finger in.

"I'm ready," whispered Kir.

Josh kissed Kir's neck before setting his dick against Kir's hole and the boy said, "Yes."

Gripping Kir's hips, Josh eased in, letting the muscle stretch slowly. Kir pulled in breaths, hissing through his teeth.

"Okay?" Josh shook, ready to ram it home. He had to be patient.

The boy rumbled with pleasure. Slinging an arm under Kir's chest, Josh held tight as he pushed deeper and Kir accommodated him. He ran a hand over Kir's vibrating skin. Josh balanced on the exquisite knife-edge between desire and restraint before reaching for Kir's cock.

"Hey." Kir sounded dazed as Josh traced the heavy vein.

"This is quite the rebound."

"Huh?"

"You're hard."

Kir groaned as Josh slid his hand up and down Kir's cock. "I think you might come again, Kir. Is that possible?"

"Jesus," swore Kir. "I want *you* to come."

Josh laughed and Kir relaxed enough for Josh to fill him to the hilt.

“Kir?”

“Ungh?” managed Kir.

“You okay?”

“God, yes.”

“Then come.” Josh bit down on Kir’s shoulder and, shuddering, Kir pulsed into Josh’s hand. He didn’t know if it was youth or excitement or Kir’s nature to come so readily.

Kir trembled. “Fuck me.”

Josh pulled out and thrust into Kir’s warmth, then plunged again, aiming deeper.

“Josh,” Kir repeated, pleading, encouraging.

“I’m here.” The world fell away until there was only Kir with his dark, beautiful body and his light moans of pleasure. White light danced before Josh’s eyes and he stiffened.

“God!” he said through gritted teeth as he drove home, pulsing inside Kir whose muscle clenched the base of Josh’s dick. He fell forward, but held himself so Kir wouldn’t collapse. He blanketed Kir, keeping the contact.

It wasn’t the hottest sex ever, but Josh felt quite emotional. He rubbed his face against Kir’s sweat-slick back. He was supposed to protect the boy, not fuck him in the ass. Where the hell was his head? Well...

Carefully, he withdrew and sat back, pulling the boy against him, a kind of apology in his touch as he rubbed Kir’s shoulder and gathered him into his lap. Kir curled into him, showering his neck and collarbone with kisses, his face wet but his body languid. The trembling had finally ceased and, while flushed, Kir was breathing normally.

“It feels right with you.” Kir seemed amazed and grateful. “Special.”

“It was special.” Josh didn’t know what to do with Kir’s gratitude so he just held Kir.

“I was hoping...”

“Hoping what?”

“That you would remember me with a bit of love.” With that, Kir clung tighter and Josh caressed his back, trying not to be alarmed by this talk of love.

“Don’t forget, okay?” Kir muttered against his skin. “Don’t forget this was right.”

Josh kissed Kir’s forehead, because he couldn’t find words. He padded off to take care of the condom.

Chapter Six

In the middle of the night, Josh became sleepily aware that he was holding and being held. Kir pressed soft kisses against Josh's chest and shoulders. His cock stirred and he managed to regret the exhaustion that overtook him as he fell back to sleep.

He was smiling.

Next, he woke with a vengeance. The door flew open, light flared and Kir screamed. Josh's first impulse was to block Kir from the intruders' view. He moved to stand in front of the boy. He wished he wasn't naked but soon had bigger concerns. Someone marched over and placed a gun to his head. Cocked it. Thoughts of nudity fled and Josh froze, holding his breath.

"Speak." The gunman talked over Josh to Kir. "And this guy is history."

Josh couldn't turn but he heard Kir's ragged breathing. No words though.

Josh swallowed. "Can we get dressed?"

"Slowly, carefully. You first."

Josh retrieved his jeans and shirt and refused to succumb to the shakes. He was aware that someone had taken Kir off the bed, but he couldn't see what they were doing to him.

To Josh's relief, the gun disappeared. A man stepped forward and cuffed Josh's hands behind him. "You'll come with me."

Josh turned to see Kir standing half-dressed and shaking. His mouth was taped and Josh's gut twisted. Did they always do this to him? Kir's

frantic gaze landed on Josh as if he wanted to tell him something with his eyes.

Josh was pulled out of the room and pushed into a car.

The next few hours passed in a blur. The police drove him to the station and left him alone in a room with occasional visitors who wouldn't answer his questions about Kir. Josh found it hard to track time, especially with that last vision of Kir in his head. Above all else, he'd wanted to keep Kir from harm.

