



# *Dreams & Palmares*

by Willa Okati

Dreams and Daymares by Willa Okati

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## 1. "Dreams and Daymares"

### Shakespeare's Sonnet #27

Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,  
The dear repose for limbs with travel tired;  
But then begins a journey in my head...

#### Excerpt from the diary of Jacob Rushton:

I am no longer a young man, nor a useful member of society, and I need no reminding of that fact. As for what I have become -- a cold, corporate drone, devoid of any heart or soul -- it torments me every time I open my eyes.

I wake with the knowledge of ruination in my heart. The day passes by, taking far too long before I sleep again, tossing until I nod off, unhappy thoughts bitter as gall on my tongue.

I need -- I want -- I crave the impossible, as I lie alone on my bed. The only comfort I can find is in dreams.

And so I find myself falling deeper and deeper into fantasies, and even waking dreams of what can never be...

\*\*\*

There is no alarm clock; they don't need them here. Time is a fluid thing, shaping itself to their desires.

Jacob's... and Owain's.

The windows and curtains have been opened for him the way Jacob likes them best, spilling a breeze heavy with salt and the sounds of the ocean into the bedroom. This is what he's always dreamed of, all the peace and privacy he could wish for. A place so perfect, it's like it was made just for them.

Night and sleepiness fade away in the wake of yellow-rose sunlight creeping in from the eastern exposure. It slips over Jacob's pillow, warming his face.

For a long moment he's happy just to lie there, curled on his side, one hand stretched out to caress the still warm dips and hollows in the mattress beside him. Owain always does wake up first.

Jacob imagines, pretending he feels a lingering tingle on his lips, he'd been kissed gently before Owain crawled out of bed, careful not to wake Jacob up.

Owain loves him that much.

Jacob's alarm shrills into the darkness — strident and harsh, jerking him out of a stormy sleep. His eyes snap open and he hears himself gasping roughly.

More nightmares. Awful things, filled with the eternal grayness of meetings and committees with gimlet eyes that measure him up and decide he isn't good enough.

His bed is narrow, just big enough for one long, lean man. Even his own body warmth doesn't keep it from being cold and uninviting. Jacob slaps at the clock to shut it up, and gladly leaves the mattress behind him.

It's still dark outside, but it's already time to start another day.

His pet ferret, Pinch, a gift from a colleague — a strange gesture of goodwill on her part (he refuses to believe it was because she felt sorry for him, all alone) — skitters around his feet, chittering *~good morning~* and *~feed me now, please~*.

Pinch allows a brief stroke of Jacob's hand down his lean body before he bounds away, not interested when there are better things to play with.

Jacob's body is rested, but his mind is still exhausted. Burned-out and burned up to a crisp. Jacob shuts his eyes and sways on his feet.

Just for a moment, he lets himself drift away...

\*\*\*

Jacob stretches, delighting in the pull of every muscle and the soft popping of joints. He feels boneless as a cat, like he could happily roll in his sunbeam for hours.

A smile drifts across his lips as he remembers the night before. Strong fingers massaging their way down from his hips, then gripping him tightly enough to leave red marks in their wake...

...the sound of heated breaths coming heavy and quick... white-hot burnings left in the wake of lips brushing his cheeks, his throat, his chest... the unbearable gentleness of his lover lifting his legs to drape them across broad shoulders... stroking down his calves, the undersides of his thighs, tickling, teasing...

Flexing a little, Jacob discovers he's still sore, deliciously so. If he closes his eyes the sense memory of Owain's slick glide in and out is still so vivid. He can all but smell how much Owain needed to burst loose, not to be gentle. Remember how he urged Owain on with grasping hands, pulling him even closer. Taste the relief and the savage need when their mouths met.

Jacob looks up at a small sound of movement from the warm kitchen adjoining the bedroom. Clinks and clanks of metal on iron. A burst of fragrance wafts in to entice him — the smell of rich coffee, freshly brewed and ready to drink. He can almost taste it, heady on his tongue, from the scent alone.

Careful not to trip on Pinch, chittering at him from here and there as the ferret scurries around his feet, Jacob stumbles into his tiny kitchenette.

Out of habit he snaps on the power to his computer as he passes it. The blue glow of the screen creates an eerie light in the darkened room.

Jacob shivers in distaste. Such a cold light...

The timer's broken again on his automatic coffeepot. What's the point in putting beans and water in to grow stale through the night if they won't have the decency to brew before he wakes up?

Depressed, thinking this is a bad omen in an already ugly day, Jacob turns the machine on by hand. A pinpoint of red "brew" light joins the blue.

His favorite mug is in the sink, dirty. He's forgotten to wash it again.

To pacify Pinch's loud demands for breakfast, Jacob reaches under the sink and fetches out a bag of scientifically formulated kibble, pouring it into the small green dish on a mat at his feet. No wonder Pinch is so eager -- he'd eaten every scrap Jacob left out the night before.

Watching Pinch dive in face first, Jacob wonders why the creature isn't round as a ball by now. Still, what does he know about ferrets? He could -- should -- read up on them, but he never seems to find the time.

Unable to resist, he bends and touches the silky fur once more, so soft beneath his fingertips. Pinch is a small bit of comfort to have around. A living creature that needs him. It's as good a reason as any to keep going as long as he can.

Jacob's muscles creak as he stands and rubs both hands over his hollow cheeks. There's time to shower, to shave, to pick out a company-approved suit.

But almost no desire to do anything but go back to sleep, and dream.

No. He can't. He has a job, he has a life. Sort of.

For now, at least.

Jacob steals the first strong cup of sour coffee from the pot -- he never could make a decent batch -- and sits in front of his monitor. A click of the mouse and his itinerary scrolls up onto the screen.

He sighs. No surprises, which is depressing. Meeting after meeting with no end in sight until it's well past dark again.

Jacob's head nods tiredly. If only...

Jacob slips from beneath his warm, rumpled sheets and stands, savoring the feel of the wooden floor beneath his bare feet. Polished to a high gloss with a honey-rich sheen, it's bliss to stand on, more welcoming than the thickest rug.

A pair of well-worn pants lies cast over the ladder back of a nearby chair. Not his own, but loose and comfortable, and blue as the salt sea. Jacob slips them on, grinning with pleasure at the feel of fleece on flesh and Owain's scent, rising as the pants warm to his skin.

Quieter noises emerge from the kitchen. The light rustling of newspaper, the contented whine of Jacob's mongrel dog as it makes itself comfortable in front of the gas range. A clink of metal on ceramic as coffeepot meets cup, pouring out a fresh dose of wonderfully fragrant brew.

Jacob sighs in deep contentment with all of it, their quiet domesticity. But still, he wants more, to be part of the peaceful scene, to join his lover now that he's good and awake. A few minutes parted are a few too many.

Luckily, he doesn't have far to go. A few languid steps bring him to the doorless passage through to their kitchen.

There, Jacob leans against the wall, drinking in the sight before him... and smiles.

\*\*\*

The light over the sink is the only one that works. Harsh and fluorescent, the bulb crackles and spits at Jacob when he turns it on.

Jacob sighs. He turns to find a growing list on the refrigerator, and adds a note about needing to buy more bulbs when he goes shopping.

After a moment's thought, he adds: ferret kibble. Bulk bags?

The list is battered, so old it's gotten ragged around the edges. Jacob never gets a chance to hit the stores for more than a quick snatch of basics. He could pass the task off, but he hates displaying his needs to gofers or secretaries. It's not their business what sort of lettuce he likes, or if he favors minty toothpaste over the whitening blend. There'll be time someday. Surely.

Until then, he'll just add items to the list of what he wants. What he doesn't have, but still needs to survive.

If you can call this life.

Still, it's all just things. What he really wants...

\*\*\*

"Good morning, sweetheart," Jacob says, leaning his head against the wall. All the better to gaze at his Owain.

He's beautiful in the morning light, chair pulled away from the stove, but close enough to feel the warmth and toast his bare toes. One foot is gently rubbing the dog's shaggy belly. She whines in pleasure, wiggling on her back with all four paws in the air, but rolls over eagerly at the sound of her real master's voice and barks fit to make their ears ring.

"Hello to you, too, Molly," Jacob says, amused. He'd go give her a good petting, but he can't pull his eyes away from Owain for long. Rumpled from sleep, hair sticking in every direction, and wearing a loose pair of pajama bottoms. One of Jacob's own.

Owain smiles at Jacob, eyes crinkling, and pushes a steaming cup of coffee across their pine table toward his lover, inviting: "Join me?"

As if he could or would stay away. But though it smells like ambrosia, Jacob's not as interested in the coffee anymore. He ignores the second chair waiting for him, and comes to Owain's side instead, bending his head down for a kiss.

Nibbling gently on the fullness of Owain's lower lip, Jacob feels it quirk into a smile. He nips back, then sucks the bitten sweetness briefly into his mouth.

"You're in a good mood," Owain says softly, reaching up to ruffle the hair on the back of Jacob's neck. He returns the kiss, slipping his tongue inside Jacob's mouth.

Jacob makes a muffled noise of pleasure. Owain tastes of coffee and the morning air, of love and friendship, and the faintest remaining traces of his own natural flavor.

When Owain draws back, their eyes meet. "It's a beautiful morning," he says. "Better now, though."

Jacob runs his fingers lightly over Owain's bare shoulders. "I'd say so. But you know, it could always get better..."

\*\*\*

A discreet envelope pops up in the corner of Jacob's computer screen. E-mail. Company internal memo. Already. He grimaces, but clicks on the thing to open it.

It's terse to the point of painfulness:

*Jacob,*

*Breakfast conference in one hour. No food or coffee to be provided; eat at home if you absolutely have to. Company dress. Shave!*

*Owain*

No "hello", no "good morning". Not a personal word, much less a kind one. Jacob reaches out to stroke the screen with one finger.



If only... if only...

Pinch jumps up on Jacob's shoulder, peering at the e-mail. He hisses, displeased by something.

Ah, well. How could a dumb animal understand?

"Good boy," Jacob mutters, sighing as a cold nose pokes into the graying hair above his temple. "Yes, I know you're there. Lay off."

*Lay off. Lie down.*

God, if only he could.

Faced with cold reality and reminders of how he has to face another day of pretending to be everything he's not, Jacob can't help but drift away yet again...

\*\*\*

Languid as a swimmer, Jacob uses his leverage on those shoulders to lower himself onto Owain's lap. One leg to either side, he hugs his lover's thighs close and leans into the solid chest, tucking his head into the curve of one shoulder.

Owain's hand comes up to stroke Jacob's back as he sighs deeply in pleasure. "You feel so good to me. The weight of you. I'll never get tired of this."

"You'd better not," Jacob whispers into the softly curling hairs that tickle his chin. "The way you collapse on me, muttering gibberish in my ear, every bit of you gone loose as old elastic..."

He lifts his head to nip at Owain's chin. "The way you nuzzle me, then complain of beard burn, but still come back for more?" he teases.

Owain's eyes are darkening. "You're insatiable," he says, arms settling and tightening around Jacob's waist. "What you do to me with that mouth, even when it's just talking..."

His hands curl down around the curves of Jacob's ass and shift him closer still, pushing their groins into contact. Jacob can feel the hardness growing there, stirring inside Owain's borrowed sleep pants.

With a mischievous grin, he wiggles, pushing their cloth-covered cocks against each other. "You know what I like best?" he asks. "Thinking about you sitting here waiting for me to wake up."

Owain chuckles, leaning in to flick his tongue across Jacob's earlobe. "You," he says, his voice pure sex. "You'll drive me crazy someday."

Jacob undulates again, rubbing tantalizingly against Owain's swelling cock. "You feel so good to me," he whispers.

"And you... oh, God, you too." Owain presses small, sucking kisses in a line down Jacob's jaw and neck, leaving little raised marks he'll wear proudly as the day goes on.

Jacob moves one more time, then pulls back and slides off, gliding his hands along Owain's thighs as he goes. "Coffee's what most people want first thing in the morning," he says, mock-serious, "but me? There's something else I'd rather have."

Owain's fingers curl into a tight ball as Jacob's hands pluck at his drawstring, dipping inside. "Far be it from me to turn you down," he breathes. His hands rake through Jacob's hair. "What would I do without you?"

"Don't even think about that!" The thought pisses Jacob off, but he forgets quickly when his hand closes around Owain's cock, jutting proudly out, resting it in his palm before squeezing. "Think about *this*. Be as glad as I am that you're a part of my life."

"I will," Owain says. Jacob can hear the truth in his voice. "I have, I do, and I always will. Swear."

\*\*\*

What Owain wants, Owain gets, so Jacob pushes away from his meager breakfast and pads to the bathroom. The lights in there, stark and unforgiving as those in the kitchen, reflect back a face in the mirror with hollowed cheeks and dark circles beneath the eyes.

It doesn't matter. No one will take a close look at him anyway.

Jacob's morning rituals are old habit. Shaving first, the razor gliding down his cheeks with the ease of long practice, scraping away graying bristles. He rinses his hands and checks the smoothness. Not perfect, but it will do.

He sheds his T-shirt and sweatpants, reaching into the shower to start the water. Not hot. Lukewarm. Almost a little cool...

\*\*\*

Owain's legs are splayed wide, his head thrown back. He breathes in and out, quick gasps of air, as Jacob's tongue plays with his cock, swirls around the swollen head, licking away dribbling pre-come and stabbing deep into the slit. One hand has wormed beneath Owain and strokes hard at the smooth strip of skin behind his sac, thrusting up a little, not quite enough to satisfy.

And Owain loves it.

Jacob's other hand slides down to work on his own urgent erection, but from somewhere Owain finds the will to bump his questing fingers away with one knee.

"No," he rasps. "Mine!"

"Soon," Jacob says, lapping down the length of Owain's shaft. "Soon."

\*\*\*

Jacob's vaguely surprised, as he steps beneath the spray of water, to discover he's hard. He could ignore it, and he's more than half-inclined to do so.

But for the chance at one quick moment of pleasure -- a small spark of joy...?

He grips himself loosely in one fist and begins to pump. His hand is cold and feels like a foreign thing.

\*\*\*

The coffee is forgotten, the sunlight ignored, the pounding ocean outside only an echo of Jacob's pulse. Owain surges from the chair in a wave and seizes Jacob tight, kissing him as if he's life to be drunk up in vast, parched gulps.

Jacob goes along for the ride when Owain pushes at him, smoothing the way down, laying him flat on the floor. His wide hand wraps tight around Jacob's cock and milks it, stroking hard and fast.

"Need you," he's mumbling into one ear, nearly gone in his fit of want. "Need you now. Let me have you, Jacob, please."

In between kisses, Jacob manages to sit: "You never have to ask, you know. All that I am belongs to you. I am yours."

He spreads himself wide and wanton. "Come here and finish what you've started."

Owain falls upon him, all but devouring Jacob whole.

\*\*\*

Despite his hopes, Jacob's half-hearted shower masturbation ends in a joyless climax after all, a small amount of semen spattering to land at his feet and wash down the drain. Looking at it, he feels... nothing. Neither pleasure nor guilt. Only a sense of: *well, that's one thing taken care of.*

He ignores the small part of him that wishes it had been more. That wants to reach about and touch himself deeper, bringing his body back to life.

He would rather dream...

\*\*\*

Owain's fingers spread Jacob wide, pressing ruthlessly on the sweet spot that makes him roll his pelvis like a slut, rasping out wordless cries. Shamelessly begging for more. .

"Say you're ready for me," Owain rumbles against Jacob's throat. "Can't... can't wait much longer."

"Ready." Jacob thrusts his hips up. "Always ready."

\*\*\*

Naked and uncaring, Jacob leaves the bathroom without a glance behind him. The towels can fester on the floor until he needs one again. What does it matter?

He glances at Owain's e-mail, still open, as he passes his computer.

But only once.

\*\*\*

Owain's cock is sunk so deeply in Jacob's ass that it can go no further. Hands grab, clutch, stroke, bite everywhere they can reach; mouths ravage and chests rub against each other in hungry rasps. The fire is building, blazing; soon it'll burn out of control.

\*\*\*

Every day is the same, isn't it? No one cares about more than the proprieties. Jacob's clothes all look alike. He misses the old days of boyhood and battered shirts and jeans, all worn and washed soft, that clung to his skin.

Here and now, he's faced with a row of suits, each one another dull day on a dull metal hanger. The ties differ only in their muted jewel tones, meant to add a bright note.

He always picks a gray one. It seems symbolic, somehow.

On a whim, he pulls a red one off the rack and tosses it to Pinch, for him play with. The ferret chirps in excitement and runs away with his prize.

\*\*\*

Jacob and Owain collapse upon and into each other, aftershocks rippling through them. Owain's head is pillowed on him, hands still moving sleepily. His own soft ache has sharpened into a delicious burn. All around them the smells of sex and coffee fill the air with a heady perfume.

No matter how many times it happens, it's never enough. Jacob knows he'll always want more, and so will Owain. They crave each other like uncut cocaine, an addiction grown out of control. It has already consumed them both.

All the same, just like always, Jacob knows he will never forget *this* particular moment.

\*\*\*

Jacob moves toward the computer to shut it off. Pinch is sitting upright in his chair, nosing at the keys. He discovers there's still a smile left in him for the ferret's antics.

He wishes he had time to sit down and see if Pinch would curl up in his lap. Maybe it could warm him with its simple animal affections.

He's so cold. Always so cold.

But no, no, and again, no. He has to get to work. Owain will be furious if he's late.

A second red-tagged e-mail pops up on the screen as Jacob's finger moves toward the mouse to power down. He stops long enough to read, and winces, regretting it right away. The words are sharp enough to cut. He can hear Owain's disgust in the terse note:

*Jacob, you're late. Are you going to make us all look bad -- again? Make me look like an idiot? Get your ass up here. Now!*

*Owain*

Ah. He's taken too long getting ready, then. He always does.

The dregs of his coffee are poured out in the sink, another dirty mug joining the first. A quick check ensures him that Pinch has enough food for the day.

Then, there's nothing else to do, not really. Just straighten his tie, pick up his briefcase waiting by the door, and walk out into the dawning daylight.

He's ready. Ready to face Owain in his cold office, in his chilly role of *boss* and *superior*, distanced as the moon and just as frigid.

He'll be ready any minute.

Any minute now.

\*\*\*

Worn out beyond even getting off the floor, Jacob and Owain curl up together with their arms and legs entangled. The ocean waves rush in their ears, lulling them into a doze.

Jacob has time for only one thought before he drifts away in the warm comfort of sleep: it's better here.

So much better by far...

\*\*\*

## **The Letter**

Russell,

How's it hangin'? I swear if you write back and tell me "right" or "left", I'll figure out a way to kick your ass long-distance.

Mike says I shouldn't talk like that, but you know I'm just messin', right, Russ?

Look, I'm not much good at this letter-writing shit. Never have been. Not my thing, you know? You yell it in someone's ear or you don't say it at all. But I can't find your cell phone number anywhere and this is the only way I know to shake you down.

I'm glad you decided to live on your own, away from all this crazy, big city stuff. Washington State's gonna be good for you. You've been through enough, you need some time to just be. Trouble is, I don't know if anyone keeps you filled in on everything -- the crowd don't talk much about you anymore, since you left. Sorry.

You know Owain went to head up some big-shot corporation, right? Computers or something? I dunno. Anyhow, ya know, it's like they always say. Power corrupts. Way I hear it, bastard got up in his cushy office and turned cold as a damn popsicle, man. Shut everyone out. Shitty world, huh, where a decent guy can get his head so screwed up?

Anyway, he handpicked some people he trusted and reeled 'em in to play his personal flunkies. Some kinda perk. Most of the crew I couldn't give a shit about, but the one guy I am kinda worried about is Jacob Rushton.

Yeah, I can see you scratching' your head now. Come on, I know you gotta remember Jacob. Him, with that crush on Owain so big everyone knew about? They'd been friends from a long time back, too, so you know Jacob followed Owain out there lickety-fuckin'-split.

See, Jacob wasn't there too long before he just... cracked up. No one's telling me how, or why, or when. Dunno how long ago, either. Maybe two, three months? I hear they tried keepin' him in a psych ward, but he just went monkey-shit. Started tearing up everything he could, saying he couldn't find the ocean.

Bad shit, man.

I don't know if Owain cares or not -- I think he's changed big-time -- but after a while someone found Jacob this little shack on the coast. He has a private-care nurse, even got his pet ferret back. They make sure he can't hurt himself and he can walk around mumbling all he wants, nobody's gonna bug him.

But it gets to me. Jacob don't deserve to be treated like some slobbering no-hope whacko. Me, I think something happened to make his brain crack, and it don't look like Owain's too interested in finding out -- or lettin' anyone dig too deep.

See, what I think? Owain tried playin' Jacob and broke him. Did something. Pushed one button too hard. Played the wrong games. Broke Jacob's heart, broke his head, probably broke a whole hell of a lot of laws, too. He always played things kinda fast and loose when it comes to makin' deals, yeah?

See, now we're getting to the point — why I'm sittin' here scribbling you a crazy-ass note. I can't just leave old Jacob like that, Russ. And weird as this is, you're the only person I can ask. The rest of us are up to our necks in everyday life. You're close enough you could check in on him some weekend, see if he's treated OK. Maybe work on him and see what happened in the first place.

I know you said you were done with this life, and it's cool. I respect. But I'm askin' this one last thing. You and Owain, you hardly ever met. Don't think he'd remember you, or your name.

So, do this? For me. For Jacob. See if maybe you can figure what the whole sorry mess is about, will you? And let me know?

Don't know how to sign something like this, so I'll just scratch my name down here —

-- Becca

(PS — Hope you can read my lousy handwriting, man. I'll be the first to tell you it's pretty bad.)

\*\*\*

Jacob lies curled upon the floor, gripping at the boards with his fingernails. They're cut too short to get a grip, though the once-glossy surface he gloried in has lost its smoothness, and faded to ugly bare wood. He's slept there all night long, head pillowed on nothing but his forearm.

It's still better than the bed. He can't bear the sight of it now, once so beloved. First the heavy quilt vanished, then the pillows.

He'd begun waking to find himself cold underneath nothing but a thin sheet, alone again and again. His lips unknissed. No bumps or hollows in the now-hard mattress where another body would have curled against his own.

Long ago, a small shaggy shape used to come and wiggle under his arm, whining for him to wake — feed, play, laugh at its antics. But the dog — Molly? — is gone now too. He heard her carried away by the tide, yelping frantically, but no matter how hard he swam he couldn't catch her in time.

He thinks she must be haunting him, because every so often he sees a sinuous furry shape from the corner of his eyes, mocking him with a chittery echo of her barks. It looks like a snake with a pelt and he dislikes it as much as he adored the mongrel dog.

Gone, now. All gone.

He'd thought Molly loved him, too. Why does she torment him with the memory of something else he's failed to save?

Jacob runs his hand along the hard floor, rejoicing when he catches a splinter, and then weeps for the pain and all he has lost.

\*\*\*

Russell climbs the rough wooden steps of the beat-up shack he's been directed to. He can't believe Jacob lives there. A letter, worn with reading and re-reading, crackles in the hip pocket of his jeans. It's a few months old now, having been lost in the mail before it turned up. Becca wasn't lying about her handwriting.

Russell's still not sure why he's come. It's not like he and Jacob cared anything about each other back in the day.

But Becca's letter... he almost threw it away, then found he couldn't. Kept taking the thing out to look at. For Becca, it sounded close to begging him for help, and she wouldn't do that if it didn't really matter. If she wasn't needed so much in the city, he thinks, she'd have been out here herself long ago.

But she can't get away, and he lives close enough, so... here he is. Standing on the front porch of a tiny, unpainted, beer crate of a house, feeling like a fool. The sound of rushing waves in his ears and a tang of salt in the air.

He rings the doorbell once, twice, and again. No answer. Knocking, same result. Nurse must be asleep or in the bathroom. Something.

Maybe.

Russell shifts uneasily, feeling weakened porch boards creak beneath his feet. This place needs some fixing-up. With all the money Owain supposedly has now, you'd think he could find something better for a guy like Jacob. A guy who loved him, even if Owain didn't love Jacob back. Right?

So why didn't he?

\*\*\*

The air is cold and stale. Thank God none of the windows are broken, though Jacob has no doubt they will go soon. There are already cracks mazing the surfaces, wild spider webs that need only a — tiny — tap — and they'll shatter. He has nothing to board them up with. Perhaps the sheet from his bed? But no; what would he curl underneath for warmth, when he truly needs it?

Besides, the sheet still smells ever so faintly like Him. The tiniest hint of male musk, spicy cologne, chemicals and hair gel. If he closes his eyes and breathes deeply, he can almost remember snuggling under good, heavy covers and wrapping his arms around Owain.

The sheet is all he has left. He'd rather freeze than put it to any other use.

How did it come to be winter so fast?



Russell's getting nervous, and kinda upset to tell the truth. He's rung the doorbell seven times, hammered with his fist until it's sore, and no answer. He knows it's the right address – he checked, even looked it up, and the name's painted on a rusty mailbox by the weed-grown, dirt-sandy drive. So why isn't anyone around? From what he's heard, Jacob isn't allowed out. There's supposed to be a nurse on duty, dammit. So where the hell is she?

One finger picks at the splits in the loose screen on the porch door, widening a hole without meaning to. When it jabs his finger, he yelps and jerks away, shoving the digit in his mouth to suck at it. He kicks the door and it rattle-bangs almost loose off its hinges. Nothing else happens.

*OK, that's enough. Gotta find out what's going on.*

Hoping one or two windows might be low enough to peek through, Russell wanders around the tiny cottage. No luck. Maybe if he jumped, but it's dark in there. Not a light, not a lamp, and he doesn't think he wants to risk it.

He does notice one thing: there's no cars parked outside. No motorbikes. No scooters, even. How's a nurse from the city going to make it all the way out here without wheels?

Then he sees it, coming back around to the front: a whitish piece of paper jammed down in a dying hedge. It looks soggy and crumpled from morning dew and humid sea air. He doesn't want to touch it, but grimacing, he pulls it out between forefinger and thumb. It's a plain envelope. Scribbled on the front in pencil, just barely readable, are the words "MR OWAIN".

*Okay... all Spidey-senses on alert now.* If Jacob left that for a guy he'd crushed on, he wouldn't say "Mr. Owain". No way can that be his handwriting, either. Has to be from the nurse.

Russell thinks for half a second about whether Owain would mind him opening his mail, then decides he doesn't care. He pries the gummy letter open and finally pulls out a sheet of damp notebook paper.

Same handwriting, the spelling downright scary. Yeah, it's from the woman who'd stayed here, saying she's a home help aide, *not* a nurse, and she wasn't going to live with a nutcase like Jacob any longer. So she quit, as of right then.

It's dated three days ago.

Pretty obvious Owain hasn't been around since then.

Russell's stomach twists. He wonders, staring at the near-illiterate scrawl of the woman, if Owain's ever been out here at all.

He looks up at the house, so dark and quiet, and suddenly he's feeling a whole different kind of sick.

There are noises outside. Strange bangings and a voice he doesn't recognize, muttering things he cannot understand. Jacob's shivers from the cold become tremors of fear. Desperate, he scrabbles his way to the bed and pulls down his beloved sheet, twining it about himself to hide inside. He wishes he had Molly's bright, braided rag rug to put his head under, but that went too... when she did... somewhere.

The noises are louder now, and there's no one to protect him. The kitchen is empty of lover and coffee and comfort and all that's left is the banging and the voices.

He hides beneath his black shroud, faintly scented by his lover's smells, and waits in shaking terror.

\*\*\*

Russell can't just walk away, even to get help. Yeah, this is probably pretty illegal, but so is abandoning a patient who can't take care of himself. And it's easy. The screen door is so loose all he has to do is tap a couple of the pegs, and it comes off the rickety hinges.

He tests the more solid-looking wooden door beneath, and the knob turns in his hands. Unlocked.

A smell wafts out, sour and foul: unwashed things and the faintest lingering trace of burned coffee.

"Jacob?" he calls, half-afraid he'll get an answer. "Jacob, it's Russell Worth. Russ. You in here?"

\*\*\*

Is it a sea monster, come to devour him? Jacob tries to lie still and flat as possible, to be a shadow that blends in with the dark of the room.

When his Owain was there, nothing could harm him. They had golden moments together, touching and drinking deep of each other until they were satisfied by lust and love alike. He could even go out and walk the dunes, plunge into the ocean and swim for hours if he wanted. Knowing, content, that Owain watched out for him, he'd savor the saltiness of the water and taste it on his tongue.

But that's all gone now. He's cold and alone and lost in darkness, and something is coming for him...

\*\*\*

Russell steps carefully inside, avoiding the debris on the floor. Is this Jacob's doing, or does that aide need to be hunted down and killed? Open, half-empty containers of country food – - potato salad, fried chicken, succotash — lie rotting on the countertops. The floor is both gritty and sticky, black in the corners with years' worth of dirt. A box of crackers is spilled out in the middle of the room, as if someone tried to open it, dropped it, and forgot about the thing.

And the dishes in the sink... God, he doesn't want to think about them, but they smell horrible, sour and rancid, piled up as high as the tap. Milk's curdled in a few glasses lined up on the edge, full except for one or two sips gone. Russ isn't house-proud, but this is horrible. No one can live like this.

The smell of burnt coffee is coming from an industrial-sized urn in the corner. He peeks in and sees that there's just the littlest bit of sludge, welded tight to the bottom, sizzling away. Horrified, he jerks the plug. How close did that come to being a fire? With the rest of this mess, he can't see Jacob making coffee. Has it been on for three days?

He's getting a real urge to track that aide down. If he just knew her name - she didn't sign the letter. Owain would know, but he's starting to feel like he really doesn't want to trust Owain on anything.

"Jacob?" he calls softly, stepping over the mess and into a short hallway. "Jacob?"

The place is quiet as a grave. He opens a bathroom door, afraid of what he might see floating in the tub — but no, except for mildew stains on the walls and rotting grout, nobody and nothing in there. Not even toilet paper.

Only a couple other places to look; this shack really is tiny. There's nothing but a sagging couch and an ancient TV in the first of the rooms, so Jacob, if he's gonna find Jacob, has to be in the last one. A bedroom?

Russ reaches for the latch and rattles it. This one's locked from the inside.

Must be it, then.

\*\*\*

It's all his fault. When they came to tell him he was ill, he tried to hide behind Owain for protection, but found himself being firmly peeled away. All the warmth he'd always seen in his lover's eyes had turned cold and decisive.

They took him away from his beloved cottage by the sea, made him stay somewhere stark and cold. He fought them. Owain would understand by now that he'd just been confused. He and Molly would be waiting, dressed in warm flannels by the woodstove, wondering why it took him so long to come back.

Then he came back, but it was different, and cold. A crow fluttered around him every now and then, like Elijah's ravens, offering greasy bits of food and warm glasses of milk. He'd pushed them aside in disgust. He didn't want any of that. He wanted his Owain back, warm arms enveloping and comforting, wanted the coming together of body and soul in the warmth and the light that he was used to.

Why were they doing this to him? What had he done to make Owain stop loving him?

He's been alone, until now. Now, the monsters are coming to get him. He can hear the

rattling at his door.

Won't they leave him alone? Let him stay wrapped up tight in what he has left of the good times. Let him rest in peace.

\*\*\*

Russell hates to do this -- really hates to do this -- but the hinges to this door are on the inside, and the lock's a good one. Probably the only new thing inside the place since the 70's.

So he lifts his fist and punches the wood hard, then kicks it. *Bang! Bang!* "Jacob, don't be scared!" he yells, knowing that it won't do any good. "It's just Russ. I'm coming in to get you. Don't worry." *Bang!*

Finally, finally, there's the *crack* he's been waiting for. The lock wobbles and swings free of its bolt, the wood cracked into splinters. More solid than it looked.

He recoils without meaning to. Fuck, but the room stinks! Like... like something's been dead in there for a while...

\*\*\*

Without his Owain, without his warm haven by the sea, there is nothing left that matters. And if nothing matters, then he has ceased to matter. Therefore, he does not exist; this creature should not know his name, to call it out. He is gone, lost, a dead thing.

He flattens himself as low as he can go and lies as still as possible. *Ignore me*, he sends out silently. *Nothing to see here*

\*\*\*

A small, furry thing, rat-like, chittering wildly, skitters out between Russell's feet as the door swings open. He yells and jumps back, thinking it's a rat, but no -- it stops a yard or so away, sits up on its hindquarters and waves a long body sinuously, furiously scolding him. A ferret. Jacob's pet.

Hope stirs. It looks OK. Decently fed, bright-eyed, not sick in any way. If someone took care of it, then maybe...

\*\*\*

Jacob can hear Molly's chattersome ghost screeching at the intruder. Trying to protect him to the last. There's a faint glimmer of something like love in his heart, but it quickly dies. After all, Molly's not real any more. None of this is real.

None of it ever was.

No, no! He won't think that way. He buries his face in the black sheet and breathes in deeply, frantically, straining to catch that beloved smell of the male who shared it with him.

It happened. Just as he dreamed it, it all happened. He's sure of that.

He's not crazy. Just bereft.

\*\*\*

Thick curtains are pulled across the one bedroom window, leaving it dark as twilight inside. Russell steps in carefully, for fear of treading on or in something, and feels for the light switch. *Click, click*, and nothing. Broken or burned out. Damn. If he just had a flashlight...

