

*Single
Shots*



volume four

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Running Away to Home: A Torquere Press Single Shot by Chris Owen

When Hound told the Boss he was leaving, the man just nodded and thanked him for the two weeks' notice.

"Most either just don't show up or tell me the night before that they're movin' on. That's how I know the good from the bad when it's time to rehire." The Boss smiled at him and said, "Not that I needed you to give me notice to know that you'll always be welcome back, Kevin. Let me know if you're ever in need of work, ya hear?"

Hound smiled and nodded, happy that he was appreciated. He'd really liked working this spread, had spent a good year here. He was going to miss the land and the men, was going to miss Lego nights and Elias bitching about ... well, about everything.

He didn't tell the others until one night at supper, when Jake finally asked him what was wrong.

"Nothing," he said, staring at his plate. Then he made the mistake of looking up and meeting blue eyes and Jake was looking at him all worried, and that just wasn't right. "I'm leaving," he admitted.

Elias looked at him and didn't say anything for a long moment, letting Jake ask the question.

"Where're you going?" Jake still sounded concerned, but he didn't look so worried; his posture had eased a bit and he was eating again.

"North," he said. He picked at his food for a couple of minutes and told them that his brother's painting and sculpting was taking off, that Alex needed his help. "Gonna go up and help build his studio. Stay until winter and see if I like it up there. If it's too cold, or I hate it, I'll just head back down the coast, maybe see Florida or something."

Jake nodded. "Couldn't get me off this land, but yeah, I can see trying something new. Good to be near your family, too."

Elias agreed with that, anyway. "Family can be a damn good thing, Hound. Besides, not like you have ties here. Good to see some of the country before you settle down."

Tornado didn't say a word.

After supper Hound went up to the stable to feed the horses, and he wasn't surprised to turn around and see Tor standing in the doorway watching him. He just nodded at Tor and finished what he was doing, hoping Tor would go away. But of course the stubborn bastard merely stood there, watching. Finally, Hound sat down on a tack box and waited.

Tor walked over and sat down next to him, not touching, not looking at him. They both stared straight ahead, watching the sunset framed by the barn doors.

"You're gonna hate it up north," Tor said, his voice low and sure.

Hound nodded. "Yeah. That's why I'm not going there. I'm heading west, looking at southern California."

Tor glanced at him. "So why the bullshit?"

Hound stared at the floor, fingers lacing together and gripping each other, knuckles turning white. "Had to say

something, didn't I? Give them a reason that sorta made sense; they wouldn't buy me just getting the itch to wander."

Tor nodded but didn't say anything; he just waited.

"Couldn't tell him the truth, could I?" Hound whispered.

"No. He'd get upset, think he'd been hurting you all this time without even knowing. He'd want to make it better, and he can't." Tor sounded very sure.

Hound glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. Tor was still looking ahead, watching the sunset.

"How long have you known?"

Tor glanced at him and smiled a little. He shrugged and said, "Couple of months, give or take a week or so. Been waiting to see how you were gonna play it. Got to admit, didn't see you leaving being the way you were gonna go."

"Hurts too much to stay."

Tor nodded, and this time his look was full of sympathy. "I get that. It's gotta be rough."

Hound was suddenly seized by a horrible thought. "Oh God, *he* doesn't know, does he?"

"Taggart? Fuck, no." Tor laughed then, an honest sound of amusement. "That man is completely oblivious most of the time. I had to get naked and shove my tongue down his throat before he clued in. So, unless you've been dragging him out in rainstorms—" Tor raised an eyebrow and Hound just about fell off the tack box, shaking his head so hard.

Tor relented. "No. He doesn't know. I'll not be telling him either."

They sat for a long time, watched the sun fading away.

"What's it like?" Hound asked quietly.

Tor looked at him again, eyes dark and searching. "Don't torture yourself."

"I want to know." He did. More than anything.

Tor sighed. "Fuck." He was silent for so long that Hound was sure he wasn't going to say anything more, then he started to talk, still watching the sky's colors. "Being with Jake is like spring and summer together. Everything is new and growing, and full of life and hope. Like the rain is always gentle and needed, and the little tiny start of green is sure to be something wonderful and strong by the time it's done growing. The storms are powerful and sometimes scary, but you know that they're gonna end and then there's gonna be rainbows and birds and fresh sweet grass. There's heat and passion and long days that leave you exhausted and dead, but the nights are cool and refreshing, and through it all he's right there, being just what I need."

Tor didn't look at him again, just got up and left the barn. Hound knew that no matter how much he thought he loved Jake, he had nothing on Tor, and it was a good thing he was leaving. It almost hurt to be near them.

* * * *

Leaving was both harder and easier than Hound expected. Harder, because he'd hoped to just wander off and not have to face any of them. No, that was a lie. He didn't want to face Jake, and he knew it. Easier, because no one made a fuss—they just walked him out to the truck so Elias could drive him to town.

The Boss gave him a bonus, said it was incentive for him to come back. That made Hound feel guilty; no way he was coming back. Elias offered to drive him to the bus, which was kind, and even Kip showed up, coming over from his new house to say farewell and take care.

Jake grinned at him and offered his hand, so Hound made himself smile back and take it. Couldn't do anything but, though he was scared shitless that he'd do something and then Jake would know. But it went okay, even if it did leave him feeling shaky and sick to his stomach.

Tor leaned in the open window of the truck door and looked him in the eye. "Hope you find what you need," he said, and Hound nodded at him, not sure how to tell the man everything he wanted to. He figured Tor already knew, and really, the only thing to say was 'Thanks for not kicking my ass for falling for your man'. He said, "See ya around," instead.

Elias drove him into town and waited around until the bus got there. He had a ticket to Little Rock, so Elias didn't say anything about him not going north like he'd said. All Elias did was shake his hand and pat him on the back.

"Take care of yourself. Send us a card if you get the chance, let us know how you're doin'."

"Will. Take care, Elias, and thanks."

That was it. He got on the bus and stared out the window all the way to Little Rock, trying his damndest not to think of Jake and failing miserably.

He reckoned he was a damn fool. He was more than ten years younger than Jake and had never even been interested

in a guy before. Jake was with Tor when Hound had first met him; he'd never had any illusions about that. He hadn't harbored any false hopes, either; he knew commitment when he saw it, knew it before Tor did, if what had happened was any indication. Tor had taken off, but Hound knew he'd be back.

Hadn't even cared about Jake then. No, that was another lie. He'd cared, but not like he did later. He liked the man fine, same as he'd liked Kip and Elias and Tor. That was another thing. He'd always liked Tor, had never wished him gone, had always known that there was no one more suited to Jake than Tor. Certainly not himself.

But he'd fallen anyway. Had known it when he saw the marks on Jake's wrists and figured out how they'd gotten there. Had known it when he'd gone to clean stalls and saw the bales in the empty stall and wanted to fight something, thinking about Tor tying Jake down. Never mind that Jake obviously wanted it. It hadn't been him.

He'd gone back to his room shaking that day. He felt like an utter idiot, completely taken unaware. He'd never thought about Jake like that, not in a sexual way. Why would he? He wasn't gay. And yet, seeing the bales, knowing that it was leather cutting into Jake's wrists and that ... damn.

He'd lain down on his bed, mortified beyond all belief that he was even thinking about such a thing, about what his friend would look like tied up like that, cock hard and wanting, what it would be like to kiss him, to touch him, to feel him. It was the most invasive fantasy he'd ever had about anyone and he couldn't get rid of it, couldn't get rid of

his own erection by willing it away. He'd bitten his lip and forced himself not to touch his cock, not to indulge himself by shredding Jake and Tor's privacy, and he'd come anyway, just thinking about it.

He'd avoided them for days after that.

Then all the shit with Jake's brother had happened and he'd watched Jake handle it; that was when he knew he loved him. He waited a long time for that to go away, to mellow back into admiration and respect. It hadn't, and through it all there was Tor. Hound had never stopped liking Tor, never resented him or anything. But he couldn't stay. It hurt too much and he was losing himself, bit by bit. He wanted a piece of happiness for himself and he didn't think that would happen if he was still on the ranch.

It was time to go, and so he went.

When he got off the bus in Little Rock, he went straight to the ticket window and bought a one-way ticket to Santa Monica. It was a long trip and he slept most of the way, coming awake in groggy fits and starts to see that the faces around him had changed and that it was time to get off the bus and stretch his legs for a bit. He didn't talk to the people on the bus; everyone had a story to tell and he was still too close to the center of his own. He bought sandwiches that tasted of cardboard and drank too much pop, then fell asleep again, waiting to see the sun and the ocean.

When he got off the bus in California, he was disappointed that he couldn't smell the ocean right away. All he could smell was diesel and piss, and he had to force himself to remember that he was still standing in a bus station, and yeah it was

gross, but if he'd just go out the door he'd be able to find the damn Pacific and then he could see it for himself.

His legs were stiff and he was utterly exhausted for all the sleep he'd had, but he walked and walked, duffle over his shoulder, until he reached the beach, and then he walked some more, along the sand. He walked until he found a place that wasn't littered with people or dogs or crap, and he dropped his bag in the sand and he just stared.

It was so fucking big. It was windy and sunny and he could hear people laughing and screaming and there were gulls screeching and the air was thick with salt and something he didn't have a name for, and coconut oil. He sat on the sand, leaning on his duffle, and fell asleep listening to the waves roll in.

* * * *

Hound spent two weeks in California. The first three days he spent on the beach or not far from it. He had some money saved up, and the bonus the Boss had given him meant that he didn't need to look for work right away. He found a room in a cheap motel a few blocks from the water and stashed his stuff, then made his way back the beach dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, determined to even out his tan. White legs were just not the thing to be sporting in California.

He walked. He sat and watched the waves and looked at all the people. At night he changed into jeans and sat on a bench, watching the sun set over the Pacific. He spent most of his time feeling like he was utterly outside of himself,

unable to focus on one single thing for more than a couple of minutes at a time.

He watched the ocean, listened to it. He had been impressed by its sheer size from the first moment, but the more he watched it the more uncomfortable he got. It was flat and moving, and even though he knew it was full of life it was so far removed from what he'd always known that it looked dead to him. An endless expanse of water. It was just so fucking huge.

He didn't go swimming.

He was watching the sun settle low on the horizon on the third day when a girl sat down next to him on the bench. He was sitting back, his legs pulled up to his chest, just looking out over the ocean. He'd wrapped his arms around his knees and part of his mind was thinking it was too damn hot to sit like this, but the rest of him was really feeling like being drawn up close into a small ball was right.

He didn't even glance at the girl until she said hi. He suddenly realized that she was sitting there *because* he was, and not just 'cause there was an empty spot on the bench. He opened his mouth to say something back to her and had to clear his throat. He hadn't said more than a few sentences out loud in four days.

"Hi," he finally managed, not terribly surprised at how flat his voice sounded.

"I've been watching you," she said. "For two days. You wanna talk about it?"

Hound looked at her, startled not so much by the offer but more by the fact that he had no idea where she'd come from.

He'd been on the same stretch of beach almost constantly and he had no recollection of anyone. He looked around and tried to see if any of the people looked remotely familiar and came up blank.

"You have?" he asked carefully.

She nodded, her shy smile falling away. "You've been walking and staring and just looking blank. Thought you might want a break from the thinking."

He looked back at the water. It was too big. He had no idea what he'd been thinking about for the last three days. He couldn't recall a single idea, or a plan, or even a day dream. He remembered picturing the fields and pastures over the water, he remembered standing up to go feed the horses and sitting down again feeling like an idiot. He remembered thinking about Jake and Tor and Lego, and sounds from the back of the house, and a scream from the river bed.

The girl was staring at him.

He looked at her again, this time to actually see her. She was about twenty, he thought, brown hair back in a ponytail and brown eyes, too. She wasn't the prettiest girl on the beach, wasn't as pretty as Missy even, but she had a lovely mouth and really nice legs. She was wearing shorts and a big loose shirt and sandals.

He smiled at her. "Hey."

She grinned back and relaxed a little. "Hey. So, wanna talk about it?"

"Not really," he said, still smiling at her.

"Okay. Where're you from?" She looked out at the water and settled back on the bench.

"Arkansas. You?"

"Just from here."

They looked out together for a bit, not saying anything.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" she asked in a low voice.

Hound shrugged. "It's ... awesome." He didn't want to tell this Californian girl that her ocean scared the crap out of him, that it was too wide and empty and dead looking.

"It sounds nice," she said, not looking at him. "But it can be terrifying, too."

He nodded.

A little later she moved closer to him. "So. Girl trouble?"

He had to grin. "No. Not girl trouble."

"Good," she said, and then she leaned over and kissed him gently, just brushing her mouth over his.

He slid an arm over her shoulders and kissed her back, just as gently. She tasted of lemonade and bubble gum, innocent flavors that didn't sit well with a girl who would be kissing a stranger from Arkansas. He wondered what he tasted like in her mouth.

They sat there for a long time kissing softly. He swung her legs up, across his lap and she leaned into him. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Does it matter?"

"No. Are you going to do anything more than kiss me?"

"No."

"Okay."

When it was dark, Hound walked her to her car and she left. He went to his motel room and fell asleep late, tasting something that was too sweet to be good for him.

In the morning, he checked out and did a tour of used car lots, finally buying a used Suzuki bike that looked like it had a few months' hard use left in it. He got a new helmet and a leather coat and headed up the coast, riding alongside the ocean for as long as he could before he had to move inland.

Hound toured a little in California because he thought he should; it seemed a waste to come all that way and not see the major spots. He went to LA for a couple of days, but noise and the color of the air drove him out, feeling more than a little cheated. LA wasn't grand and glamorous at all; it was crowded and violent and rushed and yellow.

He went to San Francisco, which was better; however, his stay there convinced him that he most certainly wasn't going to be a city boy. Ever.

He took his bike north, and two weeks after leaving the ranch he found himself at a truck stop, miles from the ocean, drinking his third cup of coffee in an hour. At that rate he'd be stopping to piss every few miles, so he sat tight and ate a big slice of pie. The waitress started to look at him funny, so he went out to the parking lot and sat on a huge rock next to his bike and forced himself to think.

He still thought about Jake all the time. He was still numb, and sad, and for some reason he had actually believed that just leaving the ranch was going to make everything better. He looked at the pay phone and had to fight the urge to call. It got easier when he decided he didn't know if he wanted to talk to Jake or Tor.

He wondered what the hell he was doing. Touring cities for what reason? He was a cowboy; he didn't belong here on the

coast, near so many lights and too many people. He wasn't going back to Arkansas, wasn't about to head back to the land yet. But he didn't belong here, and he wasn't sure anymore if running was a good idea. Hard to run when you take everything with you.

He did a quick check of his funds and figured he had two weeks before he needed to find work, but sooner would be better. Maybe working would give him something to do besides torture himself with memories of blue-grey eyes that only saw someone else.

Eventually he went into the bathroom and took care of the coffee problem and then he hit the road again, heading for Oregon as fast as he could get there.

It only took him four days to find work, doing day labor for a small construction company. It wasn't great, and he didn't like it much, but it paid better than tending bar and he managed to save up some money in a few weeks.

The guys he worked with were okay. They asked him lots of questions about stuff he liked—horses and ranching—and he found his humor starting to come back. He went out with them on Friday nights, only having two or three drinks because of the cost, and he started to feel ... better.

One of the guys finally asked him why he'd left Arkansas if he loved it so much, and he froze for a second. Someone else saw the look on his face and slapped him on the back. "Love fucking sucks, Hound. Keep movin', keep workin', and give it time." The others laughed and made assorted jokes about getting laid helping, too, and variety being the spice of life, and fucking curing love ... he stopped listening after a while.

When he was alone in his cheap room that night he tried to be objective. He'd been gone from the ranch for six weeks and things seemed to be easing up; he was working and talking and having a bit of fun again. He still loved Jake, and hell, maybe he always would. But maybe he was ready to let go a bit and be less *in love* with him.

The next day was Saturday and he woke up late, feeling lazy. He had his usual morning erection, and for the first time in more than two months he let his hand drift to his balls. He'd started to hate jerking off—hated that his imagination always sent him places he didn't belong. This time he just felt, touching himself with care at first, concentrating on the physical sensations. He let himself use his hands and fingers, let the sound of his own breathing and his own touch get him off. He came with a cry, joy mingled with the release. His body was his this time.

He took a shower and went for a walk, getting back to the motel about mid-afternoon. He could feel summer starting to slip away, and he decided it was time to head out again, get out of Oregon before he wound up working construction all winter. He wanted to be somewhere warmer before late autumn, and it looked like the bike still had a few more miles to go. He called his boss and gave notice, promising himself that he'd take a look at Nevada next. Another week and he'd go see the desert. And then, just 'cause he could, he took another shower and brought himself off again.