"You should worry about yourself instead," one stranger remarked as he removed Josh's cuffs.

Another came in and asked if he understood how lucky he was.

Josh guffawed, then felt stupid at his loud, uncontrolled laughter. "Lucky? I don't feel very lucky at the moment. I feel like shit."

"Most people don't survive contact with a Minder. You seem to have forgotten that they mess you up, buddy."

"Kir didn't."

"That's what they all think. Until they're dead."

"He didn't," repeated Josh, wishing he wasn't arguing with some cop who knew nothing about Kir and psis. *Kir has a crush on me*, he could have said, but Josh wanted to keep that information to himself. Even if he and Kir had been found in the same bed.

"No." The cop's tone suggested just the opposite. "He didn't work on you at all. He was desperate and you just agreed to run away with him."

You didn't see what they did to him.

The cop hiked up his pants. "Let me ask you a question. Are you normally attracted to men, or just Kir?"

"I'm gay," Josh said flatly, but his heart began to race. He recalled that he had not intended to have sex with Kir. His face heated up, thinking about last night's intimacy. But the idea that Kir had forced the sex didn't make sense because earlier Kir had been genuinely frightened.

That had been no act. Snow's viciousness had been real. Josh wasn't so confused he had made up Kir's past abuse and present skittishness.

"I hope so, for your sake. Because these fucking Minders, they plant illusions in men's minds."

Not Kir. But his head hurt and Josh pressed the heels of his hands against his temples.

The man stared with some satisfaction. "Your contact wants to talk to you."

Josh blinked at the cell phone offered to him, then picked it up. The cop left to give him some privacy.

"Horton?"

"Josh! You're in one piece?"

"Yes. I'm being held at a police station in Fairview."

"Good."

Josh didn't feel good.

Horton continued, "You're safe and while you've broken all kinds of laws I think, under the circumstances, you won't be punished too badly." He paused and when Josh didn't respond, he added, "I'm flying in with the agency. We'll take care of you."

"Okay." But Josh's heart sank, thinking of Kir and what they would do to him. "Make those agents go easy on Kir."

"Go easy?" said Horton, incredulous. He cleared his throat. "Don't worry, Josh. Kir will be properly taken care of. As will you. No one is blaming you. We understand what Kiran Brunner is. You were putty in his hands."

Josh felt lightheaded. "Oh yeah?"

"We don't have to talk about this now. In fact, it's probably a bad idea. But you should know that we're on your side."

"Why do you think I was manipulated by Kir?" Josh should shut up. He wouldn't do himself any favors by insisting on his autonomy. But he couldn't stop himself.

“Josh.” There was pity in Horton’s voice. “It’s on tape. Kiran Brunner ordered you to kill Snow, and help him escape.”

Pain throbbed in one eye and Josh pressed it. “Snow was going to rape Kir. Did you get that on tape?”

Horton paused. “We shouldn’t talk about this now, Josh. Later.”

“Did you see, *on tape*, what Snow did to Kir?” Josh insisted, his voice rising. He had to get himself under control but pain pulsed through his temple.

“Snow’s relationship with Kiran Brunner will be investigated,” Horton said placatingly, as if Josh had lodged a complaint about the dress code. “Perhaps the relationship had become a little warped. But we can’t be sure that’s all Snow’s doing. They think Snow lost control at the end to Kiran Brunner.”

“So Snow could rape him? Like hell.” *You didn’t see him last night.*

“Josh.” That voice full of pity again. Josh wanted to smash Horton’s face. “Kir is one of those Minders who use sex to manipulate people. Just be glad you got out alive.”

“Oh, I’m glad.” He wanted to throw up. Instead, he turned off the phone and put his head between his legs. The problem was, he couldn’t remember what was real right now. Kir had yelled for him to kill Snow, but by that time Josh had had no choice. He thought.

And last night, those emotions had felt real. Surely Kir didn’t shake and tremble on cue?

Josh stood and walked around the room, shaky himself. He tried the door but it was still locked. He leaned his forehead against the cool wall, trying to remember when Kir might have ordered him to have sex, or make love or feel real affection. But Josh knew enough about Minders to understand he wouldn’t necessarily remember that. They made you forget you’d been given an order.

It had been Josh’s decision to save Kir. Hadn’t it?

The door opened and he spun to face whoever was there. He tried to cover his discomposure. A woman stood at the door and she didn't react to his expression. She just pinned him with her brown eyes. "Josh Mackay?"