"Jacob?" Russ whispers.

You can tell a patient stayed inside this room. An old IV stand is abandoned in one corner, and a lap tray with the crusted remains of a lunch sits by the door. There's a massive bowl of cat food, half-empty, and a licked-dry pail of water. The ferret's? Probably. A pharmacy's worth of pill bottles litter a rickety table beside an old cast-iron frame bed that looks comfortable enough, but has been stripped bare. He peers and thinks he sees a blanket and a thin pillow hurled into the far corner, pawed down by animal feet to make a ferret nest.

"Jacob?"

Russell knows Jacob won't be like he used to be. Back in the city, he'd been tight as coiled twine, stiff as if he had one poker tied to his back and another jammed up his ass. Always made him laugh, how a guy so rigid could get hearts and stars in his eyes over a bastard like Owain.

It's not so funny anymore.

And he's remembering something else now. Something he'd tried really damn hard to forget. Back when he knew Jacob, saw him every few days or whatever, every so often he'd caught a crackle of heat in Jacob's cold eyes that somehow got to him. Made his nerves stand to attention. Got him edgy somehow, so he always ran when he got the chance. Something about Jacob clicking against thoughts he'd buried deep down a long time ago and figured were lost in the past.

He can feel that connection again, weak and fizzy like a bad TV signal. Jacob's somewhere in here. Maybe hiding under the bed?

Scooting carefully across the floor, he starts to bend down to look, and stops.

\*\*\*

The thing, the creature, is walking about his room. It broke down the last of his walls, and Owain has not come. Will not come, now.

Jacob inhales carefully as the being approaches, sure that he will smell the death and rot that's so present here in this abandoned place.

Instead, there's a gust of warm air, rolling through the open door. For just a second, he

smells the sea.

Russell sees him, now. Jacob Rushton. Painfully thin, gaunt, the stubble on his cheeks almost a beard. He's curled up on the floor, skinny knees hugged to his chest and his face buried in them. A scant piece of black cloth, ragged and ripped, is wound tightly around his hands and wrists. Only the gripping of his fingers lets Russell know that he's still alive. Aware.

He listens, and hears Jacob breathing: quick, fast and terrified.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he lowers himself to one knee. Doesn't quite reach out to touch Jacob. Not yet. "Jacob?" he whispers. "Do you know where you are?"

"Do you know who I am?" the thing murmurs. Its voice is black velvet, thick and burly as wood, sounding far away; it echoes in his ears. Hardly daring to, Jacob shakes his head.

"I won't hurt you. Take it easy. I won't hurt you. Hush, now."

A hand touches his shoulder. He stiffens, then shies away from it. Broad as Owain's, but rough where his lover was smooth. Hard where Owain was soft. The stupid, half-formed, dared-to-hope dies in his heart.

"Look at me," the voice coaxes. "Come on, Jacob, look at me."

He raises his eyes, blinking in the harsh light spilling in from — where? — the hallway? — the kitchen? — and sees...

A young god.

\*\*\*

Jacob's gray eyes, once so sharp, are muddy and pale as they wince and squint at him. How long has he had them shut, keeping out everything that he couldn't face? Russell doesn't know. Second thought, he doesn't want to know.

The ferret chatters at him from the doorway, racing in circles. In, out, in, out, in, out. "Good idea," he mutters to it. He glances Jacob over. He's so thin — and are those sores? From the rough wood floor, or bedsores?

That decides him. They're sure as hell not staying here.

He touches Jacob on the shoulder again, not letting him jerk away. "Hey, tough guy? Time to get up, okay? We're getting you out of here. Taking you home."

Jacob's eyes start to brim with tears. Russell gets the sick feeling that whatever it is he's saying, that's not what Jacob is hearing. God only knows what's filtering into that worn-down mind.

"You will come with me," the young god commands — but oh, so gently. Jacob tries his

hardest to look at the creature, to see him as he should be seen. Appreciated. Dark as his Owain, very close in coloring and build, but different. Modeled on smoother, less craggy lines.

"Zeus," he whispers. "Apollo?"

"That's right," the god answers. A warm hand strokes down his arm, gentle and sweet. "Your world has changed. It is time to find a new one. Another sunlit place, with another wood fire and a sea of trees, not water, and another lover to open your heart."

Jacob whimpers. He doesn't want to go.

"Me," the god continues. "Will you come with me? I would take the best care of you that I know how. No harm comes to you in my presence. You will be my beloved, and I will be your own."

The breath catches in his chest. He doesn't dare. Does he? But Owain... what if Owain...

"He is no longer your concern." Gentle fingers dab at the tears rolling down his cheeks. "He does not love you so well as you deserve. He has played you false. Not I. I will be yours until the end of all time, if you wish it of me. Only come with me now. Let me care for you. Will you?"

Jacob's heart is in his throat as he stares at this beautiful god and feels things move within him that have not moved in what seems like forever.

\*\*\*

"C'mon, Jacob," Russell's begging him now, trying to shake some sense into the befuddled man. "You need to get out of here. This place isn't safe. It could come down any second."

He takes a deep breath. Really hadn't been his plan, but... "I'll take you home with me. Find a real nurse who'll help get you healthy again. Get you away from –" the name sticks on his tongue in distaste – "Owain. Okay?"

No response. "Jacob, please." Russell rubs the thin arms, trying to coax some warmth back into them. "Just trust me."

Jacob blinks at him once, twice, three times.

A lifetime seems to pass.

Slowly, too slowly to be a mistake, Jacob nods.

\*\*\*

Jacob thinks longingly for a moment of golden sunshine, and shaggy-haired dogs, and sinking down into Owain's hungry lap in the kitchen. Being devoured, mouth to mouth. Sliding down on that throbbing cock until he's split in half with lust and such good pain and

love.

But then the young god is stroking his lip with the tip of one firm finger, and a thrill runs through him. He calls Jacob 'beloved', and Jacob's chest palpitates.

He nods. If Owain won't come to him here, and if their golden time is truly over... if the gods themselves have arrived to lift him up, and honestly want him...

He is so tired and cold, and he yearns for sunlight and warmth. He nods a second time. His mouth is too tired to form words, and he prays that he's understood.

\*\*\*

It takes Russell only two trips to get everything they'll need out to his truck. No cage for the ferret, so he just prays it won't run underneath his feet when he needs to brake or put on the gas. Food bowl and fresh water on the floor. No idea what they do for litter boxes, so he hopes they're tidy. Cute little guy. His collar says "Pinch". He hopes that's its name, not a warning, or instructions.

Then Jacob. He shudders away from the ferret-nested blankets in the corner, and won't give up his shred of black cloth, so Russell finally gives up and gets his own winter, wood-chopping coat from the truck bed, as well as an old quilt he uses to pad the liner.

Those, Jacob takes without question, threading his arms into the warm fleece and settling with a sigh into the heavy covering as Russell wraps it around him.

Even then, Jacob's light, so light, easy to slide his arms beneath and carry out to the front seat of the truck, arranged in what Russ hopes is a comfortable position. Jacob doesn't make any noises, good or bad, so he hopes it feels okay. It's a good, cushiony seat, reupholstered just last year, though the truck itself is so old there's no division for gear shift or anything.

The letter to Owain he wads into a ball and tosses with all his might. Never was a ball player, but it hits a wave of the outgoing tide and sails away to sea. That feels satisfying.

He doesn't bother to lock the door. No keys, anyway.

Then he's ready to get in the truck himself. He hesitates a little before sliding in. Jacob's a long man, all legs, and there won't be much room for him to be comfortable if he's got to ride scrunched up with his head butted into Russell's hip.

After a long debate, frowning and scowling to himself, he gives up with a sigh, and lifts Jacob's head gently with one hand, easing himself underneath so that the filthy hair rests in the middle of his lap. Yeah, he can drive like this. Better yet, he can hang onto Jacob with one arm, keep Jacob from slipping. This'll work.

The man's breathing is shallow, but steady. He looks pale and gray out here in the strong light, but he's alive. And if there's any justice, he's going to get better. Then Owain's going to catch hell from both of them.

"Hold on, Jacob," he murmurs, stroking back a lank lock of brown threaded through with



early gray. He kicks the truck into reverse and rolls out of the overgrown drive, looking back at the main road, not ahead to the rickety shack by the sea. "It's gonna be all right, you'll see. Everything's gonna be all right."

\*\*\*

Jacob is flying in the god's arms, wrapped around by the softest of clouds and getting warm at last. He can hear a faint pulse beat as he's held close to the divine creature, and it soothes him, as would a kitten's purr.

Something furry crawls up and cuddles under his arm. Molly? No... not Molly... but not the frightening ghost creature, either. This is warm, and snuggles deep into the crook of his elbow.

He spares one last anguished thought for his time with Owain, then shuts his eyes to it all. He has had an Owain. Now, perhaps, he shall have a god.

\*\*\*

## The Letter

...Becca, I'm going to kill Owain. You were right. He's changed. So has Jacob. You wouldn't recognize him. He's asleep in my bed right now and he barely makes a dent under the covers. I had a neighbor who's a nurse come by, and she thinks it's mostly just dehydration and starvation that's wrong with him. I didn't tell her about the mental thing. So I don't know about that. Yet.

But I feel this need, you know? Like I'm meant to take care of him. I washed him, I shaved him, I dressed him in my pajamas — and I couldn't stop touching him. Not like *that* — just couldn't stop needing to feel that he was real.

Sometimes he smiles in his sleep. It's like a kid's smile. Breaks your heart.

What do you think I should do, Becca? Should I keep him here with me and try to make him better myself?

I want to.

But, God, I don't know if I can.

\*\*\*

## The Phone Call

"...yeah, but that's why I called you." Russell is pacing the walls of his bedroom, cordless phone tucked between shoulder and ear. Both hands toy with an oddly shaped river rock, worn shiny from constant rubbing. His lucky piece, only brought out when he's feeling vulnerable. He listens for a minute, and sighs.

"That's the whole point," he tries to explain to the waiting silence on the other end. "I need someone who's good at computers. I know you've kept up. All you have to do is look at the things and you get it. It's all part of that freaky Zen you have going. But most of all I need someone innocent. Outside of all this. Someone they wouldn't suspect of being connected.

"I know it's risky. But Owain's the only one you've got to stay away from. He's never met you. I need your help on this. Come on."

There's a pause before Russell relaxes heavily against the wall. His friend is going to do it. He'll help. Try to hack into Owain's corporation's computers. Find out the story Jacob's still too broken to tell.

"God, I so owe you." Pause. "Nah, I'm not playing guitar any more. Maybe someday. I could, though." He laughs. "What, you want me to write a song for you?"

He pauses, listening to his friend's response, stroking his worry-piece. "You're sure?"

He listens, and nods. "Okay. You trust me, and I'll trust you." He wishes he had something better than this, but meaning it with all his heart, says: "Thanks."

*\*click\**

\*\*\*

Jacob floats in a sea of drowsiness, lazily thinking. Wondering. The thing which has taken him treats him with kindness, but is somehow frightening to look upon. Foreboding, something he cannot name, and is not sure he wants to understand. It must be a powerful force unto itself.

It asks nothing of him save his comfort. And when he moves, the being moves in return, smelling of pine sap and sweet cedar. Its hands are rough but gentle. Its kindness lets him know that all is well here.

And so he's content to lie still, eyes shut. Safe in the beautiful, new world he's been gifted with, where the trees rustle outside richly as his beloved ocean once did, and the air is full of different, but equally pungent smells. The small, warm, not-Molly, but equally furry, thing often comes to lie upon his stomach and chatter softly.

It would be good, he thinks, to remain here forever, where nothing is asked of him — or almost nothing.

\*\*\*

Russell's alarm clock goes off at dawn, his favorite time for rising. His eyes open, and he stares blearily at the ceiling.

Used to be you couldn't pry him out of bed before ten with a crowbar, but since he's come to Washington — gone redneck, Becca says — he's turned into an appreciator of quiet

mornings watching the sun rise over a cup of coffee. There's nothing like it, those moments of uninterrupted peace.

Or they used to be uninterrupted. Now he's thinking, forever thinking, about the man lying in his bed. He won't open his eyes, even when Russell can tell that he's awake, and that scares him. Whatever Jacob's thinking, or dreaming, it's better than here. What happens if Jacob never really wakes up?

So far he's been managing. His neighbor Ellen, the nurse, fat and fifty-ish and a grandmother, comes around to check on things and show him what he doesn't know how to do. The way to massage long legs and arms so they don't get stiff, how to turn Jacob so he doesn't get sore. How to coax thin broth, juice and water down his throat. Just like puppies, she tells him. He's never had a dog, but he caught on fast.

She's not one to go poking her nose into other people's business, but he can tell from the worried look on her face each time she comes by that she's thinking about reporting this. Believing Jacob should be in a hospital, on an IV, monitored around the clock. Not that he'll die. Just that he's sicker than Russell lets on, sick as he really, truly is.

But she likes him. And she likes Pinch, who runs to her feet and sits upright, chittering noisily.Laughs at him, saying he's a worse gossip than her sister, and pretends he's tattling all of Russell's dirty secrets.

And she hasn't told yet.

But each day, he wonders if she might. If he's going to lose Jacob.

Since starting to be afraid of that, his morning coffee has lost its savor.

\*\*\*

Jacob has always loved the early hours the best. The window faces east in this place, and he can feel the sunlight crawl up his body, warming him ever more as it travels. When it reaches his face, he smiles in pleasure.

His beloved smell of coffee, so rich and intoxicating, fills the air and he can hear the quiet sounds of his benevolent protector moving about in the kitchen beyond. There's even the clinks and clanks of a wood-burning stove, the spatter and scent of frying eggs and spicy meat. It's perfect, all as it was before, save that...

But there his mind seems to skitter away. When he was brought here, he lost something that had once been precious to him, and he does not understand it. He holds on to a piece of black cloth tightly wound around his hand, unable to let it go, and puzzles. There are memories... somehow growing vaguer in the sunlight... of where he got his treasure, and the reason he cannot bear to let it go.

Sometimes his keeper tries to take it away, but he resists with all the strength in his enfeebled fingers. The god is never rough, never harsh, and lets go in the end with a sigh and a squeeze

of his hands. He wishes he could give the thing up for its sake, but somehow he cannot. Not yet, not just yet.

\*\*\*

It's the however-many-eth day in, and Russell's hanging on by a thread. He wakes slowly, rolling off the couch one leg at a time, and wanders yawning into the kitchen. He rubs his face and wonders if it's worth shaving, then decides against it.

First things first: food. Nourish the skinny body so it can fight off any lurking infection. His own fatty, bacon-egg goodness won't do for someone who refuses to chew. Man, would he love to see Jacob tear into a plate of that. But that'll wait for another day. When he's sitting up, when his eyes are open. When he can hold a fork. When he recognizes Russell.

For now, Russell takes up a pot of beef bouillon that's been simmering on the back of the range, not too hot, and pours it into a shallow bowl. Ellen says straws are better for this, that Jacob could try to suck the liquid down himself, but Russell doesn't have any and he keeps forgetting to ask her to buy him some when she goes to town.

He doesn't dare leave. If Owain finds out he has Jacob, and comes for him — well, Russell would rather just be there, that's all. In case. He can make do. He always has.

Adding a small, baby-sized spoon that Ellen did have to loan him, Russell carefully carries the broth through to his bedroom. He loves that bed, such a fucking great bed, with the only problem being he's had no one to share it with. It sleeps better than any bed he's ever had, cushiony mattress swallowing him up.

Sometimes he wonders if he shouldn't move Jacob to the couch. Make him less comfortable. Maybe he'd get pissed and wake up at last. But no, Russell can't stand the thought of that. Besides, Pinch likes drowsing on the bed, too, and he'd give Russell hell for moving in on his territory.

Jacob's lying on the left side of the bed, which always strikes Russell as a little funny. He's arranged Jacob in the middle who knows how many times, but the guy keeps on rolling, twitching, shifting over until he's on a definite "I'm-sharing-this" mode.

Probably why Russell always sleeps on the right — or did, before he moved to the couch. So long without any bedmate in there with him, and he still can't get used to flopping down any which way. There's something in him that just makes him want to leave room for another person.

Jacob's position makes Russell want to know, with a strange spark of jealousy, who he's been sharing with. Then he stuffs that feeling down as stupid, and gets on with what he's got to do.

In the early light, Jacob lies still and quiet as ever, though he's got that faint look on his face that says he's maybe just a little bit happy. Awake, anyway. His eyes are moving slightly under their lids.

"Morning," Russell whispers. He knows he's been heard, though Jacob doesn't even twitch. "Breakfast. You hungry?"

He guesses Jacob isn't. But he'll feed Jacob, anyway. Take care of him.

It's just what Russell does now.

\*\*\*

One thing Jacob cannot understand is this god's insistence on lining his mouth with ashes. They're hot, and flow down his throat in gentle, persistent waves. He thinks he'll choke on them, but he struggles not to fight. Perhaps there's healing in them, no matter how foul. Or herbs, are they herbs? Bitter rue and alder bark? He's not sure. But he knows the creature caring for him only means well, so he abides it.

But he hates it. And he wants to open his eyes, his mouth, to tell the god "stop". To let him have some of that fragrant coffee and those eggs, with butter and salt and pepper.

He just doesn't quite seem to have the strength yet.

\*\*\*

Russell studies the bowl. Not bad, Jacob got more than half of it down this time before the grimaces of disgust turned into a softly keened protest. It isn't that great, just canned stuff, but it's got to be nutritious. It says so on the label.

He sets it aside, for Pinch to finish. The little ferret likes the salty broth, and he'll lap up whatever Jacob doesn't want. He can be handy like that. Russell just hopes it's not really bad for him, or that he's not a demon in disguise building up his strength on beefy goodness.

He dabs at the corners of Jacob's mouth, though he's been so neat he barely spilled a drop. The lips twitch under his gentle touch, curling up a little, and he grins in return. "You are in there," he murmurs. "I know you are. You understand a little bit of what's going on. More each day, you know that?"

He thinks so. He hopes so.

\*\*\*

The god-creature speaks soft words, and Jacob knows it is pleased with him. He would like to lift a hand and touch its face as it smiles, to feel the satisfaction ever deeper, but his limbs will not cooperate.

What next? He hopes — this is usually next —

\*\*\*

"Bath time, big guy." Russell folds the covers back and away from Jacob's skinny body. He studies it. Any fatter? Any healthier? Maybe a little. Jacob's lost that gray cast to his skin; it's

pink once more. No real weight gained, though, and from what he remembers Jacob didn't have that much to lose to start with.

Russell's sweatpants and T-shirt drape on Jacob like they'd dangle on a clothes hanger. Still, he always pulls that near-smile when he's dressed in something else warm, something that smells like the house. Like Russell himself.

Russell's not really letting himself think about what that means right now.

That's happening with a lot of things.

So he just takes a deep breath and gets on with it. "You ready?" he asks, sliding one arm beneath Jacob's shoulders, one beneath his knees. "One, two, three, up!"

\*\*\*

Flying — Jacob is flying again! He could throw back his head and laugh for the delight of it. What a wonderful creature his keeper is!

\*\*\*

Russell's already run the tub full of water, hot when it came out of the tap, so it will be soothing and warm when he gets around to dunking Jacob in it. He tests it with his elbow just to be sure. Still feels fine, nice and soothing. The antibacterial bath salts he's poured in have turned it a milky blue. Pretty.

Stripping Jacob is always kind of awkward, though he's not sure if Jacob even notices. Shirt off first, showing a chest that was once muscular. Traces of it linger, even though you can count the ribs. Then the sweatpants. They take barely a tug to come down off his hips and slide down his legs.

Bending to ease first one foot out and then the other, Russell finds himself strangely aware of being this intimate, this close. It's been a long time since high school gym, and back then he'd perfected the art of the thirty-second *eyes-to-the-front!* shower. He's never been this close to another man before.

He wonders, if it wasn't Jacob, or if Jacob wasn't like this, would either of them mind?

He's not sure. He just knows it's getting harder and harder to keep his hands off those long legs, not to stroke them soothingly. Harder to keep his face turned from what he's getting so curious to look at. Harder to keep the baths clinical, gentle but impersonal.

Because it is personal. Jacob is getting under his skin. Inside his skin. Into his own dreams. Sometimes like he was back in the city, with that weird crackling energy between them that made Russell nervous and sent him running away. Sometimes more just a slow burn that pulses through him head to foot.

Gently, he lifts Jacob up and lays him down in the water. There, there's that smile again. He grins himself at the sight of it. "You like that, huh?"

He picks up a soft cloth and rubs the bar of soap into it. "Time to get you clean."

On the outside, anyway.

If he just had a key. A way to get in and wipe away the stains.

\*\*\*

Gloriously naked and uncaring, Jacob floats on his back. No longer the ever-rolling waves of the ocean that lift him up and down, this is the stiller water of a hot spring. The warmth of it fills his muscles with new strength every time. Sometimes he thinks he could open his eyes and look up and around. But no, better to have them closed. It's still better not to see.

He inhales deeply, scenting the personal musk of the god-creature that cares for him. Pure, clean, male. It washes him as tenderly as a baby, the softest of cloths rubbing gently up and down each limb until he feels yet another thin layer of dirt fall away.

When it cleans his genitals, there's always a strange hesitation. As if his keeper doesn't want to intrude, to be too intimate yet. He waits every time, hoping...

And there, yes, the gentle hand lifting his penis and wiping it down with the cloth. A delicious tremor ripples through him, the beginnings of what could deepen into arousal with enough time and strength. The gentle, callused hand feels so very good on him there that he longs to feel it elsewhere, to learn its touch as it roves his skin — not in caring for him as an invalid, but learning him as a man.

All too soon, it's over. Jacob sighs a little as he feels the water of the hot spring begin to drain away, off to some other pool and someone else's pleasure. But that's all right. The best part is yet to come.

\*\*\*

Russell's trembling just a little bit as he hangs the washcloth up to dry. When he was holding... touching... he felt it, just the beginnings of Jacob's erection. Enough to make his own cock swell in response.

And that's just not right. He shouldn't. Not when Jacob's so... and male... but his body's not listening to him, dammit. It wants to keep touching, to see that part of his patient swell up thick and purple. The throb in his crotch grows uncomfortable as he thinks about it. *Whoa, boy. Back off. Ease down. Be careful. You don't want... when he wakes up, he'll probably...*

Russell just doesn't understand himself anymore. Is he lonely, or has he somehow gotten attached beyond the basic rescue mission?

All he knows is that when he takes the razor and scrapes the itchy-looking bristles from Jacob's cheeks and chin, the delicate skin of Jacob's upper lip, he finds his hand tracing after it, feeling the softness. Mapping out each line. Learning it so well he could find it in the dark.

Pictures flashing in his mind of doing just that.

Enough. No, enough! *Lust on your own time, Russell.* Pathetic. Lose an ex, run away to be a mountain man, start humping anything that comes through the door. *Grow up.*

"Okay," he says again. Odd how he doesn't talk much around Jacob. Anyone else, he'd be babbling non-stop, filling up the air. But here and now, the silence is too deep to be intruded on. It's a serious quietness, somehow. "All clean, huh? Back to bed."

And as he lifts Jacob to pat him down dry, dress him, Russell's not thinking about wanting the man he's touching to touch him back. He's not thinking about it at all.

\*\*\*

There aren't any words for it. Jacob's simply lost in pleasure. The delicious rippling still floats through his body, turning every bit of him soft and strong at once. He feels himself begin to rise, to harden. The thrill is better than ever before. And he wants more. More.

He struggles to remember. There was a time when... but he's forgotten. He knows he knew before the god-creature brought him here. Then it changed. What is it that he's lost?

\*\*\*

Jacob's so relaxed by the time they get back to the bedroom that Russell doesn't have the heart to disturb him by threading those limbs back into clothes. Instead, he pulls back the covers and lays down an old, worn sheet, then gently deposits Jacob on top of it.

*Okay, Russ. This is your final test of the morning. Can you do it?*

He picks up a bottle of massage oil, smells the cocoa butter, and dribbles it onto his palms. You have to rub the arms and legs of the bed-bound. Keep their circulation going. It's necessary.

Dammit.

He'd skip it if Jacob didn't have that tiny smile again, stretched out and waiting...

\*\*\*

He thinks he is beginning to remember. Soft touches, soft words -- those are all well and good, but the stiff, vigorous strokes that curl deep into the meat of him bring back more and more of the memories he has lost. Hands working hard at his back, his legs, stroking firmly up and down his calves. He quivers with joy under that rough touch, just what he wanted.

It's good. So, so good. The sunlight alone dresses him, but he can smell the warming fabric of the pants he'll put on. Or maybe he won't. Maybe his keeper will leave him bare. Let him savor this moment as long as it will last.



For some reason — he's not sure why — Russell leaves Jacob naked. The room's warm enough that he won't catch cold, at least for a little while.

Going to put the cocoa butter away, he almost walks into Pinch. The ferret stares up at him, looking for all the world like it's weighing him in a balance.

Russell can't help but grin at it. He runs a hand across the stubble on his cheeks. "What, I'm not pretty enough for you?"

Pinch chirrups.

"He's like a cat, you know?" Russell says conversationally, and here's the babble he finds lost around Jacob: "People say that cats have nine lives, right? Three for playing, three for straying, and three for staying. I think that whatever else was going on, Jacob was playing around in it. Then he wandered off inside his head and got lost. Except I found him."

*And I want to make him stay.*

He peers at the little creature. "Does that make any sense?"

Pinch gives him a disgusted look. The ferret clearly thinks he's insane.

Which is probably right; after all, he's had nothing but an animal to hold a conversation with for several days. He wishes Jacob would wake up. He wants to hear that voice again.

Russell closes his eyes, suddenly tired. *Quit lying to yourself.* He doesn't know how, he doesn't know why, and he doesn't know when, but if he's gonna be honest with himself he's wanted more than that voice for days now. He wants those long fingers to wrap around his own. He wants to see what those lips taste like.

Wants to dig his fingers into that back, but in an embrace, not a massage.

He wants Jacob.

But Jacob might be gone forever.

And he doesn't know what he's going to do.

He turns to gaze down at the man, so beautiful, so beaten, so lost... so wanted. Licks his lips. Thinks, for just a strange second, about fairy tales, and almost laughs.

How do you wake a dreamer?

With a kiss.

"Hey, Jacob?" he whispers. "Don't get mad. Okay? Just once. Just so I can rest. I have to — I have to know —"

Bending over, bracing his weight on his arms, he touches his lips to Jacob's. Carefully, tenderly, just flicking his tongue out a little to taste Jacob's skin. It's as sweet as he'd dreamed, and bittersweet, too. Because if that's all he'll have...

Then he'll take what he can get, and pray that Jacob won't hate him. Not really even thinking, just doing, just being, he climbs up on the bed he hasn't lain on since Jacob arrived and stretches out beside Jacob. The warmth of the sunlight and the softness of the mattress embrace him snugly as a long-lost friend.

Reaching out, he strokes down the length of Jacob's bare chest. *Beautiful*, is his last exhausted thought. *Want. Need. Love...*

And he is asleep.

\*\*\*

Jacob is asleep, and dreaming, but knows that he is dreaming. He is stretching out on the bed, strong as ever, graceful as the ferret in his lazy undulations across the mattress. The sound of laughter fills his ears, and he rolls, throwing a leg across his lover's own to trap him there.

"And what's so funny, eh?" He can hear the chuckling in his own voice. "I'm a tired man with a great many sore muscles."

"Mmmm." A warm body snuggles up close to his, arm sliding across his chest. A voice, rich and heady as the smell of cedar, rumbles in his ear: "And how'd you get that way, sweetheart?"

"You," he whispers back. "You. It was always you."

"Now you're talking." There's the slight sting of a playful bite on his earlobe. He yelps, pretends to slap at the hand, and then they're rolling, one across the other, over the vast expanse of mattress that seems to have no end.

It stops with more laughter, as he's pinned by his lover's strong arms. "Gotcha! You can run, but you can't hide." The man wriggles above him. "Where are you gonna go now?"

"Nowhere at all," Jacob murmurs. The grin hovering just above his own is bright as the rising sun, and just as beautiful. It begs to be kissed and so he kisses it, hungry for the taste and touch, slipping his tongue through eager lips to twine with the other's. He draws back just long enough to say: "I'm staying right here."

His lover nibbles at his lips, sipping his kisses. "That's what I wanted to hear," he whispers. "Here is where you belong. With me."

"With you," Jacob agrees, his arms sliding loose of his lover's grip and coming up to wrap around his back. Warm, living, loving. "I see it. I belong with you, now."

"Now and always." The man thrusts down gently; Jacob can feel the heated pressure of an erection pushing against his own. It feels so good, this long-forgotten sensation, that he groans into yet another kiss. They begin to move, one against the other, slick and hot and just right, strength into strength, body and soul; fingers are probing gently, opening him up, and they are becoming one...

And Jacob...

Jacob...

Wakes up.

\*\*\*

His eyes fly open under the strong, harsh light of noon — or is it later? For a moment, he is horribly confused. Where is this place? He doesn't recognize — but then he smells it, and it all comes back to him. The woods, the maleness, the reality.

There have been hands on him, loving and kind. The warm eyes of his god-creature — no, his caretaker — no, his rescuer -- watching over him when he needed it the most. Lips that did touch his own.

How had he gotten so lost that he didn't know what he had found?

He shakes his head in wonder, staring at Russell. Feeling those familiar/unfamiliar arms wrapped around him. Watching him stare back, obviously startled out of his own dream. Red with blushes from being caught like this.

Wanting Jacob so much that he reached for him even in his sleep.

Tentative, Jacob reaches out to stroke Russell's face. He is older than Jacob remembered, a grown man now, aged into himself like a fine wine. "Oh," Jacob whispers.

Russell looks horribly embarrassed. "You're awake," he stumbles, trying to untangle his arms. "Oh, god, Jacob, I am so sorry. I didn't mean..."

"Don't." Jacob tightens his own grasp. Not harsh, but firm, meaning every bit of it. He knows what he felt when dreaming, he knows what he feels when awake. And he doesn't want to lose that. Not now, not ever. "Don't go," he whispers, meaning it. "Stay."

He can feel Russell shaking just a little. Filled with yearning and fear, wanting and uncertainly. "I shouldn't."

"Stay," Jacob whispers, and kisses him again, kisses him back, in exchange for the loving token that brought him out of his dazed world.

"Stay," he whispers, tracing his tongue against those lips.

And: "Stay," he whispers, nuzzling against his soon-to-be lover. Better than any dream.

And Russell does.

He stays.

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### **The Phone Call**

Jacob stands behind Russell, still thin and fragile, but on his own two feet, under his own steam, and holding Russell's hand. Russell's on the land-line, just listening, waiting for the long-distance connection to click through. He's got no idea what he'll find out when his friend answers.

If Owain knows he's gone.

If Owain's searching for him.

If he knows Russell has him.

No matter what they may end up having to do, it won't change what they have. Russell's keeping Jacob, and Jacob is keeping Russell. Safe in the small cabin and far away from what drove him so deep into his own mind that only this strange and wonderful thing they have together could bring him back out again.

They wait, together, for the line to connect. Jacob squeezes Russell's fingers and smiles at him. A true smile, alert and sparkling. There's so much of the story left to tell. So many things left to find out. But they know what's important.

The line clicks. Relying on the connection.

Soon, they'll know what happens next. And that'll be another story. But until then and after that, they'll have each other. In dreams and in reality.

And that's all that really matters at all.

*\*click\**

## “A Better Spirit”

There is a reason why Luke stares at the blue-eyed man when he rounds the corner in the hallway of his brand new job at the New York Public Library. Why his "oh, my God," is quiet and touched with awe.

He knows this man and his face, because he's searched for it at great length. He knows it nearly as intimately as his own. There is no doubting who this is, no matter how remarkable it might be to see him here.

As Luke stares, he sees beyond the maple-colored hair grown long to something he has struggled to understand for years. Because despite all that he has seen and done, he's long believed this meeting would never happen. He's nearly convinced himself that his London madness was all the fevered imaginings of a brain over-taxed by study in a foreign land.

Though he has never forgotten it.

As he stares in wonder at the man, who's not yet noticed him, he thinks back to a time ten or more years gone, and remembers when he last saw this man. In England. Under very different circumstances indeed...

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Stranger things have happened, more than once. Time folds inward on itself occasionally, as pleats in a length of fabric, until the then touches the now. Sometimes in dreams, and sometimes in reality.

It always happens to the ones who expect it least. Are they the ones who deserve it most, or not at all? There's no telling.

But it does happen. Look around. In any crowd, there's at least one person who's felt the cool finger of the past brush down their cheek. A strand of gray in otherwise young hair, a haunted look to the eyes, a grim set to the jaw. These are the folks who have seen or felt the presence of the dead brushing against their lives.

Yet, if you look again, you may see one with a certain sort of smile that never fades, neither from eyes nor from the soul reflected within them. Their meetings with history have been gentler.

It could be they never knew what happened. A soft weight settling on their beds while they lie fast asleep and a long-gone mother's hand smoothing down their hair. Passing a cheerful flower-seller in the street and being charmed by the old-fashioned airs of her.

This, too, is the past reaching out to touch the present. Mostly it's quiet — it must be, for the veils between the worlds don't often allow for greater contact than a bit of sight, a little sound.