* * * *

The desert was flat and dry and hot, just like it was supposed to be. Hound loved it. Where the ocean had been cold and seemingly dead, the desert had animals and plants and nowhere near the amount of noise. He rode all the way down to Vegas and took a look around, thought he could like it better than LA. He got propositioned by four hookers in an hour, though, and he left as quietly as he'd arrived.

He swung northeast this time, wondering vaguely what this zigzag pattern said about him. He spent some time thinking about himself as he rode through the desert, not having much else to do except stop fairly frequently to let the engine cool down. He thought he might actually have to stop when he reached the mountains and let the poor bike die. He was doing his best, but the Suzuki could really only be called one by its ancestry, he'd replaced so many parts.

So he camped and rode and stopped in tiny towns that weren't so much towns as places where people happened to live close to each other, and he thought about stuff, tried to figure out who he was. He wondered if it was just because he was twenty-four and that was the thing to do—go on a journey of discovery. He didn't mind if it was; he was grateful he had the chance to do it and not be tied to something he hated instead.

He smiled a little at the thought he might be as crooked as his path. He'd been doing a little bit of careful exploration of his sexuality as he traveled—careful in that he was doing it all by himself. He'd discovered quickly that he shouldn't think about girls while driving very fast on a motor bike, and that had been reassuring. When he had gotten that settled in his

mind he decided that it might be time to look at the other side of the coin as well.

He wouldn't think about Jake, and it was getting less difficult to put the man from his mind. What he needed to do, he decided, was think about someone as physically different from Jake as he could.

It wasn't that challenging, really. Someone with dark hair and eyes. Shorter than Jake, even a bit shorter than himself. Slim hiped and lean, olive skin and small dark nipples. Strong legs, and smooth hands; very little body hair, just smooth, smooth skin, unless you count the hair around his—

Hound pulled over to the side of the road, intensely thankful that he was in the middle of the desert, and waited until his breathing had slowed to normal. He took his helmet off and ran a hand through his hair, looking up at the sky, bluer than it had any right to be.

"Guess that answers that question."

* * * *

Hound meandered around Nevada for a couple more days, moving steadily north east, toward the mountains. Summer was wearing on, but he was far enough south that he didn't mind at all; the intense heat had faded just enough, and the sun was gentling in the late afternoons. The foothills of the Rockies beckoned him and he went willingly, thinking that it might be nice to see some of Utah before dipping south again into Arizona. He didn't want to be too far north—he had no interest in Salt Lake City or that area—just enough that he

could let the bike play out in the hills for a few days, see what it was like.

He liked the mountains just fine. He wondered idly if his new-found passion for the desert and the hills was a reaction to his distaste of the ocean but decided it didn't matter either way. He was just liking what he was seeing, and that was the point, wasn't it? He had to think about it for a few minutes before realizing that no, in fact the point was to get away from the ranch, and it seemed that he'd managed that somewhere along the way. Now he was truly just riding, looking at the world. It felt good.

He pulled over to the side of the road and turned off the bike. He looked around and listened to the birds for a few minutes, then walked a little bit to stretch his legs. Gone from the ranch for two months and he felt like he was a world away from there. That didn't seem right somehow, like he was getting away too fast, that Jake shouldn't be so easy to move past.

He shook head and looked to the sky again. What the hell did he want? He left so he could get away from Jake, so he could stop feeling sick and sad and lonely. Now he wasn't sad, he didn't want to puke when he thought about the man, and hell, he wasn't really even lonely, just alone. And alone was okay. So how come he felt guilty about feeling better too fast?

"You, Hound," he said aloud, "are sick in the head. Just put the past behind you, get on the fucking bike, and get moving."

He rode for a few more hours, taking twists and turns carefully, heading higher and higher into the trees. He loved the smell of the place after the dust of the desert, and he loved the shadows that were lengthening on the road in front of him. He pulled in at a motel for the night and slept deeply, the window wide open so he could smell the cedars outside.

The next day he headed south and turned off the main highway onto a two-lane secondary road. It twisted and turned more than the state roads did, and that's what he wanted. He liked leaning into the curves and he liked having to adjust his speed every once in a while. It was more exciting than the desert, where all he really could do was go faster and faster; here it was slower and slower. He wasn't an idiot, he didn't play games on the turns or the hills. He just like the concentration.

He was heading down a gentle hill and eyeing the next one when he noticed it. The slight hesitation in the brakes that made him pay more attention on the next turn. He took to controlling his speed entirely by the throttle and gearing down, testing the brakes every half hour or so when he had a straight stretch to play on. They weren't dangerous yet, but they could be if he was going to stay in the mountains for long. He started looking for somewhere to stop for the night.

The shadows were just starting to lengthen when he came around a bend in the road and saw a gas station that had two service bays just ahead of him. If nothing else, he could take a good look at the brake cables before going any further, as well as find out where the nearest motel was. He wasn't completely put off by the thought of camping out, but he was

kind of hoping for a really cheap room with hot water and a TV.

He pulled into the station and killed the engine, looking around for a minute before climbing off the bike. He was about halfway down the side of the slope, and it looked like there was a small town ahead of him. Very small. He figured that if the collection of buildings rated a four way stop sign at the crossroads it would be something; there certainly wouldn't be a traffic light. If there was a motel he'd be happy, and if there was a diner he'd be over the moon.

Behind the station and up the hill a bit was a big old farmhouse with a lane coming down and disappearing behind the bays. Most likely the owner, he thought as he looked at the painted sign. Worn and tired red letters on a chipped white background spelled out *DeI's*. There were three gas pumps out front and a small office to the side. Hound could see bottles of oil and shelves of fan belts behind the cash register. What he didn't see was any people.

He left his helmet on the bike and wandered over, listening for anything from the bays. One of the doors was up, showing a Jeep up on jacks, so he banged on the other one with a closed fist and called out, "Hey, anyone around?"

"Shit!" The curse was followed by a clang and the sound of wheels on cement as a man a few years older than himself appeared out from under the Jeep. "Sorry, was kinda lost under here. Can you hold on a sec?"

Hound grinned down at the greasy mechanic and said, "Sure. No rush at all."

The guy nodded and pushed off with his boots, sliding under the Jeep again. Hound stood and watched for a minute and then looked around, deciding that skinny legs in coveralls sticking out from under a vehicle weren't that exciting. He peered into the other bay, but whatever was in there was hidden under a tarp. Had to be a fucking boat though, the car was huge. He could see fins and tried to guess the year by their size. He was still pondering when the guy slid out again.

"Hey, not to be rude, but do you know your basic way around an engine?" the mechanic asked him.

Hound turned around again and nodded. "Yeah. Can't fix anything with a computer chip, but I can find my way. Why?"

White teeth gleamed up at him, the man's smile like a sunbeam at twilight. "Thank Christ. Just need you to check the oil level, if you don't mind. Got a leak here that I can't find."

Hound grinned back at him and moved into the work area, grabbing a couple of sheets of paper towel. He checked the oil quickly and studied the dipstick before shoving it home again. "You're down about halfway," he said to the work boots.

"Yeah, figured," the guy in the boots said as he crossed his ankles. The voice was smooth and deep, kind of rumbling but not growling. Hound hadn't heard anything like it before. He was used to voices hoarse from dust, or smooth like velvet—and yeah, not going to think about Jake anymore—and the combination was interesting.

There was another clank from under the jeep and then the voice swore a couple of times. "Do me another favor?" he finally asked.

Hound scuffed his boots and smiled to himself. "Yeah?"

"Grab the flippin' light on the bench and shine it under here? I need more light on the left-hand side."

Hound got the light and moved to the right, shining the light up under the jeep.

"Thanks."

Hound chuckled. No one under a car ever got left and right directions correct. If they did, it threw the whole 'helper/helppee' system out of whack.

"There you are, you son of a—" the voice muttered. One more noise, this one more of a crunch, and then the feet were pulling the rest of the skinny body out again. "Thanks," the guy said.

Hound reached out a hand and pulled the guy to his feet. "Not a problem." He had time to notice that they were exactly the same height, meeting eye to eye, before the man was handing him more paper towel.

"Got ya all greasy. Sorry." He had brown eyes, leaning toward hazel.

Hound took the paper towel and wiped off his hands. "S'okay."

They walked to the front of the bay and the mechanic turned to him. "Now then, what can I do for you?"

Hound smiled and looked at the ground. "Nothin' actually. Was just going to let you know that I was letting my bike cool down and then I gotta check the brakes. But maybe you could tell me how far to a motel, that'd be a fine help."

The guy blinked and then laughed. "Cool. Yeah, that's fine. Give you a hand if you want; what are you riding?"

They walked out toward the bike. "Supposed to be a Suzuki, but trust me, it's a hybrid. Whatever fits is on that thing. Just don't want to kill myself before it up and dies on me."

The man nodded and pushed a hand through his dark hair. He looked at his hand and cursed, giving Hound a look that said 'Yeah, I always manage to grease my hair, shut up,' and looked the bike over. He glanced up at Hound a couple of times and then finally stood up and asked, "How much of this did you do?"

Hound shrugged. "Not all. Bought it used about two months ago and have been riding it pretty steady since then. Most of the cooling system went in the desert and I've had to fix the timing a couple of times since I left California, but the body work was all done when I bought it."

"Where you been?" the guy asked in a friendly voice, still looking at the bike.

"Started in Santa Monica about nine weeks ago, rode up into Oregon, stayed there for a month, went down to Vegas, around the desert and crossed into Utah yesterday or the day before." Hound thought it sounded very impressive out loud like that.

The mechanic did too, apparently. "Cool. Where you headed next?"

Hound shrugged. "Not sure, gonna need to stop fairly soon and work for a bit. Eventually I'll go to New Mexico, I think, and maybe Texas. But not for a while." Texas was too close to home. Maybe next year.

The mechanic bit his lip and looked up at the house for a second. When he looked back at Hound his eyes were sharp and curious, but Hound didn't think he was wondering so much about *him* as he was about ... something.

"Let's see what you think about this," he said and led Hound back into the bays, going to the behemoth under the sheet. He didn't take the sheet off, just reached under it and lifted the hood so Hound could see the engine, and then stepped back.

Hound looked at it and then the mechanic. "It's new. I mean, not brand new, but it's not original."

The guy nodded. "Yeah, I had to drop it in 'cause the old one wouldn't burn unleaded. It was shot anyway. But the timing's fucked and I want this baby to purr."

Hound looked at him. "And you can't adjust the timing?"

That got a belly laugh. "Of course I can. I want you to do it, though."

Hound stared at him, no idea why he was supposed to play with the timing on this beast—whatever it was—but willing to help out. "Turn it over then, let me hear."

That earned him a quick grin. He waited for a second and nearly jumped out of his skin as the engine roared to life. Fucking thing was loud before it settled down. He listened for a few seconds and adjusted the timing and listened again. It took him a couple of tries, but when he was satisfied the car was purring. Like a lion, not a tabby, but purring nonetheless.

"Beautiful." The voice came from behind him and he turned around to face the mechanic, grinning. The man

moved around the car and turned it off, silence falling nicely.
"Wanna see her?"

Hound nodded.

"Know what she is?" The man was teasing him, one hand on the tarp, not pulling it back yet.

"Nope. Fins aren't big enough to be from the fifties, or at least the mid-fifties. I'm going with a Ford, most likely late forties, from the length, and the fact you've dropped a Ford engine in there, but I can't get any closer than that. Oh! And it's a convertible. Can see the roof supports through the tarp. Soft top."

The mechanic blinked at him and nodded his head. "Cool." Then he pulled back the tarp and Hound whistled.

Midnight Cherry paint, cream leather interior, original trim, four-speed stick shift. "1948 Ford Galaxy convertible. Very nice." Hound walked around the car, admiring its lines. "You restore it?"

"Yep. Took me three years." The man's voice was full of pride, and Hound thought he'd earned the right.

"It's gorgeous," Hound said honestly. He was still admiring it when he heard a car pull up outside and the man beside him swear under his breath.

"Cover her for me, will ya?" he said as he moved away.

Hound jumped a little, startled out of the happy car-loving space his mind had gone, and pulled the tarp up. He made sure the car was nicely under wraps and wandered back outside, thinking he better see to his brakes and find out where he could bed down for the night.

When he went outside, the mechanic was leaning over the open door of a blue Neon, talking to a pretty blonde. Hound's first thought was girlfriend, but as he walked past them to get to his bike he could see the mechanic's eyes flicker toward him with something close to pleading in them. He wondered what he was supposed to do, and the man motioned him over.

The girl looked up at him in surprise. "You didn't say you had a customer in, Del. You should have told me; I wouldn't sit here gabbing at you if you have work to do, you know that." She smiled at Hound and said, "I'm sorry. Del's a little too polite to tell me to go away."

Hound smiled at her; she seemed nice enough, even if Del did look like he'd rather be back under the jeep trying to find an oil leak. "It's okay. I'm just going to take a look at my brakes and see what's what. Then I'll be out of his hair."

He turned to walk away again, but she said, "Where are you from? Don't get many strangers through here."

Hound knew the opening of a chatty woman when he heard one and settled himself back on his heels. This could take awhile.

"From Arkansas. Decided that the main roads were good enough, but you get to see more on the side roads. Got nowhere to be in a hurry, so I'm just wandering through the mountains for a time."

She smiled at him. "Must be nice to have the time and money to do that. I'd love to just take off sometime, go see the east coast and maybe go to Vermont one fall." She talked for a bit more, about leaves and such, and Hound gave Del a

friendly glare as the mechanic slipped away and went back to looking at Hound's bike. Traitor.

Hound answered her questions for a few more minutes, and then Del wandered back. "Daisy, you best get to Miss Edith's. She'll be wanting her supper soon." It wasn't an order; the tone was more like the one Elias had used when Kip had lost track of time and was in danger of getting to Beth's later than he'd said.

She blinked and looked at her watch. "Oh, God." She smiled at Hound and said, "It's been nice talking to you—?"

Hound heard that pause which was the universal invitation to introduce oneself and opened his mouth to say 'Hound'. He really did. But in that split second he heard his own voice from the day before, telling him to leave the past behind.

"I'm Kevin," he said with a smile.

* * * *

Kevin waved to Daisy as she drove away and shook his head. This had to be the weirdest place he'd ever stopped. Usually he could count on a friendly smile and a little bit of chat about where he was from, but this place ... Lord above. Getting tested on simple mechanics, chatting up a pretty girl so another guy could avoid her, Del loving on his bike like it was something special when he knew it was just about to die dead on him ... and he was still just standing in one spot, watching Daisy's taillights go around the bend in the road.

"Kevin." Del's voice made him jump, pulling him back to reality pretty damn fast. Smooth voice, one he needed to

think about. Later. He turned to his bike and saw that Del was taking a close look at the brake lines, not looking too happy.

"Hey," Kevin said as he walked back to the bike. He crouched down on the side opposite Del. "Daisy seems nice," he said with a grin.

Del made a face and went back to looking at the brake lines. "She's all right."

Kevin raised an eyebrow, deliberately exaggerating his look of interest into something like Jerry Springer about to delve deeply into some poor bastard's childhood full of circus freaks and exotic pets who had been reclaimed by the government and that's why he was married to a transgendered petty thief. "So she's what? A cousin? Ex-wife overcome with guilt? Sister?"

Del looked at him, eyes wide then narrowing for a moment before he threw back his head and laughed. "Lord, no. Not an ex of any kind—oh God, that would be really awful—never get any kind of peace then. No, it's worse than all that." He gave Kevin another quick grin and stood up, then walked back toward the bays, Kevin following along. "I chose her, if you can believe that. Daisy's my best friend, has been ever since we were about four years old. She's a real mother hen to me, though. Can't seem to keep out of my business and she's always checkin' up on me. You'll see tomorrow. Twenty dollars says she's around here at least three times before supper."

Kevin stopped walking and blinked a couple of times. "Tomorrow?"

Del turned around and stared at him, thinking for a moment. A slow flush rose on his face. "Damn. Had that part of the conversation in my head didn't I? Daisy says I do that 'cause I'm alone too much, that I need to start talking to myself out loud so everyone can know what they're saying to me. I think she just wants me to look silly in front of ... well, everyone. Doesn't matter though, 'cause you're looking at me like I've lost my mind, so I'm just gonna go in here and have a sit for awhile, and you can decide if you want to hear about what I was thinking or if you're just going to head out now and try to get to Cedar City before your brakes die." The last part was said as Del disappeared out of sight, moving fast.

Kevin blinked again and started to laugh. He figured that anyone who could babble that well was worth listening to; he'd heard some interesting things come out when people's nerves got the best of them and had given away lots himself. As a seasoned babbler and chatter box he knew a fellow talker when he met one, even if it did seem to take something embarrassing to wake the man up to his potential.

Kevin followed Del into the bay and looked around. Gone. He went through the side door into the cash office and found Del sitting behind the counter, rummaging around in a box on the bottom shelf.