He nodded.

"Follow me. No questions. You don't want to hurt me."

"Okay," said Josh while his body filled with refusal and denial and fear. But he followed her out like a dog on a leash.

It was early morning now. They took a circuitous route out of the station and passed only one man. "You'll let us leave," she told the guard and he agreed.

Soon they were outside and Josh found it difficult to think.

"Get in the car," she said. "Then don't move."

It was easy to obey.

She walked around the other side and it was only as they pulled onto the road that Josh realized he recognized her. She was an older version of the picture he'd seen in Kir's file. The picture of Kir's sister, Madeline.

He found it hard to breathe and sweat broke out on his forehead. She turned and smiled at him. "Relax. Don't worry."

A strange, iron calm fell upon him. He floated outside his body, watching himself act as Madeline wanted him to act, and he didn't mind. It was, he thought with some hope, utterly unlike his experience with Kir, where he got too involved too quickly.

She drove into the suburbs. Although a different city, Josh couldn't help but think of the safe house he'd taken Kir to a few days ago. She parked in the driveway and got out of the car. Then she sighed and poked her head back in to look at the immobile Josh. "Follow me."

He did.

A girl let them in the house.

"Well?" Madeline asked sharply.

"Kir's here," the girl answered. "Down the hall."

Madeline seemed to relax a little at that. She turned to face Josh who trembled. "Come on."

There was no compulsion behind the words. Josh just stood there, breathing, the vise that had gripped his chest receded.

She sighed again, as if he were a nuisance. "I'd rather not force you to enter the den because you're giving me a headache, but I can and will." She gestured and, after a slight hesitation, Josh followed. Because her orders were making him sick, not because he wanted to see Kir again.

"Bring us some tea," she called, then turned to him. "Do you want tea?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

She smiled faintly. "I'll take that as a yes." She indicated the door to the room. He was to precede her.

"Are you going to lock me in?"

"Worse. I'm going to sit with you."

"I'd rather, under the circumstances, that you didn't talk. It makes me twitchy."

"As you wish. But, after all, you just spent days with my baby brother. You must be used to us by now."

Josh just looked at her, without speaking, and she shrugged.

When the tea arrived, she merely lifted the teapot in question and Josh nodded to receive his cup. He wasn't a big tea drinker, but he was thirsty.

She sat, completely at ease while Josh became more and more tense. "It won't be long now," she said with some sympathy.

Josh didn't answer.

Down the hall, a door slammed. "Get your fucking hands off me." Josh recognized the voice, hysterical, shaky, *Kir's*.

Madeline jumped and strode to the hallway, though she kept an eye on Josh.

At the sound of Kir approaching, Josh felt sick. Basically, he never wanted to see Kir again, yet he didn't know how to reconcile that with his desire to protect Kir.

"Maddie?" Kir sounded uncertain.

"I'm here, Kir," she called. "It's fine."

"It's not fucking fine. I've been manhandled and I can't fucking stand it."

She rolled her eyes. "Get a grip, okay? I just rescued you when your mouth was taped shut and you were trussed up like a chicken."

"I liked it where I was!"

"Come here," she said with false calm. "There's someone I want you to see before we all head out."

Silence. Then Josh heard Kir's footsteps. Madeline backed up so Kir could stand in the doorway. When he saw Josh, his angry face went blank.

Which was pretty much how Josh felt. Blank. He couldn't trust any of his feelings. He couldn't look away from Kir either, away from those brown, fathomless eyes. The eyes and voice had made him kill a man. Had made him run. Had made him fuck. Josh had been some kind of automaton. The Minders called those in their thrall zombies.

To Josh's surprise Kir broke eye contact first. Josh had been expecting another order. Instead Kir turned to Maddie.

"*Why?*" he asked, as if she had caused him a great deal of pain. Josh felt even more at a loss.

"So you could say goodbye," she said softly. "Let him off the hook a little, if you care about him."

Kir shivered, then quickly brushed his eyes with the back of his hand. "He's not safe here and *you know it.*"

"I've stayed with him the entire time, haven't I, Josh?" She didn't wait for his answer. "And we'll be leaving soon."

"Why?" he repeated.

She smiled, but the smile was sharp and cold. "They were hurting him there, though they didn't know it, by telling him you'd messed with him."

"*I did.*" The anguish in Kir's voice angered Josh. He was tired of feeling protective about someone who had done him harm.