But rarely — oh, ever so rarely — the walls part just long enough for something, or someone, to pass through. Again, no one knows why. It just happens.

And one never realizes it until it's over.

This is the story of how it happened once, and what became of it.

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Newly minted as a graduate in arcane studies and archaic languages, Luke Grey is still a young man, though he has never felt that way. Deep inside, his soul is withered and unhappy and old. His parents never wanted a child; they wanted a miniature grown-up, smart and neat and polite, to show off as the next generation of the mighty.

"Grow up!" were his orders, and he has ever since striven to do so. Serious and solemn and sober and dedicated, he is everything an academic should be. His life is lived by the book, every action done by carefully protected rote, and his soul nearly deadened from the strain.

Perhaps it's because he's lonely.

"Dating" is more or less discouraged among the circles his family moves in. Parents still arrange marriages more or less as business deals, benefiting them instead of the mates to be. There's no fighting something so commonly accepted and expected. Just another part of life to cope with.

Luke expects he will be ordered to do the same someday. On a schedule, more than likely with a horsy-faced girl whose pedigree runs as deep and long as his own. It's no wonder that he shudders away from the thought, and thanks all merciful powers daily that his father has not summoned him for That Conversation.

The trouble is, he knows he wouldn't know the first thing about how to act around a young lady. His fellow students and professors are used to him being stiff and shy and awkward, and the kinder females among their number leave him comfortably alone. The men, unless they need something, prefer to leave him alone as well.

Luke doesn't fit in. He never has; he never will. Were it not for his father, he's well aware that, brilliant though he might be, he would not be where he is.

Often, he wonders if he would be happier elsewhere, though this is the only life he has ever known. Sometimes, in his narrow bed at night, he runs thoughtful fingers across his chest and ponders what life might be like as a doctor, a lawyer, a window washer. Would he have cracked through the thick eggshell that divides him from the rest of humanity? Would it be there at all?

He doesn't know.

But he does know this, and never more keenly than when he lies by himself at night: he is lonely.

He doesn't want an elegant lady, whose lip will curl behind his back, lying stiff and silent beside him in a cold bed. He has pondered the thought of trying whores (secretly, shamefully) but he can't make himself take such a step. Cheap perfume and overripe curves don't do a thing for Luke; in fact, he despises them for some reason he can never quite understand.

Occasionally he writes in his journal, in a nearly-lost language that very few understand, and talks to himself of the things that he yearns for.

Companionship. Quiet friendliness from someone who understands what it means to be alone amongst the crowd, forever striving for acceptance yet somehow always... just... missing it.

He never expects to find it.

And so it is the very greatest shock of his life when, following an afternoon of traipsing London in search of rare books, he enters the quietest pub he can spy out and discovers what he has been longing for all his life.

It's his secret shame, isn't it? Father tried to beat it out of him when he was a boy. The way his eyes would follow the comely, young men about their estate, rather than linger on the ladies with their long legs and softer curves. Many's the blow across his legs and bottom that he'd received from Father's heavy, affected walking stick when he was seen to glance too long at a young gardener stooping to plant a tree in the ground.

It was a wonder, really, his being sent away to school. Most young boys of his age, knowing what tales were told about what went on after dark — or even during the daylight hours — shook in fear of being tortured by the older students.

All the way to the train station, through the long ride, and the taxi to the school, Luke kept his eyes down to hide the wondering glow within them. Wrong, wrong, he knew it was wrong, and that he was a sick and warped young man, but at that age he had not yet forgotten how to dream. Maybe someone handsome, a few years older and wiser, might take a liking to him. Become his protector. Teach him.

He'd swallowed, and felt his hands go damp. Perhaps that boy would even care about him. Maybe.

But again, life had sorely disappointed him. What Luke Grey wanted most, he was most certain not to get. His housemaster not only had eyes in the back of his head, but a strict, Puritan conscience and spies everywhere. Most particularly, under Father's orders, the man erected a wall of protection around Luke.

Luke never made a friend, much less had a lover during all his years at school.

Perhaps that was when he gave up hope.

But this afternoon... coming in from the miserable, gray drizzle that is the constant of London weather, shaking droplets of moisture from his good, gray coat, he glances around himself and feels very strange, peculiarly at home.

Odd. He's certainly never been to this pub before, and would not have stopped in had it not been the closest at hand.

But he likes it. And he's not one to make snap decisions in favor of things, not any more. Yet how could it not appeal to him?

The place has all the flavor of a hostelry that time has forgotten. He's read of such places, and imagines that they still exist somewhere in the country, but never in London where things must be posh and bright, glittering with neon lights and redolent of cigarette smoke.

What this establishment is... is quiet. No -- peaceful. Serene with such an overwhelming sense of calmness in the air that it ripples through Luke's tense, tight muscles and sets them at ease before he knows what's hit him.

Honey-golden floors gleam with wax, as do tables and stools. An inviting color, coaxing one to walk across them and sit in comfort. There's a fireplace of an excellent size with logs *crackling! snapping!* and throwing out the most welcome of heats to a chilled pedestrian. It even has metal hobs set up at either side of it. The air smells of yeasty beer, mulled wine and pipe smoke, not cheap cologne and the musky sweat of the unwashed.

It amazes him how few folk are in here. A handful of men, scattered round about, supping quietly at pints with thick, frothy heads of foam. A lady sits in the corner, calmly reading a book and sipping at a glass of something dark that he imagines must taste fruity and dry rolling over her tongue.

And then... there is *him*.

He's young, perhaps near Luke's own age, with no lines on his face nor a bow to his back. They share the same slightly slumped shoulders that come from forever bending over books, as indeed he is right now. His chin is propped in his hand as he studies the lines in a battered, old tome.

Luke squints. Poetry? Perhaps. An edition of the *Faerie Queene*. It's an elegant, long-fingered hand that turns the pages slowly, while the other is propped beneath his chin.

Luke doesn't even feel himself falling before he's completely gone.

It's rude, but he finds himself unable to move or peel his eyes away. Luke's throat grows dry. Wrong, wrong, wrong... yet the pull that he feels is so very intense...

The fellow hasn't even noticed the pub door opening. Indeed, aside from a measuring glance from the landlord, no one has taken any notice of his entrance.

He could slip out now, unnoticed. Walk away from the temptation that he faces. Avoid the



almost certain humiliation to come if he dares to walk across to that young man's table, introduce himself, and ask if he might join him.

He could.

He should.

He doesn't.

"Forgive me," Luke says, somehow managing not to stammer. "I had wondered if this seat was taken? I know there are plenty others, only this one is so nice and close to the fire that it looked terribly comfortable. And I had thought that perhaps if you didn't mind I might sit here quietly with you and read my own books, and —"

*He* looks up quizzically, a finger automatically marking his place in *The Faerie Queene*. Those gorgeous eyes examine Luke for a brief moment that seems to go on forever and makes him squirm. Luke's not a handsome man, and he knows it — chin too sharp, lips too thin, hair cut in a way he realizes looks too severe but doesn't know what to do about — and next to this rumpled young beauty he must look like the worst sissy-boy in history. His cheeks flush red, and he's ready to back away with apologies.

But *he* nods. Saying nothing at all, he indicates the chair beside him, not across from him, and smiles. It is a timid smile, yes, but a beautiful one, and it takes what is left of Luke's breath away.

There's no grace in the way Luke manages to fumble his way into the seat, nor in the unpleasant bang his book makes when it hits the table. Yet the man beside him doesn't seem to mind. He casts a shy and curious look at the title, frowning a bit when he can't read the language, then gives Luke another hesitant smile.

He gestures at his own book with a deprecating shrug, as if to say he can't quite rise to those heights, and is asking pardon for being stupid.

"Oh, no!" Luke protests. "This isn't English, it's—" He stops himself before he looks like an intellectual snob. "Something else," he finishes lamely.

*Oh*, the man nods. He looks as if he'd like to reach for the book, to run his hands over the ancient, leather bindings, but contents himself with a wistful look.

"Books are the most beautiful things in creation, yes," Luke surprises himself by saying. "Don't you think? All the wealth within them, and their casing besides. The smells of ink and paper and old leather."

The man smiles and nods appreciatively. "Old books are best," Luke ventures. "Paperbacks lack soul."

At that, the man laughs, albeit silently. He slips his fingers out of *The Faerie Queene* and folds his hands atop it. His eyes twinkle bashfully behind his glasses.

It does not occur to Luke to wonder why the fellow hasn't spoken yet. His own waterfall of words is astonishing enough that he's no room left in his mind for musing on *his* silence. All he can think of is this man's amazing face, and the fact that *he's* looking *back* at Luke.

He almost seems... interested. Embarrassed and shy, yes, but interested. As if he'd like to know Luke better.

But Luke knows how unlikely it is that they will ever meet again. A chance encounter in a bar; he's heard enough tales to know that these golden moments never last. And it is golden — it shines, sweet and warm as the rich wood surrounding them — a bubble of time in which they, and only they alone, exist.

His throat is dry, though his heart is pounding within it. He has never done this before. It is rash. Foolish beyond compare. But as he looks at those blue eyes, those tender lips, his adoration for them grows until it becomes desire, and desire becomes yearning.

The man seems content to sit and smile at Luke, warming Luke with his presence, but... oh, God, he cannot let this slip away. He swallows hard and dares to put out his hand.

"I'm Luke," he says hoarsely, praying those gorgeous, slim fingers will rise and wrap around his own. To touch them, should he be so lucky...

And he is, for without hesitation *his* hand lifts to grasp Luke's own. It is warm and dry in his grasp, good and firm. *He* still doesn't speak, but inclines *his* head with the graciousness of any lord, and another of the very shy smiles.

Then Luke does something very foolish. Without considering it. The options. The consequences. He takes the index finger of his hand, and drags it in a long, slow stroke across the stranger's palm.

The man freezes.

Luke's stomach flips over. How did he — where did he get the foolish courage? It's an old sign, from before his time, and he doesn't know if this fellow will understand it at all. There are new gestures these days, if folk bother to be that discreet, but with that brush of his finger he has spilled forth everything that has been building within him:

*I want you.*

Sexually.

The moment goes on forever, and he cannot read the expression in those eyes of blue. Absurdly, flashes of that song by what — the Who? — croon in his mind. *No one knows what it's like/ to be the bad man/ to be the sad man/ behind blue eyes...*

What is *he* thinking?

Their hands are still touching; *he* has not pulled away. Luke sees the man's throat work nervously, and breathlessly watches *him* glance back up to meet his horrified/anxious/ eager gaze.

Then *he* smiles again. Soft and shy. And *his* own finger, warm and comforting, slides along the contours of Luke's palm.

Within his suit pants, the half-quiescent erection Luke has borne since he sat down at the table swells into fullness. "My God," he breathes. "Yes?"

The man nods *his* head bashfully. *Yes*.

Things go a bit hazy for Luke after that. He remembers letting go, ever so reluctantly, of that warm hand. Standing and beckoning, as if he knew where to go. They left their books on the table, as if certain they would be safe there.

And then he's outside again, following a honey-colored head of hair around the side of the building. Timid glances back at him make certain that he's following — as if he would leave. No words are spoken; none are needed, and now that this is actually happening, Luke cannot find a single thing to say.

His cock is so hard it aches, a state he is never able to achieve on his own, and when the beautiful man turns around to beckon him by a corner of the pub he sees a corresponding bulge between those slender thighs.

If he does not touch the man again soon, he knows that he will burst.

But thank God, they have come to where they were going and it is far better than he could have hoped for. A small byre, old-fashioned as the rest of the pub, stuffed with straw and stacked with logs for the hearth. The smell is musty, warm and heavenly, and the quarters are close, with just enough room for the pair of them. The man turns back to Luke and smiles nervously.

*He* knew where to go, but if *he's* ever done this before, there's no telling. *He* lingers back against a bale of hay, as if afraid to approach. But the urgency that drove Luke on in the first place has settled on him again, and with courage he did not know he possessed he approaches the beautiful man, lays his hands on those slim shoulders, and leans in to kiss the shapely lips.

First kiss. For Luke, at least. For the man? Perhaps? They are clumsy at first, not knowing what to do with their noses, nor how to move their mouths against one another. What Luke tries, the other man copies, until he hears the breath catch in that throat and their rhythm falls into place. No longer moving uselessly against one another, their lips and teeth cling and catch, sucking and nibbling.

Everything that they think of, they try, and it all feels so heavenly-holy-good that Luke doesn't realize how close their bodies have drawn until they collide and the heavy weight of an erection rubs hard against Luke's own.

He pulls back with a startled gasp, as does the other man. For a long moment they stare at each other, as if stunned by this evidence of the strange and new-sprung passion between them. But Luke is confident now, and holding on to the last strings of his control. He wants more. Everything that he has dreamed of, if this man is willing to give it, then he will take it.

"Please," he whispers. "Let me taste you. You needn't do anything. Only just let me..." his voice drops, and his hand, bolder than the rest of him, slips between them to brush against the hardness that matches his own. "May I?"

The stranger nods, his face dazed. *Yes*, he seems to say, and Luke is more than happy to oblige.

He has done this a thousand times in his dreams. One last lingering kiss, for the sake of the flavor of the other man's mouth, and then he's slowly sinking to his knees. His hands find their way to lean hips, and he bends forward just far enough to press his mouth against the man's cloth-covered cock straining at the seams of his pants.

The man shudders once, hard. His hands come down to Luke's shoulders and squeeze. *Yes, he is saying. Oh, God, yes.*

*His pants button instead of zip, and beneath them he wears nothing.* The musky smell of masculinity and the slightly bitter tang of pre-ejaculate fill the air. Luke knows himself for a wanton now, but his mouth waters at the scent and he can't help but kiss the tip of the man's cock, then lick his lips for the residue clinging to them.

More. He needs more.

He has never done this; he does not know how to do this, but he has imagined it so many times and he is a very quick study. He learns the different reactions that long, laving strokes and short, quick laps bring; he sucks hard at the spongy tip for the sour-sweet taste that is better than wine, and takes as much of the cock into his mouth as he can. His hands drift, touching the wrinkled softness of the man's balls and caressing them lightly as featherdown. With each move and each shudder of his new partner's body, his own excitement grows until he cannot bear it. With his free hand he fumbles his own trousers open to stroke himself hard and fast.

His lips are fastened around the other man's cock when the hands on his shoulders tighten and he hears the first audible sound from his partner of the moment -- a soft cry. His hips thrust forward hard, and Luke's mouth is suddenly filled with spurts of salty, sticky seed. He swallows once, twice and again, desperate for every drop that's given to him. Smears cling like dew to his lips and chin as his own climax bursts forth in a fiery blaze, spilling his semen into the straw he kneels on.

The man collapses forward against Luke, leaning all *his* weight on Luke's shoulders for the briefest of moments. They both tremble and shake like aspens in the breeze, clinging to one another for dear life. Virgin no more, Luke feels something deep inside himself -- a seed of being he had long since thought dead -- begin to unfurl.

"Beautiful," he manages to whisper. "My God, you are so beautiful."

One hand releases his shoulder, and runs through his hair. It pulls him to a warm thigh where he can rest his cheek. They cling together until the last of the shivers have passed.

When he can, Luke rises to his feet and without permission kisses the pretty mouth again, hungry as ever he was. "Will I see you again?" It's desperate, but he doesn't care. He cannot give this up after just finding it. He must, must have more time with this fallen angel.

The man regards him with blue eyes still a little hazy from climax, but the sweet, shy smile lifts *his* mouth at the corners. *He* nods once, then leans forward for a kiss that is almost chaste in its delicacy.

*He* gives a sideways glance to the door, then back at Luke with the greatest of reluctance. And though it pains him, the message is clear: the man must go. Wherever it is that *he's* needed next. Perhaps back to a college; *he* has the look of a professor.

"Meet me here again tomorrow?" Luke fumbles for the delicate hand. "Here. I'll wait for you. Please? Say that you will."

He gets no answer save for another kiss. A ravenous, devouring kiss that steals his breath away and leaves him boneless as a doll.

When he opens his eyes again, the man is gone.

\*\*\*

Luke combs the streets the next night, hunting for the pub, but to his dismay he cannot find it. He was certain it lay two streets over from the latest bookshop he visited, and he knows that location as well as his own hand. But when he asks about it, he receives only frowns in response and shakes of the head.

Where it should be, there is a small tailor's shop.

He waits outside, but no beautiful, honey-haired man comes wandering by, book in hand. He waits until it is full dark, and he must go back to his digs or risk being caught by his landlady, who suspects him of every evil under the sun.

But he comes again the next night, and the next. Always hoping. Watching. Waiting. Turning down the advances that seem to come quick and fast now, as if his encounter in the byre uncorked something that both men and woman can recognize within him. He wants none of them. He wants his stranger, and no other.

He is still coming when the call comes through from New York, in America. A college desperately needs an expert translator of ancient languages, and he's been recommended for the job. It's the opportunity of a lifetime, and he'd be a fool to turn it down.

He's dizzy with his good fortune, and can think only, desperately, of one last chance to find his one-time lover and let him know. To beg him, if he is found, to come along with Luke, back to America. There must be a way. He'll find one; he'll make one.

But the pub is not there. And as he turns away from the tailor's shop, feeling sick to his stomach, he knows that he has lost something infinitely precious.

What he doesn't understand is why it was ever given to him at all. A taunt? A tease? A gift?

Perhaps he will never know at all.

And for five years, he does not.

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But when *he* turns that library corner, there is a moment — one small and single moment — when Luke catches sight of the blue in those eyes, that shade he's never seen before in any other man, and his heart leaps straight into his throat again. His mind shuffles back through countless, dusty pages, and the realization of what he has missed for years hits him with the force of a sledgehammer.

"You," he breathes. "You, here?"

The man casts him the barest of glances. Yet in that look, for just the smallest fraction of a second, there is a startled recognition.

The moment passes. His stranger moves past him without a word, and Luke is choked for sound, silent and staring after him.

But deep inside himself, he is full to the brim with the wonder of a mystery solved and another unburied.

He wonders to himself: what will happen next...?

\*\*\*

When Sean turns the corner in his library, there is a moment — one small and single moment — when he passes a man who stares at him and whispers: "You?" He catches sight of the sea green in a strangely familiar set of eyes, a color he's only ever seen once before, and his muscles twitch despite themselves. There's a startled moment of recognition, a quick *no, it couldn't be*, and then he's passed and left the green-eyed man behind.

But he can't shake the feeling that he knows that face, those hands --

Then the moment passes. He has a secret to keep, and he's spent the last five years building a life for himself that no one can find out about.

But deep inside himself, he's full to the brim with the wonder of a mystery solved and another unburied.

Somehow, he knows he'll meet Green-Eyes again. And he wonders to himself: what happens next?

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Sean ponders on it for a long time that night. He lives alone, in a small but comfortable cranny of an apartment, and no one's around to bother him. He stretches out on his bed, spreading his arms angel-wide, and thinks hard to himself.

He knows that stranger things than his coming all unaware to this time and place must have happened. Time turns in on itself every now and again, like the folds of a curtain, until what was then touches what is now. Mostly in dreams, yeah, but every so often in reality. Like with him.

And it always happens to them that least expect it. How come? Are they the ones who most deserve it? Or is it a punishment? In his opinion, there's no telling.

But it happens, he knows that for sure. Especially in a place like this city. It's old and full of secrets, strange things that have no explanation. Like him, jumping forward a hundred years in time, a stranger in a strange world, living by his wits.

And he's made a life for himself. Had to drop all his airs and graces, touch base with some dodgy individuals, but he has a forged degree and license and credentials. He's in all the computers as an expatriate British citizen, resident of New York. He's rising fast in the ranks at the library.

But he's never forgotten his life in Victorian London. The rank pea-soupers, the lonely hole he lived in, and the warm pub he used to spend his nights at.

The pub... that man...

He slaps himself in the forehead, stunned. *Now* he knows where he's seen Green-Eyes before. Five -- a hundred -- years ago, in that pub. They shared one night, just one night together and he'd thought he would never see the man again.

Though he came to the pub every night, hoping for a chance to meet with him just one more time...

\*\*\*

A new-made professor of poetry, Sean was still considered to be a young man. He's never felt young, though, what with Father dying when he was just a lad, and Mother to take care of. He'd learned from the age of five that he should have to grow up quick and smart, and do his duty by his family.

He's tried. God knows, he's tried. But everything he tangles with, he somehow manages to muck up a bit. They're too poor for the latest fashions every year, so they go about a bit shabby. It's just him and Mother, and a full household staff isn't sensible. They make do with one maid and a cook. Cook knows only how to make watery soups, glutinous puddings, and burn costly meat to a crisp. The maid dusts when she feels like it, beats the

carpets out at her pleasure, and dawdles about her daily tasks. They're both dreadful and he knows it, but what's to be done? He can't afford better.

The position he's just secured should bring a little more into the coffers, but it's thrown him into the class of working men, made him no longer a gentleman. This isn't good, especially when he knows that he'll have to marry well, and marry soon, in the hopes of a dowry to augment the family's meager funds.

There are... certain girls... beautiful young ladies... and he strives over love poems to them, because for some reason he's got the idea that it's the accepted thing to do. He's not sure. There's no one to ask.

But despite, or perhaps because of that, he's lonely.

He'd like a bit of companionship far more than he would a wife. A merry-eyed lad, or a serious, bookish chap about his age who he could smoke and talk about books with. Even someone to go riding with, though he's not much good at that. Best of all, a man already married, who could guide him through all these mysteries of courting.

He hasn't a clue how to act around young ladies, let alone Ladies. His new colleagues, that's one thing. They're quite used to him being stiff and shy and awkward, and the kinder few wives and daughters among their number leave him comfortably alone. These days, gentlemen -- unless they need something -- prefer to leave him rather severely by himself.

He knows why. He doesn't fit in. Never has and never will. Sometimes he thinks his life here is simply an accident of birth, and that he was meant to be born into the working class or a much richer family, where he could pursue his poetry with all the passion he has in him.

Often, he wonders if he would be happier elsewhere, though this is the only life he has ever known. Sometimes, in his narrow bed at night, he runs thoughtful fingers across his chest and ponders what life might be like as a doctor, a lawyer, a librarian. Would he have cracked through the thick eggshell that for ever divides him from others? Would it be there at all?

He doesn't know.

But he does know this, and never more keenly than when he lies by himself at night: he is lonely, and craves companionship more than a wife.

Companionship. Quiet friendliness from someone who understands what it means to be alone amongst the crowd, forever striving for acceptance yet somehow always just missing it.

He never expects to find it.

And so it was the very greatest shock of his life when, following an afternoon of traipsing London in search of rare books, he sat down to take a meal at his beloved pub and discovered what he had been longing for all his life.

Sean had always known his secret shame for what it was. Tutors tried to beat it out of him, and Mother wept about it when she learned the truth. For her sake, he's swallowed down



any talk of his desires or his preferences. But he could never stop the way his eyes followed the comely, young men striding about their estates, rather than linger on ladies in their sweeping skirts. When he stops to remember, he can yet feel the pain from the *smack!* of a teacher's ferrule when he was caught gazing out the window at a handsome, young gardener trimming the bushes.

He knows it was a wonder, really, that he ever went away to school. There were stories about what the boys did to one another, and Mother thought him almost too fragile. It was a near thing, but in the end he did go.

All the way to the train station, through the long ride, and the horse-cab to the school, Sean kept his eyes down to hide the hopeful glow within them. He knew it was wrong, and that he was beset with a sickness, but at that age he had not yet forgotten how to dream, and his mind was full of fanciful images. Hopes and notions, about older boys, with strong arms and commanding ways, filled his mind.

He'd swallowed, and felt his hands go damp. Perhaps some boy would even love him.

But again, life sorely disappointed him. What he wanted most, he was most certain not to get. Plenty of boys took advantage of his slight frame; used his mouth and his asshole to derive their pleasures from, but none did more than laugh at him, after, and perhaps beat him. Others, who knew he had at first gone gladly to such demands, shunned him as unnatural.

Sean never made a friend, much less had a lover during all his years at school.

Perhaps that was when he gave up hope.

But this afternoon... he takes a little comfort in being in his favorite pub. They're quiet here, with an old-fashioned flavor that he appreciates. The place is quiet, serene. Old men play dominoes in chairs by the fire and mulled wine warms on the hobs while meat turns juicily on the spit. He can only afford this treat once or twice a month, and he's determined to savor it for as long as he can.

So he orders wine, first, to sip while he alternately reads his book and gazes around.

And then suddenly, opening the door and shaking himself free of the ever-drizzling rain... there is *him*.

*He* is young, perhaps near Sean's own age. They share the same slightly slumped shoulders that come from bending over books, as indeed Sean has been just now. There are volumes tucked under *his* arm, thick and old, bound in good leather gone shabby, as has Sean's own edition of *The Faerie Queene*. Are they books of poetry? Perhaps so. His own thin, long-fingered hand that has slowly been turning pages, ceases as he stares at the young man. *His* hair is the same rich dark brown as the ale, and *his* eyes are such a vibrant sea-green as you'd find in the heart of the ocean.

But really, there is no reason why Sean's heart should skip a loud thumping beat when his eyes fall upon this young man — but it does. The fellow is shabby in *his* dress, clothes odd

and disheveled. Peculiar glasses are just a bit askew on a patrician nose, but the mouth beneath it curves in a soft smile that warms *his* face and makes it a thing of even greater beauty.

God, yes, beauty.

Sean's throat grows dry. Wrong, wrong, wrong... yet the pull that he feels is such a fierce thing that it cannot be denied.

The man hasn't noticed Sean yet. Indeed, aside from glancing at the landlord and receiving a grunt in return, no one has taken any notice of *his* entrance. Sean could slip out now, unnoticed. Walk away from the temptation that he faces. Avoid the almost certain humiliation to come if he dared to wave that young man over to his table, to introduce himself, to ask if the young man would care to join him.

He could.

He should.

He doesn't.

\*\*\*

Lying in his bed in the modern-day world, Sean remembers it all. How Green-Eyes came over to his table and sat by him, ever so silent no matter how many questions he asked. He'd been unable to stop himself, overcome by the feeling that he'd found a kindred spirit. He didn't mind the silence. But when they touched hands, he felt that strange little gesture (and he chokes with laughter, now, recognizing it for what it was) on his palm and knew it was the kind of invitation he'd been waiting for all his life.

There was a byre 'round back and he'd led Green-Eyes to it, heart triphammering in his throat. They'd stared at each other, the longing plain in both their eyes, until Green-Eyes touched his hands to Sean's shoulders and kissed him.

God, but that had been a kiss. The first real kiss of his life, nothing like the mocking fooleries forced on him by schoolboys. It nearly sucked the life out of him, and drew hot blood to his cheeks and down to his cock, which was just a lovely, burning source of pleasure, dimly aware of, until he'd bumped into Green-Eyes and realized what was going to happen.

He'd been willing... but no, Green-Eyes had stroked his cheeks and hushed him with a finger to his lips. Dropped to his knees, taken out his member, and sucked it like a newborn babe at the teat, licking and nipping and almost swallowing it. He had been taught how to use his mouth like that on others, but never, never had it done for him.

It still surprises him that he'd managed to stay upright while he was having his brain blown out via his cock. Best orgasm of his life. He'd never come being buggered by those school bullies, and fumbling under the covers, praying no one would hear, didn't lend itself to

intense pleasure. The yell he'd given when he came — he'd have sworn the dead, living, and yet-to-be-born could have heard it.

Well, he supposes that they did after all, then, didn't they?

The chiming of the town clock startled him. How long had they been out there? Hours? Enjoying each other so much that much time slipped away from them? He'd have to go home to Mother, but not before he'd gotten this silent man's agreement to meet again.

And he'd thought he had. Eager nods, reluctance to part. Promises to keep.

He went by the pub every night, draining his month's allowance to the last copper for a single cup of mulled wine, drawing it out as long as possible — but Green-Eyes never came back.

And then had come the night when time folded, reality shifted, and he found himself in another world. Another land, where he was still something men laughed at.

But he'd learned. Learned fast. Found someone willing to believe him and take him under his wing. A man with connections, a big, burly bear of a fellow who introduced him to computers and how to hack into systems to create an identity for himself. A man who, with a gentle kiss but nothing more, taught him that it wasn't wrong to love other members of his own sex.

He hasn't taken a lover in the five years he's been here, but he's felt admiring glances follow him, and occasionally he's flirted over a cup of coffee. The shame that he felt all his life has lifted, leaving behind that burning need to seek a companion.

But not just anyone would do. He wanted his Green-Eyes, or at least someone that reminded Sean of the man, and he'd never found them yet -- until that day. No one with that spark of magic that had flown between them, making the night into an explosion of bliss never to be forgotten.

Magic makes everything look different, doesn't it? And he guesses, now, that it was magic that put Green-Eyes in his way at the pub.

Why, he's got no idea.

But he knows Green-Eyes must remember it, the same as him. Sean wonders if he's at home, stroking off to thoughts of the time they shared together, rubbing that cock in his firm, lean hand and dreaming of a warm, sweetly-scented byre.

A braver man than Sean would go look him up, knock on his door, and demand that they talk about it.

Yeah. They would. Sean doesn't. He stays on his bed, stretched out and thinking deep thoughts until the dawn.

Maybe he'll see Green-Eyes at the library this morning. Talk to him, casual-like. Make sure of a few things. See where they can go from there.

Or then again, maybe he won't.

For the first time since his first days in New York, he's afraid. Unnerved. Fearful of rejection, of a denial of the enchantment that brought them together. And when it comes to speaking to the man, well, he just doesn't know...

His strange, new world has just taken another spin on its axis. Is Green-Eyes the reason he was dragged through time?

He doesn't know.

But he thinks he should find out.

And he wonders -- can't stop wondering -- what'll happen then...

## “One Good Day”

"Morning!"

Nathaniel is jostled out of a sound sleep by the bouncing of the bed as a lithe form wriggles over it on its — knees? — oh, yes, knees, both arms being occupied by a tray the contents of which resemble the leaning tower of Pisa.

Pizza?

He sniffs, perplexed, then gives a not-at-all soft "Oof!" as his partner, Vince, smacks the laden tray down on his lap with the proud air of a cat presenting a dead bird to its owner.

He shifts as best he can — "Hey, watch it, there's hot stuff on there!" -- wriggling his shoulder blades along the headboard of the bed until he's mostly upright. Vince's helpful hand shoves his glasses into lopsided place on his nose with a rough caress.

He blinks as the world comes into focus, and stares first at Vince, still so proud he's almost glowing, and then at the hundredweight of food on a broken TV tray balanced on his lap.

Toast. Stacks of it. Some slices burned so thoroughly that they may crumble into ash with a tap of his finger, some that look as if Vince wafted them through a sunbeam on the edge of a fork. A lump of unmelted butter lobbed on the top of each pile. Eggs, a great sloppy heap of scramble surrounded by healthy dollops of beans, salsa, chopped ham, ketchup, and what looks suspiciously like pudding.

Pudding?

Enough bacon to reconstruct a small piglet. Waffles hiding under French toast hiding under pancakes. He thinks he can see a few herring heads peeking out from beneath a slush pile of fried tomatoes and mushrooms, each tiny, fishy head fixed in an expression that screams "Help me!" And then there's the coffee and the tea, though he can't quite tell which is which.

"Vince," he asks slowly, "What is all of this?"

Vince first gives him the expression reserved for utter idiots and then, when Nathaniel doesn't cotton on immediately, melts into the miserable mask that's guaranteed to turn him into mush. "You don't remember?"

Still a little sleepy, and deeply confused, Nathaniel says the most stupid thing possible: "Don't remember what?"

The hurt on Vince's face wavers, then disappears, solidifying into his usual 'hell-with-it' expression. "Never mind," he snarls, snatching the tray and tossing it to the floor with a mighty clang. "Go back to sleep."

Well.. damn. Nathaniel's life has taken some pretty unbelievable twists and turns this past

little while. Not the least of the unexpected detours was taking as a lover this beautiful specimen, apparently now prepared to either cry into a heap of spilled hash browns or kick his way out of their room with murder on his mind.

Neither sounds like a plan to Nathaniel and so he borrows a trick from his lover, executing a nice little lunge-and tackle that lands them both at the foot of the bed, Vince's startled, hazel eyes staring up into his own.

Casually, almost lazily, Nathaniel takes both of Vince's unprotected wrists into one hand and lifts them above his head. "Would you like to try that again, without the portable IHOP and the histrionics?"

Ah, there, the faintest glimmer of a smile before Vince forces it back down. "Should I bribe it out of you?" Nathaniel asks solemnly.

Again, the smile's squashed into submission. "Jerk," Vince grumbles.

"These days? Only necessary when asked politely by my viewing audience." Nathaniel drapes himself over Vince's chest, still comfortably maintaining their eye contact. "Once more. What have I forgotten? If it's that important, remind me. It's not the anniversary of the first time we kissed; that would be two months ago last Tuesday. Neither could it be in commemoration of the first time we --" and here Nathaniel shimmies his hips against Vince's own, confirming that Vince is not altogether unhappy at being pinned there. "That particular anniversary's not for another week."

He pretends to be deep in thought. "I'm fairly certain it isn't Father's Day."

That earns him an outraged snort from Vince. "Not damn likely!"

"Nor Mother's day?" Nathaniel teases.