"Takes talent to do that," Kevin offered as he leaned on the counter and watched. "When I get going like that I actually have to keep talking until I tell my entire life story or someone does me the kindness of smacking me upside the head. And I'm having a hard time figuring out how you talking to me in your head is a bad thing, other than me not

actually knowing what we're going to do tomorrow. Fill me in?"

Del looked up at him, his face still red but with laughter in his eyes. "Daisy took off with my smokes. She does that."

Kevin nodded sympathetically. "Yeah. Best friends—can't stand it when you try to kill yourself slowly. Damn her, anyway."

"Oh, shut up," Del said with a grin. "Not like three cigarettes a year will kill me."

"God, they will if they come from the same pack. Christ, they'd be so dry your fingers would be in flames just from holding onto the damn thing. Easier just to tell me what you're thinking."

Del stood up and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah." He gestured out the main door toward the motorcycle. "Looked at your bike."

Kevin nodded. "It's tired out, I know. But she's got a few miles left before she quits." He looked out at the bike and then back at Del. "The brakes fucked?"

"No, not completely." Del ran his hand through his hair. "Damn," he said mildly when he realized he'd greased his hair yet again. He rocked back on his heels and looked at Kevin. "Brakes are needing a bit of work, yeah. But you're good for a bit, as long as you don't take any chances. If I were you, I'd take care of it soon—either do it now or get out of the mountains as soon as you can and strip the bike down. Can't be riding around up here with brakes soft as that."

"Yeah, I know. Not in a real rush to leave the mountains, so time to overhaul it, I guess." Kevin was doing another

mental adjustment to his wallet, and it wasn't looking so good. He'd have time to strip down the bike and get it all nice and tight for a good run and have to stop somewhere and work a stretch. Or, he could just head to Arizona and pray he hit the desert before the brakes really gave it up. He was still weighing options when he realized Del was talking to him.

"...the bays. So if you tear it down we can rebuild and—shit, I'm talking to myself aren't I?"

"Yeah, but at least it's out loud," Kevin said with a grin. "Sorry. Was adding up what it'll cost to strip it down. Even if I do it all myself I'll need help rebuilding it, and between parts and labor I'm not sure I can do it right now."

"That's what I'm saying. Do it here, take a week or whatever and scatter parts all over one of the bays. I'll move the Ford up to the barn, and we can work on the bike here. If you need parts, I'll make some calls and see what I can do."

Kevin thought about it for about two seconds before seeing how good a deal it was for him and what a lousy deal it was for Del. "Can't pay you for your time, and I'll be taking up your space—"

"I'll just help out when I have the time. No charge. You pay for parts, and if you're going to get all hung up on it, you can work around here for a bit. Can't let you do inspections, 'cause you're not a mechanic, but you can do what you can, even if you just want to pump gas and do oil changes. Or if you want, you can work on my cars, or you can work in the barn instead of in the bay, though I'd prefer if you worked on the bike down here because the tools are here and—" Del was starting to babble again.

"Why?" Kevin interrupted.

Del blinked. "Why what?"

Kevin blinked. "Why do you want me to stay?"

Del's face cleared. "Oh! 'Cause you knew what the Ford was. 'Cause you work on your bike, don't just ride around like you're wild and free. 'Cause I want to hear about Arkansas. Okay, maybe not that last one so much. But ... well. Maybe Daisy's right. Maybe I spend too much time alone."

Kevin nodded. "Okay."

"Yeah?" Del sounded surprised and pleased.

"Yeah." Kevin figured he just sounded pleased.

* * * *

Kevin had a feeling that he was going to be grinning all night. Del had given him directions to the motel—"go straight down the road and when you hit the end of the S curve go straight, can't miss it"—and he was pleased to find a small café in the building. The directions were correct in that when he hit the end of the curve he went straight and was in the parking lot of the motel; if he hadn't been paying attention to the signs and the speed limit, he would have wound up actually in the building. He shook his head as he pulled up outside the office and wondered how many near misses there were in winter. The motel was literally dead ahead if you didn't follow the course of the road.

"Oh, we just close down the last few units at the first sign of ice," the owner said when Kevin asked him about it.

"You're serious?" Kevin asked, not sure if the man was pulling his leg or not. He got a slow grin in return and still

didn't know if the man was telling him the truth or not. He'd ask Del in the morning.

He got a sandwich from the café and went to his room. He lay back on the bed watching TV for a bit, but he realized he hadn't been paying any attention for at least an hour and he still had that silly grin on as he shook his head again. And let his grin grow even bigger.

Kevin hadn't felt any sort of connection to anybody since leaving the ranch. He'd kissed that girl back in Santa Monica, but that hadn't been anything at all; he'd known that at the time. He'd liked the guys he'd worked with in Oregon, but now, three weeks or so later, he couldn't really remember their names.

Del was funny, in a good way, and he was really good looking, in an underfed, loose-limbed way that was exotic to Kevin, who was used to cowboy muscles and beer bellies. Kevin even liked the way Del talked; it was comforting to see someone string words together without a set stopping place, to see someone get as flustered as he himself often felt.

Then there was Daisy. Kevin wished he'd seen more of her, gotten to see if the rest of her lived up the promise of pretty blue eyes and smooth blonde hair. She had creamy skin scattered with freckles and a wide smile. When she'd been talking about wanting to go north for an autumn, her eyes had gotten far away and dreamy, and ... and he hadn't been paying any attention. He'd been trying to see Del out of the corner of his eye.

The stupid grin was back. Kevin stripped down and got into bed, leaving the TV on for light, the sound off. He reckoned the next week or so was going to be real interesting.

He wasn't surprised to wake up in the middle of the night with sticky sheets. He could still feel the throb in his cock, still feel the tremble of release. He waited a moment until he was sure he could stand up and then went to the bathroom to wash himself. He stripped the bed and curled up in a spare blanket, going back to sleep with the silly grin still in place. He hadn't had a wet dream in years. He figured maybe tomorrow night he'd just stroke off instead. Or maybe as well. Depended on how he and Del got along.

* * * *

It didn't take long for the locals to find out there was someone new up at Del's. Daisy was there by ten, bringing a thermos of coffee and a basket of fresh muffins. Del rolled his eyes and disappeared under the hood of a Dodge. Kevin pulled up a chair and had a nice cup of coffee and bit of a chat.

"You going to stay long?" Daisy asked, looking at him through her eyelashes.

"For a bit," he answered, unable to stop himself from glancing in Del's direction. "He's gonna help me get the bike in shape, and I'm going to help out here—pump gas and such."

Daisy glanced in Del's direction as well. "Uh huh." She handed Kevin a muffin and another cup of coffee, smiling a

little. Well, kind of smirking actually, and Kevin knew he was blushing, but couldn't seem to stop.

Daisy stayed for about an hour, talking easily with him while Del worked on the car and threw in comments now and again. Kevin was happy and comfortable, just throwing out questions about the town and the people and getting a lesson about local history in return. He loved that kind of thing; it made him feel good to know that there were still places where everyone knew everyone else, where family and community mattered.

Del and Daisy told him about the garage, which had been Del's father's, and how Del's momma had died when Del was a little guy, just a toddler. About how Del's daddy had taken him into the garage every day and how Miss Mabel or Miss Edith would come up and sit and watch to make sure he didn't get hurt, and how Del's daddy wouldn't let them take his little boy away every day. He wanted to raise him, he just needed someone to keep him safe.

Daisy told him how her own mother took to dropping her off at the garage some days so she could play with Del—that was before they were even old enough for school—and how Miss Mabel would take them up to the house in the afternoons and let them help cook supper for Del's daddy. It sounded like they had grown up with a lot of people who loved them, and when Kevin said so they just nodded in agreement.

Del's father had died just after they were out of high school, and now the whole thing was Del's alone, no other blood relatives to help out. "But I sure as hell have family," Del said with a smile at Daisy.

Daisy had smiled back at him and then looked hard at Kevin. "We take care of each other."

Kevin nodded and finished his coffee. She'd made her point.

He walked back to the motel that evening, pleading a need to shower and sleep. Fact was, there was no way he'd be able to spend another hour with Del without embarrassing himself by pushing the man into a wall and asking for a lesson on how to make a man scream.

So he went to his room and stroked off, thinking about Del's smile and his voice and trying to imagine him naked. After he had some supper he took a bath and jerked off again, this time trying to imagine kissing Del, feeling that lanky body moving against him; he bit his lip hard enough to draw blood that time, but at least he didn't cry out loud enough to let everyone know what he was doing.

He still woke up with sticky sheets.

* * * *

On the second day, people started arriving to see who this cowboy was, and Kevin found himself spending more time talking to people than working on the bike. At this rate, he was going to be there all winter. He tried to find a down side there and could only come up with the fact that he hadn't enough money to pay for his room that long.

Everyone was very polite, and the conversations were pretty quick and predictable. He'd tell them he was from Arkansas, that he'd worked on a ranch and was just out seeing a bit of the country for a while before heading home to

settle down. Some of the men looked wistfully at the bike, some of them seemed a little confused about why he'd leave a place he loved, and others would just nod and pay for their gas, making it clear that they weren't really interested in him as anything other than something new to be seen at least once.

The women, on the other hand ... well. The ones who were 'of an age' as Kevin's own mother had said in reference to people over fifty, were very nice, if a little abrupt in their questions. "Who are you?" and "So, you'll be moving on when your bike is fixed?" and "Oh, yes, we like it here very much, it is a friendly place." Some of the younger set flirted a little, and that was fine, too. Kevin knew that it was innocent and fun, and hell, he liked to flirt. But when the big Lincoln rolled up and the woman driving got out and walked right to him, he knew that this was the woman he had to impress. She had the bearing of a person who knew her status in the community and took it very seriously.

Kevin heard Del swear softly behind him and had time to realize the oath was a prayer before his upbringing took over.

"So, you're Del's new help," the woman declared as she drew near. She was in her fifties, he guessed, solid and compact; if he were home he would have taken her for a Boss's wife, someone who was in charge.

He smiled warmly. He loved talking to women like this, absolutely loved it. He felt safest when he knew his place, and with this woman he knew what he was—an interloper to be inspected and either approved or disapproved. The only way

to win at this game was to be himself. Dishonesty or trying to play up to her through flattery would be death.

"Hi," he said, standing to meet her eyes. "I'm Kevin. Del's letting me help out here in exchange for his own help with my motorcycle."

She nodded sharply and glanced at Del. "You taking care of yourself?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss Mabel. Though it would be easier if you'd send me another batch of molasses cookies."

She rolled her eyes and grinned, her face folding into well worn laugh lines. "Pup. Behave yourself, and ask nicely." Kevin knew that a batch of molasses cookies would be in her oven half an hour after she returned home.

She turned her eyes back to him. "You know much about cars?"

"Not really, ma'am," he replied. "I worked on the vehicles on the ranch some, and my daddy let me work on his old car, but I'm just a cowboy really. Del's showing me some things when he has the time."

"Well, that's good of him. You'll not be working on the cars then? Just doing the other work around here?"

"Yes, ma'am. Just help out where I can and stay out of the way the rest of the time. My momma always told me to be a help and not a hindrance, and I've found that momma was almost always right."

She laughed. "Mommas usually are. What does she think about you gallivanting all over? She must want you home where you belong."

Kevin bit his lip and looked at the ground for a second. "Momma, well, she's gone, ma'am. Just me and my brother now, and he's up north, following his dream. Momma wanted us to do what makes us happy, and to do what we're good at. I'm still trying to find out what that is."

She looked at him with compassion, but didn't offer the overly solicitous sympathies he dreaded getting from strangers. "You not eager to return to ranching then?"

"Well," he said carefully, "I was good at it, and I miss the work. But I'm not sure that being a cowboy is what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm learning stuff here, and maybe that's what I'm meant to do right about now. Maybe if I was as good at ranching as I hear you are at baking I'd feel different."

She raised an eyebrow. "Who's been talkin' about me?" she asked, giving Del a teasing look.

"Daisy and Del raved for ages yesterday about your lemon pie," Kevin offered, letting a little pleading into his voice.

She blinked and then gave in to a belly laugh. "You're a sneaky one, aren't you? Fine then. Molasses cookies and lemon pie." She walked back to her car and opened the door. "Get back to work, the both of you. I'll send them up with someone later."

She drove off and Kevin grinned at Del, who just shook his head and said, "You're far too good at that. You do know that you were just adopted, don't you?"

Kevin just grinned at him and walked to his bike. Things were going just fine.

* * * *

Things were calmer the next day, in that they had fewer people dropping by to check out Kevin's story, but Kevin was far from calm. He was reaching the point where it would have been so easy to just get on his bike and ride away from Del so he didn't have to decide what to do or how to do it ... he was a nervous, horny wreck. He stood over his bike, which was pretty well stripped down to a million tiny parts by this point, and wondered if he could make it through another day without coming onto the man.

"Hey, want to show you something," Del said from behind him. Kevin's mind skittered off somewhere for a moment, and he had to close his eyes and breathe deeply to calm himself down. God, he was such a mess.

He followed Del out of the garage and up toward the house, but they headed to the right instead of left. They were going to the barn, which would have been great except Kevin was in such a state he thought about stables and stalls, which brought the image of hay bales and marked up wrists ... he thought he may have whimpered, and Del was staring at him.

Kevin flushed and looked back down at the garage, hoping someone would drive up so he could run away.

Del just opened up the big barn doors and stepped back. "Take a look. I'll be down there when you're done." Then he turned and walked away, tossing Kevin one of those brighter-than-anything smiles.

Kevin watched Del walk away and forced himself to go into the barn. He really just wanted to watch Del walk. He absently noted that he seemed to be traveling down that one

track again and again. Then even the thought of Del's ass was forced from his brain as he surveyed the interior of the barn.

Six chassis lined up on the far wall, all in need of massive amounts of body work and most likely equally impressive amounts of mechanical work. He wasn't sure, but they all looked like they were pre-1960; he didn't know enough about cars to tell for sure. There were two convertibles, a sporty little thing that was mostly curves and head lights, a sedan, and a station wagon. All begging to be restored and loved and petted and oh ... this could be so very much fun.

He looked at the cars, opened doors, popped hoods, even crawled under the wagon for a bit, though he wasn't sure exactly what he was looking at. All he knew was that he had a lick of excitement starting a fire in his gut, and for the first time in days he was hard for something other than Del.

Del. Oh Christ, Del's cars, and why did he show this to Kevin unless he wanted help to restore them? Just to see what Kevin would think? The man knew Kevin wasn't a mechanic, just someone who kind of liked to mess around. But then, he'd never thought he would get so wound up about a wreck of car before and here he was, practically caressing the hood of the station wagon.

He walked back down to the garage and noticed the sun was low in the sky; it was later than he'd thought, well past the time he'd been running off to the motel to hide. He went in and leaned against the workbench, watching Del finish up with a rust pitted Chevy.

Del didn't say anything when he was done, just quirked an eyebrow at him and leaned on the car.

"Looks like you have your fun cut out for you," Kevin said mildly. "Gonna take you a lot of time and money to restore those cars."

Del nodded. "Time and money I have."

Kevin didn't have anything to say to that. Del moved away and started closing the shop up for the night. "C'mon up to the house," he said. "Have a beer." He didn't wait for an answer, just lead the way out, and they walked up the lane in silence.

They were sitting on the porch watching the sun sink behind the ridge when Del asked him why he'd left Arkansas. Kevin sighed and looked at the sky, all pink and orange, like it had been when he had watched the sun set with Tor just before he'd run.

"Fell in love with someone I'd never be with, someone I wasn't *supposed* to be with. Hurt too much to stay, be so near and so much on the outside. So I left." He looked over at Del, who nodded like he knew what Kevin meant.

"You were that sure it wouldn't work out for you? You had to leave the state?" Del asked carefully.

Kevin laughed. "Good Lord. Don't think there's a man on the planet more unavailable to me than Jake. Jake and Tor ... fuck. They were perfect for each other and there was no way I was ever supposed to be with him and I just outed myself didn't I?" Blind panic had taken hold, and stopping the flow of words was not going to be easy. "Jake, he never knew, but Tor did. He was right nice about it, made me see that it wasn't my fault, but yeah, Jake wasn't ever going to want me, and that was okay, because he had Tor, and all that

mattered really was that Jake was happy, really honest-to-fuck happy. I wasn't, couldn't be if I stayed; I mean, hell, I lived with them, heard them, saw them, and so I had to leave, and it's better now, 'cause I can think about him without feeling bad and I really can't stop talking so you better say something, please—"

Del leaned over and kissed him. Immediately, several things happened, but the first was that Kevin shut up. He had a brief moment of utter shock, quickly followed by another burst of blind panic, and ultimately settled on something which, if asked, he would only have been able to describe as "blank mind."

