

New Again
by S.A. Payne

Cole Manner, (yes his parents did hate him to give him a stupid name like that), has been on a quest to find his place in the world. Over the past few years he's traveled and worked whatever job he could find where ever the winds had taken him and for the most part he's enjoyed his new outlook on life.

Until one damp day he happens to see an advertisement for what sounds to be a very odd job and it makes him curious enough that he checks it out, just wanting to know what it was.

That stumbles him into a job like none he'd ever could have imagined and maybe, just maybe, will end his wanderlust and show him his place in the world... of course... his grumpy, troublesome, drop dead sexy new boss could have something to do with that too!

New Again

Chapter One

The sunshine was warm but the air was still chilly with the damp of the night's rain. It wasn't like Cole had anywhere to go; he'd gone to great lengths to see to it that his life was as random and pointless as possible. He'd been tossing crumbs to pigeons for the last hour, thinking, trying not to think, pondering fate or free will and if he should stay in the city or move on.

The wind gusted up, blowing a touch of the coming fall into his hair and around the browning leaves in the trees. It was a sure sign that the winter was going to be colder than Cole generally liked and if he stayed put even a few more weeks he'd have to buy something warmer than his thinning jean jacket. It was a good sign to move on.

"Well," he said to the pigeons that were cooing out of reach, "What do you guys think? Should I stay?"

They ignored him; his crumbs had run out.

"Thought as much." He sighed and pushed himself to his feet.

The wind gusted again and a piece of damp newspaper floated up, caught the breeze and smacked wetly into Cole's face. It was just damp enough to stick to him, clammy and vaguely slimy. He batted at it but when he went to pull it away, the wet paper shredded, leaving only one piece intact when he finally managed to pull it from his face and neck.

He glanced at the damp length of paper in his hand and raised an eyebrow. "Huh."

Aric hovered outside the small shop, watching for the current visitor to finish up and be quietly escorted out. He dropped his finished cigarette and crushed it under the expensive Italian leather shoes he was wearing. The man that passed him looked stuffy, ordinary, and he didn't even glance up as Aric passed. He shook his head at the man's blindness and opened the shop's door.

Bells hung over the door rang. "Be right there," a gruff voice called from the back.

"No rush, Mike. It's just me," he called out and scanned the front of the shop. It had become a collection of antiques really. Old ink wells, paintings, books, well polished furniture all sat about. None of it was untended, dust gathered nowhere and the quality of the items was superb.

Aric paused in front of a centuries old mirror. It was getting flyspecked now as the silver that made it shine wore away but it was still a lovely item. The frame had been handcrafted, carved and polished almost as brightly as the reflective surface. The sight of the glass made him smile warmly but the sight of his wind tussled hair made him frown.

"You're such a vain creature, Aric," a voice called from behind him.

That brightened his smile, showing the line of strong white teeth. He took his time and soothed the last of the highlighted locks into place. "You're just learning this?" He turned and was again shocked by the man's age. "You look like a monk, as always."

Mike glanced down to the tan shirt he was wearing tucked into the black dress pants. "Well, maybe that's because I am. What brings you by?"

He flipped the newspaper out, the ad folded to be on top and held it at arms length toward Mike. In a large, bold advertisement in the help wanted section was an entry that read:

Archival and Personal Assistant Wanted: Knowledge and background in theology, mythology, folk stories, ancient history, philosophy, story telling or related area necessary. Formal education not required, must be willing to work in an independent manner, be flexible and open minded, skill at dealing with difficult individuals required. Work environment is varied and often challenging, travel may be required. Excellent compensation, benefits and housing option available. Temp position with option for long term, full time employment for the right person. Apply in person only, today only.

"I've seen it, I placed it."

"I guessed as much. I wanted to make sure you were still breathing after Hue read the paper this morning. Or did you slip a Mickey into his coffee?" He dropped the paper onto one of the vanity tables as he walked past.

"He isn't here."

"Ah, explains the apply today only part. Where is he?"

Mike rubbed at an aching hand, the cold weather was killing his arthritis. "Your father is flying in, you know how he hates traveling alone."

"And you let Hue go without you?"

"He's a big boy, Aric," he snapped back and moved to return to the warmer back room where he could sit near the heater and bake some of the pain from his bones.

"But father is a pain in the ass, he always gives Hue fits! You should have gone with him." He followed the old man and slowly started to notice the limp.

"And have Hue worry about me as well? Look at me. I don't travel well anymore. I'm an old man." He sighed and lowered himself down into his chair; the kitchen table in front of him had a small stack of interview papers filled with his notations.

Aric really did look at him and agreed, Mike wasn't getting old, he was old. "You're right, I'm sorry. Hue's going to throw a fit when he hears of this."

"Let him. I'm a burden now, it's time for me to retire. I've a nice room arranged through the order down south." He motioned to the coffee in the pot but Aric just waved it off.

"You really mean to retire? So close to the convention?" He did sit down, he needed to.

Mike just nodded. "I mean to, and have. All I need is a replacement."

"But the convention."

"Will be better served without me holding Hue back. Can you honestly disagree?" He raised bushy, white eyebrows and smiled gently. No one had been willing to point out his growing age but he saw it.

Aric glanced away. "No, I can't. But this advertisement, Mike, it's never been done before. Hue needs someone from the clergy to help him. He's going to be livid when he finds out."

Mike glanced to his cooling coffee, unable to meet the dark eyes watching him. "Do you love him?"

"What kind of question is that?" Aric snapped back too quickly.

"The kind I've wanted to ask for far too many years. Indulge an old man, do you love him?"

There was an awkward moment but Aric sighed and broke it. Too comfortable with the aging man to lie or hide to save his own ego. "Yes, I do, as if he were a son, or as if he were my father, depending on what mood he's in. I do love him."

Mike nodded knowingly. "As do I, as do I. We're losing him, Aric, more so every year. Surely you've seen it?"

He hadn't. "He seems fine."

That made the older man snort. "Fine? I haven't heard him laugh in seven months, I mean really laugh, not that cynical, bitter chuckle he uses. He's been broken, he needs a good year-long vacation but there's no time. He's fading away before our eyes. The last thing he needs is another stuffy monk hovering around. He needs someone alive and vital to be his friend. Policy and Hue be damned, I know what I'm doing."

"He has lost weight lately and he hasn't been to the club in ages," he started slowly. "You're still taking a huge risk."

"But it's one that needs to be taken. If it is meant to be, it will be. Don't worry, the prospects are dim, this lot is no better than what would be sent normally." He sighed and waved to the stack of applicants.

Bells rang from the front room.

"And here comes another." He sighed and pushed himself painfully to his feet. "You should go, unless there was something else?" Mike paused.

"No, just, thought you might need protecting." He smiled and stood, aware that he wasn't going to be allowed to stay to watch an interview simply for amusement's sake.

"Check tomorrow," he muttered and caught sight of the man standing near the door.

Aric noticed him too and paused in the doorway. Not six feet tall but tall enough to stand out in the small shop, dark blue eyes hid behind a messy fall of light brown tumbled hair. The tips of the messy hair had been dyed bright fire engine red and it accented the casual, unconcerned expression that had been forced on the man's face. He was too old to be a goth kid, and looked well on his way to his thirties but he was dressed in black jeans, black t-shirt. The jean jacket tossed on over all the black was covered in marker drawings, signatures, patches and pins.

The man nodded to the pair that just stood there. One looked to be in his mid-thirties, tall, with blonde highlights streaked in his brown hair. The cut it fell in had to have cost more than Cole had paid for rent last month. The man was dressed like euro-trash, the expensive button down shirt was left unbuttoned around his collar, the belt was as finely made as the shoes and the pants had to have been custom cut to fit so well. Even the coat that hung long and loose over the fit frame was pricy, stylish and almost too much of a display of casual wealth.

The other man was the exact opposite. Plain, ordinary looking, his white hair was cut short and simply. The face may have been handsome at one point but now it hung in aged wrinkles and lines. There was a thinness to the man's skin that spoke of age greater than the lines proclaimed. His dress was as simple, understated, unfussy and downright plain.

Both stared. Cole shrugged and held out the now dry scrap of paper. "Hey, I know it's getting late, but, you still interviewing?" He'd folded the paper over and tucked it away, but the idea of it had kept resurfacing during the day and it drove him to at least see what the job was.

The older man blinked and nodded. "Of course." He came over and offered a hand. "Mike, Mike Hadlin."

"Cole Manner, and yes, my parents hated me to stick me with a name like cool manner," he headed off the joke. His eyes slipped to the other man, the one still standing staring. "Have we met before? You look familiar."

Aric's eyes slid to catch Mike's with a knowing glance. "Perhaps we have met before. Aric Aliss." He offered his hand and was surprised at the warm strength in the stranger's grip. "Well, I've a job to do, believe it or not. Mike, call me tomorrow if you need me, or come by the club. I promise not to corrupt you too horribly. Cole, it was a pleasure to meet you again." He was grinning wider as he hurried out of the door, bells chiming as he escaped. Hue was going to be pissed but maybe it wasn't such a crazy idea after all.

Cole let the stylish man slip by him, suddenly aware of the grime that had splashed up on his shoes that morning while he'd been out walking around and the rather cheap, dingy way he was dressed. It left him standing in the unusual shop, with the man that seemed as old as the items around him. He glanced around again and tossed his head to the one side.

"Nice collection."

Mike's eyebrows raised. "You know antiques?"

Cole shrugged. "Not professionally. That's an especially nice ghost dance shirt." He pointed with his chin to the white leather beaded shirt carefully framed on the wall. "Shame someone was wearing it when the bullet hole was made."

"Don't lose sleep over it, they lived. The shirt wasn't plundered if that's your meaning." He watched carefully as both curiosity and skepticism slide across the agile face before it settled

back to unconcern. "Well, let's get this started shall we?" He smiled and put on his best, well behaved grandfather look and guided the young man back into the small work room.

Cole followed and sat across from what had to be the older man's chair; it was worn to the shape of the slender body and pulled close to the small stove. In fact, the room was hot enough that he stripped off the jean jacket and hung it on the back of his chair before sitting down.

"Sorry for the heat, these old bones don't like the damp any longer." He groaned as he sat back down and took his pen back up. "Do you have a resume?" Most of the folks today had, and the plain, boring lists were giving him headaches.

Cole shook his head. "No, I don't, I wasn't planning on coming by. Look, I know I'm not suited, we don't need to do this. I just wanted to know what this was all about."

Mike nodded and pulled a notepad onto the table. "Why would you come all the way here just for that?"

"Because the paper smacked me in the head this morning and I had nothing better to do."

"You're not currently working?"

"I was parking cars at a hotel downtown for a while."

"But you're not any longer?"

"I'm not a bum." Cole answered sharply. "Look, I went to college, I'm half way to my master's in education. I was a ninth grade English teacher a couple of years ago."

"And yet, here you are, parking cars."

"I just..." He wasn't sure how to explain, every time he tried people didn't get it. "I just woke up one day. Six AM like always, and sat there. I knew if I got up and went to work and forced jaded, rotten, little monsters to read and ruin the beauty of Whitman or Shakespeare one more time I would do it again, and again, and again. I just knew that if I gave in for one more day, every day for the rest of my life would be just the same. So I didn't."

Mike's pen moved across the paper. "You wanted to be a writer?"

"I'm not so good or so vain to think that. I just knew there was way more out there than I'd ever dreamed of and I wanted to see some of it before I was too old to. Spent a year backpacking in Europe, four months in Africa, cut across the Middle East for a time, spent nine months bumming around India and Asia, jumped to Argentina and went north until I was back home. Been floating about here since, working when I need to, moving when I feel like it." He watched the pen scratch across the notepad and fought the urge to tear it up.

"What kind of work?"

"Any kind. I fixed cars in Columbia, juggled, badly juggled, in Morocco, told stories in Scotland, parked cars here. I'm a hard worker and I learn fast. Figured if nothing more I fit your flexible requirement." He grinned at that, wondering if the stuffy old man even understood the double meaning such a request could carry.

"Well, that's excellent, if a bit unconventional. You aren't adverse to travel."

"No." The grin melted into a smirk.

"Mr. Manner, I must ask some, unconventional, questions."

"I was asked if I had lice once, the only requirement for hire was being willing to work and vermin free. I think I can deal."

That made Mike chuckle. "Well, not so unconventional as that. Are you religious? Do you believe in God?"

"Which one?" He replied with his normal sarcasm about such matters.

That turned Mike's chuckle into a laugh. "Indeed!"

"Seriously? Do I believe in one set of dogma? Naw. Do I believe there is something beyond what we can measure and see? Sure, why not. I'd like to believe that there's some all knowing creature that looks out for us but I don't think it works that way. So, I guess, I'm agnostic, skeptically so." He watched the man's face for signs of reaction and found little.

"Do you have any allergies?"

"Now, that was random. No, not that I know of."

"Can you cook?"

"Is this a job interview or a marriage proposal?"

"Is that a yes or a no?"

He shrugged. "I can toss shit together." The casual swearing slipped out but the older man didn't even acknowledge it. "So, who's the asshole?"

"Pardon me?" That got Mike's attention.

"Well, anytime an ad mentions 'must be good with difficult people' as a requirement, it normally means the boss is an asshole. Since you aren't one, I assume that means someone else that works here is the dork. Who is it?"

Mike sat and studied the man across from him. "You're blunt."

"I don't need this job. I'm too comfortable with myself to pretend to be something you might approve of. Should I go?"

He shook his head. "On the contrary, it's refreshing. To answer your question, I'm not the boss as you put it. You're interviewing to replace me."

"So the boss is an ass."

"Sometimes, he can be rather difficult, sometimes. However, we deal with a vast array of people and personalities. Some are more rational than others, some require very creative means of management. Do you feel someone so blunt would be able to manage that situation?"

"Just what is it that you're hiring for?" He glanced around but the simply decorated room could have been a store room or kitchen from the 1950's, even the table looked dated. Nothing gave clues to the nature of just what occurred around it.

"I am the personal assistant to Mr. Hugo Dana."

"Oh, it's all so very clear now."

Mike narrowed his eyes and wasn't sure if the man across from him was the best or worse choice, but he was certainly the most exciting prospect that had arrived all day. That alone earned him some leeway. "Mr. Dana is a mediator of sorts. His job is to sooth the egos of his clients and see that things run smoothly. Your job would be to make his job and life easier."

"So you are looking for a wife. Sorry, not interested in marrying some old fellow."

For the second time, Mike laughed. "Well, now that's an interesting mental image! Mr. Dana isn't an old fellow like I am, but he is rather mature."

"Now, that's cryptic."

He leaned across the table. "And you're fascinated. This is a very special job, Mr. Manner, unlike any you'll ever have. I've spent the last seventy years doing this and have never been bored once."

The old man didn't look more then seventy. "Just how old are you? And how have you been able to work for this Dana for seventy years? Did you work for his father or something?"

Mike leaned back and shook his head no. "All in time. Temp position is ninety days, salary is four thousand a month, plus room and board if you wish it. Insurance is provided and paid in full, if you're still here after ninety days. Sadly vacation time is when Mr. Dana can find the time for himself, which is rare."

"Training?"

"On the job, no one can teach you how to do this."

Cole raised an eyebrow and felt a gnawing sense of curiosity at the pit of his stomach. "Start date?"

"Yesterday."

He sat back and folded his arms across his chest. His study of the older man gave nothing away. "Am I being offered the job?"

"I think so."

"Will I be sold into white sex slavery if I agree?"

Mike barked out a laugh again. "Well, I should hope not. Would you like to be?"

"My love life's been a touch barren lately." He shrugged. "It might be amusing."

"If we're very unlucky, Mr. Dana may well arrange such a happenstance. So, what do you say?"

"Ninety days, huh?"

"It's more money than you'll make parking cars."

"No suit and ties, no dress code?"

"It's a very liberal work environment."

"Ninety days, I'm game. When do I meet this Mr. Dana and get his final say?"

"Oh, he's away today, he'll be back first thing tomorrow morning and he doesn't have final say."

We sort of replace each other, I don't think he's ever fired anyone yet." He stood up and offered his hand. "Welcome aboard."

Cole hopped to his feet and accepted. "Thanks, so, is there any paperwork? What forms do you need to see?"

"Oh, nothing like that, we're pretty informal." He smiled. "Not even a confidentiality contract, you just be back here tomorrow at seven and we'll get you settled into the apartment upstairs. Will you need help moving? I'm sure I can scare up some strong people."

He shook his head. "No, I travel light. Thanks."

"Thank me tomorrow, lad. You haven't met Mr. Dana yet." He ushered the young, hopefully as un-easily shocked as he appeared, man out the front door. "Tomorrow at seven!" When he pulled the door shut, he locked it and pulled the blinds. Things were definitely looking up, and as he made his weary way up to the apartment above the store, he found himself whistling.

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Chapter Two

For some reason, it felt very important to be at the shop at seven the next morning. Cole wasn't a morning person by any stretch of the imagination but he managed to pull up to the curb on his old Vespa almost at seven on the dot. He dropped the kickstand and pulled off his helmet, hanging it trustingly on the handlebars. The storage under the seat had the smaller, secondary helmet he carried for emergencies plus a shopping bag of his dirty laundry. Everything else he owned was stuffed into two backpacks and strapped to the back of the seat. These he unhooked and tossed over a shoulder.

The door to the shop opened and two young men came out. In their arms were boxes and around their necks were collars. Cole watched the priests go by, dressed in their all black and they watched him. It wasn't until they were loading the boxes into the back of a station wagon parked nearby that they whispered back and forth and tossed serious looks his way.

"Now that's a little odd." It made him rethink his joke about being sold into slavery.

"There you are! Good, good, come in out of the damp," Mike called from the doorway. He followed the younger man's gaze to where the two priests were talking quietly. "Pay them no mind, they're jealous. They thought they'd be getting your job!"

Cole followed inside but the priests had him nervous. "Just what did I sign up for?"

"All in good time, all in good time." He felt lighter, younger, than he had in years and Mike planned to enjoy the feeling for as long as he could. "Is that the entire of your worldly goods?"