She shook her head. "You haven't changed. You have to learn when to shut up. And when to speak." She gestured impatiently. "Anyway, I'm running out of time. You have a few minutes to be clear with him, if you choose. You can help him put his head back on straight before you leave him for good."

Kir didn't look at his sister again. He walked through the door and slammed it behind him, shutting Madeline out.

To Josh's dismay, his hand shook when he reached for his tea. He gave up all pretense of control. "Maybe it's better..." He talked through clenched teeth. Rage shook him by the throat. "...if you keep your shitty little mouth shut."

"Josh—"

"Shut the fuck up," Josh said furiously. "No wonder you don't like touch when you only know how to prostitute yourself. I was already fucking helping you, but that wasn't enough. I had to fuck you."

Kir shook his head.

"Well, say it. Say no and I'll *have* to believe it whether it's true or not."

Kir jammed a hand into his hair, revealing yet another bruise on his face. Bright purple compared to the older, yellow ones Snow had left. For someone who could manipulate others, Kir seemed to invite a lot of physical abuse.

"I wish I could tape your mouth shut now, because I don't want to hear a fucking word you say. Because I don't know what it will do to me. You made me kill someone, Kir. I was your fucking tool."

"He was going to kill you," Kir said dully.

“Oh, I see. You saved my life. How kind. Well, if I don’t believe it now, you just have to repeat it again, with feeling.”

Kir glared at him, sullen, angry, *lost*. It struck Josh as highly unfair that Kir could look so uncertain.

“Just cut this lost-boy crap, okay? I’ve had my fill.”

In response, Kir launched himself at Josh, as if to pin him to the couch. Josh fell back, surprised by the contact. Then, furious, he knocked Kir to the floor and landed on top of him, knees on Kir’s arms. Josh raised a fist above Kir’s face. A face discolored by new and old bruises. A face that turned to the side, ready to submit to the blow. Kir’s body went limp beneath him.

Josh let his arm fall. “Shit,” he said in disgust, wondering if Kir somehow wanted the violence. God knows he couldn’t figure out much about the boy.

Josh stood. “Get out.”

Kir pushed himself up and scrubbed his face, as if warding off tears. Josh loathed his tears.

“I didn’t push the sex, Josh, only the escape.”

Josh couldn’t believe a word. He clung to that knowledge so he didn’t feel crazy.

“I won’t forget you,” said Kir.

“Oh, great.” Josh desperately wanted to forget Kir.

Someone opened the door. A man, tall, hefty, not particularly handsome or athletic. But strong. Kir seemed to shrink.

“We’re leaving,” the man declared. “Now. So get in your kiss goodbye.”

Kir looked down, saying nothing.

“Ah, an unhappy parting.” The man eyed Josh and Josh froze. Oh God, not another one. He didn’t think he could cope. “I’m Brad. Perhaps you want to kiss *me* goodbye.”

Josh struggled, hooked in place, trying to figure out if he wanted to kiss Brad or not. He hadn’t thought so until Brad smiled.

Kir announced, too loudly, "I'm coming."

Kir moved away from Josh and went to Brad who circled an arm around Kir's bowed shoulders. Brad caressed his face and Kir submitted to it. "Welcome home, love."

"Let's go." Kir took the man's hand, pulling him away from the threshold. He turned to close the door and Kir's face was blank again, his eyes hollow, and Josh found that yet again he wanted to rescue him.

The door shut and Kir was gone.

Josh sat alone with his tea and tried not to think. He didn't move for the longest time. But the last scene kept playing itself in his head—Brad's hand on Kir's face and Kir's submission. Something about a kiss. The last few days made no sense and his mind was falling apart. He wasn't even sure how he'd gotten here.

They said this happened when Minders worked too hard on someone. They broke down and sometimes never came together again. So Josh just stared at his cold tea and occasionally sipped it.

Eventually it occurred to him that he heard only silence in an empty house. He was alone. Hard to imagine why he was here. He ventured out of the den to find a telephone. He figured he should phone his contact. At least he could remember Horton's name and number.

It didn't take long for the police to arrive, with Horton and another agent in tow. Horton couldn't seem to get over Josh's survival. Not once, but twice, Josh had escaped from the clutches of the Minders. People just didn't do that.

Horton stopped talking when Josh no longer tracked the conversation. Josh thought he slept then. He didn't remember much, just that time passed. He found himself in a hospital, sleeping a lot, with occasional visits from Horton and the other agent, Walters. Sometimes they came together, sometimes separately. Horton became his interrogator.