Del's mouth was on his and the only part of them touching was their lips. It wasn't the best kiss Kevin had ever had, but he figured that was because he wasn't participating. So he kissed Del back. Just lips, no tongue, and—fuck—it didn't matter, because he was hard enough to pound nails, just from this. It was sweet and gentle and unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Del's breath tasted of beer and he needed a shave and he smelled like grease and oil and gasoline and he was warm and Kevin was pretty sure one of them just moaned and yeah, *now* it was the best kiss ever.

Del pulled back and they stared at each other.

"Sorry—"

"Wow—"

Silence.

"You're sorry?"

"Wow?"

More silence. Kevin kind of wondered how sorry Del really was, what with the silly grin he was wearing and everything. "Uh, maybe..."

"Maybe what?" Del asked, his eyes hot and bright as he shifted his weight in his chair.

Kevin let his tongue trace his lower lip. "Maybe we could try that ag—"

He was interrupted by car horns honking and the phone ringing in the house. Both men jumped up, heading in opposite directions, like they were caught doing ... well, what they had been doing. Del went into the house to answer the phone, and Kevin stood wide-eyed at the railing, watching four cars speed up the dirt lane from the garage, each one sounding its horn. Jesus. It was just one kiss.

Daisy pulled up first, followed by Miss Mabel, who had someone else in her car, and then two other cars stopped beside them, driven by people he'd met but couldn't remember what their names were.

"Kevin!" Daisy screamed, even though he was only twenty feet from her. "Thank God you're okay. We didn't know where you were, and we couldn't see you and you've always been there by now and oh, Lord, I thought you were under it all somewhere, and here you are. Where's Del?" By the time she'd asked about Del she'd made it onto the porch and had her arms around Kevin in a death grip. He could feel her trembling.

"I'm okay," he said, confused. "Shhh, calm down. What happened?" He tried to soothe her, using the voice he'd always used on the horses when they were skittish. He looked

to Miss Mabel over Daisy's shoulder and saw relief in her eyes, behind her show of impatience at Daisy's hysterics.

"Lord, child, leave the man be. He's here and that's all we need to know right now. Get Del and let's get down there, lend a hand getting that idiot's trailer out of the wreckage."

Del came out of the house looking worried, his car keys in his hand. He hugged Daisy quickly and asked, "Anyone hurt?"

"Not so far as I know," she said into his chest. "Now that we know where Kevin is, anyway."

He let her go and took off down the steps. "C'mon Kevin. Got work to do."

Everyone piled into their cars and Kevin ran after Del toward the garage and the modified pickup he used as a tow truck. "What happened?" he asked as they followed the line of cars down the road.

"Some damn fool didn't have his trailer chained properly, I think. Couldn't really tell through all the babble about the motel being hit. I think someone missed the curve, or took the corner too fast, or something. Anyway, the hotel got rammed and it looks like you're out a room. Which would be why Daisy was so upset, thinkin' you got smooshed."

Kevin blinked at him. "My room is gone?"

Del glanced at him and nodded. "Apparently." He pointed ahead of them. "Take a look."

Kevin's room wasn't really gone, they found on closer inspection, it just had a broken window and a tent trailer in it. The family who owned the trailer was pretty upset, as was Mr. Harrel, the owner of the motel. Del pulled the trailer out, with help from Kevin and several other men, and they got it

ready to tow up to the garage so he could take a look at the axels and undercarriage. When they got the trailer out, damage to the exterior wall was revealed and it was obvious to everyone that Kevin was indeed out of a room.

"Well, that's easy to take care of," Daisy said. "He can come home with me."

Every man in the area took a step back, including Kevin, as Miss Mabel and the other woman from her car, who turned out to be Miss Edith, descended on Daisy. It was quickly made clear that *that* wasn't going to happen, and any self-respecting woman wouldn't be seen to make such an offer to a young man. Daisy was suitably chastised and her cheeks were flaming by the time Miss Edith was through.

"However," Miss Mabel concluded, "we do need a place for the lad, and I think it's perfectly clear where he should be, don't you agree, Del?"

Del looked up from where he was securing the trailer and stared. "What? Where?"

Kevin knew Del wasn't dumb; it only made sense that he'd stay in the big house behind the garage; it wasn't like Del had limited space, and shit, Kevin was working there and didn't even have his bike to get back and forth. So that meant Del was panicked. Which was okay, 'cause the thought of staying alone in the house with Del was making Kevin panic, too. A kiss was one thing, and yeah, he wanted to do that again, but oh, God, if he was sleeping in the same house, where would he jack off? There had to be rules about that sort of thing, and he was so not ready to just leap into bed with the man. Well, okay, parts of him were, but Kevin tried very hard to

live his life with a lick of sense and just ... oh hell. He decided to think about it later.

Once everyone around them decided that Kevin was going to stay in his spare room, all Del could do was make sure the trailer was secure and head back to the garage, with Kevin riding with him in the cab of the truck.

"This isn't really the way I saw this playing out tonight," Del said, not looking at him.

"You had a plan?" Kevin blurted.

"No, not as such," Del admitted.

"Well, I'm willing to buy you not paying people to trash my room so I have to stay with you," Kevin said with a grin. He was rewarded with a laugh, and they spent the rest of the quick drive in easy silence.

When they got the garage, Del went to work on the trailer, talking to the owner about a lot of things that Kevin didn't really understand. Kevin wandered around for an hour or so and finally went up the house to make them all something to eat, feeling a little odd about rummaging about in Del's kitchen. After he delivered sandwiches and some quick pasta to the crowd at the garage, he asked Del if it would okay if he went back up to the house and just watched TV for a while, as he wasn't much help with the work that needed doing. Del told him where to find things he might need and said he would be a while.

"Don't bother waiting up for me," he said, meeting Kevin's eyes. "There's a guest room made up at the end of the hall; it's a little girly, though—Daisy did the redecorating."

Kevin nodded, knowing that Del was really saying he wasn't going to rush things and that they could figure out where they stood at another time.

Kevin did wait up, until after midnight, but finally took himself off to bed when he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer. He hoped that being exhausted would keep him from embarrassing himself during the night. He didn't hear Del come in.

When he woke up, sunlight was streaming in through the white lace curtains and the house was silent. He made his way to the bathroom and got into the shower, waking up slowly under the hot spray. By the time he was done he was awake, refreshed, and feeling pretty damn relaxed. Almost ready to face Del.

It wasn't until he was dried off and naked in the bathroom that he remembered they'd left all his stuff in the motel room. He found an unopened toothbrush and brushed his teeth, but he was sadly out of ideas about what to do about clothes. The ones he'd worn the day before were dirty, streaked with grease and dirt, and, quite frankly, they smelled bad. He sighed and wrapped a towel around his waist. He opened the bathroom door and smelled coffee. Oh, good, Del was up. This could be interesting.

He made his way down to the kitchen and stood in the doorway for a moment, unable to take another step on weak knees. Del was leaning on the kitchen counter, legs out in front of him, ankles crossed. He was drinking a cup of coffee and looking out the window, lit up in the morning sun, looking gorgeous and only half awake.

Del was wearing boxer shorts, and that was all. Kevin's general impression that Del was skinny vanished at the sight of all that naked skin, tight over lean muscles. His abdomen was sculpted, his legs long and hard, his shoulders broader than Kevin had thought. He was beautiful. And he was turning to look at Kevin.

Kevin swallowed hard, not sure what to do with his hands. He felt flustered, knew he was blushing, and knew that if he didn't get out of there in less than five seconds Del would be perfectly aware of how his state of undress was affecting Kevin.

"I ... uh ... I don't have any clothes," he stammered, unable to move or stop staring.

"Jesus," Del said, nearly dropping his coffee mug. He was staring, too, and Kevin suddenly thought that things were about to get a lot more interesting than he'd bargained for.

Del turned and carefully put his mug on the counter. "I think I have something for you—I mean, I have pants you could get into—I—oh, fuck." Del was blushing, too, a nice red flush that started on his chest and worked its way up, and he hung his head for a second before looking at Kevin again. "Shit. Kevin. Do you have any idea..." He started toward him and Kevin's brain stuttered a little, taking in Del's erection, feeling his own against the towel.

Del moved closer, biting at his lip. "Tell me to stop. Now, Kevin. 'Cause I'm going to kiss you, and if you don't tell me right now to stop I don't know if I'll be able to." He was almost to Kevin, his eyes dilated, his voice getting hoarse.

Kevin reminded himself to breathe.

"Tell me to stop if you don't want me to kiss you," Del said again, and Kevin stepped forward, not sure how his legs knew what to do.

Del's hands were around his waist and Kevin's arms slid around to Del's back and then they were pressed tightly together, mouths hungry and rough. Kevin opened his mouth wide to the kiss and Del pushed in, tongue sliding and thrusting and playing with his own. He could feel Del's hands at the small of his back, pulling him closer; he could feel Del's back muscles flex under his hands, and Kevin moaned softly into the kiss.

It was unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. Del's mouth was hot and eager, not soft and gentle like the girls he'd been with. There was fire here, and power; the rasp of stubble and the strength of rough fingers on his skin made his head spin. Del's hands were in his hair now, holding his head as Del continued to fuck Kevin's mouth with his tongue, and Kevin's hips were thrusting into Del's with no help from his brain at all.

He could feel the heat of the man's erection through the towel and boxer shorts. Fuck, Del was hard and wanting, and Kevin couldn't control himself anymore than he could answer tax questions. His own cock was hard and throbbing; his balls were starting to ache. He needed more, needed now and oh, yes, like that, pushed back into the wall and Del's hands on his ass, trying to get the towel out of the way, sounds that might have been words spilling into the kisses. They moved together fast and hard and then Del bit lightly at his neck and Kevin groaned, his hips jerking as he came.

Del's hands slowed for a moment and he licked Kevin's neck. "Did you just—?"

Kevin flushed. "Yeah, I've never done this—"

He didn't get a chance to finish the thought before Del rocked hard into him, his eyes rolling back. Kevin could actually feel the man's cock pulse as he shot, and then they were both shaking, holding each other up in the kitchen, kisses softer now.

"Well, Goddamn," Del said.

"Uh huh." Kevin's heart was pounding, and one of them was making happy "oh, that was nice" noises, and Kevin thought it might be him. He didn't really care, as long as Del kept his hands where they were on his ass and kept nibbling at his neck like that. Except he stopped.

"Did you just say that you've never done this before?"

"Uh, did I say something?" Kevin tried to think. He'd felt like he was going to burst into flame, he'd jerked in Del's arms and come hard, and he'd ... "Oh, that. Yeah. Never done this." He ran his hand back up Del's back and did some neck nibbling of his own. Del's skin tasted nice, sort of salty and smoky, and really warm.

"What do you mean—oh, that feels good—never?" Del's hands were moving, too, still on his ass, still trying to get the towel out of the way without actually pulling away enough for that to be possible. Plus, it was sort of sticky now, and Kevin figured he'd have to clean himself up with it anyway.

Kevin licked a path along Del's collarbone. "Never, like ... never been with a guy, never kissed a guy, never done anything with a guy. Outside of my head, anyway."

Del pulled away out of his arms, looking really upset.

"What?" Kevin was confused. "There's a rule somewhere about first times? I know I'm new to this but—"

Del shook his head and kissed him again, but didn't lean in as close. "Shut up. No, there's no rules. Just wish I'd known, it should have been special. Not a great memory for you, you know? Just push you into a wall and rub off on you."

Kevin felt his cock twitch. "I kinda liked that part."

Del looked at him and blinked, then his eyes got kind of funny, sort of dark and fiery. "Yeah?" Oh, and hey, an answering twitch from the other side of the towel.

"Yeah." The deep kisses that made Kevin's knees want to give out were back, and Del was where he belonged, full length pressed against Kevin, hands holding them together. Kevin moaned again and heard Del moan in reply before, once more, Del was gone.

This time Del shook his head and stepped back. "Not gonna do this in the kitchen. We're sticky and messy and you're far too fucking sexy to just rub off on." With that, Del took his hand and led him back upstairs. Kevin went as easily as he could, but his brain was misfiring, and he kept wanting to lean on the walls, or lick Del's back or just fall over.

They went into the bathroom and Del turned the shower on. "Step one is rinse off."

Kevin grinned. "What's step two?"

"Crawling into my bed so I can treat you right." Del stripped off his boxers and stepped into the shower.

"Coming?"

"Almost." As a matter of fact, Kevin was feeling a little poleaxed. First, Del had said he was sexy, which wasn't something Kevin was used to hearing at all, and then he was just so matter of fact about wanting to ... to ... Kevin's brain went skittering off and he gave up entirely, dropping the towel onto the floor and getting into the shower for the second time that morning.

They washed quickly, soap and water taking care of the parts that needed to be soaped and rinsed, and Del washed his hair, not wasting any time. Kevin stood on the edge of the spray, just looking at Del, and trying not to blush. He was about to get very acquainted with this body; it might be a good idea not to be shy. But he'd never actually studied a naked man before, and not one he wanted to kiss and hold and touch. Del was lean and lanky with sharp hip bones and a sculpted upper body. He was smooth and strong, and Kevin watched the shampoo slide down his chest as Del rinsed his hair. They were both hard again, and Kevin wanted so badly to reach out and touch Del, to explore every part he could reach.

Del looked at him, eyes raking up and down his body, and Kevin felt his cock jump. God, he was going to start to hurt if he got any harder. Del reached back and turned off the water.

"Gotta get dried off," Del said, his voice strained. "If I wasn't going to let this happen in the kitchen, I'm sure as hell not going to do it in the tub."

Getting dried off took a bit of time and was more difficult than it should have been. Kevin kept staring, and he was sort of waiting for Del to change his mind, to suddenly realize who

he was—not some stunning man who could make Del fly, just a cowboy who had no experience and a tendency to blush. Del kept getting distracted, apparently by water drops on Kevin's chest that had to be brushed away with his fingertips or the corner of the towel, and then they were kissing again, Del against the door this time, their hands and fingers tangled together as Kevin held Del's arms up near his head.

"Oh, shit," Del gasped. "Kevin. Stop, we really have to get out of here. Want you in my bed. Please."

Kevin could only groan and lean his head on Del's, their foreheads pressed together. "Oh, God. Are you sure?"

"Sure? Jesus. I'm supposed to ask you that, I think. Hell, yes, I'm sure."

Kevin let him go and stepped back. They both took a deep breath, and then Del led the way into his room.

Del's room was yellow and white, everything pale and clean and warm, sunlight spilling in the window through white lace curtains like the ones in the room Kevin had slept in. The bed was unmade, white cotton sheets flipped back over a patchwork quilt. Kevin thought that the bed was the scariest, most wonderful thing he had ever seen.

He only had a moment to think about it, though, and then he was being kissed again, his knees giving out on him. Fuck, but Del's mouth made him boneless and shuddery and so Goddamn hard. He found himself being pressed back onto the bed and thought it wasn't so scary anymore, and hey, weren't they lucky it was there or they'd have been falling onto the floor, and then his brain just sort of turned off altogether and he just went with it.

Del was kissing his mouth, hands easing over his body, touching and stroking and smoothing and gliding. No one had ever touched Kevin like this, like they wanted to know everything about him; no one had ever been so focused on his skin before. He suddenly felt sorry for every girl he'd ever slept with; he'd never taken this kind of time to caress and explore. His skin was tingling, little shocks following Del's fingers along his sides and across his chest and down his belly to—

"Oh, fuck, yes!"

Del chuckled and left sucking kisses on his chest, his hand wrapped around Kevin's cock, stroking firmly. "Like that?"

"Oh, yeah. Find me a guy who doesn't."

"Good point. How about this?" Del's head went lower, and Kevin's brain short circuited as a stubbled chin grazed his inner thigh and Del started to lick and suck at his balls.

"Ahh..." was the best he could manage as his legs fell open. Oh, this was definitely something he liked. And the stubble left no doubt that it was a guy doing it.

Del was making happy noises; at least Kevin was pretty sure he wasn't the only one moaning and whimpering. Then Del shifted a bit and there was a hard prick, hot and heavy, against his thigh and it just felt even better.

Kevin was writhing on the sheets, lost in sensation. The heat of Del's mouth and the hands that wouldn't be still were sending him higher and higher, and even the heat from the sun across the bed was like an added touch. The *sheets* were turning him on, and he couldn't be still even if his life depended on it.

Del crawled up his body, almost lying on top of him, and kissed him as his arm reached across the bed to the nightstand. His cock was hard on Kevin's belly, leaving a wet trail, and there wasn't much chance of resisting the impulse to touch it. Kevin didn't even bother trying.

Del had to break the kiss and stretch further so Kevin twisted a little, forcing his hand between them to tentatively touch his first prick that wasn't his own. He was rewarded with a gasp and Del froze, except for the little leap and throb his cock gave up as a gift.

Kevin pressed his advantage and rolled them over, his hand becoming a bit more aggressive as he sought to find out what Del liked. He figured he'd found out when he swept his thumb over the tip and Del cried out, his hips pushing up. With a happy grin, Kevin did it again and bent his head to explore Del's chest with his tongue.