"Fraid so."

"Well, let's see, down here is the store front, back here the store room but it's mostly a place to sit and chat." Mike hustled past and to the room where he'd sat with Cole the day before. Only this time, a door in the back of the room was opened to show a narrow set of steps. "The building is from the eighteen eighties. These steps lead to the apprentice's quarters best I can recall." He climbed the steps painfully, another reason it was time to retire, his knees didn't like the steep steps.

"You're living here?"

"I was, but for the next ninety days it's yours. The door to the shop locks but I never bother. It's a small space but cozy. Oh, here we are." The steps opened directly into the apartment, with a shallow railing blocking off the empty hole that dropped into the stairwell.

It wasn't what Cole had been expecting. The space was small, yes, but recently renovated. The walls were dry walled and painted in soothing, pale tones of blue and green, trimmed in white. The temperature was pleasantly warm and central air vents just as obviously were able to cool in the summer. The large windows were topped in stained glass, the floors were highly polished hardwood, broken with nice, modern throw rugs.

The wall across from the stairs was a small kitchen. A two burner stove and small oven, dishwasher, slightly smaller fridge and a nice, stainless steel sink stood around light pine cabinets with a soft blue counter top. The small, round table sitting to the side was wood and well made but with clean modern lines.

Facing the railing by the stairwell was a wood entertainment center and housed in it was a good sized television, surround sound speakers, a DVD player, CD player and DVR. The sofa that faced it was new, clean and plush. Tossed over the back was a light blanket in the same pale and creamy colors the entire space had.

Along the far wall was a double bed. The head and foot board were wrought iron and obviously vintage from the scroll work and detail put into them. They'd been painted white but that only added to their charm. The bed was made, crisply, and a large, heavy quilt was folded over the foot of the bed. Pressed along the wall closest to the bed were a wardrobe and a pair of dressers.

There were two doors and Mike moved to the one nearest the kitchen. "Old spaces, I'm afraid, offer no closet space. In here is the bathroom, the linen closet I had them add has sheets, towels, everything you'll need."

"You're leaving all of this?"

"I've no need. It was furnished when I got it, it's only right to pass it to you furnished." He smiled at the home he'd had for most of his adult life. "Be grateful I talked Hue into letting me remodel. Had to drag him kicking and screaming into the central air. Aric just got him to switch from fountain pens a couple of years ago."

"What the hell is going on here?" Cole dug his heels in. He was confused and didn't like it.

"Follow me, hurry now, he'll be home soon." Mike grinned cryptically and led Cole to the other door.

This was a second stairwell, this one wider and not so steep. They climbed down to a small

entrance way. The door in front of them was obviously a door to the outside but Mike turned to the one to the right. The heavy wood door actually creaked when he forced it open.

"Oh, my God," Cole whispered as he walked in.

The apartment, situated in the back of the shop, felt like, and smelled like, a museum. For as light and airy as the upstairs apartment was, this one was dark and heavy. Heavy, antique curtains hung on thick rods over the windows. The furniture was dark woods, thick and ornate. The walls were covered in paintings and few photographs. There was no overhead lighting; instead vintage lamps sat on tables or floor lamps hovered over elegantly outdated chairs. Cole was observant enough to see everything had been rewired but little more had been done to the place. Even the slightly larger kitchen space was older.

"He doesn't change easily. His bedroom is that doorway, washer and dryer are off of the kitchen. Don't even try to change things, it took me forever to get him to add the new washer and dryer."

"This, this is..." He lost what he wanted to say when he started to add up the value of the obviously old, obviously well made furniture. "You don't know me, there must be a million dollars worth of furniture alone here. How can you trust that I won't just steal it all?"

"Million five actually, according to the appraised value." Insurance had been another issue that he'd fought for. "And you won't steal a thing, I know better."

"What is this Hugo Dana? Like some whacko recluse rich dude?"

"Something like that. Cole, what if I were to tell you that the world is filled with powerful beings, not always all knowing but very powerful." He watched the carefully controlled face for a reaction but saw little.

"I've heard the same story from drunks in pubs and shamans around fires. So? I'm not a priest, I don't waste time thinking about God."

"Gods."

"Whatever."

"Not whatever, it's of utmost importance. Haven't you ever wondered why there are no crusades today?"

He shrugged. "People aren't as stupid as they were."

That made Mike laugh warmly. "Hardly. A truce was called, treaties were signed, a balance was created and it's a fragile one at that. Hugo Dana's job, his sole function, is to maintain this balance."

"Okay, check please, I'm not buying this bullshit. Where're the hidden cameras?"

"Sadly, there aren't any. Hue is the mediator, the judge, nearly the final say. It's been my honor and my privilege to assist him for the past seventy years. Now, normally, my replacement would be a member of the clergy, specially trained as those young men outside have been, to replace me. I'm breaking tradition because I feel you have something Hugo needs right now." He watched the growing skepticism.

"What would that be? Sanity?"

"Some days. I was thinking a connection to today, a sense of humor, youth. Sanity works, however, so we'll leave it there."

"This is crazy."

"Here." Mike held out his wrist and the plain, woven bracelet that hung there. "This is yours now." He slid it off. "At least for the next ninety days anyway."

Cole accepted the worn rope bracelet. "Gee, thanks. Now, if I put this on and say we're friends, do you promise not to eat my liver?"

"Just, put it on, your left wrist." He nodded.

"And no liver eating?"

"I promise. Go on."

With nothing to officially protest with, he slid the worn rope onto his wrist. Only, as soon as he'd let go of it and it was resting against his flesh something sharp jabbed him. "Ow, what the..." Blood dripped from the small wound and soaked into the rope. "What did you do!"

"Perhaps nothing, perhaps everything."

Cole's eyes grew wider at the cryptic answer and he reached frantically to pry the rope from his arm and toss it aside. Before he could touch it, the rope moved. It slithered like a living thing and shivered. He not only saw it move, he felt it. "What the hell!"

"Well now, seems I'm not as uselessly old as I'd feared," Mike muttered to himself.

"What's going on? Get it off!"

"Settle down, it's all perfectly harmless."

"Harmless!" He held his wrist out, repulsed and fascinated at the same time.

The rope shivered and caught the light with a metallic flash. A spot took on a smooth glow, it shined and sparked before the entire rope twisted and turned. As Cole watched it, the rope turned from fiber to metal. The braided pattern smoothed out to a perfectly round silver bangle.

"What the fuck!" He shook his arm but the bracelet was plain metal, cool against his skin and a perfect size to rest against his hand without being loose. As he turned his wrist, he caught glimpses of dark red flashing along the silver.

Mike chuckled. "Well, well, that is a variation that hasn't shown up in a long while."

"What the hell? Christ, no wonder there's no confidentiality agreement, who in their right mind would believe this." He was staring at his wrist, wondering if he was having some bad drug flashback.

"I don't care if you chose to believe all that I've told you or not, Mr. Manner, so long as you remember your job is to attempt to make Hugo's life a little easier. Believe what you see, or not, it doesn't matter." He drew a breath and glanced around the apartment. "Well now, excuse me a moment, a curse of age I'm afraid. The need to empty your bladder before going anywhere."

Cole's head snapped up and the boxes in the station wagon below added up. "You're leaving?"

"Of course."

"But, I mean, what am I..." Cole glanced from the bracelet, still metal and smooth, not braided

rope, back to the serene old man. "That's it? Some magic trick with a bracelet, a few cryptic words and that's it? How am I supposed to figure out what to do?"

"You'll know. I can't teach you and it'll be easier if I'm not hovering around. Besides, I'm years overdue for a vacation." He smiled gently.

"You're not even going to introduce me to this old coot?"

"Oh, he'll be home soon, before I leave I'd imagine." He sighed and disappeared into the bathroom.

"This is insane." Cole was alone, in a well furnished apartment that was now his, wearing a rope bracelet that wasn't and told he was to be the personal assistant to a man that mediated people that thought they were gods. "What the hell have I gotten into this time?" He sighed, considered leaving and ruled it out. Things seemed harmless and he was too curious not to stay and see what happened. After all, the entire point of turning his life upside down was to see what adventures he might find. This was already shaping up to be a doozy.

The door to the back steps opened and a man wearing a black suit, stark white shirt and black tie pushed his way into the apartment. "I swear, if Xander doesn't behave better I will kill him," the man announced before he was fully in the apartment, only he froze at the stranger standing there. "Who are you, where's Mike?"

"He's in the bathroom," Cole forced out, told his tongue not to loll out and prayed he'd not get hard.

The man was tugging at the tie, pulling it loose and that alone put a dozen dirty thoughts into Cole's brain. The suit was hot, there was no denying that, a man in a black suit was always a fine sight but this man could have stepped from one of his wettest of adolescent dreams.

Not very tall, Cole guessed he was close to five seven if that, but well built. His shoulders were wide and strong and it gave his body a clean tapered line to a narrow waist and long legs. His hair was midnight black, almost with blue highlights and was pulled back into a tight, small ponytail at the back of his skull. It looked glossy, thick, and as if, when freed to fall, would curl into loose ringlets. Cole had always known he was a sucker for dark hair, the shiny loose curls always did him in, but added with the man's dusky olive skin and eyes as black as his hair and Cole was ready to drool.

If the man in the suit had been drawn on an Egyptian temple wall, he'd have been at home. If Cole had seen his face on early Islamic artwork, he wouldn't have been surprised. There was a clear Mediterranean or Arabic look to the him, from the shape of his nose that was slightly too large for his face, to the size and shape of those dark eyes that sucked in all notice. It all added up to a body that Cole would have happily worshiped.

He let his eyes swipe over the new arrival, tried to hide the instant melted attraction he felt and tried to settle his body down. For the darker man's part, his eyes swept over Cole as thoroughly but if he liked, or even approved, of what he saw, nothing touched his face. The feel of those black eyes across his body made Cole forget to breathe.

Until those eyes stopped on the bracelet and a frown turned the expressive lips downward. "What's going on here?"

Cole managed to shrug. "Your guess is a good as mine."

"I don't like my guess."

It was only by listening closely that Cole heard the soft, buried accent. It made him think that

English wasn't this man's first language but the source of the accent eluded him. He'd thought he had a good ear for placing locations to the variations of accents but this one was new.

The water stopped running in the bathroom and the door opened a moment later. Mike came out with a placid smile fixed to his face. It was an expression that Cole was starting to suspect, even from his short association with the man, was a mask to hide his real feelings.

"Ah, good, you're home."

"Mike, what's going on?" The dark eyes slid from one man to the other but understanding clicked in. "No, you can't."

"Hue, I can and will and I have."

"Mike!" The dark eyed man snapped, stuck between scolding and hurt. "Not now, we're less than a hundred days from the convention, I need you here."

Mike held his ground and shook his head. "No, you need someone that can actually help you. Not an old man tottering around, another thing for you to worry about, my friend."

The frown deepened. "You are not a burden."

"Hush, we've had this discussion too many times. I told you I was retiring."

The hands, held loosely at the dark man's sides, balled up into fists. "I know, I'm sorry. I honor you."

"Now, don't go all formal." He hated it, hated seeing the cold shutting down in his friend's eyes. Hated that responsibility and the burden of his purpose had so broken what had once, long before, been a vibrant man.

"When are you leaving?" The eyes slid to Cole. "And don't tell me that's your replacement?"

"Hey now, buddy..." Cole shut up at Mike's upheld hand.

"He is and I'm leaving now. Goodbyes hurt less when done quickly, yes?"

The dark head nodded. "Yes."

"Hugo Dana, this is Cole Manner."

Hue snorted.

"Yes, my parents hated me." Cole gave the sharp, automatic reply. "Hugo Dana isn't a winning name either."

"Oh, this is rich. If I can't whip him into shape before the convention..."

"I'll come back for a couple of weeks." Mike nodded but smiled gently, already liking the interactions he was seeing between the two men. "Don't worry, you broke me in, in what? Two months?"

"You were more clever than most. So, Manner? Who sent you by and are you spying on me?" Hue asked roughly, willing himself to neither grieve at Mike's leaving or like Cole's arrival.

"Pardon?"

Again, Mike, stepped in. "He isn't sent by anyone. I, sort of, bent the rules a little."

Dark eyebrows rose. "Oh?"

"I put an ad in the paper. Left it to chance and fate."

One, long fingered hand rose up and started rubbing at the headache that was growing behind his eyes but Hue only shook his head.

"Aric was worried you'd be angry, stopped by to offer me his protection."

"Aric is a fool. You've earned a retirement, you've served well. I won't begrudge it." In truth, he did, but he was too tired to be angry. "That's the way of things."

Mike narrowed his eyes at the easy acceptance. "I've told him little, you'll have to bring him up to speed."

"Wonderful."

"Consider it a blank slate." He moved to embrace his friend one last time.

"Hello! I'm standing right here, don't talk about me like I can't hear you."

Both men looked to Cole briefly before going back to ignoring him.

"I assume your young priest lackeys are hovering nearby?"

"Downstairs." He pulled the shorter man into a hug and patted the shoulder that was tense with stress and worry. "It'll be okay, he's a good choice."

"Says you," Hue mumbled back.

Mike grinned softly, a touch of bitterness in it, before stepping from the hug. He paused, knelt stiffly and with pain down on one knee, the formal sign of subjection that Hue never asked of him and the closeness of their friendship rarely ever made proper.

Hue saw the uneasy way his friend knelt and the proud formality stabbed him in his heart. It wasn't a sign of respect he'd snub easily or lightly, so he followed through. One of his hands briefly covered the thinning white hair and he whispered an ancient blessing under his breath. No amounts of formality would keep him from helping Mike back to his feet, and he finished the small ritual with a gentle kiss placed on the aged forehead.

"Blessing upon you for your faithful service, I honor your name."

Mike nodded, unable to form words. He'd known leaving, just walking away, would be hard, he hadn't been aware it would be this hard. Without another word to the man he was leaving behind, he turned and started for the steps.

Only he paused in front of Cole and slipped him a business card. "You met Aric yesterday. For all that Hue calls him a fool, he is trustworthy and a good friend. If you need help, contact him." It was the only advice he was willing to offer.

Cole accepted the card, feeling even more lost and confused than before, and watched the frail old man make his careful way down the steps. Hue moved to the front of the apartment and peered out behind the crisp new curtains. Down on the street below, he watched as Mike climbed into the front seat of an older station wagon without once glancing back. He stood and watched until the car had pulled from the curb and driven away.

"So. What do you want me to do?" Cole asked carefully.

Hue slid his eyes over to glance at the blonde stranger standing in the middle of Mike's apartment. He ignored the question and glanced back out the window just to make sure Mike wasn't changing his mind and coming back.

"Okay, obviously you're not happy about this. Since I don't have another place to crash right now, you're stuck with me. At least for the short term anyway, it'll take me a bit to line up something I can afford." He heard himself talking and just couldn't turn it off. The easy way the darker man had simply moved his eyes to glance at him, keeping body and head still, had been oddly sexy.

"Do you ever shut up?" Hue asked, feeling the headache threatening to grow worse.

"Not often."

"That your Vespa?"

"She's my baby girl."

"Well, your baby girl will be stripped bare for parts soon if you leave it on the street. See the keys on the table? The little one's to the garage, let me show you."

"Sweet, I'd be unhappy if someone messed with my scooter." He followed Hue but only after scooping the keys from the table.

The garage was along the side of the building, facing an alley. The small key opened a locked box that hid a button which opened the garage door. The box didn't need to be relocked, it locked automatically. It was a nice set up and Cole found himself nodding where he stood next to his Vespa.

The door opened slowly and the light inside the space clicked on. It was large enough for two cars but only one sat there. It wasn't the type of car Cole had been expecting and he chuckled as he walked the Vespa in to the empty side space.

"I half expected it to be a model T or something." He dropped the kickstand on the Vespa and moved to run a hand over the side of the black, brand new, hybrid car.

Hue shook his head. "That's in storage."

"Kidding, right?"

"No."

"Hard to picture you as a hybrid type."

"They're efficient."

"I'd love to get under its hood. I haven't gotten to work with one before."

Hue moved to a door near the back that lead to the small garden in the back of his building. "Touch it and I'll break your fingers."

"That's harsh man, that's really harsh." He followed again like a puppy dog, as the garage door lowered shut behind them. "So, what am I supposed to do?"

"Right now? I don't care." Hue made a mental note to check that the aphids that had been eating the roses had been stopped and unlocked the back door to the building.

"Seriously."

"Right now I'm going to take a long, hot shower. Then I may or may not eat something but I will catch a few hours of sleep. I have a meeting tonight and will be leaving around eight. Do us both a favor and stay home." Hugo shut his apartment door behind him, almost on the blonde man's nose.

Cole stood in the hallway for a long moment, surprised at the coldness. "Rich, eccentric weirdos." It was easier to think of it in those terms but the cool metal of the bracelet that hung on his wrist contradicted such simplicity.

The upstairs apartment was unlocked but Cole took the time to learn which keys fit the lock. Inside felt too nice, too expensive, for a place he was staying in. He'd grown used to pay-by-the-week motels and hostels where not having rats nibble on toes was a luxury. The elegant comfort made him feel like an intruder.

The easiest way to remedy that was to make himself at home. Systematically, he started going over the apartment. Pulling out drawers and sitting on the bed was a good start but it felt odd to unpack his few things so while he knew where he wanted to put his socks, they stayed in their bag.

The bathroom turned out to be narrow but clean. The tile was smooth and cool in a classic black and white design. While the sink and toilet were new, the tub was an old cast iron claw foot. The shower hung high over head and the curtain circled the monster like a cape. It had an older, sexy feel to it, which didn't suit with the idea of the older man that had lived there.

The kitchen turned up some more interesting finds. The cupboards had simple, elegant dishes in teals and blacks, all neatly put away. There were spices in one and boxes and cans of food in the other. When he pulled open the fridge he found inside fairly well stocked. The milk was fresh, the fruits were ripe but not rotten and everything down to the salad dressing was there waiting for him. He really was stepping into someone else's life.

