

A photograph of a man's muscular torso, showing his chest and shoulders. The lighting is warm and dramatic, highlighting the contours of his muscles. The background is dark and out of focus.

# Jamie Craig

A NOVEL

# However Long The Night

## HOWEVER LONG THE NIGHT

...Jesse stepped out of his pants and began to wonder if this was serious. There was one thing that he had let himself forget—rather foolishly, perhaps. Gideon had a wicked possessive streak.

“Yes, Sir. I...flirted a little bit, Sir.”

Gideon ignored his nudity now, choosing instead to go over to the wardrobe and open the door. His gaze flickered over its contents. When he reached in, he re-emerged with black leather restraints that Jesse didn't immediately recognize.

“So not only did I get cheated when Derek called, I had to spend the rest of the day and night watching you salivate over two other men. Men who were not me.”

“I'm sorry, Sir. It won't happen again. I promise.”

“Because you won't drop everything to help a friend who needs it? Because you'll be able to hold your tongue when a gorgeous guy like David smiles at you?” Gideon stopped in front of him. Jesse recognized the leather now. They would fully immobilize his arms. “You're a slut for that kind of attention, and we both know it. So don't lie to me and make promises you can't keep. I'll tie you up and leave you in here to think about it, if that's the kind of game you're going to play.”

“Please, Sir, don't.” Gideon was close enough that one of the cuffs brushed against Jesse's thigh. The feel of the cool

leather was enough to make his cock twitch. But the thought of being completely immobile, helpless, made him hard. “What can I do, Sir?”

“Anything I want.” He grasped Jesse’s wrist in order to slide his arm into the first of the restraints. “But first I’m going to remind you who it is who owns you, boy...”

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# HOWEVER LONG THE NIGHT

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BY

JAMIE CRAIG

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HOWEVER LONG THE NIGHT  
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# CHAPTER 1

The unmistakable sound of old-fashioned police sirens came from Jesse's new iPhone, blaring through the house at an unnecessary volume. Jesse barely heard it; he didn't even think about stopping to see what Derek wanted. He wasn't exactly in a position to call for a time-out when the arm of the couch was hard against his stomach, and Gideon was plowing into his ass like he was making up for lost time. Even if he wanted to call a time-out, he couldn't. The tie Gideon had shoved in his mouth just after bending him over effectively stifled any speech.

The iPhone stopped, and for several seconds, the house was silent except for Gideon's grunts and Jesse's short, hard

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breaths. Gideon held both Jesse's wrists in one powerful hand, and his shoulders were beginning to ache. Just a little bit. Just enough to remind him how strong Gideon was.

From behind him, Gideon's cell began to trill. Was that Derek's set ring? Jesse thought so. *There might be something wrong.*

Jesse pushed the thought out of his head. If there was something wrong, Derek O'Dell was a detective with the Chicago Police Department. He could find somebody to help him out until Gideon felt like letting Jesse answer the phone. As if Gideon could read his mind, he tightened his hold around his wrists and moved his hips in a punishing rhythm.

The trilling stopped, and Jesse's full faculties turned back to Gideon. His ass burned, and tremors moved from his lower back, down his thighs. He didn't want Gideon to stop. He wanted to stay right where he was, shaking and sweating and making muffled begs for *more*. Always for *more*.

The phone on the desk shrieked. The business line. The one that Jesse always tried to answer if he was in the house. The ability to teleport made it easier to do just that—though Gideon always went slightly sick when he saw Jesse pop out of the kitchen without warning or any obvious reason. He wanted to answer it. He did. And he could have stopped Gideon if he really, truly thought it was important. But the machine would catch it and his balls were throbbing, sending echoes of pleasure all the way up to his throat.

The machine did, in fact, pick up after seven rings—which was the equivalent of about fourteen thrusts. Jesse wasn't



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surprised to hear Derek's voice over the roaring in his ears.

"Jesus, where the fuck are you guys? Wait. Don't answer that. Just call me back as soon as you can. Jonah's in trouble. Well, he better be in trouble, because if I find out he isn't and he's just screwing around and making us crazy, I'm going to kill him." Derek let out a long, exasperated sigh. "Just...please. Call me back."

Jesse spat out the tie. His tongue felt dry and thick. "Did...did you hear that?"

Gideon's fingers dug into his wrists. His rhythm never slowed. "No. And you didn't, either."

"But he..." Even as the protest formed, a voice in his head screamed at him to be quiet. Or, if he had to speak, beg for Gideon to fuck him harder. "He sounded really worried."

Abruptly, Gideon leaned over his back. His free hand found the front of Jesse's throat and squeezed over the bite marks on his neck. "And do I sound like I want to stop?"

Jesse moaned, shivering as new pain flashed through him. Derek's voice was already faded from his mind. "No, no, Sir."

The faint prick of Gideon's fangs made his lungs seize. Gideon hadn't been vamped out when they'd started. Silently, he urged Gideon to bite, even going so far as to tilt his head out of the way to give him more room.

Gideon chuckled. "That's my boy. Always want just a little bit—"

Jesse's iPhone started screaming again.

"Damn it!" Letting go of Jesse's wrists, Gideon reached across to the coffee table to snatch up the phone. He shoved it

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into Jesse's ear. "Tell him exactly what we're doing and that if he calls and tries to interrupt again, I'm going to chain him up and make him watch the next time I split your ass."

Jesse took the phone, even though it felt more than a little awkward to talk in his position. "Derek? This isn't exactly a good time."

"I know. I'm sorry. If I wasn't so worried, I wouldn't keep bugging you. But Jonah's been missing for three days now, and my sister is freaking out. Like calling me every ten minutes kind of freaking out. She's convinced something's happened to him, but nobody in London will give her a straight answer."

"That...really sucks, but..." Jesse bit back a groan as Gideon slammed into his prostate. A reminder that he was straying from the given script? Probably. "Jonah is an adult. And we're not in London."

"But you could just pop over there, couldn't you? Just check out his apartment, that's all I'm asking. If he's home, shove a phone in his hand and tell him to call his mom. Five minutes, tops, Jess."

"You're not a babysitting service," Gideon growled.

"I heard that," Derek complained. "Do you think I'd bug you if it wasn't important? We tried talking him out of going in the first place, but he's been obsessed with this stupid project ever since your housewarming party. I'm just worried he's in over his head."

Jesse almost asked what the stupid project was, but decided it would be best to hold off on his questions.

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Especially since Derek sounded genuinely worried. Perhaps the latest call from his sister had sent him over the edge. “Okay. I’ll check it out.”

Derek let out a long breath. “Thank you. Have a pen ready? I’ve got his address right here. You can just pop over, pop back, and then go back to whatever you were doing.”

With a frustrated hiss, Gideon pulled out of Jesse’s body and abruptly let him go. “When we get back to it,” he warned, flopping down into the chair, “I’m putting a ring on you so you can’t come for hours.”

Jesse put his free hand down to catch himself before he fell flat on his face. His legs shook a little as he straightened, and his spine popped and cracked. “Fair enough.” He crossed over to the desk and reached for the pen, his ass still flexing and relaxing. “Okay, Derek, tell me where I’m going.”

He scribbled down the address, but he cut Derek off before he could launch into another round of gratitude. Disconnecting, he asked, “Are you coming with me?”

Gideon arched a brow. “You’re teleporting to London instead of staying here to let me fuck you. What do you think?”

“I think you probably want to sit right there and devise new and interesting punishments for me.”

“Give the boy a prize.” Fisting his erection, he stroked himself slowly, deliberately, making sure Jesse saw every movement. “Now get out of here so we can get back to what’s really important.”

There was no sense in arguing that Derek’s nephew

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counted as important—he knew where Gideon’s priorities were, after all. And it was difficult to claim that some kid who probably misplaced his cell phone was more important than what they had been doing. Jesse pulled on the pants and shirt that Gideon had practically torn from his body. The teleportation didn’t take any more preparation than that. One moment, he stood in his familiar library, staring with more than a hint of longing at Gideon’s cock, and the next he was in the middle of a strange London flat.

“Jonah?” If the young man were there, Jesse knew he would respond. Their paths hadn’t crossed often since they first met at the housewarming party, but when they did see each other, Jonah made it clear that he was still interested in whatever Jesse wanted to give him. “Jonah?”

There was no window, and no light in the room. Wishing he could see in the dark, he felt his way to what he hoped was the door and felt along the wall to the light switch. He found one and flipped it off and on. Nothing happened. Was the light not connected? Power out?

Had the light bulb simply burned out?

Jesse found the thought more than a little unsettling.

It wasn’t difficult to navigate around the flat, even in the dark. He followed the wall until he found what could only be a small kitchen nook. Despite his new abilities, his senses weren’t like Gideon’s. He couldn’t smell anything out of the ordinary. And he couldn’t see in the dark. Even so, something niggled at the back of his mind. *Blood*. That was the smell of blood. Faint and questionable, but once Jesse got the idea in

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his head, he couldn't get it out.

He found another switch, and this time, he flooded the room in low, golden light. It wasn't much, but it was enough to see the carnage he had missed before. Books torn apart, a broken television, shredded paper, shattered glass. And that blood that had teased the edge his senses. Smearred across the walls and staining the carpet. He had seen enough crime scenes to decide two things. First, the attacker had probably been human. And second, whatever Jonah's ultimate fate, he had suffered a head wound.

Jesse had the sudden image of Jonah's friendly smile smashed in, his teeth broken.

His stomach rolled. A moment later, he stood in front of Gideon. "I need your help."

Gideon still had his cock in his hand, but the look on Jesse's face must have given him pause. "That was fast."

"I didn't need to stay long. He's not in his flat. The place has been wrecked. There's blood everywhere."

Swiftly, Gideon tucked his cock into his pants, doing up his belt as he rose to his feet. "You want me to call Derek?"

"No. Not until we have some actual news to give. We need to ascertain if he's still alive. And if he is, maybe there are enough clues around to figure out what attacked him." He waited until Gideon was fully dressed again before taking his hand. "Ready?"

"For having my stomach sucked out through my nose? Never." But his grip was firm around Jesse's, his gaze unwavering as Jess pulled him through space to the hallway

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outside Jonah's disrupted flat halfway around the world. Though he looked a little green around the edges, his head snapped toward the door, his nostrils flaring. "There's blood from at least two humans in there."

Jesse nodded, not really pleased that he had confirmation of what he suspected. He turned the knob until the lock snapped and the door drifted open. "Let's see if you can go in and have a look."

Gideon waited until Jesse was out of the way before stepping forward. The moment his toe hit the threshold, his body jerked to a halt. The brown eyes he turned back to Jess were grim. "There's your answer. At least he's still alive."

"The lock wasn't broken. Jonah knew them and let them in, or they knocked and pushed their way in. Either way, it's difficult to tell if there was a struggle or if the ransacking happened after Jonah was knocked out." Jesse peered into the flat, tempted to throw himself into an investigation. But that's not what Derek had called them for. And they weren't exactly in their own backyard. "We should get the local authorities started on this as soon as possible. You call Derek, and I can call 9-9-9 here with an anonymous tip."

"Did you grab your phone? Mine's back at the house."

"Yeah, I put it in my pocket."

Jesse unlocked his phone, relieved to see that it had several reception bars. He gently shut the door, hoping that the busted lock wouldn't harm the police investigation too much. Gideon watched silently as Jesse dialed the emergency number and waited for the firm, no-nonsense tone of the operator.

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He was vaguely amused to hear his own accent when he spoke—it was always thicker when he was in England. He kept the conversation brief, focusing on the task instead of the earlier image of Jonah's broken smile.

"Stay there until the police arrive, sir."

Jesse took that as his cue to end the call. "They'll be here in a few minutes."

"We shouldn't be here for that." Gideon grimaced. "I can't believe I'm suggesting this, but why don't you just teleport us back, and we'll tell Derek in person? He's going to want to know what you saw anyway."

"Yeah."

Jesse had no problem agreeing with Gideon's suggestion. He was worried about Jonah—literally worried sick. But this didn't appear to be an investigation that needed to involve him. Jonah wasn't the type of person to spend a night alone. Jesse didn't like to think so, but it seemed perfectly plausible that this time, Jonah invited home the wrong man.

Not that he would say as much to Derek.

\* \* \*

Derek's reaction to the phone call was not what Jesse had expected. Three simple words. "I'm coming over." No demands for more explanation. No questions about what Jesse had seen. Not even a shocked gasp or a tremor in his voice. Just, "I'm coming over." Jesse might have told him not to bother, but Derek didn't give him the chance. Three simple words, and then dead air.

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Jesse had been friends with Detective Derek O'Dell ever since first hooking up with Gideon. He had seen Derek through good times, through bad. They'd passed favors back and forth so many times, it was impossible to tell who owed who what anymore. So when Jesse opened the door and met Derek's grim, hazel eyes, he knew something was bad. He might complain about his nephew's exuberant personality and colorful sex life, but Jonah was still family. And if there was one trait to describe Derek, it was loyal.

He stepped inside and brushed the snow off his shoulders. His prematurely gray hair was in disarray, like he'd been running his fingers through it, and his normally smiling mouth was a hard, straight line.

"Gideon said it was human blood?" At Jesse's confirming nod, Derek exhaled. "God, I hope I'm wrong then."

"Wrong about what?" Jesse asked. "Do you have a theory about what happened to him?"

"Not a theory, just..." He stopped when Gideon appeared from the library, waiting for him to come up and stand next to Jess. "A theory requires knowledge I don't have," he continued. "And all I know is, he's been obsessed with that demon that possessed Gideon and Emma. The one that made Gideon lose his memory? That's literally all he's researched for the past two years. He even lost his fellowship because of it."

"*What?* Why?" Jesse looked over to Gideon, automatically hoping he would have some sort of answer. But Gideon looked just as perplexed as he did. "Why would he do that?"



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“Honestly?” Derek glanced guiltily at Gideon before meeting Jesse’s eyes again. “I think he started out because he hoped to impress you.”

“To impress me? Please tell me he didn’t let himself lose his fellowship on some insane notion of impressing me.”

“I don’t think that’s so insane,” Gideon commented.

“But I’m sure that’s not why he stuck with it,” Derek was quick to say. “I don’t know what he found, but he got sucked into it. Like he’d finally find one detail, only to drive him to want to get the next. And the next after that. Research was his thing, remember. He lived for that kind of stuff.”

Jesse understood. That impulse that made you stay up all night because you just couldn’t put the book down. The need to find that rare volume that may or may not have the single page you needed. The constant, nagging feeling at the base of your skull that the answer was just around the corner, in the next library, in the next handwritten manuscript.

“Is that why he was in London? Chasing another lead?”

Derek nodded. “About a month ago, he came and asked me to keep an eye on his apartment. He’d gotten his passport and everything, said he’d finally figured out which collection some grim-something was in. He wasn’t going to be gone long, but then after he got there, his story changed.”

Gideon frowned. “To what?”

“To, ‘Well, they’re not just going to hand it over to me, Uncle Derek.’ And, ‘Honestly, you don’t want to know.’”

If he had been investigating the paranormal and the occult for two years, there was a very good chance that Jonah was

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well beyond dusty books and brittle manuscripts. But Jesse didn't want to jump to any unwarranted conclusions. Especially since Gideon had sensed blood from a second human.

"So he didn't give you any details beyond that? Where is his apartment?"

Derek held out a single key. "I figured you'd want to take a look through it. But I'll warn you, the place is a fire hazard. I don't think he's thrown away a single thing he started."

Gideon rolled his eyes. "Oh, great. More books."

"You can stay here if you want. Unless you want to supervise from the hallway."

"No, I'll stay here. Someone's got to be around when Dominique gets home from school."

Derek had a visibly hard time suppressing his grin. "I never thought I'd see the day when the great Gideon Keel was relegated to babysitting. If I wasn't on duty, I'd stick around just to watch."

Gideon leveled an unamused stare at him. "After what you interrupted earlier? You don't want to be alone with me, Derek."

That was probably true. Jesse herded Derek toward the door. Despite the ease of teleportation, Jesse wanted to drive. The extra time would give him a chance to ask more questions about Jonah. Could he have kept Jonah from London, and from danger, if he had known what the younger man was up to? He didn't even question if keeping Jonah from danger numbered in his list of responsibilities.

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"I'll call you if we find anything interesting," Jesse promised as they reached the door.

Gideon nodded. "Call me anyway. Interesting is always relative."

Jesse smiled a little, despite his errand. "I will." As soon as he closed the door behind them, he turned his attention to Derek. "How long did Jonah plan to stay in London? As long as it took?"

"He had enough money saved up to pay for two months over there, but he kept telling us he hoped it wouldn't be that long. Part of me actually hoped he'd meet somebody who'd distract him from all this, but as far as I can tell, he hasn't dated much since this started."

Of everything Derek had told him, Jesse found that the most surprising. Jonah was just the sort of person to be distracted by a pretty face. And he was just the sort of person who would attract distraction. His vibrant blue eyes could make a person forget his own name, and he flirted like it was second nature. It probably was second nature. Jonah was not the sort of person to dedicate his life to celibacy.

"I wish you had told me about this sooner, honestly," Jesse said, once he ducked into the car out of the frigid air. "I could have at least kept an eye on him."

Derek slid into the seat next to him. "You and Gideon have had your hands full. You didn't need to worry about Jonah, too." The car roared to life. "Besides, that might've actually encouraged his little crush. You didn't want that."

"I'd rather deal with his crush than this. In fact, I'd happily

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let him sniff around the house every day for the rest of his life, if he's not out getting himself into trouble." He knew Derek was worried enough about his nephew without detailing all the horrible scenarios Jesse feared. "Did he ever mention anybody or anything that he might have been...afraid of? Like he had gone too far?"

Derek's bark of laughter was harsh. "This is Jonah you're talking about. The kid's not afraid of anything. And no, he didn't mention anything. For as much as he talked about everything else, this was the one topic he clammed up on. He wouldn't even talk to me about what happened after he got himself arrested two weeks ago."

Jesse sat up a little straighter. "He was arrested. For what?"

"B&E. The charges ended up getting dropped."

He sincerely hoped the charges had been dropped because Jonah had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and not because somebody decided it would be easier to take care of Jonah themselves.

"Did you call your sister yet?"

"Not until I have something more definite. But, Jess..." Derek glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, clearly uncomfortable about something. "There's something you should probably know. I had to hire a lawyer for Jonah, because I know fuck all about English laws. But I didn't want to get some kind of quack, so I went with the only name I knew." He took a deep breath. "David Brighton."

"He agreed to take Jonah's case?"

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“Didn’t even argue.” With a frown, Derek glanced at him again. “Why? Should he have?”

Jesse shrugged. Just hearing David’s name sent an odd shiver down his spine. Tall and gorgeous with rich, dark skin and a body hard with understated strength. In another dimension, David was his doppelganger’s lover, and so Jesse supposed it wasn’t a great surprise that he recognized his more attractive attributes. He had occasionally wondered—worried—what would have happened if he had stayed in London long enough to meet David instead of running to Chicago to find Gideon.

“There was no guarantee that he’d be a lawyer in this dimension. That’s all.”

“I guess I got lucky then. But it’s not going to be a problem, is it? I still don’t understand how all this dimensional stuff works.”

“It’s not going to be a problem at all. In fact, David is probably the only thing we’ve got going for us. It’ll be helpful to have somebody to touch base with in London. If he saw Jonah as recently as two weeks ago, he might be able to give over some information.”

Derek let out a long, relieved breath. “Good. I’ll e-mail you all the contact information I have for him and let him know he can talk to you and Gideon about Jonah’s case. I don’t know the particulars, though I wish I’d been a little bit nosier about what was going on over there.”

“No, don’t start blaming yourself. Your plate is too full as it is, and Jonah is an adult. You shouldn’t have to worry about

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babysitting him, on top of doing your actual job.”

“Are you guys too busy right now to see what you can do? Because it would make me feel a hell of a lot better knowing you and Gideon were looking for him.” They turned the corner, and almost immediately turned again into the parking lot of a large apartment building. “I know I give Jonah a hard time, but he’s a good kid. I don’t want anything bad to happen to him.” He grimaced. “Anything else, at least.”

“Derek, we owe you so much that even if we were too busy, we would make the time for Jonah. We don’t want anything bad to happen to him, either.”

Derek pulled up to the unsecured front door of the building and put the car into park. “Just keep me in the loop, okay?”

“You’ll know everything we do,” Jesse promised.

Jonah lived in a three-story walk up. The building itself didn’t raise any alarms, but as soon as they stepped through the front door, Jesse understood why a poor graduate student might find himself there. The wallpaper on the walls was old, yellowed, and peeling, and what remained of it was covered in crayons and markers. Snow boots and heavy, wet coats littered the hallway that led to the flight of stairs, and thumping music bled from the walls.

Jesse followed Derek to the third floor. Each step creaked ominously, but the wood held strong. The room was at the end of the hall, and Jesse thought calling the space an apartment was a bit too generous. Immediately to the left of the door was a sink, a tiny fridge, and a stove with two burners. The living room couldn’t have been more than six feet wide and four feet

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from the kitchen to the far wall. A doorway led directly to the bedroom—or what Jesse assumed was a bedroom. There didn't appear to be a bed in the room. Just a desk and books and paper.

In fact, there was paper everywhere.

"Does he ever clean this place?" Jesse asked, only half in jest.

"Believe it or not, this is clean." Derek stepped around a stack of haphazardly placed books to go to the far end of the tiny futon that served as a couch. "I want to start here. Every time I came over, he always seemed a little too protective of what he had over here. I want to know what he was hiding."

Jesse followed him, bending to pick up balls of paper as he walked. He absently unrolled a few, pulling the wrinkles out of the sheets. He expected to see notes, perhaps taken in a tight, careful hand. And at first, that's exactly what he found. The pages were full with notes in a variety of languages. Most of them were translated directly to English. Other lines were completely left alone. Did Jonah know these obscure languages? Had he taught himself the words while researching these rare books?

Eventually, the notes gave way to one line, scribbled across the middle of the page. Sheet after sheet, the same line, over and over. Sometimes it was scratched out. Sometimes it was translated. Sometimes it looked more like a doodle. Jesse didn't know the importance of the words, but he did recognize it as a puzzle. Something that had stumped Jonah.

Sinking to the edge of the futon, he flipped through the

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pages, looking for the significance of that single line. Derek had stopped rummaging, his gaze steady on Jesse, his breath inaudible. The only sound to fill the tiny apartment was the occasional scratch of Jesse's nail across the paper as he sought out fragments of the phrase that had captivated Jonah. It was a Latin derivative, of that he was sure, but Jonah's handwriting was atrocious, grown worse with his obvious frustration at not solving this last riddle.

Jesse saw the glimmer near the bottom of a sheet with a coffee ring stain in the upper corner. He must have stiffened or reacted some way, because Derek sat down next to him and peered over his shoulder.

"What is it?"

Silently, Jesse pointed at the phrase. Now that he'd seen it, it leapt from the page. He strongly suspected he'd find it repeated in the other languages he hadn't recognized.

Derek shook his head. "Enlighten the ignorant masses here. What does it say?"

*Votaries of Castelain.*

"It says that Jonah finally figured out what he was looking for." He ran his thumb over the phrase, then pointed to the first word. "A votary is a worshipper. Really devout. Maybe even a fanatic. Castelain is a name. Or a keeper of a castle."

As Jesse watched, Derek's normally amiable features hardened. "Are you telling me Jonah took off to a different country to try and get some magic book from a bunch of cult wackos?" He shook his head. "When we get him back here, I'm going to kill him. And then I'm going to sic his mother on



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him.”

“The cult might not be full of wackos,” Jesse said mildly. “There are cults all over the place. Most of them are pretty benign. They just offer some money to whatever vamp or demon wants a couple of followers, and they get something to worship in return. But it’s a place to start looking.”

“Except that demon who possessed Emma and Gideon didn’t exactly turn them into Fred and Ginger.” With a muttered curse, Derek rose from the futon and marched over to the small kitchenette. He dug around beneath the sink until he pulled out a garbage sack. “Let’s bag up everything you think you might need. The sooner you get to London, the happier I’m going to be.”

That would be easier said than done. How was he supposed to divine what pile of junk was actually junk, and what was necessary? He settled for throwing in all the discarded pages—the notes might be helpful—as well as a few books that he didn’t already own. There were two titles he didn’t even recognize, and that made his stomach clench. Would it be enough to merely find Jonah? Or was he in even deeper than Derek understood?

The question almost made Jesse laugh. Almost. When he was Jonah’s age, he was preparing to move to Chicago to seek out a vampire.

## CHAPTER 2

The last time Gideon had been in London, he and Jesse had been only barely reunited, struggling with their grief over Emma's "death," dealing with Jesse's new Guardian-ship, fighting off another insane Guardian who thought Jesse was an abomination and threat to all he supposedly held dear, and trying to cope with seeing Jesse's counterpart and a mother who was alive and kicking.

Gideon sincerely hoped this trip wouldn't be nearly as fraught with headaches. Of course, meeting up with David Brighton could go either way. The man didn't know Gideon and Jesse had not only watched another dimensional version of him fucking a different Jesse in their playroom, but that he

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had also provided some wonderful fantasies in the two months since. It would be interesting to see if Jesse could look the man in the eye and not blush.

Gideon's primary goal was to keep his focus above the man's waist. He wasn't so sure he was going to succeed.

It helped that they were meeting him at a pub in Chiswick. The George IV was packed from stem to stern, the din all the voices created nearly maddening. People of every age, shape, and color clustered at the bar, at tables, in corners. Their bodies warmed the room without the need for extra heating, and the mild rush of all the heartbeats made his own body tighten in anticipation. In the old days, this would have been a smorgasbord. Now, he would have to wait until he got Jesse someplace private, to fuck and feed to his heart's content.

"We're not going to be able to hear a word he says," Jesse complained over the noise. "Assuming we can even find him."

Gideon scanned the crowd. "But nobody will hear us, too. That'll help." He spotted the familiar dark head seated at a corner table and nodded toward him. "There he is." He grinned as he began to wind a path through the crowd. "It helps that he doesn't have any hair in this dimension, either."

"Yes, at least we have baldness going for us," Jesse mumbled. A human probably wouldn't have been able to hear him, but Gideon could always hear everything Jess said. Whether or not Jesse realized it.

David looked up as they approached, and it was a little strange not to see so much as a spark of recognition in his direct eyes. He waited until Gideon stopped at the table to nod

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at the two free chairs. “You must be Mr. Keel and Mr. Madding.”

Jesse offered his hand. “Jesse, please. And thank you for agreeing to meet us.”

“It’s no trouble.” He was just as soft-spoken as his counterpart, his accent as cultured. “I was a bit alarmed when I heard from Detective O’Dell this evening. I’d thought I’d managed to talk some sense into Jonah.”

“So far, there’s no reason to think you weren’t successful.” Jesse sat, leaving the chair closest to David vacant for Gideon. “The state of his flat indicates that whatever happened, he was not a willing participant.”

“No, but if he’d listened to me...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “My apologies. Detective O’Dell said you’re friends with Jonah?” Gideon and Jesse both nodded. “Then you know how...tenacious he can be. I told him he’d missed his calling. He should be prosecuting cases, not buried in books on the occult.”

“Derek hired you to help Jonah get out of some breaking and entering charges?”

David’s long fingers caressed the side of his pint glass as he met Gideon’s gaze. “You’re not going to ask if he was innocent?”

Gideon shrugged. “From what I know about Jonah, I think that would be a little naïve.”

“We both know that Jonah isn’t a bad kid. I’m less interested in his guilt or innocence and more interested in the relevance.” Jesse pulled a battered sheet of paper from his

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pocket and smoothed it out on the table. “Do you recognize this at all?”

David leaned forward, eyes narrow as he read the words. “You’re looking for votaries?”

“It’s a secret society. Or a cult. I haven’t been able to figure it out yet. There’s actually not a lot about them, so whatever they do, they do it out of most people’s view. But it’s our best lead.”

For several seconds, David stared intently at the paper, but eventually, he shook his head. “I can’t say that I heard Jonah mention anything about this at all. And it’s not ringing any other bells. Do you think they have something to do with his disappearance?”

“I don’t know. But I do know that their society has been in London since the fourteenth century, and that Jonah didn’t leave Chicago until he figured out just what this phrase meant.” Jesse took the paper back and carefully folded it. “What can you tell us about what he has been up to here? Derek didn’t have a lot of information.”

“I can tell you what he hasn’t been doing. Sleeping. Jonah runs on coffee and cream buns. It never mattered what time I might call, he was awake.”

“Doing what?” Gideon asked.

“Studying. Running for the tube. He seemed to spend a lot of time in Chelsea, which I never understood. There’s nothing there but too much old money.”

“Old money wouldn’t be very far removed from an old secret society,” Jesse noted. “Did you call him a lot? I thought

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the charges against him were dropped?”

David had one of the easiest smiles Gideon had ever seen. “I talked to him quite a bit while we were sorting out the mess he got himself into. That was only fully resolved three days ago.”

Three days. And now Jonah was missing. It didn’t take the sideways glance from Jesse for Gideon to draw that particular line.

“Where did Jonah try breaking in to?” he asked.

“A pub. Specifically, he was accused of breaking the lock on the cellar. Somebody dialed the police before he made it much further than that. Since it’s not exactly an uncommon occurrence, and since no harm came of the attempt, the owner was amenable to letting it go.”

“A pub? Why a pub?” Jesse looked as perplexed as Gideon felt.

“He just muttered something about the pub being around since Shakespeare. I thought he was just being provincial, so I pointed out that there are things in London older than that.”

Considering how obsessed Jonah had been about his new research, though, Gideon knew that it wasn’t a random choice. He had had only one purpose in coming to London.

“I think we need to start with the pub,” he said to Jesse.

With a frown, David leaned forward. “I realize you’re a private investigator, and that you’ve done quite extensive work in Chicago, but what exactly do you think you’re going to accomplish here that the police cannot? If you suspect something with the pub, tell them.”

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“We don’t have a lot of time.” Jesse took a deep breath. “Jonah is still alive right now. That might not be true tomorrow morning. And a human cult doesn’t preclude black magic, enchanted weaponry, or demonic bodyguards. I don’t think that the Met is prepared to deal with any of those eventualities.”

Everything about David went utterly still. Except for his heart rate. That accelerated dramatically.

“You did not just say...magic.”

Jesse stared back. “You’re not aware of the existence of magic.” It wasn’t a question. “I thought that since you’ve been talking to Jonah that maybe he... So you don’t have any idea what he’s doing here or what he’s looking for?”

David’s words were carefully chosen, carefully enunciated. “He’s a historian with an interest in the occult. He said he was here because he needed a rare book to complete his current project. Did he lie to me?”

“No. Technically, that’s the truth. He was, until recently, completing his M.A. in history. He also has a recent interest in the occult. But...well, the reason for that interest isn’t important.” Jesse offered an understanding smile. “Do you think we’re crazy now?”

“You wouldn’t be the first,” Gideon said, though Jesse’s nudge beneath the table indicated that maybe he shouldn’t have spoken up at all.

David still appeared unconvinced. “What is it exactly you think we’re going to come up against?”

“Black magic, enchanted weapons, demonic bodyguards.”

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Jesse shrugged. "I just don't know. The information about these folks is sketchy, and even if we had information to give to the police, they wouldn't believe us, right?"

"You don't have to worry about the details," Gideon added. "Just give us the name of the pub, and we'll take care of the rest."

He might as well have said he was going to eat the Queen. David's eyes hardened, and he sat back stiffly in his chair.

"If you believe for a moment that I'm going to stand idly by and do nothing, you're sorely mistaken."

"Giving us the information we need so we can end this tonight isn't idly standing by and doing nothing," Jesse pointed out reasonably.

"It's not enough. Jonah's my friend. Probably the only one he has in this country. I'm coming along."

Gideon didn't like it. David didn't truly understand what they might be up against. He had no idea about Jesse's abilities, or the fact that Gideon was a vampire. If push came to shove, he was going to be one more person for them to protect, should things go wrong.

But from the steely look in his eye, David wasn't going to bend on this. And the longer they sat here and argued about it, the worse Jonah's odds got.

Which was exactly what he said to the man.

"So we should go." David glanced between them. "Because I have the car, I have the address, and frankly, you need me."

Jesse caught Gideon's eye, and he could practically hear



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the other man's thoughts. The fact remained that they didn't need David, and that he could become a liability. He didn't have any sort of telepathic link with Jesse, but in this case, he didn't need one. *Let him come. Let's stop wasting time.*

"Don't do anything stupid," Gideon said as he rose from his seat. "Which means, stay out of the way and do as you're told."

David bristled. Jesse touched his arm, the contact brief but enough to distract David from his offended sensibilities. "I probably would have tried for something more diplomatic, but doing what he says will make this whole process a lot easier."

Any other time, and Gideon would have loved a battle of wills with David. He already knew the man was a Dom; the session they had witnessed with his other self proved that beyond a shadow of a doubt. Clearly, his need for control spread into other aspects of his life as well. Gideon was half-aroused considering what it would take to break David of it, while the rest of his body argued against stripping the man of the strength that served him so well.

"Diplomacy isn't my strong suit." He smiled, trying to get David back onto their side. "Saving people like Jonah is."

"Fine." David took a few notes from his pocket and left them on the table. "Let's stop talking about it and get to work."

"Good plan," Jesse agreed.

David led the way through the crowd and out the front door. Music, light, and people spilled onto the street. Another niggle of hunger moved through Gideon—he couldn't help it.

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Especially since now he could pick up David's scent, which gave him a pretty good idea of just what the other man's blood would taste like.

Jesse didn't speak again until they were all in David's car. "It's probably best if we can get down to the cellar while the pub is still open. With all the people there, we'll look less suspicious."

"All the people?" David pulled out of the car park and onto the street, slipping onto the roundabout without even pausing. "I doubt it gets crowded, even on Friday nights."

Gideon slid all the way to the side, to avoid having David resort to glancing back at him in his rearview mirror and not seeing a reflection. "So what would be your suggestion, then?"

"Honestly? The same way Jonah tried to get into the cellar. Only better."

"Doesn't that still require going through the pub?"

David shook his head. "There's an outside entrance for deliveries. I'm assuming one of you knows how to pick locks. Someone else can play watchman."

"I think you should play watchman, David. Gideon's automatically suspicious because he's such an obvious American."

"What's he going to do then?"

Gideon smiled. "Trust me. I can blend with the best of them."

"We've done this sort of thing before," Jesse added. "Well, we've never broken into an English pub before. But the principle is the same. It's not too late to change your mind

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about this, you know. You could get in serious trouble if we're caught."

"No." David didn't even hesitate. "I'm in. Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

"You're not even afraid of what could be waiting for us?" Jesse asked, his voice soft and curious.

"You mean, the black magic, enchanted weapons, and demonic bodyguards?" There was a ghost of a smile on David's full lips. "What's the point? If this is your specialty, I'm sure you have the means to take care of whatever we encounter. Fear will only hold us back."

"Sometimes, fear is what drives you forward," Gideon suggested.

"Well, you're right that there's no reason to be afraid. Gideon's been rescuing people for years. And there probably aren't any demonic bodyguards. They really cost a huge amount of money. Most people don't feel like...making the appropriate sacrifices."

Gideon's eyes narrowed. Jesse seemed to be agreeing with David an awful lot. It was probably just to placate him, but the knowledge that Jesse was more than attracted to the other David they had met made Gideon wonder how much of this was professional courtesy, and how much...was not. It had been one thing to flirt with the fantasies of David; the reality was proving a little more difficult to handle than Gideon expected.

"Jonah never mentioned any of this," David said. "I'm beginning to suspect there's a lot about him I didn't know."

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“I know the feeling. I’ve known him for two years and Gideon is a family friend, and we just found out to...a couple of days ago what he’s been up to. If I had known what he was doing, or what he was planning, I would have tried to stop him before he ever left the States.”

David fell silent at that, navigating away from the busier streets of Chiswick for more sedate minor roads. Once or twice, Gideon caught him glancing in the mirrors, but if he noticed Gideon wasn’t there, he didn’t say a word. Everything about him was calm. Apparently, he’d either come to grips with the fact that they were dealing with the supernatural, or dismissed them as eccentric.

“Are either of you practiced in first aid?” David asked out of the blue. “If Jonah was hurt in the abduction like it appears, we may have to do something until we can get him to hospital.”

“I’ll be able to help him,” Jesse promised. “I can keep him stabilized.”

Gideon didn’t doubt that, but there had been a lot of blood in the apartment. And that was only what he could see from his vantage point in the hallway. The smell had reminded him of the sort of devastation he himself had regularly participated in. He wasn’t certain how much of that was only Jonah’s blood. Had he fought back and made the abductor bleed? Or had there been two people in that apartment?

Either way, Gideon just hoped Jonah was conscious when they found him.

## CHAPTER 3

The knowledge that he could have already gone in, found Jonah, and returned to Chicago made Jesse's teeth itch. He was beginning to have a real appreciation for the frustration Samantha Stephens must have experienced. No wonder her entire family hated Darrin so much. But David's calm determination assuaged most of his annoyance. He clearly wanted to do the right thing and help his friend. And he normally would not begrudge a helping hand, if the person offering was at all competent and trustworthy.

Still, he was about ready to jump out of his skin by the time they reached their destination. *You're getting so impatient.* Emma's voice. He heard it often, but this wasn't

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just something he had made up. *You're getting so impatient with people. Is it because of me?* She had asked that question in his dream the previous night. He pushed her voice aside and focused on the building in front of them. The Rose & Crown wasn't the most impressive pub Jesse had ever seen. In fact, it looked like it was allowed to remain open out of sheer habit. He could easily imagine the customer base. The same handful of men drinking through their paychecks on the same stools at the same time every single night. The exterior needed a good coat of paint, and two of the windows were boarded up with cardboard. It wasn't abandoned, though. The place wasn't full, but when the door flew open, Jesse caught a glimpse of a handful of men.

"Where's the delivery door?" Jess asked.

David nodded toward a nearly invisible alley that ran along the side of the building. "There's a service drive in the back."

The feeble light from the streetlamp didn't extend as far as the mouth of the alley. It beckoned only the brave approach, hiding any number of dangers in its inky depths. Jesse glanced at Gideon, who regarded the alley intently before prowling forward to its edge. He bent his head, hiding his face from view, but Jesse knew that was for David's benefit. Gideon didn't want the other man aware of his enhanced capabilities.

"Everybody's inside," Gideon finally said. "And as far as I can tell, they're all human."

David frowned. "How can you know that?"

Gideon cocked a brow. "I have really good ears."

*Among other excellent attributes,* Jesse thought before

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turning to David. "You should stay here. Try to keep out of sight. If anybody approaches the door, don't try to stop them. Just try to warn us."

David looked doubtfully at the alleyway. "Perhaps I should move the car around to the back. It'll be easier for Jonah, if anything's wrong."

"No, stay here. That'll take too much time, and if the unfamiliar car doesn't spook anybody out here, the sound will alert everybody downstairs. Hopefully, we'll just be in and out. You won't even have the chance to miss us."

The frown on David's face didn't go away, but he melted into the shadows alongside Gideon, with an ample view of both the alleyway and the front door. Gideon disappeared into the darkness, drawing Jesse forward to join him. Within a few steps, the noises of the city vanished behind them, and Jesse had to reach forward and touch Gideon's back in order to find his way.

When Gideon paused, Jesse did, too. Both waited. Gideon held still, listening or smelling for whatever had given him reason to stop. A sudden gust blew cold air down the back of Jesse's jacket collar. Somewhere in the distance, a door slammed shut, and after several seconds, Gideon began creeping forward again.

The service drive was barely wide enough for a car, let alone a truck. One light mounted high on the back wall of the pub cast a pale yellow circle along the oil-stained track. Nobody was around.

"What weapons do you have on you?" Gideon said, his

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voice barely audible.

“Two guns and a knife.” Technically, weapons weren’t needed for self-defense, and he didn’t intend to kill to anybody, even if they were guilty for harming and kidnapping Jonah. David could make sure that the police arrived and arrest all of the culprits, and they could get Jonah to safety without any harm coming to anybody.

It was an overly optimistic view, but Jesse would rather plan for that instead of some sort of bloodbath.

“I wish we had an idea of what was going on in there,” Jesse murmured.

“If it helps, I don’t smell blood.” Gideon inched forward, closer to the door. “Do you want me to come in with you, or stay out here?”

“You come in and run interference while I get Jonah. And I know you don’t want to hear this, but I would rather teleport us all out and get somewhere safe.”

“You’re right, I don’t want to hear that. What about David?”

“We’ll just have to call him and tell him something magical happened. Or we’ll tell him the truth.” Jesse looked back to the top of the alley. He couldn’t even make out the shape of David’s body. He hated to keep the man in the dark, but he didn’t think anybody would be served by a long explanation of what a Guardian was and what he could do. “And thank him for his time and help.”

“Derek’s going to love cleaning this mess up,” Gideon muttered. He gripped the heavy knob on the delivery door, and



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cast one last glance at Jesse. “Ready?”

Jesse took a deep breath. He had a brief flash of Jonah’s face smashed in, his skull broken, the life force drained from his body. Blood staining his blond hair before flowing across the floor. His stomach revolted at the thought. He wouldn’t destroy everybody, but if Jonah wasn’t alive, he sure as hell wouldn’t stop Gideon.

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

The lock snapped audibly in the alleyway, loud enough to make Jesse wince. Gideon held still, presumably listening for any signs of acknowledgement inside. Each and every second branded Jesse’s skin. One more second gone was one more second Jonah didn’t have. Sometimes, he almost thought it was easier to save people he didn’t know. He didn’t have the constant fear of loss in the back of his throat then.

The door pushed inward, and immediately, the muted sounds of the pub overwhelmed any other. Gideon slipped inside, allowing only enough room for Jesse to follow, and caught the door to hold the broken knob before it swung back into place. Jesse scanned the crowded entryway while Gideon eased the door shut again. The close walls were stacked with pub supplies—dusty glasses, boxes of napkins. A dolly leaned against the shelves. In front of them, a narrow stairwell descended into pitch dark.

“I guess we go down,” Jesse said, the words not more than a breath.

*Be careful, Jess.* More from Emma, but that was what she said in every dream.

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He kept his hand on Gideon's back, relying on Gideon's eyes that were still so much stronger than his. He strained his ears, trying to separate the sounds from above and below them. He had hoped there would be some clear sign of what they were walking into. He would be happy with some chanting.

The stone steps were narrow and well worn. It was impossible to measure just how far they had descended, though he understood on one level that it couldn't have been very deep. They were beneath a pub, not in a church's vault. But it felt deeper. Like they were descending into the underworld. That thought made him think of Jonah's broken body again, and he nudged Gideon, encouraging him to move a bit faster.

When Gideon came to another stop, it was at the bottom of the stairs. Another door separated them from the cellar, but there was enough floorspace in front of it to allow both of them to stand. Room for the dolly to navigate, Jesse thought. Room for them to do a quick recon and decide on their next course of action. Though he hadn't actively entertained the possibility, he knew there was a possibility Jonah wasn't here. This was just following the trail Jonah had left. They had no way of knowing if this was where it ended.

Gideon grasped the back of Jesse's neck and pulled him close enough to rest his mouth at Jesse's ear. "Five humans inside," he murmured. "And this place reeks of Jonah."

Five humans. That wasn't too bad. Unless they were crazy. Crazy people were always stronger than they should be. And

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more inclined to use weapons, if they were armed. And despite what he said to David earlier, cultists did tend to be completely wackadoo.

Gideon tested the knob. They were both surprised to see it turn easily between his fingers. With a shrug, he pushed the door open. Jesse had expected robes and chanting, maybe some smelly smoke and flickering candles. But if anything, it reminded Jesse of a game of poker. Except, the fifth participant was trussed up like a bird, semi-conscious and bleeding.

A chair knocked over in two men's haste to rush them. Gideon vaulted forward first, catching both by the throat and throwing them in the opposite direction. A third man dove in Jonah's direction, while the last whirled to slam his hand over a button on the wall.

Jesse didn't hear anything, but it distinctly felt like the walls were vibrating.

"That can't be good," Gideon commented.