"Oh, God. You're sure you've never done this?"

"Pretty sure."

"Okay. You're doing—oh, fuck, harder—fine."

Kevin laughed and teased a hard nipple with his tongue before grazing it with his teeth, his hand still getting used to the soft skin of Del's cock and the way it felt in his hand.

"Better stop," Del said, his breathing even more ragged than before. "Gonna come if you keep that up."

"That's the point, isn't it?" Kevin asked, not stopping.

"Not yet. Please, I want to—" Del stopped talking suddenly and Kevin looked up at him. Del was biting his lip and suddenly looking unsure of himself.

"What?" Now Kevin was unsure. He'd thought that they were having a good time, and Lord knew he really want to keep going.

"Just—suddenly realized I never asked you how far you wanted to go with this."

Kevin blinked and moved back up Del's body, this time lying on top instead of being underneath. He ground his hips into Del's, enjoying the way their cocks slid together. "Don't be backing down on me now, Del. Want you."

Del shook his head. "Not what I meant. Do you want me in you? You want to do me? Want me to go down on you? Sixty-nine? Your call. We got time to try 'em all, just need to know what to do first."

Oh. Kevin blinked again and tried to get his brain to reengage. He stopped thrusting into Del, hoping that would help. "Uh ... oh, fuck, that's a lot of choices. You got condoms?"

"Lots. And lots. Daisy keeps hoping I'll get lucky, so she drops them off every couple of months."

"Can we not talk about girls right now?"

Del laughed and kissed him again. "Sure." The kiss got hungrier and Kevin found himself thrusting again, once more in danger of coming just from rubbing off. But now he knew what he wanted.

"Want you in me," he said quietly.

"Oh, fuck." Del shuddered and froze, holding his breath.

Kevin froze, too, waiting. When there wasn't a sudden explosion of wet heat between them, he started to breathe again.

"Like that idea?"

"Oh, dear God. Just about had to suck you off by default." Del was still breathing heavily and Kevin rolled off him, just to be safe.

"What's easiest? Hands and knees?"

Del nodded, his eyes wide and dark. "Yeah. If it hurts bad, tell me and I'll back off."

Kevin nodded and kissed him again, hard and fast, before getting into position. Then there was a warm hand on his back and Del kissed the nape of his neck. He heard a snap and then Del's fingers were stroking over his balls, teasing him. He moaned and arched his back.

"God, Kevin. You're so fucking hot. Ready?"

Kevin just nodded and then there was a finger sliding over the skin behind his balls and up his crack, circling his entrance. He sucked in air when Del pushed into him. It didn't hurt, but it took some getting used to, and he fought off the urge to push back. After a moment Del started to slide the finger, in and out, nice and easy, and it got easier, better.

He relaxed and went with it, the sensation different and becoming good, Del's other hand on his back comforting, and the occasional kiss reassuring. He starting moving his hips, more experimentally than anything else, and Del asked if he was ready for more.

The second finger stung. It took longer to get used to, but he wasn't in pain, though he was starting to wonder when it would start to feel really good. Then Del did the thing he'd always wondered about—crooked a finger inside him—and it got *really* good.

"Oh..."

"Yeah."

Del did it again and Kevin moaned, his head dropping and his body relaxing around those wonderful fingers that were alternating between scissoring to stretch him and brushing against that magic, wonderful, beautiful spot that was setting lights to dancing behind his eyes.

"Okay, this might hurt a bit," Del warned, and then there were three. And it did hurt. But within moments Del was touching his gland and Kevin was willing to forgive him, as long as he didn't stop doing that.

He was feeling tender and a bit sore, and he frankly doubted that Del's cock would actually fit; he'd touched it, he knew how big it was. But the pain was receding and he was willing to try. Del thrust his fingers a few more times and eased them out altogether and Kevin felt a little empty and a little glad when the pain went away almost entirely. He heard the crinkle of the condom wrapper, and then he felt the head of Del's prick nudging at him and he waited, trying not to hold his breath.

"Kevin, keep breathing, and if it hurts, for God's sake tell me." Del kissed his back again, one hand still there, the other MIA. Kevin figured it was currently around Del's cock, guiding him, and that particular image made him hungry again. He made a mental note to see if mutual jacking off could be added to the menu.

There was sharp pain and he gasped, but before the breath was fully drawn the pain had faded a little and it was

okay. He concentrated on breathing while Del pushed into him, filling him.

"Oh, God," he whispered.

"You okay?" Del's voice was tight.

He nodded and Del moved again, and then there were hips against his butt and Del was deep inside him.

"Oh, shit. So tight, Kevin. So Goddamn tight and hot," Del said, his voice full of need and hunger. His hands were on Kevin's hips and they stayed like that for a moment or two until Kevin couldn't take it anymore and he pushed his hips back.

"Oh, fuck," Del hissed. One of his hands slid around Kevin's hip to his cock and started stroking him lightly.

"Gonna move now."

Kevin's brain had mostly been back in place; enough to start second guessing, at any rate. He knew that the pain would be there this time, and he knew that it would be less next time. What he didn't really expect was that Del's cock would find that magic spot so Goddamn soon and that it would make everything go shiny and bright and good this time. But he sure was glad it did.

Del's hand was firm on his prick, stroking him off in time with the slow thrusts that were setting off the fireworks in his head, and Kevin heard himself moaning again. It was good. It would be better but for now it was good and oh, hell, if Del kept hitting his gland like that it would be better this time, too.

"Del—oh, shit. Gonna be fast."

"Good?" Del was panting and his hips were speeding up.

"Fuck, yes. Please—"

Del groaned and the hand still on his hip gripped him tighter and the thrusts grew shallow and fast. "Oh, God. Tight, so fucking tight—"

"Gonna come, oh, God—"

Del's thumb brushed over the head of his cock again and he thrust into Kevin's ass and that was it. Kevin cried out and came hard, hips jerking as he shot onto the white sheets.

"Oh, fuck, yeah!"

He could feel Del throbbing in him and that, more than anything, made him think that this was something they were going to do again. And again. After they had a nap and a pot of coffee.

* * * *

Kevin woke up from a short nap, all curled around Del, his head resting on Del's belly. He smiled a little as he opened one eye to see exactly where he was—just in the right place to snuggle a little more and maybe lick warm skin. If he turned his head just the right way, he could actually stick his tongue into Del's belly button.

Del squeaked when Kevin did exactly that. Kevin grinned and did it again.

"Hey, you," Del said softly, one hand running through Kevin's hair. "How're you doing?"

"I'm fine," Kevin said, surprised. He licked a little lower, watching with fascination as Del's cock twitched and started to fill. He licked again and moved his head an inch or so lower.

"I didn't—you're not—I didn't hurt you, did I?" Del said in a rush.

"Nah. I'm fine. Little tender, maybe, but I'm good." Kevin dismissed the topic and licked the tip of Del's semi-hard cock and grinned when Del moaned. Del's hand tightened and relaxed in his hair as he moved lower still, his mouth easing over Del's prick.

"Oh, God," Del whispered. "Yeah, oh..."

Kevin thought Del might have said some other stuff; he wasn't really paying attention. He was absolutely fascinated with what he was doing—how amazing it was to feel Del's cock filling and growing in his mouth, how soft the skin was, how unbelievable good Del smelled. He shifted, putting his hands on Del's hips, and started to suck and lick and play. He had no idea if he was doing it right but he was having a ball, and by the sounds Del was making, soft and then louder, he was doing okay.

Del was twisting and shifting, his hips thrusting slightly, and Kevin looked up at him, looked into his eyes, and just about died. He'd never seen anyone like this, eyes glazed and hungry, overlaid with tenderness and longing. He winked and sucked a little harder, teased the head of Del's cock with his tongue. Del moaned and let his head fall back on the pillow.

"Kevin..."

Kevin just sucked a little harder, hands squeezing Del's hips rhythmically. Del's hands were tangled in his hair and then gone, and Del was trying to get him to stop, or slow down, or something.

"What?" Kevin demanded, exasperation and lust making his brain a little non-functional.

Del didn't say anything, just shoved lube and condoms at him and let his head fall back again.

"Oh! Sorry." Kevin was pretty sure he was blushing.

"Don't be, just ... oh, shit, yeah, that."

"Uh, Del?" Blushing be damned, he needed help. "Officially out of my depth here. Let me know if I screw up?"

Del just groaned and pushed against his hand, his legs starting to tremble.

Kevin blinked and said, "Okay, then, Going on instinct here." Kevin decided that if his brain was going on vacation, he needed to do this as simply as he could. He could try for creative later, when he'd figured out the basics. Step one, lube. Step two, condom. Oh, oh. Choices to make. He'd really been enjoying what he was doing, and there didn't seem to be much chance of getting anything sensible out of Del right then, so he figured he'd just go with it. Condom on Del, slicked fingers, and back to business.

"Jesus!" Del gasped and Kevin laughed, his mouth tight around Del's cock. Del made another encouraging noise so he made another rumbling sound and Del arched, pushing further into his throat. "Yeah, like that."

He teased at Del's balls for a second and then just went for it, pushing gently against his hole and sliding in and oh, holy Christ, Del just about flew apart, sound pouring out of him, swearing and begging and moaning; Kevin thought he might just come himself, rubbing on the sheets. He moved his finger, looking for something he'd never even tried to imagine

the feeling of, and he guessed he found it when Del screamed and came, his cock pulsing in Kevin's mouth, hips jerking and hands clenching.

Fucking amazing.

Kevin stayed where he was until Del stopped shuddering quite so hard and then kissed a path up to his mouth. "You okay?"

"Oh, fuck," was about all Del seemed capable of saying.

Kevin grinned, sliding his fingers out of Del's body. Del whimpered and Kevin froze. "Shit, did I hurt—"

"Feel empty. Fuck me?"

Kevin gasped and nodded, reaching for another rubber. "Really?"

"Really. God, I want you." Del's eyes were huge and dark, his lips swollen from kissing and biting, and Kevin was starting to tremble himself. Del was just too good to be believed, his legs wrapping around Kevin's waist like that, his eyes looking right at him, his hand guiding Kevin's cock right to where he wanted it.

"Del—"

"S'okay. Just push."

Kevin did. "Oh, my God."

"Yeah."

They moved slowly and then faster, rhythms building and then falling apart before beginning again. Kevin couldn't stop looking at Del's eyes.

"Tight," he whispered. "No one ever felt like this."

Del blinked slowly, eyes glazing over. "Nope. No one ever felt like this before."

Kevin leaned forward and kissed him, and Del arched his back again, heat spraying between them. Kevin had time to wonder when the hell Del had gotten rid of the other rubber and then he was coming, this climax taking him by surprise as it washed over him.

* * * *

Daisy was smiling at him all the time, and it was about to drive Kevin nuts. He wasn't sure how much she'd figured out, though he was kind of thinking all of it, and he was waiting for Del's lead on the matter. In the meantime, she kept arriving at the garage and the house unexpectedly.

Oh yeah. She knew.

For two weeks there had been nothing in Kevin's mind other than Del or the bike, and he really only thought about the bike when he was actually looking at it. Del was just as bad, making mornings an adventure of bed, showers, is there time for breakfast or can we...? Del started to walk around with condoms in his pockets. They had lube in the kitchen and under the couch. They both grinned a lot and Daisy smiled at them.

Then there was work itself. Kevin would work on his bike and pump gas, Del would be under whatever car or truck he was working on, and all was well. But if Del was leaning over, looking under the hood of a car? Kevin decided it was Del's fault for just being Del and felt very little remorse about attacking the man right there in the shop.

One day they got lucky and it rained, so Del pulled the bay doors down turned the radio up and they worked. Kevin had

the bike almost back together, was just waiting on some parts on order, and he turned around the see Del staring at him, eyes dark, tongue tracing his lips.

"Uh, Del?"

"Come here."

Kevin stood up and found himself leaning against the front of the pickup Del was working on, Del on his knees sucking him off fast and hot. He was just about to blow when they heard a voice calling Del from the office, and that did it. Kevin shot hard, biting his lip until it bled. Del was up and gone in a moment, adjusting himself as he went, and Kevin's mind reeled. He'd had no idea that getting caught, almost being seen, was such a turn on for him.

Del barely had time to squeak when he came back into the bay, Kevin had him bent over so fast. He held on to the front of the same pickup and gasped out his need while Kevin took him from behind, whispering filth into his ear until they both cried out and came, praying the radio was loud enough that a casual passerby wouldn't stop to investigate the racket.

A couple of nights later, they were sitting on the couch listening to the TV when the news came on. They made out during the actual news, but when the human interest stuff came on, Kevin sat up suddenly and pointed to the TV. "Hey, that's the auction my old Boss takes his cattle to."

Del blinked a few times then pushed himself up. "Yeah? See anyone you know?" he teased as the camera panned over the crowd.

Kevin grinned. "Twit. No, but I can tell you who's there. Boss, of course. Jake goes, so Tor'll be there. Elias, most

likely. Don't know if any of the day hands would go, but Kip might if Bobby didn't go. I expect Bobby stayed home, seeing as how he's got a family and all. But the rest of them are there somewhere, roaming around and working and having a ball." He grinned happily and moved closer to Del.

"You miss it?" Del asked softly.

"Nope," he said, suddenly realizing it was true. "Not really. I miss parts of it, but in more of a 'hey, that was kind of fun' way than an 'I want to be back on the ranch' way. Does that make sense?"

"Not really," Del said. His eyes were troubled as he stood up to turn off the TV. "Bed?"

Kevin sat for a moment. "What's wrong?" he asked, not sure if he really wanted to know, or if he had the right to even ask.

"Nothin', just wondering ... hell. The parts for your bike will be here tomorrow. Can get it good to go in a couple of days." He looked downright miserable now.

"Yeah," Kevin said slowly. "Bike'll be fine. And?"

"And then there won't be a need for you to keep stayin' on." Del wouldn't look at him—had, in fact, turned to go up the stairs.

"You want me to go?" Hurt and anger slammed into Kevin, and he stood up, ready to run away to ... he didn't know where.

"No, that's what I'm trying to say." Del said, not turning around. "You can, and I can't stop you." His voice had dropped to a near whisper.

"You don't think you're worth me staying for?" Kevin was losing his equilibrium, the conversation was taking so many turns.

"Don't want to make you stay if you'd rather be somewhere else."

"You idiot. You can't make me stay, you can only make me go. And just 'cause I miss horses and riding and the smell of hay doesn't mean that I don't like working on the bike or want to learn about the cars or that I don't love you."

There was dead silence.

"Oh, shit." Kevin literally bit his tongue and turned, walked to the door, had his hand on the knob before Del managed to get to him, pulling him back and wrapping his arms around him.

"You love me?"

Kevin sighed. "Of course I do. You couldn't tell?"

Del grinned and pulled him closer. "Could you tell I love you?"

Kevin couldn't help but grin back, his agitation and fear fading as fast as his blood was flowing south. "Maybe we should talk more."

"Uh huh. With kissing."

An hour later, Kevin rolled over on the kitchen floor and groaned. "Damn, we need to get softer flooring."

"You can pick it out."

End

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Solstice: A Torquere Press Single Shot by Sean Michael

Prologue

Aquan couldn't believe it when he saw it. A single calla lily. Its white petals curled protectively around the orange-yellow stamen. He almost missed it in the newly fallen snow. Liet was away for two more days, he was going to miss the flower entirely.

Aquan thought that was a terrible shame. Well, spending a week away from his lover was an even bigger shame, but he wanted to do something special to celebrate Liet's return.

It was growing colder though and the flower would not last two more days. And if he picked it, it would die.

He bit his lip, looking around the large garden, trying to think of some solution.

Their cottage was simple, ivy and roses growing everywhere in the summer, frost and icicles in the winter. There were three rooms inside—the common area, Liet's workroom and their bedroom. The little touches of magic were everywhere—faerylights flickering in the lamps, the tiles cool in the summer and heated in the cold.

He could see the window to Liet's workroom now, the lines of crystals catching the light.

Oh! He could turn the flower into a crystal.

Then it would last forever. It would be his gift to Liet, his welcome home to his lover who he missed so much. They'd only been together two years and each time Liet had to go somewhere he was so lonely, and so happy when Liet

returned. It would be good to be able to give Liet something so special.

Liet had a stone that turned matter into crystal. He'd even watched Liet do it, was pretty sure he remembered the incantation.

Aquan carefully picked the calla lily and ran into the house, going into Liet's work room. The room sparkled with magic, with promise, with something that was the essence of his green-eyed lover.

The crystals were lined carefully—ruby and emerald, sapphire and topaz, rosy quartz and deep amethyst.

He crept in; it felt strange, almost wicked, to be in here without Liet.

The crystal he wanted was at the end of the row. White, almost clear, it glistened like the snow under sunshine. It seemed to call for him, the pale veins within holding the light, almost glowing, almost ringing.