One of the last drawers in the kitchen turned up a stack of take out menus and a yellow post it note. It read: "Cook occasionally, there's a market down on the corner. Above the fridge I've stashed some useful things. Good luck." Under that was a paper with vital information: the apartment's address, the telephone number, all things he'd forgotten to ask after neatly prepared for him.

"Weird, very weird." It wasn't so weird that he wasn't climbing up to pull open the small cupboard above the fridge.

Inside were two bottles of scotch and a white paper envelope. Cole gathered them all up and carefully lined them up on the counter. He wasn't normally a drinker, though he'd been known to hit the pubs a time or two, so it took a moment to understand that the two bottles were seventy years old. The envelope wasn't sealed and he slid it open to find a note and five hundred dollars in tens and twenties.

Cole whistled under his breath and set the cash next to the bottles. "Very, very weird."

The paper the note was written on was heavy and of a fine quality and the same handwriting that had neatly rolled across the post it had scripted his name across the front. He unfolded it, half worried something would fall out and make things weirder.

"Dear Cole. I'm sure you're very confused right now, don't worry, it'll make more sense soon."

When I started, my predecessor left me two bottles of brandy he had purchased during his first year, he had been given two bottles from the woman that predated him. It's one of our traditions. I'd recommend going out and buying a case and stashing it, that's the only way, as the years go by, that you won't want to crack into your saved two bottles. This is assuming that you'll be sticking around, I know. Trust me, working with Hue requires a stiff drink occasionally. The cash I left in case you needed it, consider it a gift. Welcome to a grand adventure. Mike."

"Okay, weird doesn't even start to cover this." It would be easy to take the cash and run, Cole went so far as to pick it up.

With a sigh he put it back down, back into its envelope and stashed it and the bottles back above the fridge. He had a full day to kill before having to be ready to go out at eight. Unpacking wouldn't take nearly long enough but a day off wasn't a bad thing. There was no way he was leaving until he figured out just what he'd stumbled into. The fact that Hugo was drool inspiring handsome didn't hurt his decision to stick around either.

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Chapter Three

Cole started getting ready around six that night. He hopped in the old fashioned shower and instantly knew why the old man hadn't replaced it. The water streamed down like a rainfall. It was one the best showers he'd ever had, total luxury, and Cole lingered in it until the hot water started to run out. He dried off and wasn't quite comfortable enough to walk into the main space naked.

With the towel wrapped around his hips he crossed the apartment to where he'd laid out clothes. Without knowing where they were going, if he was even welcome or what he'd be doing when he got there, Cole dressed as he would for any night out. His favorite pair of black jeans, the ones that hung low on his hips and looked skin tight but moved beautifully, they were a requirement.

Once he had his pants on, he towel dried his hair and went to pull out a pair of socks. It would be combat boots tonight, flexible, sturdy and tough looking; his boots had been with him forever. The only regret he had for changing his life was having to leave his clothes behind. Once he'd allowed himself to, and those first months settled in a new city, he'd bought a collection of club clothes; he'd been sorry to part with them. He'd loved them, they'd made him feel whole for the first time in his life, but when the itch to move on had hit, he'd had to give away all but his favorites.

That left him with few choices for the night and he settled on a black t-shirt that was cotton spandex and a nice dress shirt for over it. The t-shirt had been a gift from his first lover and the man had been way skinnier than Cole was. He had to peel the shirt down his body, it clung to him and made him smile. It was so tight that when he'd soothed it out he had to make sure the

blood red lettering across his chest was straight.

“Unsocial.” He read the word and smiled. The dress shirt slid on easily, black with slender silver pinstripes. He let it hang open and rolled the sleeves up to his elbows, the silver of the bracelet on his wrist shined. It suited him well, he had to admit that, even if he’d no idea how the old man had pulled the trick off. A little bit of gel worked across his still wet hair promised to keep it straight and show off the red as much as possible and a small amount of black eyeliner smudged along his eyes finished the look.

Dressed and ready, he grabbed his jean jacket and made his way down the stairs to wait for his employer’s arrival. There were lights on in the apartment, glowing softly from under the door and very softly he heard the sounds of movement drifting out. One of Cole’s concerns was that the obviously independent man would have simply left without him. That would have been a shame since he figured the best way to get answers was to stick by the unusual man.

It was several minutes before the apartment door opened and Hugo Dana emerged dressed in dark tan chino pants that fit perfectly and cost more than Cole could imagine spending for such casual, boring pants and a button down cotton shirt in boring dark blue. He looked rested at least, less snappish but still not amused to find Cole hovering outside his apartment. The neutral expression he wore turned into a frown.

“Still here?”

“Still here,” Cole answered and reminded himself not to slobber on the shorter man. They stood frozen in place for a heartbeat before Cole realized that his new employer was staring at his ear and the six white gold loops he wore high on the cartilage. “What?”

Hue shook his head, dismissing a half recalled memory. “Nothing, it’s just, I think I knew someone who had earrings like that, once, a long time ago.” He turned and headed for the back door and waiting car without locking his door or looking back.

Cole shrugged, shoved his hands into his pockets and followed. “You know what they say, everything old is new again.”

Hue shook his head and let the door swing shut behind him, nearly breaking Cole’s nose.

“Cold, dude, really cold.” But Cole was half smiling, liking the challenge that was presented to him, liking the way the shorter man’s ass looked in the chinos, with no external visible signs of the stick that was obviously shoved up it.

He hurried to catch up and managed to pile into the hybrid car before Hue could get it started and leave him behind. The interior smelled new, the car ran with hardly a sound and the way Hue moved the stick shift made it obvious the man loved the car.

“So, where’re we going?”

“To work.”

“Informative.”

“Shut up.”

Hue wove the car around traffic and across the city to an old neighborhood of row homes. The

dark reddish brown stone used in its construction accented with the fall-painted leaves of the old trees out front along the street. He rolled a little bit, found an open space and slipped the car in to park along the curb. Almost before the engine was off Hue was popping the door open and climbing out.

That left Cole to scurry after him. "For such a short guy, you move fast."

"It's not my fault you're overgrown because you drank too much growth hormone laced milk as a child," Hue muttered and strode away from his annoying shadow.

They went a couple of houses down the street until Hugo turned at one house that looked like any other. The light was lit over the small landing at the top of the steps and Cole followed as Hue took them in quick, efficient steps. One slender finger pressed the buzzer and disappeared back into a pants pocket.

The pair waited, Cole shuffled his boot against the stone making a raspy scraping sound. Hue gave him a harsh look and he stopped. "Sorry." The only reply he got was a long, harsh sigh. "Cold huh?"

Hugo's eyes slid sideways but as he opened his mouth to tell the younger man to shut up, again, the door in front of them opened. The heavy wood door slid inward and spilled warmth and light out from within. Standing in its glow was a slender woman with coffee colored skin and glossy amber hair. She stood in nylons with no shoes, a skirt that fell to just above her knees and a classically cut suit jacket, all in shades of rose.

Her golden brown eyes lit up and she smiled. "Hugo!" She stepped back and held the door open. "Come in out of the cold. You look well."

"You look stunning, as always." Hugo nodded and stepped inside the well lit and warm foyer.

Before Cole could follow, the lady pushed the door halfway shut. "Who's this?" she asked, her smile gone.

"Mike retired, this is his replacement," Hugo explained without introducing his shadow.

A finely shaped eyebrow raised upward. "Well, interesting choice."

"Not my choice," Hue corrected.

"Indeed."

Cole bobbed his head. "Cole Manner, ma'am."

That brought her smile back. "Your parents must have hated you."

He met the smile and raised it with a teasing smirk. "That's the story ma'am."

She laughed. "I like him, Hugo." The door opened again. "Come in, Mr. Manner. I'm Bonnie Imstey."

"Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Imstey. Did you know your last name is shared with an Egyptian god?" Cole added for small talk's sake, just grateful he'd been invited in from the cold, literally and figuratively.

"Oh, Hugo, I really like this one, sharp isn't he?" She turned a wide smile to the frowning man beside her.

When she turned back to Cole, his vision blurred, just for a moment, and the image of the

successful business woman in front of him was overlapped and replaced by something else. His eyes grew wide, trying to understand the images, convinced he was half crazy but seeing it anyway. It took a moment for his brain to catch up but he was certain he'd seen the flash of a vulture's head, a pair of horns and a solar disk set between them, all over and above the lovely, welcoming face.

"Are you okay, Mr. Manner? You look a touch pale," she asked smoothly but her eyes slid to where Hugo stood brooding and silent.

Cole rubbed his eyes and the woman was the woman that had greeted them at the door. "I'm fine, just thought I saw something."

"Mike didn't train him, did he?" she asked of Hue, but the answer was obvious.

"You know it's not the way it's done," he answered.

"But, Hugo, dear, he's a babe in the woods. I almost feel bad for him."

Cole raised a hand. "I'm standing right here."

Neither one acknowledged him.

"It was Mike's right to pick his successor and he picked someone from outside. He'll swim or drown on his own."

"Still, standing right here."

"I have to go, busy night and such. Here are your keys back." Hugo handed over a pair of keys on a plain ring.

"Thank you so much, again, Hugo. You're a doll."

"It was no bother. I should go."

"Hugo, do something with Johnny? He's driving everyone crazy. It's endless, the trouble he's stirring up."

"He's harmless."

"Harmless! I was having a business lunch today, he walks up to my table and shakes his finger at me as he says 'I don't care what you've heard, I'm not gay.' Hugo, he's obsessed."

"Where is it written that I have to worry about his sex life?"

"Nowhere but he's being disruptive. I had to tell my associates that he was my sister's crazy boyfriend. Just do something with him, for mercy's sake."

Hugo sighed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "I'll say something to him if I see him."

That brightened Bonnie's smile back up. "Thank you, you're such a dear."

"You're welcome. Now, please excuse me."

"Thanks again, Hugo. Try not to let Xander give you fits."

"Oh, he won't, my tolerance is limited right now."

Goodbyes were said but Cole was ignored until he was outside on the cool stone landing and Bonnie stopped him. "And, Mr. Manner, it was a true pleasure to meet you. Keep in mind, flexibility is very important."

Cole turned around and smiled rakishly. "I'm told, ma'am, that I'm flexible enough to put my foot into my own mouth and that I manage it often."

She laughed merrily. "Oh, this is perfect. Goodnight, thanks again, Hugo!" She waved at the sullen man but he seemed too miserable to notice. Cole, however, returned the wave with another bold smile. She was still laughing merrily as she shut the door behind her.

Cole waited until he was back in the car to ask his question, half worried that Hugo would be annoyed enough to leave him behind. The door sealed shut and he was reaching for his seatbelt. "So, what's a guy like you doing with keys to the apartment of such a beautiful woman."

"I was watching her cats."

Cole sat silent, uncertain if his leg was being pulled or not. Hugo didn't seem the sort to make idle jokes but from what little he'd seen Cole was betting the man had a wickedly dry sense of humor. That meant there was a fragile line between teasing joke and reality. A line Cole wasn't sure had been crossed, or even if the serious man ever crossed.

They'd been rolling along streets, some busy, some not, when with little warning the happily humming car whipped to the side and quickly pulled up to the curb to park. With long practiced skill, Hugo got the car turned off and was pulling the keys out of the ignition.

"Stay in the car," he ordered.

"What?"

"Stay in the car!" he snapped back and was climbing from the driver's seat and slamming the door before Cole could question.

"Like hell," he muttered as he followed the rapidly moving man.

Hugo only spared a look over his shoulder at the sound of the car door slamming behind him and only a single thought to be surprised that Cole was following. "Idiot," he muttered and tried to go faster down the street toward the group of men.

"What're we doing?" Cole had caught up by the grace of longer legs alone.

"Stay out of my way," Hue hissed and pushed past the handful of young men to reach the one in the center.

The group was the sort Cole avoided. Hair shaved in a high and tight military style, broad shouldered, and while out of uniform, screaming of army. The group of five guys were the sort that used to drill in ROTC and beat the snot out of him when they could catch him. The group was the sort that had taught Cole how to fight back.

Apparently, no one had ever told Hugo that a man of his height and stature shouldn't be picking fights with men so much taller and larger than himself. Hue caught the one's shoulder and pulled the taller man around. There was no pause, before the military man could react to the contact, Hugo's balled up fist swung up and landed solidly on the square jaw.

The man staggered back, startled more than hurt it seemed, and his buddies moved to jump Hue. The man who'd been punched straightened and waved a hand. "Wait!" His friends backed down, glancing from each other to Hue. "What the hell, Hugo?"

"That's for pissing me off, Johnny," Hugo answered calmly. He was ignoring the other men like they weren't there, dark eyes locked on blue.

"Look, I told Bonnie I was sorry."

"Sorry isn't cutting it anymore," Hue cut off. "Stop it."

"Johnny?" One of the men standing around asked but all he got was a quick shake of a head for an answer.

"My life is enough of a trouble right now, as you well know, without you being a whiny bitch."

That made the taller man straighten up and his eyes narrowed. "I'm no one's bitch, least of all yours."

"Odd, that isn't what you told about half the community the last time you were drunk. Face it, Johnny, you have been and are my bitch. Deal with it, stop causing trouble or you and I will cross." Hue took a step forward, just that, he didn't even raise his voice, and the men around Johnny took a step backwards. "We wouldn't want that to happen again, would we?"

Johnny actually snarled, it distorted his square jawed, solid, all American solid looks into something unpleasant. "You fucking faggot, I'm not like you!"

Cole would have missed it if he hadn't been watching Hugo's face for any sign of a reaction. He caught it, the slight tightening of his mouth, the smallest narrowing of his eyes and it looked more to Cole like hurt than anger.

"Johnny," Hue's voice was lower now, "stop causing me trouble, this is the only warning I'll offer and I only do it because of our history together. You know every time we fight I win and end up fucking you."

The group of friends around Johnny took another step back on shuffling feet and exchanged uncomfortable looks. Cole had to keep his feet glued in place, not in an effort to avoid retreating but the opposite. The open admission that Hugo, hot, darkly sexy Hugo, not only was attracted to men but had relations with them in the past, made Cole almost lightheaded with the need to pounce.

"I'm not gay!" Johnny almost screamed.

Hugo just shrugged. "Whatever you say, just behave and I won't have to spank you again." He clearly considered the discussion over. Hue turned and pushed past the gawking group and the wide eyed Cole.

Johnny actually snarled and took a couple of steps toward where Hugo was retreating. There was no need for threatening words or actions, all Hugo did was stop and turn slightly. Dark black eyes slid over and locked onto angry blue and Johnny froze in place. There was a moment with all the weight of lightening about to strike before Johnny glanced away and took a step back.

Hugo turned away. "Come along, Mr. Manner, I've more important things to attend to."

It was cold, it was dismissive. The harsh words turned the angry flush on Johnny's face from red to deep purple but Cole didn't wait for the man to recover. He followed quickly behind Hugo, a spot on his neck feeling itchy until they were back in the car, certain that they were going to be rushed at any moment.

For as shaken by the almost conflict they'd apparently narrowly avoided as Cole was, Hugo

didn't appear moved. He sat in the car seat with all outward appearance of calm and pulled his seatbelt on. Only his eyes slid over to where Cole sat, startled and jumpy. "Buckle up for safety."

It sounded half threat and Cole nodded like an idiot as he pulled his seatbelt across his body. "Hey, dude..." he started as the car slid back out into traffic.

Hue ignored him.

"Dude, you should let me take a look at that hand. That was some punch, you probably broke something. I mean something other than his face." He tried to catch a glimpse of the hand on the steering wheel but the flash of the street lights wasn't enough to provide any insight.

"I'm fine." The words were as coldly dismissive to Cole as they were to Johnny.

"Sure thing, Rambo."

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Chapter Four

Hugo remained silent the rest of the ride and with the radio off it left Cole alone in his thoughts with only the softly whooshing road noise for distraction. They crossed the city, back toward downtown, and the traffic became heavier. Cole found himself watching Hugo's hands on the wheel, the way he shifted gears with firm confidence and wondering how those hands would feel against bare skin.

The car turned into the parking garage with a little too much force. It jarred Cole from his wandering thoughts and snapped him back to the reality of things. He didn't know a thing about the silent, darker man. If Cole's track record was any guide, the men he'd been instantly attracted to were never the ones anyone sensible started a relationship with. Then again, was he really considering a relationship? Could hot, animal sex on the hood of the hybrid car really be considered a relationship? He smiled wickedly at the thought.

The car turned into a parking space with such a sharp jolt that it made Cole wonder if the silent man had somehow known the train of his thought. "Should I wait in the car while you put the smack down on some other jarhead?"

"Do what you want." Hue slid from the car without even glancing over to his passenger.

There was never any question that Cole was going to follow. He scrambled out and followed the quickly moving man to the elevators. There was no standing there, as if the lift had been waiting to be used, the doors opened as soon as Hugo pressed the button. They rode down a rickety elevator that rocked slightly from side to side. When he glanced to his companion, he noticed the grip he had on the railing along the wall and how white the man's knuckles were.

"You okay?"

Hugo's eyes never left the doors. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine."

The doors opened and Hugo strode out, leaving Cole to play catch up again. "I don't like small spaces, let alone ones that feel like they could fall." The confession came out tight lipped and begrudgingly.

Cole shrugged. "Next time we'll take the stairs."

"It's not that simple," Hue half whispered under his breath but led the way onto the street and down to the corner building.

The sign above the old brick building that was shaped more like a warehouse than anything commercial glowed in an expensive display. It read simply Crass but under it in script was printed the simple description of discothèque. It didn't seem to be the sort of place a man like Hugo Dana would be headed for but from the line of people outside, waiting to be allowed in by the crew working the door, it apparently was the kind of place a lot of people headed for. The crowd was a mix of trendy slutty to punk and a little goth. It was the sort of place Cole happily would have spent the night in if he wasn't certain that the costs of drinks would be outrageous. Not that he ever bought his own drinks at a place like this, there were always plenty of people trying to gain attention.