No, it probably wasn't. But Jesse couldn't take the time to worry about the strange vibration. He vaulted across the room and pulled the man from Jonah, tossing him aside like a dog might toss aside a cat. He was mindless of his own strength, and unconcerned when the man slammed against the wall with enough force to snap his head back.

"Jonah? Are you awake?"

Jonah mumbled. But Jesse couldn't tell if it was an actual response.

A gunshot split the air. Jesse instinctively dove to cover

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Jonah's body.

"How can you have such crappy aim in such a small, confined space?" Gideon said behind him. When he glanced back, there was blood soaking through the left sleeve of Gideon's coat. Gideon was ignoring it in favor of snatching the gun out of the other man's hands. A man who couldn't be much older than Jonah himself.

Jesse tested the ropes binding Jonah as the gunman's shout of pain echoed off the stone walls. The knots were surprisingly tight. He didn't have the time or the luxury to work the knots free. He didn't even think he had the time to cut through the ropes. It was best to take Jonah to safety, then worry about the ropes.

"Gideon!"

"Little busy here, Jess!"

Something whistled through the air. This time, the grunt of pain came from a more familiar source. He looked back to see Gideon pulling a long knife out of his shoulder.

Fresh, cold air blew through the airless room. Upstairs, a door slammed. The light that spilled down the stairwell was suddenly blocked off as a body rolled to the bottom. A moment later, David appeared as well.

If one of them had a gun, it stood to reason that the other three might be similarly armed. Jesse didn't want to find out because one of them shot David. Gideon could walk away from a bullet, David wouldn't.

"Hold on, Jonah. We're getting out of here."

David ignored the scuffle in favor of rushing over to

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Jonah's side. "How is he?"

"Don't know yet. Sorry about this, by the way."

He grabbed David's arm, his fingers sinking into the flesh, closed his eyes, and let the world jerk away from them. When he opened his eyes again, they were sitting in the middle of his nice, quiet library, and David was staring at him with nothing less than stupefaction.

"What the fuck just happened?"

"I'll explain in a minute. Untie him but don't leave the room."

"Wait."

"One minute."

David lunged at him just as he disappeared. Explaining this was not going to be fun, but right now, Jesse's priority was Gideon.

In the few seconds he had been gone, more men had spilled down the stairwell. Gideon had vamped out, snarling at any who tried to get near him, but there was a long streak of blood along his leg where somebody else had taken a shot at him, and a cut along his forehead leaking into his eye. His head snapped around the moment Jesse materialized, and he leapt toward him, hooking his arm around Jesse's waist and dragging him out of sight behind some of the kegs.

"Get us out of here," he growled.

"Yes, Sir." He clung to Gideon and another gun blast made his ears ring. His ears were still ringing when his stomach was pulled against his spine, and all of his organs protested the sudden teleportation so soon after the other one.

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They landed in the library, still in a crouch. As soon as everything solidified around them, he realized his hands were slick with Gideon's blood. He also realized that David was still there, working on Jonah's ropes. He looked distinctly unhappy.

"When is someone going to tell me what's going on here?" he snapped.

"When nobody is bleeding all over the floor." Gideon groaned as he straightened. His hand went to his arm, and he winced again as he dug around inside the hole in his coat to pull out a bloody bullet. "I am so glad most people are too dumb to go for head shots."

"Most people aren't good enough aims for a head shot," Jesse corrected. "They probably try." He pulled the coat from Gideon's shoulders and tossed it to the floor. It didn't quite expose the extent of the damage, but it gave Jesse a good idea. "God. You're going to need to need some blood."

"Just what the hell are you two?" David demanded.

Gideon grimaced when Jesse pulled some of his shirt out of the wound. "I suppose 'pissed because I was shot' isn't the answer you're looking for."

"Friends." Jonah's hoarse voice startled all of them. He offered a weak smile up at David as he struggled to get up. "Don't be mad at them."

"Don't stand up," Jesse said, moving to his side. "It won't do any good if you fall and hurt yourself more. How are you feeling?"

"A little drunk, actually." His blue eyes swept around the

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room before returning to Jesse. "If David wasn't here, I'd think I imagined the trip to London. Am I really back in Chicago?"

"You're really back in Chicago. And I promise, the house is safe this time. I think we might need to get you to the hospital, though."

"I'll call Derek," Gideon said. "He can meet us there."

Jonah pushed off David's hand and sat up against Jesse's instructions, weaving dangerously once he was vertical. Both David and Jesse shot a hand out to steady him.

"No hospital," Jonah protested. "I'm fine. I just need some Tylenol and a nap."

David frowned. "They hit you in the head. You could have a concussion. We're taking you to hospital whether you like it or not."

Jesse almost smiled at the commanding tone of David's words. It was the same sort of tone Gideon often took when Jesse didn't want to go to the hospital. "You don't have to stay at the hospital. Once you're checked out and you've seen your uncle, you can come back here."

Mention of Derek paled Jonah even further. "I don't have to see him, do I? You guys can just tell him I'm okay."

"You need to see him. He's really worried about you. He's not going to be mad at you."

"Oh, I believe he's worried. It's what happens five minutes after he sees I'm fine that I'm worried about."

"Then Gideon will kick him out of the room four minutes after he sees you're fine." Jesse looked over to David. "I can

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take you home, if you want.”

David shook his head. “I’m not going anywhere until I make sure Jonah’s all right and I get some answers. The order of which I leave entirely up to you.”

Jesse figured that would be David’s answer. He didn’t blame the other man, either. In the back of his mind, he was already working on the appropriately edited explanation. “Let’s go, then. I’ll explain everything on the way to the hospital.”



## CHAPTER 4

An emergency room in Chicago. He was standing in a hospital room in Chicago, Illinois. America. No matter how many times David repeated that fact to himself, it never took on the quality of reality. It had to be some sort of dream. A bizarre nightmare, brought on by his own anxiety about Jonah's disappearance, combined with cheap curry and too much beer. Unfortunately, that explanation couldn't withstand the information his senses gathered. The steady *beep beep beep* of unseen yet critical machines. The smell of death and antiseptic—a universal smell, it seemed like. He didn't trust his eyes. He knew how easy it was for those to lie. Eyes didn't even need a reason to pass on an untruth. Still, all of the colors

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seemed right, and none of the angles were too sharp or crooked. So he must have been in emergency in Chicago, Illinois, and not sleeping in his own comfortable bed in Chiswick.

Across from him, Jesse Madding and Gideon Keel sat calmly. They had gone directly to those chairs, and David couldn't help but wonder if it was a force of habit. Did they visit the hospital so often, they just found themselves sitting in the same chairs, waiting for the same doctors, time after time? Jesse looked worried, his brow heavy, his mouth pulled into a thoughtful frown. When they had met earlier, David thought he seemed like a normal enough chap. A fairly attractive one, at that. Somebody he might have flirted with under different circumstances. Gideon, however, mostly looked bored. Occasionally, his nostrils would flare and it would strike David like a blow to the head: *I am sitting across from a vampire. That's a bloody vampire.*

A hospital, in Chicago, with a vampire, and a guy who could...what was it that Jesse had said? Manipulate the fabric of dimensions? How did that even make sense? It didn't. The words were meaningless. As far as explanations went, it was pure gobbledygook. Rank nonsense. But David knew what he had felt. Like his intestines were going to be pulled up through his mouth, and his stomach was the last thing to join him in Chicago. In other words, he had *moved*. It wasn't like he closed his eyes and then woke up in a new city. It wasn't painless. It wasn't comfortable. Did Jesse do that often? If so, how could he stand it?

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In the car, Jonah had seemed perfectly fine with Jesse's explanation. He hadn't asked any questions, or thrown out an *are you shitting me?* To be fair, though, it was difficult to tell the difference between ready acceptance and serious concussion. It might have been that Jonah hadn't even heard Jesse, or couldn't quite comprehend what was being said to him.

"Where's Derek?"

Jesse didn't seem to be addressing anybody in particular, but Gideon—the vampire—answered, "He'll be here in a few minutes."

"Was he working?"

"No. I think he was at home." Gideon paused before adding curtly, "With Carly."

"Oh. She's probably going to be here, too, then."

"Who's Carly?" David wasn't convinced he wanted to know the answer. "She's not a witch or a goblin or something, is she?"

"No, she's just a regular girl," Jesse said mildly.

Gideon snorted.

"Don't start with her."

"I'm not going to say anything."

"It's okay. She's at home anyway."

The statement came from a tall, gray-haired man standing in the doorway, looking decidedly the worse for wear. His long coat was damp from snow, and shadows under his eyes heightened the planes of his face. At second glance, David realized the man was younger than he had first thought. The

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hair was deceptive. The relief when his gaze landed on Jonah's sleeping form was not. This had to be Derek.

"Is he unconscious? Or is he sleeping?" He turned to Jesse, still not acknowledging David's presence, though whether that was because he was too focused on Jonah or for some malicious reason, David didn't know. "What have the doctors said?"

"He's resting right now." Jesse stood. "He has a slight concussion, but it's nothing serious. He had to have four stitches on the back of his head. He's a bit dehydrated, but we got to him before it reached a critical stage. Now sit down before you fall down."

But Derek ignored the directive. "I still don't understand what went on, though. If it wasn't something demonic who snatched Jonah, why bother with him? He's harmless. And it can't be for ransom. You saw his apartment."

"I think he stole something from them." Jesse nodded at David. "He might have a better idea of what."

Derek finally turned back to face him, and his eyes immediately widened in recognition. "David. I'm sorry. I didn't...my head's all over the place right now."

"It's okay. It's not like you expected to see me here in Chicago." David frowned. "Why would you recognize me?"

"Gideon told me you were here when he called. Does this have something to do with the book Jonah was looking for?"

"I don't know. He told me that was why he was in London, but he never specifically said he was looking for it when he was arrested. And I didn't see any book in the cellar. Did

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you?”

Jesse shook his head. “No, there was no book in there. But I’d say it definitely has something to do with what he’s been researching for the past few months.” There was no mistaking the apology in his tone. “We haven’t had the chance to get the full story yet.”

“Don’t worry,” Derek said grimly. “I’ll get it. Right after I lock him in his room for the next decade for worrying us like this.”

“Now just wait a minute,” David protested, without thought.

“I assured him that if he let us take him to the hospital, you wouldn’t overreact,” Jesse said.

“How is making sure he doesn’t get into trouble again, overreacting?”

“I dunno,” Gideon commented from his chair. “Aren’t cuffs Jonah’s idea of foreplay anyway?”

It was more than a little inappropriate, but David’s groin tightened at the mention of cuffs, Jonah, and foreplay in the same breath. Derek, on the other hand, blanched at Gideon’s words.

“He’s an adult,” Jesse said quickly, doing a good job of keeping his smile in check. “You don’t need to lock him up to keep him out of trouble.”

“He’s going to need someone responsible keeping an eye on him while we get this sorted out, though.” Derek’s gaze settled on David, and he tried to smile in spite of his discomfort. “I don’t suppose your services include watching

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out for wayward clients with more curiosity than what's good for them?"

"I...I don't think I'm licensed for that sort of thing here in the States." As soon as he spoke, he remembered the real reason he couldn't watch out for this particular wayward client. "And I've got to get back to London."

"I sort of had to whisk him away without warning," Jesse added.

When Derek's brows shot up, Gideon added, "We kind of didn't have a choice once the gunfire started."

Derek looked between the two men for several seconds before turning back to David. "My sincerest apologies. I did not mean for you to get mixed up in all this. I just hoped you could give Jesse and Gideon some information they could use to find Jonah."

"To be fair, I got myself mixed up in all this. I just couldn't..." He couldn't stand the thought of Jonah getting hurt. "Couldn't stand by and do nothing. I wanted to help in any way I could."

"The information he gave us did lead right to Jonah."

"Well, thank you again, then. Make sure you send me the bill to pay for all your time. Though I know there's really no way I can reimburse you for all the surprises tonight."

The thought of accepting payment for the events of the night was vaguely distasteful. He hadn't helped because he wanted a few bucks. He helped because Jonah had needed him. And all the strange shit that happened to him couldn't make him regret his decision.

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“Don’t worry about it. I’m not counting any of this as billable hours.”

“Can I go home yet?” Jonah asked from the bed.

All eyes turned to him. Even Gideon rose from his chair in order to get a better vantage. The bruising along the side of Jonah’s face stood out even more starkly with his eyes open, but seeing the familiar smile on his mouth was worth it.

“That depends.” Derek folded his arms over his chest. “You ready to face your mom’s inquisition?”

Jonah’s face screwed up in dismay. “God, no. She’s going to go into hyperactive protective mode enough as it is. At least don’t make me face her until I look normal again.”

“You don’t look that bad,” Gideon said. “And hey, at least you didn’t get shot. Twice.”

“You got shot?” Jonah’s blue eyes zeroed in on Jesse. “You weren’t hurt, were you?”

Jesse smiled. “No. I’m fine.”

“Did I already ask you that?”

“Yes,” David said gruffly.

“So does that mean I’m stuck in here for a while?”

“It would keep you out of trouble,” Derek shot back.

“I didn’t ask to be kidnapped. Or hit over the head. Or tied up.”

Gideon opened his mouth to comment. Derek immediately jabbed a warning finger in his direction.

“Don’t say it.”

“You’re not stuck here,” Jesse assured Jonah, ignoring the sniping behind him. “The doctor would like you to stay here

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for the night, but that's up to you."

"Good." He pushed the blanket back and started to sit up. "Then I'm out of here."

"Wait," David said quickly. "Wait, you can't just get up and walk out of here. You've been really hurt and tied up for three days. I know what the doctor said, but I think it would be best if you stayed here for at least a night."

Jonah collapsed back onto the pillow. "Like you said. I've been cooped up for three days. I just need a real bed and a good night's sleep."

"That is a real bed," Derek said.

"And don't forget all the nice drugs they have here to help with that good night's sleep," Gideon offered.

Jonah turned pleading eyes to Jesse. "You understand, don't you?"

"You don't have to stay here," Jesse promised him. There was a certain finality to the statement, like Derek, Gideon, and David could continue to argue about it all they want, but the matter was settled. "But you shouldn't be alone, either. Not until you're better."

"He'll stay with me."

At Derek's announcement, Jonah shook his head, and then winced. "Your place was small before Carly moved in. There's no way it'll handle all three of us."

"You can stay with us," Jesse said with the same finality. "Even with Dominique and Michelle in the house, we've got about a hundred spare rooms."

"I'll stay, too," David volunteered. "I mean, for the night."



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To help keep an eye on you.”

Gideon chuckled. “Looks like I’m not the only one who can’t stand the teleporting.”

“I like that plan,” Derek said. “Tomorrow’s my day off, so I can come by in the morning and you can tell me exactly what’s going on.”

“Jesse, too.” Jonah’s gaze slid back to him. David couldn’t help but wonder if there was more there than met the eye. “You’re going to want to know about what I’ve found out, I’m sure.”

“Yes, you’re going to give me a full report. Including just what, exactly, you thought you were doing, and why you didn’t bother to tell me what was going on.”

David stiffened at the words, and he wanted to intercede to tell Jesse to back off. Jonah had been through enough without being scolded like a child, but Jonah’s good-natured smile remained in place.

“Yes, sir,” he said, with a crisp bite to each word. “And you’re not going to believe some of the stuff I found out. Just the grimoire—”

“Tomorrow.” Gideon cut him off cleanly. “You two are not going to start talking books. Nobody will get any sleep tonight then.”

After that, things happened very fast. David found himself alone in the room with Jonah as Jesse and Derek went to talk to the doctor—David suspected Jesse was really just giving Derek a rundown on what happened—and Gideon went to bring the car around. Finding himself alone with Jonah was

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not at all a bad thing, except that the younger man seemed more interested in getting dressed than he was in talking to David.

“Can I help?”

Jonah shook his head. “No, I’ve got it. But thanks. You know, for everything else you’ve done.”

David smiled. “It was my pleasure.” He would have added more, except Derek returned, with Jesse on his heels, and a nurse following both of them. Everybody swirled around him as prescriptions and last minute instructions were handed out, as Derek grilled Jonah again, and as Jesse tried to keep everybody focused on the task at hand, which was getting Jonah home.

The ride back from the hospital was mostly silent. Jonah sat in the backseat with David and dozed with his head against the window. When he began to stir, David gently tugged on his arm and pulled him over until he was resting his head on his shoulder. He watched the men in the front of the car, and occasionally, like when they were at a red light, Jesse would reach over and touch Gideon in casual—yet very pointed—ways.

Several lights burned in the house when they returned. Hadn’t Jesse mentioned that there were people living with them? What were their names?

“Oh, hell. Do you want to take these two in through the back and I’ll run interference with Dominique and Michelle?” Jesse suggested.

“Best offer I’ve heard all day.”

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Gideon hit a button on the dash, opening the door on a three-car garage looming in front of them. A Miata was parked in one of the other spaces, sleek and shiny. Gideon's, most likely, since he hadn't even protested when Jesse had slid into the driver's seat of the Jeep at the hospital.

As Jesse killed the engine, Jonah stirred again. His long lashes lifted, and he blinked several times before realizing he was leaning against David's arm. With an embarrassed smile, he sat up and slid a few inches away.

"Sorry about that. I get gropey when I sleep."

"I don't mind. You didn't look very comfortable smashed up against the window like that."

"I'll take you two in through the kitchen," Gideon said. "There's a back staircase that leads up to what used to be servants' quarters. The rooms aren't as big as they are in the rest of the house, but it's got its own bathroom, and you'll have privacy there."

It was difficult to appreciate just how large the house was when he was inside of it, and he hadn't even paid attention when they were driving away, but now the sheer size left David a bit staggered. What one earth did they need such a home for? And was it technically a home? It looked to David more like a boarding school.

As soon as they stepped into the kitchen, he heard a girl's voice carrying from a nearby room. She could have been excited or angry. It was difficult to tell. But the voice was definitely much younger than he had expected. Did they have a child living with them?

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“Are you going to be able to make it up these stairs?” David asked as Jonah began to ascend the narrow staircase.

“I’m good.” He kept one hand on the wall, one on the railing. David tried not to let his gaze stray to the man’s tight ass, but it was next to impossible when it was practically in his face. “These are better than the stairs at the front, anyway. Those are too wide to keep myself balanced right.”

“Oh. Good.” Still, he braced himself to catch Jonah, just in case the stairs were too steep. He would have been much happier if they all would have seen reason and made Jonah stay in the hospital. Why did Jesse have the power to override Jonah’s uncle and Jonah’s own best interests?

The bedrooms Gideon led them to were quite small, but not unbearably so. In fact, David thought his was perfectly cozy and a good countering agent to the overwhelming sprawl of the building itself. They were also clean, which made David wonder if they regularly had homeless guests.

“Bathroom, spare blankets and towels, intercom,” Gideon said, pointing to each in turn. “I can’t guarantee the intercom works, but give it a shot if you want to find me or Jess. We only used it once, and then we got some kind of weird psychic charge through the electrics in the house that fried half the wiring.” At David’s frown, he held up a hand. “Don’t ask. Let’s just say, dealing with the supernatural in this town isn’t always about the bloodshed.”

“Is Jesse going to come up when he’s done with Michelle?” Jonah asked.

Gideon cocked his head. “I wasn’t going to let you two

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talk books at the hospital. You really think I'm going to let you do it here instead when you're supposed to be resting?" He looked at David. "Make sure he sleeps. We'll see you in the morning."

David snorted as soon as Gideon was gone. "I guess I can make sure you sleep, because I'm sure as hell not going to be able to."

Jonah sat down on the edge of the bed, though slumped might have been a better word for it. "It's not so bad here. Jesse and Gideon are good people."

"It's not Jesse and Gideon. It's the fact that just two hours ago, I was standing in England." And just three hours ago, Jonah had been missing and possibly dead. "I guess you know those two pretty well?"

"Well enough. Gideon's been friends with my Uncle Derek since he was younger than me. And I got to meet Jesse when they moved into this place."

"How long ago was that?"

Jonah cocked his head to consider it. "Two years? Something like that. Their last apartment got burned down, so Emma and Jesse talked Gideon into buying this place." He grinned. "Isn't it fantastic? I love this house. All this history. Jesse's going to go nuts tomorrow when he finds out what I learned."

"Who's Emma?" Another woman's name. That along with the mysterious Michelle and Dominique made him wonder if they just collected women.

Some of the light in Jonah's face faded. "She was...well, it

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was the three of them. Together. Gideon, Jesse, and Emma. What they had...the rest of us should be so lucky.”

“What happened to her?”

“She and Jesse got attacked last summer. Jesse almost died, and then, well, I still don’t know exactly what happened, but he disappeared and Gideon went a little crazy looking for him, and then when they came home, he was fine again. I don’t know the details, because Derek never tells me any of the good stuff, but I guess it’s all about that whole Guardian stuff he was explaining in the car.”

“All this shit is a little too weird for me. I know they’re your friends, and they seem to be good guys, but why would you even want to be around all of this?”

“You don’t think it’s exciting?”

“Which part do you think is exciting? Getting kidnapped and nearly killed? Or being near Jesse and Gideon?”

His blunt query brought a flush to Jonah’s cheeks, and the young man bent his knee to get to work on removing his shoes. “What’s so funny is that Jesse’s right. I probably wouldn’t have been hurt at all if I’d just told him what I was doing. I’ve just always been a little jealous of what Jesse has, that’s all. Maybe not now, not with not knowing where Emma is, and having Michelle and Dominique living here, but, well, probably everything else.”

“What are you jealous of?” David’s eyes widened. “Gideon? Do you want to be with a vampire?”

“Oh, no,” Jonah was quick to say. “I mean, Gideon’s hot, but Jesse’s definitely better looking. It’s just all the other

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stuff..." His voice trailed off, his color rising even further. "I probably shouldn't say anything. Jesse's pretty open, but the only reason he even let me see their playroom was because I practically begged him."

It all made a weird sort of sense. Gideon had already dropped a hint that Jonah was a sub—that fact had been dwelling in the back of his mind, waiting for the moment when David could spend more time with it. Gideon being a dom—Jesse's Master—was probably the least surprising bit of news he had heard all night.

"So, you want Gideon to dominate you?"

"Gideon?" Jonah half shrugged and tossed his shoes aside. "That wouldn't be bad, but if I had a choice, I'd pick Jesse any day of the week."

"This...might be getting into information I probably don't need to know territory. Do you need anything from downstairs before you go to sleep? A glass of water or anything?"

"No, I'm good." He laid back on the bed, wincing slightly when his head hit the pillow. "I'm sorry if I embarrassed you."

David paused, then took a step back toward the bed. "No, no, it's nothing like that. I just didn't...I didn't want you to think that I'm trying to pry into your life."

When Jonah smiled, the room was automatically brighter. He just had that way about him. David had noticed it the first time they'd met. "In case it hasn't been obvious, my life is kind of all out there for anybody to see if they want. I'm not ashamed of who I am, or what I like. There isn't anything you could ask me that I wouldn't answer. So don't worry about it,

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okay?”

“Okay, I won’t. But you should get some sleep. If you don’t, I’ll be held accountable. And I don’t really want to have to answer to an angry vampire. Or an angry Guardian, I suppose.”

“No, they can be pretty ruthless when they feel like they have to be.” When David started to turn away again, Jonah leaned forward. “If it makes you too uncomfortable around this place, you can always crash in here if you want.”

David wasn’t sure if Jonah was offering for David’s sake or for his own. Ultimately, it didn’t matter. In Jonah’s shoes, he wouldn’t want to spend the night alone. And he wasn’t looking forward to a dark, empty room, given his own circumstances. “Thanks. I think I will. Though I’ve been told that I snore.”

That beaming smile again. He didn’t think he’d ever get tired of seeing it. “I’ll put my head under my pillow. We’ll be just fine.”

David grabbed a pillow from the bed and peeled off the top blanket. “I’ll take the floor. You don’t need me jostling you around.”

“I’m the gropey one, remember?”

“You’re also the one with the head injury.”

David toed off his shoes and stripped down to his boxers. What he really wanted was a hot shower and a cold drink. And a thick mattress. He supposed he could have all three of those things, but exhaustion defeated those other desires. Still, he kept himself awake until he heard Jonah’s deep, steady breaths.



## CHAPTER 5

*I don't know where the red light is coming from.*

*Is it a sun?*

*I don't know, Jess.*

*But you see it, right? Emma?*

*"Hello! Earth to Jesse!"*

Jesse blinked, snapping out of his memory. Or daydream. Or whatever the hell it was. He wasn't the least bit surprised when Dominique met him in the hallway, bubbling over with questions. She had the tendency to do that any time he was gone for more than a few hours. Instead of explaining everything to her right there, he herded her into the parlor, where Michelle was reading while the television droned

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quietly.

“Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“No. I’m not tired.”

They hadn’t planned it that way, but Dominique and Michelle had more or less taken over certain rooms in the house. They had three rooms upstairs—two bedrooms and another one that Michelle had converted into her own private library—then the parlor and the kitchen. Once Dominique established boundaries around herself, she was quite happy to keep them. Jesse thought she mainly just liked the consistency. No matter what she did at school, no matter where she went, no matter what happened to her, she could come back to a house that felt like hers. Jesse was proud, and happy, that he could give that much to her. Even if, at other times, he felt like some sort of deadbeat dad because he was pretty awful at learning how to make time for her.

“We have a couple of guests,” Jesse announced. “I don’t know how long they’re staying. Gideon is going to put them in the rooms above the kitchen.”

“Who are they?” Dominique asked immediately.

“Derek’s nephew, Jonah.”

“Who’s that?”

“You never met him. But he’s a nice kid. And...” Jesse braced himself. “David.”

Dominique’s eyes widened. “David Brighton? He’s here in this house?”

“Yes, but not the David you know.” He blocked the door, and her escape. “And he needs his rest, so you’re going to

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leave him alone tonight.”

“What’s he doing here, Jess?”

Michelle looked up from her book, her eyes alert, but her face still pallid and drawn. Her injuries were healing, and she insisted on going to the book store every day to work, but the process was slow. The blow that had nearly crippled her would have killed Jesse without question. Every time he saw her, he felt a pang of regret for how angry he had been at her—how much he had hated her—when he learned that she had made him a Guardian without so much as a warning.

“It’s a bit of a long story. Jonah...well, it’s a long story. I’ll tell you tomorrow, sometime.”

“Is he going to stay for awhile?” From Dominique.

“He might insist I take him from this mad house first thing in the morning. Or he might stick around to make sure Jonah is okay.”

“Is he okay?” Michelle asked.

“They’re both going to be fine.”

“You have to let me see him before he goes,” Dominique said.

“I mean it. Let him rest. I’ll ask Gideon to make breakfast for everybody tomorrow morning. You can see him then.”

Dominique beamed at him.

“Just remember that he’s not the same David you know.”

“Whatever.” She tossed her hair over her shoulder and went back to her usual seat on the couch. “He still looks the same.”

Jesse sighed and looked over to Michelle. “Do you need

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anything?”

“No, we’re good. Aren’t we, Dominique?”

Dominique reached for the bag of chips on the coffee table and shoved a handful into her mouth. “We’re great.”

Jesse couldn’t help but smile, his exasperation forgotten. Seeing the change in their relationship always made him happy. They weren’t exactly a mother and daughter team, but they were much closer than they had been before. Of course, Michelle made Dominique feel useful—the girl had declared herself Michelle’s personal nurse as she healed from Foster’s attack.

Satisfied that David, at least, would be left in peace, he wished them both goodnight, and left the room. His stomach rumbled and he turned toward the kitchen. Gideon was waiting for him there, arms folded across the chest as he leaned against the counter. The look on Gideon’s face was enough to tell Jesse that the vampire wasn’t going to offer to make him a late dinner.

“Jonah’s settled,” he said before Jesse could ask. “And David’s promised to keep an eye on him for the night. Which means you are now going to go downstairs so we can have a talk about all your behavior today.”

“My behavior today?”

Gideon frowned. “Did you just question a direct order, boy? I said, go downstairs.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The command in Gideon’s voice was enough to make Jesse hard. It was also enough to make him turn around and

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head toward the basement stairs. He couldn't hear Gideon behind him, but he knew that his lover was there just the same. Moving like a predator as he followed Jesse down the long flight of stairs that led to their playroom. Soundproof and with a heavy lock, Gideon could do anything he wanted to Jesse behind that door, and nobody in the house would be the wiser.

The playroom had been one of the first fully functional rooms in the house when they had fixed everything up. Hooks were embedded in one wall when Gideon didn't want to bother with an apparatus, as well as the ceiling when he craved a suspended partner. There were the matching cages Jesse and Emma had been proud to own along one wall, with long cupboards that housed every whip, flogger, weight, and clamp in their possession. Anything they might want was in that room. Jesse's heart thumped with excitement at what might tickle Gideon's fancy tonight.

Goose bumps erupted along his skin as they stepped inside. Gideon kept the temperature lower in here on purpose. The contrast when they started heating up made it more than worth it. Especially when Gideon issued his most common command in the playroom.

“Strip.”

He knew Gideon was already annoyed with him. Annoyed enough that it would be in Jesse's best interest to follow the order immediately and undress as quickly as he could. The weight of Gideon's gaze pressed heavily against his skin, taking in every small detail as Jesse slowly unbuttoned his shirt, beginning with the cuffs. He kept his own eyes averted,

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though, not giving into the impulse to watch Gideon's face as he exposed an inch of his skin at a time.

"Did it make you hard, flirting with them in front of me?" The low, hard question came without inflection, without a hint of the menace Jesse knew Gideon kept tightly contained.

The protest rose to the surface before Jesse had the chance to think. "I didn't flirt, Sir."

A soft snort preceded Gideon's appearance in the corner of his eye. "You would've been on your knees if David had showed you the slightest sign of wanting you there. And you've always deliberately baited Jonah because you like how much he wants you. So don't tell me you weren't flirting. I was there."

Jesse stepped out of his pants and began to wonder if this was serious. Or at least, more serious than he had initially thought. It wasn't that they hadn't discussed how hot David was before—they had. And Gideon had always been fully aware of Jonah's obvious desire for Jesse. But there was one thing that Jesse had let himself forget—rather foolishly, perhaps. Gideon had a wicked possessive streak.

"Yes, Sir. I...flirted a little bit, Sir."

Gideon ignored his nudity now, choosing instead to go over to the wardrobe and open the door. His gaze flickered over its contents. When he reached in, he re-emerged with black leather restraints that Jesse didn't immediately recognize.

"So not only did I get cheated when Derek called, I had to spend the rest of the day and night watching you salivate over

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two other men. Men who were not me.”

“I’m sorry, Sir. It won’t happen again. I promise.”

“Because you won’t drop everything to help a friend who needs it? Because you’ll be able to hold your tongue when a gorgeous guy like David smiles at you?” Gideon stopped in front of him. Jesse recognized the leather now. They would fully immobilize his arms. “You’re a slut for that kind of attention, and we both know it. So don’t lie to me and make promises you can’t keep. I’ll tie you up and leave you in here to think about it, if that’s the kind of game you’re going to play.”

“Please, Sir, don’t.” Gideon was close enough that one of the cuffs brushed against Jesse’s thigh. The feel of the cool leather was enough to make his cock twitch. But the thought of being completely immobile, helpless, made him hard. “What can I do, Sir?”

“Anything I want.” He grasped Jesse’s wrist in order to slide his arm into the first of the restraints. “But first I’m going to remind you who it is who owns you, boy.”

The sleeve stopped just above the elbow, at the biceps. It covered his entire hand, like a mitten, rendering his fingers completely useless. It wasn’t quite tight enough to be uncomfortable, but it didn’t exactly feel pleasant, either. That only meant Gideon could pull the laces tighter, if he wanted. A series of metal eyelets along the sleeve were the perfect size for a padlock. Ultimately, the restraints were nothing more than a leather straitjacket.

“I...I know who owns me, Sir.”

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“Do you?” He swiftly encased the other arm, but rather than folding them across Jesse’s front, he slid body straps onto his shoulders, cinching the leather around his neck into a makeshift collar as well. Circling behind him, Gideon forced Jesse’s arms straight, his back bowed slightly from the force as he hooked the two leather sleeves together. “Then you know it’s my place to punish you for putting me through this today.”

His shoulders quickly began to burn from the pressure put on his arms. His chest was forced forward, and his fingers tingled. Despite the cool air blowing through the room, sweat rolled down his spine, tickling the taut skin.

“Yes, Sir. I know I deserve it.”

His head snapped back. Gideon must have grabbed the ring on the back of the collar. The snick of metal meeting metal slithered along his nerve endings.

“Why do you do it?” The sudden proximity of Gideon’s mouth at his ear almost made him moan. Even if he could have moved away, he wouldn’t. “Do you deliberately want to provoke me? Are you hoping I’ll share you?”

There wasn’t a good answer to that question. If he lied at this point, Gideon would know. The lie would do nothing more than earn a punishment. He didn’t think the truth would spare him, though.

“No, Sir, of course not.”

“But you want me to.” He reached around Jesse’s body, but didn’t grab his cock. Instead, he grabbed Jesse’s balls and squeezed. “That’s why you’re hard. You’d like nothing more



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than to spit yourself on our cocks.”

“No, Sir. I don’t want anybody else’s cock.” It was more difficult to speak as Gideon’s strong fingers tightened on his sac. Heat raced up his thighs and pooled in his stomach. His ass clenched.

“Maybe his ass then. Or Jonah’s. God knows that brat would bend over for you without having to be told.” He licked down the side of Jesse’s neck, stopping at the shoulder to suck hard. His fangs stung where they scraped over Jesse’s skin.

“He’s not a brat, Sir.”

He almost stumbled from how quickly Gideon released him. Gideon stood in front of him, golden eyes flashing, and started to undress. “And there you go defending him again. Running to his aid. Letting him have his way when we both know he should’ve stayed in the hospital for at least one night.”

Gideon peeled off his shirt and tossed it aside, but Jesse only got a glimpse of his sculpted chest, the one he could feast off for hours if Gideon let him, before Gideon turned his back on him and strode over to the cupboard on the wall. He was only gone a moment. When he returned, he held a steel cock ring in his hand he saved only for the harshest punishments. And a padlock.

Jesse couldn’t even speak to defend himself. He might have tried to justify himself, or explain Jonah, or even just apologize. But the sight of the cock ring silenced him. There were four rows of steel teeth protruding from the ring, and he knew from experience that they were sharp enough to make

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him bleed. The padlock would hold it in place. He would not have a single second of relief.

“Sir...I’m sorry. I am.”

“Not yet.” He grasped Jesse’s cock to hold it still. “But you will be.”

Gideon snapped the ring into place. The short spikes lining the steel interior dug into the base of his shaft, and the first fat drop of blood oozed out from the metal to roll onto his sac. Without looking away from Jesse’s eyes, he slipped the padlock into place.

Jesse almost protested. Almost said *Gideon*, but that wasn’t an option. If he tried to beg for mercy now, if he even indicated he wasn’t going to be receptive to his punishment, he might make Gideon truly angry. And besides that, he was receptive to his punishment—he knew he deserved it.

“Yes, Sir.”

A ghost of a smile shadowed Gideon’s mouth. “It must be nice where you are. Having everybody want you. Me. Jonah. Even David did before he got freaked out about the supernatural thing.” His hand slipped between Jesse’s thighs, unerringly finding and catching the blood on his fingertip. He brought it back up and smeared it along Jesse’s bottom lip. “But you’ll always be mine, boy. And I’ll prove it to all of them if you force my hand.” With that, he bent his head and sealed their mouths together.

The kiss was as hard as Gideon’s tone, but Jesse responded eagerly as Gideon’s tongue plunged into his mouth. The tips of his fangs made small, bleeding cuts on Jesse’s lips and his

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tongue, but he barely tasted his own blood. His pulse throbbed in his throat with each sliver of pain, and though he knew it couldn't last, he didn't want to lose the pressure of Gideon's mouth.

He whimpered at the loss when Gideon stepped back, though he had known it was going to come. Gideon left him there, and Jesse had to concentrate on maintaining his balance while watching Gideon strip down the rest of the way.

"You know what I realized the other day?" Gideon walked back to the open cupboard, scanning through its contents. He selected a whip, cracking it once through the air, but replaced it to resume his search. "I coddle you."

"Coddle, Sir?"

"You heard me." The muscles in his back flexed as he reached high and pulled out a many-tailed flogger. Its leather strands were shorter than many of its counterparts; Gideon usually used it on smaller areas of Jesse's body. "You're a Guardian now. You can take a lot more than I've been giving."

Jesse tensed. He couldn't disagree that, by that definition, Gideon had been coddling him. Jesse had never been inclined to complain about it. Becoming a Guardian didn't make a whip sting less, even if it took more force to split his skin open and the wounds healed faster. But now he could take more without causing any permanent damage. How far did Gideon want to take this? He supposed that question could be answered by how much Gideon wanted him to remember this punishment.

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Gideon's erection bobbed in front of him as he sauntered back to Jesse. His wrist rotated, the flogger's strands caressing the side of his leg, and Jesse wasn't sure which sight to focus on. Both made his body react, albeit in different ways. In spite of the sticky drop of blood from the cock ring, his arousal throbbed for more of Gideon's attention, while every inch of his skin heated in anticipation of the pain to come.

When he stopped a couple feet away, Gideon didn't lash out with the flogger. Instead, he reached and caressed the scars lining Jesse's stomach, scars Jesse loathed for more reasons than how they looked.

"These, for instance. I never punish you where I think it'll make you remember."

"Are you..." Another slow caress momentarily stilled Jesse's question. He didn't want to think about where those scars came from, or why they were there. He had learned to live with them. He had learned not to hate the sight of his own body and not to flinch if Gideon, or Emma, ever touched him on his stomach or chest. "Sir...may I ask why you want to?"

"I don't." He dropped his hand and adjusted his angle. "But I've realized...if I don't treat every inch of your body the same, that's not really helping anything, now is it?" The flogger made a soft humming sound through the air as he swung his arm.

It had been years since he had received the scars, but as far as Jesse could remember, this was the first time Gideon had targeted his front, specifically. The first time he had heard the resounding slap of leather against his twisted skin. Hot,

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unfamiliar pain exploded through his torso, and he cried out. A second quick hit brought another cry to Jesse's lips, and his legs wavered. He wanted to sink to his knees.

"This hurts?" Gideon clicked his tongue in reproof and swung again. The strands cut perpendicular across his first stroke, leaving behind a thin trail of red that caught the edge of Jesse's nipple. "I've definitely been negligent then. We need to build your tolerance."

Jesse was almost certain that had nothing to do with his tolerance. The short strands of the whip felt like knives where they landed, and Gideon wasn't keeping his strength in check. He didn't need to. "No, Sir, you're not negligent with me."

Two more lashes had the blood flowing freely now, the flogger sticking slightly to his skin as the leather dragged across the viscous fluid. Gideon's nostrils flared, his gaze fixed on the rivulets, and once, his tongue swiped over his lower lip.

Jesse healed quickly, unless injured by a rare hurlbat like Michelle had been, but Gideon didn't give him a chance to do so. As soon as his skin began to stitch close, Gideon targeted that spot again. As a result, blood flowed without interruption, the rivulets meeting and joining, changing course, going over his stomach and dripping down to the cock ring. Jesse tried to bite back his shouts, but it was just too hard. And he felt better when he could release the surprise and pain through a scream.

His legs trembled, threatening to give way, when Gideon dropped his arm. Every inch of him was on fire, blood and sweat mingling to sting as it seeped into the open cuts. He

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didn't know how much longer he could stand. His spine felt like it was being torn out of his body through his chest, and his shoulders ached with a pain he knew he would feel all night long. Seeing Gideon sink to his knees came through a red haze, and he groaned in anticipation when Gideon grasped Jesse's cock.

"You don't honestly think I'm going to give you relief, do you?" Gideon jerked the shaft upward and flattened it against Jesse's stomach, forcing the teeth of the ring to dig into the base. "This is about what I want." He bent his head and sucked Jesse's balls past his fangs.

At first, Jesse only felt Gideon's tongue. He was gathering up the traces of blood that made it as far as his sac. The touch was almost gentle. Jesse looked down on Gideon's dark head—each strand of hair familiar. Jesse wished he could run his fingers through it. Instead, he just settled on tracing every inch of Gideon's head and shoulders with his gaze.

That only lasted until Gideon scraped his fang across the loose skin. It sliced across the folds, until blood flowed freely into Gideon's mouth. Jesse tried to stop himself, but the whimper escaped, sounding impossibly loud in the otherwise quiet room.

A moan echoed it. Not his. Gideon's.

His steel grip curled around Jesse's length. Without abandoning Jesse's balls, Gideon began to stroke him, sliding all the way to the head, then reversing direction to go down as far as he could. The side of his hand pushed into the cock ring for interminable seconds, but the contact was brief, the sharp

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pains momentary as Gideon moved back up the length again.

Jesse's cock was slick with blood and pre-come, and each time Gideon's hand reached the crown, he shuddered, which only tightened the muscles in his shoulders and back. He thought—even hoped—that Gideon would lose interest in his shaft. But he didn't stop. His tempo didn't even shift. The slow strokes made Jesse weak. Weaker than the blows from the whip ever could. Combined with the warmth of Gideon's mouth—warmth he had stolen from Jesse's blood—he knew he was going to lose his control sooner rather than later.

He just hoped that when he finally did, it was with Gideon's permission.

Gideon licked a path along the groove of his thigh to lap at the blood collecting behind the cock ring. The probe of his tongue was almost delicate, tender in ways Gideon could never hide no matter how stern his punishments were. When his hand was at the dripping tip, he raked his fangs along the tight skin of the shaft, licking the fresh blood away almost immediately.

"I think we should take some of this pressure off for a bit." He sat back on his heels and gazed up, eyes heated, mouth bloody. "Shoot on me, boy. Let me hear how good it feels."

The direct order was enough to make his balls tighten. He throbbed around the cock ring, flesh pounding, blood thrumming through his veins. And Gideon's words echoed through him. He curled his fingers inside the leather mittens, and his chest expanded with a deep breath. All of that happened almost instantly. He exploded without further

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prompting, come shooting from him exactly as Gideon had demanded. It felt good, but it wasn't any sort of relief, and his cock did not soften as each white string landed on Gideon's chest.

Gideon kept his grip firm. It helped. More than Gideon probably realized, or maybe he did it because he knew that Jesse needed the aid to keep standing. As long as Gideon was there, he could maintain his stance, hold the burn off, keep his legs from failing him. But when Gideon smoothed a hand up his body, over the already healing cuts, smearing the blood over the scarred skin, Jesse yielded to the firm pull with gratitude. He sank to his knees, gulping for air.

"Nobody takes it like my boy," Gideon murmured. He cupped the back of Jesse's head and pulled him closer. "You may clean me off."

"Thank you, Sir." Well accustomed to the taste of his own come, he wasn't surprised by the salty sting against his tongue. He wanted to wrap his arms around Gideon and hold him as he laved his tongue over the taut skin. He chased every drop of come as it rolled down Gideon's chest, even trying to reach his stomach, though his angle made that awkward. Gideon kept his hand buried in Jesse's hair as he cleaned him, and the pressure of his palm against Jesse's skull was almost as satisfying as his task.

That same hold pulled Jesse straight again until their gazes were level. Without speaking, Gideon leaned in and sealed their mouths together, his tongue sweeping past Jesse's lips to taste what lingered within. When Jesse whimpered and tried to



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deepen the caress, Gideon slowed him down, pulling harder on his hair to make his point. Jess conceded. Gideon wanted to savor him. Far be it for him to deny Gideon.

“Who do you want?” Gideon murmured when they parted.

“You, Sir,” Jesse answered immediately. “I only want you.”

“Remember that.” He licked away a drop of come that had smeared across Jesse’s chin. His hand loosened, but didn’t leave, Jesse’s hair, as he stood up. “Open up. You’re going to swallow my cock until I’ve decided what your next punishment will be.”

Jesse dropped his jaw without further coaxing. He leaned forward to catch Gideon’s erection as it bobbed in front of his face. After only a few seconds, he closed his mouth around the hard flesh. He moaned, but it was cut off by Gideon slamming his hips forward, driving his length down Jesse’s throat. He adjusted immediately, relaxing his muscles so he could accommodate every inch of Gideon’s heavy cock.