"Oh, get off already!" Vince wrestles a little. Nathaniel knows that Vince could toss him off with one easy thrust and roll, so he's pleased when Vince doesn't go to that much trouble. Vince still wants him there, then.

Leaning down and in, Nathaniel ever so gently brushes his lips across Vince's busily swearing mouth. After a moment, Vince's lips respond to his own, even parting a bit for Nathaniel's tongue to delicately sweep the inside. Soothing, caressing, petting down.

When Vince's own tongue comes into play, Nathaniel curls his around it, gives a brief tug, then pulls back and away. "Tell me."

Vince looks embarrassed. "Look, it's nothing. Not worth all of this."

"Yet it was worth raiding the entirety of our food supplies?"

"You gonna drop it, or what?"

"Depends entirely on how nicely you ask."

The ghost of a leer glances across Vince's mouth. "When exactly did this turn from me being pissed off at you, to you seducing me?"

"Just about when I did this —" Nathaniel kisses him, long and wet and deep — "before."

"I have a suspicion," Nathaniel continues, turning his attention to the indentations of Vince's cheekbones, then trailing across them to behind an ear and down that neck, "that what I've failed to remember is your promise that you could wind me up at any time, and my sure knowledge that you'll go to any lengths to do so."

Busted! But Vince doesn't look guilty at all; instead, he gives his hips a wicked, little twist under Nathaniel's. "Worked, too, didn't it?"

"Depends on your point of view." Nathaniel's questing mouth finds and bites down on one cherry-red nipple. When Vince is done squeaking, he raises his head to grin knowingly at his lover. "But you have proved that you'll go to any lengths."

"Oh, yeah." Vince thrusts up. Nathaniel thrusts back. "Any lengths is right, mate."

And so the breakfast prank goes entirely ignored on the floor beneath them. Two sets of wicked eyes twinkle into each other, because they both know they'll be enjoying something entirely different to get their day started properly.

Deliciously.

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"Would you get your ass over here where it belongs, already?"

Vince thumps himself down against the headboard of the bed he and Nathaniel share and gives the pillow next to him a dose of hearty love-taps. "Time's a-wasting; tick-tock."

Nathaniel tosses him an odd, amused look and gives the bed a miss on his way to the bathroom. Shedding office clothes as he goes; shoes, socks, shirt, slacks, boxers — it's a nice, little striptease, intentional or no. But he doesn't speak.

Vince frowns. That's not in the rules they play by. One of them — doesn't matter who — says "fuck me", and the other, well, they don't bother with words. Usually they can't, on account of their mouth being instantly better occupied elsewhere. They've got a hundred little signals that mean "Come in and play", and Pavlov can go fuck himself because they know what's worth what.

But seems like Nate isn't jumping like a good puppy tonight, and that has Vince a bit miffed. Not concerned, of course; he doesn't do concerned. Still and all, his boy's just passed "go" and doesn't seem keen on collecting his two hundred quid. "What's wrong with you, then?"

No answer from the loo. Just the soft squeak of a tap turning, the sounds of a clean

washcloth being retrieved from the stack on a shelf, wetted in the stream of warm water, and stroked lazily across nine o'clock shadow.

Vince wriggles a little, horny, impatient, and dreaming idle dreams about how his lover will come to him tonight. Unshaven. To please him.

He knows it's just for him that this is, or rather isn't, done. Nate always needs a shave 'round this time of night. A few years ago, he'd probably have scraped off every bristle and made sure he looked ready for tea with the Queen, even if he was just going off straight and alone to his prim, little bed.

Now, Nathaniel knows that Vince appreciates -- hell, hungers after -- the rasp of stubble over jaw when they kiss, and he'll leave it so that he can please his lover with a nice beard burn at night and a gentle tickle with the morning loving they occasionally indulge in.

Now, if he'd just hurry his ass up...

What's he doing in there, anyway? Awfully quiet.

Then --

Vince freezes, because he hears a sudden noise. *Clink, clink* of something being picked up. Sounds awfully like a razor and a can of shaving foam. The sudden worry is paralyzing. Is Nathaniel going to shave his bristles off, then? Is this some sort of punishment? What's he done?

He's subtle, is Nate; he knows that denying Vince one of his particular pleasures is painful as a boot to the gut, because it says: "You're not enough for this effort; I can't be bothered going out of my way to make you happy."

"Nate?" Vince scootches forward to the edge of the bed, angling for a glimpse into the bathroom. "What's going on, then?"

Silence. Utter silence. The kind that comes with complete absence of being.

Even the clinking's stopped. Vince's heart is in his throat, because hell, this might not be the urban jungle, but the streets outside aren't a whole lot better, and what if something's happened to him? It's only been a minute or so, but hang on, Nate wasn't acting exactly right to start with. What if he's been possessed or something and now it's taken over and eaten him up from the inside, which it had better not do because that's *\*his\** job, and --

Nathaniel appears in the doorway of the bathroom, serene if perplexed. "Is something the matter?"

No shaving cream. No razor. Sexy, scratchy stubble still intact on lean, kissable cheeks. Vince's heart nearly stops at the sight.

"You're all right," he says numbly.



Blink. "The last time that I checked, I appeared to be, yes."

"Not possessed?"

Nathaniel takes a glance down at the length of his lean body. Pats it lightly, here, there, up the length of his thighs and down the stretch of his arms. Puzzled eyes look up. "It certainly feels like I'm the only entity in here."

"And you didn't shave?"

"Shave?" Crinkle in the forehead. "Vince, what are you going on about?"

Vince can't take it; he has to see for himself. He vaults from the bed and onto his lover, one arm stealing around Nathaniel's ribs for comfort, for warmth, while with the other he reaches up to brush his fingertips along the beloved prickles of new beard.

Nathaniel doesn't seem to mind; as a matter of fact he tilts his face into the caress, letting Vince's slim white fingers dance over his cheekbones and chin, just beneath his neck, and up to his ears. He pulls Vince a little closer and they can both feel the result of relief and their natural reaction to being within two feet of each other: raging horniness.

Nathaniel grins like a fool. "You thought I'd change something that brings you so much pleasure? Why? Do you think me that selfish?"

Vince, suddenly ashamed, drops his head to Nathaniel's chest. He burrows his face against shirt buttons.

"Worried, were you?" Nathaniel's warm voice goes on.

"Thought you were punishing me," Vince admits.

"Whatever on earth for?"

Because there's always a reason. Because in his mind, Vince doesn't deserve Nate. Because if there's some being on this sodding planet worthy of punishment, it's Vince, whether he knows how he's sinned or not.

He shakes his head and is silent.

"Lovely." A soft kiss is dropped atop the crown of his head. "You wind up even better than I do."

Silence.

*What -- ?*

Vince snaps his head up, the fires of seven Hells crackling in his eyes as realization dawns. "You rotten —"

Nathaniel drops his arms and backs off, giggling like a schoolboy.

Vince goes after him. "You set me up!"

"And you fell so beautifully!"

Vince lunges for Nathaniel, this time without loving or caressing on his mind, but Nathaniel catches him, and apparently he's certainly got those thoughts on his brain, because he's suddenly developed seven or eight extra hands and each one of them is stroking, groping, squeezing, tickling, gripping —

Vince loses his breath when Nathaniel steals his mouth in a kiss that goes on for minutes, deepening and heating until they've almost melted into one being.

He pulls away for a moment, his face stinging with the delicious eroticism of beard burn, and gives Nathaniel one last accusing look. "What was all that clanking around in the bathroom, then?"

Nathaniel doesn't play fair. That is, of course, one of the reasons Vince loves him. With a wicked grin, he pulls a pair of handcuffs from his back pocket. "Just fetching these from the medicine cabinet," he says, the very picture of innocence. Butter wouldn't melt between his thighs, he's such an angel.

Vince considers the manacles. "Another time and place, I'd be asking you why the hell you had those in the medicine cabinet, but for now, oh, I'll just say screw it."

"Rather screw you," Nathaniel growls into his ear.

Kiss.

"You're still an utter dick," Vince murmurs as his knees grow weak.

Kiss.

"Idiot," Nathaniel purrs into his ear, nipping the lobe. "And such language!" Nathaniel dangles the handcuffs between them, captures Vince's chin in one hand, and proceeds to lavish kisses on his lover's face until it almost glows pinky-red from the loving attention. "Shall I punish you now?"

"About damned time."

"I'd hoped you'd say that."

*Kiss. Kiss. Kiss.*

*Grope.*

*Oh!*

A good, hard grope, with no double meanings. *Want to fuck you now. Ready to play?*

Vince's eyes cross. Hell, yes.

Let the games begin!

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"Babe?"

"Mmm?" Nathaniel asks sleepily, twisting a bit closer. Vince's fingers curl and twine in his hair, a lazy motion, petting him a bit like he might a tamed tiger. Nathaniel resists the urge to purr, encouraging as it might be to Vince. There are some things simply beyond the pale for his dignity.

"Are you here with me at all? Or are you dreaming about dark nights and satin sheets with, say, whipped cream, fur-lined handcuffs, velvet floggers —"

Nathaniel slaps Vince on the angle of his bare hip. "Pervert."

"Get the terms right. I'm a proper pervert."

Nathaniel laughs, unable to help it. "And the difference would be?"

"Class. Good taste. Quality and quantity."

"How can you imagine that you qualify?"

Vince nips at Nathaniel's earlobe and whisper-kisses, lips tingling against his skin: "I'm with you, aren't I?"

"Ah." Nathaniel settles down, seeming well-pleased. "Consider yourself a suitable holder of the title, then."

"And don't you forget it."

A long, lazy moment passes. The two men lie comfortably on their backs on the floor, and gaze out at the blueness of the sky through their bedroom window. White clouds drift aimlessly past, tracked by their eyes.

Following a particular set of cumulonimbus, Vince speaks again, abruptly: "I wouldn't ever have imagined this. Spending the day playing hooky, in a bed with you and a view of the sky a good few would kill for. Plus this blanket — genuine fleece, very nice touch — good wine and better liquor. Time was, I'd have thought this all a dream."

Nathaniel is quiet, but it's a slightly darker quiet this time. "How do you know it's not?"

"Don't, I suppose."

It's quiet.

Nathaniel manages to look quite serious for a few breaths, but he can't stop the slightest of grins.

"Asshole!" Vince pounces him, tickling without mercy, rolling both entirely bare bodies about in a way that ends them up with their limbs hopelessly tangled together and both quite happy with the situation.

They settle together, tight as pieces of a puzzle, Vince's head tucked beneath Nathaniel's chin, and resume their sky gazing. It's the kind of closeness that invites kisses, touches, caresses. But they're content to lie still for the moment. Sex — no, not sex, more like frantic devouring each to each from tip to toe — has already happened once, when Vince saw the setup Nathaniel had laid out for him.

No doubt it will happen again soon, perhaps with gentle tenderness; and of a certainty they will greet the sunset with their own blaze of glory. Sex certainly has its place in this day. But for now, yes, they're at peace, relaxing, held in one another's arms.

Nathaniel draws his finger down the length of Vince's chest, pausing at the navel. "Tell me, did you ever do this before?"

"What, lie on my back wrapped around a nice piece of ass — hey, watch the fingers, there! Clip your nails, would you? Not shaving, you know how fine that is by me. But you put your hands near my delicate bits all the time, and I'm no crazier about scratches in certain places than you would be."

Nathaniel pinches him again for good measure. "I mean watch the clouds, imbecile."

"Prick."

Insults come more easily than endearments, and they both know they mean the same thing.

"Yeah, I did," Vince relents. "Used to make up stories about the shapes that I saw in them."

"I suppose everyone does, at one time or another." Nathaniel's eyes darken a bit. "Children, at least."

"Children, yeah. Even adults, unless they've got too much weighing them down to ever look up." Vince shifts position, far too innocently bringing his thigh in closer contact with Nathaniel's. "You needed this break. Therefore, we're busy being lazy and cloud-watching, right?" Vince warns -- teases -- warding away darker thoughts that might threaten their balmy day. "So watch, already."

Nathaniel gives him an unreadable look, but points up obediently. "That one, then, just to the left of the sun. What would you guess that to be?"

"A dog," Vince says promptly.

"That looks nothing like a --"

"Didn't say a canine, did I?"

"That looks nothing like a dog or a canine of any breed I know."

Vince snorts, and toys with Nathaniel's hand. "What's it look like to you, then, master genius?"

"An ice cream scoop."

"You're joking." Vince blinks at the sky. "Well, the wind blew it out of shape," he complains.

"Do you agree?"

"Yeah." Vince subsides. "Damned ill wind that blows, to change a dog into a scooper."

"And that one?"

Vince considers. "A row of ducklings?"

"No..." Nathaniel says after a moment. "Dwarves."

"All right." Vince counts. "Fifteen dwarves."

"There aren't that many."

"Some are hiding behind each other."

"That one's bigger than the rest."

"He's carrying their sack of hammers."

"Their what?"

"Going mining, aren't they? S'what dwarves do."

"Vince, I'm not sure, but I don't think people mine armed with a household hammer."

"Fine, then, he's carrying an absolutely massive jackhammer. That'd bust up any rock you cared to name. Satisfied? Loosen up a bit."

Vince moves his hand a bit lower, a little closer to where he'd most like it to be, and grins when Nathaniel gives a little, involuntary twist and shiver. "Face it, glorious as it looks, a cloudy sky might as well be a Dali painting. It means whatever you want."

Nathaniel wiggles a little bit — not further away, but closer to him. The smile Nate gives Vince makes him wish, for only one moment, that he had a camera. Nate never looks this

young, this happy, this carefree. He wants a photograph of that face to remind himself of this day during the tough times.

Nathaniel covers Vince's hand with his own, nudging it a little further down. The smile never leaves his face. "Much like what we share together. Some would say it's quite wrong. But I think..."

"That it's all in the beholder's eye." Vince lifts his head a bit and kisses Nate gently, a bare brush of lips against lips. "And I see this. See you, Nate."

Nathaniel regards Vince for a moment. Darkness and light clash in his face, his eyes; the smile loses ground. Vince is unnerved for a moment, until he finds himself caught between two slim, strong hands and discovers that he's being kissed as if he holds the keys to life out of death.

He surrenders gladly. Sure, it's a stolen moment. And they both know how literally true that is. Nothing is free in this world. Except love, given as they have between themselves.

But for now, under the ever-moving clouds and the benevolence of the afternoon, it's enough.

## “Sugar Man”

James sees him first in a gay-friendly coffee shop in the middle of downtown, where times are good and the men are pretty. He's refilling his cup from the open urns, but he's looking warily around, as if he's not sure he should be doing this.

Yeah, the sign says "Free Refills", loud and proud, but this guy has a sort of quiet nervousness about him that says he's afraid he'll be caught. Punished for stealing.

He's unusual enough in the middle of all the rowdy college kids -- a man a little older than the rest, shy and quiet — without all the blatant wondering if he has the right to another cup of java.

It's enough to make James put his cup down and watch.

He wants to see how the man drinks his brew.

See, James figures you can tell a lot about a man by the way he takes his coffee. Of course, he knows that's just his point of view and, ergo, bullshit to the rest of the world, but as a philosophy it works for him. And when a person spends as much time in cafes as he does, he's discovered he's not often wrong.

Of course, he's always there cruising for those guys he's watching get their coffee, so he can be pretty sharp-eyed about it. He's got a classification system, and it doesn't often fail him.

Black coffee means they're straight-up and straightforward. No time for creamer or sugar or crap like that. In bed, they want it hot and hard and fast. Nice, when you're in the mood for it, but, tempting as it might be James's not up (no pun intended) for that tonight.

Then there are the ones who take milk — non-fat, half-and-half, creamer, whatever — they like it bitter, but smooth. Maybe they're wearing Lennon sunglasses, and they'll be just as cool as can be. Whatever you want, man, that's fine. They figure you're good material for a rhapsody in lavender on the next open mic night.

Okay, maybe he's a little sarcastic about that one, but he's had enough finger-snapping improv artists for a while. Poems about "James and the Giant Peaches" don't mix with blending in and keeping his profile low. He knows he's good. He just likes to keep that a surprise. Who wants to be wanted for what you've got in your engine compartment?

Well... maybe him, on occasion. But he guesses he's being picky tonight.

Sugar men, now those are sweet. They're the cuddlers, the ones who give you tender kisses and want to hold you after it's over, fall asleep in your arms and get up to a breakfast of bacon or granola. They like snuggles in front of the TV, or a cozy walk in the park.

James thinks he's in the mood for a sugar man. Someone to hold. A guy who likes it sweet and warm. Someone who'll give him something to cradle in the palm of his hand. Who'll wrap his lips around James' own cock like it's milk and honey, and suck like a bee on a

flower.

So he's interested, really interested, in seeing what this shy man is putting in his coffee. The man hesitates, hovering over the choices. James can't blame him for that. It's a confusing world, sometimes.

He's never seen this man in here before, with his messy, light hair, wire glasses, and delicate hands. Nice hands. Fingers that could stroke you all night long if you coaxed them sweetly enough.

God, he hopes this guy is a sugar man.

He's waiting and watching. Trying to be patient. Admitting to himself he's a little more than curious now. Feeling the heat build from the bottom of his stomach and burn down through his legs. Wanting this man to be the one he goes home with tonight, if he just turns out to be the right guy for the part.

Why is he so fascinated? He toys with his spoon and watches, captivated. He guesses there's just something about this one, so hesitant and shy. There are green eyes, the shade of exotic ocean waters, behind those glasses, glancing around like he's trying to figure it all out for himself.

James bets his spunk tastes like candied almonds, cherry-fresh and sweet.

But he's got to be patient. When someone young and buzz-cut and muscled bumps the man's arm and grins at him, the man jumps and smiles nervously. Excuses himself, like that was his fault. That gets him an uneasy eye up and down, like Mr. Young's measuring up those lips and hands against the "wary" sign stamped on his forehead. Deciding, after a second, it's not worth it.

Good. The man is so very newly out. James can tell that now. Daring to test his limits. Not sure of himself yet. If you don't know who you are, how can you know what you want?

And if he's going home with anyone tonight, it's gonna be James.

Those long fingers hover over the cups and bowls and pitchers and sprinklers. Finally, finally, they make their choice. White sugar, two spoonfuls. And then pure, heavy cream, to make the java thick and give it body.

James exhales a long and lusty sigh. A cream-and-sugar man. Sweet. Rich and full of flavor. Shy as a wild kitten, and probably purrs just as sweetly once you rub his... stomach. He takes a long sip from his own cup, full of the same concoction, and smiles to himself.

Bingo.

So James stands up when the man takes his cup back to his table, and manages to be in his way when he's wanting to move past. Turns to him with the warm, generous smile that's gotten so many sugar men into bed in the past, and puts a hand on the man's shoulder.



"Sorry," James says, before his target can. "My fault."

"Sorry!" the guy apologizes, fast and nervous. "Almost made you spill your cup, didn't I?"

"You could make me do more than that." James reaches up to touch his face. The man flinches a little, but when James strokes his lip with the ball of a thumb the man softens, staring with wide, wide eyes. "I'm James."

"W-Kevin," the man stammers. "Kevin. Is my name."

"Good name." James slides his hand down that chest and hooks it into Kevin's collar. Tugs teasingly, gently. Don't want to scare him off, now. "I've got a free seat here. Want to share the table?"

That gets him a smile, a sweet little smile, just as he'd hoped. The blush deepens just a bit. Kevin nods, and James feels himself start to fall.

Suddenly, it's more than just flirtation. It's real. And it's interesting. He wants to know this man, this Kevin. Find out what he's doing in a coffee meat-market. What brought him there. Why. And would he really like to go home with James, instead of being charmed through all his naiveté into blindly following?

He's a sweet cream-and-sugar man, and James's more interested than ever. "Then sit," he invites, patting the chair. "Let me get to know you."

So Kevin does.

And that's just the start of it all.

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Sweet Kevin. It's so clear he has no idea what to do here, so it's James who takes the lead in everything. It's nice. He hasn't had a true cherry boy in what feels like years, and Kevin is better than a boy because James's not a kid anymore himself. Takes away that edge of "could-be-arrested" panic. Gives it a "want to be bad?" feeling that he'd like to share.

So he keeps it up with the light touches, the gentle invitations. Suggestions of what could be.

From the way Kevin's warming up to his moves, even daring, once, to lay a tentative hand on James' thigh — he thinks his odds are better than good it'll happen.

Maybe even that night.

No, he thinks, watching Kevin sip his coffee, definitely tonight. He's thirsty now, and he knows which fountain he wants to drink from. What altar he feels like worshipping at. Who he's going to show what being appreciated is all about.

Took him years to learn that lesson. Ages of clumsiness and stumbling over both feet before he became who he is now, all pierced ears and snug shirts and easy confidence. Knowing how

to get his own way.

So after bringing Kevin a refill, and watching that slim throat work as Kevin swallows, feeling his jeans get tighter and tighter, James decides *what the hell?* and asks Kevin if he wants to continue this somewhere else.

Kevin blushes, stammers some things that James can't really understand, then stops, staring at him. There's a plea in those eyes that James recognizes, easy. *Want me. Need me. Take me home.* Last puppy in the shop, and feeling the loneliness.

James curls his hand around Kevin's and squeezes. "That a yes, then?"

Kevin nods. It's a yes.

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James keeps things publicly decent as they pay their bill, and even on the short walk home to his studio apartment, but his hunger's ever-growing for a sample of this sweet sugar man. But by the time he's locked his battered door behind them and thrown his keys on the kitchen counter, he can't wait any longer for that first sip of nectar.

Kevin's hand is curled inside James' own — has been, since they set foot outside. James uses it to pull him closer. Full contact, body-to-body, letting him feel how hard James's gotten just looking at those curls and fingers. Kevin gasps softly at the touch. James grins, and swallows both their air in a kiss that's meant to shatter Kevin gently apart.

Works, too. He's a good kisser. He's lost track of how many men have come in here, but they all walk away satisfied and every one of them has a healthy worship for James' tongue. One of the best-exercised muscles in his body, and it knows how to work someone else's flesh until they're cursing or calling out to God for mercy.

He plans on hearing both kinds of cries from Kevin tonight.

It helps that Kevin's so soft and pliant in James' arms, crumpling against him like a rose petal in the grip of that kiss. Kevin's lips part when James strokes them with his tongue, melting away the join between, and slips it in to flick lightly at the roof of Kevin's mouth. He doesn't let go as he does everything he knows — runs it along Kevin's teeth, strokes it in broad stripes against Kevin's own tongue, tickles the inside of Kevin's cheeks.

Then he teaches Kevin, only letting him go for gulps of air, how to play back. What it's like to twist and tangle the mobile organs together, to suck one into your mouth and bite at it ever so gently, and how to go on the attack to take what you want. Kevin's got such a clever tongue, and it learns all those new tricks so sweetly that James can't wait to see what it does on the rest of his body.

He slips his hands down between them and undoes the buttons on Kevin's shirt, just far enough to push his hands inside. No undershirt. He'd mostly expected one, so, bonus. Less to ruck up, to get between them. His fingers know where to go, and they find two small nipples, hard as pebbles, to roll and pinch, then to stroke and soothe.

Kevin makes a startled moan into his mouth, and James can't help grinning. Time to let Kevin learn how to play some other games.

Kevin groans again when James moves his mouth away, reaching after him with lips parted. James puts a finger to that deliciousness and shakes his head. "Hush, baby. You'll like this."

Bending his head, he pushes Kevin's shirt a little further aside and dips his head to the left nipple, taking it between his teeth. "You should get this pierced," he murmurs after a quick nip and a salving lick. "You'd look so fucking sexy with a ring right... here..." He bites again, then fastens his lips around the whole and sucks hard.

"God — James, God!" Kevin pushes against him, and he feels a hardness to match his own between Kevin's legs. James closes his eyes and hisses at that. It feels *so* good. But it's not time for that, not just yet.

His hands work at the small of Kevin's back, kneading like a jungle cat's. Pulling Kevin tighter and closer so he can taste that skin. He was right. Sugared almonds, sweet cherry boy. Light and clean and fresh, tasting of soap and smelling of some crisp cologne. Just a little.

Enough to make him want more, to send him chasing kisses across a lean but tight chest. Over to the other nipple next, where he lavishes the same kind of tongue action on it. Rubbing the left one with his thumb.

Listening to those tasty noises Kevin keeps making, like he's never felt anything this good in his whole life. He probably hasn't. And it's gonna get even better.

"You like that, baby?" James takes a last, lingering lick on Kevin's nipple. "Bet you'll like this even better."

Time to make Kevin scream. He grips Kevin by the small of the back and pushes their erections together almost hard enough to hurt. The sound Kevin makes, the jump and twitch of those muscles, hit James so hard he has to close his eyes and breathe deep, in and out, not to lose it right there. So damned responsive!

"Oh yeah," he whispers, when he's got it back together again. His hips move, starting up a slow gyration. A dirty dance. "That feel good?"

Kevin's hands are grasping at him, trying to gain a hold somewhere. Fluttering like birds. Kevin doesn't know what to do, but his body is loving it. James can feel dampness through both their slacks, and knows Kevin's leaking for him, too.

"Feels so good," James murmurs. "You have no idea —" and he runs his nails lightly up Kevin's back — "what you're doing to me, do you?"

Kevin's hair is wet now, tendrils falling over his forehead. "And you," he manages, arching against James when he undulates their bodies. "Touch — touch me?"

*Well.* James hadn't expected that so soon. And maybe Kevin's not thinking about what that

sounds like an invitation for, but he'll take Kevin up on it. "Like this?" he whispers, sliding a hand down between them to cup Kevin's cock. "Touch you just like that, baby?"

Kevin lets out a strangled noise that's halfway between a groan and a cry. "God!"

"Just like that, then." James' clever fingers roll and cup Kevin's balls through his loose-fitting slacks. "Just like that." He grips the solid length of erection and gives it a tug. "Or maybe like this..."

With one quick, tongue-flicking kiss, he starts sinking to his knees. Halfway down Kevin realizes what's going on, and the fervent swearing is music to James' ears.

"Gonna do it to you, sugar-man," James whispers as he touches down, graceful as a cat. "Wanna suck off all that sweet coating."

He knows Kevin doesn't understand. That's okay. He does. And he knows how to make Kevin get what's going on, too: by leaning forward — oh, so gently — and before he's even got Kevin unzipped or taken out, mouthing that taut cock through his slacks. Stropping his cheek against it. If he could purr, he would. It feels that good.

*Just imagine what it'll taste like.*

Backing off far enough to blow a steady stream of warm breath over that place, he waits. He wants to hear Kevin beg for it. And he doesn't wait long.

"More." Kevin's unsteady hands find places on his shoulders. "James, more, please."

Good boy. And good boys get rewarded. That zip comes down, a little bit at a time, James teasing and toying with Kevin, making Kevin want it still more, and then suddenly it slips from his fingers and Kevin's cock slaps into his palm, bulging and purple in the pale kitchen light.

James' eyes fly open wide. No shorts? No silky boxers or even tighty-whities? Okay, he's impressed. Somebody did their homework.

And hey, just as with the shirt, less to push aside. He can smell Kevin's musk now, heavy and hot, and he's dying for a taste. His tongue comes out to flick at the tip, and curls around in a long sucking lap when Kevin moans and tries to push forward.

Even cherry boys know what they want, and what he wants is...

James' mouth slides smoothly over that cock, one long glide until his nose is buried in a thick, deep-wheat colored thatch. He lost his gag reflex ages ago, and he can do that without thinking. He swallows, tasting the salt and sweat on his tongue. Candied almonds. So sweet.

He can't talk with his mouth full — bad manners — so he lets his fingers communicate for him, tugging those slacks down and working his way around to a tight, little ass that just begs for it. No lube, but that's fine, he doesn't need it yet. All he's got to do is test this out.

One finger brushes lightly against Kevin's hole. The man screams, the sound echoing through James' apartment, and bucks like he's on a horse. James swallows again and again, rewarding Kevin for being such a good, little innocent. God, he's tight as a drum skin. Pushing in through that is gonna be a taste of heaven.

Fuck this, he can't wait any longer. He has to have that. His own cock, neglected for a little too long now, is pulsing with *want* and dripping a wet spot on his pants. He pulls his mouth off Kevin in a long, steady suck and lets the head come out with a last press of his lips and a loud *pop*.

He knows what he looks like, on his knees in front of that cock. "I need you," he says quietly, staring up like a dog that might bite. "Want you." His fingers wind trails up and down Kevin's ass, slipping in and teasing that hole. "Can I have you, baby?"

Kevin groans, a wordless sound.

James lets just the tip of one finger push in. "Can I have you?" he asks, voice husky. "Let me take you, right here. Send you straight to heaven. All night long." He pushes just a little deeper, not hard enough to hurt. "Say yes, baby. Just say yes."

"Yes," Kevin breathes out. "God, yes."

James knows where the lube is hidden in every part of his home, and there's a tube of it close by that he manages to grab on his slip-slide back up Kevin's body. He kisses the man again, deep and wet, murmuring against warm lips and telling Kevin what he's gonna do, just to drive Kevin crazy.

All the while, his hands are working. Slippery with cherry-scented lube, they slide in and out of Kevin's hole, one finger at a time. He's patient — lets cries of pain turn back into moans of pleasure — and waits until Kevin's still tight, but writhing on the fingers in him, almost biting James' lips off with want of him.

"Now?" James whispers. "You want me now, baby?" James puts both hands on Kevin's hips to guide him, turning him around. "Put your hands on the counter." James' breath is getting harsh, rough. He can't hold out much longer. Thank God he doesn't have to. He can push his cock up to that puckered, little hole and press at it.

It hurts Kevin at first. Losing your virginity's always a little painful. But James has enough skill at fucking to find and keep hitting the sweet spot that makes all the pain go away. Kevin's so tight around him it feels like he's being stripped away, and it hurts so good that his whole body is throbbing. He's one big beat of a pulse that's timed with his thrusts deep into that cherry ass.

Somehow he finds the presence of mind to reach around and grab Kevin's cock in his hand, to start milking it. Kevin is shameless by now, so desperate that he's pushing himself back and forward, from the deep shoves inside to the hard squeezes out. Every muscle in Kevin's back and legs is fluttering.

James spares him what kisses he can think to give, sharp nips and long drags of his tongue over that back, tasting salt and sweet together.

He can feel it coming before it's there, this great big tidal wave of an orgasm. But he wants Kevin to know what it's like first. Breath held, he stops in place and pumps harder, faster at the man's cock, digging into the tip with his fingernails and spreading all that warm, oozing spunk over Kevin's length.

Kevin's breath starts to hitch. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," he's chanting almost too quietly to hear. "Can't — I can't —"

James bites him. "Then don't. Let it go. Just let it go."

With one great shudder, Kevin does, spilling sugar-warmth all over James' hand. It drips between his fingers, down the man's legs. It's more than he can take. Thrusting hard, past caring if it hurts, he goes in so deep that it's over his head, and he just lets that wave wash over him. Comes with such a violent burst that his vision goes white. He's just about aware that he's grabbing onto Kevin, hanging on for dear life while he rides it and prays he survives.

When they wash back down, he's still holding Kevin so very tightly he dazedly wonders how Kevin can breathe. He's filled the man's ass with spunk, dripping out and down those legs. His cock's still half-hard, but he slips out and turns Kevin about hard and fast for a kiss better than the ones they shared before. Hard. Claiming. Marking.

"You're mine," he growls between tastes of those lips. "Mine. Say it."

Kevin's so out of it that he can only nod, chasing kisses back with his own. "Yours. All yours."

Not just for tonight, James wants to add. But he doesn't. This sweet, shy man's just been fucked within an inch of his life, and so has James. Can't scare him off. Not yet.

'Cause see, he needs Kevin. And he's gonna see to it that Kevin needs him too.

They just barely make it to the bed before their muscles give out, and collapse on top of it like little boys on a sleep-over. Far too tired to get underneath the covers.

But he can't have Kevin getting cold. James manages to snag-and-drag a throw blanket off a nearby chair and arranges it on top of his new lover, tucking in the corners while the man murmurs sleepy things that sound like lines of poetry.

He drifts off fast, this one, his lips working softly together. Lips made for kissing. James drops a quick buss on the corner of that mouth before settling down behind him. Spooning up tight. Holding on. Making sure Kevin knows whose arms he's in before he goes to sleep.

The curve of Kevin's shoulder fits just right for nuzzling into. His own eyes want to close,

but he's not ready to go to sleep yet. Yeah, he's forgotten how many men have walked through his door, but none of them have made it this far yet. Not a one's gone to sleep in his arms. He might sleep at their places, but until now his bed's been his own.

Now it belongs to him, and his sweet, sweet sugar-man.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, rocking them slowly together. "Knew you were special. I've been waiting for you, you know that? We're gonna be something together, you and me. Just us. You wait and see. We're gonna be all we need out of the whole wide world."

Kevin whispers something soft, too soft to make out — could be "yes" — and then he's slack, limp in the dead-limbed sleep of the well and truly fucked.

James smiles and kisses the curve of that jaw. He'll just lie here a minute. Holding on to that warmth that he's been hunting for. That perfect moment.

"Kevin," he breathes. "My own. Best kind of sugar man..."

## “Against the Odds”

This was supposed to be a camping trip. Just a plain old, ordinary camping trip, with burned hot dogs and scorched marshmallows and maybe wishing they had a beer stolen from his dad's refrigerator.