Too often, Josh dreamed of Kir and he became enraged by his desire to see the boy again, to ask him, *why*? No explanation could be trustworthy but still, Josh had to dream it. It was an exercise in futility. The yearning made him weep.

He told no one. Not that there was anyone to tell but Horton and Walters who continued to visit; the agency allowed no one else in. After a time, Josh realized they wanted something from him—his memories. It took days for him to make sense of his time with Kir and when he did, Josh couldn't differentiate the real from the imagined. Presumably Kiran Brunner could have suggested every memory, every moment—was anything he remembered real?

"No," said Walters when Horton put forth that theory. "Minders push people to do things and that can result in false memories, but it's not so common. If Josh, for example, remembers staying at a motel, they almost certainly stayed at a motel. We've tracked them now, anyway."

"I remember lots of things." Josh remembered killing Snow, he remembered driving a heck of a lot, he remembered making love. The last was most painful because he had cared, as if he were falling in love, which didn't make much sense in hindsight. Josh didn't fall in love in three days with some skittish colt of a boy who was, in fact, faking it the whole time. Josh closed his eyes, remembering Brad's caress on Kir's face.

That was the problem. He couldn't make sense of Kir's actions.

"Josh." Horton was annoyed by Josh's lack of focus but conversation was difficult to follow.

"What I don't understand," Josh said finally, after their third round of going over all the details of his encounter with Kir, "is why Kir wasn't with his sister and her gang from the beginning. Why he was all alone when I lured him to the safe house?"

"Well," said Walters, as if he didn't know how much to say. "We don't understand the Minder society all that well, but they appear to prey upon

themselves. The younger, weaker ones don't fare that well. Maybe Kir didn't like it there."

"His sister couldn't protect him?" asked Josh.

"Like I said, we don't understand them well." Walters went silent and looked out the window.

Horton was less circumspect. "Why are you crying? Kiran Brunner is still a threat to us all."

Josh placed an arm over his eyes to hide his tears, but still he spoke. "What will happen to him?"

"We don't know. They occasionally kill each other." Horton was unaware of the pain he caused Josh, or perhaps didn't care. "I'd guess his sister will look out for him. We'll catch him if we can. Catch them all, if possible. We think there may be twelve of them."

Twelve. And Kir had avoided them all.

"You shouldn't care," added Horton. "He used you."

"Yeah," said Josh with disgust, but he couldn't decide where his disgust was directed. He just remembered Kir clinging to him after sex, talking about love in an eager, unabashed way which had nothing to do with Minders and zombies.

Josh tried not to ask the question, but it came out despite himself. "Will you let me know if you find Kir again?"

Walters looked away while Horton took his time answering. "Josh. We *will* find Kiran Brunner again and we'll need your help."

Josh shook his head. "I can't go through this a second time."

"You have no choice, Josh. It's that important."

Josh didn't speak. There didn't seem to be much point. He could, perhaps, argue against it later.

And he did, but by that time he was living in a secure compound with severe restrictions and no one had any intention of listening to him.

He'd been hired to capture Kir and somehow he'd ended up the prisoner.

Joely Skye

Joely Skye is an introvert, a wife and a mother. Men fascinate her, as does romance, so gay romance is the perfect fit.

She has three contracts with Samhain Publishing. Together they make up Josh and Kir's story.

Monster's sequel, *Zombie*, will be released November 28th. *Minder* will follow February 28, 2007 and complete the trilogy.

To learn more about Joely Skye, please visit <http://joely.wordpress.com/> or <http://joelyskye.livejournal.com/>. Send an email to Joely Skye at joely.skye@gmail.com or join her yahoo group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/joelyskye/>

Josh and Kir's story continues...

Enjoy this excerpt from

Zombie

(c) 2006 Joely Skye

Two years after Minder Kiran Brunner abducted Josh Mackay, Josh's life is in ruins. The agency controls his every move. He is essentially their prisoner. Josh dreams of escape. Instead, a nightmare arrives in the form of Brad.

When Josh becomes Brad's zombie, Kir rescues Josh from the amoral Minder and the agency. Now Josh knows what Kir is and how he was used two years ago. Their relationship is built on hatred and fear, no matter how badly Kir wants Josh to trust him.

Kir is patient and protective. However, Kir may not be able to protect Josh, and himself, from those who wish them harm.