Gideon didn’t move. He forced Jesse to keep his nose buried in the short dark hair at the base, breathing in his scent with each shallow inhalation. His free hand caressed the side of Jesse’s face, ticklish strokes that made it harder to concentrate. And he needed to. Gideon gave no sign that he was going to let Jesse up. Even when Jesse swallowed convulsively around the shaft, Gideon only sighed in pleasure.

If Jesse’s hands were free, he would have massaged Gideon’s balls, tugged and caressed them until it shattered his control. He tried to make up for his inability to do that by

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using his tongue and teeth. He doubted even his best could break the vampire, but that wouldn't stop him from trying. He even hummed and moaned, creating a range of vibrations for Gideon's flesh.

Black spots danced behind his eyes before Gideon eased enough on his hold to pull Jesse off. He didn't dare gulp for air, though his lungs burned. If Gideon stuffed his throat again, he'd gladly take it. He'd take whatever Gideon gave him and be thankful for it. Because he knew Gideon only gave him what he truly wanted.

Gideon held him still, dragging the tip of his cock over Jesse's swollen lower lip. "So what should come next?" he mused. "Do I fuck your face until you can't speak? Maybe drag the brat down here and fuck him instead? Or let him ride your cock but keep you from coming?" He smiled. "I kind of like that last one."

It was all he could do not to lean in and swallow Gideon's cock again. He knew that Gideon could choose one of the latter two options, but he felt sure that his lover would choose to fuck his mouth. "Please...Sir...can I taste your cock again?"

A sharp tug yanked his head back to meet Gideon's hard eyes. "Well, now I know which option you like best. Which means I pick one of the other two." He crouched down, letting his fangs retract. "How about we go wake up Jonah? And because you spent the whole day paying more attention to him and David, you don't get to come again. I'm going to split that boy's ass and make you watch."

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Protests immediately sprang to his lips. Jonah needed his rest. Jonah wasn't a tool for punishment. He hadn't spent more time paying attention to the younger man. He had only wanted to help him. But, worst of all, was the slow burn of jealousy already igniting his blood. Despite the protests, Gideon's dark promise made Jesse's cock throb from the crown to his balls.

"Yes, Sir."

The slow, seductive smile confirmed that he'd said exactly the right thing. Gideon reached behind Jesse and undid the locks holding his arms immobile. "Teleport upstairs and get him then. We don't want to risk waking David up." As the last hook came free, Gideon licked along Jesse's jaw to his ear. "And if you behave yourself, I'll see what I can do about getting you a shot at David's cock after all. With me there, of course."

As soon as Gideon released him, he knew he could end it and leave Jonah out of it. He knew it, but it didn't strike him as a real option. He murmured, "Yes, Sir," and then he was out of the playroom and standing in the much darker bedroom. To his surprise, he saw David sleeping on the floor, his bare chest rising and falling. He started for a moment, Gideon's words coming back to him. He believed Gideon would absolutely keep his word. Despite the fact that he was being punished, his ass still clenched at the thought of bending over for David.

After a moment of debate, he slid his arm under Jonah's legs and neck. The younger man stirred and his eyes fluttered open. "Jesse?"

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“Shh. Want to come with me?”

“Where?”

“Playroom.”

“Yes.”

As soon as Jonah finished speaking, they were both in front of Gideon.

Jonah jerked when he saw they weren't alone, sliding out of Jesse's arms. His gaze widened as it swept over Gideon's naked form, lingering pointedly on his prominent erection for several seconds. Then he turned his head to see Jesse's trapped cock, and the sharp intake of breath was audible.

“Don't even think it,” Gideon barked the second Jonah started to reach for Jesse. “Unless you want Jesse to take you back upstairs before any of us get to the good stuff.”

Jonah snapped straight, though his focus kept swiveling between Gideon and Jesse. “No, don't do that.” He paused. “Can I at least know what's going on?”

Gideon nodded at Jesse. “Tell him. This is your punishment, after all.”

“I...I forgot who I belong to.” It was more than a little humiliating to be forced to explain the situation, but he supposed it wouldn't be a punishment if he found the experience pleasant. “I flirted with David and you because I'm a slut for the attention.”

Jonah frowned. “I don't understand what this has to do with me.”

“Gideon is punishing me. He's going to make me watch him fuck you.”

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He thought Jonah would have whiplash from how hard his head spun in Gideon's direction. "You? But..." His voice trailed off as he finally drank in his surroundings. He tilted his head to the side enough to see the open cupboard on the wall behind Gideon. By the time Jonah looked back at him, his arousal was a prominent bulge in the front of his pants. "How?"

Gideon smiled. "Now that's what I like. A brat who knows his place." He scanned Jonah's trim body. "Well, almost. Strip and get on your hands and knees."

Jonah still seemed unsure. When he turned to Jesse, the query clearly on his lips, Gideon growled. He moved fast enough to make Jonah cry out in surprise when his large hand grabbed Jonah's chin and yanked his attention back.

"You're down here only because I asked Jesse to bring you. Jesse is not the one in charge here, no matter how much you might want him to be. Do you understand?"

Jonah's eyes widened, and for a moment, Jesse feared that Jonah would offer the wrong answer. He held his breath, only releasing it when Jonah said, "Yes, Sir, I understand."

Satisfied, Gideon released him, and Jonah immediately began stripping his clothes. Jesse watched from beneath his lashes, trying not to openly stare as Jonah revealed his tight, sleek body. Once the clothes were discarded, Jonah lowered himself to his knees. He didn't look away from Gideon before falling forward to rest on his hands.

Crouching at Jonah's side, Gideon smoothed his hand down the young man's back, curving over his bare ass in a

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proprietary stroke. "I'd say Jesse's lucky having such a pretty little specimen like you ready to lick his feet, but Jesse's not the one who's going to get to break you in tonight." He reached between Jonah's legs and squeezed his jutting cock, eliciting a strangled gasp for his efforts. "You ever think about me fucking you, brat?"

There was a pause. Jesse wondered if Jonah realized Gideon was referring to him. It was a mild relief not to hear Gideon call Jonah "boy." That might have been just a little too painful.

"Yes, Sir."

Without letting go of Jonah's erection, Gideon bent over him to rest his mouth at Jonah's ear. "But you think about Jesse more, now don't you?"

"Oh, God, yes." He yelped. Gideon must have squeezed his cock harder. "*Sir*. Yes, *Sir*."

Gideon locked eyes with Jesse. He was almost smiling. "Why don't you tell the brat what it is you think of, boy?"

Jesse addressed Jonah, as instructed, but he kept his gaze on Gideon. "I think about Gideon chaining me to the bed, facedown, so I can't move, leaving me open to everything that he wants to do to me. I think about him starting with the whip, gentle at first, because he doesn't want to make me bleed, he just wants me to scream. Besides, he knows I'm going to beg for it. Knows that I'll beg him to make me bleed for him, because that's all I want to do.

"Once he's split my skin, I think about how good his tongue feels. It's just cool enough to ease the sting, but hot

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enough to make me squirm against the bed. I think about him moving his mouth down to my ass, using his fangs and his tongue to eat me out. And by that point, all I want to do is feel his cock, pounding into me until I can't even breathe."

By the time he was done, Jonah's shoulders heaved from how hard he was breathing. "Jesus..." he heard him mutter. It was choked off by another cry as Gideon cupped his balls, and every muscle stood out in his tense arms as he held himself up.

"You know what that feels like, don't you, brat?" Gideon's voice had gone deceptively soft. The knowledge of how deadly he was at that cadence brought goose bumps to Jesse's bare arms. "Know what it means to want someone to practically devour you with how badly they want you. To be laid open to him, in every way possible."

"Yes..."

"Look at Jesse." He waited until Jonah had lifted his head. Those blue eyes were nearly black with desire. "I had him bleeding for me already once tonight. If I let him, he'd get on his hands and knees and crawl over here to beg me to do it again. But I'm not going to. Because right now, I want him crawling here for you. He's going to eat your ass and get you all wet and ready for me to fuck." Gideon smiled at Jesse. "Aren't you, boy?"

"Yes, Sir."

Jesse obediently dropped to his hands and knees. He wanted to fuck Jonah with his tongue, but only because Gideon wanted him to. In that moment, Gideon could have ordered Jonah back to his room, and Jesse would have been

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happy to beg for a hint of attention from the vampire.

Gideon let go of Jonah's cock to grasp a cheek in each hand. He pulled them apart, exposing the tiny, clenching hole, and nodded for Jesse to approach. The cold floor was hard on his knees, but Jess had long ago grown used to the discomfort. Some nights, he craved it. Because those were the nights when he needed Gideon the most.

"Go good and deep," Gideon said when Jesse knelt behind Jonah. "I plan on fucking him hard enough he'll be able to feel my dick in his throat."

Jesse whimpered. He wanted that—but that was the point, wasn't it? To get an up close and personal view of just what Gideon could give him, or withhold from him. He wanted to tell Gideon that he understood. That he learned his lesson and the torment didn't have to continue. But if he did that, and Gideon actually gave him what he wanted, then he wouldn't get the chance to bury his tongue in Jonah's ass and use his mouth until Jonah screamed for more.

He leaned forward, teasing the pucker without penetration. Jonah shuddered, his moan sending goose bumps down Jesse's back. Gideon gripped the back of his head in unforgiving fingers and forced him forward until Jesse had no choice to follow Gideon's orders exactly and go good and deep.

The angle of Jonah's body shifted abruptly. Without breaking the contact of his tongue inside the quivering channel, Jesse lifted his lashes to see Jonah had crumpled onto his forearms, burying his face as moans poured from his mouth. He squirmed back against Jesse's face when Jess



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paused. Jesse grabbed his hips to hold the young man still while he drove his tongue as far as it would go.

“Know what would make this better?” Gideon’s mouth covered Jesse’s ear, the words meant only for him. “David’s cock in your ass.”

Jesse moaned. What was Gideon trying to do to him? Drive him crazy? That seemed the most likely answer. Or perhaps just remind him that Jesse’s body belonged to him, and only him. If he wanted Jesse to eat out Jonah, then Jesse would do it. If he wanted David to pound into Jesse’s ass with his gorgeous cock, then Jesse would have no choice but to let him.

Jonah practically vibrated with excitement. If he reacted like this to just Jesse’s tongue, it was probably a good thing that the playroom was soundproof. He was going to lose his head when Gideon finally took him.

Gideon eased back, keeping one hand on Jesse’s head while the other took the same path it had down Jonah’s back earlier. He didn’t stop at Jesse’s ass, choosing instead to slip between his thighs. One finger traced his throbbing shaft, but when it came back up, it deliberately pushed against the cock ring, digging the teeth into his skin to break it all anew.

Jesse tore his mouth away from Jonah. “Please, Sir...I can’t...”

Pain shot through him as Gideon grasped his arousal. “You can, because I say you can.”

His lungs seized, but he managed to choke out, “Yes, Sir,” before returning to the heat of Jonah’s body. His flesh felt

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slick, but his passage was still unbelievably tight around Jesse's tongue as the muscles flexed. The pain gradually eased as Gideon relaxed his hand, but he didn't release him. His fingers remained around Jesse's shaft in a silent reminder.

Jonah pushed back against his mouth with every stroke into his ass. Constant groans fell from his lips, and gradually, words joined them. The thrill of, "Please, please, don't stop," was enough to compel Jesse to pull his cheeks wider, while the "God, this is even better than I dreamed," made him shiver.

"Enough." Gideon punctuated his command with a hard slap against Jesse's balls. "I want that ass for myself now."

Jesse crawled backward, pain and excitement rolling inside of him until everything hurt in the most exquisite way. His whole body cried out for Gideon, but he couldn't do anything except make room for Gideon to kneel behind Jonah. His cock glistened with pre-come, and Jesse swallowed hard, thinking about how it felt to have the salty crown resting on the back of his tongue. Jonah wiggled backward, all eager, hungry enthusiasm.

The tip rested at Jonah's wet hole for several moments before Gideon began to press forward. He took his time, and it struck Jesse that he did so deliberately. Jonah was human, and though Gideon might joke about Jonah's submissive tendencies, he didn't know the young man's limitations. Jesse's heart swelled with love for the vampire even more. Even now, when Jesse knew Gideon wanted—probably needed—to pound at something, Gideon took care.

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“Oh...fuck...fuck yes...” Jonah panted, rocking backward to meet Gideon’s slow entrance. “God...that feels fucking amazing.”

Jesse’s fingers curled into fists as he watched. He knew exactly what Jonah was feeling. His gaze jumped from Gideon’s disappearing cock, to his face, and back again. Jesse’s ass clenched, the ache in his groin increasing to eclipse everything else. Then Gideon was fully sheathed, his balls against Jonah’s, his fingers digging into Jonah’s hips.

“Fuck, he’s tight.” Gideon stretched his thumb to stroke along the crease, soothing the tension in Jonah’s back. The moment the muscles relaxed, Gideon slapped the leaner upper curve of his ass, the sound making both Jonah and Jesse jump. “Been saving it for Jesse, brat?”

“No, no, just...” He wiggled against Gideon’s cock, only to be rewarded with another spank. “Haven’t had time, Sir.”

“Good for me, then.”

Not good for Jesse, though. He could have looked away. He could have turned his head and refused to watch—though the sound of Jonah’s groans, of Gideon’s grunts, of flesh slapping against flesh was inescapable. His fingers itched to close around his cock, and his hands were free, and Gideon was busy, but he didn’t want to be punished further. He didn’t doubt that Gideon would be happy to find a new way to prove his point once he was done with Jonah.

“God...faster...Sir...” It almost came out as a demand. The words wrapped around Jesse like a tight rope of jealousy. He thought Gideon would ignore him. Until Jonah shouted,

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“Please.”

Gideon's fingers sank further into Jonah's pliant flesh. There would be bruises in the morning. Jonah would be able to look at them in the mirror and see the proof of what Gideon had done, bear the reminder for days if he was anything like Jesse had been before becoming a Guardian. Jesse curled his hands into fists. Those should have been his.

Gideon was his.

But even with that knowledge curling inside his gut, Jesse couldn't look away. He'd had few opportunities to sit back and appreciate Gideon's feral beauty while he fucked someone else. He'd done so with Emma, of course, but that was different. Gideon loved her. This was pure lust, driven by his desire to show Jesse once and for all who was in charge. Watching Gideon would always give him pleasure. The sinew of his back as it flexed with each violent thrust. The grim delight in his hard jaw when Jonah begged for more. The delicious sight of his thick cock tearing into Jonah's hole.

Gideon hooked his arm beneath Jonah's waist and pulled him up against Gideon's chest without breaking his rhythm. Jesse's eyes widened. Gideon wouldn't bite him, would he? For one thing, Jonah never indicated that he would be fine with that. And wouldn't that be going just a little too far? Jesse didn't know if he could happily sit by and just watch that. Judging from the look on Jonah's face, the possibility of a bite either never occurred to him, or it did occur to him but he didn't care.

Pre-come dripped down Jonah's shaft. When Gideon drove

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into his body, the tip slapped against Jonah's tight stomach, smearing even more of the clear fluid over his bare skin. Gideon ran his fingers through it, coating them until they were shiny, then brought his hand up to Jonah's mouth.

Jonah sucked the fingers past his lips with a greedy moan. His cheeks hollowed out as he let Gideon fuck him at both holes now.

"Oh, someone's a good little cocksucker, that's for sure," Gideon said. "Too bad I didn't know this first. I would've fucked your throat before having a go at your ass."

Jesse caught his breath. He wished his arousal would disappear. He wished his cock would simply soften, despite the ring, so he didn't have to be torn between sharp desire and even sharper jealousy. Gideon looked over Jonah's shoulder and met Jesse's eyes, and he knew without a doubt that all of his lust and insecurity and need and pain was right there on his face.

Without breaking his rhythm, Gideon wrapped his free hand around Jonah's cock. He stroked the hard length at the same tempo he pistoned into the young man's ass. Jonah didn't last. In two pulls, his body arched away from Gideon's, his jaw falling slack as he screamed with his release. Come splattered onto the floor in front of him.

Though the muscles standing out in Gideon's neck were proof he was dangerously close himself, he kept his gaze steady on Jesse. "Clean it up, boy."

Jesse's eyes widened. "Sir?"

Gideon didn't look away, didn't waver. His eyes had a

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simple message—*do it*. Jesse dropped forward to his hands and knees and crawled over to the white stain on the floor. He watched Gideon through his lashes as his tongue darted out and he scraped up the first line of come. This was not how he had imagined finally getting a taste of Jonah. His cock jerked as he realized both of them were staring at him, forcing his flesh harder against the cock ring. He felt fresh, hot trickles of blood sliding down his skin.

A grunt followed by another of Jonah's choked cries yanked Jesse's eyes up in time to see Gideon slam into Jonah's ass one final time. The dimples forming in Jonah's hips testified to his clenching, and Jesse had to focus on the task of cleaning up the floor to keep from reaching down for his own cock. His tongue swept up every drop of the still warm fluid. When he finished, he began to sit back on his heels, only to be interrupted by Gideon's next command.

"You're not done." His grip tightened around Jonah's shaft, angling the tip toward Jesse. "Lick him clean. Then you're going to get every drop of my come out of his ass."

Jesse lifted his head enough to reach Jonah's cock. He lapped at the sensitive head until Jonah moaned and tried to squirm away, but Gideon's firm hold stopped him from escaping Jesse's mouth. Once he had the crown completely clean, he moved on to his shaft. It had only been half hard before, but the more Jesse licked and sucked at his skin, the more Jonah responded. He moved on to his thighs, and then found a drop on Jonah's taut stomach. He knew one thing for sure—Jonah's salty, hot body was infinitely preferable to the

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floor.

As soon as he was clean, Gideon lowered him to the floor and pulled free of his ass. Come already leaked down the back of his thighs, and Jesse started there.

The coarse hair tickled across his tongue. Jonah was still wriggling at the contact, and Jesse clamped a hand down at the small of his back to make him stop. He did it out of reflex more than anything else, but when he felt Gideon's strong fingers rubbing up and down his own back, he paused and glanced back.

Gideon's eyes were soft, though still black with desire. "You can use your hands. Pull him apart so you can really get at him."

"Please, Jesse." Jonah's hungry begging made Jesse's mouth water. "Do what you want to me. You know—"

Gideon slapped at the nearest cheek, hard enough for the fair skin to immediately pink. "Be quiet, brat. Jesse's not yours to tell what to do. He's mine."

The possessive words were like a warm balm on his ragged feelings. He pulled Jonah's ass open, exposing his stretched and red hole. If Gideon wasn't right there with a firm hand on his back, he would have slammed his cock into Jonah's body without a second thought. He could tell by the long chorus of whimpers that Jonah was amazingly sensitive. Jesse didn't doubt he would welcome another hard fucking. But they both had to settle on Jesse's tongue, seeking out every bit of come.

Each quiver of flesh against his lips made Jesse ache even

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more. He clamped his mouth over the hole, fucking the channel as much as licking away each drop. Gideon let him get away with it for several minutes before smoothing his hand up to the back of Jesse's head and curling his fingers in Jesse's hair.

"Enough." He tugged to separate them, leaving Jess bereft of Jonah's body heat. "Get up, Jonah. You're done."

The hurt look in Jonah's eyes when he twisted around to stare at them reminded Jesse just how young he really was. "That's it?" His gaze dropped to Jesse's throbbing cock, his tongue running over his lips. "At least let me taste him. Please, Gideon?"

Gideon hauled Jesse back against his chest. His erection had never flagged, and it now pressed against Jesse's ass. "You have a lot to learn, brat. In here, you don't get to call me by name." Jonah's eyes widened in alarm, but Gideon cut off his impending protest. "Second thing you need to learn is I take care of my own. I promised Jesse I'd reward him if he was good, so I'm going to give him a choice. He can either have you blow him, or me bite him. But not both." He aimed his mouth closer to Jesse's ear. "The choice is yours, boy. All you have to do is name it."

Jonah had a perfect mouth. Jesse had long ago recognized that and even indulged in a few brief fantasies of Jonah wrapping those full lips around his cock. But the choice was so obvious that it almost didn't count as a choice at all. He needed Gideon far more than he wanted Jonah.

"Bite me, Sir. Please."



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Tightening his arms even more around Jesse, Gideon licked down the side of his neck to the original site of his very first bite. It was their favorite. Jesse tilted his head enough out of the way to give Gideon room, but still kept close enough to feel his hair tickling across his cheek.

“Love you, boy,” he murmured for Jesse’s ears only. He sucked hard once at the tight muscle, and then widened his jaw. His razor fangs pierced the scarred skin to sink deep, deep, and even deeper into Jesse’s waiting veins.

All of the tension drained from Jesse’s body. The negative feelings—jealousy and confusion and hurt—completely evaporated like they had never existed at all. He closed his eyes and dropped his head back, his muscles so lax that Gideon had to support him completely. Despite that, his cock still throbbed. He reached up to grip the back of Gideon’s head, holding him against his throat, silently begging him not to stop. Not to stop until he couldn’t take anything more from Jesse, until he was almost completely consumed.

When he began to feel light-headed, he opened his eyes to meet Jonah’s open-mouthed stare. He must have known that Gideon drank from Jesse, but Jess supposed the reality of witnessing it differed from anything he might have imagined. He stared at Jonah until darkness began to creep into his vision. His hand tightened on the back of Gideon’s head as he sensed the vampire pulling away—or maybe he had just imagined it. But he didn’t imagine the way Gideon’s skin flushed with heat, or the pleasure encasing his entire body.

And then Jesse completely lost touch with the world.

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Everything was dark and on fire and he felt the orgasm rushing through him, even though it seemed like a distant thing. He felt the come, as hot as blood, painting his stomach and thighs.

The loss of Gideon's fangs came from far away, as was the gentle way Gideon cradled him against his chest. Over and over, Gideon soothed the fresh puncture marks with his tongue, endearments raining down between them like he'd never punished Jesse in the first place. He reached between Jesse's thighs and broke the padlock on the ring, letting the heavy steel fall to the floor. Cool air rushed over the pinpricks left behind, a stinging pull back to the real world, back to the playroom, back to Jonah watching the pair of them agape.

"Not a word to anyone about this," Gideon warned Jonah. "This room is safe, and if you don't respect that, you'll never see the inside of it again."

"No, no, Sir."

"Can you make it back up to your bedroom?" Jesse asked, his mouth barely moving to form the words.

Jonah looked like he wanted to protest, but he nodded anyway. He gathered up his clothes and pulled them back on, all the while never looking away from Jesse and Gideon.

"Do you understand now?" Gideon said after Jonah had left. He brushed his lips across Jesse's forehead, collecting the beads of sweat that had erupted along the skin. "I don't like sharing when I don't have a say in the matter, even if it's just your attention."

Jesse wrapped his arms around Gideon, clinging to him

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tightly. He didn't want to move. "I understand. I won't forget."

They stayed like that for more minutes than Jesse could count. He might have gotten cold were it not for the stolen heat Gideon radiated. But even if he had, he knew Gideon would have immediately rectified it. Gideon would take care of him. No matter what.

## CHAPTER 6

Getting Dominique fed and out of the house wasn't exactly an easy task at the best of times. It was made even more difficult when she tried to linger in the kitchen, waiting to catch a glimpse of David.

"I just want to tell him hi."

"He doesn't even know who you are," Jesse reminded her. "And you're going to be late for class. So get moving."

"This isn't fair."

"It's one of history's greatest crimes." He gave her a twenty-dollar bill. "That's money for your lunch for the week."

"It's not enough."

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“It’s more than enough.” A horn honked and Jesse gently pushed her toward the door. “That’s Carol. Get moving before she drives away and you have to walk to school.”

Grumbling, she shouldered her backpack and dragged her feet toward the front door. He heard the heavy door swing open, and then Dominique shouted, “Hey! Jesse! Derek’s here to see you!”

“Send him back to the kitchen!”

For once, Derek actually looked well rested. Jesse supposed he got to sleep for more than two hours. He also thought that if Derek had any idea of what had happened in the playroom, he probably wouldn’t have been sleeping at all.

“Jonah hasn’t come down yet,” Jesse said, pouring a cup of coffee. He handed it over to Derek before nodding at the table. “Go ahead and take a load off.”

“How about we go wake him up instead?” Derek reached inside his coat and pulled out a small parcel, wrapped in plain brown paper. “He can explain this, then.”

Jesse frowned as he took it from Derek. One end had been slit open, and he carefully extracted a thick, weathered book. Its leather binding was cracked and worn, and a small silver chain wound through a clasp in order to keep it closed. Nothing was written on the cover or spine. When Jesse opened it up, the book fit perfectly in the palm of his hand.

“Where did this come from?”

Sipping at his coffee, Derek leaned against the counter. “England. It arrived at the station addressed to me. Jonah shipped it here, right before he went missing.”

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Jesse suspected that Derek was now in possession of a stolen item, but he didn't say as much. He thought Jonah should have a chance to explain himself before Jesse started making accusations. Judging from the look on Derek's face, he had the same suspicion.

"I'll run up and get him then."

Once he reached Jonah's bedroom door, he hesitated to knock. Memories from the previous night were still sharp in his mind. He knew they would probably be at the front of Jonah's mind, too. It wasn't like him to be shy around people when it came to sexual situations, but then, it wasn't like Gideon to punish him so thoroughly in front of another person.

He was saved from knocking when David pulled the door open.

"Is Jonah awake?"

"No. Why?"

"Derek is downstairs. He's got something Jonah needs to explain."

"I'll wake him."

Derek hadn't moved from his spot when Jesse returned. Less than a minute later, Jonah burst through the door, David following several steps behind.

"It got here?" Jonah went straight for the book Jesse had set on the counter, only to come up short when Derek stepped in front of him. "What?"

Derek looked grim. "Do I want to know what that is?"

Jonah glanced at Jesse, but he wasn't going to give him the out he was clearly seeking. "No, probably not."

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“I think that you need to start from the beginning and tell us everything,” Jesse instructed.

“Is this what you stole from the pub?” David asked with surprising bluntness.

His direct question actually brought an embarrassed flush to Jonah’s cheeks. “I just wanted the chance to read it. They wouldn’t let me even look at it.”

“Maybe because it’s none of your business,” Derek said. “Jesus, Jonah, what could possibly be worth getting a criminal record for?”

“Finding out what kind of power would want to seek human form.” His blue eyes burned where they pleaded with Jesse’s. “I think the answers for why the demon chose to possess Emma and Gideon are in that grimoire.”

“I understand being curious about what happened, Jonah,” Jesse said gently, trying to take the edge off Derek’s outburst. “But all that was...it was years ago. It’s certainly not worth risking your life over now.”

“I didn’t risk my life. It’s just one book, and if I’d gotten it the first time instead of getting caught, nobody would’ve been the wiser.” He grimaced. “Those Votaries are all thugs.”

“Crazy thugs who kidnapped you and tossed your apartment,” Derek reminded.

“They can’t even read half of the books they’re sitting on,” Jonah continued. “All they care about is being ready for when this god they worship decides to come back.”

“So what’s so special about this particular book?” Jesse asked.

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“I’ve been following the trail of what the demon could possibly be, right? And this same group kept popping up, no matter where I went. The Votaries of Castelain. It took me forever to translate it, and even longer to find them. But this book...” He darted around Derek to come to Jesse’s side, picking the book up and holding it out to Jesse. “They call it a grimoire, but that’s only part of it. Every other reference I’ve found to it says it’s also a hagiology. *The hagiology.*”

Derek frowned. “A what? For those of us who aren’t word nerds like you and Jesse.”

“A hagiology,” Jonah repeated. “A biography of a saint. It’s considered a sacred writing. From what I could tell flipping through it, their original idol had a colorful life. A long, colorful life. He talked about walking between worlds. Being impervious to human frailties. It’s really no wonder they thought he was a god.”

“They worship the demon you’ve been researching as a god?” Jesse asked slowly. “An immortal, invulnerable demon who can control dimensions?”

“There’s no mention of dimensions...” When Jonah made the connection, his brows shot up. “You think this demon might be a Guardian?”

“He might have been once. As far as I know, Guardians can’t possess people. Or turn invisible. Or erase a vampire’s memory.” Unless those were all powers Michelle planned to tell him about later, but somehow, he doubted it. “But he could have just been a regular human who got an infusion of power. Maybe whatever is in the book will clear that up.”



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“I still don’t understand why any of this matters,” David said. “Were you going to try and kill this demon or something?”

In spite of his annoyance with his nephew, Derek snorted. “Jonah? Kill something? I don’t think so.”

“Because nobody knew what was going on,” Jonah explained. “Gideon killed people that night. Emma was trying to turn us against each other. There was no way to know something like that couldn’t happen again.”

“Did you find out why it happened? What the...thing wanted with Gideon and Emma?” Jesse asked.

Slowly, Jonah shook his head. “But whatever’s in that book, it’s important enough for those Votaries to go even crazier wanting it back. That’s why I mailed it to Uncle Derek as soon as I got it. I was planning on getting on the first plane I could after that, but, well, you know how the rest of that story turned out.”

Jesse picked up the book and gently thumbed through the thin pages. This was clearly the cult’s holy book. Their Bible. No wonder they had turned into a bunch of thugs when Jonah stole it. Even though he suspected nothing worthwhile would come out of encouraging Jonah, or reading the book, he was curious himself. Was this thing a Guardian? Is that why it had targeted the three of them? Had it known that Michelle planned to make him a Guardian? JT had been one for years. It stood to reason that other versions of himself had already been a Guardian at that point.

“What happens now?” David asked. “Are you going to

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return the book?"

Jonah looked at him sharply. "What? Why would I do that?"

"He means, yes," Derek said.

"No, I don't."

"You can't keep it. It's stolen property."

"I really don't think the government is going to bother extraditing me over one old book."

"I think you should return the book," Jesse said. "David can take it back."

"But..." Jonah started.

"After we've had the chance to read it. It's not a very big book."

"I don't know about that, Jesse—"

"It won't take us long, Uncle Derek."

"Us?" Derek looked between them. "You don't really think I'm going to let you stay involved in this, do you?"

If anybody had the right to boss Jonah around, it was probably Derek. But every time Derek tried to dictate what Jonah was going to do, it made Jesse's hackles rise.

"How long do you think it'll take to read?" David asked.

"Depends on if I need to translate anything," Jesse answered. "By tomorrow, probably."

"And twenty-four hours is nothing." Jonah looked back at David, his gaze intent. "You don't mind sticking around another day until we're done with this, right?"

"I don't even have a change of clothes."

"We've got lots of clothes around here," Jesse assured

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him. “We can probably find something.”

David shrugged. “I don’t mind staying. The work day is almost done in London, anyway.”

Jonah whirled back to Derek. Jesse had no idea how he could have so much energy after the night before. “See? Nothing to worry about. David’s not going to let anything bad happen to the book.”

Derek still seemed unconvinced. “You promise to stay out of trouble? Do exactly what Jesse and Gideon tell you? Even if it means getting out of their house.”

Jonah beamed. “Absolutely.”

Jesse’s cock twitched at the thought of Jonah doing whatever they told him to do. It didn’t help that he was already intimately aware of just how far Jonah would go to please the two of them. *Don’t think about that. There’s no time for any of that, anyway. Right now, the most important thing is the book.* He would just have to be sure that Jonah understood, too.

“We won’t kick him out, just yet. Come on, Derek, I’ll walk you out to your car.”

With one last withering glance at Jonah, Derek stalked out of the kitchen. He stayed quiet until they were out of earshot of the others. “You don’t have to put up with him, you know. All I have to do is call his mom. Then he’d be out of your hair.”

“He’s not a child, Derek. You don’t need to talk about him like he’s twelve.”

“Then he needs to stop acting like it.”

“This is the worst thing he’s ever gotten himself into, and

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nobody died or was even seriously hurt. I think you should count your blessings.”

“Right. He’s a history geek, Jess. He doesn’t know the first thing about what it is we do, except that, for some inexplicable reason, it makes you look even more exotic to him.”

“He was just trying to help. What happened that night was seriously fucked up. Every one of us could have died. You and I were ready to kill each other. Can you really blame him for being curious about why it happened?”

Derek stepped out into the brisk morning air. “Curious, no. I just wish he’d focus on something that mattered. If he wanted to research something so badly, why didn’t he offer to help with Emma’s case? That would sure do you a hell of a lot more good than some random event that happened two years ago.”

“No reason why he can’t help now.” Jesse rubbed his eyes against the glare of the sun. Emma was always in the back of his mind, a ghost that lingered with him. He woke up, she was there. He went to bed, and she was in his dreams. Her memory was just a part of his life, even when he was forcing himself to actually live his life. “God knows a fresh pair of eyes might do us some good.”

“If you don’t need him to help with this book he stole, you should have him look through the forensic copies Gideon has. I can collate the new stuff I have and drop it off this afternoon, too.”

Jesse doubted Jonah had the knowledge necessary to recognize anything useful from the forensic evidence, but it

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would keep him busy, and Jonah was a bright kid. “I probably won’t need his help to read, no. Go catch some bad guys. I’ll keep an eye on your errant nephew.”

Derek paused before opening his car door. “You promise to call me if he gets to be too much?”

“I’ll call you. But I doubt he’s going to overwhelm me. I’m used to dealing with Dominique, after all.”

“I’m just glad you’re the one who gets to tell Gideon.” Tipping a smile at him, Derek slid into the front seat and pulled away from the house.

“Somehow, I don’t think he’s going to mind,” Jesse said to himself as the car disappeared down the road.

\* \* \*

Jonah scowled at the closed door to the library. “I can’t believe he’s not going to let me help.”

“Let you help with the book? Don’t you think he’s smart enough to read it alone?”

David’s deep voice sounded as reasonable as ever, which only frustrated Jonah more. “I’m the one who found it. I’m the one who had the foresight to ship it to Derek. I should be able to help Jesse figure out what exactly it all means.” He sighed, hefting the weight of the box Jesse had given him so that it rested more comfortable in his arms. “I guess I should be grateful he wants my help on anything. I just wish it wasn’t sorting through evidence on Emma’s case that even Derek thinks is useless.”

“Yeah but...he wants you to help him find his missing

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girlfriend. This doesn't exactly seem like busy work to me. I can help you with that, if you want."

The offer shouldn't have surprised him, but it did. Jonah tore his gaze away from the door to look up at David. In spite of having spent the night on the floor, David looked as sharp and collected as he always did. The eyes he leveled at Jonah were dark and warm, and his full mouth slanted in a half smile. He was not a man of many words, but those he chose were always carefully selected for the best effect, Jonah had learned. Jonah had liked him from the first moment he'd introduced himself at the police station.

"You wouldn't mind? I know you don't really want to be here."

"No, I don't really want to be here. But I'd rather be doing something productive. And since I've had more experience in criminal investigations than you, I might be able to spot something. We can go in the kitchen." David looked around with an exaggerated shudder. "It's the only room in this place that doesn't creep me out."

With a frown, Jonah followed David's line of sight. "Why? I mean, it's big, and okay, maybe a little gothic, but considering Gideon's about a thousand years old, that's probably to be expected."

"Gideon's not a thousand years old, is he? Besides, this place is more than a little gothic. I wouldn't be surprised if there was a ghost in the attic or a troll under the stairs."

"No, I'm pretty sure Jesse exorcised all those after their housewarming party bombed," he tried to joke. When David

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failed to even crack a smile, Jonah started for the kitchen. “They’ve really done a lot to the place. You name it, there’s probably a room for it.”

“Do they have an indoor pool?”

Jonah laughed. “Okay, you got me. Maybe not everything.”

“You should suggest they put one in. If you visit here enough to make it worthwhile.”

The kitchen was warmer than the rest of the house, the scent of coffee still lingering in the air. Jonah set the box down on the table and began emptying it.

“This is only the second time I’ve been here, to be honest. Not for lack of wanting. But when I met Jesse, they were all happy in what they had.” Memories of how Jesse had turned those vibrant blue eyes to Emma and Gideon crowded his thoughts. He’d wished more than once to be the object of Jesse’s desire, but until last night, that was all they had been—wishes. “Nobody could break those three up. Until last summer anyway.”

David sat down beside him and began looking through the stack of documents and photos. “Are we looking for human culprits or something paranormal?” David shook his head. “I can’t believe I even have to ask that question.”

“Paranormal. Whoever took Emma managed to get her sister out of a locked cell in solitary confinement without anybody knowing. Derek told me that Jesse thinks she was teleported out.”

“Like he teleported us out of England?”

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“Yeah.” He grinned. “I’m going to have to ask him to do it again when I’m not barely conscious. I don’t even really remember what it felt like.”

“God, you don’t want to know. It’s like...when a plane takes off but you’re not quite ready for it. That feeling of leaving your stomach behind.”

Jonah shook his head. “You’d think I’d remember that after having done it twice.”

“Twice? What do you mean twice?”

The question made him hesitate. He’d blurted it out without thinking, but of course, David didn’t know about last night. And he couldn’t. Gideon had sworn him to secrecy. There had been threats and everything. The last thing Jonah wanted was to fuck up any chance of a repeat performance. He could do without witnessing the biting again, but the rest of it, everything up to that point, had far surpassed any other experience of his life. The look on Jesse’s face, the command in Gideon’s voice, the thick cock buried in his ass that still made it a little painful to sit today. Then having Jesse’s mouth on his cock after he came...

But David regarded him with a solemn question in his liquid eyes. How could Jonah answer him? He’d never been shy about his sexuality, but it was one thing to make his preferences known, and something else entirely to flaunt his kinks in front of someone like David. It didn’t matter that David was hot as hell. Odds were good he was straight anyway.

“Jesse...asked me to help him with something last night.”



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There. That was true, and it didn't give anything away.

"When? After you went to bed?" David put his hand down on the paper Jonah was pretending to study. "Was there something so important that he needed to take you out of your bed?"

He had never seen David look at him so intensely before. Heat crept up the back of his neck until his ears burned and his mouth was dry. "He didn't force me or anything. I was glad to go."

"You were glad to go where?"

"Does it matter?"

David leaned back, his face becoming impassive. "I guess not. I just want to know why people aren't safe to sleep in their own beds around here."

"It wasn't like that." But the protest sounded feeble, even to Jonah's ears. David had been more than nice to him from the beginning; he felt like a jerk by not answering him. He leaned forward and lowered his voice. Not that that would matter if Gideon was anywhere near, but Jonah just had to take a chance the vampire was still asleep. "If I tell you, do you promise not to tell Gideon or Jesse that I did? I made a promise I wouldn't say a word."

David regarded him for a moment before nodding. "You have my word. I won't say anything to either of them."

He swallowed against the sudden tightness in his throat. "Jesse gave me a chance to go down to the playroom last night. No way could I turn him down."

David's eyes widened. "You went down into the playroom

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with them? Well...Jesse didn't waste any time, did he?"

"It wasn't Jesse's idea. It was Gideon's."

"Why didn't he want you to tell anybody? Did they...did he...hurt you or anything like that?"

"Oh, no," he was quick to protest. "Gideon just fucked me. Jesse said he was getting punished for flirting with us."

"*What?* Nothing you just said makes any sort of sense, Jonah. For one thing, I don't remember Jesse flirting with anybody. For another thing, why is Gideon fucking you punishment for..." David shook his head. "I probably don't even want to go there. So...you didn't mind that?"

"You've seen Gideon, right? Why would I mind?"

"I guess you wouldn't." David offered a small smile. "Man, every time I think I've heard it all, you guys spring something else on me."

Jonah flipped open the file that had rested in front of him, forgotten for far too long. "Then I probably shouldn't sneak you down and show you the playroom. Jesse'd get mad at me for scaring you off before he was done with the grimoire."

"I think you should be more scared of Gideon catching us than of scaring me off."

His head snapped up. "You'd want to see it?"

David lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. "Maybe I'm curious. I've never had a chance to see a vampire's BDSM dungeon before. Especially one so whimsically labeled a playroom."

The way he said it made it sound like he'd seen other BDSM rooms before. The sudden image of David standing in

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Gideon's position in the center of the playroom had Jonah's cock hardening against his thigh.

"I could show you." At David's cocked brow, he rushed to add, "Jesse's not going to come out of the library until he absolutely has to, and Gideon is asleep. Now might be the only chance we get."

David leaned forward. "You're not scared of getting caught, are you?"

"A little." He couldn't resist leaning forward, too. "That's what makes it worth it."

David's smile widened and he pushed back from the table. "Lead the way, then."

## CHAPTER 7

David didn't know if he should be jealous of Gideon or envious of Jonah. Not that he wanted to have sex with a vampire, but if you looked past that, Gideon was an attractive man. He was mostly jealous. He already had Jesse, did he really need Jonah, as well? Was it just a one time thing, or did he plan to incorporate Jonah into all their activities? David supposed it didn't matter too much, since he probably never really had a shot with Jonah and he had no right to be vaguely possessive of the younger man.

His jealousy only sharpened when Jonah opened the heavy door in the basement. The so-called playroom was a wonder. David had been in his fair share of dungeons—though there

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was no room in his flat to stock one of his own—but he had never seen anything like Gideon’s elaborate set-up. He especially liked the cages, stockade benches, and spreader bars. The whips were of less interest to him, but the hooks on the wall held a real sense of promise.

“Did he use any of this stuff on you?” David asked as he circled the room.

Jonah shook his head. His cheeks were flushed a pretty pink, and he’d been in near constant motion ever since raising the topic. His excitement—yet another element to hone David’s jealous feelings—was eerily contagious. David had the overwhelming desire to bind the man and then hold him, just to absorb all the vibrations Jonah would have no way of releasing otherwise then.

“He just fucked me. But he had this heavy metal cock ring on Jesse, and I saw a pair of leather sleeves he must’ve had Jesse wearing before I came down.” He practically sprinted across the room to the cupboard, pulling it open to display even more toys. “Look.”

David felt like he was ten again, snooping through his parents’ closet to find Christmas presents and whatever other goodies he could get his little hands on. The possibility of seeing secrets he was not meant to see, coupled with the low, electric thrill of getting caught, made him feel a little heady. The part of him that was still an adult, and looking at this whole adventure logically, reminded him that he was being a fool. Especially since Gideon didn’t seem like the sort of man—vampire—a person would want to cross.

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But instead of leaving the room, he followed Jonah over to the cupboard. The array of cock rings alone would have been enough to impress David. "I guess Jesse is quite the masochist."

"More than I even thought."

"Why? You knew he was into all this stuff before last night, right?"

Jonah picked up a leather cock and ball harness, quite tame by the others' standards. "Well, yes. I guess I just didn't expect to see so much blood. And when Gideon gave him the choice between getting bitten or getting a blow job from me, Jesse didn't hesitate to ask to get bitten." He returned the harness back to its hook, selecting a clamps and ring set to finger next. "And I mean, *bitten*. Jesse could barely talk when Gideon was done feeding from him."

David grimaced, his stomach turning over at the thought. "That's...yeah, I can see why you didn't expect that. But I guess Jesse is invulnerable, right? Still..." He picked up the harness Jonah had just discarded, absently wondering how Jonah would look wearing it and nothing else. "Even if I were immortal, I don't know if I would let him bite me."

His comment drew a curious glance from Jonah. "You say that like you'd be willing to let him do other stuff," he said cautiously.

"I probably would. Once I got over the fact that he's a vampire. Which would take some time."

Now Jonah lost all interest in the chain link he'd been holding. "You're gay? You never told me you were gay."

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“Well...it never really came up, did it?”

A tiny line appeared between Jonah's brows. “Well, no. I guess that explains why you always seemed so cool about me. Uncle Derek says I have no shame.”

“I wouldn't say that you have no shame. You're just not uptight about sex or what you want. I like that about you.”

The frown disappeared again. Good. David liked it better that way. “You have no idea what a relief that is. I mean, part of the reason I like Jesse so much is because he understands about it all. Uncle Derek practically grounded me the one time he caught me getting my ass paddled by this gorgeous fireman I picked up one night.”

David wasn't necessarily into paddling anybody's ass, but the image of Jonah bending over for him—for anybody—was enough to heighten the arousal already coursing through his body. “It sounds like you should have gone back to his place.”