He reached out, careful not to touch anything else, not to say anything or make any noise—he didn't want to awaken any of the magics that lived here. The crystal seemed to vibrate in his hand, the power of it moving along his skin. The light grew and spread, sparkling behind his eyes, inside his chest.

Oh, it was so big. So very big.

He almost put the stone back, but the flower in his other hand seemed to call to him, to demand that he preserve it. He backed slowly from the room, worried that if he spoke the incantation there, he might release some other magics.

He walked—out of the house, out in into the garden, the magic seeming to surge through him. He brought his hands together, the crystal and the calla lily touching, and began to whisper.

"Stone and air, earth and fire, bring the magics I desire."

Nothing happened. Oh, the magic was still moving through him, as it had been before, but nothing new appeared to happen. So he repeated the words, louder this time.

Icy cold began to creep up his body, the lily's petal hardening, going clear.

It was working!

Excited, he repeated the words, even louder now, laughter filling him.

Oh, wouldn't Liet be surprised.

Such a wonderful gift for his lover. One of a kind, unique and only from him.

* * * *

Chapter One

Everything was perfect. There were pastries and candied fruits, mulled wines and beautiful sheets upon a feather-stuffed bed. There was a copper tub filled with steaming water and flower petals. The very best of all things.

The solstice was upon him, the darkest night of the year. The night when the gods sat around their great table of stars and pondered the hearts of mortals, judged whether they were worthy. For sixty years, Liet had offered all of himself to

their will—his craft, his words, his skill. He offered it all for this one night of freedom, this dusk to dawn.

Liet took his cane, stepped carefully out to the garden, the crust of snow sharp and crunching beneath his feet. For sixty years, he had walked this path, gone to look upon a perfect face raised toward the moon.

The crystal was pure, almost see through. There wasn't a scratch or fault upon it and he'd spent sixty years making sure it remained so. The statue's skin was smooth, cold to the touch. As the sun shone its final rays upon the day, they reflected off the crystal figure, the eyes seeming to glitter, a sharp, bright blue.

Liet's eyes filled with tears as he slowly knelt before the statue. He whispered a soft prayer to the gods who held his heart in trust, begging them to not forget their promise to him, their bond.

He heard a breath that was not his own. And then a second, the cool, silky touch of a flower petal sliding across his cheek. His tears spilled over, sorrow and joy as one within him now, inseparable, braided together by the memory of a solstice long past...

* * * *

He'd been gone nearly a week, working with a diviner to find the best lands for a drought devastated village to grow food on. Being away from his sweet lover was the hardest thing, but Aquan would not have been welcome and so now he hurried in out of the cold.

His hearth was also cold though, the fire burned right to ashes, a hush over the little cottage.

Liet hurried through the cottage, calling Aquan's name again and again, panic filling him. His lover would not leave, would have no call to go. The villagers avoided the glade with a passionate fear.

As he came from their empty bedroom, he noticed a slight dissonance in his work room, the song the magic sang there off just a touch. He frowned, heading into the room. The stones upon the window were muttering, complaining, their voices ... He stopped short, staring out the window into the garden.

Sweet Yalena in the Heavens. No.

No.

It could not be.

His Aquan, shining in the winter sunlight, a flower held in one hand.

He ran outside, blinded by tears and the sun reflecting from the statue formed of a crystal as clear as ice. It was a perfect reproduction, complete in every detail.

It was not until he saw the icy heartstone of Wilha, lying deserted upon the ground, that he truly comprehended what happened. His Aquan must have invoked the stone's magic, turned himself into pure crystal. But why? Why would Aquan tamper with his magics? His lover knew how dangerous they could be.

No matter. No. He simply had to undo what had been done.

There would be a way.

There was always a way.

But there hadn't been a way.

Nothing he tried melted the crystal cheek beneath his fingertips. Not blood or tears, pain, pleasure, hope, fear. Nothing. Finally, at the end of his ability, broken and lost, he had prostrated himself before the gods and offered anything—anything—if they would return his Aquan to him. And they had.

For one night every year.

One single night, so long as he did their bidding. One night of hearing that voice, of seeing his Aquan's eyes.

One night, from dusk 'til dawn, he was whole.

* * * *

One night his lover was returned to him, cold crystal melting into heated flesh and always, always, his Aquan pressed the flower into his hand and said the same words.

"My Liet. How I have waited for you."

He kept his head bowed longer this time. He was aged now, wrinkled, skin tough as leather, hair silver as the stars. "Aquan."

Smooth, youthful fingers slid beneath his chin, encouraged him to turn up and look into the face of his lover who aged only one day for every year that passed. "Liet, my love. You came for me."

"Always. In all things." He searched the beloved face, drinking in every feature, hoarding the sight. Aquan's fingers slid over his face, tracing the lines and wrinkles, only love in

the blue eyes. His tears were endless, the loneliness within him dissipated for this one night.

Aquan wrapped hands around his arms, tugging him up. "Come out of the snow, my love. Bring me to your bed."

"I had a bath drawn for you, beloved." He stood slowly, leaning on his cane. With every winter his joints felt filled with glass, each step slower than the one before.

Aquan's arm slid around his waist, Aquan himself slipping beneath his arm, supporting him as they walked back toward the house. "That sounds lovely, Liet. I'm so cold. I need your kisses to warm me."

"Every kiss I have is yours." They moved into the cottage, the candlelight welcoming and warm.

"Promise, Liet? For always?" Aquan turned to him, those blue eyes so young.

"For always, my love." He helped Aquan into the heated water, brought over a tray of sweets and fruits and candies to tempt his lover.

Aquan sat back with a soft moan, hand sliding along his arm. "Feed me, Liet. They are sweetest from your fingers."

Liet chose the best pieces, feeding Aquan slowly, watching his lover enjoy. Those eyes never left his, glittering, so full of love, just like in all of his best memories. Of course, he was an old man, now. No longer the young man filled with hope, or the man in his prime, but an elder. How he must look to Aquan.

"Enough, Liet. I have tasted every delicacy there is but the one I truly want. Please. Kiss me."

"Are you sure you still want my kisses, beautiful one?" The question was asked, even as his lips were offered, given freely.

"Until the end of time, Liet." Aquan's lips pressed against his, a soft cry filling his mouth.

So sweet, so fine. The flavor made him gasp, made him arch as if he were a younger man.

The kiss continued until he could not breathe and Aquan's lips parted reluctantly from his own. "The water grows chilled, I want to shiver from your touches, not from cold."

"Come to our bed, most loved." He found a soft towel, dried the sweet, lean body. Such beauty.

Aquan arched beneath his touches, body eager for each one.

"How I have missed you." He moaned, leaned to kiss one smooth shoulder.

"Yes. Yes, my love. My Liet. Oh." Aquan's fingers worked at the fastenings of his clothing, pulling them open.

He ducked his head, embarrassed, hiding. "I ... I am no longer beautiful, Aquan."

"Tshaw! You are the only thing my eyes long to see, Liet." Aquan pressed kisses over his face.

Oh, that sound—rebuking and loving all at once—it filled his waking dreams.

His cheeks were held between Aquan's hands, his lips taken in a soft kiss, Aquan drawing him toward the bed. Liet followed easily, willingly, wanting nothing more than Aquan's joy. They lay together on the bed, Aquan's hands warm on his

skin, gentle, not letting him hide. If his tears fell, Aquan did not mention it, the passion between them blossoming slowly.

Those eyes held his, adoring and loving. Aquan, as always since the first solstice night of freedom from the crystal, wasted not a moment of their time together.

He clung to his lover, hands relearning flesh that was more familiar now as hard, cold crystal. But for this night Aquan was neither hard nor cold, no instead he was warm, pliant and giving. The fine flesh was smooth as any crystal, and each touch drew out such sounds of pleasure from his lover.

His Aquan tasted of life and youth, skin scented with oils. Liet was taken back to before the accident, to when they were young together, both of them drunk upon the beauty of their love...

* * * *

As always when he came home from being away, Aquan was waiting for him, watching for him. He never made it up the path without being assaulted by his warm, eager lover.

"Oh, Liet! I thought you would be gone forever!" Those blue eyes shone at him from beneath dark lashes, Aquan's smile bright. Forever had been only overnight this time.

"Silly goose. As if I could leave you." He held his Aquan close, tongue sliding deep to taste the hint of cider and spice. The flowers were blooming, the sun shining and warm.

Aquan's arms went around his waist, the sweet body wriggling closer, pressing against him. The magic between them was sweet and strong, love a stronger bond than any other.

Aquan's slender fingers wormed their way beneath his tunic, warm and gentle, stroking his skin.

"I have a gift for you, beloved." He moaned the words against Aquan's lips, purring with pleasure.

"Yes, you do. You've come home to me."

"Sweet lover." The grass was soft and sweet smelling where he eased them down, mouth sliding over Aquan's throat.

"Yours," whispered Aquan, pushing into him, so eager for every touch.

Buttons and ties came loose at a whisper, Aquan's skin bared for his will. Aquan purred, his own fingers nearly as quick as Liet's spells and soon they were both naked, moving together. The heat between them was the sweetest thing Liet had ever known, overwhelming him and sending him soaring. Aquan's kisses were warm, peppering his face, those knowing, gentle fingers sliding over his skin to awaken each inch. His own fingers drew complicated sigils over the soft skin, stroking and petting.

Aquan was gasping for breath, legs tangling with his in restless movements.

"Love." His shaft was hard as crystal, rubbing along Aquan's belly.

"Yes. Oh, please Liet, I must feel you inside me. It has been so long."

And despite the fact that it had been no more than two days, Aquan's words rang with desperate truth.

"One day you will learn patience." He slicked his fingers within his mouth, pressed them deep inside Aquan's body.

Oh. The heat, the pressure. Aquan arched, his reply lost to a cry. His lover's slender body moved on his fingers, Aquan fucking himself. Liet bent, tongue sliding over one tight pink nipple, teeth sliding along the tip.

"Liet!" Aquan shouted and bucked, hands coming to grasp his shoulders. He nodded, purred around the tight flesh. Aquan tossed his head from side to side, the smell of the grass rising around them as Aquan disturbed it. "Oh, don't stop, Liet."

"Never." He bit Aquan's nipple carefully, then sucked more and more fiercely as his fingers played within Aquan's body.

"Love! I'm going to!" With that Aquan's body squeezed his fingers hard, the beloved body shaking as heat splashed against his chin, against Aquan's belly. He moaned, lapping the salty fluid up, moaning low at the flavor.

"You now, Liet. I need to feel your heat inside me." Those blue eyes were still glazed with pleasure, Aquan's words soft and breathless, needy.

His moan echoed, entire body shuddering as he covered his beloved.

Aquan's legs slid around his waist. "Oh, please, don't make me wait."

Liet could deny his lover nothing, pressing in deep, whispering an incantation to ease his way. Aquan's eyes rolled, that sweet mouth open on an "o", swollen lips red and wet.

He leaned for a kiss, soul afire, body shaking as it was held in perfection. Aquan's lips welcomed him as readily as the rest of him did, arms sliding around him, holding him

completely. They moved together, the scents of sex and earth and sky overwhelming his sense, making him arch.

"Love. Love you, Liet."

"Yes. Beloved." His hair fell around them, black as night.

Aquan's body squeezed him, the soft, pink tongue licking at his lips. Pleasure slid up his spine, hot and bright. So right.

"More," whispered Aquan, body rocking up to meet his.

He arched up, hips driving him deeper, harder.

"Yes. Oh, yes, Liet." Aquan shuddered and shook beneath him, cock hard again, leaking for him.

He nodded, body shaking as his pleasure threatened to crest.

"Please, yes. Fill me with yourself, Liet."

"My beloved one!" Seed poured from him, the magics making him shiver and tingle.

"Yes!" Aquan jerked beneath him, body squeezing him tight as Aquan's seed splashed between them. He nuzzled and cuddled, body pressing Aquan into the soft grasses. His lover made no complaint, only held him, eyes shining at him, hands stroking along his skin. "I love you, Liet."

"As I love you, beloved. What mischief have you found in my absence?"

"Me? Mischief? Never!" Aquan rolled them, looking down at him now. "I have been very good and you mentioned a gift..."

"Did I?" He chuckled, fluttering his eyelashes, teasing outrageously.

"Oh, you did! And I'm not going to let you up until you show me!" Laughing, Aquan started to tickle him, fingers finding his ticklish spots.

Liet rolled, laughing, chasing Aquan's fingers. Aquan leapt up and ran toward the cottage, laughing and dancing away. Liet took a long, quiet moment, watching the tight, fine backside as Aquan moved.

His lover turned, face bright and laughing. "You're supposed to be chasing me!"

"I was watching. You're beautiful."

Aquan beamed at him and came running back, grabbing his hands. "I love you, Liet."

He nodded, grinned as he grabbed his clothes. "I know."

"You do? Good." Aquan settled against his side, walking in with him, happiness painting the pale face.

The ring was in his belt bag and he fished it out, held it out to his lover. The stone was a pure, sweet blue, shining and glinting in the sunlight.

"Oh! Oh, Liet!" Aquan threw both arms around his neck, hugging him tight. "Did you make it yourself?"

Liet nodded. "The stone is a bit of the water where I visited, captured forever, for you."

"Oh, Liet. It's beautiful, thank you." The stone was nothing compared to his Aquan's eyes.

"I'm glad you like it, beloved." He slid it on Aquan's finger, the fit perfect.

"It's beautiful, but it's even more special because you gave it to me."

"Next time, you should come with, bathe in the waters. They are healing."

"Oh, could I? I hate it when you have to go away. I would be with you always for all time."

"I would like that. You would love the water, how it bubbles over the stones." His Aquan was innocent and precious and he worried so.

"As long as it wouldn't cause trouble for you, Liet."

"You are never trouble, Aquan. You are my joy."

"As you are mine." Aquan laughed then and ran again, leading him into their bedroom.

Their love had colored all their days, that laugh keeping him warm.

It still did. For a single night of the year.

* * * *

Liet leaned close, kissed Aquan's shoulder, jaw, cheek. "My beloved."

"Still, Liet? After all this time?"

His laughter was harsh, almost bitter. "No one has ever been so loved as you, Aquan."

His lover frowned, hands soft as they slid along his cheeks, those blue eyes filling with tears. "I am sorry, Liet. So sorry."

"No. No. No sorrow from you." He kissed Aquan softly, kissed the tears away. "Soon you should be free to live, beloved one. Soon you will see the spring again."

"You've found a way to free me from the crystal?" Aquan beamed at him. "Oh, Liet, you are most brilliant!"

He placed his fingers over Aquan's lips, hushing the boy, petting. "No, beloved. I am old. I will not see another winter. The gods have promised your freedom as payment for my service."

Aquan's eyes widened as the words sank in and he shook his head. "No! No, Liet. I do not wish to be free if I cannot be with you."

"You are young. You will have a life." A life beyond him, a life free.

"I don't want a life, I want you." Aquan shook his head. "It isn't fair. I made the mistake—you shouldn't have to pay!"

"Nothing is fair. I would work a dozen lifetimes to earn your freedom." He leaned down, resting against Aquan.

"Let me talk to your gods, let them take me and give you your freedom." Aquan's hands were clutching at him, holding onto him as if dawn were already approaching.

"Not even the gods can deny time, Aquan." He held tight, refusing to miss a moment.

"I don't want my freedom without you."

"Don't say that. I cannot bear the thought of you frozen, alone for all time."

Aquan pressed close. "And I cannot bear the thought of living without, alone for all my life."

"You are still young. You could find another." His hands traced each line, each inch of skin.

"Another?" Aquan sounded shocked. He closed his eyes to hide his agony and nodded.

"I could never love another, Liet. I would not want to." Aquan continued, pulling away from him and beginning to pace, arms hugging himself. "I thought when you died I would just remain frozen forever. I was prepared for that, Liet. I am not prepared for a life without you."

"Please..." He held his arms open, needing. "This is the last night I might be with you. Please. Please."

Crying out, Aquan returned to his side, crawling into bed with him and taking him into those arms. Liet sobbed, his tears bitter as the first solstice his lover was returned to him.

* * * *

A year. It had been a year of begging and pleading and working himself half to death to fulfill every requirement his gods had set in front of him. But tonight, as the sun's last ray touched the sky, his lover, his Aquan was to breathe again.

He did not know if Aquan would be aware, if his lover would be mad. Liet did not care; he simply needed his lover's touch. As the sun disappeared, the last glint leaving his lover's crystallized body, those beautiful eyes suddenly shone blue, Aquan smiling at him.

The flower slid along his cheek. "My Liet. How I have waited for you."

"Aquan..." His tears washed the soft skin of his lover's feet.

Aquan took a deep breath, stretching his body, shivering and then curling around his kneeling form. "Liet. Is it really you or am I dreaming?"

"Not a dream, beloved. Not a dream, I swear it." How could he tell his lover it was simply for a single night?