Coming November 28, 2006 to Samhain Publishing.

Josh needed a weapon with which he could strike quickly and irrevocably. A knife or a piece of glass would slice through Kir's throat before the boy—the *monster* Josh had once hunted—could speak and bend Josh to his will.

Kir fed Josh to keep up his strength and he didn't want to think why, didn't want to think Kir had plans, like Brad's plans.

The kitchen would have a knife. Presumably Kir had sliced vegetables. The soup hadn't come out of a can.

Josh slid off the bed without letting it creak. He walked quietly. There were no city lights to guide him. The moon wasn't shining. In the dark, he moved slowly, careful not to bump into anything. The crucial thing was not to rush.

Despite his painstaking efforts, a board creaked under his weight. He froze. From elsewhere, a bed's spring creaked in reply and, to Josh's horror, he heard Kir rise. Quick-footed and sure, Kir strode towards Josh. Kir was everything Josh wasn't—powerful, healthy, autonomous.

Kir flipped the switch and blinded Josh with light. He was caught in the kitchen and he couldn't move. He could barely breathe.

"Hey." Kir's greeting disconcerted Josh. He squinted, confused by Kir's friendliness. Because Josh was bracing himself for an assault—he would fight. But Kir didn't speak. He merely walked to the fridge and pulled out juice, as well as bread.

As if he thought Josh needed a snack. As if he knew Josh was terrified of Kir's words. Josh wanted to think these contradictions through, but he didn't have the luxury of time or clear-thinking—his trembling body betrayed him in a way he despised.

While Josh looked on, Kir put a sandwich together, all but ignoring Josh and his turmoil. Josh couldn't take his eyes off the knife Kir used to slice the bread. It was sharp, serrated, and Josh could use it against Kir's dusky throat. It wouldn't be the first time Josh had killed in such a way. He'd sliced open Snow's throat, after Kir had ordered him to.

After Snow had attempted to rape Kir. *No, don't think of that. Don't think of anything but the knife.*

Kir offered Josh the sandwich. Did Minders feed their sacrifices? The boy's innocent good will freaked Josh out, so he didn't look directly at Kir as he passed the plate over. Josh watched the boy's steady hand place food down.

What Josh needed was the knife. He edged around the counter, leaned on it, then forced himself to look up.

Kir smiled briefly in encouragement and, oblivious, turned to wash his hands. *Now!* Josh's brain screamed. He threw his body forward, grabbed the knife and lunged at Kir's throat, his movements clumsy, but accurate.

The surprise on Kir's face was momentary. He shifted, arm snapping up as he blocked Josh's thrust. Thrown off-balance, Josh stumbled back, keeping a death grip on the knife. But adrenaline shook him so hard, his teeth chattered. He could not make a second attempt now.

Stupid. He hadn't even cut Kir's arm. Josh was weak, confused. Panicked. He should have planned an attack, not taken the first poor opportunity. But there was no time, no time, and now it was over. Kir would speak and Josh would worship him as a god to love and protect. Terror gripped him, coating his eyes with tears.

The boy remained silent, his dark gaze on Josh. At the very least, Kir should compel Josh to drop the knife. Instead, the knife remained in his hand while Josh vibrated with fear. It was an illusion, he told himself, that he had the power to hurt Kir.

And still, Kir stood there, eyes black and fathomless, watching Josh like one would watch a wild, unpredictable animal.

Why didn't he speak? Disarm him? Josh's head ached and, gripped by this confusion, he couldn't move.

Very slowly, so as not to startle, Kir approached him. Kir spoke no words, yet Josh was rooted to the spot and vulnerable. *Damaged.* He was damaged and Kir knew it. Kir, who gently extracted the knife from Josh's hand without touching him, for which Josh was pathetically grateful. After Kir backed away, Josh leaned down on the counter, dizzy, pulling in breaths.

"Why don't you sit and eat?" Kir finally said, as if Josh hadn't just tried to kill him.

Josh searched the words for compulsion. A useless exercise. A zombie never recognizes compulsion. He justifies every thought forced upon him. For God's sakes, Josh had thought Brad was his boyfriend. Josh rested his head on the back of his hands, trying not to gag. Appalled at his helplessness. Waiting for Kir to say more. He couldn't

understand why Kir wasn't talking all the time. He couldn't make sense of the quiet.