Somewhere along the way it turned into... well, this. And he's not sure exactly what's happened, but Aidan's pretty sure that's on account of still being in shock.

'Cause what with one thing or another, he doesn't think he's a virgin anymore. But it's not a pretty girl underneath him, it's an angular boy. It's Joey. Everything in his life has been turned topsy-turvy upside-down-inside-out, but however weird this might be, he doesn't think he regrets it. You know?

Can you call it sex, what's happened between them tonight?

Aidan's not sure.

He's never had sex before. The best he's ever managed is what every guy does — lying on his bed, cock in his hand, rubbing and thumbing and jacking himself until he's hard and wet and then, with this weird little sense of disappointment, coming on himself. Mostly on his stomach or thighs, or in a handful of tissues if he thought ahead.

It's kind of lonely.

So sometimes he's thinking about (though he'd never, ever admit it) a girl like the ones in his college classes or his dad's magazines, with jumbo-sized breasts and legs that go on va-va-va-forever. The way they might wrap around him and squeeze him tight.

His favorite fantasies involve petite women, so little he's got to be careful. When the ladies he dreams of are small, they ride on top, delicate knees braced on either side of his thighs and all that hot wetness (he imagines) taking him deep inside.

Definitely not what's just happened here.

Was it sex?

All he knows is it's a little bit awkward and a whole lot weird, but he's still shaking from coming so hard that his fingers have dug holes into the forest floor. He knows any second there's going to be the *what have I done?* questions and a lot of blame, shame, guilt, and doubt that come after doing something really, stupendously stupid.

Funny how he doesn't seem to care.

Right now, all he can do is tremble as he feels the warm body of his best friend shaking beneath him. He swallows hard as he realizes that the slick scooting of their bellies against one another's isn't all sweat, but heavy spurts of come, too. His... and Joey's.



Joey's fingers are digging into his back. If his nails weren't short, they'd be punching holes through his skin, he's holding on to Aidan so tight. His knees — thin, sinewy, eighteen-year-old knees — are raised a little, the muscles in his legs shuddering against the trembling of Aidan's thighs.

His face is tucked hard into the crook of Aidan's shoulder, and Aidan can't tell if that's sweat or tears. If tears, from what? Happiness? That'd be... okay, strange, but better than a severe case of *ohgodohgodhohgod*.

Or maybe it's just drops of dampness on his eyelashes. They did get kinda sweaty, all worked up...

He didn't mean to do it. They'd been naked, because it was so hot out, and it's just a thing guys do, right? It's hot, you strip down. Bare-assed-ness, no problem. But then... you know, things had happened. He'd gotten hard, and Joey had gotten hard. Looking at each other with hungry eyes, quick, darting glances that didn't quite dare to linger.

Then, before he knew it, they'd started with the kissing. Neither one of them were sure what they were doing, but it felt so good. Joey had never kissed anyone before, he knew, and it was such a thrill to be the first one there. Like that was where he should be, putting his stamp on those soft lips.

And it was just a gentle slide of mouth against mouth before they started learning each other's rhythms, sucking so very carefully — afraid to bruise, afraid to move forward, but no way they were moving back. Aidan had felt so ignorant, not knowing what to do with his hands or whether he should shut his eyes.

But he didn't want it to stop.

So, with two kisses to his past credit, both stolen from girls behind the bleachers at football games, he'd gotten a little more into it. "Here," he'd whispered. "Like this." And he'd showed Joey what he knew, rocking a little against the kiss like he guessed you should do.

Then Joey shocked the ever-loving hell out of him by pushing the tip of a warm, wet tongue against his mouth and tracing the seam of his lips. Aidan had gasped, his mouth opened, and that tongue had shyly ventured inside.

After oh, say, just a second or two, Aidan really wondered what kind of idiot he'd been before when it came to kissing because this was nothing like what he'd done with those girls. He didn't know if it was Joey or if this was just doing it right. He just knew he wanted more.

It had felt so natural to shift onto his hip, moving closer to Joey, so that he could, if a little nervously, rest one hand on his friend's bare side, fingers curling in an unsteady, petting caress. Joey liked that, he thought, so he did it again, moving a little closer while he was moved a little closer too. But hey, that was all good because their cocks accidentally bumped and holy God, Aidan would swear he'd never felt anything like that in his life.

Then when they were as close as they could get, he remembers — he thinks — Joey tugging at him, rolling over onto his back. It was just the right thing to do to follow Joey until he lay

on top, feeling a hard cock digging into his belly. He'd hissed with scorching, mixed pleasure/relief as his own dick found more friction and depth against Joey's skin.

Lying there, careful of his elbows and knees, he moved. Just did it, the way his body was telling him. It felt so good, the pressure and slickness just right.

When he came, his vision went white and he couldn't see a thing. He wonders, was it like that for Joey? They came pretty close together. He can't remember now, but he questions himself and thinks he'd like to know if it was his orgasm that pushed Joey over the edge. He knows that when he came to, Joey was grabbing him, breathing heavily, and the slick spot between them had doubled in size.

Was it sex? Aidan doesn't know.

But he does know that lying here, holding Joey like this, he wants to kiss Joey again. So he does. Those *Aidan, you're a moron* doubts and regrets are going to hit him any second now, and he might as well take advantage of the time they have before that happens.

Nudging gently at Joey's face with his nose, he gets his friend to look up high enough that he can dip down and take what he wants.

They really understand kissing a lot better now. Joey's mouth opens eagerly under his own, sucking at his tongue. That feels really good, and he'd gotten Aidan to buck hard against him earlier when he did that. Aidan bites at Joey's upper lip, just a little nibble, something that had gotten Joey to do the same.

Finally, he has the moment he's been waiting for. A quick flash of doubt: what if Joey comes to himself in the middle of this? What if he pushes Aidan away with a growl of disgust or a "you sick fucker!"

What if it hits him like that?

But it hasn't, not just yet. Not while he's learning, once again, what his friend tastes like. While his hands are starting to move, like they have little, finger-y minds of their own, sliding up and down sweat-slick forearms in the same motions he'd use to jack himself off. Joey groans a little into their kiss. "God, Aidan."

"Yeah," he whispers back, stopping to lick at Joey's lower lip. "Oh, yeah."

They're young and inexperienced and they've never done anything like this before. Again. And you know, he knows that this really should be stranger. It should gross him out. Shouldn't be making him hot, making him moan against Joey's skin, making him do things like kiss across the sharp edge of Joey's jaw down his neck and shoulder. But hey, like he'd thought earlier, they're young. He can feel his cock starting to fill again, and Joey's, too, beneath him.

So, this is probably sex. When he actually thinks the word, and really thinks about it, his head swims. He's always seen The Act as kind of, well, insert Tab A into Slot B.

There's been no inserting of any kind tonight. No way are they ready for that. He's just really enjoying being on top of Joey, feeling Joey's arms wrap around his back and legs come up around his own, and pounding between the vee of his thighs like he's done once or twice to the mattress when he's been really really really horny.

Joey reacts better than the mattress had. It squeaked and gave way. Joey groans and gives back, snapping his slim hips up to meet Aidan's thrusts.

Shame's been a really lazy guy tonight. Aidan hopes it holds off for a little longer. Just long enough to let him enjoy this one more time.

"Joey," he whispers as he thrusts, liking the way that sounds, lazy and hungry and wanting all at once.

But he likes the way it sounds better when Joey undulates against him and moans his own name back, sweet on the night air: "Aidan..."

## “Perchance to Dream”

Matt is asleep, and knows he is dreaming.

He's vaguely amused by this, and he can just hear Wolf's dry response now when he'll tell him about it tomorrow: "Cool. Very Zen."

Which it is, so he might as well go with it while he can.

Within his dream, Matthias leaves his body behind him (wrapped in several blankets, loosely tangled up in his lover's arms) and lifts his eyes to the strange, new world inside his head.

He's in a forest. Green, fragrant, and verdant with new life. The trees are a kind he can't identify, so tall that they stretch to the roof of the sky and punch clear through the blue. Who knows how much higher they grow after touching the sun?

The branches stretch out just like arms.

No, wait, they are arms, long and supple, their hands each works of art with palms up and fingers outspread or cupped to catch the rain should it fall. He thinks he'd like to touch one, but doesn't quite dare. They're a little too perfect to be real, and after a moment, looking at them sends an uneasy little chill walking down his neck.

Doves coo above his head, circling against the azure sky. Maybe they like the look of him, for as he watches, the pretty creatures flutter down toward him in a soft wave like an Easter's shower. He tilts his head back to watch them fly, and laughs to see all those wooden fingers reach out and make places for the feathery balls to perch.

He stands for a while, watching them wave a little in a soft breeze that smells of cinnamon and cloves, and decides that this is a good place. Is this his inner peace? Doesn't seem too likely. Much more Wolf's style than his. What *he* likes best is a ten-minute break in the middle of his day when he's got nothing better to do than head down to the diner for a cup of coffee.

Now that's peace.

This is only... beauty. Not that he doesn't appreciate it; just seems like there should be something more.

"Huh." He looks down to see Wolf, standing by his side. Automatically, he reaches for the man's warm hand, clasping it tight.

Wolf gives him a faint smile that means a hundred different things, and dips his head at the forest. "So that's what it sounds like when doves cry. I wondered."

Matt goes to laugh, then realizes Wolf was serious. The doves are louder now, then louder still, like a pack of wild hyenas. Every one of them laughing at him for thinking they're

innocent. Suddenly, he can see their true faces under those delicate, little masks, angry and heartbroken --

-- and he looks down, his hand empty and cold, to find that Wolf has gone. A chilly nose bumps his hip. He whirls around, arms up to defend himself -- and panting, grinning a wide, canine grin, is a real, wild wolf, the kind he's only ever seen behind protective bars. Facing him down.

Wolf as wolf. Definitely a dream.

There's that fear again, but Wolf would never hurt him, would he? It doesn't enter his mind that this could be another wolf altogether. He knows this one as if he's rubbed his fingers through the rich, russet fur while it slept close by his side. He reaches out, wanting to touch.

The cold nose nudges deep into his palm, rooting for something. "Are you hungry?" He wishes he had some food with him in this dream. Maybe a strip of jerky or dried salmon.

But, he thinks, he is dreaming. Can't he just wish up a handful of beef, or some gobbets of raw chicken? He tries, 'cause Wolf is backing off, giving him this look of utter disappointment because he's got nothing to offer.

"Don't run off, boy," Matt coaxes, alarmed. He crouches down and holds out a palm, whistling softly. This can't happen, not even in a dream. Wolf won't ever leave him. Wolf's promised.

The animal lifts its head sharply and gives a yap. *You want me?* it seems to sneer. *Come and get me.*

It turns and bolts.

*Thud — thud!* From nowhere, thick hobnails drive themselves through the toes of Matt's boots, fixing him to the spot. Wolf yelps again, mocking now as he disappears into the trees.

This is a nightmare, now. Matt yanks and pulls at the nails -- hell, they're spikes -- hammered through his feet. It doesn't hurt, and he's glad of that, but the damned things won't budge. He has to pry them up with his fingernails, and he tosses them aside although he wonders if he won't want them later. This place feels dangerous now.

"Wolf!" he yells into the forest. "Wolf, get back here!" Like a wild creature's going to listen.

All he can think now is that he's got to find Wolf (and doesn't remember, now, that he could just roll over and wake up next to his lover, that he has but to reach out and have Wolf be there).

He's forgotten all he ever knew about tracking, but there's a chance he could do this. Wolf's a huge beast, and as he tore into the woods he left a swath of broken tree-arms and tossed-up leaves behind.

Matt hesitates. The wooden fingers on the trees are angry now, curling into fists and grabbing at the air. But no, he's got no choice but to go, and it's weighing on him with greater urgency by the second. Wolf. That's all that matters; finding Wolf.

So he follows in his lover's wake.

The hands *are* angry; they snatch at him as he runs through their midst. One or two catch hold and hang on hard, tearing off bits of his — what's he wearing? a priest's robe? — as he wrenches away and by. Thin-lipped mouths grow in the bark of the tree-trunks and catcall, razzing him with a thin, shrill laughter.

No matter. He can see the edge of the forest. But they don't want to let him leave, oh no, they grab and hang on tight, needle-sharp fingers cruel and digging into his flesh. He'll be damned if he'll let that stop him, though, because beyond the trees he can see a field of overgrown grass, and the path where Wolf has run.

"You think I'm scared of you?" he shouts. "I'll fucking turn you into firewood! Let me go!"

Sharp nails catch, pinching arms and legs, slapping sticky handfuls of sap in his hair. Wind hisses at him through pine needles, pissed off now, but that's okay because he's breaking free, he's done it, thank God, and he's out.

No pausing to catch his breath. He can still see the trail, but already the reeds are bending back together. If he doesn't hurry, he'll lose it altogether.

Better run. His feet want to mire in the earth, as they do in dreams, but he pushes himself forward and makes it piecemeal at a time.

He passes by a little man, lying peacefully on his back in the meadow. Smoking a pipe full of something fragrant, clouds of pale gray curling up over his head. He grins and waves as Matt passes.

"You're not gonna find him!" the man calls out in a surprisingly light tenor, perfect for singing. "I lost track of him a long time ago. He's way too fast for you."

*Screw you*, Matt thinks, and saves his breath for running.

He can hear the sound of water rushing ahead, just over a rise of green hillocks. His heart gives a leap of hope. Maybe Wolf stopped for a drink, or maybe wolves don't like to cross water? He can't remember, but it's a hope to cling to.

The muscles in his legs are feeling better now, strong and springy, and he doesn't pause for a second ascending that grade. He's filled with hope, and that drives him on.

But when he gets to the top a certain smell hits him, and he stops, gagging. When his stomach quits wrenching and he can look up, what he sees is a pure horror. There's liquid all right, rushing past, but broad and deep and fast as the Niagara that he and Wolf camped by that one time.

It's red; deep, vicious red. It stinks of copper and corruption.

He looks a little further down and spies a hummock of rocks. And there's a woman — a girl? — sitting there innocent as you please, her legs crossed over a stone. As he watches, her hair flickers between red as dawning sunlight, black as sin, and white as snow. She holds a fistful of daisies with thorns on their stems.

Drawing closer, he realizes that each yellow petal is made from strands of golden hair. She's plucking them off and dropping them one at a time into the thick, crimson water with a slight chiming sound of music. A harp, maybe? They sink, slow and sticky, going under with tiny cries.

He realizes then that the water doesn't just look like blood, it *is* blood. Countless gallons of it. It frolics over rocks and fallen branches as would crystal clear water in a country brook, sprinkling the metamorphosing woman with spatters of red.

He feels sick.

When his head clears, Matt looks at the girl again. Red, black, white. "I recognize you," he blurts suddenly. "Maiden, warrior, goddess. Queen Mab?"

She turns to him and gives him a startlingly cheerful smile. "Not really, no."

"Who are you, then?"

"I'm not sure anymore." She turns pensive. "Ask Wolf. He might know. He used to."

Pluck, pluck go the daisy petals. Golden hairs unravel as they fall into the blood that flows like water.

Wolf? Has she seen him?

"It's been a while." The woman frowns. "Does he belong to you now? Are you trying to find him?"

"He belongs to himself," Matt says flatly. "Nobody owns anybody in my life; I learned that lesson a while back. He's his own man."

It's the way it has to be, day by day, because he knows freedom is too precious to put any sort of limits on what they have together.

But it's oh, so hard sometimes when they're writhing together, sweat-slick and straining, not to grasp for those hands and call out the three words that would bind them together. He can taste them on his tongue now, sweet as sugar...

Matt shakes his head, hard. Can't ever say it if he's lost Wolf. "Yeah, I'm looking for Wolf. Just can't find him, is all." He gestures at the river, a little more able to look at it now. "Is there a bridge anywhere?"

The woman gives him a pixie's grin. "You don't need a bridge."

"Well, maybe you're fine sitting there all day, but I've got places to be. People to find."

"You don't want to keep me company?" She shifts closer to him, moving so that her clothes hug her body just that little bit tighter.

Once upon a time, she would have been tempting, but no, now all he wants is to find his Wolf. He shakes his head. "Have to go."

"Fine, then." With a pout, she waves her hand carelessly at the river. It parts down the middle, torn open like a throat.

The blood rises in walls higher than their heads on either side of a dry path littered with bones. Every kind, from every creature, human and otherwise. Tibias, metacarpals, hell, he can see ribcages poking from the ivory-colored scatter.

"Go on, then. I can keep myself busy."

Something tells him it's best by far to get moving before she changes her mind.

His feet — thank God he's still got boots on, he couldn't *\*do\** this in bare feet — jump forward and he's running, crunching over the bones, crushing them to powder. Even as he prays to be forgiven for desecrating so poor a mass grave, he can hear the madwoman laughing behind him.

The river seems to run forever, miles to the other side, but after skipping over a group of skulls with dangling jaws a-screaming, he's on the opposite bank. The bloodwaters close behind him with an almighty *splash*. He jumps and shouts, smacking at himself to wipe away stray droplets.

But there aren't any.

He glances back and sees -- nothing. Not bones, not a woman, not a river. Just an open field littered with rocks.

Off in the distance, maybe miles away, he hears the faint calling of a wolf's howl.

Wolf?

He turns to look, and the sun winks out. All that's left is a darkness thick as syrup that drops heavy over the land.

Stars wink on in the sky, tiny lights too small to be of use in seeing. Three moons drift out from behind the clouds, making it almost bright as day again. He drops into a crouch, all the better to protect himself, and stares around.



In front of him, two men jump from nowhere in the sky and land, fighting tooth, nail and claw. Blood runs red from countless wounds, down to the white gleam of bone, and their faces are twisted into hideous rage-masks.

The one is fair and slim, but more vicious; the other is dark, and has both height and weight on his opponent. Matt can't understand the names they're calling each other in some language he doesn't know.

The blond is knocked down and lands heavily on his back. His arms shoot up to stop the darker creature from landing on him, crushing him.

"He's not here," he grunts. "The one you're looking for? He's been and gone ages ago."

"I haven't seen him in years/forever," the second thing echoes itself as it reaches for the blonde's eyes. "But I/we could show you the way."

Breath quickens in Matt's chest. He's aching for Wolf now, a powerful hunger that coils down to the roots of his being. "Where? How?" He dares to creep a little closer — he'll touch them if he must, fling himself in the middle to get the answers he wants.

A tall woman with hair like the night sky and strange, violet eyes appears out of the shadows and reaches for him, touching his arm. "You think it's that easy? No way. I want three drops, Matt."

She holds out a silver needle. "Three drops, one for each moon, one for each hour that you've spent chasing him, one for each of three words that you won't say."

He takes the needle and stares at it numbly. He should have known. It's always blood, isn't it? Washes away your sins.

The woman taps her foot. "Do you want to find him, or not?"

Dry-mouthed, Matt swallows. For Wolf, it'd be worth it. He can feel inside his heart that his lover is drawing farther and farther away from him, and that there's only a little time left to find him.

He raises the needle and jabs it at his thumb. He misses, and pierces his wrist. A needle in the wrist hurts like a bitch, much more than fingers or arms. It's that bend where people slice to end it all, only they don't know how much it'll burn, and he's terrified. Have they tricked him into this?

But instead of blood, a thick crystalline drop of salt water — a tear? -- wells up and trickles sluggishly down his palm. It lands with a wet splat at the woman's feet.

She nods, satisfied. "That's what you owe me," she says. Then she points to the darker, ever-changing man. "Now him/them."

He's on the bottom now, pinned by the blond man's fury. Though unsure, Matt picks his way over the now-dry ground, all stones and sharp-edged glass, and lowers his wrist over that

dark mouth. He angles a bit, and the second promised drop goes sailing down to be swallowed.

"That's what you owe me," the man/thing growls. "I can find what I want now."

He changes his grip on other man, from a wrestling hold to a lover's death-grip. The blond bucks once against him, then begins to writhe, suddenly riding him. Matt's breath catches in his throat. A picture of Wolf, stretched out so wantonly atop him (was it only just a day or so ago?), their fingers interlaced, his head thrown back...

He can feel himself getting hard, straining at the cloth of his jeans.

"Not yet," the woman clucks. "Men. Never thinking with their big head." She rolls her eyes. "You owe me one more."

The needle's vanished from his wrist, and the red puncture hole is nearly sealed over, but Matt nods, because he's come this far. He pinches his arm between finger and thumb, squeezing hardhardHARD, and a third drop oozes out.

"On the ground," she directs. "Between us."

He lets it fall.

It glimmers for a second, then shivers, shakes, ripples, spreads. He has to jump back for fear of getting the spreading puddle on his boots. But when it taps against his toe, it's hard. Solid. Cold, and suddenly a perfect reflection of the sky.

The woman smiles at him. He's starting to loathe that smile. The men rutting behind him are loud now with their cries, and his cock's so swollen with wanting that it hurts.

She waves at the magic mirror, though it doesn't show her reflection. "It's because I don't belong here," she explains. "I'm just visiting. Otherwise you wouldn't have a clue."

Truth to tell, he still doesn't. He leans over the mirror and peeks in. Nothing looks back at him but his own face, drawn and tired.

He gets what she wants him to do. And because he just doesn't feel like listening, he goes ahead and does it, a swan dive straight into the crystal heart. As he tumbles out the other side, he hears the echo of her laugh behind him.

His landing's rough, on his feet in the middle of another forest glade. He glances quickly about him, but the trees are just plain trees here, good ordinary pines like he remembers from his childhood. He rests his forehead against one, sticky and worn out.

He's had just about enough of this. Would to God there was a way to wake yourself from dreaming. Pinching sure as hell won't work if a damned needle through the wrist didn't.

No, he's pretty sure that to get out, he's got to find Wolf. Why did he run in the first place? Where they were was good, and safe, until he bolted.

It's what Matt most dreads in the waking world. That he'll wake up one day and Wolf will just be gone. Not a word, because that's not his way. Just his few things — and why does he have so few, now that Matt thinks of it? — packed up in that van he's insisted on keeping, and headed down the road. Far and away.

Matt's heart squeezes tight in his chest. Hell if he'll let that happen. He'll hang onto Wolf by both wrists if he has to, do anything in his power to stop Wolf from ever leaving. Not that he'd deny Wolf his freedom, but he cares so much that it'll kill him if Wolf goes.

Dragging a weary hand across his face, he turns around. The familiar, gamy scent of wild fur fills his nostrils. A soft, mocking bark comes from nearly below his feet, and he looks down.

What he sees, nestled into a dry gully, near about ends him right there. He can feel a piece of him just quit, give up and lie down. Wolf, his own wolf at last, is down in there, nuzzling up to a smaller female. He laps at her muzzle, submitting to her power here. And cooed up to her still-rounded belly are a half-dozen pups, suckling life and milk for all they're worth.

The female lifts her muzzle and laughs at him. *See? I won.*

He hadn't even known it was a fight. He knew that Wolf had female lovers in the past, women who felt they still had a claim on him, but Wolf had sworn he was only Matt's now. His mate.

The moons pass behind a cloud, and he can see, for a split second, an angry-ugly-triumphant blaze on a sulky-pretty woman's face. Then the wolf is back, yipping her little laugh. Wolf turns about on his paws, and faces Matt, calm as ever.

Matt's got nothing to offer. He's shed sweat and blood and tears. There's nothing left to give.

Gently, gently, Wolf paces toward him. He raises up on those powerful hind legs and lays warm, rough paw-pads over Matt's chest. His heart.

And Matt gets it. He grabs the paw and holds it there, steady, gazing unafraid now into the wolf's eyes. "It already belongs to you." His voice is rough. "You took it a long time ago."

The wolf cocks its head.

"I never said. I know." Matt thinks of the grasping tree-hands, the river of blood, the sightless skulls. "You don't know everything about who I've been. What I've done."

The wolf grins with every pointed tooth. *All the better to eat you with, my dear.* Matt nods. He presses the sharp-clawed paw to his chest, feeling the nails bite in. "Go on, then," he says. "You want it, knowing what I am? It's yours. All I have to give is yours."

...and he opens his eyes.

Wolf is stretched out atop him, limb to limb. Human Wolf, greenish-hazel eyes twinkling with a hidden secret and his lips quirked up ever so faintly. His breath is sweet, scented with mint and herbal tea. "Morning. Sleep okay?"

Matt can't think; can only blink and swallow air. But he has to know: "Am I awake?"

Wolf ponders that, then dips his head to kiss Matt. "Unless I'm asleep, I'd say you were awake, yeah."

He probably doesn't understand why Matt's arms fly around him, grabbing hold so tight it likely squishes the breath from his lungs. Nor does he get why he's being kissed so deeply and thoroughly, but from his movements and the hardness suddenly jabbing at Matt's hip, he's enjoying it.

He lifts his head again, definitely amused, but up in every way for whatever's going on. "Frisky this morning?"

"Nuh-uh." Matt strokes down the narrow, pale back with feverish hands. Pulls Wolf tight and rides the wave of scorching bliss before he gasps out, "Love you. I love you. You better understand that, hear?"

Blink. Pause. Wolf's eyes stare intensely back at Matt's own, searching and seeking out the truth.

Matt stares back at him, willing Wolf to believe. Matt's gone through that dream and death and life for this armful of quiet Zen, and he is never, never letting Wolf go without a fight.

Slowly, a genuine smile spreads across Wolf's face. "Cool," he says simply. He rubs his nose against Matt's; raises the pair of hands they've joined together, and kisses the knuckles.

Then, whispered onto Matt's lips: "That's good. 'Cause you? You're my world."

His world, and everything in it. Matt gets it now. As they melt into each other's arms, he half-thinks for a moment that he can hear them all, witch and woman, river of blood and shouting trees, doves and wolves, set up a wordless cry in the tongue that humans cannot understand, but then it is gone.

Or it was only ever in his mind.

But somehow, he thinks, as Wolf moves beneath him — oh yeah, somehow -- he knows much better than that.

## “Raiment of My Heart”

*Chop. Slice. Crack. Crunch!*

Cooking's damn fun when you get down to it, Teddy reflects as he gleefully whacks a cleaver through yet another bulging, purple eggplant.

Teddy's been every place, seen it all, done everything that interested him even a bit, and he isn't afraid of a little seasoning.

He likes things spicy.

It's just as well. His partner Benjamin's cooking... well, he's lucky to set the timer right on their toaster and not end up with cinders instead of crispy bread. He'd never have a bite that wasn't junk food if Teddy hadn't taken a liking to wreaking culinary havoc.

*Chop!*

God, he loves the sound a blade makes tearing through all that succulent flesh. Rich, juicy crunches.

He pauses, considering. Should there be meat? It's tempting. Ben's a carnivore from way back, but healthy won't hurt him for once. Besides, there's some great cheese and tomato sauce still to mix in. Teddy eyes the concoction critically. It's sort of like pizza, isn't it? Ben likes pizza. Should be fine.

He gets back to work, mixing with both hands instead of a spoon, getting his fingers good and soaked in vegetable viscera. Oh, yeah, he likes cooking. It's mostly for his own pleasure that he does this sort of thing. Not like he's cock-whipped or anything.

The vacuuming and doing dishes... well, he just doesn't like big messes. Clutter is one thing and you can't avoid that with two men sharing one apartment. Especially when they enjoy playtimes involving running, chasing, tackling, and (re)christening all possible surface areas. Stuff gets knocked to the floor, so it has to be picked up, right?

Besides, Tidbit likes to burrow under dropped towels and jeans and play "freak the hell out of the naive humans" by lying in wait to be tripped on. Sneaky little prick of a cat, one blue eye and one green, deaf on the left side, white-furred with a scattering of black spots.

They've had it nearly a year, and the battle lines are firmly drawn. Have been from the start. He'd put up a fight about acquiring the thing, but Ben just had to have it out of that box at the market. Teddy gave in, with the proviso that he got to name it.

"Brat", "Hairball", and "Muncher" hadn't lasted, never mind "Hey, you". An ailurophobe can only take so many projectiles aimed at his head when he's just innocently suggesting names.

They'd compromised on "Tidbit" at the last. Teddy wishes he'd thought a little harder because he's convinced their cat is no ordinary beast. It's a monster with whiskers, too smart for its own good.

Tidbit knows what's what. He adores Benjamin, and waits by the door for him to come home from work every day. Delights in turning his backside on Teddy and flipping him off with an elegant tail. Teddy usually flicks a bit of water at him then. He makes a lovely hiss, but there's a look in his eyes telling Teddy the thing's contemplating how best to dive-bomb his ankles and send Teddy ass over teakettle.

Benjamin thinks that's funny, but he's got a blind spot when it comes to the four-footed beast. The only time he's ever drawn the line was when Tidbit took a running leap and landed on his bare butt cheeks just as he was... and Teddy was... well, no Fancy Feast for the furball next morning, that was certain. Teddy took a grim glee in ignoring all plaintive mews and letting Tidbit eat dry kibble.

It's a good hate-hate relationship, really.

But if he scratches behind the little bastard's ears when it condescends to let him fill a food bowl, that's his own business.

Ben's late tonight, he thinks, checking the clock over the stove. He despises digital clocks. No charm to them, just blinding, red numbers that whack you over the head with what time it is. Not too late as yet — and Ben hasn't called with an emergency -- so he'll deal.

Gives the parmigiana time to cook, anyhow.

He's just pushed the dish into the oven when Tidbit blurs into action, a flash of white streaking for the entryway and hunkering down in his preferred spot. Hindquarters waggling and tail whipping about.

Ben must be — Teddy cocks his head — yes, there's footsteps coming down the hall.

There's a bump, a series of thumps, a rattle in the lock, and the door's open, with Benjamin staggering in. He's got half-a-dozen plastic bags all gripped in one hand, while the other's awkwardly stuffing away his keychain.

"Teddy," he growls. "Would it hurt you to just once unlock the door for me?"

"Hey, now!" Teddy had been heading in Ben's direction for a hello-there-handsome-it's-been-hours kiss, but way to kill the mood, huh?

He stops and plants his fists on his hips. "What crawled up your ass?"

"Last time I checked? You." Benjamin stomps past him, dumping the bags on their kitchen island. "Leaving me open for the easy shots? You're losing your touch." He winces, shaking his hand. "Dammit."

Teddy counts, very slowly, to ten. "Benjamin," he asks, "what day of the week were you born on?"

Benjamin's rustling the shopping about, irritably hunting for something. "What? Teddy, why the... I have no idea. What does it matter?"

"Must have been a Thursday, because you're fucking full of woe tonight. What happened to your hand?"

Teddy cranes his neck to see welts from the heavy bags dug deep into Ben's palms and fingers, and forgets his pique to snatch the hand up and growl over it. "Dumbass. Were you trying to prove something, carrying all that one-armed? And hey, who told you we needed milk? We've got a whole gallon, barely touched."

"Skim milk," Benjamin grouses. "I hate that stuff. Tastes like sour water. This is full-fat, in the glass bottle, which is so much better."

"If you actually needed to gain weight." Teddy flicks Benjamin's belly. It's flat and hard, but that's not the point.

Benjamin gives him a look fit to curdle both gallons. "Screw you."

"When you ask so politely..." Teddy drawls. "But I didn't cook all damn day for you not to stuff your face with *food* before any other treats."

"You cooked?" Benjamin lifts his nose to sniff. "Pizza?"

"Parmigiana."

"Oh, god, tell me it's not eggplant."

"Fine. It's not."

"Liar."

"And?" Teddy jerks a thumb. "You'll like it, I promise."

"Teddy, I hate eggplant."

"Do you? Want me to tick off the list of things Benjamin Rider hated before someone, namely me, convinced him to give them a try? Broccoli, cauliflower, asparagus, skinny-dipping, and rimming?"

Benjamin's cheeks color a bit. He stares woefully at Teddy. "Not fair."

"So who ever said I played fair? Look, I spent a good hour on that eggplant crap, so you'll eat it and like it or choke on it, understand?"

Ben hesitates. He's about to say something -- then he screeches and doubles over, grabbing for his ankles. Tidbit's gotten tired of being ignored and decided to lodge a protest. Evil little thing spits at them when Teddy swipes at it, then does a runner as its so-called beloved master bleeds and curses.

Quickly down on one knee, Teddy checks out the damage. Some scratches, not very deep. Only a few ruby droplets rolling down the foot. "I think the sock protected you from the worst," he judges. His free hand absently starts rubbing small circles on Benjamin's calf. "Best go clean it up, though."

"Yeah." Ben sounds as if his mouth's gone dry. Teddy looks up, curious -- and finds himself at an eye level he's enjoyed in the past.

He changes the motion of his hand, a bit more deliberate. "Or we could patch things up later," he suggests, voice low and warming with lust. "Since it looks like you have another situation going on."

"Yeah." Benjamin steps back, out of reach. "I do."

Teddy pulls back, surprised. That's not like Ben at all. A stab of fear runs through his belly. Ben hasn't found someone else -- no, he wouldn't do that, it's not his nature -- but why would he turn down...?

And why's he acting like such a prick tonight, anyway?

Benjamin runs a hand through his hair. "Look, Teddy, I'm just exhausted. Okay? And I'm sore. I need a bath before I can pretend to be human again."

"That'll be new."

Ben slams the flat of his hand down on the counter. "Why do you have to be so flip about everything I do, Teddy? Would you just... look, I'm taking a bath now. Finish cooking, skin Tidbit, do what you want. Just leave me alone until I'm done."