It wasn't the club they went to; Hugo led them around the corner away from the clinging music and eager, lonely people. They circled the block and it took Cole a moment to understand that it was the other side of the warehouse. Only on this side it was a well lit restaurant. The front was extended outward, filled with glass and light, and had valet parking running expensive cars to a smaller, private lot.

Hugo didn't wait, he led them around the valets and to the front door, passing the sign that simply read, Retro, without even glancing at it. This was a place out of Cole's realm. His family had never been well off, they'd never dined out much let alone at such a fancy place and his life after leaving home hadn't been one of high cost indulgence. He glanced to the very well dressed couples and families and then down to his own black attire and knew there was no way he was going to be let past the front door.

The idea of Cole's dress not really being up to the restaurant's standards didn't even occur to Hugo, he strode past the etched glass doors without worry. There were harsh looks shot his ways but Hugo sidestepped the waiting, elegant people. The look he got from the well dressed hostess wasn't harsh.

She was dressed in a sleek, simple, black dress. Her walnut brown hair was straight and glossy and it hung from a single tail set high on the back of her head. At her ears small diamond earrings caught the light and sparked it back but that dimmed compared to the bright smile that lit up her face.

"Mr. Dana, it's a pleasure to see you again." And from the light in her eyes it really was a pleasure, the smile had nothing of the forced pleasantness of someone that worked continually with the public. "Give me a moment, please, and I'll have the best table made ready for you and your date."

Cole met her appraising glance with a quirky half smile, the one his mouth used to call a smirk. Her smile dimmed a little and took on a more appreciative feel.

"Thank you, no, Amy. Mr. Manner isn't my date, he's Mike's replacement." Hugo stopped her from hurrying off. "I'll be at the bar, you'll let him know?"

Her smile grew tired, slightly disappointed but she nodded. "I will, he'll be disappointed that this visit is business."

"Aren't we all," Hue muttered on his way to the back side of the restaurant, away from the tables and booths, to where the bar lined the one corner. The lighting was lower and the bar was secluded with few patrons but Hugo still picked a spot well away from anyone else.

"Evening, Mr. Dana, you want your usual?" the bartender asked, coming over almost before Hue could sit down.

"No, thanks, I'm not staying."

The young man nodded and his eyes drifted to where Cole hovered nearby, uncertain if he should stand or sit. "You let me know if you need anything."

"Get him that drink, Benny, the man needs it," a smooth voice slid over them, with almost a chuckle in the tone.

"Right away, sir," Benny nodded and began pouring drinks.

A hand fell on Cole's shoulder and he turned to find the voice and hand both belonged to the slick, handsome Aric Aliss. "So, we do meet again, and you're un-maimed I see. Hue must be in a better spirit than I'd feared."

Cole smiled as the man's cologne washed over him; it was light like citrus but with the undercurrent of sunshine and strong male. "I've scars, I swear."

That earned him a full laugh. "I'm certain! Sit, have a drink, you look like a thug just standing there." Aric nudged the young man to sit next to where Hue was perched, bent over, looking tired. He slid in on the other side and nodded for Benny to get lost now that the drinks were poured. "Amy got all excited that you were here for pleasure, Hue, not nice to get her hopes up."

"No rest for the wicked." Hugo spun the cool tumbler between his hands, the ice clinked against the glass.

"So, it is work that brings you by. You okay with Mike retiring?"

"That's the way of things, Aric, it's his right." But the words were spoken tightly, and covered with a swallow of the aged bourbon.

Aric was seeing what Mike had been trying to warn him of. There was no enjoyment left in the shorter man, no pleasure. He sipped at the drink out of duty and a distaste for waste and never even nodded in enjoyment of the smooth drink. Bourbon was Hue's favorite and Aric kept a bottle of very fine bourbon on hand just for him but from how he was drinking it, it may as well have been rotgut.

It worried him, but there was nothing he could do about it now. "So, which one of the children are you here for?"

Hue's eyes slid to the side and locked on the vain man's own steady gaze. "Maybe I'm here for you?"

Aric only raised an eyebrow. "Are you? Well, I can't recall being naughty, or more naughty than normal."

The ice clicked again. "Don't worry, your brand of naughty doesn't require my attention."

"Who're you here for?"

"Harry."

"Again?" Aric shook his head.

"You know how he gets around convention times, how his father gets."

"Just, don't make a scene."

"I won't hurt your trade."

The three sat in silence for a moment, sipping at good bourbon and not breaking thoughts. It was, like normal, Aric that ended it. "Hue? About Johnny..." he approached the subject carefully, knowing full well the history there.

"Bonnie already asked me to deal with it, I stopped him on my way here."

"He's telling everyone, loudly, that he's not gay. He's causing all sorts of trouble by being so overly macho that you'd think he was trying to be an action movie star or some bullshit." Aric tried to subtly warn that Johnny was on the verge of causing far larger trouble than he currently was.

"I warned him."

"Do more than that, just, let him fuck you or something."

Hue almost choked on an ice cube.

"This isn't about him being gay or bi, it's about power. He doesn't like it known that such a big tough guy is a simpering bottom to anyone. Let him top you, give him back some false sense of control and power and he'll settle down." Aric spoke to Hue but his eyes were on Cole and how the man almost was drooling in his bourbon.

"The phrase, hell no, comes to mind." Hue set his empty glass down, warmed by the strong liquor in his stomach.

"It's better than blood being drawn between the two of you."

Hue stood up and shook his head. "Blood was already drawn."

"You're so stubborn."

"That's me, the living pit bull. Now where is he? Your father's nonsense has me exhausted."

Aric left his drink unfinished but was impressed with how Cole slammed his own back. "He's back in the club."

"Thanks, Aric."

The tall man reached out and caught Hugo's arm as he started past. "Hue, you know I'm your friend, right?"

Dark eyes narrowed. "Let's not get all mushy."

Aric shook his head. "If you need anything, just say the word and you know if I can I will."

"Well, you can let Johnny fuck you." The grin was dark and bitter but he nodded before moving away from the bar.

"I'm not sure our friendship extends so far," Aric answered seriously.

Hugo just shrugged and glanced to make sure Cole was on his feet and following. "Blood it is then."

Cole wasn't surprised by the looks that were tossed their way but he was surprised that Hugo didn't seem to notice, or he didn't care. He followed behind the shorter man to the back of the restaurant and past a door marked private. It swung inward to allow them access to a well lit hallway with doors set at random spacings. Very few people milled about back here, all dressed as waiters or cook staff, most offered small nods to Hugo and quickly got out of his way.

The hallway ended with a door that had a punch code lock set on it. Hue barely glanced at it before entering the combination. He didn't hold it for Cole and it was only one booted foot shoved against the quickly shutting door that allowed him to slide in and keep following. On this side of the door, music throbbed. It really didn't play, it was the beat, the pulse, of the music. Its heartbeat shivered along the walls and echoed as a growing thrum.

More hallways, more startled staff members and the growing beat of the music pulled them onward until Hugo turned to one of the randomly set doors. He pushed it open, pushed a second door open a dozen paces inside and they stepped from the bright hallways to the dark flashing lights of the club. The din of voices, the vibe of music blurred into one mix and made bodies move.

"Well, that's one way to avoid the cover charge," Cole muttered to himself, feeling the pull to explore the dark confines of the rather large club.

The only effect the splashed light and driving music had on Hue was to stiffen the already tense shoulders up even more. His eyes scanned the room, studying, seeking and moving with care. At first, Cole thought it was his imagination but the more he watched the more he believed it. Every time anyone got too close to the shorter man, he flinched away. It was a dance in and of itself, as the crowds moved around him and people hurried with drinks back and forth, Hue slid around them, tipped shoulders to avoid being bumped into.

"He doesn't like crowds," Aric whispered into Cole's ear.

Cole jumped, startled. He'd been watching Hugo so closely he hadn't noticed the handsome man approach. "Dude! Don't do that!"

Aric's only reply was a chuckle before he slid gracefully forward and touched Hugo's elbow. Glances were exchanged and Aric slipped off into the crowd, intending to lead them. Cole shook his head and followed, something he was getting good at. It wasn't into the dance floor they were led but off to the side, back to murky tables and groping hands.

It became pretty clear they were headed for one table. Three men were almost curled around each other, lips kissing, hands sliding across club cloth covered flesh. It was a common sight, even the joint that burned lightly and filled the air with a sweet smoke wasn't out of place. They made a pretty trio. One was dark skinned with black eyes and hair and obviously of East Indian bloodlines. He was skillfully attacking the neck of the middle man. His hair was thick, dark and curly. It had been twisted into slender dreadlocks. His olive skin was dusted in glitter. Across his face were several piercing, a couple in his eyebrows, two in his nose, large plugs in his ears and a several in his lips. The man he was curled around was blonde, slender, and pretty. The nearly

white blonde hair fell in feathery strands around a pale, pretty face and the smoking joint was dangling from his pouty lips.

It was the blonde that spotted them first. He passed the joint to the one in the center and leaned over to whisper to the Indian. Blue and black eyes slid over and watched them approach; the one in the center happily sucked in a drag from the joint unaware of what approached.

Hugo didn't speak, he swooped in, reached past the encircling arms of the group and grabbed one pierced ear on the center man. He twisted it and earned a startled yelp from the younger man. The blonde chuckled and took up the discarded joint, passing it to the Indian.

"Hugo! Let go!" the center one yelled but all it earned him was Hugo pulling him to his feet, by his ear.

"Both of you, follow, now!" Hue snapped out and turned to Cole. "Make sure of it."

The inclusion was a surprise but Cole nodded. "Ya heard the man, come on, on your feet."

They reluctantly rose up and let Cole herd them along behind where Hue was half dragging the dreadlocked man across the crowds by his ear like a naughty school boy. They finished the joint on the way, passing it between themselves and the blonde paused on the last bit and offered it to Cole.

Cole took the scrap of remaining weed wrapped paper and dropped it, crushing it under his boot. "Crack is whack."

The blonde broke out in laughter and slid an arm around the Indian's waist to lean in and whisper in his ear. They eventually found a wall and followed it back to where Aric stood holding a door open. Hue dragged his victim inside the small office and shoved him at the battered sofa pushed along one wall. He turned just long enough to make sure the other two and Cole passed into the office and the door clicked shut behind them.

"What the fuck, Hugo?" the dreadlocked man on the sofa cursed, rubbing at his ear. "You about fucking tore it off!"

"I should have! Harry, come on, cut me some slack here."

"You need to learn to relax, Hue, you're too wound up." The blonde spoke smoothly, sliding out a cigarette case and pulling a new joint from inside. "We'd heard Mike retired, this the fresh meat?"

"I'm not doing anything wrong," Harry whined.

Cole had another double image moment, the blonde's slender beauty flickered and was replaced with a tall, broad shouldered man that was blindingly beautiful. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes and the image wavered and was suddenly red skinned and frightening.

The blonde chuckled and tried to get his lighter to spark. "Seems he's seen more than most."

Hue snapped out and pulled the joint from the blonde's lips. "You should know better!" He quickly frisked the blonde, found the case and swiped the hand rolled cigarettes out.

"Hey, that's my green!" Harry protested. "Good shit too, hydroponic."

Hue turned back to the man on the sofa. "I'll deal with you in a moment, until then, shut up."

"Listen, Hugo," the Indian started, "it's convention time, we all just want to relax. Leave the kid alone."

The comment made Cole frown since all three looked younger than him.

"Kamal, don't start on me," Hue warned but he studied the pair. "What else are you holding?"

"Nothing," the blonde protested.

"No drugs, nothing that will make me angry?"

"Just a little weed, nothing naughty."

Hue sighed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "Okay, Kamal, Kare, this is what I'm going to do. Both of you are responsible for yourselves, I'm not here for you. See to it I don't have to be, my temper is short right now. If I find word of anyone, I mean anyone, being indiscreet with Harry again, I'm holding you two personally responsible. Do we have an understanding?"

"He's a big boy, Hue," Kare protested, sliding a hand through blonde locks.

"Not as big as you, Kare-baby," Harry added from the sofa.

"Harry, shut up!" Hue sighed. "I don't care how big any of you are. This isn't debate class, nod your heads and agree."

Kamal rested a hand on Kare's arm but he nodded solemnly to Hugo. "Agreed. We will see to it rumors of indiscretions do not spread."

"Thank you, I'm glad to see you're still someone sensible."

"Anything to avoid your wrath so close to the convention." The words were serious but there was amusement in Kamal rich voice. "Are you finished with us?"

Hugo nodded. "Get out of here."

The pair did chuckle and Kare stuck a tongue out to the silent Aric as they slipped past him to go out the door. Hue stood tense until the door clicked shut.

"I expect such nonsense from Kare but Kamal knows better. As do you, Harry. Tell me what I'm doing here, wasting my time scolding you?"

The man folded arms across his chest and sunk into the sofa. "Because my father is an ass!"

Hue crossed the space quickly and brought his hand down in an open, light slap across the petulant face. "He's your father, don't speak so of him in front of me! Be grateful you have a father, not everyone is so lucky."

Harry rubbed the side of his face, frowning.

"Look." Hue sat down on the sofa beside the other man. "I understand, you may not believe I do, but I really understand. Now, I need you to try to understand my position. Your father, right or wrong, wants certain behavior from you."

"I've earned the right to a little pleasure, Hue."

Hue smiled gently. "Our lives aren't about pleasure, just duty. Your father is a primary treaty signer, the treaty is up for renewal. If he hears you're whoring with Kamal, let alone Kare, he'll flip his lid."

"I'm not whoring. We really do care about each other."

"I'm not going to debate semantics with you. You know your father won't approve, you know he'll go into a rage. If he heard about the pot he'd be angry, Kare would be beyond my skills to repair. I need you to think of the greater good. Rebel against your father all you want, after the convention. There'll be time as things wind down but let the treaty get renewed first." He locked eyes with the other's dark black and saw the compassion behind the lust and pot induced haze.

"I don't like this."

"I'm not saying you can't see them, or live your own life, just for the next hundred or so days, do it behind closed doors. For the sake of the treaty, if not for me or your father, please."

"You don't care that we love each other?"

"Why would I care about that?" Hugo answered simply, with neither malice or amusement.

Harry glanced from Hue to where Aric and Cole hovered by the door. "Well, I just thought, because of you and Johnny..."

Hue's expression hardened. "You shouldn't listen to gossip. I don't care who's in your bed, so long as it doesn't affect the convention. Since your father cares, I have to care. I find no pleasure in being your babysitter, so please, a little more low key until after the treaty is renewed?"

"Sure." Harry nodded. "Can I have my grass back?"

"No, and you're going to give me the bag in your pocket too."

"Aw, come on."

Hugo just held out his hand until the younger man sighed and retrieved the plastic bag. The bag disappeared into a pocket. "Now, I'm letting you go only if you promise to go straight home and behave."

"I'll go home but what I do there isn't any of your concern."

"Harry," Hue warned, "no wild parties, no orgies, no crack dens, if I hear so much of a whisper it won't be as pleasant as this time. If your father had heard before I did..." He shook his head.

Harry sighed and nodded. "Okay but I don't like this, I'm doing this for the treaty."

"That's all I ask."

"Can I go now?"

Hugo nodded and that was all the invitation Harry needed. He scurried off the sofa and was out the door in a flash. As the door opened music spilled in and was cut off again as it clicked shut.

"Nicely handled," Aric added into the silent room.

"I'm glad you approve." The reply was caustic and distant at the same time.

"Especially the little speech about duty over pleasure, very stirring."

"Not now, Aric, not today."

"You could use some down time, you know that right? You're too tightly wound up, you're going

to snap before the convention even starts. These troubles now? They're minor ones." Aric crossed the room carefully, not wanting to get his own head taken off as the one that Hue snapped on.

"Not today, Aric," Hue repeated more slowly. "I'm just tired, I've had four hours of sleep in the last forty eight, I've gone half way around the world and back. Just, not today."

Aric's hand slid carefully onto a tense shoulder and Hue shivered under the touch before the shoulders hunched forward. "Stay here a while, get something to eat?"

There was a moment when Hugo wavered under the hand's comfort but he drew a slow breath. "Can't, still have things to do."

"Things that will wait, I'm sure. Have dinner, I've a great bottle of wine I've been waiting for a good occasion to open."

Hugo stood up and let the hand slide from his shoulder. "I need to go. You'll toss Harry into a room and call me if he shows back up?"

"I will but it would be easier if you carried a cell phone."

"Not, today, Aric."

Aric chuckled and turned to where Cole hovered on the outside of their conversation. "You don't have a cell, by chance?"

Cole shrugged. "I'm never in the same place long enough for a year's contract, sorry."

"Figures."

"Come along, Mr. Manner, if you're still following." Hugo's body was again tense and braced for the swirl of humanity on the other side of the small office's door.

Cole nodded to Aric. "Nice seeing you again, Mr. Aliss."

"Please, call me Aric, everyone I like does."

The warm voice felt almost predatory but Cole nodded and smiled back. "Only if you call me Cole, first names are far more intimate," he openly flirted.

Aric's smile widened, knowing it was just teasing and still pleased by it. "Intimacy is something you could teach my dear Hue. He's lacking in it of late."

"Enough, before I need boots to wade back to the car." Hugo shook his head and lowered it to hide the smallest of smiles. "I'm leaving." The crush of the music and dancers was enough to shock any amusement that might have been tickling at him.

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Chapter Five

Somewhere along the crowds, Aric faded away and Cole found himself following Hugo back outside into the night. They left from the club's main entrance, not back through the restaurant and the lines waiting to get in were just as long if not longer as the night was growing later.

At the parking garage, bathed in its orange light, Cole stopped. "Hey, let's take the stairs." He tossed his head toward the open concrete stairwell before Hugo could push the button to call the elevator.

"It's five flights."

"Won't kill me, and you look pretty fit." In fact, Hugo looked fit enough, toned enough to handle a vast range of cardio work outs, getting all winded and sweaty. Cole slapped his mind out of the gutter, hard.