Jonah shrugged and turned back to the cabinet. “Probably. Except I can never count on guys having the goods when I do that. They talk big when they're trying to pick me up, but a lot of times, as soon as they see a clamp and a pair of cuffs, they make a run for it.”

David chuckled. “That just means you're looking in the wrong places.” Though he hadn't investigated at least half of the room, he couldn't make himself walk away from Jonah. A small step forward brought him close enough to feel the heat from his body. “Think we should go back upstairs before somebody notices we're missing?”

“Nah, we just got down here. Jesse will still be reading,

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and the way he talks about Gideon, even if Gideon is awake, he's not the type to roll out of bed and come down for coffee scratching himself." He froze in mid-reach for a wire mesh tube that looked distinctly like a cock trap. Alarm darkened the eyes he lifted to David's face. "This isn't making you uncomfortable or anything, is it?"

"No." Well, yes, but not for the reasons Jonah probably thought, and not any reasons that David wanted to share. "But I don't want to see you get punished for bringing me down here."

His brilliant grin made David's blood warm even more. "But that's half the fun." He jerked his head toward the wall. "Come on, I'll show you which one's my favorite."

David followed Jonah as he practically bounded across the room to the cages that rested along the wall. There were four of them, two for keeping a sub upright, two for forcing them to his hands and knees. Jonah caressed the iron bars on the roof of one of the shorter ones like it was the skin of a lover.

"Aren't they gorgeous?" He pointed out the scrollwork inlaid at the corners. "Jesse said Gideon had them made especially for them. When he showed them to me the first time, I thought he was the luckiest guy I'd ever met."

"They are gorgeous," David agreed. He watched Jonah's fingers move back and forth over the cold steel, entranced by the sight of bare skin against the stark gray. "So, if you could take one thing out of this room to have for yourself, what would it be?"

"Only one?" Though it took obvious effort, Jonah tore his



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gaze away to sweep over the room. Invariably, it came straight back to the shorter cage. "This, then. It's too good not to have." His voice lowered, softening as he got caught in the throes of his fantasy. "On my hands and knees, collar on, probably with a leash that's got me tied to the bars so I can't move. I would be completely at a guy's mercy. He could fuck me at either end or just sit on the cage to make me eat his ass out. And I'd love every second of it." With a sigh, his hand fell away. "But I've never met a guy who actually had a cage, so it's all just a pipe dream right now. What about you? What would you pick?"

"The cage," David said thickly. "I'd pick the cage, too."

Jonah knelt down to reach inside and stroke the cage's spotless stainless steel floor. "Your boyfriend must absolutely love you."

"I haven't got one. But when I did, he didn't have any complaints. Though he never wanted me to put him in a cage."

Jonah tilted his head up at him. It put his mouth at the perfect angle for sliding a cock into, the perfect angle to bury himself in Jonah's perfect throat. All David would have to do is pull him up a few more inches, get him more firmly on his knees. Jonah would need all the leverage he could get if David was free to fuck him at will.

"You obviously picked the wrong boyfriend then."

"God, Jonah, you're going to make me... I think we should get back up to the kitchen."

"Why?" Jonah glanced at the door. "Did you hear something?"

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David shook his head. He couldn't hear anything over his pounding heart. Gideon could be standing right behind him, and he wouldn't have a clue. His self-control was just shy of snapping, and he reached down to brush his fingers over Jonah's cheek, his thumb touching the corner of his mouth. He pushed gently on Jonah's full lips.

They parted automatically, though it took a moment or two longer for understanding to dawn in Jonah's eyes. He sucked David's thumb into his mouth, sealing his lips around the base. His tongue skidded along David's skin, too light and too tantalizing for his own good. Tentatively, he rested a palm against David's thigh, as if to hold himself steady. At the very first contact, his nostrils flared.

David only felt a twinge of hesitation. There were reasons not to let things go any further. Good reasons. He didn't want Jonah to think he was just using him. And he did not want to disrespect Gideon by using the room he had specifically told Jonah not to mention to anybody. But it was difficult to pay attention to his misgivings when his cock throbbed in time with each suck on his thumb. And judging from the way Jonah was watching him with his clear blue eyes, he wasn't paying attention to possible misgivings, either.

With his other hand, he worked his fly open, allowing the head of his cock to push past the zipper. He pushed the material out of the way, exposing his entire length.

His thumb popped out of Jonah's mouth as Jonah shifted to gaze at his cock. He made a small sound that wasn't quite a gasp, and the tip of his tongue appeared when it moistened his

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lower lip. He started to reach for David when he paused, his lashes lifting again. "May I?"

David almost shot right then. Not that he was surprised Jonah had the appropriate manners. "Yes." He gripped his cock and dragged the tip across Jonah's mouth. "I want to feel the back of your throat."

Jonah's smaller hand folded over David's, the contrast of their skin nearly enough to make David forget every ounce of training he'd ever received as a Dom. "I can't say I've ever swallowed anybody as big as you, but damned if I'm not going to try," he murmured. He mouthed the edge of the crown, his tongue dancing along David's hot, tight skin. "You've got the most gorgeous cock I've ever seen."

"Here, let me see if I can help you take it all." David cupped the back of Jonah's head, holding him with just enough pressure to make sure Jonah responded. He pulled him forward, forcing his crown past Jonah's teeth. His mouth was even better than David had anticipated or imagined. It took all his strength to remain upright as he pulled Jonah's mouth down his length. He murmured encouragement as inch after inch disappeared. "That's it. Good boy."

Jonah's hot breath washed over his shaft, his lips stretched tight for the best possible seal. He didn't fight David's lead; in fact, David had to tangle his fingers in Jonah's hair a little bit tighter just to keep him from sliding down too fast. Moans rumbled from the young man's throat, and more than once, his lashes dipped in obvious pleasure. Always, though, they parted again to gaze up at David as he took another inch into

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his mouth.

By the time his crown slid down Jonah's throat, he couldn't help but moan. The only thing that could have made this better was if Jonah was in that cage. Hell, even a pair of cuffs would have been good. The thought of binding Jonah with leather, with cuffs, with a collar, or even an elaborate rope harness made heat slice through his groin. He held himself deep in Jonah's throat for as long as he could stand it, testing Jonah, waiting to see if he would try to pull away before David wanted him to. His nostrils flared, but he didn't struggle.

"You feel fucking amazing," David murmured before relaxing his hold and letting Jonah slide back.

Jonah lingered at the tip, circling it with the flat of his tongue while he wormed his hand into David's pants. David grunted when Jonah cupped his sac. The next time they did this—and damn if he wasn't going to make sure there was a next time—he was going to take time to feed his balls to the boy. He already knew Jonah wouldn't object. He had a growing feeling Jonah wouldn't object to much of anything.

Though he was careful to keep his teeth out of the way, Jonah let them nip into the fleshy ridge behind the crown, adding only enough pressure to drive David forward again. The impish gleam in his eyes could only mean he'd done it on purpose.

David was too wound up to really take the appropriate amount of time with Jonah. With his blood thrumming and his heart hammering, he could only think about pounding forward

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again and again. He stopped himself from going quite that far, but he did set a quick rhythm with each sharp snap of his hips. He got a special thrill down his spine each time his cock filled Jonah's throat and muffled his moans.

"Stroke yourself. I want to see how much you love this."

Jonah's hand moved so fast to his fly, David almost laughed. That impulse was stayed when he saw the long, slim length resting in Jonah's palm. It was nearly perfectly smooth, with the pink head glistening with pre-come. His mouth watered. How would Jonah taste? Maybe when they were done here, he could convince Jonah to abandon the playroom for the privacy of their own room. The bed would be the perfect place to sit astride Jonah's face and get him to rim David's ass while David swallowed down his cock.

His pleasure climbed higher and higher each time Jonah swallowed around him. Once he got it in his head to take Jonah upstairs, he couldn't shake the image. They could spend the entire afternoon and night together while Jesse read the book. David certainly couldn't think of anything else he'd want to do.

Jonah gave his balls a good squeeze, and the dull heat that flared into his stomach only honed his desire. He moved closer and closer to the edge, but he kept himself buried in Jonah's mouth for as long as he could stand it. His tongue was rough, his teeth sharp but light, and his throat muscles were unbelievably tight. With a final grunt, David pulled free of Jonah's lips and let his cock erupt across Jonah's lips and cheek.

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Jonah lapped at the come that landed on his tongue, but the hand stroking his shaft never faltered. At the first swallow, he groaned, shooting onto the floor. He tried to take David back into his mouth, but David kept a firm grip on his head to keep him away. The boy had manners, but he also had the impulse control of a puppy. He needed proper instruction. Discipline. Just the thought of being the one to teach the boy was enough to keep David hard.

With a pang of regret, David tucked his cock back into his pants. “Clean up after yourself. Use your shirt.”

It wasn’t until Jonah winced pulling his T-shirt over his head that David remembered the stitches he’d gotten the night before. Jonah didn’t utter a word about them, though. Balling his shirt in his hand, he bent over and cleaned away every trace of come from the floor, even the spots that had splattered onto David’s shoe.

“I hope Uncle Derek had some clean clothes in the stuff he dropped off for me earlier.” He grinned as he looked over the mess he’d made of his shirt. “I don’t think Jesse or Gideon would be too thrilled with me if I showed up for dinner wearing this now.”

“Or you could just stay in the bedroom with me all night,” David said lightly. He put his hand out and helped Jonah to his feet. “How is your head feeling?”

“Better. I don’t even think about it except when I’m getting dressed and undressed.”

David wanted to apologize for making him take off his shirt, but Jonah’s voice was light and the small smile on his

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face hadn't wavered. Instead of apologizing, he kept a hold on Jonah's hand and led him out of the playroom. He half expected to find Gideon waiting for them, arms crossed, disapproving frown—or angry glare—on his handsome face. But the stairwell was empty, as was the hallway once they reached the landing.

"You should grab your clothes," David said, gesturing at the duffel bag still by the door.

Jonah trotted off as David headed for the kitchen. If they were going to spend the rest of the day in bed, he wanted to take up some supplies to ensure they had no reason to come back down again. That would certainly make the next twenty-four hours pass quickly. He had just stepped out of the foyer when he heard a door open behind him, and he turned in time to see Jonah picking up the bag and smiling at an approaching Jesse.

"Going cross-eyed from all that small print yet?" Jonah joked.

"No, but I am getting a bit of a headache. What happened to your shirt?"

"Oh. I spilled some juice down my front. I figured if Uncle Derek went to the bother of bringing me clean clothes, it wouldn't hurt to take a real shower." His grin widened. "You Brits need to learn a thing or two about water pressure. That thing they tried to pass as a shower in my apartment in London was just sad."

"That's why I was always in the habit of taking a bath. Can your shower wait for a little bit?"

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Jonah didn't even glance in David's direction. "Sure, did you need me for something?"

David released his breath in a disappointed sigh. He knew he shouldn't be surprised. Jonah had been carrying some sort of torch for Jesse for years now. He probably just viewed David as a fun distraction. David supposed he would only be around for another twelve hours—being a fun distraction wasn't the worst thing that could happen to him.

"Yeah. A second opinion. I'm afraid I might be jumping to unwarranted conclusions."

"Can I go run these upstairs and meet you back down here in five?"

"No problem." Jesse turned back to the library door. "You know where to find me."

David turned away quickly and crossed over to the fridge before Jonah entered the room. He didn't know why, but he didn't want Jonah to think he was eavesdropping.

Jonah didn't go for the stairs as he expected, choosing instead to come and hover at David's side. "Listen, Jesse just stopped me. He's looking for some second opinions on the grimoire. Do you mind if we hold off on going upstairs to help him out?" He smiled softly, tilting his head in a fresh appeal that had probably undone more than one guy before David. "We should be able to sneak away again once Gideon gets up. If you want to, that is."

The smile was too much. *Yeah, David, you're a hell of a Dom. This one is going to learn he can walk all over you.*

"I do want to. You go and help Jesse, and I'll stay here and



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keep looking through the evidence. Maybe by the end of the night, you and I can have this whole house put to rights.”

The smile widened. He was startled when Jonah crowded closer and tilted up to press a kiss to the corner of David’s mouth.

“I just wish I’d known all this weeks ago,” Jonah said, his eyes bright. “London would’ve been a hell of a lot more fun.”

“I was trying to keep things professional between us. In hindsight, I shouldn’t have worried so much about that.”

“Me? Professional? Nah.” Jonah retreated for the stairs now and paused at the bottom. “Thanks for agreeing to help, David. I know Jesse and Gideon will appreciate it.”

“Happy to do it.”

Except, at that moment, David didn’t much care what Jesse and Gideon wanted, or what they would appreciate. But he did care about what Jonah wanted. And if Jonah planned to show his appreciation later for his help, then so much the better.

## CHAPTER 8

Jonah seemed awfully pleased with himself. He literally reminded Jesse of the cat who caught the canary. It wasn't anything he said. It was just the way he held himself. The self-satisfied smile didn't help. Neither did the occasional flirtatious comment. Though, to be fair to Jonah, the flirtatious comment was only very occasionally. In that regard, the younger man was almost subdued.

The book itself was easy to read. Whoever had originally penned it hadn't been a great scholar schooled in obscure demon languages. There was a code, however. Actually, there seemed to be several codes. A different one for each section. That was why he had needed Jonah. Why waste his time

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pulling the code apart himself when Jonah was so eager to help? Besides that, Jesse didn't like some of the things he was reading. Or at least, some of the conclusions he was reaching. Especially regarding why the Votaries worshipped what Jesse had been referring to as a demon.

What did it mean if the demon was actually a Guardian? That was the question that ran through his mind over and over. He hoped there was some passage, some encoded page, that would put that idea to rest. And he didn't intend to take a break until he finished reading it, even if that meant that he and Jonah were locked in the library without break, and Gideon and David were left to their own devices.

*I only see the girl who comes by to bathe me. But I don't really see her. I just know she's there.*

*What do you mean? Is it dark?*

*No. Yes. I think it's bright, but my eyes are closed.*

*You must be so lonely, sweetheart.*

*Lonely? I still have you, don't I?*

*But I'm not here all the time. And I should be. I should be there instead of you.*

*You don't even know where we are.*

*Doesn't matter, Emma. It doesn't matter.*

*"Jesse? Hey?"*

*"Oh, sorry."*

Jonah looked at him curiously. "You do that a lot, you know."

*"What?"*

*"Just sort of...check out."*

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“I was just wool gathering.” Gideon knew about the dreams, but even he didn’t know how vivid they were. Jesse didn’t like to talk about them. It felt strange to try to explain the hours he spent talking to Emma. And the hours he spent reliving those conversations. Gideon was infinitely patient with him—indulgent with him. And why not? He thought that was just how Jesse coped.

“Oh. You know what I’ve never been able to understand?” Jonah looked up from the section of the book Jesse had copied out for him to translate, his face thoughtful. “Let’s say this demon the Votaries worship really is the same one who possessed Emma. How does a Guardian go from being all powerful, to some incorporeal...thing that gets banished with just a little bit of hocus pocus?”

“Well, if—and so far that’s still a big if—if this thing is a Guardian, then John probably didn’t *banish* it. It’d be more like a...a temporary exile.”

“But where did it go? And where did it come from? Why this particular house?”

“It wasn’t the house, remember?” Jesse frowned. “Or maybe you don’t remember. Maybe you weren’t told at the time. But the demon-thing was attracted here because of John. He wanted to take Emma...use her physical form...to kill John.”

Jonah frowned. “And it happened to pick the night of your party to go after him? That’s weird.”

“I don’t know if it is. John never leaves his house. After the demon nearly killed him, he became even more of a

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hermit, and he has all sorts of wards around the house. Maybe the night of the party was the only night the demon had a shot at him.” Jesse leaned back in his chair and chewed on the end of his pen.

Jonah crossed something out in his translation. “Did you ever ask John afterward about it?”

Jesse looked away. “No...we were just happy that it was behind us. Gideon didn’t want to talk about it ever again. I think the whole thing...well, none of us wanted to discuss it or relive it. We sort of all agreed that it would be best to move on.”

The scratching of his pencil stopped. Jesse glanced over to see Jonah looking uncharacteristically solemn. “Did I make everything worse by doing all this?” Jonah asked. “I didn’t want to dredge up bad memories for you, or for Gideon. That wasn’t my intention.”

Jesse shook his head. “No. You didn’t dredge up anything bad. You did the work that I should have been doing already. But I was happy to believe that once it was banished, it was gone forever.”

“It still could be. Just because the Votaries are still around, doesn’t mean the demon they worship is.”

“If it’s a demon. The thing is...we thought we killed it once. Gideon *did* kill it. We transferred all of its power to John and then killed it. But...last night, if Gideon had just let me drop to the floor, unconscious, you might have thought I was dead, right?”

It was the first direct reference he had made to the events

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in the playroom since Jonah had joined him in the library. Just the way the other man's eyes took on a fresh glitter was enough to make Jesse shift uncomfortably in his seat, trying to will away his growing erection.

"Yes, but I know you can't die, so it's a moot point."

"But imagine that you didn't know. My point is that for a little while, maybe just a few seconds, you would have believed Gideon killed me. Demons don't come back after you kill them."

"You really think this is a Guardian, don't you?"

"I'm literally afraid that it is. I'm just hoping that I'm wrong. Of course, the thought of a being besides a Guardian having these powers is pretty damned disturbing, too."

"You guys don't have any arch nemeses or something like that?"

"An arch nemesis? I don't think so. Why?"

Jonah rolled his pencil between his fingers, his features once again thoughtful. "Oh, just thinking about all that power. It just seems so dangerous to put it in the hands of a select few. You'd think *someone* would get pissed about that."

"Technically, somebody did get pissed about that, but he wouldn't be involved in this mess. And there aren't many people who are aware that Guardians even exist. Michelle doesn't like the fact that I'm willing to tell people."

"These Votaries know. There could be cells like that, all over the world."

"Yeah. Or, there could be cells all over the world that just worship evil demons." Jesse leaned over the desk, dropping

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his head in his arms in frustration. “God, I hate this.”

He heard the chair squeak as Jonah moved, but he didn’t expect the nimble hands to start rubbing at his tense back.

“Maybe you should take a break,” Jonah said from behind him. “I could help with that, if you want me to.”

Jesse chuckled, but he didn’t push Jonah’s hands away. “You’re just saying that because you’re not the one who got punished last night.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” His lean body weighted slightly against Jesse’s back as he leaned in. “I didn’t get your cock. That sounds like punishment to me.”

“And, gee, to me, it sounds more like greed.”

Jesse’s head snapped up to see Gideon lounging in the open library door, arms folded across his chest, a bemused smile on his face. Jonah jerked his hands away from Jesse’s shoulders, though at least he didn’t make himself look even guiltier by scurrying back to his chair.

Gideon chuckled and shook his head. “Where’s David?”

“In the kitchen. Derek brought over some more information about Emma’s case, and he agreed to look it over because of his background.” Jesse gestured at the book he had abandoned on the desk. “We were just discussing the growing possibility that the demon was—is—a Guardian.”

“And the fact that it might be makes Jonah think it’s okay to drape himself all over you?” For the accusation in his words, Gideon didn’t sound angry. He actually sounded amused by the whole situation, which was more than a little odd considering his response the night before.

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Jonah shrugged good-naturedly. “After last night, I thought it was worth a shot.”

“To be fair, he was helping me get my thoughts in order before he decided it was worth a shot. Have you been awake long?”

“Long enough. Jonah, go get David, would you? There’s something I think we need to talk about.” He didn’t bother moving out of Jonah’s way, smirking at his attempts to pass without touching Gideon. When he was gone, he added, “So what is it you’re looking at exactly?”

“The book Jonah stole from the cult. He shipped it to Derek just before they nabbed him, and it arrived today. It’s written in code, so we’ve been working through it and... I’m trying not to jump to any conclusions until I finish reading it.” Jesse pushed the book away, happy to think about something else. “What do you need to talk to them about?”

The smirk was back. “You’ll see.”

When Jonah reappeared with David in tow, Gideon waved them toward the long sofa, gesturing for Jesse to join them. David remained standing, but Jonah didn’t have any qualms about making himself comfortable in the corner of the couch.

“Did Jesse tell you we’ve got the grimoire?” Jonah said. “Uncle Derek brought it over this morning.”

Gideon nodded. “But let’s not talk about that right now. Let’s talk about the playroom.”

David pulled himself straighter, like Gideon had punched him in the chest. Jonah’s eyes widened, but his reaction wasn’t quite so pronounced. Jesse had a feeling he knew what was



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coming. He waited for either one of them to speak, but they didn't.

"What about it?" Jesse asked without smiling.

Gideon glanced at him before letting his dark eyes return to Jonah. "Someone used it today. Well, two someones."

"I was just showing David around," Jonah rushed.

"Really? When did showing him around mean having sex on the floor, too?"

Even though that was close to what Jesse suspected, his surprise wasn't feigned. "They had sex on the floor? You had sex on the floor? Jonah...you know better than that. You both do."

"We didn't have sex," David protested.

"We have security cameras in the room," Jesse said flatly.

"We didn't plan to have sex in there," David tried.

"It was just a blow job," Jonah intervened.

Gideon cocked a brow. "And you don't swallow? Somehow, I find that very hard to believe."

"Not that it's any of your business, but I didn't let him."

Some of Gideon's amusement faded. "You had sex in a private area of the house." His voice had gone hard, too. "I would've thought you, of all people, would respect that."

Jonah rose to his feet and placed himself between them. "Don't blame David for this. I'm the one who took him down there. He wouldn't even have known the playroom existed if I hadn't told—" He stopped. Jesse didn't need to see his face to know just what he'd been about to say.

Gideon's voice was deceptively low. "How much did you

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tell him?"

"He told me what happened," David answered before Jonah could speak. "And you're right. I did know better, and I shouldn't have let things go as far as they did. At least in that room. That was...disrespectful."

Gideon nodded briefly in acknowledgement of David's concession, but his gaze returned to Jonah. To Jonah's credit, he didn't quail under the scrutiny.

"You just never know when to stop, do you, Jonah? You promised me you wouldn't say a word, and yet, the first chance you had to get lucky in there again, you grabbed it. With both hands, I'll bet."

"It wasn't—"

"I don't want to hear excuses. The smell of both of you is all over the room. Were you just not going to tell us what you did?" He growled when Jonah glanced at Jesse. "Don't look for help. He's not going to give it to you."

Jesse could tell that Gideon was annoyed—with good reason—but he didn't see any telltale signs of genuine anger. But Jonah and David didn't know Gideon as well. All they saw was an upset vampire. Jesse felt slightly sorry for them.

"He's not a stupid kid," Jesse said mildly. "I'm sure you can think of a way to help him learn about appropriate boundaries."

"Well, someone has to, that's for sure." Gideon looked to David. "Since he dragged you into this mess, do you have any suggestions on how we can teach him his place?"

"I'm not...I have no idea."

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“We have plenty of time if you need to think about it,” Jesse observed, keeping his voice even. The prospect of getting Jonah and David in the playroom at the same time had his heart pounding. “What would you do with him in Gideon’s shoes?”

“I guess he needs time to think about what he did. Maybe an afternoon in one of the cages.”

Only Jesse would have caught the slight flare in Gideon’s nostrils. Which meant either David or Jonah—or fuck, both of them—had responded to the suggestion on a more primal level than Jesse could detect.

“I like that,” Gideon conceded. “But that might give him just a little too much freedom. On the other hand, locking him into one of the spreaders would definitely show him his place.”

“Jonah?” Jesse waited until the younger man tore his gaze from Gideon and met his eyes. He appreciated that Gideon probably wanted to drag him down the stairs and lock him in the spreader without further discussion, but none of them were going to leave that room until Jesse was satisfied that Jonah wasn’t going to be locked up against his will. “Do you think that’s a fair punishment for breaking your promise?”

Jonah swallowed. “You’re not going to just lock me in and leave me down there, are you?”

Jesse snorted. “Are you kidding? Like either one of them would be able to just leave you down there and ignore you.”

Though some of the worry in his eyes receded, Jonah still swiveled his head around to David. “What do you think?”

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“I think you’re not going to be locked up and left alone,” David promised.

The Jonah who addressed Gideon now was the same one Jesse had known all along. There was even a playful slant to his mouth. “Okay, then. That’s fair.”

“Now that we’ve got all that sorted out, you three can get out of my library so I can...” The doorbell cut Jesse off. “Answer the door, I guess.”

Visitors to the house weren’t exactly common. Usually the imposing nature of the mansion deterred more casual visitors. A fact that Gideon, at least, never shed any tears over. He really only expected Derek these days. The bell echoed through the house twice more before he finally reached the door, and he frowned at the impatience. If it were that important, why didn’t he just call them?

But when he pulled the heavy door open, there wasn’t just one person the front porch. At least twelve young men were waiting for him. Moving as one, they dropped to their knees and touched their foreheads to the ground in supplication.

## CHAPTER 9

When Gideon had seen David and Jonah emerging from the basement earlier that day, he'd known exactly what they had been up to. Going down to sniff out the scents of their sex had merely been a formality. It didn't surprise him. Jonah had zero self-restraint, and the other David had been fascinated by the playroom. It was, however, a little surprising that it had happened so quickly, but Gideon wasn't one to argue with fate helping him out for a change. He and Jesse had wanted to know what it was like to have David join them for months now; the fact that a little slut like Jonah got thrown into the mix only made it all that much more delicious.

The punishment was perfect, though he wished he'd been

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aware of David's interest in Jonah sooner. He would've insisted Jesse bring both of them down the previous night then. But once the possibility was raised, there was no denying the way David's body reacted. Gideon didn't actually care too much what they had done in the playroom; the floor had been spotless, and other owners might not have even known it had been used. Knowing they could get their hands on David's cock now...well, whatever they'd done had been worth it.

But before anybody could have any kind of fun, they had to get rid of their unexpected guests.

He followed Jesse out to the foyer. Though he hung back while Jesse answered the door, he had a perfect view of the small crowd congregated there, all young men, though of varying sizes. The moment they saw Jess, their heart rates jumped as one, and they fell to their knees, bowing down in unison.

"Did you post your picture on the Internet or something?" Gideon commented wryly. "Not that I don't think you're gorgeous, but this sudden twink parade tripping over themselves to get to you is starting to make me wonder what you're actually doing on the computer all the time."

"I have no idea what the hell is going on," Jesse said, his attention still fixed on the prostrate young men. "Um...you guys can all stand up now."

"No, we can't. Your Worshipfulness."

Gideon couldn't hold back his bark of laughter. Folding his arms over his chest, he leaned against the wall in a spot where his view would be unobstructed. "Worshipfulness, huh?

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This is going to be good.”

“I’m glad somebody thinks so.” Despite his words, there was a hint of a smile in Jesse’s voice. “Okay, I’m ordering all of you to stand up.”

“Would it please you, my Lord?”

“Yes, yes, it would please me greatly if you stood up. Also, don’t call me that anymore.”

The man nearest to Jesse stood, but everybody else remained on their knees. “What would you like us to call you, then, my Lord?”

“Jesse is fine. Can I...help you guys with something?”

It dawned on Gideon the young man had an English accent. He was so accustomed to hearing it from Jesse, and now with David in the house as well, that it had taken a few seconds to register. His smile faded slightly. These boys were a long way from home.

“We come in humble apology, my—Jesse. My name is Alan Swain, and we are seeking something that was stolen from us. Something very precious.”

“I don’t...do you mean you want to hire us to help you retrieve something?”

Alan frowned. “Hire? No, no, we would never suggest having you demean yourself that way. We come in request of *Castelain’s Monograph*.”

The name made Gideon stiffen. Slowly, he eased back and caught the library door that still stood ajar, closing it without a sound.

“Oh. You’re the Votaries of Castelain, aren’t you?” Jesse

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shook his head and sounded appropriately apologetic. "I don't have your book."

"But you have the thief. And he has the book."

"I saved the thief from you, yes. But he did not have the book when we rescued him. You know that."

Someone in the back of the throng shifted against the man at his side. Alan glanced back at his cohorts, clearly perturbed. He took several seconds to weigh his next words, and the face that turned back to Jesse was a trifle harder.

"The monograph is the holiest of our relics," he said. "The man you protect broke both the law of England, and the honor of our following in stealing it from us. He must be made to relinquish the book, even if it's just to tell us where we can retrieve it."

"I don't think I should make him relinquish anything to you. Kidnapping is against English law as well, the last time I checked." Jesse folded his arms and regarded the group. "But...I can get the book for you. Not right now, but soon."

"He was the one who came to us." Alan seemed intent on pursuing this, and his hands balled into fists before he hid them behind his back. "Surely, you don't condone what he's done."

"I never said I condoned what he did," Jesse said, with remarkable patience in Gideon's opinion. "But I also told you that I don't have the book right now. We can work out something to transfer the book later."

"No." The single harsh word startled Alan more than it did Jesse, his cheeks flushing from something other than the cold.



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“I mean, please, my Lord, we can’t wait. Every day the book is out of our possession is another day someone else might use its power for their own gain. You can’t want others to steal what is rightfully yours.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?”

Alan paused. “What? You mean, ‘my Lord’?”

“Yes. I’m not anybody’s *lord*.”

“But you’re an immortal. We saw you appear and disappear.” Murmurs rose from the men behind him. Alan waved a hand at them, and they immediately fell silent again. “You’re kin to Castelain. Therefore, we honor you.”

“Oh. Well, if you want to honor me, I think you should actually listen to what I’m telling you. You can have the book back. I’ll give it back to you. I will personally deliver it to London myself, if that will make you feel better. But I can’t give it to you right now. I’m...I’m sorry.”

The way the man kept glancing past Jesse’s shoulder made Gideon uneasy. The situation might have started out funny, with people worshipping at Jesse’s feet, but it was obvious Alan wasn’t pleased about being turned away. Gideon wasn’t fearful for Jesse’s safety, but these men hadn’t worried about kidnapping Jonah in order to get this book back. Being denied again might provoke another attack of a sort.

“Is the thief here?” Alan tried. “Let us talk to him. You don’t have to be bothered by this at all if he gives over the book’s location.”

“No. He’s here under my protection. As he’s still recovering from being knocked unconscious, dragged out of

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his apartment, and held without food for three days.”

Something cold flashed in Alan’s eyes. He retreated a step and lifted his chin. “So you do harbor him here. Even though he’d defile holy relics he has no respect for.”

“Yes, I do harbor him here...he’s...he’s one of my followers. And he has not defiled anything.”

Gideon muffled his snort at Jesse’s characterization of Jonah, though in a completely different context, it was entirely true. Alan, on the other hand, didn’t appear nearly as pleased with the new information.

He made a crisp bow at the waist. When he straightened, the men stood behind and around him. Collected in a group like that, it was easy to see the mob threat they represented, and Gideon took a single step closer, just in case they decided to do something stupid.

“My apologies for disturbing you, my Lord. Should you change your mind about turning over the book this evening, we have rooms at the Quality Inn by the airport.” His dark eyes fixed on Jesse with the light of a fanatic gleaming in their depths. “I do hope we see you.”

“The Quality Inn. Got it. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

They didn’t acknowledge Jesse’s promise as they filed away from the porch and back to the cars they had apparently rented at the airport. Jesse watched them until the cars disappeared down the driveway, then he shut the door.

“Okay, that was totally insane, right?”

Gideon smiled. “Oh, I don’t know. I have the urge to get on my knees in front of you all the time.”

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Jesse rested with his back against the door, his arms still folded over his chest. “You can joke, but I feel like a complete ass.”

“Why? Because a group of nubile young men are making a completely reasonable request, and you turned them down for no reason other than the fact Jonah’s got a crush on you?”

Jesse didn’t even crack a smile. “That’s not why I turned them down. I turned down their completely reasonable request because the thing that we thought was a demon could very well be a Guardian. I need to finish reading the book to find out.”

Joking his way out of Jesse’s mood wasn’t going to work. Gideon thought he stood a pretty good shot at doing it if he mentioned the spreader and David naked, but that almost felt like cheating. He opted for the direct approach instead.

“I’m going to pull a Derek here, and ask why it matters.” He approached carefully, to lean against the door at Jesse’s side. “It’s gone. John promised us that. What difference is it going to make finding out we were fighting a Guardian and not a demon?”

“Because we gave John his power, didn’t we? We drained this Castelain, and we funneled all that power right to John. The power to destroy dimensions.”

The conclusion brought a frown to Gideon’s face. He hadn’t considered it like that. “But if that was true,” he argued, “John wouldn’t still be practicing black magic out of his house. He’d be doing something a hell of a lot more destructive.”

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“He doesn’t know it. That’s all. He has no reason to suspect that demon had any powers like that. Christ, Gideon, he had enough power to banish it to another dimension. It’s only a matter of time until he figures it out.”

Jesse’s conclusions just got more and more dire. “He’s had two years. You don’t think he would’ve figured it out in that time period if he could actually fuck around with dimensions?”

“Why would he even think to try? Look...I’m just saying, I’ve got to finish reading that book so I know if we have a real problem on our hands.”

Gideon could think of a lot of reasons John might give it a shot, but he held his tongue. There was another matter that needed to be addressed, too. “You realize the Mickey Mouse Club is going to be keeping an eye out for Jonah, right? We’re going to have to keep him here until we know there’s not a threat to him anymore.”

“You’re willing to make the sacrifice of keeping him around, huh?”

Gideon ignored the knowing gleam in Jesse’s eye. “For the greater good, and for your peace of mind, I think I can put up with him for a few days.” He headed back to the library to tell Jonah he wasn’t going anywhere any time soon. “Especially if we keep him naked and in a spreader the whole time.”

Jesse followed Gideon, sliding past him once they reached the library door. He went directly to the desk, sitting down and reaching for the book without acknowledging the questioning looks on David and Jonah’s faces.

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“What’s going on?” David asked.

“The Votaries of Castelain decided hopping the pond was worth it to get their little book back,” Gideon explained.

Jonah’s eyes widened. “They’re here?”

“Well, not anymore. Jesse refused to hand you or the book over.”

“I told them to cool it until tomorrow, and then I’d return the book.” Jesse thumbed through the text in question. “They didn’t like that. For a bunch of cultists who think I’m some sort of god, they’re remarkably disobedient.”

“You refused to hand over Jonah?” David asked. “So they still want him?”

“Yeah.” Gideon perched on the corner of the desk. “Well, they want the book, and since Jesse told them he didn’t have it, they figure Jonah is the next best thing.”

“If they think Jesse’s some sort of god, can’t he order them to leave me alone or something?” Jonah said.

“I tried. I’m not *their* god. I’m just...what did they call me? His kin. I suppose I don’t have any real authority over them.”

“But we think you should stay here until this blows over.” Gideon used the *we* even though he had been the one to make the statement in the foyer. He knew Jesse would agree, even if Jonah didn’t look awfully appealing naked and begging. “Just to be safe.”

“I’ll stay, too, then,” David said. “I mean, until these crackpots go home.”

The declaration didn’t surprise Gideon, but Jonah was

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more than a little taken aback by it. “What about your job? I thought you wanted to get out of this mess.”

“They’re not going to fire me. I’ll just tell them that an emergency came up and I’ll be out a few more days. Besides, if Jesse gives them back the book tomorrow, they’ll probably just quietly go home and everything will be back to normal by tea time.”

Gideon snorted. “Stick around a little bit longer, and you’ll see that this actually *is* normal for us. Someone’ll have to run and get Jonah some more—” He stopped and frowned, his gaze sweeping over Jonah’s trim body. He wore a different shirt than he had the day before, and it wasn’t either his or Jesse’s. “Derek must’ve dropped off more than Emma’s case stuff, I take it.”

“Enough to see me through for a couple days, in case this doesn’t get resolved.”

“It’s going to get resolved,” Jesse said firmly. “I’m going to finish this tonight, make a copy if I need to, and then wrap all this stuff up tomorrow.”

Jonah went around the other side of the desk, fussing with scattered sheets of paper that held unfamiliar scrawls. “What can I do to help?”

Gideon lifted a brow. “You’re supposed to be in a spreader, I thought.”

He bit back his smile when all three hearts in the room leapt. “Now?” Jonah’s voice almost squeaked from his desire.

Jesse turned back to the desk, and judging from his body language, he was already mentally checking out of the

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conversation. “You’ll have to do it without me. I’m not leaving here until I’ve got this done.”

Jonah looked between them. “Can we do it after?”

“That is up to Gideon.”

Jesse was clearly too distracted by this problem if even the prospect of the playroom wasn’t enough to get his attention. “We’ll do it after,” Gideon promised. “Does that mean you’re going to stick around in here and help Jess?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess that just leaves you and me, David.” Gideon jerked a thumb toward the door. “Since you’re going to be here for another day or two, do you want to check out what I have to see if there’s anything that’ll fit you?”

Jesse snorted. “I wouldn’t miss out on this opportunity, David. It’s a rare person who is invited to Gideon’s closet.”

“Just because some of us care about how we dress...”

“There’s a difference between caring and being obsessed,” Jesse said under his breath.

“I’ll remember that the next time you want to go book shopping.” He headed for the door. “Come on, David.”

“At least my books are actually useful,” Jesse threw out before Gideon shut the library door.

David smiled. “Does he always get the last word?”

“He tries. His problem is, he’d rather be naked most of the time, so he can’t really appreciate a nice shirt.” He led the way up the stairs. “Not that I can really argue with that kind of logic.”

“So...you saw these cult guys. Do you think they’re going

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to try anything stupid or be a real threat?”

Concern was in every word from David's mouth. The night before, Gideon would have thought it a natural reaction to his own circumstances. Now, he knew it was as much for Jonah as it was for himself.

“I think any time you've got a group of people obsessed with something, you run the risk of violence. Not to mention the fact that it's usually pretty hard to predict what crazy people are going to do next. So I guess...yes, to both your questions.”

“That isn't very comforting. Why is Jesse putting Jonah's life at risk? I don't get why we can't just give the book back and send them on their way.”

“As long as he stays here, Jonah's life isn't in danger.” They reached the bedroom, and he pushed open the door, motioning for David to enter first. “And Jesse wouldn't have kept the book if he didn't think it was absolutely necessary. We were doing this a long time before he ever even heard of Guardians. It's against who he is to even consider putting someone at risk, let alone a friend.”

“I know...I don't mean to say that Jesse is being casual with Jonah's life. I'm just worried about him. It seems like somebody's got to worry about him, because he doesn't ever take an extra second to worry about himself.”

Gideon opened the wardrobe doors and stepped out of the way, allowing David free rein to look through the carefully organized clothes. “He does have a tendency to rush headlong into things, doesn't he?” The need to say something more,



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especially in light of David's obvious concern, was too strong to ignore. "Listen, about what happened with last night, if Jonah had even once hinted at not being comfortable with it, I would've stopped and sent him back to bed. I want you to know that."

"I know." David glanced at Gideon briefly. "I didn't know this morning. That's why I kept pressing him for information until he told me everything. But after seeing your playroom, it's clear to me that you take your role as a Master seriously. And I guess it would be silly not to trust you at this point. Derek and Jonah are both comfortable around you, and you've apparently got a teenage girl living here. So I guess you know how to control your...vampiric impulses."

"Forty years of practice." It was on the tip of his tongue to joke about only chewing on the bad guys, but he thought maybe he wasn't quite at that kind of place yet with David. Instead, he added, "I also would have been a little more careful if I'd realized you were interested in Jonah. Or that he was interested in you."

"He's not." David took a dark blue button down shirt out of the closet. "This looks like it's big enough across the shoulders. Mind if I try it on?"

"Help yourself." He tried not to drool at the smooth, dark skin of David's back as he pulled off his shirt. "What makes you think Jonah's not interested?"

"Because he's interested in Jesse. Considering what you did last night, that's probably not a revelation to you." He pushed his arms through the sleeves and flexed his shoulders.

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“Yeah, this is a good fit.”

Leaning back on his elbows gave Gideon an even better view of David's hard body. The fabric molded over each muscle, straining slightly across his biceps. David left it untucked, which unfortunately hid the tight curve of his ass, but when he stepped sideways to look at his reflection in a mirror, Gideon glimpsed the bulge of his cock.

“Jonah has a crush. That's all. And until last night when I was punishing him, Jesse has never once encouraged it. Frankly, I think it's more a jealousy thing than anything else. Not that I think he's jealous of me, but of the fact that Jesse has a lifestyle as a sub that Jonah's always wanted.”

“Whatever is going on in his mind, I think that if he had a choice at this moment to be with anybody in this house, he would choose Jesse.” David shrugged. “Which makes sense, because the day after tomorrow, Jesse is still going to be here in Chicago, and I'm going to be on the other side of the planet.”

“You do have a point with that. But the fact of the matter is, Jonah's looking for a Master. And Jesse might like to top occasionally, but he's a sub at heart. He is never going to be able to give Jonah what he wants. Or what he really needs.”

“You and I know that. I think Jonah is going to have to figure it out for himself, though. Which is probably going to be a pretty rude awakening.” David peeled off the shirt and draped it over a nearby chair. “Do you have any jeans, or shorts even, that will fit?”

“I am not giving you shorts in the middle of a Chicago

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winter.” Rising from the bed, Gideon went to the wardrobe and pulled out a faded pair of Levi’s from the far end. “These are the longest pair I have. My legs are shorter than yours, but the waist should be a good match.”

“Cheers.” David undid his pants and pushed them down his legs without a hint of shame or modesty. The boxers, however, did not follow. His thighs flexed as he pulled the jeans up and over his undeniably nice ass. “Oh, these will be fine. I don’t feel like I’m in short pants or anything.”

“We can toss your other clothes in the laundry. And if it turns out you need more, you’re always welcome in here.”

David smiled. “For just clothes, though, right?”

Shrugging, Gideon matched his grin. “Let’s just call it an open-ended invitation.” He deliberately let his gaze drop to David’s midsection and line of his cock the jeans did nothing to hide. “Jonah’s going to be a very lucky boy.”

“Since I’ve got an open-ended invitation now, he might not be the only lucky one.”

With a statement like that, it was impossible not to have his mouth water. “Why don’t we go down to the kitchen and discuss just how lucky Jonah’s going to be? I have a feeling Jesse will break sooner rather than later anyway.”

“You think he will?” David quickly buttoned the shirt he took from Gideon’s wardrobe. “He seemed pretty focused on reading the grimoire.”

“Trust me.” Gideon dared to smooth out a wrinkle along David’s chest, letting his fingers linger over a nipple already perking to attention. “Nobody knows my boy like I do.”

## CHAPTER 10

Even though Gideon had taken the time to show off in front of their guests and make a great dinner, Jesse could barely touch his food. His appetite was gone, and his mind was back in the library, on the book he had carefully placed in his safe. He wasn't prepared to talk about everything he had read—or fully work out the implications—but everybody seemed to sense that. Or they were too tied up in other thoughts to think about pressing Jesse.

A part of him would have even been happy if Dominique had chosen that moment to bound into the kitchen, full of enthusiasm and stories about people Jesse didn't know. Except, it was Friday night and Dominique had opted to spend

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the night at a friend's house. Michelle had retired to her room without even pausing for dinner, but Jesse supposed that was just as well. He wasn't ready to talk to her, either. The situation was not great, but it wasn't a high priority. Nobody's life was currently at risk, except Jonah's, and they weren't going to let anybody get within two hundred feet of him.

Jesse was still working on his first helping after everybody else had finished their second. He only listened to the conversation with half an ear until David caught his attention. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Jonah wanted to know if you were all finished in the library for the night."

"Oh. Oh, yeah. For the night, at least."

"So that means your night is free." Jonah's eyes were bright, constantly dancing around from Jesse to David to Gideon, back to David, and then to Jesse yet again. "I've got a punishment to get, remember?"

Jesse remembered. He felt oddly distant from the entire situation. It didn't seem right to call it a punishment, since Jonah was going to get exactly what he'd always wanted. But then, Gideon wasn't interested in actually correcting Jonah's behavior.

"Yeah, my night is free. I don't think my brain is up to any more work."