Jaw set hard, he's storming out of the kitchen. No kiss, no hug, no scratch behind its ears for the sorry cat. Teddy flicks his glance down to the tangled mess of grocery bags and plucks out one of the beers he figures Benjamin was looking for.

"You want this?" he asks blandly, offering it.

Ben gives him a long, flat look. He snatches the beer and stomps through to the hall.

*Well.* Teddy narrows his eyes. *This is just great, isn't it?*

He can either stand there and fume over the now-bitter tang of the meal he had such visceral pleasure in putting together, or he can go see what's gotten under Ben's skin.

It's actually a hard choice for a moment.



But in the end, he goes. Calling himself 'whipped' all the way, until he reaches the bathroom and sees Benjamin, leaning against the countertop to support himself, head hung low.

"Ben?" he asks, surprised. "What's wrong?"

He gets a shake of the dark head. No words.

Okay, that does it. Whether he's interested or not, Teddy's not going to let it drop now. Teddy slides up against Benjamin, spooning him from behind, arms around his waist.

"I'm not stupid, you know," he whispers against one stiff shoulder. "Tell me what happened. Did I--"

"Not you." Benjamin manages a shaky laugh. "It's stupid, Teddy. You wouldn't..."

"Wouldn't understand? Try me."

Ben heaves a sigh, then holds up his right hand for Teddy to look at. Teddy winces aloud despite himself. The palm is a serious mess. Skin stripped off in places, bruised. Red, raw, and angry-looking.

"Ben!" he scolds, reaching above their heads to rummage for a first-aid kit. "What the hell did you do to yourself?"

"Tried to use one of the old presses and show a new kid in the shop how we used to do things way back when. You know, before copy-quick stores opened." He laughs again, self-deprecating. "I got my hand caught in the rollers. They're sort of rusty and rough, and --"

Teddy stiffens. "You didn't know better?"

"I should have. I do. But there I was, all pompous and 'let me show you a neat trick'. Made a jackass out of myself."

"Ben!" Teddy shakes him. "Shut up, would you? That's the reason you've come home fit company for neither man or beast?"

Benjamin nods.

"You? Are a fucking idiot." Teddy softens that with a kiss to the back of Benjamin's hand. "The only thing you ought to know better is accidents happen. To everyone, including you. Believe me when I say the only thing I care about is getting you fixed up. Understand?"

"God, Teddy." Benjamin leans into the caress. He half-laughs. "So what did I do to deserve you?"

"If memory serves, you got drunk on the night the Steelers lost a big game and ended up sharing a bottle with a stranger, me as a matter of fact, in a bar. From then on, I'd say you were just lucky."

Ben cracks up. "God, I'm glad we can't have kids. What a story to tell if they asked how we met."

Teddy kisses Ben again, pressing lips to lips, flickering his tongue over the mouth a bit. "Better. Come on, we'll get this bandaged for you."

Teddy rummages among gauze and patches, but Benjamin shakes his head. "I'm dirty and I stink, Teddy, I need a bath. Use the plastic skin stuff to cover it for now."

"It stings," Teddy warns. "Stinks like hell, too."

"I know."

Teddy's nose wrinkles, but he obeys. The clear liquid settles as he paints it on, and dries into a shiny, transparent film. "Better?"

"Much." Benjamin leans his head into Teddy's shoulder and just holds on, lets himself be held.

Teddy cards gentle fingers through Ben's hair. Still glossy and dark, though there's more threads of gray now than there used to be. He rolls them thoughtfully between finger and thumb. He doesn't like to think about them getting old, but time just slides by on greased wheels.

"God," he says, forcing a laugh as he pulls back. "You do stink. Smell like you've been in yet another bar for hours, all beer and sweat. Take your bath, and fast."

"If I get relaxed, I'll fall asleep." Ben nuzzles his face into Teddy's palm, kissing it. He glances up, and there's a bit of the wicked old sparkle in his eyes. "I'm thinking a shower instead."

"Are you?" Teddy runs his hand up Ben's side, fingers dancing over the ribs. "Would there happen to be room in there for two?"

"Your dinner?"

"I set it on low," Teddy murmurs, leaning up for another kiss. "Hoped I'd be a while."

Benjamin biffs him lightly across the ear. "Dork."

"Nah. Smartass is the term I like better."

Benjamin kneads softly at Teddy's shoulder. "Not really. You chose me."

"See? You just proved my point." Teddy reaches past them to pull back the glass shower door and turn the water on. "Now." He plucks at Benjamin's soft, flannel shirt and the cotton T beneath it. "Clothes, off."

Ben's smile is definitely back, and deliciously naughty now. "What about you?"

"Let's see." Teddy lazily undoes the first buttons on Benjamin's flannel, his fingers lingering in the opening wake. "How do you want me?"

Heat flares in Benjamin's eyes. "Naked, and under that water as fast as I can get you there."

*Hot damn!*

Teddy gives up on the buttons and dives for Ben's belt, yanking both shirts up. His lover protests in fits of laughter, but finally raises his arms to let the garments be pulled over his head.

Down Teddy goes again to unzip the jeans and pull them off, pausing only to hungrily mouth Ben's bulging erection through soft, cotton boxers. Then there's impatient hands plucking at his own clothes. Ben's smothering him with kisses, and urging him to hurry all at once.

When he steps out of his jeans, eager hands haul him in the shower, underneath the steaming spray of water. He undulates, rolling his hips and shoulders in pleasure from the heat.

Then there's a warm body flanking his back, and the jutting pressure of a cock nestling into the cleft of his ass. Ben rocks him a little, swaying back and forth. "Feel good?" his lover whispers in his ear.

Teddy's gasping for breath. "Good," he manages. "Too one-sided, though." Slick as a fish, Teddy wriggles about in the circle of Benjamin's arms and meets him face-to-face.

They both hiss as their erections collide, sliding against each other.

"That's better, huh?"

Benjamin's response is buried in the curve of Teddy's throat, mumbled in the midst of nips and open-mouthed kisses that suck up faint pink marks on his flesh.

Teddy thrashes under the assault. Sneaky bastard! Ben knows what a hot spot that is for him, and is taking unfair advantage.

He *likes* it when a guy plays dirty.

Teddy manages to make his hands cooperate enough to reach up and grasp Benjamin's ass, pulling them into closer contact, still. Slick with water, they glide against each other, cocks bumping bellies and grazing across one another with delicious friction. "Better yet," he murmurs, setting up a rhythm.

"Teddy," Ben's panting at his ear. "God, Teddy — so good —"

"Oh, yeah. Try this now." Teddy slips a finger down the line of Benjamin's ass, then dips in between the cheeks to tease his hole.

Benjamin yelps and writhes against him, fingers digging into the small of Teddy's back, his shoulders, the long muscles. "Do it," Benjamin's begging. "Do it. Need you."

"Anything for you." Teddy's finger slips past the ring of muscle. He knows exactly where to head, and drags his fingertip deliberately across Ben's sweet spot. Ben's heavy cock spasms against his stomach in time with a strangled cry.

"Again?" Teddy teases, eyes wicked.

Ben makes some noises Teddy figures mean: "Yes, god, yes, again!" He slips in another finger, and another, twisting and stretching. He dips down and begins to gnaw at Benjamin's nipples, turning them into dark, puckered nubs.

His lover's whimpering now, near about lost. Thick, ropy strands stretch belly to belly from both their cocks, pulsing with the need for release.

Teddy withdraws his fingers reluctantly. God, the only thing he hates about shower sex is the floor's not long enough to lie down on. He desperately wants to see Ben's face when they do this. Watching the bliss wash over Ben is nearly as good a rush as coming himself.

But God, he has to be in Ben, and has to be in Ben *\*now\**.

He pulls back gently, nudging at Benjamin's shaking shoulders. "Turn around."

Ben staggers about and braces his hands against the wall, legs spread, one-hundred-percent ready to be fucked within an inch of his life.

*Damn!*

A bolt of pure pleasure shocks through Teddy's dick. Lube, where the hell's the lube... they always keep a tube in the shower. Like other gay couples wouldn't. Come on!

He fumbles blindly for it and finally closes his hand around a tube. Squeezing a vast dollop on one hand, he slathers his erection with it, pinching the base with the other. Won't come... not just yet.

Pushing into Benjamin, ready and open for him, has never gotten old and it never will. Incredible heat, tightness, pressure, sucking him in to the very last inch. When he moves, it's like being inside a vacuum, drawing and pulling at his cock with desperate hunger. He angles to hit the best of all places and is rewarded with a howl fit to wake the dead.

"Good," he manages. "Tight."

Teddy's hands fumble around Benjamin's torso, tugging at his nipples, scratching his stomach, finding his leaking dick. This is too good to last very long. Teddy thrusts slowly in, out, struggling to keep the pace as he begins to milk his lover.

"Come on," he growls, butting his head hard into Ben's shoulder. "Come for me, baby, come with me..."

The noises Benjamin's making grow louder, frantic from the double stimulation of being filled and stroked. His hands are fists now, thumping at the wall. He thrusts back, deep as he can onto Teddy's cock, then forward into the squeezing fist. His balls are drawing up high and tight to his body.

Teddy moves a hand down to the sac, kneading it to the sound of deep, desperate groans. He's lost the beat, lost it utterly, just pounding into Benjamin now, desperate for his own explosion, and oh, God, Benjamin beats him by just a second, the violent spasming of muscles around his cock pulling him into the white-hot void.

Lights are flashing in front of Teddy's eyes. He slumps against Benjamin, weakly stroking down Ben's arms. Peppering the skin with light kisses. He hears and marvels at the strong pounding of the heart beneath Benjamin's ribs, and lavishes kisses over the pulse.

*I belong to this man, Teddy thinks sleepily. Just as he belongs to me.*

Under the tender treatment, Ben's melted boneless against the wall, utterly relaxed. "Feeling okay now?" Teddy murmurs.

"Very." Wearily, Benjamin turns around to enfold Teddy in his arms. They rock against each other, not with passion but in love. "How do you always know what I need?"

"I'm just good that way," Teddy murmurs smugly. "You want to use some actual soap in this shower now?"

Benjamin throws his head back and laughs. "You're trying to kill me!"

"Mmmmm." Teddy suckles at the dent between Ben's collarbones. "Not how you want to go out?"

Benjamin's hands slide down his back. "I didn't say that, did I?"

Much, much later on, they eat the slightly burned parmigiana, Tidbit snarling around their ankles for a taste of the cheese.

Teddy was right.

Benjamin likes it just fine after all.

## “Caught in the Daymare”

Jeffrey does not love Lewis.

But Jeffrey has been waiting for him all the long day, and welcomes him when he returns from his wandering of the downs. Dampened by spats of rain and grey as the sky, he barely seems to notice the cottage door opening or Jeffrey’s supporting arm about his shoulders, helping him inside.

He’s been out since dawn or soon after, aimlessly walking as is his habit. Searching, seeking - for what, he will not say. Jeffrey knows, because Lewis was gone from their bed when he himself awoke. His half of the tangled sheets, long cold.

There were no breakfast leavings, no half-empty teapot. No obvious food missing. So he’ll have been hungry all day, but won’t have thought of it. Foolish boy. No, not a boy, a man; nothing pains him more than to be mistaken for young and lacking in experience.

Jeffrey must remember that now.

It’s almost gone sunset when he returns. This is cutting things dangerously close for Jeffrey’s liking. Though he had occasionally glanced out the window and worried, he’d assumed that if his companion were still alive he’d be home by dark. Still, he had begun, despite himself, to fret.

But Lewis is home now.

Chiding and cossetting, Jeffrey half-carries Lewis through to the sitting room and arranges it so that Lewis may collapse into a chair by the fire. He’s glad that he thought to make up a good brisk blaze and have it ready. The day was warm, but evenings tend to grow cold quickly. Besides, he sees now that beneath his overcoat, Lewis is soaking.

Jeffrey tsks over that. Truly, the man can make such astonishing messes of himself. Did he lay on the dying, autumn grass to watch the rain? Jeffrey’d not be surprised. Did he roll in the reeds, or simply jump in a pond?

Jeffrey goes to fetch towels, old and worn, but dry. When offered, they are stared at blankly, as if part of some complex mathematical equation not yet understood.

“Must I do everything for you, then?”

One hand creeps out to touch the ratty softness of terry. Petting it.

Jeffrey shakes his head. “Very well, then. Can you remove your coat for me? Can you do that, at least?”

Lewis bites his lip in an agony of uncertainty, and Jeffrey moves to help. He takes care of Lewis. He cannot *not* do so.

But he does not love Lewis.

\*\*\*

Jeffrey no longer believes, really, in dreams. It had been easy to fall into the habit when he was young and ran with a wild crowd, so full of what they hoped tomorrow would bring. Almost uncrushable, though they danced with death, the drink and the drugs, every night. It had been satisfying, somehow, to let himself believe in better things while he played with them.

It was with that crowd that he met Brighton, who turned his nights into days, and set his life spinning. Twenty years they had together, good ones all, but ended far too quickly with a squeal of brakes and a *thump* that ended one life, and nearly brought another down in its wake.

With Brighton gone, Jeffrey's reason for living had gone as well, and he was no longer able to think of brighter tomorrows. They had all gone down with Brighton, six feet into the grave.

He has been on his own for over a year, and he still has no regrets. He'd found a small place in the country, where he could be alone, be himself, and find some small pleasure in life again.

It took some hard work, but finally he found himself at peace for the first time in forever, longer than he could remember. Just peace, a whole calendar-span of it.

Then *he* arrived. Lewis.

*His* presence burst every carefully-crafted bubble. Let the dark night back into Jeffrey's pleasant afternoons.

He did not love Lewis then.

He cannot love Lewis now.

\*\*\*

Lewis blinks once, twice and again, processing Jeffrey's request. Before Jeffrey can help him, he stands under his own power and peels his arms out of the coat like so much overcooked spaghetti. The heavy weight of wool collapses to the floor. Droplets of water land on the fireplace gridiron and sizzle; both men wince at the unpleasant sound.

Jeffrey inspects the damage. Mercifully, the chair is only damp, but still, that won't do. He spreads two of the thicker towels across it to blot up the excess.

At this, Lewis slowly develops a worried look in his eyes. He glances from his coat to Jeffrey, seeking some acknowledgement that he has done well to obey.

Jeffrey touches his shoulder to soothe him. The warmth of his fingers brings a flash of relief across Lewis' face, a softening that turns him from looking every one of Jeffrey's years to his

proper, younger status.

“The shoes, next? Can you remove them?”

Lewis blinks, confused again. Jeffrey expected no less. He kneels. “Lean on me for balance, and lift your left foot,” he directs.

He tries not to react to the over-cool feel of wet, clammy fingers on his shoulder as he is obeyed. Instead, he tucks his head close to Lewis’ hip, butting against it in support and mostly-real comfort.

The shoe slips off damply to reveal a nicely-shaped, bare foot, long and narrow with an aristocrat’s arch and ankle. Jeffrey regards both for a long moment before putting the loafer aside. Resists the urge to caress the sole of that foot, make the toes curl up. It looks so cold that he wants to warm it with his own fire-toasted hands.

It is not hard to touch Lewis. Oh, no, not at all.

But it is impossible to love him.

\*\*\*

The afternoon Lewis arrived had begun as the most pleasant of Jeffrey’s new peaceful, lazy existence. He’d bargained hard at a rummage sale and come away with a steal on some old books. Childhood favorites in worn leather bindings.

On his way home he’d stopped at the local store and bought two pounds of the richly scented tea he liked best, some hot dogs, and a supply of fresh fruit. He’d planned to go out for a long, rambling walk later on, or if it got too dark, to have a drink by his fire and a dozy skim through the newspaper.

*His* arrival changed all of that.

*Scratch, scratch, scratch* at the door. He’d thought perhaps it was a dog.

But when Jeffrey’d opened the door, there *he* stood. Lewis. Unshaven long enough for stubble to become a thin beard. His clothes stank to highest heaven and lowest hell, stained by mud from the road and splashes of railway coffee. His hair a filthy tangle. His shoes? Gone. Feet badly cut by rough cobblestones. Hands chapped and raw from cold.

He said nothing, only swayed a little, and gave Jeffrey the look of a terribly lost and confused child.

Lewis. A face from his past, long since forgotten in the brightness of Brighton. One of the crowd that he ran with. A friend, once upon a time, almost a decade ago. Where he’d come from, Jeffrey had no idea, nor why he was in such sorry condition.

A sensible man would have shut the door in Lewis’ face and called the police. Jeffrey did neither. He touched Lewis. Put out his hand and grasped the arm, feeling scrawny but solid



heat underneath. Too hot; feverish.

Though he recognized the gaunt figure, he heard himself blurting: "Lewis?"

Lewis touched him back, hand flat to his chest, expression solemn and shuttered as a cat. He nodded once, wincing as if the movement hurt his neck.

Jeffrey hesitated, knowing things would change forever if he let Lewis in. But he could not turn this creature away, no more than he might the homeless dog he'd come in search of. He stood back from the door and gestured Lewis in.

Like a story-book vampire, only able to cross the threshold after being invited, Lewis sidled inside. He stood still for an eternity while Jeffrey struggled for something intelligent to say, then turned around, blinked once, took Jeffrey with one hand to either shoulder, and calmly kissed him.

Jeffrey was startled, not smitten. He did not love Lewis then.

He does not love Lewis now.

\*\*\*

He works slowly and carefully as a nurse, not a lover, unbuttoning Lewis' wet shirt. Long of sleeve, but made from thin Egyptian cotton, all wrong for this weather. Utterly spoiled now, of course. He would throw it in the fire if not for the stink of burning fiber sure to follow.

There's no undershirt, only an expanse of pale skin, a down of honey-colored hair and two nipples dark as chocolate, pebbling up in the sudden chill of exposure. Jeffrey strokes them with the ball of his thumb, softly, thoughtfully. Lewis gives a shiver of a different sort.

Lewis does not speak. Can't. Or won't. Jeffrey isn't sure which.

After some thought, Jeffrey, too, remains silent. He moves his hands a little further down and kneads Lewis' stomach lightly. *To bring some warmth back to the skin*, he tells himself.

But Jeffrey's hand wanders a little further south, to the buckle on Lewis' belt. At least he remembered to wear one. He's grown far too thin for even the trousers Jeffrey bought him to fit. Much more weight lost and he will become skeletal.

Jeffrey frowns unhappily at the realization. He'll have to think of things to tempt that fragile appetite.

Appetite... he traces the soft line of hair that disappears into Lewis' belt, from top to bottom. The soft gasp pleases him. He touches a slim flank with his other hand, squeezing just a little.

Gently. Lewis begins to sway back and forth, but Jeffrey has learned that although words have deserted the other man, this means he is pleased.

It pleases Jeffrey as well. He glances up to be sure, and sees a slow heat growing in darkened eyes, eyes that grow stronger in an awareness of himself, his surroundings, his seducer. He nods once, daring to push at the hand on his belt.

Jeffrey dips his head. The belt, too, is loose — threaded through the loops, but not pierced by the buckle — and comes off easily. Without needing to be unzipped, Lewis' trousers slither partway loose until they stick to his thighs, still wet. His cock, half-hard, springs loose and hangs temptingly before Jeffrey's mouth.

Jeffrey takes it briefly between his lips, giving one hard suck. Savoring the taste of autumn and Lewis, he draws Lewis in as far as can be, then laves the organ with his tongue until it swells into full hardness.

Too soon, he pulls off with a wet *pop*. Lewis' hands are on his shoulders now, fingers curling and uncurling.

*Please*, they beg while his voice is silent. *Jeffrey, please!*

But Jeffrey has never claimed to be merciful, and he is not obliged to be kind.

A final flick at the engorged crown with the tip of his tongue and he lets go. Hard as stone, it slaps Lewis in the belly and leaves a sticky wet spot. With a secret smile, Jeffrey peels the remains of the rained-on trousers away from Lewis and eases them off one foot at a time.

He gives in and kisses the tops of those feet. He would swear his lips leave burn marks in their wake.

But he only wants Lewis now.

He does not love Lewis.

\*\*\*

Jeffrey took in and took care of his bewildered stray, feeling at first a vague sort of obligation. A sense of fellow-feeling among old friends.

Lewis never speaks, and when he tries he fails with a grimace. His once plummy voice, smooth as cream, has deserted him.

But despite that, Jeffrey soon begins to understand.

Lewis needs to be wanted. His serious, solemn kisses were first disquieting, then pleasant, and finally loaned a sort of borrowed peace back unto Jeffrey's soul.

When hands began to wander, he allowed and then encouraged them, until he realized that rather than taking, they sought; instead of demanding, they begged for attention.

Lewis needs to be ruled. Not necessarily a weakness, but now, a burning obsession. And Jeffrey -- he fell back into a role he had not played since his adolescence, the days of dancing

and beer and sweet grass smoked in foggy rooms. He became Lewis' master. Bought him new clothing, for he had not a stitch save those on his back. Plied him with food and drink to make him strong.

Kept him warm, permitted him to sleep in Jeffrey's own bed. Rolled him onto his flat stomach and used slippery fingers to spread him open, thrusting in to claim him deeply. Entwined their fingers tight to signify his commitment. Muffled the cries of ecstasy or pleasure/pain with his own lips and tongue.

He will not beat Lewis. This is a sore point between them that Lewis insists on jabbing at with sharp sticks, never permitting it to heal over. He thinks he deserves it, though he will not say why, and cannot be convinced otherwise.

If the temptation grows too strong, Jeffrey binds his wrists to the bed with rough, hempen rope and takes him that way. He is always careful not to lavish extra attention at these times, not to reinforce Lewis' idea that this is good.

Lewis needs to feel that he belongs. So Jeffrey lets him stay. Gives him all he needs. Doesn't push or pry for knowledge of hows and whys. Doesn't bring up the past.

He wonders if he should go back to the big city, where there would be a proper hospital and good help available for Lewis' condition. Or contact old doctor friends.

In the end, he lets it go. Adjusts his life to include Lewis, and goes on much as before.

But he does not love Lewis.

\*\*\*

Lewis is bare from tip to toe, as nude and elegant in his form as a Grecian statue. Apollo? Eros? Perhaps Priapus, with his angry, red, dripping erection. His hands are clenched into tight fists as Jeffrey walks around and around him, pretending to dry and warm his skin, but truly just feeling through the towel, gentle sweeps and long strokes.

When he comes around Lewis' front again, Lewis puts out a hand to stop him. Flat-fingered on his chest, just as he did when they first met here.

He shakes his head.

Jeffrey's blood, long since simmering, rises toward a blissful boiling. He runs a hand through Lewis' hair and tugs him closer. Their groins meet; he rolls into the contact and grows harder at the sound of a catlike hiss.

"You're willing? Able?" he asks, carding his fingers through soft, drying locks.

Lewis nods.

Jeffrey smiles, and it is not a nice smile. "Then nod once, to say please."

And there is no love there, none at all.

\*\*\*

Jeffrey's clothes have joined Lewis' in a heap by the chair. Wanting has made Jeffrey loose and limber, yet coiled as a tense spring. He kneels and leans back on his heels easily. He strokes one tight thigh muscle, inviting: come to me.

Lewis draws close, sinking onto his haunches. Jeffrey has oiled him, drizzling it down his back and between the cheeks of his ass. Stretched Lewis past the point of pleasure with one, two, three, four fingers, and finally his thumb, till he rotated his fist deep inside and knuckled that hidden bundle of nerves until Lewis let out a soundless scream.

Has knelt the man down before him and run the tip of his own weeping cock across Lewis' lips, letting him suck as strongly as he could, permitting him to lap up and down the length of it until his strength threatened to break.

He is not a rude lover. He will not give what he will not take. But all Lewis wants to do is give by taking. Already he's lowering himself over Jeffrey, his stretched hole widening yet more as he sinks down and takes Jeffrey in, every inch, until thin hips are flush against groin.

Jeffrey shows approval with searing kisses over the bared shoulders and curve of his neck, rubbing his arms until Lewis lets himself be held around the waist.

They know this dance well. Lewis lowers; Jeffrey lifts. Flesh meets flesh with a hot, sweet sound. Though Lewis would pick up the pace, Jeffrey holds him back and angles to hit the pleasure spot every time.

Soon enough Lewis is a whimpering mess in his arms, thrashing back for greater contact. Jeffrey holds on as long as possible, then lets go, allowing Lewis to plunge and impale himself as hard as he wants. Jeffrey's legs are strong enough for the impact.

When they come, Jeffrey from the spasming flesh encasing him and Lewis from Jeffrey's own hands pulling at his cock, it is almost as one.

Exhausted, they tumble like puppies on the threadbare rug before the fire. He slides free of Lewis, dark flesh wet and shining against a creamy pale thigh.

As ever, Lewis turns his back and curls up on himself, making a miniature ball out of a tall man. Jeffrey strokes him soothingly, up and down the sides of his legs.

Slowly, Jeffrey edges closer, until he is able to wrap his arm around Lewis' trembling ones and hold on tight, murmuring soft hushing noises into Lewis' ear. Lewis pushes himself backwards into the embrace... and weeps.

Jeffrey holds Lewis with all of his might. He has strong hands, powerful enough to kill, or to save a life. He holds Lewis, and tells him silently that he will never be cast aside.

But Jeffrey will not love Lewis. Will never love Lewis. He won't permit himself to.

A lone tear rolls down his cheek. He breathes Lewis' scent in deep, presses them together skin-to-skin, holds Lewis as if he will never let Lewis go.

And he lies to himself, one more time.

*Never* love Lewis, not *ever*...

## “The Better Part of Me”

Nick leans against the cool, stucco wall of his apartment hallway, fiddling with an unlit cigarette in his right hand and balancing a phone shaped like a cartoon duck's head between his ear and shoulder.

He's talking, earnestly, to the person on the other end of the line: "Flight went all right? Hope you gave the stewardess what for when she came on to you... well, they do with me. You'd have to be deaf, dumb and blind not to." He smirks. "That doesn't count, and you know it."

Nick pauses while he twiddles with his cigarette. God, he'd love to light up. Sneak just one. But nope, can't do. Stupid smoking laws and lease agreements. What's the point in paying for your own home if you can't do what you want in it?

Yeah, well, there is the one thing. Can't stop him from doing *everything* he wants... or anyone, one person in particular.

The person in question has finished speaking for the moment, and Nick nods. "Sure. Around ten, yeah, sounds good to me. Everyone should have cleared out by then."

"What? Hell, no, I'm standing in the hallway." He grins. "If you get me started, you'd better finish, hear me?" Pause. "That a threat, or a promise? Yeah? No way. You don't have the balls."

He stops to laugh. "Okay, good point. Call me back at ten, then, but for fuck's sake use the cell number. I can't see myself doing *that* on a phone shaped like a speech-impaired mallard. Kills the mood."

"Yeah. Love you, too."

He sighs, and listens. Pauses. "Emma and Julie, I think. If you count clearing up as bagging a half-dozen greasy boxes and paper plates. Anyone tossing a drink knows damn well they'd better swill it to the drop, 'cause I'm not hauling a sloshy bag down the to dumpster."

"I wasn't planning on it, no. I think it's Mike's turn."

"Well, that's not the point, is it? One of you cooks, or pays for delivery, and another one cleans."

"I'm not their host! They just descended on me like a short, sharp shower of —"

"Look, go catch your taxi, will you? And stay away from any drivers that have pointy ears. Wisconsin's fairy country from what I hear. Yep. Unseelie Court."

"No, I'm not kidding. Would I lie to you?"

"Fine, go ahead and hop in a Big Yellow with some cat's-eye driver named Na'am'thul and see where you end up. I doubt the cell's got that much range on it."

He stops, a reluctant grin curling up the corners of his mouth. "Okay, maybe a bit. Just want you to be careful out there, alone."

An indignant look twists his features. "Did not, am not, were not, have not, and will not!"

Laughter sounds through the earpiece, and Nick struggles against grinning. "Oh, you're good, you are. I have to pay you back for that later. Yeah. Don't worry, I'll think of something good."

His eyelids drop halfway and his lips part. "Ross, you just said that in a public damn airport," he breathes. "If I didn't love you before, I'd have to now. Don't think I won't hold you to it when you're home where you belong."

He fingers the telephone, longingly running his finger down the length of the cord. Realizes what he's doing and snatches his hand away as if stung. "Get off the phone. No -- off! Get your taxi and to that hotel. Unpack and call me once you've settled in. I'll get rid of this crowd and be alone, all ready for you when you call. Deal?"

Smirk. "Always am. For you. Yeah." He swallows. "You too. Now get moving. Right... bye."

The phone goes gently into its receiver instead of being slammed down as he's wont to do. The damn thing quacks reprovingly at him, so he flips it off. "Piece of shit," he mutters, running a hand over his face.

Well, hell. Here he is, acting like a mother hen with his only chick gone missing.

It's just... he and Ross haven't been apart in ages. He didn't care for the idea when it first came up, and he likes it even less now. Twelve hours alone, and already the place feels empty without Ross in it to run up and down the stairs, trailing dirty socks and hopping up on counters to wave his hands in excitement as he talks about his day.

It's not right. Place feels... empty.

It's why the crowd of friends and acquaintances in there barged in on him, thinking he'd be lonely. Well, he was, to tell the truth.

But so what? They've got to go, and soon.

He has *plans*.

Maybe they'll have taken the hint when he disappeared to get the phone without so much as an "excuse me". He hopes...?

But when he wanders back in, they're still lifting pieces of greasy pizza to their mouths, laughing and talking as if it's an ordinary night. Nick stifles a groan. *Shut up and go home!*

" — and that's why Miranda isn't allowed to have green peppers on her pizza anymore," Emma finishes some story or another. The roar of laughter that goes up makes even Nick grin, reluctantly, at the embarrassment of the lady in question.

"It's not funny!" Miranda protests. "Well, it's not. Anyone could make that kind of mistake."

Nick flicks the top off the last beer remaining, wipes the crystalline beads of condensation running down the sides off on his shirt, and flops down in the only chair left.

Besides, sitting here he can pick up Ross' scent — fabric softener, soap, and cologne that smells like Christmas when he was a kid. When he breathes deeper, through the overpowering smells of pizza and beer clouding the room — oh, yes, there it is. Sex and sweat, soaked deep into the dark-patterned fabric.

It's a good wide chair, nice for playing stalk-and-pounce. Just enough room to the side of either hip for Nick to slide a knee into as he slips onto Ross' lap, paws Nick's newspaper or magazine away like an impatient cat, and takes that mouth with his own in a hungry kiss...

And that's enough of that, right now. Nick adjusts his jeans a little uncomfortably.

Better distract himself. One eyebrow lifts wickedly as he takes a swig and offers, off-hand: "That's nothing. You ought to hear what Ross got up to one time with these little, red habaneras --"

He cackles at the instant chorus of "Ew, Nick!", a shout of "TMI!" and a few groans.

"Whatever the rest of that story is, I'm betting we don't wish to hear it," Mike says hastily. "For God's sake, Nick, they should make anti-Viagra for men like you."

"You just wish you got half as much as I do. This one time again, Ross --"

"Nick, shut it!" Mike looks like he wants to reach up and rub away a rising headache.

Miranda strides over to tower over Nick in the chair. "Any more jokes and I brain you, Nick."

"I'd like to see you try!" Nick pops up indignantly, right into Miranda's waiting hand. She twists the tip of his nose.

"Gotcha," she says smugly. He swats at her, but she's already sashaying off, hips swinging. Naughty, naughty wench. If she ever catches someone who measures up to her expectations, they won't know what they're in for.

Then again, he and Ross have raised the bar a bit high in that department, Nick thinks smugly.



The clock ticks over, loud in his ears. Nine-fifteen. Nick inhales deeply and breathes out on a sigh. Well, they can linger a few more minutes if they like. Then it's out the door, swear to God.

But no, Emma's touching Julie's arm and whispering down to her. They don't usually keep such late hours. Real morning types, those two.

Ah, well, he hasn't minded the company too much, he guesses. He would *have* had a lonely night without their visit.

Emma smiles up at him. "We have to —"

"Yeah, yeah." Nick's grin is unexpectedly gentle, for those who don't know him. "Time for bed. Do you plan on sleeping, or --"

"God! You're never going to grow up, are you?" Emma stands and leans over to kiss Nick on the cheek. "Don't ever change. You keep the rest of us feeling young."

Nick isn't the type to hug anyone — except Ross, of course — but he does pat her awkwardly on the hand as he gets up.

"Go on, scram," he scolds to cover his sudden surge of emotion. "Get out of here."

Julie obeys, tossing a wink back over her shoulder. Miranda messes up his hair as she passes. Belinda waves goodbye, and even Mike's got a little smile for him before following the ladies, scooping up the heavy trash bag on the way.

Nick approves.

Left alone, he glances around himself. The den's a wreck, but not a total disaster. He can leave it until Ross comes back. Won't hurt the place to look... well, lived-in.

The clock ticks over again. Nine-thirty. Time for a shower? Yeah... that'll feel good.

Nick heads up the stairs, shedding clothes as he goes — shirt over the railing, socks where they happen to fall, trousers in a heap by the door. He doesn't bother shutting it. Never does.