Aquan dropped to his knees, arms wrapping around him, kisses pressed to his face. "I knew you would save me. I knew you would free me."

Liet's heart broke, and he was unable to meet those beautiful eyes. "Not free, beloved, only given a respite for a single night. I have bargained with the gods for you. The longest night of the year you are flesh again."

How he had tried and tried, but sadly, this was the best he could offer.

"Only tonight?" whispered Aquan.

"I am sorry, beloved. Tonight and every winter solstice. I am so sorry..."

Aquan's beautiful eyes filled with tears and his lover held him tightly. "It's my fault, Liet. I just wanted to save the flower for you. It was so beautiful..."

"I should have warned you. I should have locked the stones away. I ... Does it ache? Do you dream?"

"It's cold. I do not sleep. I can see, in a sense. Everything is refracted. I *miss* you." Aquan's mouth met his on the last word, tongue sliding between his lips.

He sobbed, opening to the touch, needing desperately. Aquan pressed close, tongue pushing deep. He carried Aquan indoors, stumbling toward the bed. Aquan's hands slid over his face, his neck, his shoulders, the touches desperate.

"I love you. Forgive me. Please, beloved." He found the bed, clambering atop Aquan's body.

"Yes, Liet, yet. Please. Love me, touch me. I need you."

His tears and kisses mingled together upon the smooth, soft skin. His hands slid over, relearning, touching, adoring his lover. Those blue eyes watched him, loved him, the lithe body moving into his touches, Aquan writhing beneath him. He loved Aquan as best he could, rubbing and caressing,

hands remembering everything about the lean body. Soon the blue of Aquan's eyes was glazed with passion, clumsy fingers returning the touches as Aquan's need dug into his ass where he sat astride his lover.

"Will you take me, beloved? Let me feel you within me again?"

Aquan's eyes widened and he nodded, hands opening and closing on his skin.

He removed his clothing, baring himself for Aquan's eyes. "I have needed you so."

"Yes, Liet. I have felt your need. It renews me, knowing that you wish to love me still." Aquan reached for the oil, dipping his fingers into it and sliding them over his skin.

"Only you, Aquan. Only you." Every nerve was awake, alight.

Aquan's fingers slid into the oil again before they returned once more to his skin, anointing him. Liet spread, offering Aquan everything, anything, the heat of those fingers an addiction.

"So beautiful, Liet. My Liet. I could touch you forever."

"Yours. Yours, beloved." He searched the beautiful face, those eyes.

Aquan was totally focused on him, love and adoration and need in those beautiful eyes.

"Love you." He leaned down, kissed soft, sweet lips.

"Oh, yes, Liet. I love you. Yes." Aquan's lips yielded easily to him, opening to his kiss, his heart. One of Aquan's fingers slipped inside him, causing him to gasp, to jerk. Oh, that smile was amazing, beautiful and only for him.

"Love..." He traced the sweet smile with his tongue, eyes rolling.

"My Liet." A second finger pushed in with the first, sliding and rubbing inside him.

"Yours. Please." His eyes rolled, He hadn't been touched in a full cycle.

"Are you ready, Liet? Come ride me." Aquan's voice was husky, thick with want and with tears.

His own agony answered Aquan's, but he wasted no time on it, simply moaning and raising up to sink down upon Aquan's shaft. Aquan shouted and bucked up into him, hands reaching for him. "Liet!"

"Yours." His head fell back, throat working. "Beloved."

"Most loved. Oh, I have missed you, missed you so much." Aquan's hands slid along his belly and then up to his chest, tugging at his nipples.

"Yes. Missed you. Need you." Heat flooded him, and he shook with need.

Aquan moved beneath him, hips pushing up into him, that sweet cock moving inside him. They bucked and rocked, the soft mattress squeaking beneath them. Aquan's eyes rolled in his head, hands shaking as they moved over him.

"Love. My love..." The room trembled, the magics just barely held in check.

"It feels like heaven, Liet. You feel like heaven."

"Just a man. Beloved." So close. So close and yet he didn't want it to end. Ever.

Aquan's eyes rolled again. "Close, love. Please."

"Yes..." He bucked, seed pouring from him in a wave.

"Liet!" Aquan shouted his name out, hands grabbing at him.

"Beloved." He watched every second of pleasure, every breath.

Aquan's face was transformed in pleasure, becoming even more lovely for a moment and then the tight body beneath him relaxed, Aquan's eyes softening, finding his. "Oh, love..."

"My Aquan..." His heart. His beloved. Aquan's arms drew him down against the slender chest, his lover holding him tight. "Don't sleep, Aquan. Please. Stay with me. I've so much to tell you..."

"I will never sleep again if it means I do not have to leave you, Liet."

He reached up, cupped that perfect face. "I will be thankful for each moment."

Aquan nodded, brought their lips together. "I will never again even just touch your lips without saying a prayer of thanks."

"One day, beloved. One day you will be free."

* * * *

And that day would be soon now, much as it pained him to move beyond the veil without his lover, he was happy that Aquan would no long suffer in the crystal's cage.

Aquan held him, stroked him softly. "Let me make love to you, Liet? Like I have every year since the first."

"Yes, beloved. Let me feel you." One last time.

Aquan's mouth met his, the kiss tender. He trembled, leaned into the strong arms, let Aquan hold him. Aquan's

fingers were sure and gentle, knowing just where and just how to touch him. Passion kindled inside him, slow and sweet, the heat fondly remembered, longed for. Aquan's mouth slid away from his, nuzzled along his neck, licked across his nipples. He rocked, humming low, so in love. Still. Liet's cock jerked, slowly filled.

"Oh, my love." Aquan's mouth kept sliding down, nuzzling into his belly.

"Yours. I'm sorry, Aquan. I'm so old..."

"Sh. Sh. You are beautiful to me, Liet. So beautiful." Aquan licked at the tip of his cock. Pleasure washed through him, making his eyes roll. "So beautiful," repeated Aquan, the words whispering against his skin. Then his lover's mouth closed over him, pulling him deep.

"Aquan..." His fingers clawed against the blankets, thighs parting.

"Yes, my Liet?"

"You fill me with need..."

"You are not alone in that, Liet." A kiss was pressed against his hip and then his cock was taken in again, Aquan sucking gently. He reached down, fingers stroking soft, silken hair, petting his lover. Aquan hummed, the sound vibrating his prick.

Liet shivered, whispering low. "If I spend now, I cannot..."

"I wish to taste you," insisted Aquan, suction increasing.

"Oh. Oh." He nodded, gasping, hips rolling. Aquan's head rose and fell over his groin, the heat around his cock so good. He couldn't last long, not at all, hips rocking up toward Aquan's lips. One of Aquan's hands slid back up his chest,

fingers tugging at his nipple. Liet dissolved with a cry, body shaking, shuddering.

Aquan swallowed hard, making sure not to miss a drop. "Oh, I've imagined that taste in my mouth a thousand times." "I have not spent since our last evening together."

"Oh, Liet, just because I am frozen for the full cycle does not mean that you must be also." Aquan pushed up along his body, bringing their mouths together again. He smiled. Sweet boy. He had been frozen for an eternity, just waiting for his lover's touch.

Aquan's cock lay heavy and hot against his thigh, his lover's tongue dancing within his mouth. It was sweet, perfection as he reached down, stroked Aquan's cock. Aquan moaned, hips pushing that glorious heat through his hand.

"I love you. My Aquan. My beloved one." He kept stroking, petting, caressing.

"Yes, oh yes, Liet. Yours. Always yours."

He nodded. "No one will love you as I have."

"No, only you. I do not want anyone else, Liet. Please. Do not leave me."

"I cannot stop time, beloved." He held up one wrinkled hand. "I am dying."

Aquan shook his head. "No. No, Liet. Please. You cannot die without me."

"You are young, still. You will still have a full life."

"It isn't fair, Liet. Is there not some way for me to give you my life?"

"No. Do not think it." He covered Aquan's lips with his fingers. "Do not condemn me to another life of loneliness."

Aquan's eyes filled again with tears. "Oh, Liet, I have ruined your life and for what? A flower."

"You have not ruined my life. You *are* my life. Everything I have done counted toward your freedom." Every torture, every pain, every moment.

"But I wanted to grow old with you."

He nodded, kissed Aquan's palm. "I wanted that. I wanted the spring; I wanted to show you the world." Hot tears splashed against his chest. "Shh..." He rocked, held his lover close. "I had sixty perfect nights with the man I love most. Sixty nights that carried me through a lifetime."

"You deserve more, Liet. I would give you anything. Everything."

"We live at the whims of the gods, beloved."

"What if I petition them? Ask them to let us be together?"

"I..." He shrugged. Who knew what the gods would do; he was simply a man. "I cannot risk one moment of our last night together."

"But what if it wasn't wasted? What if they gave us some time back? Will you really give up that chance?"

"But what if they denied you? Sixty years I have struggled and fought, I earned a single boon..."

"What would we lose if they denied me? They cannot take away the time we have already had. You are telling me this is our last night, I am begging you to let me make it not be."

He shook his head, holding Aquan's hand. "I would not lose a second of this night."

"When did you give up hope?" Aquan asked him, curling away from him.

Liet blinked, stared. "Aquan!"

Twenty years ago? Thirty? More?

"What? Are you telling me it isn't true?" There was reproach in his lover's eyes. For the first time in sixty years.

"I..." His heart broke, eyes closing. He should have died. He never wanted to cause Aquan harm.

"I have hope enough for both of us, Liet. Take me to where you petition your gods, let me speak to them, let me beg them for time for us."

"If you wish it, Aquan." He moved off the bed, hand scrabbling for his cane.

Aquan was at his side immediately, supporting him, mouth on his. The kiss was long and sweet. "Liet. As long as there is a hope I must do this. I do it for you. For us."

"You waste the last moments I have with you. They have listened to nothing I have begged for, only demanded more and more."

"Maybe they are waiting for me to beg, as I am the one who made the mistake."

He stared at his lover. "The mistake was not yours. I should have protected the stones."

Aquan shook his head, looked at him intently. "But I knew the magics were dangerous, knew I should not have taken the crystal." Liet shook his head. No. His Aquan was not at fault. Aquan's fingers were soft on his skin. "Take me to your shrine, Liet."

He nodded, "It is cold outside, beloved. Bring your furs."

He would spend his final solstice doing Aquan's will.

* * * *

Chapter Two

Aquan walked with Liet, his heart aching at the slow pace, at the proof of his lover's age. It had crept up slowly, Liet's magics and gods keeping him young, almost young enough that Aquan could believe that he was allowed life more than just on the solstice. Now Liet was ready to die, was preparing for it. Aquan would not allow it. It was his fault that the accident had happened and his lover had taken enough punishment for it.

He shivered, the sensation of being locked in crystal, of being nothing more than crystal pressing against his skin. He would live in it forever though if he could save Liet.

"We could return home, beloved. I could hold you until the morning." And his Liet? Always driven to protect him.

And it was tempting, so tempting. The cycles dragged so long, it was so hard to be without Liet and his body wanted nothing more than to curl with his lover and spend as much time as they had left making love.

He shook his head. "We must try, Liet. We must."

"What do you hope to gain, most loved?" So tired, so aged ... Liet was bent now, once ebony hair pure silver, eyes still beautiful, if weighed with sorrow.

"I would share my time with you, Liet. Share my life with you. Baring that I would die with you."

"No." Liet stopped, shaking. "You cannot. You have a life before you. You are a young man..."

"Oh, Liet. What about your life? You left it behind to spend a single night a cycle with me. How could I give you any less?"

"I could do no less, Aquan, not for you, but for me." Those green eyes shone with tears. "I need you more than life."

"Do you not think I feel the same way?" How could Liet not understand?

"I..." Liet's hand reached for him. "I wish happiness for you, beloved."

"I cannot be happy knowing you are dead while I live." He took Liet's hand and squeezed.

"There is no good answer to this, beloved. I cannot stop time."

"But your gods can. Or at least they can make other arrangements. Come on, take me to them. You said you would." He felt the urgency of it, knew they only had this night, it was his only chance.

Liet nodded, moving through the snow so slowly, moving past the garden gate, down to the little stone shrine, the gods' names chiseled into each stone. Aquan swallowed as they got there, fingers sliding along the names. He realized suddenly that it was possible they would not only refuse him, but kill them both on the spot and they still had hours before the sun came up and froze him again.

Still, surely they would rather a petition that included sacrifice than one made in the throes of his final minutes. Liet opened the shrine doors, whispering soft incantations so that the fire blazed, the magic as fascinating now as it had been in the beginning.

* * * *

He'd never seen a wizard at work when he'd first met Liet and though Liet had only been an apprentice at the time, Aquan had fallen in love immediately with the young man only several moons his elder.

He waited until the night of his test of manhood and once he'd passed, he was allowed to petition a lover.

Aquan put on his very best tunic and cloak, he brushed his hair until it lay flat against his head and he put together a basket of fresh bread and fine meats and cheeses and then he walked into the woods, to the small cottage where the newly minted wizard lived.

Heart on his sleeve, he knocked on the door.

Liet's eyes were green as a forest, hair black as night. Tall and lean, the wizard welcomed him with a smile that sent him soaring. He offered his basket over, along with his heart and all of himself. "I am Aquan of the Field Village. I would be yours."

"Mine?" The basket was taken, Liet opening the door to him. "Why have you chosen me, Aquan of the Field Village?"

"Because you shine. I could feel you tugging at me when you and your master came to my village and at first I thought I had been magicked, but I was not. Or at least not by you, but by love."

Liet's home was simple, but clean, little crystals and books scattered about, a white cat sitting on a windowsill, a grey owl in a wicker cage. "I remember you. You were apprenticed

to the pale man with the red tunic. The sun makes your hair shine."

He nodded. "Tiso wasn't very happy when I chose to leave. He thinks I'm chasing a fool's dream."

He didn't think he was a fool, he hoped he wasn't.

"Why would love be a fool's dream?" Liet nodded to a bench. "Would you like to sit?"

He nodded, nervous enough to be eager to get off his feet. Now that he was here, his heart was thumping madly. Liet everything he had remembered and more. The magic in the cottage was fascinating, coating everything with shimmers and glitters and he carefully put his hands together in his lap. "I guess Tiso believes so because he's never found it."

"How horrible for him." Liet took the kettle, poured two cups of a deep ruby tea, handed one to him. "I have never been in love before, but my gods told me you would come."

"Me? Your gods spoke of me?" He would have thought that he was hardly important enough to merit attention from Liet's gods. But then perhaps it was Liet himself who merited the attention. Aquan certainly believed he did.

"They did. They whispered your name to me." The tea was sweet, tart, warmed him all through.

"Does that mean I can stay?" That you will love me?

"It does. I pray that you will not regret your choice. A wizard's life can be harsh, the gods demand much."

"I won't regret it." Even if the wizard did not love him, it would be enough to be able to share the same air, to be able to watch Liet.

Liet looked at him, those green eyes so warm, so happy. "I believe you."

He smiled and put his tea cup aside. "Sit next to me? Please."

Liet smelled of wood smoke and fruit and something unknown, something addictive. Driven by his love, he reached out and took Liet's hand, their palms sliding, fingers twining. Oh. Oh, the touch sent tingles through him, made him gasp and shiver. He met Liet's eyes, his heart swelling, along with other parts of his anatomy.

"Can I kiss you, Aquan of the Field Villiage?"

"Oh, yes, I would like that very much." He leaned toward Liet, eyes wide and watching as Liet's mouth grew closer.

Their lips met, Liet's mouth warm, soft, skin tanned and smooth so close. He gasped softly, this kiss more than he had imagined it could be. He squeezed Liet's hand. Liet's fingers held on, free hand stroking his cheek. Those eyes were so close to his, so very green, so very lovely and he pressed their lips a little closer. A soft noise pushed past his lips, tongue brushing his skin. He gasped again and moaned, lips parting. That hot tongue slid inside, tasted him, caressed him. He shivered, eyes closing as his mouth took Liet inside him. Inside him. He moaned and pressed himself against Liet, mouth opening wide.

"Such sweetness..." Liet's words were whispered against his lips.

"Yours," he whispered back, eyes opening again so that he could see the green of Liet's.

"Yes. I accept your offer, Aquan. Mine." Pleasure moved through him and with it was magic, Liet's words sealing them together for all time.

* * * *

It had been the first time he'd felt magic within him.

Aquan reached out to stroke the bowed back, stepped close and hugged his Liet tight. They *were* sealed together still, if the gods were amenable, his time could be shared out between them, he was sure of it. He believed it with his very soul. And if not, he chose to die with his lover.

Liet turned to smile at him, eyes warm. "Beloved."

"Yes, my Liet. And you are most loved. Come stand with me. Lend me your strength as I petition your gods?"

"All of it belongs to you."

He took Liet's hand and squeezed tight. "I'm scared," he admitted on a whisper.

"There is nothing to fear, beloved." Liet's eyes, so loving, so old, smiled at him. "I will keep you safe."