When Jonah rose excitedly from his chair, Gideon's hand shot out and grabbed his wrist, holding him still as he turned to Jess. "I could make it a real punishment and ban him from the playroom so it's just the two of us," Gideon said quietly.

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“Just say the word.”

The offer was enough to raise Jesse's spirits considerably. The fact that Gideon was even willing to lock Jonah out meant he knew exactly what Jesse needed that night. Which meant that Gideon would see to it that Jesse got what he needed, one way or the other.

“Thanks, but it's not necessary. We should get him downstairs before he bursts.”

Gideon released Jonah, in favor of reaching for Jesse instead. His strength helped Jess stand, and it was his guidance that led the foursome out of the kitchen and to the basement door. His thumb caressed the side of Jesse's hand the entire way. When they reached the playroom, he barred the way for Jonah to try rushing past.

“Don't think I'm going to tolerate the kind of behavior I put up with last night,” he warned. “There will be no questioning of a command, whether it comes from me or David. You'll address us the way we deserve to be addressed, do I make myself clear?”

Jonah's Adam's apple bobbed. “Yes, Sir.”

“On your knees, then.”

Jonah obeyed. When Gideon released his hand, Jesse did the same.

Jonah watched the two men standing above him, but Jesse kept an eye on Jonah's reactions. He had been itching for this, and Jesse did not blame him at all. But he didn't know if Jonah had ever been involved with an actual Dom who had actual tools and toys and expected actual obedience. Jesse was

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curious to see if Jonah could handle it—if he would embrace it or if he would realize that it might not have been everything he had thought, or hoped, it would be.

Gideon entered the room first and went to the cupboard that housed the cuffs and spreader bars. He selected one that would keep Jonah's wrists locked to the bar beside his ankles, rendering him utterly powerless. From their vantage outside the door, Jesse could tell that he also picked a gag that would hold Jonah's jaw open. David waited until Gideon put both items in the center of the room before he gestured at Jonah.

"You first, pet. Stay on your knees."

To his credit, Jonah only hesitated for a moment. He dropped to his hands and crawled into the room, keeping his head low. He must have had his gaze high enough to maintain David in his sights, though, because his path was true, ending just a foot away from David's legs. The first thing he did was bow his head and run his lips over David's feet.

Gideon arched a brow at David, but his next words were for Jesse's ears. "Enter, boy."

Jesse followed Jonah, his cock getting harder the closer he got to Gideon. He wasn't often envious of Gideon's powerful senses, but he wondered just how heavy the smell of arousal was in the room. It must have been intoxicating.

"Get undressed, pet." David's voice was lower, his accent somehow more pronounced. "But stay on your knees."

Jonah looked momentarily unsure, but his hands went to his shirt anyway, trembling slightly as he opened the collar enough to pull the shirt over his head. Fear or nerves, Jesse

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wondered. He'd bet the latter. If there was even an ounce of alarm coming from Jonah's pores, Jesse was confident Gideon would have said or done something.

Tossing aside the shirt exposed the solid line of Jonah's shoulders. His unblemished skin beckoned Jesse to touch, but David was the one who acted. He ran his knuckles up the side of Jonah's neck, then along his jaw to his mouth. Jonah promptly parted his lips, ready for anything David might offer.

"Not right now," David said, pulling his fingers away. "Get those pants off, pet."

It was more difficult for Jonah to work the pants off his legs without standing, but he managed. His slender length was already fully erect, and it rested against his stomach. Jesse licked his lips, remembering the small taste he had got the night before. Jonah was delicious, and if either David or Gideon didn't take advantage of the chance to get their mouths around him, they were fools.

"Go ask Gideon to lock you into your spreader," David instructed.

For all his eagerness to be in the playroom, Jonah seemed reluctant to leave David's presence. His crawl toward Gideon was slower and more careful, his head still bowed when he came to a halt.

"Please, Sir..." The restraint in Jonah's voice amazed even Jesse. "I need to be locked into the irons."

"Do you know why?" Gideon asked.

"For disobeying you. For disrespecting you."

The answer satisfied Gideon, and he slid the spreader bar



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beneath Jonah's ankles. Prodding Jonah's shoulders, he pushed him forward until his forehead nearly met the floor. Jonah held completely still as Gideon locked first his ankles into place, then his wrists right next to them.

Jesse felt a curious thrill at seeing Jonah locked in the spreader—in his spreader. He was always the bound one. The one at Gideon's mercy. He empathized with what Jonah must have been feeling, and with that empathy came a small pang of jealousy. At the same time, he loved the way Jonah looked with his head down and his ass in the air. He loved the curve of his spine, the slight hitch in his breath, and the way his fingers wiggled as he became accustomed to the heavy steel around his wrists. His cock pressed against his thigh, aching to be free of the confines.

David went around to the front of Jonah and dropped down to his haunches. He held Jonah's chin in one hand, forcing the younger man to look up.

"Now I want you to ask Gideon to put the gag in your mouth."

Jonah swallowed, his gaze sliding sideways to see the toy in Gideon's hand. It wasn't so much a gag for keeping one quiet as it was to force one's mouth to stay open. The stainless steel device spread the jaw and lips to make them impossible to close, even if you wanted to. The real genius in using a device like that wasn't in how it took away the ability to choose to shut your mouth. It was how it stopped you from containing your desire once it got too much to contain. Jesse knew from experience that once Jonah started to drool around

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the cock that would invariably fill his throat, he wouldn't be able to stop. He'd end up coating the prick in his mouth, probably even have it drip down his chin.

Jesse's cock got a little bit harder at that.

Jonah's whispered request made Gideon smile. Crouching down, he slipped the gag over Jonah's head, locking it into place. He ran his thumb over the wet lower lip before pulling back.

"There's still someone with too many clothes on in this room." He looked at Jesse, his eyes nearly black with desire. "Strip, boy."

Jesse nearly sighed with relief at the order. He muttered, "Yes, Sir," before pulling his shirt over his head. He scrambled to rid himself of the clothes, and his skin broke out in goose bumps as a cool breeze from the overhead vent whispered over his back. From his angle, he could see the bulge in Gideon's pants, and he itched to feel Gideon's flesh.

He knelt in front of Gideon so his mouth was level with his fly. "May I, Sir?"

"You may."

His hand dropped to the top of Jesse's head, massaging it gently as Jesse leaned in first and mouthed the hard line of his erection through his pants. He used the edge of his teeth, blunted as they were by the fabric, and was rewarded with the slight tug at his hair as Gideon tightened his grip. His hands worked at the button and zipper, the metallic rasp as it opened echoing inside the room. Gideon remained completely still while Jesse pushed his pants down, only moving once they

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reached his ankles, but when Jesse caught the exposed length with his lips, he groaned in obvious satisfaction.

“I’m going to fuck the brat first.” His cock twitched against Jesse’s palm when Jess nibbled at the shaft. “So it’ll be your job to make sure David is good and slick when it’s his turn.”

Jesse stiffened at Gideon’s declaration, disappointed that he would have to take his mouth from his lover’s cock. The disappointment only lasted until Gideon mentioned David. He looked up to Gideon through his lashes and spoke against the smooth skin. “Yes, Sir.”

He couldn’t turn away from Gideon, but he heard David behind him, shedding the clothes that Gideon had allowed him to borrow. He heard Jonah’s sharp intake of breath—a clear sign that he, at least, was watching David.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw David step behind Gideon, his arms coming around to start undoing the buttons of his shirt. Jesse was torn between licking Gideon’s cock and watching the slow undressing, the contrast of dark fingers against paler skin as David exposed Gideon’s chest. In the end, he opted for both, cradling the shaft against his palm as he tilted his head and sucked on Gideon’s balls instead.

Gideon groaned. He pulled at Jesse’s head, burying his nose in the musky skin of his sac. His head tipped back to rest against David’s shoulder, and his hips rotated in a small circle. It took a moment for Jesse to realize he was grinding his ass against David’s erection. Would Gideon let David fuck him? Just the thought of witnessing it was enough to make Jesse

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reach down and fist his own cock.

A whimper from behind him reminded Jesse of Jonah's presence. Gideon straightened, noticing the location of Jesse's other hand with a raised brow.

"Who said you could touch yourself yet, boy?"

Jesse's hand fell from his cock and he murmured a soft apology. That wasn't enough, though, and Gideon pulled away from him, stepping out of reach. Jesse almost vocalized his frustration, but he held it back. He wanted to follow Gideon with his eyes, but David caught Jesse's chin and forced his attention forward. When they were both standing, they were about eye level, but from his position on the floor, David seemed much, much taller. His cock jutted forward, and Jesse throbbed with the thought of getting the entire length down his throat. Even though Gideon had already told him he would have the chance to get David slick enough to fuck Jonah, Jesse didn't dare lean forward to wrap his mouth around the glistening crown.

Gideon returned with a bottle of lube in his hands. David tapped on Jesse's shoulder, and together, they shifted until both of them had a view of Jonah's bowed form. David had the best angle. He was riveted on the sight of Gideon crouching down behind Jonah and squirting the lube directly onto the top of Jonah's crack.

Jerking, Jonah made a gargled sound in his throat, drawing it out into a moan as the lube dripped down over his hole and further onto his hanging balls. Gideon followed it with his finger, spreading it evenly. When the tiny opening clenched

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further, Gideon chuckled.

“You think you’re excited about my cock?” His finger traced around the tight ring, relaxing it with each revolution. “Just wait until David’s buried inside you.”

Jonah moaned, as if to say he couldn’t wait. Jesse’s ass clenched, and he wondered if he would get his own chance at David’s cock—or Gideon’s, for that matter. It felt like it had been weeks since he had been fucked, though it had only been three days. He could only see half of Jonah’s face, but the young man’s color was already high, his cheeks splotted with bright red. He tried to rock against Gideon’s hand, but he stopped as soon as Gideon slapped his cheek with his other palm.

The only thing that could distract Jesse from the sight was the rich smell of David’s skin. His length was almost touching Jesse’s lips, and he could almost taste that salty, clear fluid. Jesse put his hands behind his back and gripped his wrist—it was the only way to keep his hands off his own cock and David’s body.

Gideon started with two fingers, driving them past the waiting muscle without preamble. He kept Jonah from arching upward with a firm hand at the small of his back, a touch Jesse felt as well when David rested his hand on Jesse’s shoulder. Two fingers became three on the very next stroke, and Gideon twisted his wrist in order to stretch Jonah even further.

“I know you don’t see this as punishment, brat.” He thrust in and out, taking his time with each one. Jesse had only ever seen Gideon with Emma before last night, but this was

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different. With Emma, Gideon had always been just a little bit gentler, even when he was in full Master mode. This was carnal, lust in its rawest form. “But that’s because you’re not seeing the whole picture.” He leaned over Jonah’s back, his mouth at the other man’s ear though his voice remained loud enough for Jesse and David to hear. “See, the punishment part comes where nobody touches your cock. If you want to come, it’ll be without contact, do you understand?”

Jesse wasn’t sure if Jonah’s groan was disappointment or excitement. Either way, the sound went straight to his racing heart, accelerating it even further.

Jonah’s groan also made David’s cock jerk, and the velvety skin moved against Jesse’s lips. He let the tip of his tongue catch against the crown. It was nothing more than a teasing caress, but David’s fingers tightened on his shoulder. Lust wound around Jesse’s chest, pulling tighter and tighter until he didn’t think he could tolerate it for another second. David should already be filling his throat.

“Sir?” Jesse rasped. “May I use my mouth on David now?”

When Gideon glanced over, his nostrils flared. “Do it, David,” he said. “Just don’t let him get too greedy about making you come.” His mouth canted. “He’s a little slut for a gorgeous cock.”

David put one hand on the back of his head and held the base of his cock with the other. Jesse opened his mouth eagerly, his tongue already tingling with the promise of David’s length, and the weight of his arousal. David held him in place with a firm hand—one that might not have been as

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strong as Gideon's, but was strong enough. David didn't guide his cock to Jesse's waiting mouth. Instead, he pushed Jesse's head down.

"Start with my balls."

Jesse didn't have a problem with that. He pulled David's sac between his lips with an eager moan.

His first hard suck prompted David to spread his legs further apart. His balls were different than Gideon's—larger, heavier—but the texture was much the same. So was the way he pulled Jesse as tight into his body as he could, forcing Jesse to bury his nose in dark, musky skin. It was harder to breathe that way, but everything he did take in was pure David, arousing enough for Jesse to feel pre-come drip down the length of his own cock.

Jonah's cry distracted him for a moment. Out of the corner of his eye, Jesse saw Gideon pushing into the other man's opening, the flesh stretching to accommodate his girth. It was as delicious as he'd witnessed the night before, but the real treat was yet to come. Jesse wanted to see David's magnificent cock disappearing into that tight hole, hear Jonah's screams at being split open. From what Jesse remembered, David would be torturously slow, drawing it out as long as possible. It made him even more anxious to experience David's cock for himself.

Gideon's grunts momentarily drowned out every other sound in the room. At first, Jonah barely made a sound, but as Gideon began to move faster, the shouts spilled from his lips. They were shapeless because of the gag—they could have

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been screams for anything, but they didn't disrupt Gideon's relentless rhythm.

David moaned and yanked Jesse by the hair, forcing his mouth even with David's tip. It was dripping with pre-come now, each drop like an invitation for Jesse's tongue. David caressed his lips, pulling his mouth open with his thumb, testing the texture of his bottom lip. Without taking his attention from Gideon and Jonah, he slid his cock into Jesse's waiting mouth.

"I think I'm going to pretend I'm already in the pet's ass," David said, moving his hips with enough force to push his cock to the back of Jesse's throat.

Jesse had taken a lot of cocks in his time, but the reality of David filling his throat scorched his entire body. He gripped David's thighs, using him to help balance, and though Gideon might have slapped his hands away and forced him to stay still another way, David seemed too intent on fucking his face. He pulled back after only staying in Jesse's throat for a moment, then drove forward again until his balls slapped against Jesse's chin.

Jesse was mainly accustomed to sucking off vampires—their flesh was cool unless they were already warm from friction or blood. But David was hot. Unbelievably hot. And his flesh throbbed with his steady pulse, pressing against Jesse's tongue and scraping against the roof of his mouth. He was only a bit wider than Gideon, only a bit longer, but it felt like more. Especially when his throat bulged as David cut off his air supply. The rhythm was a little rougher than Jesse had



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expected from him. Jesse had the feeling that it was rougher than he'd treat Jonah, too. He was going to have a sore throat when this was all over, especially if Gideon wanted Jesse's throat once he was done with Jonah's ass.

He lost track of time. His head swam from the constant assault, his tongue and lips slightly numb from the friction of cock to skin. With each stroke, David stayed in his throat another second longer. Jesse was ready to burst out of his own flesh when he heard Gideon shout, his orgasm rattling all the way to Jesse's bones.

David paused with Jesse's nose buried in the tight curls at the base of his cock. Jesse tried to look up through his lashes, but he couldn't see what had prompted the cessation.

"Just wait until it's your come dripping out of his ass," Gideon said.

Jesse held still, but he didn't stop swallowing, his throat muscles flexing around David's cock, massaging the head. He slid his tongue around the shaft, trying to taste as much as he could before David eased away and shifted his attention to Jonah.

"Are you going to let your boy get a taste before I fuck him?" David asked.

Gideon's eyes danced with amusement. "Well, somebody's got to clean him up for you." He stepped out of the way, his cock still hard. "Do it, boy. David's our guest. I want the brat to be as fresh for him as he was for me, which means not a single drop gets left behind."

Jesse didn't try to move until David released the back of

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his head. He took his time sliding off David's cock, and had to swallow several times to try to soothe the slight pain in the back of his throat. He didn't waste any time crawling across the floor to Jonah. His ass was stretched and red, and Jesse knew just by looking at him that the lightest touch would be overwhelming.

He started at Jonah's thigh and caught a line of come. He dragged his tongue up Jonah's smooth skin, following that line all the way to Jonah's hole.

\* \* \*

Jonah cried out at the very first contact of tongue to skin, and squeezed his eyes shut in a vain attempt to control the sensations within his flesh. He'd been tied up more than once. Cuffed to a bed, a chair, himself. He'd been the bottom in a threeway twice, and been spanked more times than he could count.

None of it compared to this. Not even the night before, impaled on Gideon's cock as Jesse was forced to watch, compared.

His muscles screamed from the passive position, his knees sore from resting on the hard, cold floor. His jaw ached from being held open for so long. Though he'd tried to hold back his screams, he'd failed miserably, which had exacerbated the drool that had started collecting at the corner of his lips, tickling them as it dripped out. Gideon's blunt fingers had been very thorough as he stretched Jonah's hole. Every time he'd turned his wrist, his nails scraped over Jonah's prostate.

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His cock was harder than he had ever remembered it being before, and when Gideon had pulled out of his ass, Jonah had almost wept in frustration. Release was just out of his reach, and as Jesse began almost tenderly licking the back of his thighs, Jonah felt it ebbing even further away.

How long had he waited to feel Jesse's mouth on him? Two years. Ever since the housewarming party when Derek had introduced them and Jonah had fallen head over in lust. Getting sucked the previous night had been as satisfying as getting fucked, more so, maybe, because it was Jesse doing it. Now, Jesse took the same care, tracing over Jonah's sore opening, never pushing so hard that it would hurt. It was everything Jonah had always wanted, but still, though he hated to admit it, something was missing.

The edge, maybe? That need to be pushed, to feel a firm hand taking charge? Jonah didn't need the pain the way Jesse did, even though he got off on it just as easily. But he did need the dominance.

He cried out when Jesse clamped his lips over his hole and sucked. Hard. His back arched, his head fell back. Every nerve ending in his skin electrified. He wished he had his hands to do something, touch anything, but the cuffs made it impossible to do more than clench them into fists. His nails dug into his palms, and he opened his eyes to try and stop the swirling inside his head.

To see David now standing in front of him.

The larger man pushed on Jonah's head until he leaned back as far as he could, until he was almost sitting on his

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heels. Jesse adjusted his position behind him, but didn't take his mouth away from Jonah's body. David caressed his mouth—just like he had done before—only this time, Jonah couldn't close his lips around David's thumb. He gently slapped Jonah's cheek with his cock. It was still wet from Jesse's mouth, and Jonah tried to chase it, but David held him still.

"Are you going to fuck his mouth first?" he heard Gideon ask behind him.

"It'd be a shame not to take advantage of this gag." David followed up his observation by sliding his length into Jonah's mouth, slowly pushing until Jonah's nose reached the base. He moved slowly, like he wasn't interested in doing anything except tease Jonah. "Do you want a turn at his mouth?"

"No, I was thinking I'd reward Jesse with that."

If his mouth hadn't been full, Jonah would've cried out from how tightly Jesse gripped him at that. Had Gideon touched him? Was it the prospect of Jonah sucking him off? He hated that he couldn't turn around and look, but there was no way he'd abandon David's cock to find out, even if David was benevolent enough to give him rein enough to do so.

David continued his slow slide in and out of Jonah's mouth. If Jonah could have moved, he would have grabbed David, held him still, and swallowed his length. But he was helpless to do anything except sample his skin with his tongue while Jesse continued to lap at his flesh.

"Is that hole clean, yet?" David demanded.

Jesse grunted. The sound made Jonah's channel clench. It

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wouldn't be long until he and David traded places.

Teeth scraped across his ass as Jesse dug deeper. Jonah didn't know which he liked more—the suction when Jesse sealed his lips or the drive of his tongue as he invariably fucked Jonah. He wriggled his hips to try and get closer, and promptly got a slap across the side of his thigh.

“I've got gear that'll keep you completely immobile if you keep that up, brat,” Gideon warned.

Jonah immediately stilled. He locked eyes with David, wondering what his impression was of Gideon's order, but the other man's face was inscrutable. Gorgeous, though. He'd always thought David was a beautiful specimen of a man. Finding out he was gay, too, on the heels of finally getting into Gideon's playroom, had made it feel like he was getting Christmas early. David moved with the feral grace of a wildcat. A very large wildcat. It wasn't the same danger that Gideon exuded. Though there was no mistaking David's command, Jonah never felt threatened by him.

The sudden absence of Jesse's mouth was a shock to his system. His first instinct was to move his hips back, to seek out his tongue once again, but Gideon's warning still echoed in his ears. He suspected Gideon didn't think he was very bright, but somehow, it seemed important to prove to David that just because he broke his promise to Gideon didn't mean that he couldn't follow orders at all. He could. He wasn't the sort of sub who got off when topping from the bottom. So he kept himself completely still, waiting for whatever would come next.

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“Is your boy done, Gideon?”

“Yeah. The brat’s all yours.”

Jonah took a deep breath when David finally pulled his cock free of Jonah’s mouth. It wouldn’t be for long, not if Gideon kept his promise to Jesse. The two other men appeared at David’s side, though Jesse was no longer on his knees. Now, he stood in front of Gideon, leaning against his chest, Gideon’s arms around his waist as he slowly jerked Jesse’s erection.

“I do have to give him credit for looking good in that spreader,” Gideon commented. “He’s rough around the edges, but I think he’s probably a natural.”

“He does look good,” David agreed, and from the corner of his eye, Jonah saw him reach into his pants for something. The sharp sound of foil tearing made Jonah tingle. He knew that sound. “I think he’d look better if he learned how to mind.”

Jonah waited for Jesse to add something—he had thought about being put in a spreader or cage for Jesse more than once—but he didn’t say a word. Still, Jonah thought he agreed with the two Masters, especially since his cock was leaking clear fluid and his eyes were half-closed, heavy lidded with desire.

“Sir, may I make a suggestion?” At Gideon’s nod, Jesse continued. “He’d look better with a leash.”

A slow, dangerous smile curved Gideon’s mouth. “That’s my brilliant boy,” he growled. He nipped at Jesse’s neck for a moment before releasing him and striding over to the rear

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cupboard. “Do you have a preference, David?”

“A chain. Something heavy enough that he can feel.”

He couldn’t see what Gideon pulled out, but he heard it. Links clanked against links. Jonah’s eyes widened at the silver pouring through Gideon’s fingers when he came strolling back, along with the thick leather collar he carried with it.

Gideon crouched and buckled the collar around Jonah’s neck. Jonah waited for the weight of the leash to join it, but instead, Gideon straightened and moved out of his view. “I’ll let you do the honors,” he heard him say. The chain clinked some more.

David’s chest pressed against his back, a wall of solid muscle. The leather was smooth against his neck, but it wasn’t nearly as nice as the texture of David’s skin. Just as the chain hooked into place, Jonah felt the soft pressure of David’s lips against his neck, just above the line of the collar. It shocked him so much, he barely even felt the chain weighing against his neck. Not until David began wrapping it around his hand, tightening the slack. It wasn’t quite enough to pull him back—but it was enough to make him tense in anticipation.

While David held him with one hand, he pulled Jonah’s cheeks apart with the other. Jonah shuddered, knowing he was already well stretched for David’s girth. The blunt tip pressed against Jonah’s hole, the lubricant on the condom just slick enough to ease David’s entry.

He cried out as the head breached the outer ring of muscle, but that wasn’t enough to make David stop. He continued to press forward, inch after excruciating inch, filling Jonah’s ass

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in ways Gideon hadn't touched. Fire erupted along his skin, chased away by a rash of goose bumps, and shivers wracked through his flesh. It wasn't pain. Pain didn't even begin to enter the equation. It was sensation too virulent to contain or describe. The slight pull of the leash, the hot contact of David's thighs against his own, the restraint of the iron around his wrists and ankles...it all added up to drive him back to the edge he'd teetered precariously on earlier.

"That's what you look like," Gideon murmured. But when Jonah blinked up at him, he saw that it wasn't him Gideon addressed. It was Jesse, close within Gideon's embrace. "Look at him. If he didn't have the gag in, he'd be begging for more."

The corner of Jesse's mouth lifted at that, and Jonah noticed that Gideon was stroking Jesse's cock again, his big hand moving up and down Jesse's length like it was his own. The deeper David moved into his body, the more he pulled back on the chain, forcing Jonah to bend at an almost uncomfortable angle. After all, this was a punishment.

David didn't move. He stayed buried in Jonah's passage, his cock throbbing against the walls of Jonah's body. The pressure was intense. Almost intense enough to make the corners of his eyes prickle. Gideon's speed had been harsh, literally enough to stop his breath, but David had introduced a whole different sort of torture to the mix. The pressure beneath his skin was so great, he didn't even realize at first that David had manipulated Jonah's body into the perfect position to receive Jesse's cock.



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Gideon nudged Jesse closer, never letting him go. Jonah watched the cock he'd craved approach, and wondered for the briefest of moments why he wasn't more excited about finally getting it. Not that he wasn't excited. He was. But it was hard to concentrate with David filling his ass, with David's firm hand holding his hip, with every inch in contact with David blurring any sense of separation.

Holding Jesse's length steady, Gideon dragged the wet tip across Jonah's lower lip, then painted even more pre-come along the upper one. Jonah licked it away, panting for more.

Smiling, Gideon pressed a kiss to Jesse's neck that made the man shudder. "Fuck his face, boy. I want you to have fun with it."

Gideon didn't release Jesse, but it was clear that he was no longer wholly in charge of what Jesse did. Jesse grabbed the long hair at the top of Jonah's head, but he didn't even pull hard enough to hurt. With a soft moan, he slid his cock into Jonah's mouth as David had done earlier, taking advantage of the gag to thrust all the way inside. He tasted better than Jonah had imagined, and he couldn't deny the small thrill at finally being on his knees for Jesse.

Except, he wasn't just on his knees for Jesse. David reminded him of that by pushing him forward until a few inches of his length disappeared from Jonah's passage. He thrust forward hard enough to make stars explode behind Jonah's eyes. Jesse followed David's lead, moving easily with the way David pushed and pulled Jonah's body. As a result, not a second passed when Jonah wasn't full of cock.

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He gave himself over to it. He could have found ways to compel Jesse to go faster, or to push David to punish him with a slap, but Jonah refrained from doing so. This wasn't just about his needs any longer. He was here to ignite the others, the vessel for them to use, the body for them to claim. And it wasn't as if he didn't gain pleasure from it. He did. More than he'd imagined possible. When Jesse buried his cock in Jonah's throat, Jonah drank in the scent of his skin and swallowed around the head because he had to show Jesse just what it did to him. When David plowed deeper into his ass, Jonah squeezed around his shaft, as much to hold him in as it was to give David more sensation.

Being bound became immaterial. Being bound ended up being the most freeing thing that had ever happened to him.

Even though both men gradually quickened the pace, Jonah sensed they were both holding something back, though in different ways. David was so close to Jonah's back that he could feel the tension in his muscles, feel his solid frame get tighter, even harder. And though Jesse followed Gideon's instructions to the letter—fucking Jonah's face like Jonah had been born for the task—he almost felt like Jesse was keeping something from him. That only made Jonah redouble his efforts. He needed both men to use him until they were completely spent in their pleasure. So he hummed around Jesse's shaft, and he clamped down harder around David's length.

The choked sound in Jesse's throat prompted Gideon to reach forward and caress Jonah's cheek. "Want to come, don't

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you, boy?" he murmured in Jesse's ear. "Know you do. I can feel it in the way you're shaking. So do it. Fill him up. Don't let him spill a single drop."

Even before Gideon had finished speaking, Jesse slammed his head back onto Gideon's shoulder and buried his cock in Jonah's mouth, shooting straight down his throat as Gideon had instructed. Jonah swallowed, greedy for it all. He couldn't taste it with Jesse so deep, but that didn't matter. All that mattered was the fact that it was Jesse's release, because contrary to what Gideon might have thought, Jonah wouldn't have spilled any of it. If there was one thing he knew how to do well, it was suck and swallow.

Though his cock softened against Jonah's tongue, Jesse didn't pull away. He let Jonah mouth the sensitive head, eliciting small moans and whimpers each time he sucked on his skin. Jesse's cock didn't disappear from his mouth until Gideon forced him backward. The vampire might have said something else that Jonah couldn't catch, but either way, Jesse was on his knees in an instant, his mouth seeking out Gideon's erection. Jonah could only watch Jesse for a moment before David pushed him forward, easing the strain on his back and arms as he bent far enough forward to touch his brow to the floor. The new angle gave David a chance to shift his position, and he drove harder into Jonah's body, finding his prostate with each thrust.

He couldn't take it. Each element on its own was tolerable. The leash. The restraints. The slap of sweaty skin against sweaty skin. He even craved the steel grip David had on his

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hip to keep him still. But combining them all together, with the taste of Jesse's skin still on his tongue, and then adding the deliberate scrape across his prostate, too? Too much. Too, too, too much.

His orgasm ripped through him. He screamed around the gag, heedless of his saliva pooling on the floor, and jerked with each blast from his cock. In the back of his mind, he had the irrational thought that Gideon's punishment hadn't worked. He'd still come. And he was still coming, longer than he could ever remember, so violently that the world went black around the edges.

David's shout had a sort of raw quality to it that Jonah would never have associated with the man. He was too in control, too self-possessed, to shout like that. But he did, and it was just enough to penetrate the fog around Jonah's head. David kept thrusting, and Jonah knew he couldn't take it. He couldn't physically tolerate the sensation of each new thrust. His nerve endings were raw, his blood rushing too close to his skin. He whimpered, each sound a small plea for relief. But that seemed to have the opposite of the desired effect, until finally he felt David's big body shudder, and then his cock was jerking in Jonah's passage. He wished that David hadn't put on a condom. He wanted to feel his hot come the way he had felt Gideon's and Jesse's.

Jonah was still trembling by the time David stopped moving. His heart hammered in his ears, and there were no other sounds except David's harsh breathing and Gideon's cock disappearing down Jesse's throat.

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“Keys are on the hook on the inside of the cupboard,” Gideon said, though his voice had a faraway quality. Whether that was because of Jonah’s state or Gideon’s, he had no idea.

He did know, however, that he hated the feeling of emptiness David left behind when he pulled out. He moaned in protest, but he didn’t have the strength to do anything more than that. He couldn’t even lift his head. Part of him was floating, the other melted across the floor. Neither wanted to move.

Seconds or minutes passed until David returned. He began by removing the gag, giving Jonah’s jaw an opportunity to rest. The ache went all the way to his neck, but he barely registered that. As he unlocked the cuffs around his wrists, Jonah realized his fingers were tingling. His arms were asleep. Just as it crossed his mind that he might fall flat on his face as soon as David unlocked him, the other man put his arm around Jonah’s waist, supporting him. Once the spreader disappeared, David lowered Jonah back to floor, allowing him to rest on his back.

“You made a mess out of Gideon’s floor again,” David observed, almost conversationally.

Jonah smiled. Or at least, he thought he did. “I blame you.” He groaned in appreciation when David slowly straightened his leg, massaging the tense muscles as they sprang to life. “I never touched my cock. Just like I was told.”

David nodded. “You did do exactly as you were told.” He straightened the other leg. Jonah was vaguely aware that Jesse was still kneeling in front of Gideon. “I noticed there’s a big

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old-fashioned bathtub upstairs. We can go get you cleaned up.”

“I like the sound of that.” Though his hand was still tingling, he reached to caress David’s thigh. “But only if you promise you’re not going to sleep on the floor tonight.”

David’s warm smile was the only agreement he needed.

## CHAPTER 11

A deep red sky greeted Jesse almost as soon as he closed his eyes. He recognized it immediately, and knew there wasn't anything to fear. The deep red bled to the trees and the ground at Jesse's feet. It was a trick of the light, he knew, from the sun dying on the horizon. The big ball of red fire never seemed to set. Or if it did, Jesse always managed to show up just after it began to rise. All of the blossoms on the trees were white and easily absorbed the light, and the rocks on the ground were white, too.

He was there to find her, but it always felt like she found him first. Like she was expecting him and she always knew just where to wait. This time, she was under one of those

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blossoming trees, letting the flowers fall on her shoulders. Her blonde hair caught the red light, too, and held it. The symbolism was obvious to Jesse, but he chose not to analyze these dreams too closely. They were more comforting if he didn't pick apart the symbolism and metaphors and the anxiety just under the surface. The dying sun also colored her skin a nice shade of pink. A shade that didn't seem unnatural at all. When he looked into her eyes, he saw twin red globes.

Her smile was the same, though.

"Hey, you," Jesse greeted.

"Hey, you," Emma repeated. She caught his hand and pulled him back beneath the shade. The first contact of her skin always shocked him with how cold she was, but she never failed to warm within seconds of touching her hands. "You're late today."

"I almost didn't make it at all. I've been really busy. Gideon made me go to sleep, though."

"Of course, he did." In the shadows, her eyes returned to their warm brown, smiling along with her mouth as she reached up and touched his face. "It makes it easier being apart because I know he's taking care of you."

Jesse lowered himself to the ground, folding his legs neatly, and pulled her down beside him. She fit against the side of his body like she had never left that spot, and he could smell her hair. It didn't actually smell the same as he remembered, which was the least bizarre thing about these recurring dreams.

"How are you doing?" Jesse asked. "Are you okay?"



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Emma plucked at a fold in her skirt. “Mostly. Today wasn’t good, though. The girl that usually comes to help me bathe didn’t show up.”

“Oh? Why do you need a girl to help you bathe?” Jesse didn’t always know what Emma meant when she spoke to him, but that didn’t matter too much. He was just happy to hear her voice.

“Because of the cuffs, silly.” She nudged him with her bare foot. There were goose bumps on her leg where her skirt didn’t protect her from the evening chill, but it never seemed to bother her. “You of all people should know how hard it is to move in those things.”

“Oh.” Jesse’s heart dropped and he pulled Emma into a tighter, more protective embrace. “I can’t figure out where you are. I look...I try to feel you. But I never can.”

She rested her cheek against his chest, her lashes fluttering closed. “You feel me now. Doesn’t this count?”

Jesse didn’t think dreams counted. Even if each dream made him feel warm and somehow soothed—that was nothing more than the power of suggestion. But he acted like they counted. He spoke to her like it counted. “I think I need your help, sweetheart. I feel like there’s something staring at me right in the face, but I just can’t...piece it together.”

He felt her smile. “If you can’t figure it out, how do you expect me to?”

“Because you’re smarter than me. And I don’t think anybody else can help.”

“Did you ask Gideon?”

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“No. Gideon has been a little...distracted. Also, he doesn’t think it matters. You know how he doesn’t like to dwell on the past.”

Her laughter reached into his chest and wrapped around his heart. “True. Good old Gideon.” Though it hurt to let her do so, Emma pulled away and sat up, twisting in order to face him. “So what is it you need help with?”

“The demon that possessed you...it wasn’t a demon. It was never a demon. It was something else. Something so powerful that it’s like a god. And we...I...me...I used you to drain it of its power. I drained a god...or a Guardian or whatever it’s become of its powers, and you were the vessel. I should have never, ever done that, Emma.” Panic closed around his throat, but he didn’t quite know why. He felt like ancient man, quaking in terror at the sight of lightning rolling across the sky.

Emma reached forward and cupped his face, her fingertips smoothing over the lines at the corners of his eye. Her thumb touched the edge of his lips, and he turned his head to press a kiss to her palm, a caress he held for as long as she kept her hand there.

“You did what you had to do to save John,” she assured. “I wanted to help, remember? Stop blaming yourself.”

“I shouldn’t have saved him,” Jesse said simply. “I should have listened to Gideon. I know this is absolutely true, Emma. But I don’t know why. That’s what I can’t figure out. Gideon reminded me that the demon had been banished. It’s gone. So why do I regret letting John live?”

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She regarded him for several minutes, her hand never straying from where she touched his face. Jesse remembered a time when just the merest glance of her fingertips would be enough to flood him with whatever emotion she wanted to convey, but of course, that was when she was real, when she wasn't merely a figment of his imagination, conjured up to help him cope with her loss. Now, all he felt was the heat of her touch, and someplace deep inside him ached with the absence of the other.

"Maybe because he's there and I'm not," she finally said. "Because the one thing you've always believed in was justice. Even before Gideon. That's part of what drew you to him in the first place. And you don't like a world where John gets to thrive in spite of everything he's done, and I get stolen away and punished for wanting to help him."

"Punished." Jesse covered her hand with his. Her skin wasn't as smooth as he remembered. "Punished. Your sister was teleported right out of her cell, Emma. Did I tell you that? I don't remember. One second she was there, and then she wasn't. Just like that." Jesse swallowed. "Just like..." *You*.

"I know." Her voice was rough, like she was fighting back the emotion, but it shone in her dark eyes anyway. She could never hide anything because of them; they always betrayed what she felt in her heart, even when she tried to conceal it. "They told me. They keep trying to use it against me."

"Where are you?" He buried his hand in her hair and touched his forehead to hers. "Where are you, sweetheart? I can find you, but there are an infinite number of dimensions. I

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need to know something. Anything.”

“You already do.” She kissed him then, and if her skin didn’t quite feel the same, and her hair didn’t quite smell the same, her lips at the very least tasted exactly as they always had—sweet and warm and aching his. “You just need to reach out and grab it.”

“I’m trying, Emma. I’m...”

The red light disappeared, and Emma disappeared with it. It took several seconds to realize he was staring at his own bedroom ceiling. Gideon was asleep beside him as quiet and still as always.

“Emma?” He whispered the word and even to his ears, the word had too much hope.

No answer. He couldn’t even taste her anymore. He had been through this enough times that the disappointment was muted, though undeniable. This time, though, something was different. He could still hear her. Every word she said. Like she had been lying at his side and whispering in his ear while he slept.

He pushed the blanket aside and reached for the closest pair of pants. As soon as the weight shifted on the mattress, Gideon stirred.

“Where you going?”

“Just have to check on something.”

“Come back.”

“I will.”

Jesse dressed without turning on the light and slipped out of the room. The window at the end of the corridor let in

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enough light from outside that Jesse could find his way once his eyes adjusted. He stopped at Dominique's room first, as he always did when he was wandering around in the middle of the night, but remembered she wasn't there. Michelle slept in the room next to hers. Gideon hadn't even grumbled when Jesse ordered new furniture for the room. He knocked on her door, but when she didn't respond, he opened it and poked his head inside.

"Michelle?"

"Is it morning?"

"No."

"Then why are you waking me up?"

Jesse stepped inside and shut the door behind him. The window's heavy curtains were drawn tight, and not a sliver of moonlight fell on the floor. Jesse didn't bother with a light. He carefully made his way across the room to kneel at the side of her bed.

"I need to talk to you."

"Is it Dominique?"

"No, she's fine."

"It can't wait until morning?"

Jesse closed his eyes, waiting until his mind pieced together an image of Emma against the blood red sky. It made his heart ache. He didn't want to lose a single detail of what happened, and dreams were such fragile things that the morning light was often enough to destroy them.

"No. Have you ever heard of a Guardian called Castelain?"

"Why are you asking, Jess?"

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“Jonah found a book...well, he stole a book from the Votaries of Castelain. I decoded and read it today, and it’s pretty clear, though they never use the word, that Castelain is a Guardian. It’s also developed—or stolen—the power to control minds and become incorporeal.”

“Why was Jonah looking for this book?” Michelle’s low whisper masked whatever emotions were behind the question.

“He wanted to know what happened here the night of the party. What could possess Gideon and Emma. And why. He was doing research I should have been doing. And he found something that I should have found. Please, Michelle...is Castelain a Guardian?”

“She...she is. Or, she was. I never knew her. She died in this dimension long before I was selected.”

“But that doesn’t necessarily mean she’s died in every dimension, right?”

“Right. But if she still exists in some dimension...she’s old, Jesse. Older than you can even comprehend.”

“Is that why you didn’t know her the night of the party?”

“Jess...the night of the party, I was...the night of the party, she could have introduced herself to me, and I wouldn’t have understood. Not while Rita was lying dead in the house.”

Jesse swallowed. “Michelle...we helped John drain Castelain. I took her power from her, and I used Emma to do it. She said that I shouldn’t blame myself for that, but it’s true.”

“Who said that?”

“Emma,” Jesse admitted. “I...I dream about her.”

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“And you talk to her?”

“Yes.”

“How long has that been happening?”

“About a month now. But that’s not important right now. Listen...listen, she told me she was being punished. She was being punished for something that I did, and for something that John isn’t suffering for.”

“I thought you said it was just a dream?”

Jesse sighed. “I dream about her because I miss her. And because she makes me think. But I get it now. Gideon didn’t kill Castelain the first time. And John didn’t banish it—her—because she’s a Guardian. She was. She’s a Guardian that has been worshipped and feared like a god.” Jesse scooted closer to the bed, leaning in on the mattress. “Castelain took Emma. That’s why her sister was taken from the cell. That’s why I can’t remember what happened to Emma. The dimension opened up around her.”

“Took her where, Jess?”

“I don’t know. But I’m right, aren’t I?”

“I...I don’t know, Jesse.”

“But I’m right.”

“I think you are.”

“How are we going to fix this?”

“We’ll work on it in the morning,” Michelle promised.

“I want to work on it now.”

“I know.” She took Jesse’s hand and squeezed it lightly. “But it’s the middle of the night and I’m an old woman. I need my sleep.”

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"I'm right, though, right?"

"Yes, I think you are. But Jesse...don't get too excited. It's a step in the right direction, but it's not going to solve everything."

"But I'm right." Jesse straightened. "We're going to work on this in the morning. Right after breakfast. And we're not going to stop until we have everything figured out."

"That's fine."

"Tell me what I need to do to find more information about Castelain." He began to pace. "Books. Anything. I'll go to the store and get them right now if I need to."

"Jesse?"

"What?"

Michelle sat up. "Go to bed. Get some sleep. I'll go to the store in the morning."

"I can't get some sleep."

"You need to. Because if you don't, you're going to work yourself into a frenzy."

"If Gideon were here, he'd say the same thing."

"Well, even a broken clock is right twice a day."

"I'll go back to bed."

"Now you're lying to me. But that's fine, as long as it means you're going to let me get some sleep."

Jesse smiled. Not because Michelle had said anything funny, but because he was right. And everything was so gloriously, wonderfully obvious. It had been staring him right in the face. He wasn't going to sleep. There was too much work to be done. He bid Michelle goodnight, and slipped into



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the hallway. Bypassing the bedroom door, he went directly to the library's upper level.

He would find her. Maybe in a world that had a dying sun.

## CHAPTER 12

Jonah woke up to heavy arms wrapped around his waist, a mouth nibbling at the back of his neck. His cock throbbed, even as the ghosts of his dream scattered, and he moaned as he wriggled against the body behind him.

“Mornin’,” he murmured.

“Good morning. I can smell that somebody’s started the coffee, but I can’t seem to get out of bed.”

“You don’t even have the excuse of your legs not working after being strapped in a spreader for hours.” Jonah folded his arm over David’s, captivated by the texture of the other man’s skin. “How long have you been up?”

“I don’t know. About thirty minutes. And you were not

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strapped in that spreader for hours. Not even close.”

Jonah smiled. “Felt like it.”

“That’s because you don’t have enough experience. You need to find yourself a proper Master to break you in.”

He agreed about the lack of real experience, at least when compared to what Jesse had access to. It made him wonder what David might be familiar with, but almost as quickly as he had the thought, Jonah dismissed it. David would be going back to London soon enough. He didn’t need Jonah hounding him unnecessarily.

“I think that bath was what did me in,” he said. “You have to give Gideon and Jesse credit. They really do know how to spoil a houseguest.”

“I doubt every houseguest receives the sort of treatment you have.” David rubbed Jonah’s stomach lightly, almost tickling him. “Are you hungry?”

As if his body heard the query, his stomach rumbled. Jonah chuckled. “I think that’s a yes. If you smell coffee, I’ll bet there’s breakfast on, too.” He slid out of David’s arms, sitting on the edge of the bed and stretching. “Are you going to come down now, or shower first?”

“I’ll go down and get some food.” He felt the mattress shift as David stood up. “I don’t think I’ve done anything to get dirty since last night’s shower.”

“Only because I managed to fall asleep on you.” He snuck a glance back to see David scooping up his clothes. Long, sinuous muscles rippled in the man’s bare back and legs, the curve of his ass a near work of art all on its own. Swallowing

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against the tightness of his throat, he added, “Not too disappointed in me, are you?”

“Why would I be disappointed in you?”

He grinned and reached for his underwear. “Because, apparently, I have the stamina of a teenager.”