He makes the shower a quick one, though he'd love to stand under that needling, hot spray for hours. Soaks through his skin, it does, pinks him up and makes him feel warm. God, it'd be nice to carry that warmth for hours. It'll be cold, sleeping alone again for the first time in ages.

They've got their own separate racks in there for stuff. Nick's citrus-smelling gels and such, and Ross' one bottle of shampoo that this week smells of — he sniffs — balsam. Always something woody with Ross.

Nick hesitates over his orange bottle that he likes so well, then, with a shrug, goes for the balsam. The smell of it fills his nose as he rubs it in, foaming up, and he recognizes it as one of Ross' favorites.

Closing his eyes in pleasure, he tips a bit more of the stuff out onto a washcloth and soaps his body with it, more for the smell and the slick feel than getting clean. He likes running his hands over the muscles in his legs, chest, arms, imbuing them all with Ross' smell. Should last a while, keep him company with the sense memory.

He hesitates, one hand over his cock. The water's gotten him half-hard, and he's tempted. Not like he can't get it up again fast when Ross calls, but... nah, doesn't seem right somehow. He's jacked off by his lonesome plenty of times before, but he's gotten spoiled by having an appreciative audience.

Stepping out of the shower, he sees that it's nearly ten. Just in time.

Their bedroom's across the way. Nick towels himself off as he walks, tosses the damp bit of striped terry onto their carpet, and rummages in a half-open dresser drawer for a good pair of boxers and a fresh T. It'd be nice if he could wear Ross', but their size difference is too great; he'd end up swimming in the thing.

He's just stretched himself out on the bed, toes wiggling in pleasure, when he hears the soft trill of the cell on their nightstand table. Not even bothering to check the number, Nick swoops it up and purrs: "Good timing, you."

"Actually, this is the Montana State Commission, sir," a gravelly, two-pack-smoker voice answers. "We're calling to check on your water pressure status, but if this is a bad time..."

"Nice try, Ross. Lower it another octave or two and you might have a prayer of possibly getting me to pretend I'm fooled."

"Damn, and that was my best Louis Armstrong," Ross replies, pretending to be annoyed.

"Louella Armstrong, maybe." Nick relaxes into the mattress, tucking one arm behind his head. "You got there okay?"

"All in one piece, except for one tiny chunk I left behind on a sharp left turn."

"Ha ha. Hotel room any good? Did they put you up somewhere classy?"

"Yes, Ma." Nick can hear Ross moving around. Shuffling, tired to the bone. "I'm still unpacking, but I didn't want to miss you."

There's a rattle of curtains pulling back. "Hey, listen, we've gotta vacation here. No one else even blinked, but I saw these two guys macking on each other in the airport bar, and --"

"Totally wrapped up in each other, huh?"

"Well, one of them did wink at me."

"They what?"

"Easy, killer! Just kidding."

"Better be." Nick shifts a little. "You sound exhausted."

"I hate flying."

"I thought this was your first time."

"It was. And I hate it."

"Ah." Nick rubs his stomach thoughtfully. "Too tired to talk?"

"Nuh-uh. Never too tired for you."

"Sure. Sit down, will you? Unpack in the morning. Give yourself a break."

Ross sighs, a great outpouring of breath. "I shouldn't, but that's actually the best idea I've heard all day. Trouble is, the chairs are kinda hard in here..."

"Lie down on the bed instead," Nick suggests. "Stretch out, get comfy."

"Hey, not like that isn't tempting, but I don't want to fall asleep on you."

"Like you haven't before?"

"I said on you, not in you."

"You've done both, as I recall." He imagines Ross grinning at that. "Loved every second of it, too."

"Sweet-talker." Nick hears rustling sounds, then a groan of utter relief as Ross stretches out on the hotel bed Nick imagines as too short and too narrow, but still utter bliss to a worn-out body. "God, you were right. That feels so good."

"Gonna feel better in a minute," Nick murmurs, testing the waters.

"I doubt it." He hears the sounds of starch-stiff blankets rustling. "This doesn't feel right. I'm all —"

"Alone?"

"Yeah," Ross whispers. "Pathetic, huh? All I can think about is you, wishing you were here."

"You should. A weekend away from a body like mine? It'll be Hell."

"So tell me again, exactly what do I see in you?"

"Fantastic buns, tight abs, killer eyes, good sense of humor, happens to be a smart-mouthed jackass, but you can't have everything, can you?"

"Yeah, you can." Pause. "I do."

"Ross..." Nick makes up his mind. If he can't have his lover by his side tonight, by God he's getting something to carry him through the long dark hours. "Wish you were here," he murmurs. "I could give you one of those pounding massages you like, ease up all those kinks I know you'll have."

"I thought you liked my kinks."

"Oh, no doubt I do. Especially the dishy one involving a leather cat o'nine. I wouldn't have thought you had it in you."

"I remember having it in me pretty well," Ross answers, voice a little warmer, a little rougher. "Last night. And this morning."

"And turnabout," Nick reminds him. "Which is fair play, after all."

"Mmmmmmm." Ross exhales. "Love the way your voice sounds right now."

"Nice?"

"Good enough to eat."

"I've got something else here I'd rather see disappearing between your lips." Nick reaches down to toy with the waistband of his boxers. "I'd slip it right into that mouth of yours, and all but down your throat. How'd you like that?"

Ross groans. "God, Nick. You had to make me miss you more?"

"Oh, we're just getting started." Nick slides his finger beneath his waistband. "You dressed comfortably?"

"Boxers and a T-shirt. I got that suit off as soon as I hit my hotel room."

"Sorry I missed that. I like to see you shuck off Mr. Corporate."

"You always do."

"Can't help it if I prefer you with fewer clothes on. None at all being my favorite, actually."

"Nick..."

"So how about we play?" Nick coaxes, unfurling his hand so that all the fingers are inside his boxers now — not touching, not yet, just teasing. "Have a little fun on the phone..."

"You're saying...?"

"Take your boxers off for me." Nick turns his voice into a liquid caress. "Slide them right off your hips. Pretend it's my hands, not yours. Touching the skin on your thighs. Drawing a line down your legs."

"God, Nick." Ross' breath is slightly heavy. "You're not kidding, are you?"

"I never kid when it's time for a fuck." His hand dips a little deeper. "I'm not going to sleep without my nightcap, and neither are you. Off with the boxers, Ross."

"They're already gone. I took them off the second you told me to."

Nick's half-hardened flesh swells at that, rising up to tent the cloth. "Good," he murmurs, relishing the ache that's started up in his groin. "Wish I could see that. And the T?"

"I can't figure out how to get it off without putting the phone down."

"If I were there..." and now Nick lets himself draw just one finger down the length of his erection, "I'd rip it off you. Easy. Tear it down the middle and peel it off your arms."

"God, Nick."

"Are you hard now, Ross? Hard for me?" Nick wraps his hand loosely around his cock and bites his lip, wanting nothing more than to squeeze, imagining that it's Ross' hand there.

"Hard as hell," Ross rasps back. "Nick, can I... I need to..."

"Go on," Nick orders. "God, go on. Please. Pretend it's me."

"I already am. Oh, fuck, fuck, that feels good."

Nick lets his hand tighten, riding up and down once. He groans. "You stroking yourself off now? Letting my hand squeeze you tight?"

"I can feel you." Nick can just see Ross' face, eyes shut tight and muscles working in his throat and jaw. "Like you're here."

Nick pumps himself again, feeling dampness well up at his cock tip. "I am there. Right there with you. Seeing you. Smelling you." He swipes his finger across the top of his cock and brings it to his lips, sucking. "Tasting you."

"Oh, God, you just..."

"You too," he coaxes. "For me. See what you taste like to me."

He hears a groan, then the soft sound of sucking. So familiar to him that his body spasms with the shock of recognition, that he can almost feel Ross' mouth hot around his shaft. For a moment he can't speak, just moan.

"You."

"Touch me," Ross rasps.

"Touch you? Just touch? Babe, I'm running my fingers all over you." Nick's free hand begins to rove while the other stays on his leaking cock, jerking up and down in a brutal, blissful rhythm. "Stroking down your chest, nice and firm. Plucking those nipples up until they're hard as little pebbles. Sucking them. Can you feel me? Nibbling -"

Ross cries out, and Nick's almost afraid that he's pushed Ross too far. "Close," his lover whispers hoarsely. "Just you, your voice, and I'm so close. Don't wanna. Not yet."

Nick catches his lip between his teeth. He knows what that means. Ross's got himself pinched by the base, pressing down hard, balls drawn up tight. Ready to come. But waiting. Exquisite pain and pressure and pleasure, all at once.

"Touch yourself. Keep on squeezing, but let your fingers touch. Feel how hard you are? Ready to split open. All that juice soaking your hand. Bet you're slick, aren't you? Aching for it. Burning. Can't think of anything else."

"You. Want you. Want you so bad."

"Ah-ah-ah, not yet." Nick strips himself hard, jacking his wrist. Unneeded breath pants out between his lips. "Think about this, Ross. Imagine that swollen prick of yours disappearing up my hole. Squeezing so tight."

"Feeling you around me. You're so hot inside, it's like fire. Smooth." He hears Ross swallow hard. "God, Nick, gotta come. Need to come."

"Almost, almost. Touch me first."

"Your cock in my hand," Ross rasps out. "Jerking you hard. Pulling that skin back up over your tip, squeezing it in my palm."

"And me," Nick pants, near the end of his control, "Me, leaning over to kiss your throat. Taking a thin pinch of skin between my teeth and *biting--*"

"Fuck, Nick! Fuck!" he hears Ross shout, and that's it, that's pushed him over the edge himself. Come spouts from his cock in streams, soaking the boxers that, damn it, he never did take off. He'd wanted to do that, to tease Ross, but he didn't get around to the deed.

For a moment they lie still, their breathing heavy and hard. "Nick," Ross groans at last, "you are so damned evil. You know that?"

Nick smiles, lazy, smug, satisfied. "Don't you forget it."

"Not gonna. Not that stupid." Ross lets out a shuddering breath. He laughs, just a little. "I should have figured you'd find a way, even when I'm on a business trip."

"I make my own fun. Enough to go around." Nick draws his hand out of his boxers and laps at his sticky fingers. "Wish this was yours."

"You have no idea. Can we do this again tomorrow night?"

"Count on it. And whenever you've got to be away. I'm addicted to you. Have to have my fix."

"Whatever gets us through the night." Ross's sounding sleepy now. "I could just drift off..."

"Go for it," Nick says, voice soft. "Think about me being in your arms, the two of us spooned up tight like a pair of old queens."

"You think about me behind you."

"All the time."

"I'll bet."

"God's truth." Nick caresses the phone with one of the fingers holding it.

"Can't wait to be there." Ross' voice is drifting off. "Gonna squeeze the breath out of you."

"Looking forward to it."

"Mmmmm. Nick?"

In his mind, Nick runs his hand over Ross' shoulder. Kisses his collarbone. "Yeah?"

"Do I have to hang up?"

"Nope. You stay there. Let me listen to you breathe."

"Kay." Ross yawns. "Night, Nick."

"Night, babe."

Then there's nothing more but steady breathing, in and out. Nick'd bet the lights are still on, clothes and toiletries scattered everywhere, but it doesn't matter. Ross is content, and sleeping, and they're connected, if only through the phone.

He rolls over, cuddling the receiver close to his cheek. "Night," he whispers again. "Sweet dreams."

And he, too, falls asleep.

## “Devil in the Details”

Plenty of people out on the street tonight, but not one of them's coming to help him. And that pisses him off, but he can't say nothing about it. He's seen creatures like himself too many times, rolling and groaning on greasy alley floors, and not budged a finger. Thinking they were drunk, or if they were bloody, too bad, they were unlucky. Glad it wasn't him. Knowing it would be, someday.

Looks like that day's come.

His head's still spinning, so he can't quite figure out what all's wrong just yet. There's wetness trickling down into his eyes, making them sting, so he guesses he's got some kind of head wound. Figures. With the way that one guy came after him with an empty malt bottle, he's glad he's still got a head.

Arms, legs, torso, they're just one great big ache with spots here and there where the pain flares up supernova bright. He'd try to move them, see if anything's broken, if he thought he could move. Both his knees and probably a shin or two are goners, though, on account of he remembers the crunch of an old baseball bat smacking into him from a guy who thought he was good enough to hit a home run.

Right now, it all hurts tolerably. He knows as soon as he swims up out of the red mist, it's gonna be a hell of a lot worse, so he's hanging on to the dizzy for as long as he can.

'Cause when he comes to, even if he cries for help — and damned if he will — there won't be anyone running to see what's wrong.

That's not this neighborhood. Not this city. Hell, that's not this fucking world anymore. He still laughs a little when he thinks about it, shoving a middle finger up at the powers that be and their shady deals. You make one too many deals with the devil, and one day Old Scratch decides it's time to collect.

Apocalypse. Maybe the real, biblical deal, he doesn't know. He's not in that loop anymore. But the sun's gone red and people are scared to leave their homes, mostly, just scurrying about for the food and such that they need. Running back and forth between the few jobs that are still out there and back home again. Where it's safe. Where the things that used to live in your closet, but now roam the streets, can't get you.

He snorts. Must feel good to be able to fool yourself like that.

'Course, that's where people still have homes. Neighborhoods he hangs out in, once San Francisco's proudest, they've turned into slums and squats where there's five kids, two grannies and a momma whose boyfriend left her all living in one room. Huddling together above a crack den where people who don't have families or friends any more try to blitz themselves out for one more night. So they don't have to face it — this life.

It's a dark and an ugly world, now that Lucifer's collected his due.



Will it last forever? He doesn't know. Maybe someone's having a meeting right now that'll pull the wicked and vicious off the streets. Creatures that he'd never dreamed existed. Beasts. Vampires.

Oh, shit —

Vamps. And here he is, bleeding like a stuck pig. Groaning, he tries to roll himself over and up. Gotta get inside, some place he can name his own, before full dark. Otherwise he's just so much of a buffet, laid out like he is here.

Trouble is, he can't move. His knees truly are busted, or pretty close to it, 'cause they won't bend when he tells them to. His arms don't seem to have enough strength to take his weight and he can't even turn over and crawl. He's not stupid enough to flip himself over like a crab just to lay there some more, maybe break a few more ribs and end up choking in a pool of his own mess.

Micah Ramsey's not goin' down like that.

He's got a little dignity left.

Very little.

But he ain't giving up what he's got.

So he won't let himself groan, and he decides he just won't move. The monsters decide they want to snack on him, they'll find him ready to go down with all the pride he can muster.

He just wishes he had his guitar. No telling where it is now. Either already in a pawn shop for parts or just broken into kindling and discarded. He can't remember hearing the noise of it breaking over the crowd that lynched him. Funny how not knowing where his baby is, that's what hurts most of all.

It'd been the two of them on these streets for the longest time now, you know? Forever sinking lower and lower. Finally ending up with no place to call home but a refrigerator box.

Ever lived on the streets? Ever wondered where your next meal was coming from, or if you might as well just give it up and drink away what days you've got left? Shivered at night 'cause you've got nothing but your worn-out shirt and jeans to cover you, with one boot for a pillow?

Life fucking sucks on the streets.

But he'd made it. Taken his guitar out every day on the street corner, put down his hat until it was battered and shapeless from the abuse, and collected what little bits he could from them that had it to give. Used what he had — his talent, his voice, his songs — to earn a blanket, some more shoes, showers at the Y before it closed down and coffee at the 7-11 before they shut their doors, too.

Lately, he's been going over to Miss Lupe's for his meals. She's not in business proper, but for enough money she'll fix him a sandwich and pour him a cup of java.

Micah's been proud of himself, 'cause he's stayed alive. And doing what he loves so — the music — it's just about been... nice, from time to time. He might even get invited to play at one of the few celebrations around here, from time to time. Two young ones decide to get married, or they pop out a kid, or someone dies... well, you need music, right? And he's been there to fill that niche. It's money and it's satisfaction.

And if he's happened to run across a pretty or passable woman in his days, and come inside her place for a few minutes of comfort, there's no harm in that. Nor in maybe stepping aside with a hungry-eyed young man, heading into the alley for a few minutes, and either taking or offering what they need. They might give him a few precious dollars for his trouble, and that's just fine. Just money in exchange for services. He's not being a whore.

He almost believes himself on that one, too. Just not quite.

'Cause their eyes, you know? They're all empty. Even when he's moving above them, in them, or feeling himself penetrated, he knows there's nothing on their faces but this grim determination to get off, forget, just for a minute or two. Got nothing to do with the fact that he's still got all his teeth, little bit of color to his skin, and he's known to be clean. They don't want him. They just want a safe body to pound it out on, a robot who'll make them come, let them enjoy that burst of bliss and then that daze afterwards where you feel almost safe.

There was just one guy, out of all those countless faces, that was different. Funny how clear that comes back to him, lying where he is. He still doesn't know why, but that one guy... well, Micah just doesn't use anymore the words you need to describe him. Kind? Gentle? Humorous?

He just remembers sitting on a stoop, strumming his guitar, playing an old, old country song — Hank Williams? — and then suddenly feeling this gaze strong and warm on him.

It's not smart to look up right away. Only bad tricks do that. You make 'em want you, not the other way around, for what you can get out of them. (Except he's not a whore, not a whore, not a whore...) So he finished out his song, and only then did he allow himself a glance up at whoever it was warming his skin with their glance.

Turned out to be a guy. Probably a few years younger than him. Healthy-looking, if skinny like everyone was those days, with a warm grin on his face that almost, almost brought Micah to smiling back.

"It's been way too long since I heard that," the guy said unexpectedly. He dug in his pocket and tossed a five into Micah's hat.

Micah stared at it, feeling both shock — that'd feed him for a couple of days at Lupe's, get him the good stuff, too — and sickness, that that five stupid dollars could mean so much. He felt a flash of mixed resentment and gratefulness, and then hatred for the man to cause him this mess inside his head when all he wanted to do was play.

Then it occurred to him: you don't pay that kind of money just for a song. Must have been he wanted something else, too. A smile twisted up the corner of Micah's mouth, and he let himself take a good, long look at the john-that-would-be.

Not bad as they went. Hair dark and sleek as a baby seal's, except where it was too long and curled over his collar. Eyes dark brown as the best coffee he could buy these days. He'd shaved that day, and his clothes looked clean, no stains. Upwind of Micah, and he didn't smell bad. Micah even caught a whiff of soap on him.

Micah, he couldn't catch anything on account of his days at the corporation and their employee protection medical regime, but he purely hated having sick dicks stuck into him bottom or top. He'd bet that five dollars this guy was clean.

So what the hell was he doing down here, where Micah lived? Men like that didn't belong there.

"I live here," he'd said quietly. "Down at the end of the street. Just moved in. It's not much, but it's got a shower."

Micah recognized the offer in those words. He just about picked up that five and threw it back in the man's face, cause he fucking *wasn't* a whore and this *wasn't* "Pretty Woman". And while showers might be hot and wet and so damn good he could cry at the thought of having one again, it wasn't worth the humiliation of having a decent man take him home, not worth the misery of being cast out again when the job was done.

Micah still doesn't know why he went with the man. But he did. Picked up his guitar and his hat, pocketed the five and what loose change he'd collected, and followed that guy down to the end of the street to the one decent house there still was. Close to Lupe. He could eat, afterwards, he rationalized to himself.

They went up a flight of stairs, and Micah prepared himself for the attack as soon as they got in the door, but it didn't come. The man took his guitar from him and settled it in a corner, gentle, like he knew how to care for an instrument. Then he nodded down the short little hall. "There's fresh towels in there. You can use my soap and stuff."

Micah had been baffled. This guy was really gonna let someone as filthy as him sully up what was sure to be a good, clean shower?

"Go on," the guy nudged. He was heading for the kitchen. "I'm making coffee. You want some?"

Dumbly, Micah'd nodded.

"Go on and get clean, first, then." The man had paused, opening a battered, old tin that smelled like heaven. "I'm Tofer. What's your name?"

"Micah," was all he'd been able to say.

Tofer nodded, grinning that wide, warm grin again. "Good to meet you. Go ahead and shower, will you? Coffee should be done by the time you are."

Actually, it was done long before. Once he was in that stall, the hot water sluicing down on him, Micah knew there was no way he'd be getting out until it ran cold and then some. He soaped himself once, twice, again with a good bar of Ivory — where the hell this guy got Ivory, he'd love to know. Must have some serious black market connections. He washed himself until that good soap was just about a sliver. He wasn't going to care about taking advantage. Hell, he'd been invited, hadn't he? He washed himself so hard his skin got tender, and then he attacked his hair with near a full bottle of shampoo until the strands finally, finally ran squeaking clean between his fingers.

When he shut off the water, the guy's voice spoke up instantly. Fuck! He'd been listening. That gave Micah the cold chills. He hated being watched.

But Tofer had said, through the door: "If you want to shave, I've got a spare blade."

Micah didn't hesitate. To shave... get rid of the nasty, prickling beard that didn't suit him in the slightest... God, he lost his pride, chucked it all away for a minute, long enough to scrape his face raw and clean.

The face that looked back at him from the mirror was a little like his own, old self again. Except it burned. He was red from shame and embarrassment and too much hot water, knowing that he owed it all to a stranger that was gonna have him inside and out soon as he left that room.

And sure enough, he was waiting for Micah outside the bathroom door. Looking him up and down, smiling to see he was dressed in nothing but a towel — no *way* was he putting his dirty clothes back on, he'd connive or even steal some of Tofer's if he had to. Tofer had that smile on his face, that genuinely, bizarrely, bewilderingly warm, nice smile. "You clean up nice," he said softly.

"Yeah. Real pretty. That the way you like it?" Micah rolled his eyes. And even though it's been him wasting all the time, he's impatient now. "Look, how you wanna do this? You got a bedroom, or you just feel like going at it up against the wall? On the floor, maybe, it's clean as the rest of you. So fucking clean it makes my stomach turn."

Tofer looked at him, calm and steady. "You think that's all I asked you up here for?"

"I sure as hell doubt it was for my sparkling wit."

"No. Because you know who Hank Williams is, and you play almost like he did." Tofer's hand came out, ever so softly, to stroke the new softness of Micah's cheek. "You understand the blues."

"Look around you. Everyone does."

"Yeah. But the way you let it out... that makes you special." Warm fingers curled around the back of his neck, and despite himself Micah let out a gasp at the tingle that ran down his

spine. "I'm not saying this right. I'm just saying I saw you as a lot more than a potential lay. I wanted to get to know you."

Micah stared at the man. "Nothing to know, except what you see," he protested.

"Somehow, I kinda doubt that." Tofer's face came closer to his. "If I asked you to kiss me, what would you say? I mean, would you say 'yes' because I gave you five bucks, would you tell me to go to hell, or would you do it because you wanted to?" Fingers stroked the soft skin on his neck. "I was kind of hoping you'd want to."

And God help him, but Micah had. Because those eyes were warm, and brown, gentle and kind, with no mocking or emptiness or drug-craziness in them, and they showed a genuine interest in him that nothing and no one had for years now. He'd seen that smile, one more time and up close, before soft lips were touching his own, reverent and sweet.

He doesn't know who deepened the kiss first, but when his mouth was open to Tofer's, tasting of toothpaste and coffee, he found his arms going around Tofer's chest and clinging on for dear life. Not even minding when the man's free hand gently undid the knot on the towel at his waist and let it fall to the floor.

He'd expected to be giving a blow job. Maybe even bending over. But it hadn't happened. That warm hand had encased his dick in a steady, solid grip, and pumped it ever so slowly, lubricating itself with his own juices as he got so hard he started to drip.

Micah made noises into the kiss that hadn't stopped yet — didn't Tofer want something for himself? They were close enough he could feel the hard bulge in the man's jeans, and heaven help him if he didn't for the first time in his new life want to do something about it. But —

"Sssh," Tofer whispered against his mouth, and went on with that tantalizing, killing stroke until every muscle in his body was shaking with the need to come.

It was when Tofer slipped a finger back behind his balls, to tickle that little strip of flesh, that he couldn't take it anymore and he burst. Wet and sticky, all over Tofer's hand, dripping through his fingers. Startled by the force of it, the way it wrung him out, he'd clung to Tofer and gasped for air.

And he'd tried to return the favor. He truly had. But Tofer kissed him one more time, and said it was okay. Tofer gave Micah a wicked little grin and moved his own hand to the front of his jeans, soaked through. "It was enough to see you come," he murmured.

And Micah had been terrified, because he knew that he could fall for this guy, and he couldn't let that happen. He'd backed away, tearing loose from those careful arms, near tripping over himself. "I've got to go."

Tofer gazed after him. "You don't have to."

"No way." Micah scrambled to pick up his clothes, not caring anymore how nasty they were, just stuffing one leg after another into his jeans and tossing his shirt over his arm. "I have to go. You don't —"

"Maybe I do." Tofer leaned against the doorframe. Suddenly, he looked so very tired that Micah found himself wanting nothing more than to go back into that embrace, to rock Tofer until he fell asleep and the lines of weariness smoothed themselves away.

Which scared him more, so that he pushed past Tofer and near about bolted for the door. "I'm outta here," he'd tossed back over his shoulder. "Fuckin' freak!"

Which he hadn't meant. And wished he could take back, when he saw the flash of pain that caused. But still, Tofer had let him go. Not stepped in front of the door, not hit him, not stopped him.

"You can come back, you know," he said quietly. "Any time you want, Micah. All you've got to do is stop by."

But Micah couldn't help laughing bitterly as he wrenched the door open and almost ran back out, down the stairs and into the street. Dumbass. Didn't Tofer know you can't go back to something like that? A man like Tofer's gonna be a drug. You like it that much the first time, and you'll want more. And more. More, until you can't get enough and you're dependent on him and you've lost everything you struggled for, every survival instinct. Then he leaves, and what are you supposed to do then?

Hell, no, he wouldn't go back.

He never did, either. And didn't see Tofer once after that day, not even when he went to Lupe's for his daily meal.

Didn't see the man tonight among the crowd that decided he must have some money, to look healthy as he did, and decided they'd go after it.

Doesn't see him now, walking the streets.

Micah laughs to himself, then coughs up a little blood. Ironical, huh? The one man you spend months trying to avoid, and he's all you can think of when you're flat on the pavement waiting to die.

He tried to shut the memory of Tofer out of his mind, letting a sea of nameless other faces flash past his mind's eye. Yeah, he'd gone back to it after that. Made him a dollar or two. Just kept on keeping on, surviving the way he knew how. Earning a living with his pretty face.

Bet they won't come after him no more for any extra dollars. His nose is broken for sure, and he feels some loose molars in the back of his mouth when he prods with his tongue. One eye won't open. Swollen shut, or damaged beyond repair? No telling.

And he's as helpless out here as a newborn calf.

Hell. If he's gotta go, he'll go down as dignified as he can, but this sure ain't the way he'd planned on it.

He's just gonna wait for it. And what he's not, most definitely not, gonna do, is wish for Tofer to appear, to just be there out of the blue. To hold his hand. Skid into a kneel down beside him, all anxious eyes and worried face, calling his name: "Micah? God, Micah, what'd they do to you?"

'Cause Tofer's not real. Can't be there. He must have gotten hit over the head harder than he'd thought.

Sure feels real, though...

"I'm getting you out of here," the hallucination says. "Hang on to me if you can. And I'm sorry — really, really sorry — because this is gonna hurt. But I don't mean to make it worse, I swear. Okay?"

He laughs again. "Fuck you," he manages to rasp out between the blood in his mouth and his swollen lips.

"Yeah." A gentle hand touches his cheek for just a second. "You haven't changed. But neither have I. I'm gonna carry you over my shoulder. It'll hurt, and I'm sorry for that. But we have to get you inside."

Then there's careful arms underneath him, lifting him like he weighs nothing. A hard shoulder to lie across. Tofer's carrying him off somewhere. Maybe to that tiny, clean, little room with the shower that feels like heaven? Can't be. Must be, might be real angels, taking him to the genuine Heaven a little early.

Funny. He'd always thought for sure that he was headed straight to hell. But cradled in those arms, resting against that warm, hard chest, he'd have to swear he was headed for the other place entirely...

So he'd go with Tofer, for one more night. Didn't have to be forever. No matter how much he wished for it to be.

He'd let Tofer take care of him. And then, he'd take care of Tofer. Fuck some sense into him. You don't just act that kind out of the goodness of your heart. There aren't any good people left.

He curls his fingers into Tofer's collar. *There aren't*, he thinks fuzzily. *Except you sure do give it the old college try.*

Maybe he'll stick around. Maybe not.

But for right now, being protected -- saved -- is more than he could have wished for.

He owes Tofer. And he'll pay the man back. In spades, and then some. Love him? Doubt it. (Don't love him, don't!)

Yeah. He'll stay. And maybe, just maybe, he'll find a path to walk on.

He feels like he can do that, safe and sound in Tofer's arms.

Maybe this is the right thing to do.

He hopes to God that it is.



## “Mouth to Mouth”

### **Note taped to Cassie's alarm clock:**

Morning, doll. Hated sliding out of bed and leaving you here without even a kiss. But you sleep like an angel, you know that? A fallen angel. The way you look, with just your nipples peeking up from under that damn lacy comforter... it was all I could do not to just bend down and suck one little raspberry into my mouth.

I'm gonna get you to let me pierce those one day. I'll get new beads to match yours. You've never felt anything like fingers pulling at rings through your nipples, or a tongue tugging at it. So sweet, so fine. And maybe a navel ring, too.

I know you'd smack hell out of me if I suggested a sexy, little hood ring above your clit or a triangle to match mine. No matter how much you like playing with what I've got.

Mmm, a triangle in your sweet snatch. Feels so good underneath there, nerves like you never imagined you had. Fun for everyone. So I won't. Suggest it, that is. (Doesn't mean I won't think about it, though.)

But see? Had all those dirty thoughts, but I was good. Let you sleep, didn't wake you up.

Still, you owe me one, babe. I'll collect -- let's see -- how about tonight?

~ Molly

\*\*\*

### **Voice message on Molly's work extension:**

Morning, Molly. I just woke up. I forget... do you like your raspberries with sugar and honey, or without? I'm thinking fruit salad for dinner tonight.

\*\*\*

### **Note taped to brown bag in Cassie's refrigerator:**

See, I knew you'd forget your lunch. You got a busy day ahead of you, babe -- Pilates and spin class and aerobics, and, what, Tae-Bo? Around one o'clock you're gonna remember you forgot your yogurt and this weird crunchy stuff and you're gonna come back to find it here.

So this is just me saying "hi". Miss you. Can't stop thinking about last night. The way you opened up for me, so sweet.

Call me. Would you?

\*\*\*

**E-mail sent to Molly's mobile phone:**

You are so lucky I read that note at home instead of just grabbing the bag and going. I realized halfway to the gym that I'd left my lunch, not at one o'clock. So there! \*sticks tongue out at you\*

Don't read this where your boss can see it! Or Donny, if he's around. They're already way too proud of having set us up. I don't feel like listening to them crow about it for a few more hours, you know?

Molly, last night you were just... amazing. God, I have no words. You know I'd never -- with a woman -- before you. But if it's always like that, I don't think I'm gonna go back. The way you make me come, it's like fireworks and rockets go off in my head. I never felt that with anyone else.

In other words, you and one glittery, pink dildo, plus one tongue, are better than all the cocks out there.

Who needs men?

Call me sometime this afternoon.

Love,

Cassie

\*\*\*

**Text message sent to Cassie's pager:**

What? My tongue and my dildo are good, but nothing about the fingers? Come on, Cass. I was playing you like a good violin.

\*\*\*

**Text message sent to Molly's pager:**

Oh, God! I think someone saw that. Yes, yes, your fingers are fantastic too. I said call me, not page me!

\*\*\*

**Text message sent to Cassie's pager:**

HEY, NOSY PEOPLE! I FUCKED THIS WOMAN! FUCKED HER UNTIL SHE WAS SCREAMING MY NAME AND THE NEIGHBORS BANGED ON THE CEILING! WE HAD HOT SWEATY LESBIAN SEX AND IT WAS GOOD STUFF!

So there.

\*\*\*

**Phone call from Cassie to Molly:**

"Yeah, this is Molly. What do you want?"

"You're bound and determined to get me in trouble, aren't you?"

"I guess that last message was a little over the top, huh?"

"A little over the top? Try flight level. Soaring up into the clouds."

"Uncalled for."

"Very."

"But true."

"Molly..."

"Come on, Cassie, say it. You know it's true. I made you see stars."

"Molly!"

"Not givin' up until you 'fess up to it, hon."

"Is your boss or Donny anywhere around?"

"Nah. It's lunchtime. I think they're having a quickie in the back room."

"Oh! I so did not need to know that."

"Liar, liar. You know you want all the juicy details. You pump me for 'em every day."

"I do not! Well... not all the time."

"Girl, step away from the phone. Lightning's going to strike you down any time now."

"Okay, yes, I am nosy about them. But they're not around to hear any of this?"

"Not a peep, babe."

"And are you in your cube? Alone?"

"Alone? Oh, yeah, alone. Why? You wanna try a little phone sex?"

"Molly!"

"What? It's not like we haven't done it before."

"Yeah, but that was when I was home, alone, not at work!"

"Nosy people still on you?"

"Yeah." Pause. "What were we talking about?"

"I'm not letting you go until you confess, out loud, that I am the Queen of Woman Love."

"Molly!"