Hugo shrugged one shoulder. "Stairs it is." He brushed past Cole as if it was his idea and began the climb. Up the stairs went; with short flights and a landing every dozen or so steps, it crawled around the narrow stairwell and at each level giant painted numbers marked the floor.

Their footsteps bounced and echoed around the grey painted walls, bounced down and back again as they climbed higher. Five flights of watching Hugo's carefully placed steps, five flights of watching how the chinos covered his perfect ass, did little to help keep Cole's mind from the gutter he'd so ruthlessly dragged it from. He'd always harbored fantasies about sex in odd places and while he'd done the entire in a parking garage thing, he'd never done it in the stairwell of a parking garage. Pressed against the cool metal railing, staring down the stairwell at the dizzying distance to the bottom floor, Hugo's moans bouncing about the small space, the images were truly gutter worthy.

Since he was going first, Hugo reached the open doorway to the fifth floor first but instead of walking out into the main garage, he stopped just inside the doorway. His eyes narrowed and he glanced to where Cole was close behind.

"Run, go find Aric," he hissed out.

Movies make violence look cool. Splashed with a slick soundtrack and tough heroes that knew what to do, the action was flashy and fun. Cole had never found it the same in real life. A fight brought out dull thudding of flesh into flesh, grunts of pain and anger and bright flashes of red blood and none of it felt cool or sounded like a catchy song. He'd been in enough hairy situations to know he wasn't a hero but neither was he a coward; he'd drawn blood and had blood drawn on him, but nothing, in all his travels, prepared him.

The click was unmistakable. Sliding metal against metal and Cole heard it very clearly. It was as loud and chiming as a bell and signaled death and pain, but it was the cracking, deafening boom that followed on its heels that froze him in place. The small, narrow stairwell that he'd been fantasizing about echoing Hugo's moans now reflected the harsh, acrid sound of a gunshot.

Cole sensed he shouted, cursed maybe, but the sound of the gunshot was too loud. It blocked out all sounds, even his own voice. It left him deafened, terrified, shaken. He must have flinched at the sound because he didn't actually see the impact of the bullet hitting Hugo, maybe it just happened too quickly for his mind to register.

One moment Hugo was telling him to run, the next, before he could even turn back to the doorway, a red spot bloomed on his forehead and the back of his head exploded out. It was the splattering that pushed Cole past anything he'd ever experienced before. Once, he'd been drinking with friends and they put a large firecracker into a melon; it shattered in the same way, only the melon's splatter had been cool and sweet and this was sticky and warm.

Distantly, Cole noticed the red spray on the metal railing, the spots on the bottom edge of the flight of stairs across the open center space. A part of his mind was aware that he was sprayed in the same red but he couldn't feel it on his skin or clothes, not yet. Hugo's body tumbled down onto the concrete stairs, limp and broken. His first reaction was to go and see if the dark man was okay but Cole knew he wasn't. He knew as much from the way the body fell as from the pattern of red spots everywhere that Hugo was dead.

And then he remembered how he got dead and fear chilled him. He heard the scraping footsteps from the garage floor and knew the gunman was getting closer. Coming to check the body or coming to finish the job, it didn't matter, it meant bad news for Cole and it reminded him that he wasn't a hero. He threw himself at the wall and stumbled down the stairs, nearly tripping over his own feet.

The gun cracked again and the concrete wall exploded in front of him. Cole jumped and the spray of stones cut across his face, slashed at his neck and pebbled his hands. He didn't even look up but kept running, knowing the spiral of the flights of stairs would shelter him and only prayed that he wouldn't fall. He tried to listen but with the blood pounding in his ears and this own harsh breath and running steps, Cole couldn't hear if he was being followed or not.

The bottom floor of the garage was more open to the cool night air and it felt good against his flushed skin. Cole hit the open way at a dead run, trying to put distance between himself and what he couldn't believe had just happened. He was trying to get around people and avoid the sharp smack of a bullet into his very vulnerable flesh. Once, he'd been stabbed and that was bad enough; the thought of being shot gave his feet speed.

The line of people waiting to get in the club looked very tempting, the crew of bouncers even more so, but neither one was going to give him access to Aric. No one had said as much but Cole knew a top level manager or owner when he saw one and the blood splattered, all black wearing guy with the two toned hair wasn't allowed access to the higher ups. He wove around the alley and toward the back of the building to the stylish restaurant.

Again, the same problem was valid but he hoped the hostess would remember him. He pushed around well dressed people, earning upset and angry looks and threw the glass doors open. Cole staggered forward, his side splitting in pain from the strain to suck in air and the fear that dragged him down, and leaned on the hostess table.

"Amy, I need Aric, I need to find him. I... they... Hugo... it's... oh fuck."

There was shushing sounds made at him and fussing around him but Cole couldn't swear who escorted him or how he got from the front of the fancy restaurant to the private, elegant office. He just knew he was being shoved inside a door and Aric's eyes went wide with the interruption.

"Amy, have someone send over cold water, some napkins and a stiff drink." He spoke smoothly and crossed from behind his desk. One slender hand pushed at Cole to sit but the young man was rigid and tense. "Fine, stay standing. What's happened? You're bleeding and where's Hue?"

Cole focused, or tried to, still breathing hard but he knew now it was from fear and panic. "Dead, he's dead." He forced out and it occurred to him that his favorite shirt was now spotted in blood, he'd never be able to wear it again.

"How?" Aric asked calmly.

"Oh, fuck me, we need to call the cops, some guy shot him, oh fuck!"

The cold water and drink arrived and Aric moved away long enough to take the tray from the waiter. "Let's not lose our heads about this."

Cole blinked and found himself laughing in an almost hysterical way. "No, no, we wouldn't want to do that."

Aric set the bowl of ice water down and pressed the drink into Cole's hands, the blonde tipped it back and downed a double shot without blinking. "Careful, you can't get drunk yet."

"How are you so fucking calm? He's dead, someone shot his head off, I'm covered in his blood! I thought he was your friend."

"He is my friend." Aric twisted the cloth napkin and got most of the water out before he caught the arm with the most damage. He swiped at the blood before pressing the cold cloth to the battered flesh. "And, you're covered in your own blood not his."

"Someone shot his head off three feet in front of me, I'm sure it's not just blood!"

Aric shook his head, and dipped the cloth back into the bowl. "Look for yourself."

Cole glanced down. There was blood on him, yes, but it was his own. The shallow cuts from the scattered concrete were bleeding sluggishly but the speckles and splatters of thick, dark blood were gone. "But, I swear, it was all over me."

"I'm sure it was. I'm sorry Cole, someone should have told you. Hue should have, if no one else." He continued to fuss at the cuts, washing the clotting blood from the pale skin.

"What the hell is going on here?"

Aric let a finger trace the silvery glow of the cool metal bracelet. "It's been centuries since this version has shown up. You really are a good choice."

"Check please or I'm walking out of here and calling the cops."

"Don't threaten me, boy." Aric's voice grew dark. "I don't respond to threats."

Cole pulled his arm from the warm grip and stepped back. He drew a slow breath and squared his shoulders, locking eyes with the handsome man and scenting the danger in the room. "Then you need to stop screwing with me and start talking."

"Hugo Dana isn't mortal, he can't be killed."

"Dude, I don't know about you, but I just saw his head getting blown off. That looked pretty damned mortal to me."

"Come on, we should go get his clothes. He'll kill me if I let his cufflinks get stolen again." Aric sighed and crossed toward Cole but the younger man scuttled backwards.

Cole's hands rose to around his face and tried to emphasize his point. "Hello, a hole the size of a golf ball clean through his head. Cufflinks are the last thing I'm worried about."

"I told you, Hue isn't mortal and cufflinks will be the first thing he worries about. Follow or take off that bracelet and leave but don't waste my time." He was pulling on an expensive black trench

coat and when it was hanging loosely about his shoulders, Aric held his office door open for the younger man.

"I'm not leaving until I figure out what's going on."

Aric smiled. "Good boy."

"I'm not a dog!"

Aric followed the blonde back to the parking garage silently impressed with how he wasn't freaking out but when they stood by the entrance, Cole froze.

"What?"

"What if they're still here?"

"Trust me, they're long gone and even if they aren't it isn't a huge concern. Now, show me where."

Cole was shaking his head but he led Aric to the proper stair well. "You first, fifth floor."

"Really."

Cole just stood his ground and let the other man climb the stairs before him. He found himself cringing before the third floor and uncertain he wanted to go higher than the fourth. Aric didn't seem the least bit worried, he climbed at the same steady pace and didn't even look back.

One slender hand traced the crack in the wall where the bullet that had missed Cole had broken concrete away. "Huh, that explains some things."

"He's around the corner." Cole wanted this over with. "Hurry up, I don't want to be here."

"If they'd wanted you dead, you would be."

"I'm not fond of looking at corpses, unlike some sick sorts I could name."

"Neither am I, blood is so difficult to remove from trousers. There's no body here, Cole, come see for yourself." Aric motioned around the corner of the final flight of stairs.

Cautiously, Cole climbed higher but there were no telling spots on the wall, no tiny red rivers down the steps, even the smears from his own fingers was gone. The stairwell was as clean as it had been. "What?" He finished turning the corner and the only thing out of place was the clothing Hugo had been wearing. Even his shoes lay scattered. On one step his car keys were dropped forgotten. It was like something from a bad sci fi movie where people simply disappeared and left what they were wearing behind.

Cole felt himself covering his mouth with a hand, trying to hold back the raving panic he suddenly felt. "This doesn't make sense, this isn't real."

"It is, and it will." Aric knelt down and gathered up the empty clothes. He draped them over Cole's stunned arms before he gathered up shoes and car keys himself. "We should get you home. That'll give us time to talk before Hugo shows up."

"But, but, but, he was dead, I saw it, he was right here!" The clothes smelled faintly of laundry soap but there wasn't even a hint that a human had ever worn them.

"He's not here now." He smiled lightly. "Don't look so shocked, you'll make me think you wish he had been killed."

Cole scrubbed a hand over his face. "I've lost it, that's it, I've lost what little mind I have."

"Stop that, let me drive you home. You're in no state to get behind the wheel. Now, where did Hugo park?"

It was easier to give in and let Aric drive him back to the small shop than it was to debate or fight any more. Cole sat in the passenger seat, with blank eyes, clutching at the empty clothes. The night had even stolen the warmth from them, they may as well have been a movie prop not something worn by someone that had been vital and alive.

The shop was dark but Aric pulled the car into its space in the garage without any trouble and he seemed to know which key opened which locks without having to fumble. That was good because Cole was pretty sure he was insane and crazy men shouldn't be given keys. They could poke an eye out or something that way. He found himself standing outside of Hugo's apartment as Aric let himself in, flicking on lights and brightening up the room as he went.

"Well, come on, I'll make some tea."

Cole nodded like an idiot and wandered into the cluttered apartment. He sat down on the first thing he came to, a stiff, aged, wing back chair and continued to clutch the clothing. Eventually, Aric came over and pried the clothes from his grip and pushed a china cup and saucer at him.

"Drink that."

The cup rattled unhappily against the saucer and Cole nearly burned himself when he sipped from it.

"Well," Aric started as he lowered himself down into the matching chair, crossed one long leg over the other and sipped at his own tea. "Your color looks better."

Cole just glanced over his tea cup and kept his mouth shut.

"We've about an hour. How much did Mike tell you?"

"Not enough."

"That's apparent!" He smiled gently. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"Aric Aliss, manager of that club and restaurant," he forced out, not in the mood to play games.

"Owner, but who's splitting hairs? I mean who I really am."

Cole shook his head and with a slurping breath sipped a bit more tea. It was soothing his nerves or maybe it was the dusky warm smell that drifted up from the chair.

"Once, a very, very long time ago, men called me Phoebus."

It took a moment for the name to sink in but when it did Cole set his tea onto the small side table. "What the Romans called Apollo."

"You are a clever one."

Everything clicked into place, he wasn't the insane one. "Nice to meet you, I'm Hyacinthus."

The name, the one most people knew not to mention to his face, made Aric frown. "Mock me as you will but don't mock him."

"I'm sorry," he answered instantly, responding to the hurt he hadn't intended to cause.

Aric sighed and set his own tea aside. "You've stumbled into something vast and great. Something a handful of mortals would kill for the chance to experience. The world around you is filled with more wonderful and horrible things than any mortal ever sees."

Cole snorted. "Tell me about it."

One expressive hand briefly touched to his chest. "My people and I, what your kind call gods, are part of that."

"So," Cole started carefully, "I'm to believe that you are the god Apollo?"

"Correct."

"Right."

"Look, we're not perfect."

"But you're gods."

"We're not, we're different, we're more powerful, we live differently than you, that doesn't make us god. We're as fallible as you are, proven by the fact that almost every one of us at one point or another thought we could play god and tried it. You tell me, how many organized religions do you know of actually make sense and work?"

"Not many."

"Try none. We're flawed, the flaws expand out and multiply when we try to make your kind happier or more stable or better. It can work for a time but eventually it'll cause more trouble than it's worth." Aric tilted his head and tried to see if anything he was saying was sinking in.

"So," Cole was getting a headache, "which god is the real one?"

That made Aric laugh and he leaned back into the embrace of his tree. "Some days, I'm not sure there is one."

"That's not very comforting."

"Sorry, time to grow up. You no longer have the same luxuries everyone else of your race has." Aric's tone grew hard again, scolding but it wasn't easy staying harsh with the blonde. For one, he was adorably cute and for another he really was trying to understand. "My people, we aren't really born as you are."

"But, you have parents."

"Don't I know it. We aren't physical beings, not like your kind. We're creatures of energy, of power, we're archetypes, reflections or splinters of something bigger than even we can't see. I am a fragment from both my parents, I am them and not them and more than them. When your kind has a child, something more is made from nothing. For us, something has to be lost from the original to make a child." He sipped his tea to cover his eagerness at how this one human would

react, like a scientist with a new mouse in a maze, it thrilled him.

Cole drew a breath. "Okay, in an odd sense I understand. So, you can't die?"

"Not as your kind does. This body, you can kill the flesh but it's just a shell. I'll have a new one made within an hour. For us, there is no afterlife, no beyond, there is nothing more than here, right now. Sometimes, we grow bored and sleep, chose not to reform lost flesh but we never truly cease to be but neither do we really grow and change and move on. Whatever is beyond the barrier of death for you mortals, we can't cross it."

Aric's voice had grown so mournful, so lost at the statement that Cole couldn't deny that the man believed what he was saying. "And Hugo, he's like you?"

One shoulder rose and fell in an artful shrug. "Who knows? Hugo is a mystery. He's older than I am, far older. Even father is a child compared to our dear Hue. He's not like my kind or yours. I sometimes wonder if he's the oldest of us, the original of my kind. Or maybe, he is god, maybe Hue is the real god. I've been studying him since I was your age and I still don't understand who he is."

"And you never asked him?"

"It's not so easy. I don't think Hue would deceive me but see, he isn't like my kind. If that had been my head that had splattered over the stairwell, I'd have retreated to my true form, dissolved that creation and formed a new one. I'd have stepped back into that body exactly as I was when I left this one, even if I decided I wanted to be a short, fat, woman next time. Who I am, me, would be untouched. Hue isn't like that, he loses something of himself each time his connection to the physical world is cut."

"Each time he's killed, you mean."

Aric nodded. "Yes."

"I think I need something stronger than tea."

"Later, not now. When I remake my flesh, I make it as I will. Tall, short, handsome, plain, whatever I desire to be and it stays that way until I leave this flesh. I've had this form for almost forty years, I like it. Hue, I'm not sure how conscious he is while removed from the physical. He always holds the same form, he's barely changed in all the long years I've known him. He'll awaken confused, disoriented; we never have that unease. If one of my kind is not in flesh, all of my kind can still locate them. Hue, outside the physical, none of us can even sense him, it's like he's gone." And Aric had often wondered just where it was Hugo went, why it took him three times longer to return. Once he'd tried to follow and find out but after four or five attempts of Hugo disappearing like a will o the wisp, he'd given up.

Cole sat silent and his thoughts froze up. When they started to thaw a little there was only one question that came to mind. "So, like, you can do miracles?"

"Within the boundaries of the treaty, yes, but it really is better to keep a low profile. You're taking this very well, I might add."

"Well, I've heard stranger things and I did see a man get his head shot off and then his body disappear. It's take it well or start screaming."

"Please, no screaming, it gives me a headache."

"Are you, I mean, do you eat?"

Aric grinned wolfishly. "Eat, sleep, fuck, dream, even belch on occasion. What's the point of putting so much energy into having a body if you can't enjoy it."

"And this treaty I keep hearing about?"

"Hugo's greatest accomplishment. You see, his whole job is to keep us from tearing the world apart. A mighty task indeed. Some of us, we're not fully on our rockers. Somehow, he got all the heads of each family to agree to a treaty. It puts limits on the use of powers, the display of powers, what can and can't be encouraged with followers. It sets up mediation so instead of trying to kill each other or cursing each other's followers, we now sit down over lunch and discuss it, like civilized sorts." He finished the last swallows of his tea. "One of the requirements is that the treaty must be renewed every two hundred years. It used to be just the heads of each line that gathered but it's become something of a celebration for our kind. We start pouring into the host city years in advance and it'll be at least a decade after the convention that the population will go down. It's a busy time for Hue."

"And that's about to start?"

Aric nodded. "Which is why everyone is a touch jumpy at the moment."

"So why would they shoot him?"

"I don't think they were gunning for him, dear."

That snapped Cole's head up. "What?"

"It's just a hunch. Hopefully Hue isn't too scrambled when he gets back and he can tell us. He's normally more willing to defend himself, unless letting himself come to harm has another function."

"What function can getting your head shot off serve?"

"You're still breathing."

Cole slumped back into his chair. "I swear, I was safer in the middle of a war zone."