“That just means you’ve got room to grow,” David said lightly. “But trust me, no sane person would be disappointed by anything you did last night.”

David’s back was still to him, making it impossible to see his face. And Jonah wanted to. Desperately. For some reason, the need to know how David might feel about what had happened in the playroom consumed him. When he thought about the time he spent in the spreader, it wasn’t Jesse’s face he conjured. It was David’s. It was the press of lips to his neck, above a collar he gladly wore for him. It was the pound of his body against Jonah’s, how it had been David’s cock that had triggered his orgasm and not Gideon’s. David, with his slow, warm smile. David, with his obvious, unexpected concern.

Jonah scrambled to get dressed and hide his arousal. “I’m just glad Gideon let me have another go in the playroom. When he told us he knew what we’d done, I thought I was a goner.”

“It was kind of him, but I think he had an ulterior motive or two.” David sniffed under each arm, then began buttoning his shirt. “You think you’ll be interested in a third round?”

His head snapped up. “Would you?”

“Don’t answer a question with a question.”

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There wasn't anything sharp in David's tone, more like he was reminding Jonah of an earlier directive rather than reprimanding him. Jonah stifled the small thrill that shot through him so he could shrug without looking like an idiot and dropping to his knees then and there. "I didn't think I would get another shot," he confessed. "I'd love to, yeah, but Jesse's got other things on his mind right now. Which means Gideon does, too. I might be better off being glad for what I got."

"That's probably not a bad plan. Though...Gideon might be a gracious enough host to let me use the room if I asked properly."

Jonah licked his lips as he finished buttoning up his shirt. "Did I tell you how much fun I had last night before I passed out?"

"You may have mentioned it six or seven times," David said mildly. "I'll keep that in mind if I have the chance to talk to Gideon." He pulled the door open and gestured for Jonah to leave the room first. "But Jonah...don't mention the possibility yourself. Not even to Jesse."

The suggestion surprised him. "Why not?"

"Because it's not your place, pet. We disrespected Gideon in his own home once. If you're serious about being a sub, then you'll not forget your place again." David shrugged. "Not that I think Jesse or Gideon will give you a hard time."

Personally, Jonah thought David's estimation of Jesse and Gideon's regard for him too high. He'd had a thing for Jess for two years now; the only reason things had progressed as far as

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they had was because of extenuating circumstances. Jonah wasn't so deluded that he thought there was an actual place for him in their world. There wasn't. But for a few precious days, their worlds had intersected, and he was going to be satisfied with that. David, on the other hand, was an entirely different story. One he was still trying to figure out.

So he answered the best way he could.

"Yes, sir." He stopped in the hallway before descending the stairs and briefly touched David's arm. "I am serious about it, you know. Last night was...well, it wasn't like anything I'd ever experienced before. It was the most right thing I had felt in a long time."

"Good. I mean, it's good that you're serious about it. I think with a bit more training, you'll be an excellent sub for somebody." David pulled away from Jonah's touch and moved down the stairs.

Vague disappointment in David's response lingered all the way down the narrow staircase. Jonah didn't know why it should bother him that David seemed willing to brush him off on another Dom; it wasn't like they were anything more than friends.

Maybe that was the biggest disappointment of all.

The kitchen was surprisingly full of people when he and David emerged. Gideon stood at the stove, stirring something in a frying pan, while Jesse sat at the table with Michelle. Dominique was nowhere to be seen. It took a moment for Jonah to remember that she had spent the night at her friend's house.

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“God, that looks good.” Jonah hovered at Gideon’s elbow. “Is there enough to go around?”

“That depends.” He jabbed at the back of Jonah’s hand with the spatula when he tried to steal a mushroom. “Make yourself useful and get plates.”

“They’re in the cupboard behind you,” Jesse helpfully provided before shifting his attention back to Michelle. Jonah couldn’t tell what they were discussing, but it didn’t look like Jesse had just woken up. Michelle, on the other hand, had the blurry-eyed look of a woman who had only moments before crawled out of bed.

David appeared at Jonah’s side to help him take down enough dishes. He accepted them with a smile, though he felt a little silly about getting goose bumps at the touch of their fingers.

“So what’s the plan for today?” he said, maybe a little too loudly. “More research into the Votaries?”

“No, you can go home. I gave them back their book, and then paid to put them on a plane back to England,” Jesse answered.

Gideon’s snort went unnoticed. Jonah was too stunned by Jesse’s casual declaration to do much more than stare.

“You gave it back? What does that mean? That’s it?”

“That’s it,” Jesse confirmed. “I scanned the entire thing into the computer late last night. I promised them I’d give it back, didn’t I?”

“Well, yes, but...” He was at a loss. He honestly didn’t expect things to be resolved that easily. Wasn’t Derek always

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complaining that Jesse and Gideon's cases gave him headaches? Getting over-involved was part of their routine. They thrived on complications. And all Jesse did was give them back their book and put them on a plane? "You don't even need me for research?"

"Oh, we've got plenty of research to do." Jesse exchanged what could only be described as a meaningful look with Gideon. "But that doesn't mean you're not free to go home. I thought you'd be excited that your life isn't in danger anymore."

"I am." David wasn't even looking at him. Jonah felt a little like a jerk for being disappointed at the end of what really wasn't supposed to be a game. "Does that mean you're going to take David home, too?"

"If David wants me to."

"I don't have to go home right now. They're not expecting me back to work until the end of next week."

Jonah handed the plates over to Gideon and then turned back to David. "I'd like if it you stayed," he said, pitching his voice lower. He smiled. "Things were just starting to get interesting."

"They were," David agreed. "Maybe you can show me around Chicago a little bit. This can be a proper holiday."

"You're welcome to stay here." Gideon slid the eggs onto the plates. "It's not like we don't have enough room."

"We'll see," David answered, accepting his plate from Gideon before sitting at the table. "If you're done with the book, what more do you have to research?"



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Jesse took a deep breath. "It's a bit complicated. But...I think that Castelain is the one responsible for taking Emma." He caught Jonah's eye and smiled. It was one of the warmest things Jonah had ever seen. "I guess we owe you big for finding that book."

"I'm just glad something I did helped." His step was lighter as he went and took the seat next to David, making sure their knees pressed lightly under the table. "And if it helps Emma come home, even better."

"Hopefully, it'll do just that. There's still a lot of work to be done, but at least we aren't spinning our wheels anymore." There was an undeniable note of glee in Jesse's voice. "After you two go out and get some air, I'll give you more details."

"If you're going to stay, you'll need more clothes." Jonah grinned at Gideon taking a seat opposite them. "Unless you're going to let him raid your closet again."

"David knows he's welcome to anything here."

"I don't think any amount of research is going to lead us to the right dimension," Michelle said, like she wasn't even aware there was anybody in the room except Jesse. "It's doubtful she's in the dimension where John banished her. Most Guardians won't find hell dimensions pleasant."

"Castelain is hardly pleasant herself," Jesse pointed out.

"Still. We're facing an infinite number of choices."

"Then we'll contact an infinite number of our counterparts and recruit them to help. I don't care what we have to do," Jesse countered, not unpleasantly.

"Yeah, I think today is definitely a day to get out of the

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house,” Jonah said in a low voice meant for David’s ears only. “I’m going to run over to my apartment and grab some stuff to last me the week. Do you want to go shopping or sightseeing when I get back, or something else?”

“Let’s do both. And maybe grab some dinner, too.” David nodded at Gideon. “Not that this breakfast isn’t great. My compliments to the chef.”

Gideon smiled. It always amazed Jonah how much it changed his entire face when he did. “I can give you a list of where you want to look for things.”

“Because I haven’t lived here my whole life,” Jonah commented wryly.

“I have better taste than you do, brat.”

“That’s not a real option, Jesse. We have all the time in the world. Emma doesn’t,” Michelle continued.

“You know, I liked you better this morning when you were half-asleep.”

David leaned toward Gideon. “A list would be a good. Maybe a few restaurant recommendations. I don’t want to waste the whole day wandering around blindly.”

Jonah smiled to himself as everybody talked around him. So what if this particular adventure hadn’t turned out to be so adventurous? He finally got to experience Jesse, and the playroom, and he was about to spend the rest of the day with a guy who made his toes curl. There was nothing wrong with that.

Nothing wrong at all.

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\* \* \*

Jonah didn't waste time at his apartment. The place was a mess, and he could tell at a glance where exactly Jesse had raided his papers to try and figure out what had happened to him, but all Jonah wanted was to get enough clothes to last him another week at the mansion, the mostly full box of condoms from his nightstand, and his favorite cock ring. He left what few toys he had behind. Anything he could take would look pathetic next to Gideon's collection.

But the reason he didn't waste time was because he had another stop to make before returning to the house. He wanted to get out with David as soon as possible, and he had no idea how long this particular meeting was going to last.

He didn't expect the elegant, two-story home in the quiet residential neighborhood. Black John was a notorious mage in Chicago, the blackest of the black, Derek claimed. Derek didn't like him. Gideon hated him. Jonah had met him for the first and only time at their housewarming party, but his impressions hadn't been nearly so dire. He was trim and shorter even than Jonah, five-four, five-five tops, with a ready wit and gray eyes that looked like they saw straight through you. He'd been a little scary during the whole magic thing, and bossy, too, but not nearly as much as Michelle. Of course, she'd had her reasons, with having just lost her lover, but still, Jonah hadn't really understood what the big fuss was about John.

He still didn't. And if Jesse was too embarrassed to ask for his friend's impressions of what had happened that night,

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Jonah would do it for him.

The man who answered the door seemed almost the same as the man he remembered from the party. The only difference rested in the lines at the corner of his eyes. Jonah had thought John could only be as old as his Uncle Derek, but this man was clearly older than that. His late forties, maybe. The difference was subtle, but it was most definitely there.

Still, it was the man he sought, and that was all that mattered.

“Can I help you?” The smooth voice was cold, though polite.

Jonah put on his most obsequious smile and stuck out his hand. “Hi, I’m not sure if you’ll remember me—”

“Mr. Madding’s housewarming party. You’re the police detective’s relative.” He grimaced. “I’m sorry, I don’t recollect your name.”

“No, no, I’m surprised you even remember that. I’m Jonah Dixon. Derek’s my uncle.” He waited for several moments for John to shake his hand, but when it became clear it wasn’t going to happen, he let his arm fall back to his side. “I was hoping I could talk with you about what happened at the party.”

John cocked a brow. “That was quite some time ago. Ancient history, some people might say.”

“Some people. For others, not so long.”

He waited for what felt like forever before John inclined his head and stepped aside. “This might prove interesting. Please, come in.”

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Nobody in Chicago fit a stereotype. Gideon didn't. Jesse didn't. Black John most certainly didn't. His home had an old lady feel to it, details almost fussy as he led Jonah into a living room. He gestured to a wing-back chair with a gray velvet seat and a gilt finish, and settled into the matching settee.

"So what would you care to discuss, Mr. Dixon?"

"Please, call me Jonah."

He wouldn't call what John did, smiling. There was too much condescension in it, like a child had just amused him. "Forgive me if I'm not quite so casual. It's not in my nature to address those in my acquaintance by their first names. Unless, of course, you're not worthy of my respect." He reached for a teacup resting on the side table. "Are you worthy of my respect, Mr. Dixon?"

Such an odd question, and not one he was ready to answer comfortably. "I would hope so. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you."

"Oh, you didn't. Not yet, anyway."

This wasn't going at all as he had planned. "So about the housewarming party. I've been doing my own research on what happened. I thought I could help Jesse out."

"Why? I took care of the demon for him."

"I was worried about it coming back."

John chuckled. "Not with the spell I put on it, young man."

"Yeah, Jesse didn't think so either."

"Didn't? Are you suggesting he's changed his mind?"

"Let's say he's had his eyes opened. I found a book he's sure explains who it was that possessed Gideon and Emma."

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John's amusement faded. "Demons do not deserve such appellations as 'who.'"

"Jesse doesn't think it's a demon. Not anymore. But that's not—"

"What does Mr. Madding believe it to have been?"

The hard tone of John's voice made Jonah pause. "Do you know who it was?" he countered. "Because the one piece of the puzzle we haven't been able to snap into place was what it wanted with you."

John's face became a blank mask once again. "That is simple. It had stolen my powers. I got them back. It was angry. End of story."

"But why not go straight for you? Why act through Gideon and Emma?"

"Perhaps because they were more fallible vessels than I."

"Well, if you're going by that logic, why didn't it go through me, then? I certainly couldn't have done anything to fight it."

"And neither could you have done anything to aid its endeavors," John said with the return of his mocking smile.

Which brought him right back to his original question, that he still felt like John hadn't answered. "But what would a Guardian want to do with you?" Jonah pressed. "That's what doesn't make any sense. Maybe if we knew what it was trying to gain, we could figure out what it wanted with Emma."

It wasn't until he was done speaking that he realized John had gone completely still. Even his eyes had locked on Jonah, flaring with unknown depths that sent a chill along Jonah's

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spine. “What did you say?”

“About which?”

“You said...a Guardian.”

“Right. That’s what I found out. I found a book that belonged to the Votaries of Castelain, and Jesse’s convinced that’s who showed up at the house.” He leaned forward. “Do you know who Castelain was?”

Even the surface of the tea in his cup didn’t move as John spoke. “I can’t say that I do.”

Jonah deflated. “Oh. So I guess that means you wouldn’t have any idea why a Guardian would want to steal your power, either, huh?”

“On the contrary, Mr. Dixon, if you ask Mr. Madding, I’m sure he will be more than happy to tell you how it was the other way around, a long time ago.” Carefully, he set down his cup and rose to his feet. “My apologies I can’t be of more help to you. I am sorry to have wasted your time.”

So was Jonah, but he dutifully stood and followed John back to the front door. “Thanks anyway,” he said as he stepped back into the cold. “But can you do me a favor? If you think of anything that might help Jesse, could you give him a ring? He’s too embarrassed about not thinking to ask you after the party.”

John smiled. “It would be my pleasure.”

## CHAPTER 13

“Part of the problem is that neither one of us are at our peak power,” Michelle said. “You’re not a full Guardian. We’re both in transition. This would be easier if that wasn’t the case.”

“But then you wouldn’t be a Guardian at all. I still need your help.”

“We could finish this...Jesse, if we finish the transition, your full power will be ten times where you’re at now.”

“But you’re not fully healed,” Jesse countered. “And until you are...we can’t risk it.”

“If there’s a choice between...”

“There’s no choice,” Jesse said sharply. “We’ll figure out



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how to make this work without putting you at more risk. Besides, do you really think I could do that to Dominique?"

"No."

"Then this discussion is over." As soon as Jesse spoke, his phone erupted. Seeing John's name on the caller ID sent a small shock through his system. After a brief debate, he pushed talk. "What can I do for you, John?"

John's familiar chuckle came over the line. "No, 'How are you?' I'd say I was disappointed, Mr. Madding, but it would seem you have a tad too much on your hands these days to worry over something as common as good manners."

"When things have calmed down here, I'll catch up on all my Judith Martin books."

"I had thought all your Guardian problems would be resolved with the Texan gone. Funny to find out that's not the case, don't you think?"

Jesse's mouth went dry. "I don't know what you're talking about, John."

"Really? Then I suggest you have a talk with your houseguest. One in particular seems prone to spreading falsehoods."

"What falsehood is he telling?"

"As much fun as it would be to drag this out...Mr. Dixon labors under the impression we dealt with a Guardian at your little soiree. That you're convinced I banished not a demon, but something far more...interesting."

The lie came quickly. He didn't even stop to consider if it was a good idea or not. He just let it fly out of his mouth. "It's

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not a Guardian.”

“Then where on earth did he get the name, Castelain?”

“From a cult,” Jesse said dully. John probably wouldn’t believe him. His brain couldn’t quite handle the implications of that. “He broke into their headquarters, stole a book about Castelain, and Derek asked me to go rescue him. But I sent the book back to England today, with the cult. It didn’t have anything of use.”

“Stole it, eh?” John chuckled. “According to him, he found it. Ah, well, I suppose if he can’t get that rather large detail correct, I shouldn’t put stock in the rest of his claims...should I, Mr. Madding?”

“No, you shouldn’t. He’s just a kid. And quite frankly, he’s not a very smart one. I’m sorry that he bothered you this morning.”

“I’m not.” Another laugh. It crawled up Jesse’s spine and settled into the roots of his hair, prickling his scalp. “Good day, Mr. Madding.”

Jesse’s finger trembled as he disconnected the call. He opened and closed his mouth, unsure of where he should begin. Michelle was looking at him expectantly, her eyes clouded with concern. He was sure he must have looked exactly the way he felt, but then, he wasn’t interested in disguising his anger.

“Gideon!” Even if he didn’t have sensitive ears, the vampire would hear that shout anywhere in the house.

“Jesse?” Michelle tried.

He couldn’t answer her. He could explain the situation to

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Gideon, but he couldn't look Michelle in the eye and try to tell her what just happened.

It took only a moment for Gideon to appear in the doorway, David on his heels. One look at Jesse, and whatever smart response he might have had died on his tongue. "What's wrong?"

Jesse didn't even know how to tell him. Fear fought with rage and guilt, and all three choked him, killing the words in his throat. Finally, he managed, "Jonah went to see John."

"What?" Gideon's gaze snapped from Jesse to David. "Why would he do that?"

"I don't even know who you're talking about," David said. "I had no idea he planned to go see anybody."

"He told him about Castelain. He just marched over there and spilled everything." Jesse ran his fingers through his hair. Adrenaline dumped into his bloodstream. Only, it wasn't quite that. It was sharper, bitter. The sort of rush he felt when he was near a tear in the dimensions. "When he gets here, you better keep him away from me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" David asked.

"It means you better keep him the fuck away from me," Jesse snapped.

"Did John call you?" When Jesse nodded, Gideon added, "To rub it in, I'll bet."

"Will someone tell me who the hell this John is?"

At David's query, Gideon stuffed his fists into his pockets. "A black mage whose moral compass lost north a hell of a long time ago."

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“He was a friend. He helped us a few times. We helped him. But he’s not a friend now,” Jesse added.

“Jesse...” Michelle’s voice was low and serious. The tone was enough to send fresh chills down his spine. “You know you might have to stop John.”

“I know. But before I worry about that, I’m going to find out just what the fuck that boy was thinking.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t malicious,” David said.

“Jonah’s problem is that he doesn’t think at all.” Gideon abandoned him at the doorway to come and straddle the chair next to Jesse, resting a hand on his thigh. He massaged it lightly, though it did little to help. “Did John say anything specific?”

“Like, ‘Hey, Mr. Madding, I’m going to absorb as much power from this dimension as possible and destroy you all in the process tonight’? No, he didn’t say anything like that.” Jesse shifted his attention to David. “It doesn’t matter if it wasn’t malicious. That’s not going to be any comfort to me when John is draining this dimension. What about you?”

Any response he might have made was halted by the distant sound of a door shutting. Jesse tensed to bolt and confront Jonah, but Gideon tightened his grip, pushing Jesse back into the chair.

“He’s got to come through here to go upstairs anyway.” He looked to David as well. “Just wait.”

True to Gideon’s word, footsteps grew louder until Jonah appeared. The smile on his face faded as he met Jesse’s stony visage, and he instinctively edged toward David’s larger

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frame. “What happened? Are the Votaries back?”

“No, they’re not back.” Jesse was glad that Gideon didn’t let go of his thigh. He could toss Gideon aside as easily as he could flick away a fly, but he needed the steady pressure. “Do you ever think about anybody but yourself?”

Hurt flashed in Jonah’s dark blue eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t,” Jesse bit out. “Don’t you dare act like you don’t know exactly what I’m talking about. Or are you going to lie about where you went this morning?”

Jonah looked around, clearly seeking support, but nobody spoke. “Why would I lie? I went to my apartment to pick up my clothes and stuff, and then I swung by that John’s house so I could talk to him about what happened the night of the party. Since when is getting clean clothes selfish?”

Gideon’s other hand went to Jesse’s shoulder. He didn’t even know he was rising off his seat again until Gideon anchored him. His temples throbbed. When he spoke, each word was tight. “Who made you think that you had any business talking to John?”

“Well, nobody, but somebody had to, didn’t they? Nobody talked to him after the party.” His brows drew together into a tight line. “What’s wrong? I thought I was doing you a favor because you’ve got so much other stuff on your plate right now.”

Gideon wasn’t enough to keep him in his chair anymore. “You got lucky. Do you understand me? You got lucky. You found the right book, you didn’t get yourself killed, and

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instead of telling Derek to go fuck himself when he called us, frantic with worry, we went to look for you. You got lucky. If I ever find out that you've taken it upon yourself to put your nose in my business, you won't have the chance to do it again."

Jonah got paler with every word. He also got straighter. His nostrils flared as he clearly searched for words, but Gideon was the one to speak up.

"John's bad news, Jonah. There's a reason Jesse didn't go to him. And this Guardian stuff, this is his idea of Christmas."

Jonah's eyes darted around, over Jesse's shoulder, back to Jesse. "I didn't know. Nobody told me. And he didn't even know who Castelain was when I asked him."

"Nobody told you because it's none of your fucking concern. But since you obviously believe everything is your concern, I'll make it really, really clear for you. The only person John cares about is John. The only thing John cares about is power. I made the mistake of giving him the power of a Guardian. That was stupid of me and I shouldn't have done it. But at least John didn't *know* he had that power. Until you cheerfully told him. So let's talk about it."

"Jesse..." He hadn't even noticed Michelle stand, but she was at his side. The power, his power, flowing from her body did little to soothe him. He shook her off.

"Now, I want you to imagine the energy and life being pulled from the entire universe into one immortal man. I want you to imagine dimensional walls collapsing until reality becomes a meaningless term. Imagine the end of time. He

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probably would have found out. But until this morning, I at least had some time.”

“How did you find out I went over there? What did he do?”

“He called to taunt me. Because he knows just how powerful he is now, he thinks I can’t do anything to stop him. And you can bet he’s cooking up something fun for all of us right now.”

Jonah started shaking his head and backing away before Jesse had finished speaking. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know. You have to believe me. I wouldn’t do anything to put you in danger, Jesse. Ever.”

“I don’t believe you did it to hurt me. And you’re right. You *didn’t* know. From now until this over, one way or the other, you don’t do anything, you don’t go anywhere, without talking to me first.”

“You can’t do that,” David said. “He’s not a child.”

Jesse turned on him. “I don’t care if you’ve got something for Jonah. Try me, and I’ll send you right back to England before you can blink.”

“It’s okay, David.” Jonah stepped between him and Jesse, lifting his gaze in spite of the obvious dismay written in his eyes. “I fucked up. I’ll own that. All I ever wanted was to help. You might be all powerful now, but you can’t do everything on your own, no matter how much you want me to butt out. But that’s what you want, so that’s what I’ll do.” He went around Jesse in order to head toward the stairs leading to his room. “After all, since all I’ve done up ’til today was get

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lucky, I'm not much good to you anyway."

Jesse didn't stop him from going up the stairs. Maybe he should have, but he couldn't quite stand looking at him. David sent a withering look Jesse's direction, but he ignored that. So what if David hated him? He had larger, more important problems. He lowered himself back to his chair, the energy draining from him.

"I guess I get to be the bad guy here," Jesse muttered.

"You're not the bad guy." Gideon returned to the seat next to him, leaning forward to rest his forearms on his knees. "Jonah just got his feelings bruised a little bit. It's hard to see your idol get mad at you."

"He's lucky his feelings were the only thing that got bruised," Jesse said, without any real force behind the words. "Christ, what a fucking mess."

"I could always go kill John and be done with this whole mess," Gideon volunteered.

"I'd tell you to go right now, except you can't kill him."

"Maybe he didn't absorb that particular power. Might be fun just to try."

"I'm sure it'll be a barrel of laughs until he lights you on fire. John is already over a hundred years old, isn't he?"

Gideon glanced at Michelle. She still wasn't aware of John's involvement in Gideon's own dimensional exploits, the very same exploits that had their paths crossing for the first time. Jesse hadn't even known about the connection between his lover and John until discovering John's journal in an alternate dimension. He didn't really understand why Gideon



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had protected John all these years, but that was a question for another day.

“Can’t we take the power back?” Gideon asked. “We gave it to him in the first place. There’s got to be a way to reverse the spell. One of them, at least.”

“We had a few things working in our favor before. Three, to be precise. Emma. Ethan. And the element of surprise.”

“John’s not stupid,” Michelle said. “He’s probably reinforcing all of his defenses right this moment. But keep something in mind, Jesse. As powerful as John thinks he is right now, you’re still stronger.”

“There’s something else.” Gideon’s mouth was grim. “John’s arrogant. It’s always fucked him over in the past. I’m sure we can find a way to use it against him now.”

Jesse nodded. “I hate to say this, but I think we should wait until he makes the first move. Let him think he’s got the upper hand.”

Though he didn’t look pleased about the response, Gideon nodded. “I think we should find Ethan, too. We might not have Emma right now, but one out of two is better than nothing.”

Jesse snorted. “How do you think that’s going to go? I doubt he’ll care very much about helping us with our problems.”

“Who said anything about asking?” Gideon grinned. “We do a snatch and run, and tell him what we’re doing after the fact.”

“Okay, you can’t be in charge of recruiting Ethan to help.”

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“John isn’t the only mage in town,” Michelle said.

“No, he’s not. So?”

“Castelain chose John. She wasn’t just taking his power, she was trying to kill him. I suggest you find out why. Start at the beginning.”

Jesse held Gideon’s gaze. “Yeah, I think she’s right.”

With a sigh, Gideon rose from his chair and stretched. “So it looks like I’m on John duty for this one. Just great.” Jesse knew it was just for show for Michelle. “What are we going to do about Jonah and David?”

“Lock them upstairs so we won’t have any more surprises?” Jesse suggested, only half-kidding.

“Honestly? The smart thing might be to send them both back to London. We know David will keep an eye on Jonah. And he can’t do more damage if he’s not in the city.”

Jesse shook his head. “No, that’s not going to work. John could always do location spells. Moving Jonah to the other side of the world won’t put him out of John’s reach. If he gets curious about what Jonah knows, it’s a simple enough matter of finding and cornering him. Or if John wants to get to me through Jonah...I’d rather not give him the chance.”

“You don’t think he’d try to get to you through Dominique, do you?”

The question made him more than a little queasy, though he knew that it needed to be asked and answered. “I think we should be careful with Dominique, but Jonah has something that she doesn’t. Information.”

“I should go to talk to them, then,” Gideon said. “Get

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David to understand how serious this is, and what we need for them to do.”

“Yeah, you probably should talk to them.” Jesse’s anger was almost entirely dissipated—he was far more interested in focusing his energy on solving the problem. But that didn’t mean either one of them would want to be in the same room with him, much less talk to him. “I’ll put on a fresh pot of coffee, too. I have a feeling it’s going to be a long day.”

## CHAPTER 14

All Jonah wanted was to crawl under a rock and hide for the next decade. He'd only wanted to help. How was he supposed to know John was persona non grata around Jesse anymore? Jesse's was the one opinion he'd always trusted, and as far as Jonah knew, they were friends. How could he have guessed otherwise?

He didn't look back as he marched up the stairs, though he heard them creak behind him. He knew who it was. Gideon and Jesse wouldn't want to be anywhere around him right now. He almost thought David was better off being as far from him as possible right now, too.

Shoving open his bedroom door, he threw his backpack

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into the corner and flopped onto his stomach on the bed, burying his head as he tried to block out the world around him.

Even when the mattress shifted beneath Jonah, he didn't lift his head. "We don't have to stick around here, you know."

Jonah snorted. "Jesse isn't going to trust me to wipe my own ass now. You really think he's going to trust me leaving the house?"

"You're not his prisoner." David put a light hand on his shoulder. "He can't just lock you up."

"In case you haven't figured it out yet, Jesse can do pretty much anything he wants to."

"Well, okay," David conceded. "But that doesn't mean he should treat you like that over an honest mistake."

Jonah took a deep breath, trying to calm his racing nerves. No, it didn't, and that was what hurt most of all.

"I've never seen him so angry before," he confessed softly. "He wouldn't even listen to me."

The hand on his shoulder began to move in wide, slow circles. Like David was trying to massage the hurt feelings away. "Sometimes when people get that angry, they aren't really interested in listening to anything."

He turned his head to meet David's warm eyes. "You listened. You stuck up for me."

"Well, I don't think it's fair to blame you for ending life as we know it. He was praising you for finding the book, even though it meant breaking the law. He was the one who apparently gave John this power. It seems to me that he's the last one who should be assigning fault."

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David was still massaging his shoulder. Each rub of his muscle erased another line of tension in Jonah's back, but it took much longer to erode the hurt that still ate him up inside. "But he was probably right. I should've said something about going to see John. I would've known then that he was bad news."

"You made a mistake. You're going to tell me that Jesse never made a mistake in his life? That Gideon hasn't? Hell, I've even been known to make a few. That just means you need to correct the error, not get beat up over it." David leaned closer. His body seemed unbelievably inviting in that moment. "That means you shouldn't beat yourself up, either."

He tried to smile. "I leave the whipping to you and Gideon, you mean?"

"I wouldn't whip you over this, either."

"And here I thought you liked to punish me."

"Only if you do something to deserve it. Honestly? I'm not big into punishment, in general."

His quip died on his tongue. "I wish you didn't live in London."

"Why?"

"Because the more I get to know you, the more I like the way you think. It makes sense to me." He unbent his arm from beneath his head so he could dare to graze his knuckles over David's chest. "I guess I don't like the idea of falling out of touch, that's all."

"Who says we'll fall out of touch? I didn't plan to let you slip out of my life that easily."

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“I don’t know why. All I’ve done is bring you one headache after another since we met.”

David shifted, sliding further down the bed and turning on his side so he was eye-level with Jonah. “That’s not all you’ve done since we met. I mean, you’ve certainly made my life a hell of a lot more interesting than I would have expected. But getting to know you has been worth that.”

“Even if I’ve inadvertently brought around the end of the world as we know it?”

“I think if this John is going to destroy the universe, we better make the most of the time we have now. Don’t you?”

He couldn’t help it. He chuckled. “Okay, it’s official. Any man who can still think about sex at a time like this is someone I need to hold on to.”

David smiled. “I wasn’t talking about sex. I was talking about something...something a bit different.” He cupped the side of Jonah’s face and tilted his head. Jonah froze. He couldn’t even breathe. Warm air fanned across his face, and then David’s mouth was touching his.

He hadn’t expected a kiss. He hadn’t expected lips, soft and full, moving over his like he was some kind of special treat to be savored. He hadn’t expected his heart to leap to his throat and lodge there, or his blood to scream in his ears when the mouth that met his practically defined gentle.

Jonah stopped breathing for the duration of David’s caress, though his hand flattened over the hard chest he’d already found the bravery to touch. He opened to David’s tender probe, almost afraid everything would vanish if he pressed for

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more. Did he want more? God, yes, but at that moment, with this man, this one kiss was all he could need or desire.

Jonah didn't know how much time passed before David broke the contact. He did know that he could still feel David's lips pressed against his. His face was flushed, like he had stolen all the heat from David's body. He wanted to wrap his arms and legs around the other man's large frame and pull him into another kiss, but he waited, holding himself back so he could follow David's lead.

"I've been thinking about doing that for a long time," David admitted.

He swallowed. "Really?"

"Yeah. Maybe I should have tried sooner."

"I don't know. I kind of like the time you did try."

"Should I try again?" David's smile touched his, but this time, the kiss wasn't just a light caress. His tongue boldly pushed into Jonah's mouth, giving Jonah no choice but to open to him. Jonah closed his eyes tightly, and his arm snuck around David's back. His erection pressed into Jonah's hip, the only indication Jonah needed that David was enjoying the kiss as much as he was.

He probably could have picked a more opportune time for making out with his gorgeous lawyer. Jonah didn't really know what the standard protocol was for sex during a potential apocalypse scenario. But with David's larger body overwhelming his, the strong sweep of his tongue drawing moan after moan from his throat, he found he really didn't much care. He clung to David's muscled back with everything



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that he had, aware that his fingers were digging into the hard flesh.

A knock at the door startled him into pulling away, but when it became obvious David wasn't about to let him go, he smiled up at him. "That's going to be my inquisition. You sure you want to stick around for it?"

"I'm sure. Besides, I doubt it's going to be any worse than what happened in the kitchen."

David pressed another kiss to the corner of Jonah's mouth, then released him and rolled off the bed. Jonah sat up, wondering if it looked like he had just been making out. He expected to see Jesse—he wasn't sure if he should be relieved or worried that it was Gideon standing on the other side of the door.

Gideon's nostrils flared. His eyes darted between Jonah and David before he stepped into the room. The space had already seemed small with David filling it; now with both men standing there, facing each other, it felt practically claustrophobic.

"I don't need to tell you things are pretty bad right now," Gideon said. "But Jesse's cooled down some. He's focused on the bigger problem at hand now, and not how to best kill Jonah."

"What do you want us to do?" David asked. "We're not very helpful shut up in here."

"Like it or not, Jonah has to stay in the house now. John cut his magical teeth on location spells. We can't risk letting Jonah outside of our protection for John to find."

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“Sounds like I’m getting shut in anyway.”

Gideon glanced at him. “It’s a big house. I think you’ll manage.” To David, he added, “You’re not obligated to stay. If you want, Jesse can take you back to London and you can be clear of all this, once and for all.”

“Somehow, I don’t think I can happily go back to my normal life while I know that a potential apocalypse is around the corner. I’ll stay here and do whatever I can to help.”

“That’s what I thought you’d say. Then your biggest job is to make sure Jonah does what he’s told for now. No more impromptu bright ideas he thinks might help us.” When Jonah stiffened, he held up a warning hand. “I know why you did what you did. You don’t have to explain it again. But a big reason Jesse was so hard on you is because he’s made his own share of mistakes being that impulsive. Mistakes he almost didn’t survive. You have to do this, Jonah. It’s better for all around if you let us do what we do best.”

He hated that Gideon was right. He hated how small he felt, after he’d been so sure he was doing the right thing. But there was nothing to be done about it now.

“So that’s it?” Jonah asked. “I wander around the house, trying to stay out from underfoot?”

“I’d say yes, but I have a feeling that would just piss you off into doing something really dumb.” Gideon sighed and ran a hand over his hair. “Jesse and I are focusing on the John part of the problem. We’ve got a few ideas we’re tossing around about that, but part of it stems from getting a hold of the guy who helped Emma control her empathic abilities. I figured you

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two could work with Derek on that.”

David nodded. “We can do that. Who is he? I’m guessing he’s not still in Chicago.”

“Ethan Parker. I’m not sure where he’s from originally. Michelle probably knows. The first time we had a run-in with Castelain, we used him and Emma to siphon back the powers that were being stolen from John.”

“We’ll get right on it,” David promised. He glanced over to Jonah. “Right?”

Jonah nodded. “I’ll call Derek and see what he knows.”

“You can probably go through Emma’s case file again, too. See if you can find any ties between that and what you read in Castelain’s book.”

“Should we try to stay out of Jesse’s way for awhile?” David asked.

“Jesse’s probably going to lock himself away in the library to work anyway, but yeah, avoid him if you can.” Gideon went back to the door, but hesitated before leaving. “He’ll calm down, Jonah. Don’t worry.”

Jonah nodded, but didn’t speak until after Gideon had left, the door shut quietly behind him. “You must think I’m pretty pathetic for caring so much about what Jesse thinks.”

“I don’t think you’re pathetic. Come on. Let’s call Derek and get to work on finding this Ethan guy.” David smiled. “Then we can get back to what we were doing before.”

“I suppose asking if we can do the kissing part first makes me look a little ungrateful, huh?” With a wry smile, he rose to his feet and stretched. David might not think so, but Jonah

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personally believed he looked more than a little ridiculous for having been so concerned about Jesse's opinions. "Maybe we could just ask for a collar and leash from Gideon's stash. Then you're guaranteed to keep me from wandering off."

"I don't think Gideon is going to be inclined to give us one right now," David pointed out. "But hey, if you want to ask, I won't stop you."

"Chicken."

"When it comes to a potentially pissed off vampire?" David tilted his head, as if considering it, then nodded. "Yeah, I think I'll cop to that."

Jonah laughed. On a whim, he pressed to David's front and stretched to run a kiss along his jaw. "We'll find this guy so fast, Gideon won't have any choice but to give us anything we want. Like maybe some more time in the playroom."

"From your lips to God's ears."

Jonah wasn't going to rely on a silent deity to make it happen. This was something he could handle, all on his own. With a newfound purpose, he grabbed David's hand and hauled him back downstairs.

## CHAPTER 15

When Gideon came back downstairs, Michelle was gone, and Jesse stood at the sink, rinsing out the coffee pot. Gideon almost turned back around. For the first time ever, he wished he was alone with Michelle and not his lover. This was a conversation he was not looking forward to having.

“David and Jonah are going to work on locating Ethan,” he said. “David’s the best diplomat of the bunch of us.”

Jesse didn’t look up from the sink. “David didn’t insist we let them leave?”

“No, he was actually a good sport about all of it.” He leaned against the counter next to Jess and stared thoughtfully at the closed door that led upstairs. “I think he and Jonah have

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finally uncrossed their wires. I walked in on something, though I don't think they got past any kind of kissing."

"I'm very happy for them."

He sighed. This was going to be a very long day. "Would you rather I went back up and told them to forget about helping and to just fuck like bunnies until we fix this? Because I can do that. If you want Jonah's hands out of this for good, just say the word."

"Them fucking like bunnies right now won't help anybody but them. Even if it will keep Jonah out of trouble for a few hours." Jesse ran the pot under the water until it was full, then turned away from the sink. "Michelle has gone to her store. She said she'd check the catalogue and all the books she keeps in the basement."

Gideon caught Jesse's arm as soon as he placed the pot onto the burner. "Look at me." He waited until Jess lifted shuttered blue eyes to his. He made his mind up then and there. "Come on. We're going to the playroom."

"We don't have time for the playroom." Despite his protest, Jesse didn't pull away from Gideon's grip. "Did you miss the part where I explained that the end of the world could be coming around the corner, courtesy of me and Jonah?"

"No, but I must have missed the part where you made yourself responsible for fixing it all single-handedly." He pulled Jesse out of the kitchen and through the foyer toward the basement door. "You're wound up tighter than I've ever seen you. An hour on the rack will do you a world of good."

"Is this a punishment for going off on Jonah like I did?"

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“It’s not a punishment. You had every right to be angry.”

“I have the feeling that in a few hours, I’m going to feel like a real jerk.” Jesse kept close to him as they descended the stairs, his warmth and the familiar scent of his arousal surrounding Gideon.

But he would be a much more relaxed, happier jerk, Gideon decided. They had settled into a routine after finally dealing with Foster, but he knew Jesse didn’t sleep well. He knew about the dreams of Emma. He knew how difficult it had been for Jesse to find any kind of focus at all, when there were a million and one things conspiring to distract him. Jesse didn’t need yet another problem to compound his worries.

Gideon couldn’t do much to get Jesse’s brain to stop working, but he could erase some of the tension that was turning him into a pretzel. If he was lucky, it would relax Jesse enough to let go some of his anxiety, too.

He locked the playroom door behind them. He didn’t think David would let Jonah anywhere near the playroom without express permission, but Gideon wasn’t willing to run the risk of getting interrupted. Pulling Jesse back into his body, he wrapped his arms around his lover’s waist and began undoing the buttons of his shirt.

“First I’m going to strip you,” Gideon murmured. “Then I’m going to lay you across the rack, tie you down, and stretch you until you scream.”

Jesse sighed and dropped his head back to Gideon’s shoulder. Despite the tension making his muscles hard, he still felt pliable against Gideon’s body and beneath his hands. He

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pulled Jesse's shirt open and ran his fingers up Jesse's chest. The muscles twitched beneath his hand, prompting Jesse to push back, pressing his ass into Gideon's erection.

"I guess I can't argue with that."

Gideon mouthed along Jesse's bare neck, taking care not to let his teeth touch skin. "I'd tell you what I'm going to do next, but then that'll take the surprise out of it." His hands dropped to Jesse's fly, quickly undoing the zipper to free his throbbing length. "But I'm not putting a ring on you today, boy. You're going to hold off on coming all on your own."

"Yes, Sir." Jesse murmured as his pants fell to his feet.

Gideon helped him shed the last of his clothes, then led him to the corner of the playroom. There was only one device in that area, and they didn't use it often—but when they did, they both got a great deal of satisfaction from it. Gideon had purchased the medieval stretch rack from an old friend in Europe, though he had no idea if it was a genuine piece of medieval work. Not that it mattered, since Gideon hadn't bought it as a collectible.

The rack wasn't quite as long as Jesse was tall, but Jesse fit well on top of it. His torso went over a wheel—the mechanism that did the actual stretching—and his legs were pulled apart and each bound to a beam. His arms were stretched in front of him and bound similarly. Gideon further secured Jesse by tying his torso to the wheel, several pieces of rope crossing over his back and tied to each spoke. The crank in the center would pull his arms and legs tighter and tighter.

Gideon smoothed his hands over the ropes, pressing hard



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enough to push the coarse fibers into Jesse's skin. He had fallen in love with rope bondage all over again when Emma had come into their lives. They had needed something a little less extreme for her, since her tolerances leaned more toward submission than pain. What Gideon adored was the beauty of the knots, the long lines stretched over pale skin, the way the blood rushed to the surface of the skin in the tracts beneath each binding. He craved the cries that neither Jesse nor Emma could contain when he touched those flushed patches of flesh, whether it was his bare hand or something fiercer. His dreams of Emma were different than Jesse's. No longer were they only the nightmares of failing them. Now, with knowledge that she could very well still be alive, he dreamed of her and Jesse bound to their bed, ready for him to take over and over again.

"You've been neglected since this mess with Jonah started," he said. He walked to the head of the rack and unlocked the crank. Slowly, he began to turn it, listening to the wood creak in protest. "That's my fault."

"No, Sir, I haven't..." Jesse stopped speaking and dropped his head with a low moan. His skin was already tight and glistening, and Gideon could easily imagine the low burn in Jesse's legs and arms. "You haven't neglected me."

"I have. You haven't had my cock in your ass since Derek called."

"Oh. That's true, Sir. But I have had your cock in my mouth."

Gideon wound the crank tighter. Jesse's cry sizzled

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through his veins, the fresh smell of perspiration popping out on Jesse's brow enough to make Gideon's mouth water. It was entirely possible to wind the gears on the rack tight enough to pull arms and legs from their relative sockets. He would never go to such extreme with Jesse, but he'd be lying to himself if he didn't admit wishing they had somebody they needed to interrogate so furiously that he could do it to them.

"You know you'd rather have me in your ass." He tightened the winch another quarter turn. "Admit it."

"I...I admit it, Sir. I wanted you to fuck me...I was jealous that you didn't."

Sliding his hand over the tight skin of Jesse's back, Gideon slipped his hand between the wooden wheel and Jesse's chest, unerringly finding a nipple and scraping his nail across it. He suppressed his shudder at the fresh lust pouring from Jesse's body.

"Fucking Jonah meant nothing to me. Not like fucking you."

"I know, Sir." Each word was accompanied with a ragged breath. Gideon knew what every breath, every moan, every whimper from Jesse meant. Right now, he knew Jesse was in that place just between pleasure and pain. "But I'm greedy for you."

"Just me?" He caught the nipple now between his fingers, squeezing tighter as he reached to turn the crank. "If I told you you'd never get your hands or mouth on David's cock, would you be disappointed?"

Jesse tried to squirm against his restraints, but he didn't

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have much success. “No, Sir.”

The skin chafed at the nearest rope. Gideon bent his head and dragged his tongue over it, worming beneath the binding to steal some of the heat. It was tempting to bring the fangs out and make the skin burst, allowing beads of blood to flow over his lips, but Gideon held back. Later. When he was buried in Jesse’s ass. He would take what they both wanted.

He straightened, reluctantly, and stood back to see the alternating strips of white and pink along Jesse’s back. “God, you look delicious,” he said. “We don’t use this nearly enough.”