"Say it loud, say it proud, and I'll let you go."

Beat. "Fine. Molly, you are the best lesbian I've ever known. You make me come hard enough to cry. Your tongue works me like magic."

Pause. "Damn, Cassie. I'm all flattered and stuff now."

"But happy? Satisfied?"

"Nuh-uh. Now I'm all worked up. You free tonight?"

\*\*\*

**E-mail sent to Cassie's cell phone:**

Hey, Cass -

I'm taking a chance at playing on the 'net on company time to send you this. Don't read it with someone lookin' over your shoulder.

Come over to my place tonight. I'm gonna take the afternoon off and get everything ready.

You're not gonna believe your eyes when you see my place.

There'll be red rose petals, tons of 'em, scattered everywhere so that when you slip off your shoes and walk across them, they'll let out these clouds of perfume.

I'll run a hot bath for you, with jasmine oil and lily bubbles. No overhead lights. Candles, scented ones, those ginger and lavender ones you like so much. Think about it. A steaming tub, with candles everywhere.

And I'll be there. Nude. My hair curling just a little from the steam in the air. Maybe a few drops of sweat rolling down my chest and belly.

I'm gonna be your slave. Soft puff in hand, slick and soapy with tea-rose bath gel, ready to wash you down from head to toe. All over those beautiful, palm-size breasts, down your sides, over that tiny little curve in your tummy, and down into that gorgeous nest of curls. I'll run that sponge over you, tease you until you come - the first time, just for starters.

Then I'll take you by the hand and help you out of the tub. We'll go to the bedroom, both of us naked. I'll have more red roses on the bed, smelling so fine when I lay you down on it.

I'll kiss your breasts. Suck those pretty, pink buds into my mouth. Bite them, just a little, then lick away the pain. I could touch your breasts all day long, they're so pretty. They fit just right into my mouth, my hand.

I'll kiss down your chest, and circle your navel until you're begging me to go lower, lower. I might tease you a little bit, but then I'll go down and touch your folds. You'll be all wet for me, won't you? Dripping all that honey at the thought of my fingers and my tongue. I wanna drink from you until I'm tipsy. You're like that, you know? I get all light-headed, like I've been sipping on champagne, when I kiss your thatch.

Maybe I'll use the toy. Not the one we used last night. The special toy. That long, teardrop-shaped finger you liked so much. I still have the mango-scented lube you said made you think we were fucking on a Hawaii beach. What if I slick that thing down and slip it inside you, press it in easy and gentle, so you feel it deep inside when I come after you from the other side?

I'll push my fingers inside your cunt. They'll slip in easy, you'll be so wet from wanting me. Maybe I'll have time to get the toy, pump it in and out of you while I latch my mouth down on that little nub and suck it hard.

God, Cassie, I want to have your legs wrapped around my back and I want to hear you scream my name.

And you'll come. Harder and better than you ever have before. Right there, with me.

Say you'll be there tonight.

Text me and say you'll come -- and come!

Love,  
Molly

\*\*\*

**Text message to Molly's pager:**

I'm sorry. I can't make it.

*Fifteen minutes later...*

\*\*\*

**Text message to Molly's cell phone:**

PSYCH! But I owed you that one for the dirty talk earlier.

\*\*\*

**E-mail sent to Molly's cell phone:**

I'll be home as soon as I can, hon.

Leave the lights on for me.

## “Everyday Heroes”

Rainy Saturday.

Sometimes you can tell before you open your eyes what kind of morning it'll be, and from the feel of things... right now Elijah's debating the wisdom of waking up at all. He can hear the steady drop-drop-drop of cold water smacking into leaves and eaves, gurgling down gutters, drowning hedges.

Where his nose peeks out of the covers — the only part of him not buried beneath his collection of blankets and quilts — the air has a sick, clammy feel to it. Way too cold. The floor's gonna be ice.

Better he should stay in bed after all.

Yeah. A cold morning like this makes wisdom the better part of valor, and a smart guy takes a few more hours to cuddle beneath the blankets. Problem, though -- he discovers, when he turns over expecting to bump into a warm body -- is that he's alone. A hand reaching out beneath thick layers of bedding finds nothing but a cooling hollow where a body once lay.

That's not right. The sun's barely risen yet. No way Gavin should be up and gone by now. Without a shake to the shoulder or a kiss to let him know he'd been called away?

Bzzt. Wrong answer, sorry, thank you for playing. He's just gone? Looks like it, and Elijah's pissed. It's not like Gavin to sneak out of his bed before dawn. In his opinion, that's cheating. If you go to bed with someone and make love to them — or just fuck them, whatever -- then you need the decency not to sneak off in the middle of the night. Elijah's done apologizing for his need to cuddle. He needs someone to wrap around all pretzel-like and choke half to death, in a well-meaning kind of way. He knows Gavin knows that.

Elijah burrows down a little further into his quilts, one hand stroking the place where Gavin laid. He frowns, and he listens. Trying to puzzle it out. Nothing's going on downstairs. No urgent muttering from someone stopping by with an emergency — which could happen, he gets that. But neither is there the clatter of pots and pans to say he wanted an early breakfast. No screech-scrape of the foot-ladder along the bookshelves that says he couldn't sleep, that he's hunting for something to read. No water running or flushing. Just silence.

Oh, hell. Is he even still here at all?

If he's gone, Elijah's gonna have a panic attack. Again. Just when he thought he's left those behind, now that he's found someone to hold him when he needs it. Gavin can push the fears away by pulling him close, arms strong enough to make Elijah feel secure. Gavin's hands are the ones to make wide, soothing circles over Elijah's back; his lips those that press soft kisses to temple and forehead. Gavin turns back the tide when it threatens to overwhelm. Looks after him. Needs him. Loves him. Enough to make bad things back away.

Gavin doesn't just leave without a "goodbye".

Especially not after last night. A rare perfect night, where everything went right without even trying. They'd made dinner together. Thick pasta with rich red sauce. Gavin is trying to teach him how to cook. Elijah likes the approving nod he gets when he does something just right, and gets a kick out of joking when something goes accidentally wrong. He's been good for Gavin that way, he knows – teaching him how to lighten up about things. How to laugh about life again.

A cup of basil instead of a pinch makes a rotten spaghetti sauce, but a better relationship.

Not that they'd made it past the appetizers. Marinara's fantastic because no matter how hard you try, you're gonna, all unnoticing, smear a dab on your nose or cheek. Someplace where it begs to be kissed off. Elijah couldn't let it go. He'd leaned in to lick the smear of red from the corner of Gavin's mouth, and found it tasted of salt and tomatoes, wine and man, flavors tumbling together in a medley that beat the hell out of spaghetti.

"Elijah, what are you --"

"The thing about this stuff?" Elijah murmured, flickering his tongue. "Makes great leftovers."

So dinner got cold. They'd had better things to do. Gavin isn't young as he once was, but he can still chase Elijah up the stairs to their loft bedroom and catch him halfway there, pulling him into a kiss that went beyond the meeting of lips. Tongues pushed hard against each other, battling for the right to search out each other's mouths; hands tangled in hair, slid down backs, gripped each other's hips and pulled one another tight together. Never stopping, always moving. Gyrating to a beat only they heard. Undulating against one another's bodies in the pulse-beat of *more, more, more, now*.

They'd ended up on the bed, laughing like kids — God, he loved hearing Gavin just let go like that — pushing at one another's belts and zips and kicking off shoes. Landing with a thump that tortured the mattress into an almighty SQUEAK, pushing them past giggles into hysteria. Somehow meeting one another's mouths again and drinking it all in heady gulps, parting for air only when they had to. Amid the mess they'd made of tugging down boxers and trousers, two swollen cocks rubbed together with almost, but not quite, enough friction.

Elijah, atop Gavin, had made the first move.

It's taken Elijah so long to get here, to the place in his life where he can just love and be loved. No worrying what he looks like, sounds like, performs like. With Gavin, he just does what feels good and right. Most of the time, being honest in his love and letting that show coaxes orgasms from the older, tougher body that he knows only he has the power to cause. See, Gavin needs Elijah's light and laughter. Being with Gavin brought those gifts back to Elijah.

He tries to show Gavin that every time they make love together.

And when it happened, they came together as if in water, bodies swimming together in a relentless tide. Slick and slippery, gliding on a sheen of salty sweat. Hands scrabbling for purchase and clutching deep, bruising muscle with their effort. Palms tugging sharply then



softly on swollen flesh. Fingers sliding down and down, nudging against puckered holes and pushing themselves in knuckle-deep. Panting as a warm mouth took one in. Groaning when cocks, lubricated with their own come, slipped into the curve of one another's hips. Forgetting to breathe when Gavin positioned himself behind Elijah, linked their hands across his ribs, and pushed inside...

As much as he loves the sex — and he really, really loves the sex — Elijah's a cuddler, and he likes holding each other afterwards almost as much. Strong arms enfold him tight while he wiggles his way into the embrace and holds back just as fiercely.

And he loves Gavin's soft breath against his cheek, growing light and even as he slips away. Listening to a rich, tenor hum as he drifts into rest. Or just clinging in silence, savoring the sound of twin heartbeats. Knowing that this is for good, for real, and for keeps.

Nothing in the whole world is better than loving Gavin. When he thinks about the years he wasted before they met, Elijah wishes he could go back in time with a baseball bat and clobber himself for being an idiot. And Gavin. Who thought himself too old, while Elijah believed he was too young. Every glance that wasn't really casual. The not-so-rare wondering: "what if?"

"He'll never notice me, he'll never see me like that".

So much time wasted. But not anymore.

Not since meeting again after far too long apart and realizing that you can't throw away any second chances you're lucky enough to get. They're too precious.

So deep inside, Elijah knows that Gavin wouldn't leave him without even a word. He's panicking over nothing. Being an idiot. Again. Which is double-wrong, since Gavin has tried and tried, so patiently, to untie the knots around his brain that tell him he's the useless one. The unskilled muscle, the unlearned laborer.

In these past months Gavin's showed Elijah he's more than any of those labels. He has brains after all. Gavin's even showed Elijah how to find books that mean something to him, and he's discovers he actually likes reading them — though better still, he likes curling up with his head in Gavin's lap and being read to.

He doesn't know what impulse causes him to roll out of bed. Warm feet and icy floors are not good friends in his book. But as the silence and stillness roll on, he can't bear to lie there and do nothing, you know?

They'd made plans for today. A trade-off. First constructing new shelves for the very last bit of open space in the den. Then after lunch, finishing *David Copperfield* while lounging in each other's arms.

Gavin must be around. Or coming back.

Did he take his car? Elijah pads barefoot to the window, peers out, and sees:

Gavin. Standing just outside, beyond the awning that would protect him from the rain. Bare of shirt, bare of shoes, just soaked blue jeans between him and the weather. His battered pair, the ones that have seen more wood-rambling and house repair work than anything else he owns. His favorite mug is cradled in his right hand, the still-steaming contents covered by his left. Their paper lies abandoned and sodden where the delivery boy threw it, a few yards away from his naked toes, but he doesn't seem to notice. He's just standing. Gazing into the distance. At nothing?

As Elijah stares at Gavin, perplexed, the thought comes to him that Gavin looks... lonely. Kind of like a dejected, single shoe on the side of the highway. Tossed aside or abandoned. Alone, when by all rights he shouldn't be. What's possessed him; and hey, is that an idle question?

He puts his hand on the window between them, as if he could touch Gavin's shoulder across the distance that separates them. Bridge the gap again. Gavin looks old and tired, cold and shut-out. Like he knows he's being watched by Elijah, who's young and warm, rested and safe inside.

And Elijah wonders: all this time that he's let Gavin comfort him, how is it that he's missed noticing how Gavin must need some comforting himself? Moron. It's all been about him, hasn't it? Despite Gavin's tenderness, he's had black moods and moments where nothing can lift him up. A kiss can help, but not cure. Gavin has always said he understands. Embraced him, been there for him, and let him struggle out alone, stronger.

*But you're not exactly rowing that boat alone, are you?*

He has his times curled up on the couch, and he sees now that maybe Gavin has the rain. Standing out in the thick of it, letting the water wash over his skin. Maybe using raindrops to hide his tears; Elijah doesn't know.

He thinks, though, as he watches -- Gavin looks like he feels the way Elijah sometimes does, when the life they lead gets to be too much. Their love patches the pain. It doesn't mend the wounds. In the end, you have to fix yourself.

But he's never even thought to offer, has he? Not in that way.

It's freezing cold, and Elijah guesses this is probably crazy. Never said he was sane, though, did he? Already shivering, he toes off his bed-warm socks and shrugs off his undershirt. The sweats can stay. They're as worn-out by daily life as Gavin's jeans are; they'll do.

Goosebumps bead up on his skin and he shivers, hard. Cold, cold, cold! But that doesn't matter. This does.

He pads down the freezing steps, one by one. Puts his hand to the latch. This one's for Gavin.

He opens the front door to their apartment. And he steps outside, into the rain.

Elijah finds that the rain's easing up a little by now, pattering down gently around his head as he carefully picks his way down the sidewalk. He can feel droplets catch in his hair, on his cheeks, and his eyelashes. Glistening like tears.

Gavin must have heard him come out. But he doesn't turn. Doesn't speak. Doesn't move.

"Hey," Elijah says quietly, once he's close enough. "Hey, you."

It's not exactly eloquence, but it's enough. Gavin turns his head ever so slightly. A smile, sad mirror to the one Elijah knows he's worn before, flickers over his lips. "Good morning."

Elijah wants to take Gavin's hand, but both are occupied with the mug of tea. Instead, he satisfies himself by slipping one bare arm around the naked shoulders and pulling Gavin close.

Gavin stiffens a little at first — and Elijah gets that — but then, thank God, he softens into the embrace, muscles slumping. They're about the same height, yet he manages to rest his head on Elijah's shoulder. Elijah feels the warm breath of a sigh on his neck, almost hot in the chilly air. Silently, he squeezes Gavin tight. Offering what he can give. Hoping it helps for now.

And he does what Gavin always does for him: invites Gavin back in. "Come back to bed." He tugs gently. "Or just inside. I'll dry you off. Make breakfast."

Gavin smiles, a little pensively, and says nothing.

"For me? For the ever-loving pain-in-the-ass who won't leave you alone until you do?"

There; another smile, genuine this time. Brighter, in the rain. He sips tea and muses: "It's pure out here, isn't it? Yet so tainted."

Elijah knows the answer to that. "Yeah." He runs his hand down Gavin's arm. "And I can't fix it. Neither can you." Hip-nudge. "Love you."

Gavin shuts his eyes and lets out another long breath; but ah, he's still smiling. "How did you know where to look for me?"

"I didn't. Until I found you. Then and now." Elijah presses a kiss to the weathered cheek. "You're what I needed all along. Just didn't realize for too long how you were a part of me."

Gavin rubs his cheek against Elijah's throat. Nestles closer. "As you are half of my whole, love." Soft words, sweet-sounding, and true.

Elijah feels the bond between them, almost a tangible thing, warm and grow a little stronger at that. He's right. They're half each other now. Two men who fit like puzzle pieces regardless of the world's opinions. Too old, too young, doesn't matter. They understand each other.

Maybe he's been an ass about showing that he gets the pain as well as the pleasure, too. Making it clear he gets Gavin's darkness as well as the light.

But that's going to change. Now.

"Come inside," he urges again, pulling gently. "Come be with me where it's warm."

And Gavin's head, nestled still on his shoulder, gives one slow, gentle nod.

They walk together, hand in hand, the short distance back into the apartment. There'll be laughter at peeling off sodden pants, and warm, dry towels to rub the life back into their frozen limbs. Maybe breakfast, bacon and eggs and muffins cooked hot, dallied over for hours or longer.

They could build those shelves after all. Might spend the day reading instead. There's a real possibility they'll just go back to bed and while away the rainy day with loving one another.

Which is all okay. Gavin is still with him. Everything he does and says promises that. Even if Gavin drifts into his memories, Elijah can pull him back. Same as Gavin does turn and turn about, with love.

It's a strange life, sometimes, but they wouldn't give it up or trade it. Not for the whole wide world on a silver plate.

Being together is worth so much more.

## “Dreams of You”

It is late December and the day is wet outside, cold and grey and rainy, not fit for man nor beast of burden, but *they* are snug inside, lying side by side on a sheepskin rug before the fire. It's a bit battered, having been used countless times before countless blazes, but well-loved for all that, and still comfortable as a cloud.

It's their reward for a hard afternoon's work. Being this lazy requires a lot of effort; when they do take the night off, they work for it.

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Jesse's spent hours this forenoon engaged in the energetic chopping of a stout hickory log, splitting it with the solid *whack!* of an axe in his skilled hands. Each chop is clean and perfectly aimed, so strong that the wood parts cleanly as glass.

Instead of cleaning out old ashes and making sure the flue was unblocked, Edwin stood and supervised from the doorway, sipping tea black as sin and bantering with him, while Jesse grew red-cheeked with the cold and shouted back quips that sounded biting as his blade, but weren't, really. Not stopping until he'd made up cords of good, solid logs and suitable splits of kindling.

Edwin meets him inside as he drags the first load in for the wood box, handing him a hot toddy and asking for a kiss in payment.

"Seriously don't think you deserve one," Jesse frowns, making grabs for the steaming cup. But Edwin is just that little bit taller, and holds it above both their heads.

"Careful, or I'll drop it, and then where will we be?"

"For starters, we'll both be wet, but at least I'll be warm and wet."

Something glints deep in Edwin's eyes. "Precisely what I was asking for."

Jesse hesitates, and then he can't help smiling. "Not fair."

"I never said I played fair."

"Nope." Jesse leans forward and touches his mouth to Edwin's, brief and cold from his time outside, hissing a little when Edwin's warm tongue flickers at his lips. He shivers, and not from a chill. "Go ahead and get that fire started, huh?" he suggests eagerly when he pulls back. "I want to be on that rug with you."

"I don't suppose you'd —" Edwin hates getting messy with ashes and soot.

"You don't suppose right, big guy," Jesse shoots back. "Put on some jeans and get dirty. Then we can, you know, take them off and get dirtier. Later. When the fire's actually built."

Grinning over his shoulder, he heads back out for more wood. Edwin huffs, hands on his hips. "Now who's not playing fair?"

"I never said..." drifts back.

Very well, then. By the time he's changed into sweater and jeans, gotten the old ashes brushed out and ascertained that the chimney (thank goodness) looks fine, Jesse's come and gone, come and gone, and come in with the very last load of kindling.

Edwin helps him strip off his heavy coat and thick gloves, but notes that for all that Jesse's shivering with the cold. "You're half frozen," he says, running his fingers down the tip of Jesse's reddened nose. "We needn't have done this today, you know. It could have waited."

"Nah!" Jesse shakes mist-dampened hair and droplets fly. "This is our night, isn't it? And I want to spend it in front of the fire. Ergo, I'm being selfish..."

"By being selfless?" Edwin asks quietly. They both know that while he's strong, he cannot wield an axe like that for hours.

Jesse's red cheeks pink a little deeper. "Edwin..."

"Shush. I know." Edwin bends and kisses the tip of that pink nose. "But we're getting you warmed up first, before anything else."

Jesse cracks up. Edwin raises an eyebrow. "And what's so funny about that?"

"Just — god — you sound like a nursemaid. I'm not old or senile, you know."

"No one said you'd be enjoying that bath alone, did they?"

"What, I get the rubber duckie to play with?"

"If you're very, very lucky."

"The one that squeaks?" Jesse's sidling ever closer, putting one hand on Edwin's hip and one on a forearm, tilting the good side of his head toward Edwin's. "Or the one that you pull on a string?"

"Possibly both."

"Hot damn," Jesse breathes, sliding his hand up to Edwin's neck.

"You're freezing. Get to that bathtub."

"Warm me up just a little first."

"Oh, if you insist... but such a sacrifice, I —" Jesse cuts him off by sealing their mouths together, his lips hungry as they press against Edwin's, his tongue seeking entrance into the warm, moist mouth.

Edwin groans softly as they touch, curling around each other, gently fighting for dominance.

He slips his hand into the back pocket of Jesse's jeans and pulls him closer, until their hips meet. Jesse inhales sharply, and kisses Edwin all the more needily, hands roaming everywhere there is to roam.

Edwin is the one to break away. He dabs at the corner of Jesse's mouth with the ball of his thumb, and smiles down into dazed eyes. "Bath," he says kindly, but firmly. "Now."

"Huh?" Jesse mumbles. "Oh! Yeah. Bath."

Edwin swats Jesse's bottom. "Get a move on." He watches with a broad grin as Jesse totters loopily toward the stairs. "I'll be along."

He does not say: *I'll come as soon as I can.*

Rather, he intends to make the foreplay last as long as possible.

And why, would you look at that? Jesse's forgotten his hot toddy. There it sits, steaming hot in its neat ceramic mug atop the entryway table. Edwin doesn't drink the stuff, and it'll be spoiled by the time Jesse's done with his bath.

He'll have to go up and give it to him, won't he? Waste not, want not, after all.

He waits just a moment, until he hears the clank and groan of ancient piping, then the rush of water into the massive, old monstrosity of a claw foot bathtub that the house boasts. It takes ages to fill, pushing the ancient water tank to its limits, and you could drown or float a flotilla in there once it's topped off.

Naturally, Jesse adores it. Keeps it sparkling clean, and — despite Edwin's teasing him — guards a stash of bubble bath gels under the sink. Sweet, fruity flavors. That's all right, though; Edwin has his own cache of sandalwood and cedar and ylang-ylang oils.

He lifts his head and sniffs the air. Slowly, he smiles. Spicy, with a tang of the orient. Sandalwood. Sneaky little devil that he is, Jesse knows that's Edwin's favorite and he's gone and stolen some for his own bath. Edwin'll have to punish Jesse for that, he will.

But first, that hot toddy must be drunk before it's ruined. Carefully balancing the cup in one hand, Edwin starts up the stairs. He knows the sound of his feet will be utterly drowned out by the crashing water, and he's not worried about being overheard — in fact, he rather likes the idea. He knows Jesse knows he'll be along, but it might be a bit of fun to surprise Jesse all the same.

With that in mind, he tiptoes to the bathroom door, following the trail of clothes that starts at the head of the stairs with thick, woolen sock one and goes on with thick, woolen sock two, sodden jeans, dampened flannel shirt, drier white T-shirt, ending with a pair of Snoopy boxers just at the door. He kicks each item behind him into a more-or-less pile, then peeks through the small crack that the door has been left open.

A pretty sight, indeed: Jesse, gloriously nude, arms raised in a long, luxurious stretch. His legs are turned just so, nothing visible but the curve of his hip and the length of his thigh. Billows of heat from the old steam radiator waft through the room, but he's still cold, for those arms come down in a shudder to wrap around his ribs. With a hard shake of his head, he lifts one foot and steps into the water.

Jesse's an odd duck; he prefers to get in the tub before it's done filling up. He's told Edwin that's the part he enjoys most: feeling the water rise around him, warming him as he's slowly submerged by it. Edwin would rather come to an already brimful bath and lower himself into the hot water, feeling it instantly soothe every ache and pain that his body's accumulated over the years.

But to each their own, eh?

Edwin waits until Jesse's fully stretched-out in the tub, leaning back with his arms down in the water and his head resting blissfully on the back. Edwin won't have an accident caused by some silly prank. But just as he's about to fling the door open wide and make Jesse jump, Jesse opens one eye and grins. "I know you're there, Mr. Sneaky," he says, sounding deeply amused. "I can smell the spices in that cup."

Disgruntled, Edwin pushes the door open. "Over sandalwood?"

"I can smell quality rum wherever it lurks. Besides, I knew even if we lived like a couple of nuns and only ever touched each other to pray..."

"You do cry out to God a lot."

"I knew you'd bring the toddy up here." Jesse raises himself up, stretching out a wet hand. "So, mine. Gimme."

"And about time, too." Edwin passes him the cup and smiles fondly as Jesse raises it and drinks deeply, appreciatively. Edwin makes great hot drinks and knows it.

When the cup's lowered, empty, Jesse has a cream mustache. Edwin has to laugh.

"Just what's so funny?" Jesse demands, shoving the empty cup onto a small toiletries table.

"You look about five years old."

"Oh, really." Jesse leans back again, draping his arms over the sides of the tub. Water laps around his waist and his cock, nestled in dark curls and lying half-hard against his thigh. "How old do I look now?"

Edwin is very glad Jesse didn't give the cup back to him; he would surely have dropped it. "You look," he says huskily, "more than old enough to do any number of the things I have in mind just now."

"Care to tell me what any of them are?"



"I would," Edwin says, reaching for the hem of his sweater, "far rather show you." The old, blue garment comes off with ease, and he feels Jesse's eyes on him in approval as his still-muscled chest and flat stomach are revealed. So much that he drops to his knees even before taking off his jeans, and leans forward to kiss that smiling mouth, cleaning it of every drop of lingering cream and rum.

"Mmm," Jesse breathes when they part, leaning their foreheads against each other. "Tasty."

"You've no idea." Edwin dips his hand into the hot water, scoops up a palm full, and lets it dribble down Jesse's arm. "Is there room enough for two?"

"What do you think?" Jesse scoots forward, and yes, there is. As they both knew. Jesse reaches down and strokes himself just once, just a little. "Coming?"

"Not yet, but before the night's over." Edwin lifts Jesse's hand to his mouth and kisses it, then lowers it to the level of his waist. "Undo these?"

"With so much pleasure," Jesse murmurs, making swift work of it. The jeans are old, loose and baggy, and slip off to puddle on the floor. He raises an eyebrow. "No boxers. Ambitious, huh?"

"Was I wrong?"

"Hell, no." Jesse wriggles impatiently. "Get in here."

Edwin steps carefully in to settle behind Jesse, his own beginning erection nestling up to the small of Jesse's back. They both gasp with the pleasure of the contact.

"Soap?" Edwin asks. Jesse wordlessly fumbles a bar out of the rack and hands it to him. "Wonderful boy, beautiful boy..." he whispers, leaning forward to lay his lips on both shoulder blades. "You know exactly what I want."

"So give, already."

"Ah-ah, not quite yet." Although, as if to give lie to his words, Edwin lets his arms circle Jesse and trail down to his groin, to the purpling cock that has hardened between his legs.

Edwin squeezes it, pumping once. "Although, if you convince me, I can be very generous."

"Oh, yeah, generous." Jesse's back arches, and he rubs shamelessly back against Edwin. "You fix me heated alcohol and make sure I drink it. Then you order me to take a bath fit for a king. But then you come up here and make with the nakedness and the teasing, and *oh--!*"

Edwin has pulled him tight now, strong hands tugging. "And what about now?" Edwin whispers in the curve of Jesse's ear. "Am I generous enough for you now?"

"Only if you," Jesse breathes in raggedly, "keep going."

"For you."

It's a very relaxed, and thoroughly warmed-up Jesse who emerges from that bath. He's spent the last unmeasurable time draped against Edwin, still hard himself, but gently pushing away any offers to reciprocate. No, he's not as young as he used to be, and he wants to make this last.

Giving Jesse pleasure is almost as good as feeling it himself.

So it's with gentle, patient hands that Edwin pats Jesse dry in a huge, terry towel, and pushes the man to stand by the radiator and stay warm while he goes and finds a good, solid sweater, jeans, and thick socks.

He has to take care of Jesse, after all. Jesse is the only thing of value that he has.

Fortunately, Jesse is all that he wants, too.

Then it's downstairs again at last. The remainder of the winter sunlight is fading from the sky, and it's chilly despite the heat. Edwin is glad they've decided on a fire tonight. Sitting close together and joking that it's for sharing bodily warmth is all well and good, but there's nothing like a crackling blaze to stretch oneself before, lazy as a cat in a sunbeam.

They build the fire with a great deal of laughter, Edwin choosing inappropriately sized logs and offering them up until Jesse orders him to go and get the sheepskin and "let people who actually know what they're doing, do this".

He's been tending to hearths for years just fine, but Edwin indulges Jesse's orders and gets the massive, beloved rug down from its storage in the deep hall closet.

When he returns, Jesse's got the kindling struck and a lovely flame beginning. Edwin spreads the rug and crouches before it, inhaling deeply of the scents: sulphur from the matches, rich wood from the burning hickory, sandalwood and smoke.

Edwin scratches Jesse's back idly as he leans over the fire, coaxing it into full life, and pulls Jesse down close to his side when it's solidly ablaze. Laughing, Jesse lets himself be yanked down, rolls into Edwin, and kisses him heartily in self-congratulations.

Jesse's hand slides slowly up and down. "You know, I think you need to get a little more creative. Creativity is good."

"Is that what they're calling it these days?" Edwin chuckles and hugs Jesse close at his little 'humph' of exasperation. "Always in such a hurry. Why not wait a while? Anticipation makes the payoff sweeter."

"Edwin?"

"Yes?"

"For a smart man, you can be really stupid. I'll punch anyone else who dares say as much, but I think I've earned the right." Jesse's up on his elbow again, not quite glaring, but close to it.

"You can't always wait. Sometimes, if you wait, and keep thinking there's gonna be plenty of time later, something happens and there's no time left at all. Just you, sitting there and wishing you'd had the guts to go ahead while you still could. Carpe diem. When something feels good and feels right, it probably is and you should go with it. There's no sense in waiting."

"So what you're saying," Edwin asks dryly, "is that delayed gratification is overrated?"

Jesse *thwacks* Edwin's chest. "Exactly. Like, if you hadn't had the guts to come and hold me my first night out -- if you'd been all shy-guy and not taken the initiative -- you think we'd be here, now? Nuh-uh."

Edwin can't help it; he buries his face in Jesse's shoulder and laughs with all his might. "I will never, not ever," he gasps, "get tired of the sound of you, going on the way you do when you get fired up."

"Fired up? Oh, I'm way fired up." Jesse steals Edwin's hand and pulls it down to his own cock, fully hard again. He scoots closer, pushing their groins together, and loops his leg over Edwin's.

"So? You need another lecture, or is it here that endeth the lesson?"

Edwin gazes at his Jesse in the flickering, crackling fire light. So handsome, with his faintly curling hair, fascinating eyes, and warm, kissable mouth. "Here," he says softly, "endeth the lesson. You're a wise man, Jesse."

"I had a good teacher," Jesse says. Then he's kissing Edwin, hot and hungry and needy, and they're pushing against each other, and the time for talking is so seriously over.

Later, they lie against each other, with clothing that was cast aside, pushed away or down or up messily rearranged on wholly warmed and sweating bodies. They share the last lingering kisses of the sated, tasting one another in their mouths. "God, you're fucking amazing," Jesse breathes.

Edwin kisses him sweetly, nipping at his full lower lip. "And you? Are an amazing fuck."

Jesse laughs, weary but satisfied. "We aim to please."

"And that you do." Suddenly caught by an unnamed fear, Edwin pulls Jesse close and hugs as tightly as he can, rocking the both of them gently. "You won't ever leave me, will you? Decide that I'm far too old and useless and set in my ways?"

"God, Edwin, how can you..." Jesse gently brushes his fingers over Edwin's chest. "Never. Never gonna leave you."

"Do you swear it?"

"Oh, yeah." Jesse kisses Edwin, slow and sweet, promising everything with the touch of his lips. "Hey, so maybe it's not legal in this state yet, but until death do us part, right? That's you and me. Forever. I swear."

Edwin holds him even tighter. "I couldn't bear to lose you."

"You won't." Another kiss. "Never." Another kiss, and another. "Never."

And now it's Jesse rocking Edwin, soothing him. "You're just worn out," he calms them with his voice. "We've had some kind of a night, huh? Go to sleep, now. Don't worry about brushing your teeth, flossing forty-two times, whatever. Just rest. I've got you, okay? Not letting you go, either."

Slowly, ever so slowly, Edwin begins to ease. It is so very restful, being held in that tight young grip... listening to those words of promise. He'll just close his eyes for a minute. He wants to stay awake as long as he can, to savor the comfort of those arms and the lulling sound of that dearest voice. He won't fall asleep... not just yet...

The morning light creeps over the floor, and into Edwin's face. It's dim and pale, but the shock of it startles him awake, and he sits up in clumsy haste, sweater and jeans still in mussed disarray. The sheepskin's got rucked up beneath him, and the fire's long since burnt itself out into handfuls of ash.

He gets up slowly, barely noticing how cold the floor is on his bare feet, and pads over to the window that overlooks his yard. Squints out into the new day. It'll rain again, he thinks. Perhaps before very long, and it looks as if it will last the whole forenoon. Longer, even.

A mug full of some ice-cold rum drink sits on the table in the entryway. Absently, Edwin picks it up and sips, not making a face at the taste of the curdled cream or bitter alcohol.

Just outside, an axe is sunk deep into the chopping block. A hickory log lies half-demolished beside it, chunks of wood scattered about. It's grown weathered and rotten with time, but still it remains.

Edwin drinks again without thinking, tilting his head a little to get a better view.

Just beyond the chopping block, and very close to the copse of trees, there's a solid block of gray marble and a low mound of softening earth covered with a blanket of fallen leaves. He can't read what it says from here, of course, and it puzzles him. Who would leave such a thing there?

He thinks he hears soft, phantom footsteps coming down the stairs.

"Jesse," he says, holding out his hand to be taken. "Good morning, lover. Ready to begin another day..."

*...together?*