"Cole, you are in a war zone, we're just held at a cease fire. Do you begin to understand how important Hue is, not just to my people but to your own? Without him, simple disagreements spiral out of control and become conflicts which can build to battles and wars and suddenly we're back to fighting all the time. To us, getting a spear through the gut or a bullet in the head isn't quite as final as it is for you."

"And my job is to make his job easier?"

"Colossal isn't it?"

"I've lost my mind." He ran his hands through his hair, tussling it. "This is insane." Around the floor, from partially under Cole's chair, snaked a tendril of blue. Cole saw it out of the corner of his eye. "What's that?"

"That would be Hue returning."

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Chapter Six

"That would be Hue returning." Aric watched, fascinated by the beauty. "Don't worry, it looks like fire but it won't burn you."

And it did look like fire, slithering, dancing, flames that snaked about the apartment floor. It started out blue but soon the threads of fire that weren't fire arrived in shades of red, yellow, green and even white. Sometimes a thread found another and the two entwined before moving away and disappearing under a piece of furniture. Cole sat fascinated and as the moments passed more arrived, sliding down walls, shivering from the ceiling and before long the floor crawled with multi colored movement. When the first curious finger slid around Cole's leg, curled up to his knee, he jerked back into his chair. It didn't hurt, in fact it didn't even tickle but he definitely felt the contact as a shiver along his nerves. It reminded him of a 9 volt battery pressed to his tongue.

"He must like you," Aric whispered.

"What?"

"It's been a long time since I've seen the fire touch anyone. See?" He waved a hand to his own feet and it became pretty clear that the fire swirled near Aric but there was a solid buffer zone between him and it. "Hue must think you're as cute as I do."

"Cute?"

"Adorably so."

The fire splashed up both of Cole's legs this time, it made him shiver.

"You find him attractive."

"What?"

"Hue, I saw you looking at him, like he was something covered in whipped cream." Aric chuckled. "If you can get him covered in whipped cream, I'll buy you a car. I can't picture Hue being so wild. If you get photos of him covered in whipped cream I'll make it a really nice car."

The threading tendrils of electric fire began to thicken and meet up with one another, which was a good thing because the teasing along his legs was starting to make Cole's pants feel a little too constrictive. That or it was the thought of Hue covered in whipped cream that was giving him that itchy feeling of new arousal.

The sight of the colors entwining, flickering like the flames they appeared to be, was lovely. The ever changing patterns grew as more of the randomly snaking tendrils joined the growing collection in the center of the space between Cole and Aric. The air grew sharp with a smell like lavender and ozone, or of clean lightening. It was an almost hypnotic display and just

as Cole was certain he had to look away or be lost to the movement of colors, everything stopped.

The threads still shivering along freely pulsed in time with the growing nest of flames. It beat once, twice and a third time and Cole felt the energy tickle across his body with each throb. He felt that maybe his eyes had gone crossed because it almost looked like the tongues of flame were pulling away from each other, straining to escape, before they shivered again and were suddenly sucked into the central pile.

The colors went white, blindingly so for a second before the color returned and brought with it the image of a thousand petal lotus. It flashed across Cole's eyes but when he blinked the lotus image was gone and instead he saw a bush or tree in flames. He stared at it, worried that to even blink would allow the shadowy image to change or disappear, but his vigilance did him little real good. As soon as his mind grasped onto the idea that the image was a tree not a shrub what he saw was a world tree, touching heaven, rooted in the underworld, spanning the physical with all its branches touching, knowing everything. Cole even thought he saw the hint of Odin, crucified upside down to the mighty trunk in his sacrifice for knowledge.

The images weren't real. They were shadows and light that Cole's mind gave form to. Like being a child and laying back to spot alligators in fluffy white clouds over head, it was his own need for shape and substance that gave the flaring, pulsing light meaning.

As he started to actively look for images, when he surrendered to the game of it, the screams started. Cole couldn't say if the voice was one or many, man or woman, or even if it was human but it made him shiver. He clapped his hands up to his ears but when he looked to Aric, the man sat with a grimace unwilling to duplicate Cole's action.

"It's not a physical sound," Aric spoke, his voice soft and clear over the splitting screams. "You can't block it out."

"What is it?"

Aric shrugged and returned his eyes to the glowing collection of fire in the center of the room. "Returning only causes pain to Hue, not to us. I don't know why, it just is."

Cole shook his head and lowered his hands, gritting his teeth to keep from snapping out to make it stop. If Aric could deal with it, so could he, even as the scream intensified, sharpened and shattered. The fire exploded, cracked like brittle glass into sparks and sharp edges only to fall away and melt back to nothingness. When the flare faded from his eyes, Cole saw Hugo standing in the center of the room, right where the fire had been.

He saw Hugo standing there, naked, in the center of the room. The man was damp, as if he'd just emerged from a swim or bath but he wasn't dripping wet. The dark hair hung about his face and brushed his shoulders in loose black rings and curls. Cole had a moment to take in the sight, the lean, well muscled body under olive skin, the curve of shoulder and hip, before Hugo fell. The man collapsed, folding down across himself until he was left sprawled on the rug.

Aric stood, pulling a blanket from off a nearby chair. "Stay back, he's often confused and disorientated." He carefully lowered the blanket over shivering shoulders but no amount of care would have been enough.

Hugo scrambled away from the contact, the blanket following with him, and a guttural, broken cry escaped his throat. It wasn't the sheer agony of the scream before but one that sounded human, confused and very frightened. The arms he tried to pull himself along with were weak, unsteady and he fell back onto his side before he made it more than a foot.

"Shhh, shhh, it's okay," Aric soothed, kneeling down to stroke a hand over Hugo's head.

"Shhhh."

"Aric?" Hugo rasped out.

"That's right. How much do you remember?"

"Most, oh..." His breathing sharpened and his hands scrambled to his head, to the very spot the bullet had gone in. "Shit! That hurt." He sighed, hands dropping down and his body falling limply on the floor.

"Who did it, Hue? Do you remember?"

"I... they were wearing black... I..." Again his breathing sharpened and he struggled to sit up only to fall painfully back to the floor. "No, no, no, Cole, they... I... is he dead?" Each of his efforts at movement grew a little more coordinated, a little more steady.

"He's fine, he's right behind you."

Hugo struggled and pulled and got himself sitting up. Wide, black eyes scanned the room and found Cole sitting nearby. "Blood."

"Just a few scrapes, nothing even serious," Aric instantly reassured. He met Cole's eye and tried to motion the human into talking but Cole looked pale again and startled.

"He's okay?" Hugo wanted to go over and check the younger man out for himself but he was still too shaky, too disconnected to manage it.

Cole nodded. "I'm okay," he forced out but it came out more as a whisper than a statement.

Hugo's breathing was leveling out and his thinking was growing clearer. He nodded. "Good, good. I should get dressed."

He tried once to stand and failed, it took Aric's offered help to haul him to his feet where he stood wavering and totally naked. "You need help?"

"I'm fine." He stepped away from Aric's supportive and obviously needed hand and on swaying feet headed for his bedroom, naked.

Aric grinned at the startled human. "Modest he is not." Cole still looked wide-eyed and pale and he doubted it was from the sight of a bare assed Hugo. "This is the oddest first day at work I bet you've ever had."

"In my normal day to day world being shot in the head is pretty fatal."

"Welcome to the real world, sweet cheeks," Aric teased and instantly wished he could take it back. "You know you can walk away, no fault, no foul."

"I know."

"Yet, you're still sitting there."

Cole just nodded. "I'm still here."

"Good. I like you, Cole Manner, even if your parents hated you."

"Get bent."

Aric laughed and walked to the kitchen to straighten up the small mess he'd made while brewing tea, leaving Cole to deal with the shock of what he'd witnessed on his own. He really did like the young man, he was so different than the normally stuffy, self righteous sorts Hugo normally had helping him. It had taken almost a decade for Aric to warm up to Mike, or for Hugo to break Mike into being a real person and not one bound by his duty. The idea that there would be no breaking in period was refreshing and maybe this time it would be Cole breaking in Hugo not the other way around.

Time passed and Aric considered going into Hugo's bedroom to see if the other man was okay. Reforming shook the other up, not just physically; too often personality traits altered in subtle ways or buried emotions found pathways to the surface and Aric had seen some radical differences over the centuries. He was saved from having to make that choice when the bedroom door opened and Hugo joined them.

He was dressed in slacks and a casually formal shirt, as he always was. His dark hair was pulled back again into the same tightly controlled, small tail at the base of his skull. Outwardly nothing had changed and Aric felt some of his worries fade away.

"Dude, don't you own jeans?"

Hugo gave Cole a single look of disgust but otherwise ignored him. "I didn't smoke before?"

Aric shook his head. "Not last time."

"There aren't any smokes in the house? I'd kill for one."

"Sorry, last time you made me promise to smack you if you smoked in the apartment."

"I know, just could really use a cigarette. Maybe I left a pack in the car, I'll be right back." Hugo moved smoothly out the door toward the garage in his wandering search for a cigarette.

"Check please?" Cole held up his hand.

"Hue isn't like us, there are difficulties in reforming. Sometimes he loses parts of his memory, sometimes his preferences change. Normally it's little things but sometimes it's not. It's almost like he's a new person each time. Smoking, drinking, they're pretty common changes, it's not like lung cancer will kill him." Aric grinned. "Frankly, he's sexy when he smokes, you'll see."

The apartment door opened and Hugo wandered in. "What happened to the Mercedes?"

"It got totaled, last year, the drunk driver? Killed you, broke Mike's legs?"

Hugo stood in his living room and had no memory of the accident. "Huh, that's gone."

"You bought a hybrid after that."

"Okay, but I didn't stash any cigarettes in it."

"Probably not, you haven't smoked since the forties."

"Nineteen forties?"

Aric nodded.

Hugo sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Okay. Anything else I need to know?"

"You remember Johnny's acting up?"

Hugo nodded but his eyes fell on Cole. "Do I know you?"

"I work for you," Cole added.

He waved that off. "I know that, I mean do I know you?" He tried again, stressing the word know.

"Dude, you wish."

"Hue, he's got that feel about him but I haven't placed it yet," Aric added trying to clarify the situation.

"Huh."

"Anyone care to clue me in since I'm the topic of conversation?"

Aric just smiled cryptically. "Maybe, one day, not so soon."

"Well, you suck."

"Ask nicely and you'll find out how well."

Hugo sighed again and rubbed at his eyes. "Really..."

Whatever he was going to say was cut off by the apartment door opening. It flew forward and slammed against the wall, crashing the doorknob into the plaster and nearly denting it. A man stood in the door way, dressed in a white suit that set off his deep tan and dark looks. He was pushing well past his late forties or maybe older but the slight white in his hair and the etched lines around his eyes made him look distinguished. There was a slick charm about him, something that spoke of old money and strong confidence.

He held his arms out at his side. "Hugo, my friend!"

Hue's expression went cold. "What're you doing here, Xander? You're supposed to be at your hotel."

"Hello, Father," Aric added carefully, his eyes narrowing.

"Son! What a warm welcome, it does my heart good."

Cole sensed the mood, even if he didn't understand the source. He stood up and moved to the side of the room, unconsciously forming a half moon around the new arrival with Hugo standing in the center.

"Who's this now? I'd heard stories of Mike's retirement."

"What do you want, Xander?"

"Do I need to want something to see my favorite people?" Cole heard it then, the accent and after listening he placed it as Greek.

"Don't, just tell me what you need. I'm exhausted with games."

"I'm bored."

"Rent a movie."

"Hugo, Hugo, a movie? How bland, how, two dimensional, you know I'm a people person, I like to go out and mix with the crowds." He slid a hand into his pocket and struck a casual pose.

"You left the hotel." Hugo said it as a statement, not a question. "You promised me you'd stay in the hotel."

"The time change, it has me antsy, I wanted to go out."

The somber weight that Cole had seen Hugo wearing from the moment they'd met, and that he'd seemingly shaken a moment before, returned. It weighed down the shorter man's shoulders, pulled the corners of his mouth slightly downward and put a ridge of tense unease between his eyes.

"What did you do?"

"Hugo, my friend, you make it sound like I'm a child that needs a nanny."

"No, I make you sound like the old trouble maker you are. What did you do?"

"The bell boy, he told me of this place, he say they have beautiful women."

Hugo groaned.

"So I go there, just to see the women."

"A strip club?"

"Yes, but nice, classy, not so dirty as you make it sound."

"Xander."

"So the women are stunning and I'm thinking this city isn't too bad after all. Certainly better than sitting in that ugly hotel room for hours, the beauty of a woman is far better than solitude!"

"What happened?" A hundred scenarios crossed his mind, everything from Xander's wife learning of another one of his affairs to dead prostitutes.

"You know my weakness for women, they really were lovely! They seemed so nice."

"Enough!" Hugo snapped. "Just tell me."

"We were having a little party, drinking and dancing."

"Lap dances?"

"Yes! You should have been there my friend!"

"What happened?"

"Well, I go to leave, and I notice it's gone."

"They stole your wallet? Just tell the bouncer, he'll get it back. Really, Xander, I'm too busy for this."

"Not my wallet."

Hugo's blood froze. "Tell me you put the treaty stones in the hotel safe."

"My friend." Xander smiled and showed strong, white teeth.

"Tell me you did it, first thing, you said. You promised me you'd do it first thing."

"They were so beautiful, Hugo, like sirens."

Hue growled and was across the room. His hand snapped out and he caught the older man by the throat. With a straight arm and not even straining, Hugo lifted the other man from the ground, not even Xander's toes brushed the floor. Hugo's face was painted in livid anger and he snarled instead of speaking.

"Tell me you didn't lose the treaty stones to some g-string whore!"

Xander clutched at the hand around his throat and didn't fight. "I understand you're angry," he forced out with a choked gurgle. "My friend, please."

Cole glanced to Aric but the man didn't seem willing to interrupt and maybe draw Hugo's anger toward him. That seemed the better course of action so Cole held his ground. If an immortal paused before wading in, his own fragile skin felt too important to risk.

Hugo had to force his anger down, force his grip to let go and Xander dropped with as much grace as was possible. "Explain, and be succinct."

The older man rubbed at his throat but Cole couldn't see any bruises, not even a red mark. That's when it occurred to him that this man was Aric's father, and who that would make him. He wasn't a sort known for bowing to anyone, or for his small ego, and yet Hugo ran rough shod over him and he took it. It made Cole wonder just how powerful Hugo really was, how far removed he was from the immortals he babysat. The thought humbled and frightened him.

"I tried to find the girl, a beautiful redhead named Sunshine but she was already gone. They wouldn't tell me where to find her but, Hugo, why take the pouch when she could have taken my wallet?" He stopped rubbing at his throat, stopped pretending everything was okay. "I must have been set up, my friend. I'm sorry."

"Don't, don't say that, if you were sorry you would have put the stones into the safe. If word gets out that the treaty stones are missing, do you know what that will mean? Do you even remember what it was like before the treaty was ratified?" Hugo wanted to scream but he held his rage in check, he knew it was fueled with fear. "Do you want to return to those days? All because you couldn't keep your dick in your pants! Give me one reason, just one, why I shouldn't break you into small parts!"

Xander smiled again and looked devastatingly handsome. "Because, I'm your friend."

Hugo growled in frustrated anger and dropped himself into one of his wingback chairs. He sat, leaning his forearms on his knees, with his face bowed, and rubbed at the tension in the back of his neck.

"Hugo?" Xander asked with extreme care into the now silent room.

Hue waved a hand at all three men. "Just shut up a moment and let me think."

A long moment was spent in silence. Cole tried to read the two men but found they gave

away little. He thought he saw frustration behind Aric's eyes and wondered if it was directed at Xander, the situation or something else. From Xander, he saw guilt but it was hidden under the swagger that served the man so well. Only Hugo was open; anger, fear and raw exhaustion rolled off the man in waves and left the room silent and tense.

"Okay," Hue said without sitting up. "Xander, you're going to take me to this club, then you're going back to the hotel and you're going to stay there. Aric, you're leaving too and so help me, the both of you, if I hear a whisper about the stones being missing. I'll know it's from one of you two and I swear I'll take it out on both your hides." He glanced up. "Is that clear?"

Aric nodded. "I'll call a cab." He moved to the phone, not liking the look in Hugo's eye and not wanting what was pent up there released in his direction.

Hugo pushed himself to his feet. "Let yourself out." He caught Xander's collar as he slipped by. "Let's go."

Cole followed willingly but Xander was being half dragged toward the garage. Out near the car, Hue pushed the older man against the wall and started to pat him down.

"I have no weapons, my friend, I am as you see me, bare and exposed to the world."

Hue just snorted at that and shoved a hand into a pocket. He retrieved the box of cigarettes and lighter, shook one out and lit the tip. The first lungful was heaven and Hue held it in, letting it settle the shaky feeling along his nerves and ease a little of the tight pounding headache behind his temples. He blew out the first breath and felt less like killing Xander. "Get in."

Xander nodded and moved to the front passenger seat but Cole hung around and watched. Aric was right, seeing the shorter man smoke was sexy as hell. Hugo almost made love to the white paper wrapped stick, his eyes going half closed in forbidden pleasure as he sucked in another puff. Even the way the murky grey smoke curled around him as he exhaled was sexy.

"You're staring," Hue growled out as his new assistant watched in open fascination as he hurried to finish the cigarette.

"Yes, I am."

"Stop it."

"Make me."

"What are you?" Hugo dropped the cigarette and crushed it under his shoe. "Three years old?"

Cole smiled as he moved to the backseat of the car. "Naw, my thoughts are way more grown up than that."

Hugo followed the directions to the strip club, drove by and kept going. Much to the protests from Xander who assumed he'd be allowed to follow them inside. Instead, Hugo took the man back to his hotel and dropped him off. There was more grumbling and protests but Xander soon promised to stay inside and keep a low profile, at least until the stones were found.

Cole's only concern was getting back into the front seat, he hated riding in the back. It made him feel like a child again. "So, what's the plan?"

"The plan," Hugo started as he spun the agile car around to take them back to the strip club, "is to do whatever it takes to track down the treaty stones."