Jesse tried to look over his shoulder, and Gideon caught a glimpse of his flushed face. His eyes were bright, and his lips were parted. “No, Sir, we don’t.”

“Since this is for you, I’ll give you a choice. Paddle or whip?”

“Paddle, Sir. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt that.”

Gideon smiled. “Too long.”

As he turned to go to the cupboard, his eye caught the ring in the ceiling over the rack. “No reason you can’t have something in your ass before then, though.”

He felt Jesse’s gaze on him every step of the way. The paddle he chose was thick, heavy leather, designed to fit easily in his grip. No bells, no whistles, no studs. Each round of the strap would sting just because of Gideon’s strength. The way it was meant to be.

As he returned to the rack, he kept the other toy he removed from the cupboard out of Jesse’s view. “Talk to me,

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boy. Part of the reason you're so tense is you're keeping everything all bottled up. Let it out."

"Gideon...Sir...I'm just worried." Jesse paused for so long, Gideon wondered if he was going to have to start paddling to get him to talk. "I'm not worried. I feel guilty."

Gideon went around the rear of the rack and reached to thread the thin chain he'd retrieved through the ring in the ceiling. Jesse tried to turn his head to look and see what he was doing, but he'd placed himself perfectly in Jesse's blind spot. All he got was the clink of the stainless steel chain, and then the glide of Gideon's palm over his ass for the briefest of moments.

"Because of John?" He pulled the chain taut as he reached for the lube, coating the toy he'd brought back. "Or because of something else?"

"Because of John. Because as soon as I realized he was responsible for the obsidian, I should have put him firmly on the enemy's list."

He pulled Jesse's cheeks apart, exposing his puckered opening. Gliding the hard knob of the hook over the hole, he left a thin veneer of slick before pressing the hook inside his ass.

Jesse jerked—though not very far—and tried to twist to look over his shoulder. "Oh, God. Is that a hook?"

"I told you, you needed something inside your ass." Picking up the strap, he came around to the front and crouched down. "And once I've heard some screams, I'll make sure my cock goes in there, too."

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Jesse strained forward, but Gideon was just out of reach of his mouth. “Both at the same time?”

He smiled. “Of course. I owe you that much, don’t I, boy?”

Jesse smiled. “Even if I don’t much feel like I deserve that much, Sir?”

“Especially because you don’t.” He slammed their mouths together in a hard, driving kiss. The moment Jesse tried to push his tongue past Gideon’s lips, he pulled back, swiping away the taste of him off his lower lip. “Let’s start.”

The first slap of the paddle landed across Jesse’s straining shoulder. Jesse merely grunted, even when the strap landed across his other side. Standing back up, Gideon let it casually swipe across his thigh. The exposed bands of flesh were a deeper red now, the blood pooling just below the surface. Would he break with the first blow?

God, he hoped so.

Gideon pulled his arm back, aiming for the back of Jesse’s thigh, just below his ass. He struck with precision, and the only thing louder than the paddle against Jesse’s flesh was his shout. It echoed up to the ceiling, and Gideon was thankful that nobody upstairs would be able to hear the two of them. Unfortunately, the skin didn’t break, and the pink flush of blood heightened Gideon’s bloodlust.

He hit the exact same spot on the second blow. Jesse’s shout was even sharper. Drops of blood welled up and began flowing down his skin.

The next slap was inches upward, closer to Jesse’s ass. It kept the leather out of the blood, but overlapped enough to

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widen the cut. Scarlet droplets rolled to the narrow gutter running alongside the rack.

He had to remember to strip out of his clothes before fucking Jesse. He wanted the blood to flood every sense he had.

“Harder, Gideon. Please. Don’t...don’t hold anything back.”

Under other circumstances, Gideon would’ve corrected him, enacted some sort of punishment to remind him who was in charge. Even the lack of a “Sir” would’ve been enough to merit some sort of reminder. Now, he merely complied. It was his wish, too, after all. He wanted to see the ropes stained with Jesse’s blood, to drag his tongue through the bruises and burns.

His arm swung back. Once. Again. And again.

“Thank you...Gideon...thank you...” He spoke after each blow. Even as he started gasping and screaming, he spoke. “Sir...please...Gideon...God...”

It wasn’t long until the ropes began to absorb the blood flowing from Jesse’s ass and thighs, staining them a soft shade of pink. The stain darkened each time Gideon brought the paddle down. Jesse’s skin began to change colors, as well. The first and earliest bruises were a light purple, blossoming across his flesh. Gideon had the feeling that if Jesse could move, he would be pushing back against each blow, prolonging the contact. At one point, he strained so hard the rope on his right wrist began to fray and pop.

Gideon’s hand shot out, clamping around the back of

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Jesse's neck. "Still, boy." His fingers dug into the flesh, constricting Jesse's windpipe until he stopped moving. But the cessation of motion heightened the scent of blood. How was he supposed to resist?

He wasn't.

Tossing the strap aside, Gideon grabbed the chain to jerk against the hook, releasing Jesse's neck so he could bend and lick across the wet skin.

Jesse's blood always tasted sweet to him, but something made it even better now. His tongue burned from the heat of Jesse's body and his skin. His muscles were still tense, trembling even, but he held himself completely still. Even as Gideon dragged his tongue from his thigh to his lower back. The difference between the rough rope and Jesse's smooth skin made his mouth tingle.

Blood smeared across the front of Gideon's shirt. He should take it off, but that would mean abandoning Jesse's heat, and he wasn't ready for that, wouldn't ever be ready for that. He yanked against the chain, driving the hook deeper into Jesse's channel. Jesse jerked against his ropes, snapping the one at his wrist.

Gideon growled. "What did I say about staying still?" He brought his hand flat across Jesse's flank. His fingers slipped in the blood. "Maybe you'd just like to settle for the hook."

"No," Jesse said quickly. "No, no, Sir. I won't move. Even if you untie all the ropes, I won't move."

He wouldn't go that far. He'd lose the chafing the rope left behind. He wanted to feel the broken skin against his tongue,

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the salt mingling with the blood. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the heat seeping from Jesse's bare body. This was almost as good as molding over him in bed with his cock still buried in Jesse's ass.

The sudden image brought a throb to his balls.

Only almost. He needed to get inside him. Now.

Pulling away, he yanked his shirt off, the buttons scattering across the floor. Jesse mewled in protest, and Gideon backhanded his ass, nudging against the hook.

His pants followed, and he nearly tore them to shreds as he pulled the material from his body. As soon as they were gone, he stepped between Jesse's legs, letting the blood smear across his legs as the tip of his cock brushed against Jesse's balls. He ran the crown from Jesse's sac up to his hole. He teased the opening, rubbing the sensitive tip against the hook stretching Jesse's flesh.

"Please...Sir...I need you to fuck me."

He wasn't sure he didn't need Jesse more, but Gideon wasn't about to waste any more time. Slowly, he pushed the head past the ring, taking his time to allow Jesse to adjust to the added thickness. The pressure was excruciating. The hook had warmed from Jesse's body, but it was still cool in comparison to the fiery constriction of the muscle.

"Fuck," he muttered. "The only thing that would make this better would be if it was another cock in your ass."

"You'd share?"

He pushed in a few more inches. A shudder wracked through him.



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“If it felt like this, hell yeah.” A possibility came to mind, and his hips snapped forward, drawing a sharp cry from Jesse. “Except David’s a bit bigger than this damn hook.”

Jesse made a small choking sound that might have been a laugh or a moan. “Except David probably isn’t happy with me after how I talked to Jonah.”

Gideon bent over Jesse’s back. He drew his cock out, dragging it along the hook slowly, only to drive it back inside with a vicious thrust.

“I’m sure I could convince him,” he murmured in Jesse’s ear. “Maybe promise him some playroom time alone with Jonah. But what man in his right mind would ever turn down the chance to stuff a willing hole like yours, boy? All we have to do is show him what a cocksut you really are.”

“I am. I...” The words choked off in Jesse’s throat as Gideon slid out. At that moment, Gideon wasn’t sure who the hook was torturing more. Jesse must have appreciated the added thickness stretching him, but the pressure from the smooth metal was almost too much to bear against his aching cock. “God...I wish you’d put a ring on me.”

“No, you don’t. You can control it, boy.” He wasn’t so sure that he could, though. Every stroke into Jesse’s channel was the best sort of agony. He nibbled at Jesse’s neck to try and distract himself. “David’s bigger, though. We’d have to work to get him in you. Take our time stretching you out.”

Jesse tilted his head to the side, exposing the marks on his throat to Gideon’s mouth. The action was so familiar, so common, but his stomach still tightened and his fangs still

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itched to descend into the flesh. The ropes bit into Gideon's stomach, creating fresh burns on his skin as he slid against Jesse's back, smearing sweat and blood.

"Yes...I'd need a ring for that."

"Would you want Jonah to watch?" He stretched his arms over Jesse's, molding almost perfectly over the body he adored. The snap of his hips grew more violent, but he kept the strokes deep and slow. He wasn't ready for either of them to come just yet. "Tell me what you want, boy. I'll give it you. All you have to do is ask for it."

"God...Gideon...I want...I want you to take hours, all day, to make me ready for two cocks. With the toys. I want to be able to look forward to you and David all day long. I want to ride both of you. And Jonah...he can watch. He can help..." Jesse moaned, trying to tilt his head back further, but Gideon wouldn't give him the room he needed.

"Who needs toys?" He sucked a patch of skin into his mouth, biting at the muscle with blunt teeth before letting go. "I think I'll just grease Jonah's hand up. If you can take his fist, you can take both our cocks."

A small shudder moved through his stretched frame. "It's been a long time since I've taken anybody's fist."

"All the better." Too many images fought for his attention. Jonah screwing his hand into Jesse's ass. David's thick, gorgeous cock needing lube. Swallowing that cock down to get it wet for Jesse. Gideon groaned. "You'll be tight then. A better fit for me and David."

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“Gideon...fuck...” His ass clenched hard around Gideon’s cock—another hint of the strength in Jesse’s body. His muscles were so tight, Gideon couldn’t move. His flesh throbbed, and his pulse echoed into Gideon’s flesh. He could feel it from his groin to his throat. The same steady pulsing that he would feel rush over his tongue when he finally sunk his teeth into Jesse’s throat.

Jesse had long ago balled his hands into fists. Gideon speared his fingers through them, forcing Jesse to relax into his hands. He took control of the arm that had loosened, and curled it forward across the front of Jesse’s throat. It didn’t cut off Jesse’s air, but it was one more lock of his body to Jesse’s, one more way to hold him still, one more way to hold him close as he pistoned in and out of his Jesse’s ass.

Gideon squeezed his eyes shut. “Love you, boy. So much.”

“Love you...more than anything. Gideon...” Jesse’s body seemed to spike in temperature, and the smell of his arousal grew stronger. “Please. I’m so close...please.”

So was Gideon. The petulant child in him wanted to deny Jesse longer, but that would mean denying his own release as well. And the smell of intoxicating blood only grew stronger with each stroke into Jesse’s body. His head swam. His fangs descended of their own accord. He wanted nothing more than to drain Jess dry. Blood, come, all of it.

“Go ahead and come.” Even his balls tightened at the command. He couldn’t articulate anything more. With one last drive into Jesse’s ass, Gideon sank his fangs deep into his

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neck.

Jesse's body convulsed and he tried to scream, but Gideon didn't allow enough oxygen for that. Or for anything else. As come coated the rack, blood flowed down Gideon's throat, exactly as he had imagined it. He bit harder, applying more pressure with his jaw to force more blood from the veins. Jesse's whimper told Gideon that he had felt it, but he didn't try to pull away from the hard bite. His walls clenched and fluttered around Gideon's cock, gripping him as he coated the passage with come.

He drank until he felt the skips in Jesse's heartbeat like echoes against his tongue. Jesse was completely lax beneath him, floating on that brink of darkness he found more and more often. Sometimes, Gideon still worried about taking him to that place. The fear of losing Jess again was always there. But then Jesse would squeeze around him, exert some measure of his strength, and Gideon's faith returned. He wouldn't lose Jesse again. He couldn't.

When he extracted his fangs, he licked over the seeping puncture marks, driving the tip of his tongue into the minute holes. "From how hard you came, I almost think you want David's cock more than mine."

"No. Yours was the only one I was thinking about. For that matter, you were the only thing I was thinking about."

"The way it should be." He kissed over the same spot. "You. Me. And as soon as we find her, Emma."

"It'll be soon," Jesse murmured. "Sooner now that you've

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so kindly cleared my head.”

Gideon believed him. It was only a matter of time. Nothing could stop Jesse, once he made up his mind. Not even an egomaniacal asshole like John.

## CHAPTER 16

“So how do you want me to start?”

Gideon sat on the arm of the couch, though he felt like prowling around the living room, while Jesse lounged in the couch’s corner. They had fucked, showered, checked on David and Jonah, and now there was absolutely no more reason not to talk about his history with John. Except for the fact that Gideon didn’t want to, but that was no longer a viable response in light of their current circumstances.

“I think starting at the beginning will be best. Based on those photos John took of you, I imagine that he used to be more willing to get his hands dirty?”

“Depends on what you mean by getting his hands dirty.

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John's a voyeur. He gets off on watching other people perform at his expense." Gideon snorted. "Considering the way he likes to play mind games just with the simplest requests, I would've thought you'd have figured that one out by now."

"So, how did you fall in with a manipulative, voyeuristic, dark mage? Was he practicing magic when you met him?"

"Practicing? No. He was only six the first time I met him. I, um...killed his family." There was just no way to make that sound good. "That was in Philadelphia. He wasn't there, or I probably would've killed him, too."

Jesse grimaced. "I should have known this was going to be one of the stories that starts with a slaughter. You actually saw John then, or did he find you later to avenge them?"

"Neither, actually. It was winter, and the Brewer house was private enough that I could live in it for a while before anybody started worrying where the family might be. John wasn't there because he'd been ill when the family had left his grandparents after the holidays. They brought him back once he was better."

He'd always liked the Brewer house. They'd had money, and a comfortable lifestyle for the time. He'd been more than a little disgruntled when the scrawny little kid had returned to claim what was now his.

Jesse regarded him with thoughtful eyes. "Why didn't you kill John, too?"

"Because he found me in his father's chair, looked me straight in the eye, and told me to get the hell out of his home." He shrugged. "I thought it was cute. Ballsy and stupid,

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but cute. He was always short, and then he looked like you could knock him over just by blowing on him. But he didn't even blink when he saw me sitting there. I rationalized it later by telling myself he didn't have enough blood in him to make it worth the effort, but the truth of it was, I thought he was a gutsy little thing and I decided to give him a pass."

Jesse didn't look the least surprised by Gideon's explanation. In fact, he began nodding while Gideon spoke, like he already knew how the story went. "Are you going to tell me now that you decided to stick around for a few years and make sure nothing happened to him?"

Gideon stared at him. "Are you kidding me? Do you know how cold it is in Philadelphia in January? As soon as I left the Brewer house, I got on the first train I could find south. Spent the rest of the winter in Charleston."

Jesse shifted on the couch. He'd heal soon, but in the meantime, his ass was probably still sore. "When did you meet up with him again?"

"When he was fourteen. In Baltimore. I thought it was an accident, but as it turned out, John had already started looking for me. It's probably a good thing I didn't know that then, because I wouldn't have let him get as close as he did. I just thought it was fate being funny."

"Had he intended to kill you? Did he actually ever try?"

"No, oddly enough." Gideon still remembered spying the skinny teenager arguing with the manager at the hotel. He had come down to go out for the night, and there had been John, glaring at the portly older man with fire in his gray eyes.



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Gideon hadn't recognized him at first, but when he'd tried to pass by, the young John had grabbed his arm and demanded his aid in convincing the manager to allow him to let a room. "We just kind of fell in together. He was young, he didn't have any family, and he had money. We...fulfilled a need for the other, believe it or not."

"I hope you're not going to tell me it was some sort of sexual need. I don't know if my psyche can handle that."

Gideon stared at him in horror. "Oh, God, no. He was just a kid. And skinny. And mostly straight, believe it or not."

"Well, that's good to know. Though I'm not sure I'll ever believe that John is mostly straight. When did he become interested in magic?"

"He figured out he had a gift for it after crashing one of my kills. I caught him lurking around the whorehouse, got pissed, and when I started to haul him back to the hotel, he lashed out. You know that scar on the back of my thigh? Courtesy of John and a little bit of hellfire."

"Jesus. I knew his power was probably innate, but that's more than I expected. Did you encourage him? Or were you anti-magic then, too?"

Gideon slid wearily onto the couch. "I wish I had been. It was a lot harder to find good mages back then. You couldn't just look 'em up in the yellow pages or find them online. When I realized what John could do, I..." With a sigh, he leaned his head against the back of the couch. His eyes were starting to throb. "I might've spoiled him a little bit, cultivating it. That's how we ended up in Chicago. I heard

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about someone who could help him hone his talents.”

“You made John who he is. No wonder he always treated me with such...bemusement. Even before the obsidian, my devotion to you must have struck him as a bit...I don’t know, funny, maybe.”

“You weren’t the first person he saw like that,” Gideon confessed. “When I realized he got off on watching me with other people, I figured out ways to sneak him in or around. The photography was actually his idea. But anyway, he saw them all come and go. The fact that he was the one who lasted amused him, to say the least.”

“That’s...actually really creepy, Gideon.”

Gideon cocked a brow. “Some people would think some of the shit you like is creepy, Jess.”

Jesse’s lips twitched into a smile for the first time. “Touché. You two were pretty close, then?”

He sucked in air between his teeth. “Close? That’s not the word I’d use. We were...convenient for each other. John was stubborn and used to getting his own way. So was I. There were times when we’d get in a fight and one of us would leave for a while. And when I say a while, I mean, weeks. Months. One time, John was gone for almost a year.”

“Which one of you first thought of using John’s power to open the dimension?”

“He did. I didn’t know such things existed. Not until after Tielle was killed. That was John’s teacher. John inherited everything after she died. That’s her house he lives in now.”

“That’s what I never understood. Why you tried it. What

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you thought you were going to gain. How did John sell you on the idea?"

Here it came. The truth. His own insecurities. His own desires. Things he'd never shared with Jesse, mostly because they still shamed him. He took a deep breath, bracing to start.

"I was fucking Tielle when she got killed. And I almost mean that literally. We'd been screwing around on the side, and I was at her house, and...she got attacked. A demon I'd never seen before broke into the house. It pulled me off her, killed her, then turned on me. By the time I tore out its throat, I was bleeding from more holes in my body than I'd ever had before. I didn't even make it to the front door before passing out. John found me and fixed me up." He turned his head and met Jesse's steady eyes. "I don't know how he did it, but he claimed it was dimensional magic that did the trick. And that if we worked together, we could figure out how to channel it for ourselves so we never had to worry about dying again. I didn't even hesitate to throw in with the idea."

Jesse swallowed hard, the color draining from his face. "Gideon...you're already immortal. What did he tell you? That you would be invulnerable?"

"Yes. And I'm not really immortal. I can still be killed. Stakes, fire, losing my head. John took advantage of how badly I got hurt and played on my fears."

"God, I just thought that he tried to open the dimensions or something. But...I guess Michelle wouldn't still be so angry if it had been something as simple as that. You covered for John when she caught you, didn't you?"

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Gideon nodded. "He saved my life. And I felt responsible for him. He had his magic, but he was still human."

"The magic he used was easily strong enough to attract the attention of Guardians outside this dimension. What he acquired...the power he gained...he stole it. I mean, it's impossible to know just what he did or how he did it, but Castelain could have been drawn to him. Especially since his counterparts in other dimensions probably attempted the same thing."

"Did you ever read his journal?"

"No. I wanted to. But after everything quieted down and I had the chance, I wondered if it was anything I wanted or needed to know."

Gideon frowned. "Didn't JT say the other John tried a few times to take control of the dimension? Maybe it's got the details of what he did in there."

"Yeah, you're right." Jesse ran his hand through his hair. "I should have read it as soon as JT gave it to me. I've been dropping the ball all over the place, it seems like."

"You had more important things on your mind." He stretched his arm across the back of the couch, carefully massaging Jesse's shoulder. "How pissed are you I never told you any of this before?"

"On a scale from one to ten, I think I'm at a seven right now. I didn't need to know all of this, but the stuff with the dimensions? You should have told me about that."

"You're not going to make me tell Michelle, are you?"

"Do you want her to not know, or do you just want to

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avoid telling her yourself?”

“I’d rather not be in her line of fire when she finds out I’ve been lying to her for a century.”

“I’ll tell her. She probably won’t try to drive something sharp through my heart.”

Jesse sounded so miserable again, Gideon wasn’t sure what to do. It was a little scary to consider how tense he’d be if Gideon hadn’t fucked him first.

“Tell me what you want me to do, then. You’re calling the shots.”

Jesse took a deep breath. “I’ll talk to Michelle. If she has a problem with you lying for the past century, then she’s just going to have to deal with that for now, because we’ve got bigger things to worry about. I’ll also read John’s diary and see what I can find out. I think you should monitor John. If he starts using dimensional magic, I’ll feel it. But there’s plenty of shit he can do that I won’t feel at all.”

Gideon nodded. “I can do that. I’ll make some calls to have some of my contacts get on the alert, too.” He rose and stretched, though he didn’t feel much better having told the story. Jesse might have heard more than the slaughter story from his past, but John’s current life was purely Gideon’s doing. If he hadn’t protected John, if he hadn’t agreed to John’s plan, if he hadn’t allowed John to live...

Jesse might think the blame for the situation was his to own, but he was wrong. It was Gideon’s. It always had been.

Jesse stood as well, catching Gideon’s hand before he could walk away. With fingers entwined, Jesse pulled him

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closer. “I know that you didn’t mean for any of this to happen, Gideon. Sometimes, I wish you didn’t have all of this baggage in your past, but then I remember that if that were the case, you wouldn’t be you. And I like you an awful lot.”

It helped hearing the words. Looping an arm around Jesse’s shoulders, Gideon brushed a kiss across his temple, taking a moment to simply breathe him in.

“Just remember you’re not the only one carrying the load here,” he said. “The only person we should be blaming is John.”

“I know. He made his choices. Like the rest of us. And now we have a chance to fix it.”

And they would. Because now, they had no other options but to face everything they had both ignored.

## CHAPTER 17

Jesse would always be loyal to those he considered a friend, and a part of him still considered John as a friend. He was personally embroiled in this mess because he helped John, and John had been willing to save Gideon and Emma from Castelain when they were attacked. John and Gideon might have a history, but he and John had a history, too. If that friendship was still there—if even a remnant of the respect they had once shared was still present—then perhaps they could reach a compromise? A treaty of sorts?

Jonah and David had opted to join Derek at the police station. Jonah had asked him if they could leave, and Jesse had winced inside, even as he nodded. Michelle was still at the

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store, and Gideon had locked himself in the library with his phone, calling his short list of trusted contacts. Jesse knew that if he told any of them he was going to see John, they would argue with him. And they would have a point. But Michelle had been right—John's strength couldn't match Jesse's. He would be safe, relatively.

Jesse teleported to the corner of John's block, opting to walk to John's familiar door. Black John. Had he acquired that nickname before or after he and Gideon had had a falling out? Hell, Gideon could have given John that nickname. He'd have to ask sometime.

The door opened before he dropped his arm from knocking. John appeared like he always did, immaculately groomed, gray eyes piercing and calm. Why had he expected him to appear different? Guardians didn't look any different than anybody else walking down the street. But Jesse had assumed it would show somehow, that the power John had stolen would be evident, because he now knew to see it.

The corner of John's mouth lifted, and without a word of greeting, he stepped out of the way, giving Jesse room to enter.

"I suppose you're not really surprised to see me here," Jesse said as the door shut behind him.

"I did rather expect you to arrive sooner." John led the way back to his kitchen. "I was just fixing some dinner. Are you staying to dine with me, or are you getting what you came for and rushing off?"

Jesse wasn't particularly hungry, but he was visiting in the



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spirit of friendship. “I’d like to stay if I’m not imposing on you.”

He caught the flash of John’s smile as they stepped into the warm kitchen. “I feel we probably have much to talk about.”

Whatever John was cooking, it was heavy on the garlic. A pot bubbled away on the stove, and there were vegetables laid out on a cutting board, ready to be tossed into a salad bowl. It seemed like a lot of food for just one person, and Jesse couldn’t help but wonder if John had planned for his arrival all day.

“Yes, we do. Gideon finally filled me in on his history with you.” He would have offered to help, but he knew from experience that John wouldn’t let him. He sat at the kitchen table instead. “I can see why neither one of you were in a big hurry to tell me before.”

“I would have shared it with you, if you weren’t so determined to remain friends with Michelle.” He stood at the stove and stirred whatever was in the pot, leaning in to inhale the scent of the steam. “Of course, you understand now why I had to preserve my privacy.”

“I understand. Especially knowing what I do now. But I have to be honest with you. I have to tell her the details.”

The spoon faltered for a fraction of a second before resuming. “I appreciate that you still deem me trustworthy enough to tell me the truth, Mr. Madding. I must admit, I feared the worst.”

“I’d rather be—remain—your friend, John. Especially since we’re going to have to be able to live in Chicago with

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each other for a rather long time.”

“Or perhaps not.” John spooned out a taste of what was in the pot and blew across the surface to cool it. “The world is a vast place. One of us might decide Chicago is too small for his purposes.”

The only thing worse than John trying to target the weak areas in Chicago was John traveling the globe to find dimensional hot spots. “I didn’t think you’d want to leave your home. Isn’t a lot of your power centralized here?”

John glanced back at him. “Is yours?”

Jesse took a deep breath. “In a way. Sooner or later, I’m going to take over for Michelle. That includes the bookstore.”

He thought he saw John’s brows draw together slightly, though it could have been a trick of the steam. “You have yet to become a full Guardian?”

He knew John was fishing for information. He could only hope that John would draw the wrong conclusions from the facts Jesse handed out. “The regular process was interrupted. Michelle did not fully divest herself of all her powers due to her recent injury. When I’m satisfied that the transference won’t kill her, we’ll finish it.”

John nodded, seemingly satisfied with Jesse’s response. “You have been otherwise preoccupied, as well. Your houseguest was quite passionate about everything you’ve been studying when he stopped by earlier.”

“Yes, Jonah is very...eager. I think there’s a large part of him that’s just craving approval.” Jesse smiled. “He reminds me of somebody, but I just can’t figure out who I know that

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fits that description.”

“I was mulling over his words earlier today, and it dawned on me...” Setting down the spoon, he turned the flame off beneath the pot. “It’s rather ironic how we find ourselves today. I would have been quite pleased to take you on as a protégé just a few years ago, and here we are, nearly equals anyway.”

“I think if I had ever taken you up on your offer, both Gideon and Michelle would have both flown off the handle.” Jesse’s smile widened. “Though Gideon’s head might explode if he ever found himself in agreement with Michelle.” Sobering, he added softly, “But John, we’re not nearly equals now.”

“You don’t believe that,” came the swift response. No smile remained on John’s face. “Or else, you would not be here at this moment, attempting to assess my actions.”

“You think I’d only come here if I were afraid of what you could do?”

“You brushed me off two months ago when you needed my aid. Why would I think this would be a simple friendly visit, on the same day your houseguest revealed what you’re obviously so desperate to keep secret? How foolish do you think I am, Mr. Madding?”

“You misunderstand my question, John. I’m not afraid of what you can do. I’m more worried about what you’re going to make me do.”

The smile returned, though this was a mocking slash as only John could produce. His gray eyes were chilly, his body

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perfectly still. “Do you know what I have always liked about you? Your honor. It’s a rare beast in, well, *any* world.”

“Thank you. Why don’t you sit down so we can talk this over?”

“I’m afraid I must decline. I have dinner to prepare.” He turned his back on Jesse to reach for a spotless pot holder hanging on a hook by the oven. “Would you like some wine or tea?”

“Tea, please.” Jesse tapped his fingers against the table. John was always difficult to read, even at the best of times. But it was clear that John didn’t want to talk about this. Jesse didn’t plan to let him off that easily. “What makes you think I was so desperate to keep it a secret? Because I didn’t want to run over to tell you myself?”

“Because you lied to me on the phone.” He paused in mid-stretch for whatever was inside the oven. “Or do you deny that, as well?”

“When I said that Castelain isn’t a Guardian?” Jesse inclined his head. “Fine, I lied. You surprised me. I didn’t have any idea that Jonah would take it upon himself to come over here to tell you.”

“Should I heed my Nietzsche, then?” The pan he took out of the oven held a succulent roast, fat sizzling where it dripped and hit the hot metal. “He would not consider it enough not to be upset with you for lying to me. He would warn me to hold my anger because your lies mean from now on, I can’t believe you.”

“Does your Nietzsche apply to lies of commission, or lies

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of omission, as well?”

John only glanced at him before setting the roasting pan atop a waiting trivet. “You refer to my history with Gideon?”

“Yes. There were plenty of opportunities to tell me the truth. Perhaps if I had known about your involvement with dimensional magic, I could have learned that the so-called demon was really Castelain.”

“I would suggest we cannot rewrite history, but when one can simply find a dimension where the history works to your favor, my suggestion seems rather naïve, don’t you think?”

Jesse shook his head. “It doesn’t work that way, John. It’s not as though the other dimensions are carbon copies of this one. Or that we’re a carbon copy of some other dimension. No matter what other dimension you find, you can’t escape your own personal facts. You should heed your Lennon. Wherever you go, there you are.”

He didn’t expect John’s soft chortle. “Oh, how I have missed you, Mr. Madding. You are wasted on Gideon, that is for sure.”

“I don’t know. I think Gideon appreciates me.” Jesse traced the pattern on the kitchen table with his fingernail. “Can I ask you something? What happened that led to the current state of affairs between you two?”

Gray eyes flickered in his direction. Then they flickered away again. “I thought you were well aware of what happened between us now.” He turned his back on Jesse and reached for a knife and fork set in a nearby canister. He used the utensils to start slicing the roast, revealing blood rare beef glistening

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inside the crusty peppercorn layer. “Or has Gideon proven to be his usual enigmatic self, yet again?”

“Gideon didn’t get that far in his story.” The smell of the roast made his mouth water. “He’s not big with sharing time.”

“Did he tell you I was the one who saved his life? Constantly, it would seem.”

“He told me about the time you saved him after a demon attack. I also know you’re the one who cut him down from the cross.”

“I was also the one who protected him from Michelle for those months after she nearly killed him.” John’s voice had taken on a tinge of bitterness. “Did he care to tell you that, as well?”

Perhaps Gideon hadn’t been appropriately grateful to John, but John didn’t seem particularly grateful of the fact that Gideon never told Michelle of John’s involvement. Even when it would have assuredly made his life easier.

“No. He didn’t tell me anything that happened after the dimensional spell.”

A muscle twitched in John’s jaw as he sliced away at the beef. It curled in paper-thin folds over his blade, ready to melt on a waiting tongue at the first taste. Jesse had never seen him appear quite so angry before. John didn’t get angry. His demeanor rarely ruffled.

The hair stood up on Jesse’s neck.

When half the roast was carved away, John carefully set down the knife and fork and came around the counter to sit opposite Jesse at the table. “Six months after Michelle bound

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him to the cross, I ventured the prospect of attempting again. Gideon said ‘no.’” His right hand went to his left wrist and undid the cufflink holding his sleeve closed. He set the gold jewelry on the table and began to roll up his sleeve. “In fact, he did more than say no. He destroyed a great number of my tools, burned most of my library, and left me with this.” He held out his arm. There, on the inside of his elbow, was a vicious scar, four perfect puncture wounds where a vampire had clearly taken a chunk out of him.

But not any vampire. Gideon.

Jesse usually felt a flare of shock, or disgust, or just plain sadness when faced with one of Gideon’s ancient sins. But he didn’t this time. He supposed he and John were not too far removed from each other. He wouldn’t even be surprised if John admitted to loving Gideon, in a way. But Jesse had fallen for a vampire who wanted to rise above his own instincts. John had entwined his life with a vampire who had slaughtered his whole family. Had he really been so surprised when Gideon turned on him? How could he be?

Still, he was drawn to the injury—so like some of the scars he bore on his own flesh. What had gone through John’s head when he saw the marks on Jesse’s neck? Without thinking—without even wondering how John would react—he reached out to touch one of the unchanging wounds. His fingertip brushed against the maimed skin. A charge rushed through him, making the world turn a bright white for just a nanosecond. If he hadn’t already been seated, he would have fallen.

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Jesse had only felt a charge like that once before in his life. The first time he had touched Emma.

John's brows creased into a frown. "You can't be surprised by them," he said. "For all his supposed evolution, Gideon is, and always will be, a beast at heart."

"A beast," Jesse echoed faintly. His heart raced, like John had purposefully shocked him. "No, I'm not surprised by them. Were you?"

"How could I not be? Gideon had had ample opportunity to kill me, from the time he slaughtered my family, through the twenty years we were..." He almost spat out the next word. "...*friends*. He never even struck me in all that time. Why on earth would I think he would drain me to the brink of death, simply because I wished to share the greatest power there is with him?"

Jesse shrugged. Sometimes, he knew every thought that went through Gideon's head. Other times, he wouldn't dare assume he could read anything into Gideon's actions or thoughts. This time, he thought he understood. "It doesn't make a difference now, but he might have been acting out of a place of friendship. If he removes the means, then you can't put yourself in Michelle's path again."

Disgusted, John pulled his arm and rolled his sleeve back down. "I'm not afraid of her. I never was. Gideon never understood that."

"Then why didn't you ever tell her the truth?"

"Because one never shows his hand to the enemy, Mr. Madding."



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“And you’re still not afraid of her? Even if I assure you that you’ve got a good reason to be?”

“No.” The single word was clear and crisp, as was the smile that accompanied it. John rose from the table and returned to his preparations, as aloof as he had ever been. “Because whether you like it or not, we’re really not that different. In spite of how many ways you try to tell yourself otherwise.”

“You and I aren’t that different?” Jesse still felt more than a little dazed, but if he tried to rush out of the house, John would be suspicious. “Be careful, John. You’re treading toward cliché.”

“Would you rather I provide a more literary response?” He paused a moment, his gaze sliding sideways, and then smiled more broadly. “Why don’t we try, ‘The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.’ And I, Mr. Madding, intend to have a very *long* future.”

Jesse stood. He couldn’t remain seated for another moment. He felt Emma in his blood. His body hummed with her energy. “John, I agree that one should never tip his hand to the enemy. But I don’t want to think of you as an enemy. So, I’m going to tell you plainly. If you do another spell like you tried one hundred years ago, you won’t have to worry about Michelle catching you. Because there is no incantation you can use that will make you invulnerable to me.”

John’s smile didn’t falter. “Such a pity that you actually believe that.”

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“I don’t believe it. I know it.” And in that moment, he did know it. The power that John believed he had access to wasn’t just under Jesse’s guardianship. It belonged to Jesse. It was a part of him. There was no distinction between him and reality, except for his meaningless flesh. He needed to see Michelle. He needed to apologize to Jonah. He needed to find Emma. “Thanks for the visit, John.”

“You’re always welcome here, Mr. Madding.” Sadly enough, Jesse believed he was sincere.

Jesse showed himself out of the house and opted not to teleport home. He needed the silence, the long walk back to the mansion, to get his thoughts in order. John was the key. John had always been the key. Now he just needed to figure out how to get to the lock where Emma was waiting on the other side.

## CHAPTER 18

Jesse called Michelle and told her to come home as he turned onto his street, and by the time he made it to the house, she was there, her eyes anxious, her mouth pulled into a frown.

“Where were you? Did something happen?”

“Yes, something happened, but nothing bad. I was at John’s.”

“You went to visit John? Why?”

“Because we were friends once. Maybe we still are. I wanted him to understand that it was not in his best interest to provoke me.”

Michelle’s frown deepened. “Did he listen to you?”

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“Of course not.” Jesse pulled open the front door and ushered her inside, out of the rising wind. It had been getting colder. Soon, they would have to go through the process of winterizing the house and buying enough firewood to get them through the worst of the winter months. “But I knew he wouldn’t.”

“You seem awfully calm.”

“I am. I told you, something happened. I touched John and I felt Emma.”

Michelle stopped short. “What?”

“Come on.” He tugged at her arm, pulling her toward the kitchen. “The first time I met Emma, I knew she was an empath because of the power I felt. She was scared and hurt and she couldn’t control how she projected her emotions. I felt that again when I touched John. Only, they weren’t *his* feelings. They were Emma’s.”

“How could you know that?”

“Because it’s Emma. Here’s what I think. Wait, I only want to go through this once. Stay here.” He hurried out down the hall to the library and rapped on the door. “Gideon? I need to talk to you in the kitchen.”

The low murmur of Gideon’s voice preceded the door opening. “Thanks, Wilder. Let me know what you come up with.” When Jesse immediately turned on his heel and headed back to Michelle, he followed with a frown. “What happened?”

“I went and saw John. I wanted to see what his intentions were. If he felt like being reasonable at all.” Jesse took his

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usual spot at the table and gestured for Gideon to join him. “Of course, he didn’t want to be reasoned with. But at one point I touched his arm, and I felt something rush through me. I was feeling Emma, like the first time I touched her at the club.”

But for as excited as the revelation made him, neither Michelle nor Gideon registered the same surprise and awe. In fact, Gideon’s features smoothed into a blank mask.

“Look, Jess...” Even his voice was preternaturally calm. “You know we want to find Emma as much as you do. But interpreting a charge from someone as powerful as John as being *Emma*? You’re grasping at straws.”

“I felt her.” Jesse wasn’t annoyed by Gideon’s skepticism. It didn’t matter, because they were dealing with facts. Gideon could question the facts all he wanted, that didn’t make them any less true. “I’d know her even if I lived to be ten thousand years old and forgot everything else that ever happened to me.”

“And I believe you think that. But how do you know it was really Emma and not a trick of John’s? Why would Emma be inside John?”

“What? No. Emma’s not *inside* John. Think about this for a minute. Emma and John have Castelain in common, right? She was a conduit, he was the receptacle. Castelain wants her power back, and the easiest way to do that is to reverse the process. Use the conduits to draw the power back. But the last time she tried to get Emma under her control, we stopped her. You stopped her.”

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Each word brought the frown back to Gideon's face. His earlier questions hadn't been unkind, but clearly, he hadn't considered the bigger picture like Jesse had. "And then John banished her. Which probably made her even more determined."

"Right. So she builds up enough power to break through the dimensions again, only this time, she's not going to leave anything to chance. She takes Emma to another dimension and leaves me for dead. She kills Lizzie to cover her tracks. And she begins to siphon her power back from John. But slowly. Creating a trans-dimensional bridge between John and Emma. But Emma's smart, isn't she? Smart enough to try to use that bridge."

"Do you have proof she's siphoning her power back?"

"Jesse, when you dream of Emma, does she ever know anything without you telling her?" Michelle asked.

"What do you mean?"

"When something is troubling you, do you have to tell her, or does she already know?"

"I have to tell her. She never knows what I'm thinking."

"And when you touch her, is it like you expect it to be? Do you ever dream about the connection between the two of you?"

Jesse frowned thoughtfully. "No, no. I can never read her. She can't read me, either. Do you think she's contacting me?"

"I think that she could be," Michelle said. "She's using the bridge to find you. But she can't do anything more than that."

"Whoa, whoa," Gideon said. "Back it up. This is all going

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on the supposition that Castelain is actively attempting to get her powers back. Which would make John weaker. We've had no indications that John is weaker. In fact, he seems to be doing better than ever these days. I'll grant you there's probably some kind of link between John and Emma. But the second we assume anything about John losing his powers, he'll strike. Take my word for it."

"He hasn't even been aware of the full extent of his powers for the past several years. Chances are good that if he's been losing power bit by bit, week by week, he won't even notice or appear substantially weaker. Think of it as a giant reservoir. If Castelain is taking out a gallon of water every week, it'll still be some time before he notices." Jesse waved his hand dismissively. "Besides, it doesn't matter how powerful he is. If he tries anything, he'll lose."

Gideon cocked a brow at his last statement, but didn't say a word. There wasn't time before the slamming front door echoed through the house, followed immediately by, "Jesse!"

The urgency in Jonah's voice drew Jess to his feet. More doors slammed as he strode out to see what was going on, and he nearly bumped into an agitated Jonah emerging from the library.

The young man's cheeks were chapped red from the cold, and his eyes were bright with alarm. "You are not going to like this," he said, holding out a crumpled piece of paper.

"What is it?"

"A missing persons report," David answered.

"Missing persons?" Jesse unfolded the paper and scanned

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the printed lines. It had been faxed from the Phoenix Police Department. The only truly important information was easy enough to find. *Ethan Parker*. The date of the disappearance was marked two years earlier.

“According to Ethan’s family, he just disappeared. His television was still on, and he had pasta sauce simmering on the stove. None of the people on his block saw him leave his house. He was just gone,” David explained.

Gideon came up behind him and peered over Jesse’s shoulder. “The date is right after we moved in here.”

“That’s what Uncle Derek said.” Gone was the kicked puppy look from Jonah’s eyes. “He can get you in touch with the family if you want. Just say the word.”

“No. I don’t think we need to bother them right now.” Jesse looked over to Gideon. “Castelain knew she’d need both of them.”

Gideon growled. “I’m beginning to wish John had let me tear that bitch apart when she crashed the party.”

“What now?” Jonah asked. “Weren’t you going to use this Ethan to try and reverse the spell on John?”

“No, we don’t need to. Castelain already beat us to that idea. We don’t need to do any of the hard work when it comes to John.”

Gideon came around his side to stare at him in disbelief. “You are not going to just let John run rampant while Castelain takes him down.”

“No, I’m not. John’s not running rampant right now. He wants to do the spell he first tried with you.”



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“What spell?” Michelle asked from behind him.

“The dimensional spell that you tried to kill Gideon for. John did it. He wants to do it again so he can be invulnerable and immortal.”

“What are you talking about?”

Michelle looked more confused than angry. Gideon and Jonah were staring at him with twin looks of horror. Like Jesse had just calmly announced that he was not only John’s new best friend, he was going to move in with the black mage. He understood their reactions, but all of this seemed so simple to him that he didn’t understand why they weren’t getting it.

“Michelle, Gideon’s been covering for John all this time. His spell didn’t just attract you. It attracted Castelain. That’s what started this whole mess. Gideon, we’re going to get Emma back, soon, and neutralize John. Jonah, I need to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“About what happened today.”

“Oh.” Jonah stiffened and retreated, his gaze jumping around at the others. “You don’t have to worry about me. I know I overstepped.”

“No, it’s not...”

“What do you mean Gideon’s been covering for John?” Michelle interrupted.

“Gideon, maybe you should explain everything to her while I talk to Jonah.”

Explaining things to Michelle looked like the last thing Gideon wanted to do, but he caught her eye and jerked his

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head toward the living room. “Come on. Think of this as Christmas. I’m about to give you even more reason to despise me.”

They left, but the slightly panicked look in Jonah’s eye meant Jesse hadn’t actually made him feel any better. David wasn’t moving from where he stood behind Jonah, either.

“Look,” Jonah said. “I meant what I said. You’ve got more important things to worry about than me. I promise I’m only going to do what you say from now on.”

“I know you meant what you said,” Jesse said softly. “Why don’t we go into the library for a few minutes?”

Jonah still seemed unsure. “What about David?”

“I’d like to speak with you alone.” He looked over Jonah’s shoulder. “You don’t mind waiting out here, do you?”

He wasn’t going to give David a choice, and though the grim set of David’s mouth meant he was less than pleased with Jesse’s request, David shook his head.

Jonah followed Jesse into the library, hovering near the door after it clicked shut behind them. “What do you want to talk about?”

Jesse chose to sit on the couch, hoping that would make Jonah more comfortable. But the younger man barely seemed to notice. Jesse wasn’t even sure where to start. With Gideon, apologies were easy. Generally, if he hit his knees, nearly all was forgiven. Could he do that with Jonah? He wasn’t going to rule anything out just yet.

“When we decided you should stay here, Derek warned me that if you got to be too much, I should call him. I told him

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that we weren't babysitting a child. You're an adult. And I should have remembered that this morning, too."