His brain was obviously ruined, so Josh gave up thinking. He dragged a stool to the counter and, with trembling hands, fed himself. He made a mess of his sandwich, but he ate most of it. Kir politely looked elsewhere.

When he was done, they regarded each other. Kir looked worried.

"I don't want your fucking concern." Unable to control his voice, Josh sounded histrionic. "I want to kill you."

"Um, yeah. I noticed."

"I really do." Josh whispered so his voice didn't quaver. He expected Kir to laugh. Fool, *fool. Don't engage in conversation. You'll lose.*

"You're exhausted," said Kir in his strange matter-of-fact way, as if Josh was recovering from a bad case of the flu. "You're better off if I cook for a few days before you kill me."

Josh laughed, though the laughter went wild. So little control and his shoulders shook. He wanted to weep again.

"I'm kinda hoping you'll change your mind by then," Kir added.

"You can change my mind any time you choose."

Kir crossed his arms and leaned back against the sink. "Listen to me. I am not going to manipulate you."

Josh's face arranged itself into a sneer. Otherwise he might fall apart. "I'll never know, will I?"

"You will know." Kir's quiet conviction scared Josh. "Your body will feel different. You won't get better if I'm working on you. So, I won't."

Slate and Ash, two men whose love for each other stretches beyond the grave... proving that love can conquer anything, even death...

Enjoy this excerpt from

A Year and a Day *(c) 2006 Willa Okati*

A gay paranormal erotic romance novella available now at Samhain Publishing.

“I never could get enough of you,” Slate murmured to himself. “Yellow, white and blue. All three of them, still growing. You watching out for your babies, wherever you are, Ash?” The thought made him somehow bitter. “You watching over me? Is that why I can’t let go of you? Why I don’t *want* to?”

He knelt, plucking up handfuls of the blossoms. Violets were for faithfulness, or so Ash had told him later, much later, while they lay on their backs in bed that night. Clean from their afternoon’s devouring one another, but still hungry. Violets, those were important. Yellow for worthiness, white for the willingness to take a chance on happiness, and blue for always being true. They *mattered*.

Chrysanthemums, for long life and deep need. Mandrake, for its shape. He half winced as he pulled the roots free, remembering tales of how they were meant to scream when they came loose of the earth, but it just sounded like digging carrots, to him. Sage, to go with the salt, for binding.

He had a bag of grave dirt hanging from his waist, a knife in his pocket and a healthy supply of the other thing he needed running through his veins. The sun was climbing high, almost at the peak point. It was time.

Standing, his hands full with spell parchment, herbs and flowers, he dragged in a deep breath. He turned a bit to the left and looked at the building he hadn't entered in a year. The stable. The last place Ash had been alive in.

There were no animals in it anymore. He'd sold Brown Sugar off with the rest of the livestock, and told Zillah she could stable her horse elsewhere. Not a thing had been shoveled out but the horse shit. It should still have the selfsame hay in there Ash had fallen and died on. Slate had hated the thought of touching one strand...until he'd found the spell. Now, he thanked a God he'd mostly stopped believing in that the site had been undisturbed.

He needed it, for the spell to work right. If it worked at all. Taking a deep breath, Slate stepped out of Ash's herb garden and took bold strides toward the empty stable. *Now or never*, he told himself. *No time to worry over it being right or wrong. This is the task you've set yourself. This is what you need to do.*

Even if it's...limited...then it's gonna be worth it. He stopped for a moment, resisting the urge to crumble his fists around the paper and greenery. *I have to see him again. That's all there is to it.*

He had to stop again, at the closed stable door, to catch his breath. "It'll be all right," he muttered to himself. "Probably won't work at all. Mountain hocus-pocus. Somebody's fantasy. Bet the woman who wrote this never brought anyone back at all. Nothing says she did. Maybe she was wrong." Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. But then again...maybe not.

Taking in a deep breath, he pushed the stable doors open. The smells hit him first of all—moldering hay, sickly sweet. The faint tang of horse sweat, even though Brown Sugar had been gone for all those months. Coppery blood, from where Ash had...from his mouth...

Slate drew back fast, leaning his head outside the stable. He couldn't do this. What had he been thinking, to face this place again? God, even the straw on the dirt floor was still rucked up where Ash had lain.

But no. That was good. He knew exactly where to lie and cast his spell. Slate swallowed and firmed his jaw. No use thinking about ifs and maybes. He'd try this, see what happened, and, well, then he'd either have his heart's desire, or he'd burn the place to the ground.

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