"I gathered that much. What do they look like? I mean bigger than a breadbox? What color?"

"They're smaller than a ping pong ball, made of glass and multi colored."

The image slowly formed in Cole's already overwhelmed mind and when it did he chuckled.

"What's funny?"

"They're marbles?"

Hue shrugged. "Similar."

"So, you're telling me, we're looking for marbles, that god has lost his marbles?" The image had him giggling.

"It's not funny."

"Shit, it's hysterical!" He was laughing now. "I always knew god had lost his marbles figuratively, never thought he would literally!"

Hugo tried to look stern but the wheezing, near crazy giggling laughter beside him was infectious. He shook his head and chuckled, letting the image sink in as he wove them around traffic. Soon he was laughing, actually laughing, it made his sides ache but it felt good at the same time.

The pair rolled to a stop, Cole having to wipe at his eyes and sighing as the silliness slid away and Hugo watched as the man next time slumped into his seat. "I guess it is pretty absurd."

"You think?" Cole sighed. "Oh, that felt good. You need to laugh more, Hugo. You look nice when you're laughing."

That made him uncomfortable. The casual use of his first name, the suggestion, even the idea, that the handsome blonde had admired him. The last of his amusement fled under the awkward feeling.

"There you go, getting all serious again. I mean, the things I've seen in the last day? I should be drooling in a corner but you know, I'd rather laugh than flip out. Life is too short."

"Or too long," Hue added softly.

Cole was saved from having to answer the bitter comment by the car sliding into the strip club's parking lot. It wasn't the sleaziest club he'd ever seen but it wasn't the upscale establishment that Xander had tried to make it out to be. Pink neon highlighted the eaves and made it look like the establishment it was even if the building was painted in dull blue and gave no other outward sign.

Cole was out of the car almost before Hugo was. The shorter man was moving slower than he had before the whole being shot in the head incident and given the circumstances of the night, it was something Cole understood. "So, if we don't get these marbles back, what happens? It's bad, right?"

"Well," Hue locked the car and was fishing his wallet out of his back pocket, "if the treaty

isn't renewed, there are no rules of agreed upon conduct. Imagine every follower of every faith suddenly deciding their way is the only way and all others must die. You tell me, is that bad?"

The idea chilled Cole's blood and made him glad he was non-religious. "Yeah, that counts as bad."

Hugo paid the doorman but didn't wait to show ID, assuming that both of them looked well over the age limit. Inside the club music pulsed and lights were dim but there was a haze of cigarette smoke scented with spilled beer and cheap perfume. The women that moved around in skimpy clothes or none at all weren't the best looking Cole had ever seen but they didn't qualify as ugly either. It was a decent mid-level strip club, even if the entire predatory feel of the workers was a major turn off for him.

The women didn't even catch Hue's eye, dressed or naked; he was on a mission. He touched the arm of one of the more clothed ladies, a waitress or off duty dancer and she turned and smiled a bright, fake grin.

"What can I get you boys?"

A twenty dollar bill appeared in Hugo's hand and he dropped it on her tray. "A word with your manager in his office without delay."

The smile faltered. Her eyes went from Hue to the bill to the door in the back marked private. The bill disappeared like magic. "Sure thing, this way." The smile returned. She knocked and at the shouted reply nodded to the door. "Feel free."

"Thanks." Hue nodded as she scurried away but his expression hardened as he pushed the doors open.

"What the fuck do you want?" The man behind the desk looked more like an accountant than the tough manager of a strip club.

"You've a redhead working here."

The man shrugged and stubbed out his cigarette. "I've a couple of them, none of them real. If you're looking for a party, I'm not a pimp."

"This is work, her name is Sunshine."

"She in some kind of trouble?"

"I need her real name and address."

The manager leaned back in his chair behind his desk. "Sorry, that's confidential."

Cole swore he only blinked but Hugo went from beside him to behind the desk in that half second. He grabbed the man that slouched with self importance from his chair and slammed him hard onto the surface of the desk. One of the man's arms twisted backwards into a painful joint lock that was a breath away from breaking.

"Now, let's try this again." Hugo hissed into the man's ear. "My business isn't with you or your shit hole of a club. If I feel you're not being helpful, I'll make you and your shit hole club my business."

The shock of the sudden movement wore off of Cole quickly. He moved toward the desk and knelt down to put the manager at eye level. "He's had a really bad night, he's not normally so gentle. You're lucky, the last guy that made his bad nights more difficult had his arm ripped clean

off. It's always the little guys, you know, total temper. Now, we're not going to hurt your girl, or even rough her up but she has something that doesn't belong to her and it's our job to retrieve it." Cole smiled. "I doubt you want us calling the cops to get it back. I wonder what sort of slime they'd find if they started turning over rocks."

"Alright! Let me up!"

Hue twisted the arm further, the man sprawled on the desk cried out and tried to get the pressure off his aching arm.

"I don't think my friend likes that idea. You tell us her name and where she lives and we'll go."

"Amanda, Amanda Petrowski. She lives with a friend in an apartment over on West Rose." The arm turned a bit more and the manager squawked again. "Okay, okay, it's 349 West Rose, it's like a row home thing. Don't break it!"

"Good boy." Cole patted the tussled head that was pressed to the desk but moved quickly to the door, not wanting to be near the man when Hugo let go.

As soon as Hue let go, the man was stumbling away. He rubbed at the twisted arm, face going red with rage. "I'll kill you! I'm going to fucking bury you!" He shouted at them.

Hugo simply turned but in his eyes was death. "Be careful with the threats you make, some of us take them seriously."

Eyes met across the room but it was the manager that looked away first. The red color of rage drained away with cold fear taking its place. "Sorry," he muttered out, still rubbing at his abused arm. "Sorry, sir."

Hugo said nothing more but slipped out into the main club when Cole held the door for him.

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Chapter Seven

They were back in the car and halfway to West Rose Avenue when Hugo finally broke the silence that lingered between them. "Back there, you did good, thanks."

Cole beamed. "Welcome. See? I'm not just luggage you're hauling around."

Dark eyes slid over and studied for a moment before turning back to the night empty road. "Don't

you own anything that isn't black?"

"Not really." They turned onto West Rose and a thought occurred to Cole. "Look, I've a thing about guys beating up on women, so we aren't going to be slamming this Sunshine chick about. Right?"

"I make no promises."

"No smacking women around."

"Or you'll what? Sarcasm me to death?"

Hugo had a point, there wasn't much Cole could do to stop the man. "Or I'll be highly disappointed."

That made Hue snort. "We wouldn't want that."

349 West Rose Avenue was an attached row home that was at least making an effort to stay in good repair. They pulled up out front and even with the late hour saw lights on in the front rooms of the house. The bell was broken so they knocked and it took a moment but the porch light flicked on and the front door cracked open.

"Yeah?" a woman asked as she peered around the still mostly closed door.

"Amanda Petrowski?" Hue asked in a commanding voice.

"You guys cops?"

"Do I look like a cop?" Cole added with a wide grin.

"Not really."

"We're not cops." Hue glanced to Cole and had to agree, the other man didn't look anything close to a police officer.

"Is she in trouble?"

"We just need a word with her, are you her roommate?"

"Yeah, she's not home."

Cole could almost hear Hugo's teeth grinding together, he stepped forward just a fraction and tried to draw the woman's focus toward him. "Do you know where she is? It's really very important we talk to her tonight."

The woman behind the door glanced at them both again and weighed something in her own mind. "Well, she's probably at her boyfriend's. He's a jerk, real class clown reject sort. She doesn't bring him here cause she knows I don't like him."

"Where can we find him?"

There was a shadow of the woman's shrug. "I never asked, sorry."

"What's his name?"

A shrug again. "Mandi calls him La La, I think his name's like Lawrence or something. Look, Mandi pays her rent, doesn't drink, doesn't cause me any trouble but we're not like staying up all night painting each other's toe nails and giggling. I've got a picture of him on my fridge, want to

see it?"

Cole glanced to Hugo but there was little doubt to the answer. "We'd love to, thanks!"

She shut the door and re-locked it, leaving the men to wait outside in the cold night air. "You scare people."

"Good," Hue answered, fishing out another cigarette and lighting it while they waited. The night air grew crisp with the sharp smoke.

The door locks rattled again and a slender paper slid out toward them. "Here. Keep it, I'd be happy to never see his face again."

Cole was closer and accepted the photo but Hue snatched it from his fingers. "Thanks for the help, ma'am."

"Sure." The door shut and the locks rattled again.

Before the porch light could blink out Cole caught the look of recognition on Hugo's face. "You know him?" He asked in the now cold darkness, a sure sign from the woman inside that they weren't to hover on her doorstep.

Hugo flicked the picture out toward Cole. "Unfortunately."

In the dim light from the moon, Cole glanced down and smiling up at him was a lovely red headed woman draped over a square jawed military man, one Cole knew. Even in the photo, Johnny looked unhappy.

Cole worked up the nerve in the car to ask what had been nagging at his mind all night, but he braced for the anger he knew could be attached to the question. "So, what's up with you and Johnny anyway?"

The braced for anger didn't arrive, instead Hugo's shoulders sagged and he slumped a little more into his seat. "We have a history."

"So I've gathered. Care to elaborate? Cause, you know, it's never a good idea to piss off the god of war."

"Figured him out huh?"

Cole nodded. "He's a walking cliché and I'm not as dumb as I look."

Hue snorted. "Barely."

"Hey! I've been doing okay, Bonnie is Isis?"

"Correct."

"But, Harry, Kare and Kamil have me stumped. Kare's so pretty but there's danger with him too."

Hugo glanced over to the hungry needing to know look Cole wore and shrugged. "Kare and Harry are from the same tradition. Kamil is normally blue skinned."

"Which makes him East Indian and I can narrow that down to three or so names that he could have worn. Harry and Kare, they're not... I mean that would be wrong on so many levels."

"Jesus and the Morningstar? Now you can see why his father would be so angry? His son, the

standard of proper modern moral behavior, falling in love with his greatest rival for control of their tradition? The man would be livid, it would tear things apart.”

“Wow, okay, yeah, I can see that. Do you think they’re actually in love?”

Hugo was silent for a long time before he answered. “I think Harry loves too easily. I don’t know if Kare feels as deeply. It’s not my place to know or care.”

“But you and Johnny?”

“What about us?” The voice hardened.

“Do you love him?” He braced himself for the anger at poking an obviously raw nerve.

Again, none came and only heavy exhaustion pushed the darker man down. “Maybe once.”

“What happened?”

“I became involved with my assistant. Johnny found us in bed together and killed us both.”

“I’m sorry.” And he was, but some small, deeply buried part of him fluttered too. Hugo had let himself love once, let himself connect to other people. Cole was profoundly attracted to the man and it wasn’t just sexually, there was something dynamic about just being near him, something that made Cole want to crawl inside the other’s skin and stay there.

“It was a silly affair anyway. I would have lost him sooner or later.”

“Doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt.”

“It’s old wounds, old blood between Johnny and I.” Hugo glanced over at the soft, hurt eyes.

“Don’t worry, he won’t do something so stupid again. You’re safe.”

“It wasn’t me I was worried about.”

They pulled up out front of an old Laundromat that was dark and closed for the night with a metal grate pulled over the front glass. Hue craned his neck to stare at the second story windows, all as black as the night around them but he shook his head. “He’s not home.”

“He’s probably holed up somewhere, hiding.”

Hue smiled softly. “You don’t know Johnny.” He pulled the car from the curb and drove them off into the night.

As they drove across the city again, Cole started to get a good idea of where they were headed.

“He wouldn’t.”

“He would. It’s not subtle when he’s had a victory.” Hugo drove them past the club to study the waiting line, still long even so many hours later. It was foolish, none of their people had to wait in the line so it wouldn’t be so easily finished. This time, Hue circled the block to find an open space along the street instead of parking in the garage.

This time, Cole felt like he belonged as he followed beside Hugo, not slightly behind him. It had only been a handful of hours but the world had changed and this time, he felt like he belonged instead of something left on the outside. This time people turned to glance their way when they went straight to the doorman and it felt right. He didn’t even worry about how he was dressed, the drying bloodstains from his own scrapes or the general scruffiness he had. They were waved inside without even having to pause.

There was no hunt for Aric. No careful maneuvering around whose territory they were in. This was Hugo's job and Cole saw it clearly. He tried to be accommodating, to step on as few toes as possible, but when push came to shove Hue knew he had the bigger shove.

The party was still going strong inside. Music thumped, people danced, there was laughter and drinking and groping hands in dark corners and it was all very ordinary and human. Cole didn't feel as connected to that world any longer, he still enjoyed watching the pretty people writhe and touch but he felt above it, removed from it and partly responsible to it. He was part of something now, something that allowed the people around him to move with such carefree desire and it felt right.

In the flashing lights, red hair swirled and Hugo moved them toward it. It wasn't Amanda but it moved them deeper into the crowd and sure enough, near the edge of the group, Johnny was dancing with the large breasted redhead. She hung on him and did most of the moving, he almost stood still and let her rub against him.

They were almost on top of the pair before they were noticed but as soon as Johnny spotted them he was frowning. His large hands slid over the almost bare shoulders of his girlfriend, covering their delicate curve. "What do you want?" he snapped at them. "I'm busy."

Hue planted his feet and only came up to the larger man's shoulder. "I've no trouble beating the contrariness out of you in your brother's club."

"Half brother!" Johnny snapped back. "Father went whoring again to get that prick!"

"I'm here for the treaty stones, Johnny."

The taller man let go of the redhead and she started to slide toward the crowd, but Cole moved quickly to get a grip on her arm. "Stick around, sweetheart, the best is yet to come."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Johnny grinned. "Doesn't surprise me the old man fucked up again, his thinking is done with his little head. Just like you."

Cole couldn't tell which man threw the first punch. It was like some starter's pistol had gone off and only the two fighters had heard it. By mutual agreement they moved from talking to trying to blacken each other's eyes. The crowd gasped and pulled back, leaving a little circle around the pair, eyes turned to watch what appeared to be a serious mismatch of combatants.

Only, as blows were blocked or landed and kicks avoided, it became clear that both men were evenly matched. Seeing Hugo fight was impressive and added a whole new depth to Cole's fantasies. The man was like water, he glided in smooth ease, using greater speed to counter greater reach and height. Both men landed blows, and staggered under them, but neither one went down or backed down.

"Fuck him up, Johnny! Fuck him up good!" Amanda shouted, pulling at Cole's grip, obviously enjoying the sight of her lover being aggressive.

"Shut up!" Cole shook her, hard, and reconsidered his rule about hitting women.

The bouncers arrived quickly, men big enough to make Johnny look small, but Aric arrived as well. He waved at them to hold back and wait and while they didn't look happy about it, they turned their attention to keeping the other club goers under control and out of the way.

Somehow, a kick or a trip tumbled both men to the dirty, confetti scattered dance floor and they wrestled now for control. Blows still landed, neither man giving an inch, both snarling for the other's blood. Hue's hair tumbled free, curling about his chin and face in dark strands and made

him look wild and primal. Clothing tore, flesh split and still they twisted for dominance.

Bit by bit it started to become clear that Hugo was getting the upper hand. With the greater reach being countered by being piled together on the floor, he had the advantage and the crowd cheered for the little guy. Cole wondered if he was the only one that saw it. The fight wasn't just violent, it was almost foreplay. Hands pulled hair, groins rubbed together, the grunts of pain sounded with undercurrents of pleasure and never had he seen such a clear example of loving and hating the same person.

Both fighters were breathing hard and bleeding when Hugo finally slammed Johnny's head into the dance floor, hard. "Stop it!" he shouted. "Don't make me kill you!"

There was a moment of dazed uncertainty as Johnny recovered from the hard impact and his face stayed twisted up in rage. Until he glanced up and his eyes locked with Hugo's. The feel of the slender, lithe body holding him down, dominating him, sunk in and if Cole hadn't been sure of it before, he was now. Both men were visibly aroused and the panting breaths went from anger to lust in the span of a heartbeat. Some of the crowd sensed it too and there was an uncomfortable shuffling around them.

"It's over between us," Hugo whispered but the sound found a way to carry under the music and Cole heard the pain in it. "Over."

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Chapter Eight

"How many centuries will you punish me?" Johnny asked, as broken sounding as Hugo had been.

"For what you did there is no forgiveness. Stealing the stones was a childish way to get back at me, I want them back." Hugo was slowly lowering down, his face was now only a half a foot away from Johnny's. "Now."

"Dude!" Cole called out. "Don't make me sell tickets."

That broke whatever lingering desire had been pulling Hue down and left him only with the shattered pain of old grief. He pulled back and scrambled off of Johnny. "Where are they?"

Johnny rolled over and sat up, dabbing at blacked eye and split lip. He waved to his girlfriend. "Give them back, Mandi."

"But, La La..."

"Mandi!" he snapped at her, suddenly willing to take his hurt anger out on her since he couldn't vent it successfully at Hue.

She sighed and reached into her skimpy shirt. There was some rummaging about under one of her artificially inflated breasts and she sighed as she pulled the velvet pouch out and offered it to Cole.

"Eeew, not enough Lysol in the world..." He teased as he took the pouch from her.

"How many are in there?" Hue asked as he climbed to his feet.

Cole slid the pouch in his hand and made a quick count. "Feels like seven."

"Good."

"They're all there." Johnny moved to his girlfriend and soothed her arm to settle her anger down.

Hue wasn't willing to take anyone's word for it. He took the pouch from Cole and pulled the cords open. Sure enough, all seven of the swirled glass-like stones were inside. "Whatever is between us, Johnny, this was stupid. I know you have issues with your father but this was unbelievably stupid!"

Johnny draped an arm around the red head's shoulders and kissed her temple. "What makes you think I did this just to get back at you? You're a fool if you think this was about you and I." He turned and let the waiting bouncers guide him and Amanda away and out of the club for the night.

Aric was by their side instantly, letting his bouncers disperse the violence-hungry crowd back to their own dancing and drinking. He caught Hue's chin and tilted it into the light, frowning at the bloodied lip and swollen cheek bone. "Not even a day and you've battered this flesh." He tsked.