Though mention of Derek made Jonah softly snort and shake his head, he seemed to relax a little and slipped his hands into his pockets. "You were mad. I know that. A lot of stuff has been out of your control in the past few months, and I took even more away by trying to help."

"I was mad. But I was mainly scared. I didn't think we were strong enough to take on John. I didn't *want* to take on John. Regardless, I shouldn't have talked to you the way I did, and I'm sorry."

The apology hung between them, soft and sincere. The proof that he had rattled Jonah with his temper was etched in every taut line of the young man's body, there to see in the way he could never quite meet Jesse's eyes. In some ways, it almost made him feel worse. Jonah's intentions had been right, even if his methodology was not.

"I'm sorry, too," he said. "I'm especially sorry I added to your problems when you don't need them. All you've ever done is be nice to me. You deserved more consideration than I gave you."

"Thank you. But look...ultimately, if you were to make a list of everything that got all fucked up and started assigning blame, what you did would be right at the very bottom of said list. So don't carry this around with you, because it's going to be fine. Everything is going to be fine and I overreacted."

"How are you going to stop John without Ethan, though?"

"We get rid of John. Banish him like he banished

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Castelain. And thanks to John, I can find Castelain easily. I wouldn't do this, but now I know that John is not going to be happy to lead a quiet life. He's going to want to push his boundaries, and he's convinced that I can't stop him. So I have to send him away."

Jonah edged forward, finally shedding the last of the brittle shell that had held him back. He perched on the arm of the couch, some of his earlier fervor returning. "You're going to do that spell John did at your party? Do you know how?"

"I'm actually going to do that spell, combined with a retrieval spell. And no, I don't know how. Not technically."

As his words sank in, Jonah's eyes widened. "You can bring Emma back, too?"

"Yes. I don't think Gideon believes me quite yet, but I touched John today and I felt Emma. Before, there were an infinite number of options. Now I just need to follow the connection between John and Emma to find her."

Jonah bolted from where he sat. "We should start researching then. Because if there's one thing I *am* good at, it's research."

"What are you going to research?"

Doubt flickered in Jonah's eyes. "You said you didn't know how to do the spells. Aren't you going to research to find it out?"

"I think I'm going to let John do the research for me. He's vain when it comes to his magic. He'll never admit it, but he's thrilled when people seek him out for help."

"How in hell are you going to get John to help with his

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own banishment?”

“By making him believe he’s helping me with a retrieval spell. He likes Emma and he would not like to learn that Castelain is using Emma to slowly drain him of his power. I won’t even have to lie to him. Once that dimensional door is open, it’ll work both ways.”

A smile slowly replaced Jonah’s shock. “Man, those are going to be some fireworks. I get ringside seats, right?”

“I don’t know,” Jesse answered honestly. “I think this plan will work, but I’ve got to run it by Michelle, and Gideon will probably try to argue that any attempt to trick John will backfire. Plus, I’ve got to take into consideration your safety, David’s safety, and Dominique’s safety.”

“Dominique, I’ll give you. But David and I know how to stay out of the way. Please, Jess, don’t shut me out now.”

“I can’t make any promises one way or the other right now. But Jonah...if you did have to go to England, it wouldn’t be because I’m trying to shut you out. You’ve got a big target sign painted on your back. You can’t pretend otherwise.”

Jonah grimaced. “No, I suppose I can’t. That sucks. And I wouldn’t want to be responsible for anything happening to David, either.” He sighed. “Well, that was fun while it lasted.”

“Somehow, I’m pretty sure that you can find ways to make your own fun until all of this goes down.”

It was hard not to smile at the faint stain that rose in his cheeks. “Probably,” Jonah said noncommittally. “David’s...pretty great.”

“Does this mean I can’t count on you stroking my ego

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anymore?"

"The ego, I can do. Anything else..." Jonah grinned. "...I'll have to ask David's permission."

"And Gideon's. He'll be cross if you forget."

Waving a hand in dismissal, Jonah headed for the door. "Nah, Gideon's a big ol' pussycat. You just have to know how to pet him right."

"It's true, but don't let him hear you say it."

Rising, he followed Jonah out of the library. Once he made sure that Michelle wasn't going to kill Gideon on general principle, it'd be time to do something he had been longing to do for what seemed like years. He was going to visit Emma.

\* \* \*

Jesse sat cross-legged on the bed. *Their* bed. The bed they had shared with Emma. The bed where he still dreamed of her. The bed that she would be returning to soon. He held her collar between his fingers, sliding his thumb up and down the smooth leather. She had been so proud of it, had worn it as often as she could. Why wasn't she wearing it the morning Castelain took her? There must have been a reason, but Jesse couldn't remember it now. That energy he had felt—her strength and fear and all the delicious nuances in between—was still coursing through his body.

Gideon stood by the door, arms folded over his chest. Though Jesse had asked him to sit, he'd refused, and now Jesse wished he'd been a little more persistent. Gideon's hovering wasn't helping him relax.

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“You’re sure you can find her this way?” Gideon asked, not for the first time. Not even for the second.

“She’s been finding me,” Jesse pointed out. “And she doesn’t even have any special super powers. If this doesn’t work, I’ll regroup and try something else.”

Gideon’s lips thinned. There was no something else. Not yet, anyway. And he couldn’t really blame Gideon for being skeptical. The connection between him and Emma had always been different from the one Jesse shared with her. Theirs was tempered by the fact Gideon was a vampire. Jesse’s had always been as automatic as breathing.

“If you talk to her, tell her I love her.” A muscle twitched in Gideon’s jaw. “I miss her.”

“I tell her that every time I see her. I’m counting on you not to let anybody interrupt me.”

“They won’t.” Even if he hadn’t been standing guard at the door, the growled warning he’d issued downstairs would have done the trick. “But the sooner we do this, the sooner we’ll know if any of this is going to work.”

“Right. Okay. No time like the present.” He felt a little shaky. He knew he could do this, but the weight of failure, of the possibility of failure, still weighed on him. He didn’t want to tell Gideon that he had been wrong. More than that, he didn’t want to disappoint himself.

Jesse kept the collar clutched in his hand and closed his eyes. JT had told him how to seek out other dimensions, but he hadn’t had any reason to for the past two months. Jesse didn’t know if it was a skill that could be dulled with lack of

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use, but he did know that he felt the weight of the dimensions pressing around him at all times. Every time he left the house, reality wavered around him, blinking and dancing. An infinite number of possibilities. An infinite number of worlds to reach into, reach through, with another dimension added every time anybody made a decision, any time the wind blew from the northwest instead of the west.

Emma's collar kept him focused, helped him sort through the millions of tendrils of energy and magic surrounding Chicago like a web. They were most dense around John's house. Jesse imagined that house, flinging his mind beyond the bedroom, beyond their home, searching with his mind's eye for the one strand, the one long rope that would lead from John to a distant dimension, hidden from view until then.

At first, he couldn't feel anything except John's house. It was a curious combination of black magic, dimensional magic, and even benign wards and retrieval spells. Like John didn't like to get up and fetch his own books or tea. There was too much of the rest of the city. He could still sense the tear in the dimensions at the old church, where they had performed the first spell with Emma, and where they had defeated Foster. He could feel the pulsing energy around Michelle's store. He could even feel the signatures left behind every time he teleported. He knew he wouldn't be able to find Emma unless he could weed all of that out.

His eyes fluttered behind his closed lids, and his breathing slowed. He pulled his mind away from John's house and focused on counting. Counting down from one hundred,



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slowing his heart and emptying his mind with each number. The more he emptied his mind of thought, the more he felt the fabric of the dimension crowding inside. Power surged through his body, lighting up his veins, lifting him from the distractions that had crowded him. Once he reached zero, he focused on John's house again. This time, he didn't see anything except the bridge that stretched from John's home to the dimension that held Emma.

The world melted around him.

Dimensional traveling had never been what he expected. The first time he had done it, under Michelle's guidance when they had been seeking out Gideon's past in order to give both of them closure, Jesse had been shocked by how effortless it had seemed. Opening a door. That's all it was. Of course, he hadn't been a Guardian then. Michelle had done all the hard work, especially since she had manipulated time as well in order to get them where they needed to go. But the principles were still the same.

He didn't need to move. Dimension walls broke down around him, carved away by the power he contained, the power he was. They dissolved into the nothingness that Jesse suspected existed between everything, within everything, but he didn't allow himself the luxury of study. Later. When he had Emma back.

The fleeting thought that she would love this helped him focus.

His first physical sensation was cold. The detail surprised him. When he met with Emma in his dreams, they always sat

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under the dying sun, and while her hands were cold, the setting was not. He hadn't expected the chill of her skin to be something definitive from her location, though in retrospect, he probably should have.

After the cold came a pale, gray light. As the world solidified back into shapes and form, Jesse clutched at the collar he had brought with him. Heat from the leather seared his palm, but the pain helped him concentrate on drinking in his surroundings. He had no idea where he was. Had he teleported as well as moved between dimensions? All he knew was that he had followed Emma's trail, the one Castelain had so graciously left for him. It still blazed golden in front of him, leading along the dusty path to the mouth of a cave, carved out of a low hill.

The light seeped through low cloud cover, and the terrain was harsh, jagged rocks scattered amongst the gray scrub. A single tree loomed over the cave's entrance, and for a moment, Jesse's stomach lurched. Its skeleton was familiar, straight out of his dreams, but it lacked any foliage, nothing to block out the sun, should it ever rise. It was also alone, a solitary living specimen in a world that appeared dead.

Jesse took a deep breath. She was here. He knew it. The energy he'd absorbed from John practically made the air pulse.

The dirt beneath his feet was finer than ash. Each step sent up a cloud of dirt that coated his skin, his nose, and filtered into his lungs. He had a feeling he'd be coughing up dirt for the next two days. The occasional burst of wind didn't help

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the air quality, nor his ability to see through the swirling dust. But he walked without hesitation, allowing nothing to act as an obstacle between him and the cave.

The opening of the cavern was actually a steep drop of four or maybe five feet. The light only penetrated for the first two or three. He did not want to drop several feet into utter darkness. Anything could be on the ground. Including Emma. He had no choice but to take a leap of faith.

The soft dirt disappeared, replaced by what felt like polished slate. He had to step carefully to keep his balance. The gold line was brighter there, though Jesse couldn't tell if that was because he was in utter darkness, or because he was closer to Emma. There were other strands of magic, other disruptions, closing in around him. Whatever Castelain was up to, it wasn't just draining John. Jesse pushed all of that out of his mind.

Each step was heavy, like the air was thickening, or he had weights tied to his ankles. A part of him realized it was neither of those things—he was using too much energy for this little trip. He wouldn't be able to stay much longer, but he was not going to leave until he found Emma. Even if that meant he had to crawl through the cave on his stomach.

He came to a fork, and then another, and another. Each time, the line to Emma glowed brightly. Each step grew heavier. But there was something else guiding him. Not just the disruption that Castelain's magic caused. He could *feel* Emma. His emotions were beginning to mingle with hers, like they always did when she wasn't in complete control of her

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powers. It was a strange overlapping, a sort of doubling, that he hadn't realized was missing until that very moment. He had felt empty without her, but now he didn't feel fulfilled so much as larger. There was more of him because she was somewhere close by.

The chasms he passed had nothing resembling doors. He thought at first it was the lack of illumination, but as the lead to Emma took a downward slope, a soft red light began to fill the corridor, exposing the lack for what it was. He almost choked. He knew that light. He'd attributed it to the setting sun within his dreams, but no, it wasn't, it was something more real. Emma had recreated what she could for him, for them, which could only mean she was near.

When the line veered sharply toward the wall, Jesse almost stumbled in his haste to stop. That wasn't possible. It couldn't disappear like that. It couldn't simply go through the wall, and not provide him a way to get to her.

He scrambled over its rough surface, trying to find something, anything, that would help. Maybe the wall was an illusion. Yes. That was it. Castelain was using magic to hide Emma. Except it felt real. When he cut the fleshy heel of his hand against a sharp edge, the blood welling to the surface of his skin was real. The smears the blood left behind on the wall were real, too.

"Emma! Emma!" He pounded against the wall, unmindful of the pain shooting up his arm. "Emma, can you hear me?" *Or feel me?* He moved up and down the wall, kicking at the bottom. "Emma? Please."

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Grit rubbed into the open cuts on his hands. When the skin became raw from his pounding, he looked around for the collar he'd discarded at the start. It rested, forgotten, on the floor several feet away, and he snatched it up, winding it around and around his right hand. The leather would protect him. It might get scratched and scuffed, but he had to keep trying.

The first time he pushed at the wall with his covered palm, the stone shimmered. Jesse jerked his arm back and stared. No, the wall was as solid as it had been. Slowly, he reached out again. His fingertips met hard rock, but when the leather collar made contact, the shimmering returned, the mass disappearing around his hand to allow it to pass through.

Jesse stepped forward. Emma was being held prisoner; her energy held the key to get inside. He was more grateful than ever that he had brought her collar along to help focus. Without it, he doubted he would have found a way through the solid rock.

The red light was stronger on the other side of the wall. It seemed even more like a dying sun, but Jesse couldn't detect its source. The ground continued to tilt downward, twisting and winding into the earth. Had Castelain constructed this dungeon herself? Or was it naturally occurring? The chambers could have been rooms, or they could have been carved out by time itself. A part of him felt like he was wandering through an unknown and powerful history. A familiar fear licked at the base of his spine. It was the fear that he had felt in his dreams. Did it belong to him? Or was it Emma's?

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He reached another dead end, but this time, he knew he wouldn't let it stop him. Even if he had to use the last of his energy to teleport to the other side, he would do it. He put the leather collar against the wall, and something like fire raced under his skin. His face twisted into a grimace, but he gritted his teeth and remained still, holding the leather against the wall. He knew Emma would be waiting for him on the other side, bathed in the bloody red glow.

An implacable hand clamped over his wrist, yanking his arm away from the wall. It released Jesse as soon as the contact was broken, and his head snapped up to meet the slate eyes of a tiny, slim woman.

There was nothing extraordinary about her. Brick-red hair cut short in jagged spikes. Ruddy skin that nearly matched the glow within the hall. Only the cunning in her eyes revealed any sort of personality, and that doused the fire that had been racing through his veins as chillingly as losing touch with the wall had.

"Did you really think you could just walk in here and I wouldn't know?" She smiled, though he had seen enough rattlesnake smiles to recognize one at sight. "Though I have to give you credit. You found her a lot sooner than I thought you would."

"Really? I thought you'd be disappointed it took me so long, since you led me right to her."

"Did I?" She cocked her head in curiosity. "I don't recall doing that."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't." Jesse ignored the primal

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fear of an unknown god. She was strong, but he had defended himself when she last attacked him. And Gideon had defeated her twice. “Does this mean you’re not going to let me see her?”

“Not even if it were possible for you to step inside the circle.”

“I’m guessing that taking her home is out of the question, too.”

“Oh, no, you can have her. When I’m done in about thirty years or so.”

“Emma doesn’t have thirty years to give you.”

“Emma doesn’t have a choice.”

Jesse’s palm itched, and he folded his fingers into a fist. He might have lashed out, but a simple leather band wouldn’t give him access to the circle she had mentioned. “Why not just take John? He’s the one that you want. It must be easier than doing what you’re doing now.”

The icy amusement vanished. “Yes, why don’t I just take the monster who robbed me? The thief you aided? The thief who cowers inside the walls of my magic because he fears losing what little control he actually has?” The ambient light began to flicker, pulsing at the same rhythm of her breath. “*You* made this necessary. You created the human conduits. The only way I can be assured of getting all of my power back is to reverse the process. So if you don’t care for the methods I take, don’t blame me. You set this path, and we’re going to walk it until we’ve reached its end.”

Jesse folded his arms. “No, you and John did this. Emma

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was an unfortunate victim caught in the crossfire because she thought she was helping a friend. Besides, you fail to see the critical flaw in your argument. Emma and I are not stuck on this path.”

“Well, you’re not, at least.”

Only because he was so tired from the displacement did he fail to see her move. One moment he was standing in the corridor, the next he crumpled to the floor in his bedroom, blood gushing from his nose.

Gideon appeared at his side and shoved a handkerchief in Jesse’s face. “What happened?”

“I found her,” Jesse gasped, pressing the cloth against his face. He could feel the blood going down the back of his throat, too.

Though Gideon stiffened, he helped ease Jess back into a seated position, his back to the edge of the bed. “You saw Emma?”

“No, I didn’t see her. But I found her. I know where she is.”

“So why the nosebleed? I thought dimensional travel wasn’t supposed to hurt you.”

“It’s not. Except when somebody punches me in the face before sending me through dimensions.”

“Who?” Understanding glimmered in his eyes as soon as the single word query slipped out. “You saw Castelain.”

“She was there. In a human form, this time. She wouldn’t let me get as far as Emma.”

“But she’s got her, and you can find her again. That’s



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good. That's progress. You can rest up, and then you and Michelle go back and get Emma, once and for all."

"That won't work." Jesse smiled apologetically. "For two reasons. The first is that Castelain has a circle around Emma. The same kind we had her trapped in when John did the spell at the party. We've got to find a way past that. And the second is that Castelain is not going to stop. If we rescue Emma, she'll just take her right back."

Gideon shook his head, his face dark and resolute. "We'll protect her. We know what we're up against now."

"Do you want to be on the defensive for the rest of Emma's life?" Jesse asked softly.

His gaze was unflinching. "If it meant we have her back? Yes."

"I'm not saying we're not going to get her back, Gideon. I'm saying that a smash and grab operation is not going to work. We have to give Castelain what she wants."

"You know, you used to love my smash and grab plans."

Jesse smiled. "They still hold a certain charm. But this time, I think we need to play it with a bit more subtlety."

"But Castelain has what she wants. She's got Emma, doesn't she?"

"No, Emma is the means to an end. Castelain wants John."

For the first time since Jesse's return, Gideon grinned. "That's the first bright spot to show up in all this mess. I volunteer to be the one who hands him over."

"You sure? It's going to involve the sort of intense dimensional magic that makes your skin crawl."

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“For this? I’ll deal.”

Jesse matched his grin. “Here’s what I’m thinking. I’ll ask John if he will help me bring Emma back. I’ll tell him that it’ll destroy Castelain in the process. He likes Emma, and he likes showing off how powerful he is. He’ll also love to have me in his debt. As soon as he opens up the dimension, I pull Emma out and push John in.”

“I can’t push?”

“If John lets you in his house, the job is yours.”

Gideon scowled. “Well, damn. Fine. Just push him extra hard for me, okay?”

“I’ll push him hard enough to leave bruises,” Jesse promised. “In the meantime, though, I’ve got to shower and change. I’m all bloody.”

With a sigh, Gideon stood and helped Jesse to his feet. “I suppose the next thing you’re going to tell me is that I don’t even get to come into the shower to help you because I have to go tell the others the new plan.”

“Why would I say a goofy thing like that?” Jesse tightened his fingers around Gideon’s hand. “They can wait.”

“Good.” Gideon hauled him toward the bathroom. “Life’s finally starting to get normal again. I can’t wait until we’ve got Emma back. I plan on kicking everybody out of this house so we can spend the next year welcoming her home.”

“That sounds fair.” Jesse shut the bathroom door behind him and for the first time, the sight of Emma’s shampoo, still sitting on the sink, didn’t hurt. “More than fair.”

## CHAPTER 19

Jesse's skin crawled as soon as he walked through John's front door. It was the same horrible sense that stopped him from asking John for help against Foster. It made him want to leave. It made him want to end John, just so he could stop whatever horrible magic he was using. No matter how many times he told himself it was just preparation for the very spell Jesse had asked John to perform, a primal part of him refused to be logical about it.

He smiled anyway. He had gone to John like the proverbial puppy, with his tail between his legs, begging for scraps. It had bordered on humiliating, but he needed John to believe the request. It had been a little too easy to convince John that

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Jesse was as weak as John seemed to have believed. As galling as that was, Jesse smiled anyway.

“Gideon will be here soon. I sent him to pick up a few things for Emma.”

Though John’s back was to him as he rooted around in a tall armoire, pulling out various ingredients for the spell, his amusement was evident in every word he uttered. “This must have killed him when you told him you required my assistance.”

Gideon had been damned near bouncy since he and Jesse worked out the plan. Dominique and David had both been disturbed by the change in his demeanor before Jesse bundled the lot of them to England.

“He was less than pleased. But once I explained that this was the only way to get Emma back, he grudgingly stopped complaining.”

“Ah, well, I suppose it is a little greedy to wish to have seen it for myself.” John set down a jar of what looked like ground orange rinds and closed the armoire doors. “I’ll just have to settle for his debt. Because really, having him owe me has always been my preference.”

“Are you going to find a way to work that into the conversation when he returns?”

“That he owes me?” John’s gray eyes danced from some inner delight. He really was taking far too much enjoyment with this whole situation. “I’m certain he already knows. If he tries to pretend otherwise, well, then we’ll see.”

Jesse took a piece of chalk from the bag he brought and

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began to draw a circle in the space John had cleared on the floor. He and Michelle had talked seriously about whether or not he should bring the hurlbat as backup. If their plan failed, John could very well be too strong to be brought down. On the other hand, showing up with a weapon in tow was not the right sort of message. Ultimately, they agreed that Jesse should be able to take on John without the additional aid. He had Castelain's, now depleted, power. That didn't necessarily mean he was as strong as a Guardian.

"If you're strong enough to bring her back, I honestly don't think he'll mind admitting that he owes you."

John's smug smile only grew more so when a knock came at the front door. "As long as you remember the same, Mr. Madding." He skirted the circle and paused in the doorway to the hall. "Though it is satisfying to believe we're finally on the same side again."

And by that, John no doubt meant he was relieved they were both on *John's* side again.

Jesse moved around the room, double-checking the circle as he waited for Gideon to join him. As soon as Gideon walked through the door, he grimaced at the sight of the chalk on the floor. Jesse sidled up close to him, leaning close to murmur, "Remember. No snapping John's neck."

"You take all the fun out of these things." But his lips barely moved before he sidled around the edge of the room, getting as far away from the circle as possible.

"Should we prepare for medical treatment, should Ms. Coolidge's condition be less than...ideal?" John asked.

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“Yes, we probably should. Gideon, did you bring anything for that?”

Gideon nodded. “I’ve got your kit in the hall, along with some of that cream you use. I didn’t think you’d want it in here in case there’s something funky with the magic mixing.”

John’s disdainful sniff made Gideon visibly twitch. “Perhaps I should get a few more items. Excuse me, gentlemen. I’ll be right back.”

Gideon tracked John with a steel gaze all the way out the door. “Can we gag him for the spell, too? Because I’m feeling this overwhelming urge to slam a fist in his face every time he opens his mouth.”

“I know. He’s far more smug than usual. I hope he can keep up that jaunty attitude when Castelain is draining him dry. Honestly, I don’t think she’s going to be ill at all. Castelain wants to keep her alive for the next thirty years. Mistreating her won’t aid in that goal.”

“I called Derek and put him on the alert that we might have her back. He promised to be in the neighborhood to speed up getting an ambulance here if we need one.”

“Did you also inform him that we sent his nephew back to England?”

“Actually, David beat us to it by calling him first. Derek looked so pleased to hear that Jonah was with someone as normal and steady as David that I didn’t have the heart to tell him about this morning in the playroom.”

Jesse snorted. “That’s fine. One day, I might let it slip that normal and steady David gets off on chains and gags.” His

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smile faded as he heard John's return, and he was appropriately solemn when John entered the room again. "Do we have all the magical supplies?"

"Magical, medical, emergency plumbing." He smiled at Gideon. "Don't look so glum. You'll have your lovely Ms. Coolidge back soon enough, and then we can all go on as before."

"Except for the fact that you're going to expect us to sign over our souls to pay you back for this."

John paused where he had started to crouch at the edge of the circle. "If you'd rather I didn't attempt—"

"Stop putting words in my mouth." Gideon folded his arms over his chest and pulled himself as tall and broad as he could, appearing every inch the predator he was. Even Jesse was momentarily fooled by his demeanor. If he hadn't heard Gideon gloating the entire ride over, he would have believed the act as much as John. "Just do what you have to before I forget my manners and rip your spine out through your ass."

John wrinkled his nose in disgust. "And on that charming note..." He waved a slim hand at Jesse. "Shall we begin, Mr. Madding?"

Jesse had always been magically inclined, and while John had more innate power than Jesse, he was never out of Jesse's reach. After all, he had been able to create an antidote to John's obsidian. He had been strong enough to steal a Guardian's power—something that a normal person should not be able to do. Now he had more power in his pinky finger than John had ever had in his entire existence, and that power

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pulsed through him, demanding an outlet. Jesse was forced to hold himself back. John needed to be unequivocally in charge.

“Tell me where you want me.”

“Opposite me, please. We need to maintain an equilibrium throughout the ritual, or we’ll lose control.”

Sitting on the other side of the circle was the last place Jesse wanted to be. It put John out of his range; he wasn’t sure how he’d be able to push John through the rift from there. But that was a problem he’d deal with when the time came. He couldn’t stop before they’d even started.

John glanced at Gideon as Jesse knelt down. “You don’t have to watch, you know. We could always use a cup of tea when we’re done here.”

Gideon scowled. That response was real. “Then you should’ve thought of that before now. Stop fucking around, John.”

With a dramatic sigh, John rested his hands on his knees. “Promise you can hold your tongue, and we can proceed.”

“Do I have to cross my heart, too? It doesn’t beat, remember. That probably wouldn’t count.” He rolled his eyes when Jesse shot a stern glance in his direction. “Fine. I’m shutting up.”

“Ah, blessings...” John took a deep breath. When he starting to speak again, his voice was a low murmur, the individual words of the incantation barely discernible.

Jesse squeezed his eyes shut. There was one thing that could not be avoided. Jesse and Michelle had both been aware of that, and Jesse just hoped that by the time John realized



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what he was doing, it would be too late to stop. Nothing would work if they couldn't find Emma. And the only way to find Emma was for Jesse to take control—wrest control from John, if necessary. John trying to tear into the dimension only made it easier for Jesse to concentrate. Energy and magic he was barely learning how to harness rolled through him. The desire to stop John, to guard against his assault, only made Jesse stronger.

The room began to melt away, reality blending through Jesse's body. He let himself view the world with the strange vision of overlapping realities. Magic swirled around him. Some of it was benign. Some was dark and torrential. A warning sign that he was meant to heed. But through all the fuzz of John's magic, he found that golden spiral again. He concentrated on that, zeroing in until he couldn't even see John anymore. Without moving, he reached through dimensions, yanking hard enough to force the power of John's incantation to follow a new direction.

The golden light scattered like rice dropped onto a hard surface, tiny shards that bounced and bled until Jesse corralled his strength and began to gather them back. They rolled into a coherent string again, pulsing at the same tempo of John's words. It was so bright now, the color stabbed into his mind's eye. Jesse fought the urge to cut it off, but he knew he couldn't lose focus. The added brilliance was even further proof Emma and John's energies were intertwined.

The incantation faded. John's silence lay heavy between and around them.

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Then he made a little noise in the back of his throat, almost a “hmmm,” like something had taken him by surprise.

“Don’t get distracted now,” Jesse warned under his breath. “There’s a red light. Can you see it?”

“Patience, Mr. Madding.” Something cold slithered along Jesse’s skin, like a tickle of wind across tundra. It took him a moment to realize it was coming from the other dimension. Did John feel it, too? “I would much prefer to bring Ms. Coolidge back in one piece, rather than many.”

Jesse couldn’t see or sense Gideon anymore. He hadn’t teleported them to Castelain’s dimension, but he was sure that from Gideon’s point of view, both of them were wavering like hollow projections. The golden energy flowed through him. Could Emma feel him? Or was she only aware of John?

“Do you need my help with the magic barrier?”

“If I need your help, I will ask for your—”

A scream rent the air. Shrill, bloodcurdling. Fury wrapped up in pain.

The magic winding around both him and John constricted into knots that only grew tighter as they dug into crevices of his flesh and found soft spots to sink in. It cut off his breath and made his lungs fight to work. Spots blackened the golden trail, and he gritted his teeth to steel against the pain.

“You can’t have her,” Castelain hissed. He didn’t know where she was. He wasn’t entirely sure where *he* was anymore.

Jesse stood. Or maybe he only imagined himself standing. He forgot about the desire to keep his real strength hidden

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from John. “She’s mine. You won’t keep her.”

A shockwave pushed through him. At first, it didn’t feel like anything except a wind, but almost immediately, his skin began to burn. Like she was trying to melt the flesh off his bones. He responded immediately, sending that very same wave of heat through her, but intensifying it, driving it into the body Castelain had borrowed.

The advantage to the heat was it drove away the cold that had chilled him when he’d tapped into the dimension. No more lethargy, no more complacency, even if he had alerted John to what he had been shielding from him. Emma was his priority. Castelain didn’t even have all of her power. Jesse refused to let her win.

“Yes...” John’s exclamation was barely audible, but even in that scant breath, Jesse heard his glee. “I am not the only thief, it would seem. She’s using my own tricks.”

The world blurred around him. Things were rushing away, like Castelain was pushing him from her space. His chest ached, his lungs either too full or completely empty. He resisted, pushing back with the entire strength of his dimension. The golden light shattered around him for a second time as she screamed. It severed his connection with Emma. For a moment, for an endless second, for a brief blink of the eye, he felt like he was floating in some void. Like she had sent him to the space that existed between dimensions.

He forced the drops of golden light back together, building the connection slowly but surely, until the chain tugged him back to Emma.

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A presence formed at his side. Though he had no idea if he had solidity to his body, he felt the firm, dry grasp of John's hand over his, the fresh influx of power as John poured his strength into Jesse.

"Watch," John murmured.

The world went white. No trail, no connection, no bleak terrain. When color began to bleed back into it, the gold was tinged with red, creating a bloody orange that made the hair stand up on Jesse's arms.

John, however, cackled.

"I've blinded her," he explained. "Caught her up in her own maelstrom. Just wait, Mr. Madding. Your Ms. Coolidge shall be with you momentarily."

Jesse hated the way he could sound so calm. Like he was the one anchoring the two of them in Castelain's dimension. Like he was the one bearing the brunt of her attacks. If she sent a single shockwave through John, his cells would have vibrated until his whole body exploded.

The one thing John's trick did do for Jesse was give him the chance to gather the power of his emotions. It seemed like an old trick. It *was* an old trick. He broadcast all those emotions outward, sending them toward the one being in any dimension that was completely tuned into him. He knew as soon as Emma felt him—a flare of love erupted inside his gut, burning hotter than Castelain's attacks. She knew he was there for her. She was waiting for him.

The hand covering his turned into a claw. "Oh, my," John murmured. "I do believe I understand why it is you wish your

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lovely girl back.”

“Just do your thing before it’s too late,” Jesse said, holding on to Emma as tight as he could. By the time they were finished, he didn’t think he would have anything left.

John’s slight hesitation worried him, but he didn’t have time or focus to worry about what John might be plotting. Not until he had Emma. His grip already felt tenuous. He couldn’t—wouldn’t—risk losing it for any reason but the most dire.

The blood-orange glow separated to allow the trail to reappear in sharp relief. John’s presence disappeared, and a shadow glided over the threads, growing smaller as it followed it along.

Jesse forced himself to keep a safe distance. This would be how he made the switch, he realized. He didn’t need to be close to John physically. Trap his dimensional self inside the circle, and the mortal flesh would follow. Here, the power was his. John was but a child in regards to dimensions, no matter how much of Castelain’s strength he had.

Another of her screams dispelled the clouds John had created. It stabbed into Jesse’s eardrums, and the distinct presence of something wet trickled down the side of his neck. Vaguely, he heard Gideon’s shout of alarm. *Don’t do anything!* he wanted to yell at his lover. The last thing they needed at this point was a disruption.

Jesse caught a glimpse of Emma’s hair. Of her skin. She was solid, while everything else faded in and out, flickering in the maelstrom of magic that was barely under Jesse’s control.

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John began muttering something, and red cracks slithered along the wall of magic, cracking open like an egg. Jesse gripped John's wrist, holding him as tight as he could as Castelain screeched again. The heat returned, and something yanked at his arm. Hard enough that he thought his shoulder would be ripped right out of his socket. He refused to budge.

More of Emma's skin came into view. She was naked where Castelain held her. Her hair was too long. Had more than a few months passed in this dimension?

"You arrogant bastard!" Castelain spat. "Playing with forces you don't even understand."

"Ah, but I do," John replied.

He seemed to grow, to expand, within Jesse's grasp. It forced his fingers wider, wider, until the tips no longer met around the slim wrist. John's skin became too hot to touch, but Jesse didn't dare release him. He would tear through flesh and sinew to bury his fingers in the man's arm, if he had to.

Castelain's gaze left Jesse, eyes widening for a split second at John before narrowing in cunning speculation. Did John see it? Did John see anything but his own arrogance stretching before him?

Castelain opened her arms.

The moment Jesse saw Emma start to fall, he forgot who he was holding on to. He forgot where he was. He forgot everything but a promise he had made to her from the beginning, one he had been unable to keep when she had been abducted, one he had every intention to keep now.

He let John go. Before Emma disappeared into the bloody

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orange swirl at Castelain's feet, Jesse swept her into his arms.

They were falling. Like Castelain had pushed them. If he didn't do something, they would continue to fall, dimensions ripping open to make way for them. In a way, it was exactly the sort of thing Jesse had feared when he realized John had dimensional power. A chain reaction that would be beyond his control. Beyond anybody's control to stop, or to fix, just an eternity of falling and destruction.

He dug deep, searching for the final remains of his energy. They jerked to a stop, and a dimension he didn't recognize materialized around them. His stomach rolled, like it was trying to escape through his throat. A part of him just wanted to collapse to his knees and stay there. The blood red light was gone. Castelain's screams stopped. He couldn't even sense John anymore. But he couldn't stop. With Emma clutched against his chest, he reached out until he found the sense of home he only associated with one person.

Solid.

Secure.

Pulled against a chest of stone. Cradled like the most precious thing in the world.

"Oh, God..." Gideon's voice. Soft. Unbelieving. The arms that held Jesse and Emma tightened. "Jess. Open your eyes. Let me know you're in there."

His eyelids refused to function properly. He smelled the coppery scent that always clung to Gideon's clothes, the acrid stench of John's magic. He felt two bodies, one soft, one hard, weighing against him. He heard the hum of John's furnace

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somewhere in the distance. But following Gideon's simple instruction seemed to fail him completely.

The world swooped from beneath him as Gideon lifted them both into the air. A moment later, Jesse met solid matter again, this time in the form of firm cushions. The couch. Had to be. Emma's body stretched out above him, and the soft glow of her emotions radiated from her like the circle of light thrown by a sea of candles.

Gideon disappeared. Footsteps clipped against the floor. Jesse summoned what little strength he had to turn his head and bury his nose in Emma's flowing hair. He breathed in, out, and in again. The delicate scent was better than the hints left behind on her pillow or in her closet. It was the best thing he'd ever smelled.

Footsteps returned. A strong hand slid beneath Jesse's nape, forcing his nose away from Emma. "Drink this," Gideon commanded. The cold rim of a glass pressed to Jesse's lips.

The water soothed his throat and the back of his tongue, but his lips still felt chapped. He drank until Gideon took the glass away, but he still didn't open his eyes. "Where's John?"

"You tell me. You started bleeding, then you two disappeared." Something wet dabbed at the skin below Jesse's ears. "I've been sitting here for the past five minutes, wondering if I'd lost both of you now."

Emma's breath was warm against his neck. He felt her heart beating, but it wasn't pounding frantically. His arms were locked around her. He didn't think he would be able to release her. "He's not here? He's gone?"



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“No. What happened?”

“She took him. I thought I would have to trick her, but she just took him.”

Gideon snorted. “I think that’s the first thing about that bitch I’ve ever liked.” The cloth disappeared. “I’m calling Derek. We need to get you two to the hospital.”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital,” Jesse protested. “I just want to go home.”

“You won’t open your eyes, and Emma’s unconscious. You’re going to the hospital. Deal with it.”

“I can open my eyes. I’m just really tired.” He didn’t have to see Gideon’s face to know that he wasn’t convinced. “Don’t make me let her go.”

“And if she’s dehydrated? Or hasn’t been eating right? We can’t risk it, Jess. We’ve got her back, but she’s so...pale. Someone needs to look her over.”

“Fine. But don’t make me let go of her right now.”

“I won’t.” A brush of a kiss across his temple. Then Emma’s hair slipped against his chest where Gideon had likely done the same for her. “Before I call...can you feel anything from her? I’m not...I can’t tell.”

“I can feel her. She’s...she’s quiet. She feels the same. I don’t think she’s in any pain.”

“Good. Good. Okay, hang in there. I’m going to call Derek.”

“Okay. Okay...we’ll just be here,” Jesse murmured. He heard Gideon step out of the room and dial Derek. Emma didn’t stir, but he hadn’t been lying to Gideon. She could have

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been asleep. He didn't think that sort of quiet would last forever, but for now, he wouldn't question it. Only a small part of him was able to focus on anything besides Emma. After several moments, he realized something was different.

John's magic—the power that made his skin crawl—was gone.

## CHAPTER 20

Gideon couldn't stop pacing. Watching Jesse disappear from John's living room had been one of the worst moments in his life, even if Jesse had warned him ahead of time that it might occur. All he could remember was how alone he'd been when Michelle had kidnapped Jess, how much he'd grieved for both of his lovers. He didn't think he was strong enough to go through it again.

Now he wouldn't have to. He just had to survive these next few hours in the hospital, waiting for Jesse and Emma to be checked over and released. Jesse's wish to take all of them home was sounding better by the second.

"You're making me dizzy," Derek complained from his

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chair by the waiting room door. “Sit down.”

Gideon didn’t even break stride. “If that was Carly in there, you’d be doing the exact same thing.”

“No, I would’ve flashed my badge to be at her side. And no, I’m not going to do that for you.”

“Why? Other than the fact that you like to torture me.”

“Because if you go back there like this, you’ll scare the doctors.”

“Maybe they’ll be faster then.” He came to a halt outside the locked door that led to the emergency area. Heartbeats, too many to count, pounded through the walls, reminding him of how many other people there were in the building for the doctors to tend to, people who weren’t Jesse or Emma. “I hate this place.”

“I know.” The chair behind him creaked, and then Derek’s hand settled on his shoulder. “But you did the right thing bringing them here. No matter what Jesse said to you.”

He sincerely hoped Derek was right. Because seeing the bluish tinge to Emma’s lips had scared Gideon to his bones.

It was another twenty-one minutes before the door opened for him. The nurse, a pretty little Korean thing barely reaching Gideon’s elbow, beckoned for him to come back.

“Mr. Madding has been treated and cleared,” she explained as she led him and Derek through the antiseptic hallway. “He’s with Ms. Coolidge now.”

That was all Gideon needed to hear. His nostrils flared, and even past the regular, expected smells of the hospital, he could sense Jesse and Emma. He wanted to push the nurse out

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of the way and go directly to them. If she didn't pick up her step a little bit, he knew he would do exactly that.

But he didn't have to resort to knocking the polite nurse to the floor. She pushed a door open to reveal a very small hospital room. Emma was on the bed with the IV hooked to her arm, dripping what looked to be saline. Her lips were no longer bluish. Her cheeks had a hint of color—but she was only slightly less pale than the pillowcase.

Jesse sat next to the bed, holding the hand that didn't have the IV in it. He looked up as Gideon approached the bed and smiled. “The doctors have declared me a medical marvel. They've also said Emma is going to be fine.”

Gideon stood on the opposite side and rested a hand to her throat. He didn't need to feel her pulse in order to know it was strong, but the contact gave him a slight jolt that had been missing at John's house. He didn't experience Emma's emotions the same way Jesse did. For Gideon, most of her transmissions were like shots of adrenaline through his system, better than the finest blood. This was a ghost of what it had felt like before, but considering the fact that he could've gone the rest of his life without feeling it again, he was grateful for what he got.

“Is she just asleep then?” She didn't seem asleep. Her breathing was deeper than it normally was.

“No, she's not asleep.” Jesse waited before the nurse stepped out of the room and the door snicked shut behind her. “Her doctor claims there's no medical reason for her to be comatose right now.” He held his hand up as Gideon's eyes

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widened. "The magic Castelain used isn't completely gone yet."

"So what do we do to get rid of it?"

"Some of it will wear off simply because she's no longer under Castelain's power. The rest, I'll undo. Not here, though."

Jesse sounded so confident, it was impossible to hold onto his fears anymore. Emma would be all right. Jesse said so. Nobody understood Emma and this magic better than he did.

"You're not going to take her home while she's still unconscious, are you?" Derek asked.

"Yes, we are," Jesse said calmly. "Not tonight, but probably tomorrow."

"How long do you think it'll be before she wakes up?" Gideon hoped for soon.

"I don't know." Jesse caressed her pulse with his thumb. Her wrist looked stick-thin in Jesse's larger hand. "Soon. She'll wake up soon. Has anybody checked on John's house?" Jesse looked up. "He's still gone?"

"Still gone," Gideon affirmed. "I called Michelle to let her know what was going on. She's monitoring the house and said if anything changed, she'd let us know."

"Did she come back from England?"

"I don't know how she's doing it." And frankly, he didn't care. John was gone, Emma was home. The bottom line was what Gideon cared about. "Do you need me to get a hold of her?"

"No, I'll talk to her later." Jesse reached across Emma and

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took Gideon's hand. "You can relax a little bit. She's not going anywhere. Not ever again."

"And you always teased me about wanting to lock you two in your cages."

Derek cleared his throat. "Still in the room here, you know. Though the fact that you're joking about your twisted love lives makes me feel like things are finally starting to get back to normal."

"You might not want to come around too much in the next couple of months, or you'll get an eyeful of how normal things are going to be," Jesse teased.

In spite of Jesse's directive to relax, Gideon knew he couldn't quite do so yet. Not until Emma opened her eyes. Not until he got to hold both of them, safe and secure in their bed.

"She's going to need her own room until she wakes up. Maybe I'll call Michelle to get something fixed up before we take her home."

"That's a good idea," Jesse said. "Dominique would probably love to take on that project."

Derek retreated to the doorway. "I'm going to head back to the station and start the paperwork closing out Emma's case. If you two need anything, just call me."

Gideon nodded. "Thanks, Derek. For everything."

Derek's gaze softened as it flitted to Emma. "I'm just glad she's home."

When they were left alone, Gideon squeezed Jesse's hand. "I'm glad I'm finally getting both of you home."

"I'm sorry I scared you." Jesse grinned. "But I love it

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when my plans work pretty much like I thought they would. I hope he realized what was happening. Before Castelain ripped him away, I hope he figured out where everything went wrong. Does that make me a bad person?"

"It makes you human." On impulse, he leaned forward and brushed a kiss across Jesse's mouth. "Do you think we'll ever see John again?"

"Castelain has what she wants. What she's wanted for the past century. I doubt she's going to let him go, and I'm not going to volunteer to rescue him."

Neither would Gideon. John had been granted more years than he had ever earned by stealing Castelain's power, and while he felt mildly guilty for being the reason John had been in that position in the first place, Gideon pushed it aside, locking it away with all the other wrongs it was too late for him to remedy.

Like Castelain, he had what he wanted now. All he had ever wanted. He would embrace this new dawn with everything that he had.

He had no intentions of ever letting them go.



## JAMIE CRAIG

Jamie Craig is the collaborative efforts of Pepper Espinoza and Vivien Dean. Both successful authors on their own, they began working together in early 2006. Pepper lives with her husband and cats in Utah, where she attends graduate school, and Vivien resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

\* \* \*

**Don't miss *Those Who Cherish*, by Jamie Craig,  
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*Exiled to an abandoned presidio in southwestern Texas, Father Alonzo Vargas is accustomed to being utterly alone except for his white donkey, Angelica. He is also fully acquainted with the corrupt and rotten sheriff, John Cullen, the man responsible for his semi-permanent exile. When he finds a victim of the sheriff hanging upside down from a tree, he immediately cuts the man down and vows to nurse him back to health.*

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