Hue pulled his face from the fussing hands. "It needed done."

"So, what did he mean by that? That whole, cryptic you're a fool thing?" Cole asked, sliding closer to the pair of men. "Cause, you know, that's disgustingly melodramatic."

"Johnny isn't very subtle, we'll figure it out."

"Not now." Aric scolded. "Now, you're going to come into my office and let me wash up those wounds."

"Hang on, some of us are just human." Cole stopped the pair from wondering off. "Give me a second, need to drain the fluids."

Aric nodded to the corner. "Over there and don't dally."

1. "Yes, papa."

The men's room was a busy place in any club, one tucked in the corner didn't help any. Inside, was a small little sitting area where drugs were being done and people were doing more than groping. Cole had been in a lot of clubs, most were either entirely straight or entirely gay, finding a club that didn't seem to draw a line between one preference or the other was refreshing. It was eye candy for all and he was grinning lewdly as he made his way back to the urinals.

Surprisingly, there were a couple open, as the bathroom was well accorded with two banks of

urinals, a thoughtful touch he'd have to remember to thank Aric for. He was wondering idly if the man had been as kind to the ladies' rooms, a place famous for long lines. Cole didn't consider himself shy but there were unspoken rules about using a men's room. One was that if there were open urinals, the new arrival moved to the one as far away as he could so he gravitated to the empty urinal on the end of the line. That placed four empty spots between him and the next fellow.

So it was only natural, given the unspoken rules and such, when a man came over and occupied the space directly next to his own that Cole was startled enough that he glanced over. There was something about the man that tugged at Cole's memory but he couldn't place it. He was dressed in a black button down shirt and black dress pants but that was about as common as fur on a cat in a dance club.

"Tough night, huh?" the man said as he unzipped his own fly.

"Look, dude, I'm really not in the mood."

"I'm not hitting on you," the other man snapped back.

"I don't know what planet you're from but here on Earth we don't chat while pissing." Cole tried to force his bladder to empty faster, the man next to him was creeping him out.

"Did you know that over half of Hugo Dana's assistants die violently? It's really rare for one to live long enough to retire." The words were spoken casually.

Cole's blood froze, he was smart enough to hear a threat when one was offered. "What do you want?" He kept his eyes straight ahead, worried that if he looked around he'd find the men's room cleared out, never a good sign, or worse, occupied with thugs.

"Nothing, just a friendly bit of advice. It's not too late to walk away, no one would blame you. You really are in over your head."

The friendly voice made Cole want to kick teeth in. He finished and redid his pants, hating that to get out of the bathroom quickly meant not washing his hands. His travels had taught him to always wash his hands, always. "You aren't my friend, buddy and I don't need your advice." He spat the word out. "Now, piss off, before I get pissed off." He hated being threatened and worse, he hated that the man was right. He was over his head, he didn't even have a clue which faction or party would want to scare him off.

But he knew who would.

Thankfully, the pair still stood along the wall and hadn't wandered off somewhere. Cole hurried over and they continued their low conversation without even glancing his way.

"Hey!" he finally broke in, trying to keep his eye on the men's room through the haze of smoke and flashing lights.

"What's got you stirred up?" Hue asked, finally noticing.

Aric grinned. "Did someone in the men's room try to touch your pee-pee?"

"Bite me." He glanced again and saw the man in dark clothes pushing past a crowd of four guys, all obviously high, trying to get into the bathroom. "Who's that dude? He followed me, told me to get out while I could. To quit working for you before I got killed."

"I've never seen him before," Aric answered, suddenly serious.

"I have, just..." Hugo's eyebrows crunched together. "I can't say from where."

Lights flashed and Cole saw it, the flash of white across the man's black clad neck was the last clue he needed to have the man's identity click into place. "Oh! He's one of the little snotty freaks that helped Mike move out!"

"A priest?" Aric questioned, glancing from the man slipping into the crowd to Cole. "You're sure?"

"Positive!"

Hue shook his head and pain split his skull. "He's the one that shot me!"

The cold fear of being jumped and beaten in the bathroom that had mixed in with the anger at being threatened turned to hot rage at Hugo's memory. "Fucker!" Cole hissed and was off into the crowd before either man could stop him. It wasn't just that he was angry at the priest for threatening him personally, but that he'd go so far as to shoot Hugo, knowing it would hurt but not kill him, to scare him off just set his blood on fire. There was a burning need to protect something, or someone, that wasn't his and as he shoved dancers out of the way his anger grew.

"Oy! Priest!" Cole shouted when the man was again in sight.

The young man turned and his eyes went wide with shock before he tried to hurry out of the crowd.

"I've some friendly advice for you, friend!" Cole screamed over the music, not caring if he drew looks. He charged in after the man, rushing forward heedlessly and it wasn't until he was flinging himself at the priest to tackle him that he remembered the man had a gun.

Cole braced himself to get shot, called himself a thousand names of a fool, and landed on the other man. No gun ever appeared and the pair crumbled to the dance floor together. Unlike Hugo, Cole had never been taught to fight. He'd learned the hard way, in back alley brawls and by being pummeled by bigoted fools. That meant what he lacked in form, he made up for in clever tenacity and sheer stubborn will.

It really wasn't much of a fight. The man barely defended himself and Cole's fist smacked hard into the man's face. He even had to hold the front of the guy's shirt to punch him again. "Bad Priest! Bad, bad! No biscuit!"

Strong hands pried him from where he had the priest pinned to the floor and dragged him back. Oddly, it was Hugo that went to make sure the young man was okay and Aric that pulled Cole back. Cole strained against the strong grip, wanting, needing, to get a few kicks in. "If you so much as think about hurting him again, I'll tear your god damned head off!"

Aric started laughing. "Hue, you've quite the pit bull here!" Cole pulled loose, halfway, and Aric had to scramble to get a hold of him again. "Down boy, heel!" he forced out around his laughter before passing the still furious Cole to one of the bouncers. "Take him to my office, in fact, escort all of us there. Our new friend included."

It took a little work but it was amazing how quickly four very large, well trained men could move a small group across a crowd. Aric's club side office was more plush, more of a private room to watch the people below, than an actual work office. It was better lit, that was for sure, and the brighter lights caused them all to squint. The bouncers pushed Cole to one side and dropped the stunned priest, his nose bloody, onto one of the leather sofas.

Cole charged the priest as soon as he was let go and the wall of a bouncer simply pushed him back. "Want me to stay?" The man asked.

Aric shook his head. "I'm sure that Mr. Manner can be convinced to behave. Isn't that right?"

Cole shook his head and paced to the desk, keeping the furniture between him and the priest. "I'll try but if he says something stupid, all bets are off."

"Fair enough. Thank you, Bert, and your boys."

The bouncer nodded. "Of course, Mr. Aliss, happy to be of service."

The bouncer left and Aric was alone in his office with three very unhappy people. The ice and first aid kit he'd requested earlier had been delivered and that seemed the first course of action. Still amused, he broke open the kit and pushed a handful of plastic bandages, gauze and first aid cream at Cole.

"You're bleeding on my office. Clean yourself up."

Cole glanced down to his split knuckles that he hadn't felt. "Aw, man."

Aric wrapped a cloth napkin around a handful of ice and went to where Hue was leaning against the far end of his desk, conveniently between the priest and Cole. He pressed the ice to the man's swollen cheekbone, earning him a hiss and a nod.

"Thanks."

He just nodded and moved with a roll of gauze to where the young priest was gingerly touching his nose. "Here, don't bleed everywhere."

Around his bloody nose and slightly blackened eye, the young priest looked up miserably. "That animal broke my nose!"

"Lucky I didn't break your face, asshole!"

"Cole!" Hue snapped.

"Sorry."

"It's not bleeding enough to be broken but I bet it hurts." Aric poked at the bridge of the man's nose and rolled his eyes at the man's flinching. "Now, what is going on?"

Hue lowered the cloth of ice from his face and turned to where Cole was dabbing at his own wounds. "Yes, what were you thinking? He had a gun, he could have shot you, there's no coming back from that for you."

"He's blond, do you really expect him to think?" Aric teased, pleased at Hugo's worry.

"Hey!" Cole hated being caught. He hadn't been thinking. "He was getting away."

"The guys at the door would have stopped him, without the dramatics."

"He shot you in the head! Don't you want to kick him a little bit?"

Hugo shook his head. "I can't change what's happened but beating him now won't make things better."

"It made me feel better."

"I want answers, not revenge. Now, priest, why?"

The man looked sullen, or as sullen as he could. "He needs to go!" He pointed at Cole. "I've trained my entire life to have the chance, just the chance, at being your assistant. I speak seven languages. I've studied thousands of myths and histories; I know the aliases and locations of every player in the community by heart! And Brother Michael runs an ad in the paper and picks this schmuck off the street? Over me or my brothers? It's intolerable! You belong to us!"

The look on Hugo's face was broken sadness. "I don't belong to you, or anyone." He whispered out before ducking his head to hide his sorrow. When he glanced up again, his face was composed, steady and as level as always. "Part of our traditions states that the current assistant picks his successor."

The priest snorted in disgust. "He said you'd say that, that you'd defend that trash."

"Who said?" Aric asked carefully.

The priest shook his head. "I'll not tell you a bit more. The order has been dishonored by filth. Release me or kill me."

"I know which one I'd vote for," Cole grumbled.

"We're doing neither. You need spanking, I'm taking you to the head of your order. We'll let him deal with you." Hugo stated and knew the young man would most likely be shipped off and cloistered someplace far away from anything. At the moment, he couldn't bring himself to care.

- 1.
- 2.

The church they stopped to drop the young priest off at looked more like a small private library than a place of worship. It was behind an iron gate and they had to be buzzed in. Hugo dragged the young man out of the backseat and ordered Cole to stay by the car, which he wouldn't have done if Hugo hadn't been met at the door by an old man dressed in simple, dark clothes.

From where Cole waited by the car, he saw Hugo push the young priest at the older man before fishing out a cigarette from a pocket and lighting it. They talked for a moment, at one point the younger man tried to interject something only to be sharply cut off by his superior. The cigarette was smoked while they talked, the distance making it impossible for Cole to overhear actual words but several times he was motioned at or glanced at.

"Now what?" he asked as Hue came back to the car, crushing out his cigarette before getting in but Cole was watching the young priest being herded into the building.

"Now, we go home," he sighed out, weary beyond words and ready to stop moving.

"But what about the marbles?"

"Treaty stones."

"Whatever."

"I've a safe in my building, I'll put them in there until I'm sure the seriousness of the situation has been expressed to Xander. Let him sweat it out tonight."

Cole chuckled as he slid his seatbelt on and the car hummed to life. "You're evil."

"So I've been told."

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New Again

Chapter Nine

It had been late when they'd finally gotten back to the building that housed their apartments and the storefront. Cole vaguely remembered locking away the small velvet pouch into the safe that was bigger than he was, safely securing the marbles behind a solid, locked door. His brain had shut down at that point, he'd said a yawning goodnight to Hugo and left the downstairs apartment; the shorter man looked twice as tired as Cole felt.

Upstairs in the small space he'd stripped out of his clothes and tossed them into cold water to soak, hoping they wouldn't stain too badly. He washed his face and brushed his teeth without really thinking, letting the very long night's activity just sit on his shoulders. He'd seen enough, changed enough, in such a short time that he was pretty sure he'd be awake most of the night just trying to make sense of it. Cole flopped himself down on the very comfortable bed, pulled soft covers over his body and was asleep.

He awoke the next morning, which in truth was closer to afternoon than not, feeling rested. As he staggered around to make coffee and wake up, Cole felt connected for the first time, he felt like maybe he'd found something worth sticking around for. There was no sense of being out of his depth, just the tingle of excitement of the unknown. It felt right, it felt good and he took his coffee downstairs looking for his new employer.

Hugo wasn't in his apartment and Cole wandered outside to check to see if the car was in the garage. He didn't have to go that far, Hue was kneeling by one of the flowerbeds pulling weeds and stacking them into a small, tidy pile. He looked serene, peaceful and unguarded.

"Hey," Cole spoke and the dark haired man glanced up.

"Morning."

"I'd offer to help but, well, plants don't like me."

Hue shrugged. "Just have to know how to listen to them."

Cole lowered himself down onto the back steps and watched the last weeds join the pile and sipped at his coffee. The air was chilly but the sun had a touch of the last of summer's warmth to it. Mixed with the hot drink, it made for a pleasant contrast.

"You sleep in black?" Hugo asked, hiding a grin and taking in the black cotton flannel pants and black t-shirt as he wiped his hands of loose dirt and moved to sit on the other side of the steps from the blonde.

"No, I sleep in boxers, which today are green flannel thank you very much. I just didn't think you'd appreciate a three quarters naked man walking around, that and it's cold."

A cigarette was fished out of a pocket, held between lips and lit. Cole watched, fascinated that anyone could get such visceral pleasure from so simple a thing as smoking but Hugo's eyes half closed at the first inhalation and the man practically purred.

The lungful of smoke blew out, thoughtfully away from Cole. "I didn't expect to see you today. Thought you'd slip away and not look back. Last night was difficult."

Cole shrugged. "I'm still here, I like it."

"Nutcase, Mike hired a nutcase."

That made Cole laugh but his expression grew serious. "Been accused of worse. Still want me to stick around? I know you didn't want to get stuck with an idiot like me. I'll move on if you want someone properly trained. I mean, I can't even curse in seven languages."

"I can in nine," Hugo added around another long drag.

"Well, you're old."

"Too old."

"Seriously, I wouldn't blame you for wanting someone that actually knows something."

Hugo sat silent and studied the garden. Fall was bringing changes, as it always did. Some years, no matter how hard he tried, one of his rose bushes didn't survive the cold of winter. It made him grateful for the beauty while he had it.

"Stick around, you did a good job last night," he finally admitted.

Cole let the breath he'd been holding out in a rush. "Thank goodness! I've nowhere to go." He grinned again and nudged Hugo's shoulder with an elbow. "I think you like me."

"You're growing one me, like a fungus."

"Awww, you say the nicest things!"

A plastic bag appeared in Hue's hand. He'd set the bag down beside the steps on the chance that Cole wasn't going to flip out and run away. He half tossed it to the blonde. "Don't let it go to your head."

The plastic crinkled and something soft inside shifted. "What's this?"

"I saw it at the hotel gift shop. Xander woke me up early so I went over and had a discussion with him, spotted that on the way out and thought of you."

"How is he?"

"Xander?"

Cole nodded, carefully poking at the bag, uncertain about opening it.

"Properly chastised." He shook his head. "Just open it, it won't bite!"

The plastic parted and carnation pink stared at Cole. He reached in and pulled the t-shirt out and

it took a little bit of turning for him to read the letters printed in black across the front. "All My Black Shirts Are Dirty." He grinned and shook his head. "That's funny."

"I thought so, now you have some color. You don't have to wear it or keep it, I doubt pink is your color." He felt oddly awkward, which didn't make any sense. He'd bought things off and on for Mike all the time, as Mike had for him. They'd lived in such close partnership that they'd almost been able to read each other's minds.

"I love it." Cole folded the shirt into his lap and glanced over.

Hue was close enough that he could smell him. Strong male, damp soil, a hint of cinnamon and over it all was the tang of nicotine; it was an intoxicating scent and Cole was far from unaffected. He let his eyes rake over the lean body, overlaying it in his mind with the memory of Hue naked, the way the long muscles slid under olive skin. It was something that would fuel his fantasies for a long time.

Dark, black eyes met blue and both men froze in the fall sunshine. A final, stubborn butterfly flitted around the last of the summer blooms and a lonely cricket broke the silence with slow chirps. Cole grinned, as lazy as the cricket and reached over. He let one hand trace the side of Hugo's face, knowing he was taking a huge risk. When his careful fingertips weren't slapped away, he let his hand slid along Hue's jaw line and tilt the other man's face toward him.

Cole kept his eyes open as he leaned over, watching to see if his caress would be met with rejection or a fist to the face. He was only halfway across the space between them when Hugo's eyes slid shut and he leaned a little into the caressing hand. That widened Cole's grin and moved him faster to press his lips to Hugo's.

It started out shy, chaste. A mere brushing contact as soft as butterfly wings, uncertain about depth or willingness. The hand Hue wasn't holding the cigarette with reached out and wrapped around the arm Cole had his weight propped on, it clutched lightly to his wrist with a desire to connect. Hue moaned, softly, almost too low to be heard and his lips parted just slightly under Cole's.

That was all the invitation Cole needed. He deepened the kiss, letting his tongue explore the offered mouth. He was rewarded with another moan but as the kiss deepened the moan became a sound of surprise and Hugo pulled away, his hand on Cole's wrist flew up to cover his mouth in surprise.

"What the..."

Cole grinned and stuck his tongue out, showing off the small barbell through his tongue. "You've never kissed someone with a piercing?"

Hugo shook his head. "Never. Didn't that hurt?"

"Oh, yeah, but it has its uses." His eyes narrowed and when his meaning sunk in he was pretty sure Hugo was blushing, if just slightly.

"Well, that's something new."

"Welcome to the twenty first century, see, it's not all bad. Or, didn't you like it?"

Hue frowned a little. "We shouldn't." Speaking to the issue larger than the piercing.

"But you want to."

"My life isn't about what I want."

The sadness was there again, bitter and lonely. Cole shook his head and brushed a loose curl back from Hue's face. "Maybe it's time it should be, even if just a little."

Hugo shook his head.

It didn't discourage Cole any. He smiled and bent over to press his lips chastely against Hugo's own once again. This time, he kept it quick and casual. "It's okay, take your time and think about it. I'm not going anywhere and you're hot enough to try to convince." He winked.

The last drag from the cigarette settled some of Hugo's unease and he rubbed out the smoke. "You're crazy."

"It's a crazy world." He smiled and nudged at Hugo again with his elbow. His reward was a beautiful sight, a real smile from the solemn man.

The End (for now...)

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