"You have done so much already." He stroked Liet's cheek with his free hand and stepped into the shrine. The magic rushed through him, but not like the magic of the crystal, this was warm, almost burning. Liet was beside him, whispering the words that would wake the gods, bring them close. He trembled and took a breath. He would not fear, not here where his lover could see him, where his lover offered himself over to the gods for Aquan's very breath.

Multicolored mists appeared, swirling and swaying, the magics growing stronger. Oh, it was beautiful. Like his Liet, only too much too look upon for too long.

"Why have you summoned us, Liet? This is your night. Your boon." The voices echoed.

"My beloved wishes to speak with you."

Aquan stepped forward and stood tall. He would not fail his Liet. He would be strong and would make his case.

"I have been punished for decades for the sin of meddling with a magic I did not properly understand and could not control, but my Liet has also been punished, has been forced to live on his own bar one night in a full cycle and now he is going to die and I am to be free.

"It isn't fair, to let me live while he continues to be punished for my crime."

"His death is no punishment, child. It is the way of things."

"But I have a whole life in front of me. A life that belongs to him."

"He has only a handful of days remaining, child. He will not see the next full moon."

"Give him some of my days. Please. I cannot live with the knowledge that he grew old dedicated to a statue that only lived once a year." He could hear the note of pleading in his own voice and he dropped to his knees, hands clasping together in front of him. "Please. Do not keep punishing him for my mistakes."

"No." Liet's voice was firm. "I have lived my life. He deserves to live his own."

"No, Liet! It isn't right—it isn't fair!"

The mists continued to swirl, to slide among each other.

"It isn't fair, but it is how it is." Liet's hand stroked his head.

He shook his head, a sob filling his chest and stealing his breath. "I just wanted to save the flower for you, Liet. I just wanted to share the joy of it with you."

"Shh ... You have shared with me. Sixty perfect nights."

"No, it can't end like this. It can't." He turned his face up to Liet's, falling in love with the green eyes all over again, and then leaned his head back farther, imploring the stars. "If you will not grant him more life, then take mine so that we may be together in the hereafter."

The mists around them grew thicker, colors deeper. "We will give you this night, young, together. At dawn, you will both belong to the afterlife."

"No!" Liet sounded desperate.

"We will be together in the afterlife?" He was willing to give up his life to be with Liet forever. As they were meant to be.

"No. No, I will not. I have paid my debt to you. I will not agree."

The mist turned a soft rose, seeming to cradle Liet. "You have been a great boon to us, Liet."

"Then give him his life, let him share my days or let us hold each other forever in death," Aquan pleaded, letting his heart be known, his love.

"We cannot give him that which he has spent, Aquan. His days on this plane are gone."

He shook his head. No. No, it wasn't fair. He didn't want his freedom, not at this price.

"We can offer you this night. Offer you an eternity of spring, but Liet must agree."

"An eternity of spring? What do you mean?"

"The afterlife has no winter, no harsh summer. It is a joy, for those who have pleased us well."

"Liet? Together, forever in the spring. It sounds lovely, does it not?"

"You have a life to live..." He could see the conflict in those eyes—the desire to relieve the aches and pains of the old body, to accept this gift warring with a long-held plan, with the belief that he should live.

He shook his head. "It would be no life without you, Liet." He squeezed his lover's hands. "I love you, Liet. I am yours. What would I do with a life where you were not?"

"Live." Those eyes were filled with tears. "Do not tempt me, beloved one."

"What life would I have without you, Liet?" For sixty years he had endured the cold and loneliness of the crystal, he did not want to endure sixty more in a cold and lonely bed. One trembling hand reached out for him, beckoning to him. He stood and took Liet's hand. "I love you, my Liet. Please. Let us be together. Please."

"My Aquan. My beloved one." Crystalline tears slid down the wrinkles in Liet's face.

He brushed them away, hope filling his heart. "Please, Liet. Please, let us be together in this eternal spring. Even if we are not bodies, our souls belong together. Maybe I'm being selfish, but I don't want to be without you any longer."

"You will miss your life..." Liet kissed his fingers.

"Not without you, I will not" He pressed close to Liet, seeing his lover in the old man before him, wanting him. "We have this night and then we have forever."

"Forever..." Oh. Oh, hope. There was hope in those eyes.

"Yes, Liet, my lover, my own. Forever. Your gods have promised it. Please. Let us be forever."

One hand cupped his cheek, so soft. "My beloved. Forever."

The mists drew closer, wrapped around them.

"Make love to me, Liet. I want to feel you in me while we can one last time."

The hand against his cheek grew warmer, the lines around those green eyes disappearing.

"Liet!" He blinked, not believing his eyes, but the bent back straightened, Liet supporting him rather than the other way around.

Young and beautiful, eyes sparkling and bright, hair black as night—his lover was beautiful.

"Oh, Liet." He pressed their lips together, accepting this gift eagerly, though he would have loved Liet in any form, at any age. Liet pushed into his arms, tongue sliding deep, a hunger there he had not enjoyed in decades. He opened wide to Liet, as eager for his lover's possession as he had been the first time and, somehow, just as nervous that he would not live up to Liet's expectations.

Liet moaned, lifted his head. "Come home. Please Aquan. Come home with me."

He nodded and took Liet's hand, ready to go wherever his lover would take him.

Liet led him from the shrine without even looking back, his strong, healthy lover laughing, hurrying toward the cottage. His own laughter met Liet's, bubbling from him. Liet's happiness was addictive, more so than magic, more so than anything. It always had been. "Hurry. Come and love me Aquan. I have need of you."

He ran with Liet, breathless and excited. They stumbled into the cottage, Liet's mouth crashing down upon his, tongue pushing deep. He slid his hands around Liet's waist, holding on, opening wide. Liet moaned, hands stroking over his skin, petting him.

"Liet, oh!" His own hands slid along Liet's skin, stroking and sliding.

"Love you." The furs were pushed away, Liet's tunic pulled off, their skin touching.

"Oh, yes. Love you. Love you—please love me now." He lay down on their furs, pulling Liet down on top of him.

Liet nodded, lips covering his, fingers sliding down his body. He pushed up into the touches, mouth opening wide, need consuming him. The pressure inside his body was welcome, warm, Liet strong and sure, wanting him.

"Please. More," he begged, wanting to lose himself in this, wanting it to never end.

"Yes. Forever." Liet pressed inside him, spreading him, filling him. He cried out, arms reaching for Liet, holding his lover as he was filled. Nothing had ever felt so good as this.

"My beloved! Forever." Liet arched, pushed deep inside him.

"Yes! Oh!" He wrapped his legs around Liet's waist, arching into the thrust.

Liet looked...

Happy. Transformed. And that was almost better than the loving.

"Love you, my life," he whispered.

"Yours. I gave my life for you. Would do it again."

"Just love me, Liet. Just love me."

"Forever." The kiss was deep, stealing his breath, those eyes staring into him. He could feel the magic between them, sealing them together, binding them on a deeper level than it had that first time.

Liet pushed deep, groaning, eyes rolling. "My Aquan!"

"Yes, Liet. Yours!" He could feel Liet's cock inside him, could feel the strength and heat of it, the harness and velvet.

"Yes." Liet shook, hips thrusting, pumping, pushing heat deep into him.

"Liet!" Without even being touched, his cock pulsed, sprayed seed over his belly and Liet's. Liet leaned down, panting, dark hair pouring over him. He moaned, fingers sliding on Liet's cheeks and into the long hair. "I love you."

"I love you. Aquan. Beloved." Liet kissed him again and again.

They kissed for a long time, bodies still joined, the outside world hidden by Liet's hair. Finally, he asked softly, "What's going to happen to us?"

"I do not know." Liet shrugged, smiled. "I have never died before."

He shivered at the words. Dying. But for Liet he would do it. To be with his lover forever was enough.

"Do you regret, beloved?"

He shook his head. "I'm scared. But I do not regret, Liet."

"The gods have promised us an eternity, my beloved. An eternity."

He nodded, smiled. "I hope it will be long enough."

"I'm sorry that I could not free you. That you were trapped."

He stroked Liet's cheeks, smiling at his lover. "I'm free now. I have had one night every year because of you."

And some of those years had been very special. All right. They all had been. One year he had been bathed in milk. Another year Liet had loved him over and over until his breath failed him. One year there had been feathers and laughter. Oh, he loved laughing with Liet.

"We should feed you, let you have the things in life you desire most."

He smiled at Liet. "I have already tasted the one thing I want most this night."

Liet laughed, rubbed their noses together. "There are things we must do. Free the animals. Hide the stones."

"Yes. No one else must use them and come to harm."

Liet nodded. "I should have taken an apprentice, taught them, but my hours were taken."

Jealousy flared in him at the thought of Liet with someone else and it surprised him—he would have been happy to know that Liet was not alone and at the same time ... he wanted that to be no one but himself. "We could bury them."

Those green eyes closed, Liet thinking. "Yes, yes. They came from the earth, we could return them."

He watched Liet's face, admiring. His lover was beautiful and so special. It was no wonder the gods had granted Liet a favor in return for total dedication.

He would live another sixty cycles frozen in the crystal, or a hundred more, if it would bring happiness to his Liet, if it would bring them together in time. He was lucky that the sacrifices they had already made had been deemed enough.

Aquan lay with his lover, his Liet, and waited for their eternal spring.

* * * *

Epilogue

The fence had been taken over by roses, the gate covered in wisteria. The old women said there were ghosts here. Magic. Haunts. They said a magic-user, cursed by the gods, had lived here, died here, disappeared here.

Puck reached back for his lover's hand, the rock wall tumbled down enough for them to pass. "Come on. They say there was a house here, a magical house."

He'd wanted to come here for moons—wanted to see the wild gardens, wanted to find a magical wand or a talking bird or something—anything—special.

Tace's hand slipped into his, warm and solid, hard worn calluses familiar against his own skin.

"Magic, Puck? Are you sure we should be here? What if there's a curse on it?"

"It's been more than a ... a ... million summers since anyone lived here, Tace. Or at least since Gran's Gran was weaving in the temple. The curse would be gone."

Big brown eyes met his, Tace's hand squeezing his. "You shouldn't mess with magic, Puck. Your Gran tells stories about what happened to those that do."

"Okay. Okay, but let's just look. No touching, no taking—I promise. Just looking." Come now, Tace. Come play with me.

"Just looking, Puck. You promised." Tace swallowed and squeezed his hand again. "Okay."

"I promise. Just looking." Puck almost bounced, both of them slipping into the garden, the world seeming to disappear as they entered.

"Oh..." Tace looked around, transfixed. "Wow."

The garden, beyond the fence and gate, was a wonder, wild certainly, but the grasses were sweet and the flowers beautiful, scenting the air.

"Yes. Look at the colors, Tace. All the colors..." All the scents. The beauty.

"They make you shine," Tace murmured shyly.

Puck blinked over, meeting Tace's sweet, bright eyes. "You make me shine, silly. These are just flowers."

Tace blushed and squeezed his hand. "Puck..."

He grinned, nodded. "Yes, Tace. Puck."

Tace bumped his hip. "You make me want to forget all about exploring."

He laughed, the sound echoing and ringing. "We can do that too..."

Tace gave him an adoring look. "We could go back out and ... you know."

"We could find a soft piece of grass here and ... you know..." No one would find them.

Tace's eyes widened. "But..." Tace leaned in and whispered, "What about the magic, the curse?"

"How could loving each other be a curse?"

"Not that. The place. What if." Tace bit his lower lip and then pressed a kiss against Puck's lips. "Loving you is no curse."

"Loving each other is the most beautiful thing."

They moved further into the garden, the greenery heavier, damp and abundant. Tace walked with him now, a little more eager, no longer needing him to tug and encourage. The foliage opened up, the grass green and soft and rolling. "Oh. Here. Here is good."

Tace didn't even look around, just tugged him close, hips pressed to his. "Whatever you want, Puck."

"You, Tace. You." Their lips met, Tace tasted sweet and wild, all at once.

The kiss grew sloppy, Tace moaning into his mouth and rubbing their hips together.

They sank down into the grass, bodies meeting, cuddling in together. The smell of the grasses rose up around them, fragrant, sweet, but not as sweet as the taste of Tace's mouth or the feeling of the warm skin under his fingers as Tace's tunic slid up.

He moaned, lips trailing along Tace's skin.

Somewhere inside his head, he heard, "Beloved."

"My own," murmured Tace, almost in reply.

His skin tingled, itched, a gasp leaving him as the words poured over him. Tace whimpered, fingers trembling as his shirt ties were undone, the material parted.

"How I have waited..." He leaned down, licked the sweet, soft skin.

"So long," murmured his lover, fingers touching him reverently.

"Yes, beloved. Yes." So hungry to touch, to taste. So long. It had been so long.

A soft whimper sounded, clever fingers tearing at his clothes, pushing them away. So sweet, so fine. He moaned, tongue sliding upon that flesh. His lover arched beneath him, pushing into his touches, silently begging for more.

The grasses smelled so sweet, his beloved sweeter, the salt and life on his tongue an addiction.

"More, please more." The words whispered across the garden, his beloved always so eager.

"Always." His lips wrapped around one nipple, tugging.

"Yes!" That sweet body moved beneath him, fingers sliding on his skin.

The sunlight warmed him all through, the body of his most loved making him shudder. Slender legs cradled him against his beloved's body.

"Need you. Please. Let me feel you."

"Yes. Please. Fill me." Trembling hands traced his features, eyes gazing up at him.

"My love." His fingers touched the sweet, tight entrance, stretching his beloved.

"Yes! Oh!" His lover spread for him, begged for him. Hot and tight, gripping his finger, pulling him in. His lover moving, riding his finger, so beautiful.

"Soon. I have such need, most loved. Such need."

"Please. I must feel you inside me." His beloved begged, so eager and wanton.

His fingers slipped free, his shaft sliding into pure heat. His thighs went tight, shaking, hips rocking.

"Oh! Oh, it has been so long..." His lover pushed, meeting each movement, hands sliding over his skin.

"Forever. Forever, beloved." His eyes rolled, throat working, the scents of the flowers beautiful, almost as beautiful as the smell of his lover.

A soft cry sounded, the body beneath him undulating. His lover's hands clutched at his shoulders. "Oh, not yet, too soon."

He slowed, smiling down into beautiful eyes. "We are eternal, beloved."

Slender fingers slid along his cheek. "Yes, my love."

He turned, kissed the soft palm. "Yours."

"As I am yours." The slender body bucked against him, going tight around him.

"Yes..." He arched, hips moving again, unable to resist the tight heat.

"I love you." The words whispered against his mouth, against his skin, caressing him.

"As I love you, my Aquan."

His lover whimpered, pressed his name into his lips. "Liet."

"Yes." His climax took him, sent him soaring into the sky. His lover was wrapped around him, their souls entwined for all time.

Tace blinked up at him, eyes wide, breath gasping.
"P..Puck?"

Puck shuddered, staring down at Tace. "What was ... did you feel..." His skin was crawling, tingling, head swimming.

Tace shivered, hands wrapping around him holding on.
"Oh, Puck that was..." Tace shook his head eyes still wide, confused.

"Yes. So ... so needy." The sensation inside him had been ... huge.

Tace nodded, fingers warm on him. "Can we go now, Puck?"

He nodded, not scared as much as confused, unnerved. "I ... Yes. Yes, Tace."

They fumbled their clothes back on and Tace took his hand, pulling him back through the garden.

"What do you think it was?" They stumbled together, hurrying through the leaves and vines.

Tace shook his head. "I don't know. Oh! Look, Puck." There among the bushes was a single calla lily, white and fine.

"Oh..." He walked over, fascinated, drawn to its beauty.

"You like it." Tace bent to pick it.

Something filled him, a panic, a horror. "No! No, don't touch it!"

Tace yanked his hand back as if burned. "Puck? I wanted only to pick it for you."

"No. No touching anything, remember? We promised. We *promised*, Tace." He grabbed Tace's hand, pulling him away.

His lover went with him, Tace nodding. "It was just a flower," murmured Tace as they pushed through the bushes to the other side of the wall.

"I know. I do. I just..." He was shivering, almost feverish. "I'm sorry. I was being silly."

Tace looked back toward the cottage covered in rose bushes and vines, the crumbling wall with its gate. "Let's go, Puck, I think your Gran was right. This place is dangerous."

"I ... There is magic living there, Tace. You and me? We're just simple." Not magical at all.

Tace laughed softly. "That's what I've been saying all day!"

He popped the sweet buttocks of his lover. "So I'm slow to learn."

Tace stopped and kissed him quickly. "You're just stubborn."

His lover's eyes were dancing and Tace took off, running along the path through the trees.

Puck took off after him, never noticing the way the sunlight poured through the leaves, making the statue of the eternally twined lovers shine and sparkle in the center of the garden.

End

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The Spirit of Mardi Gras: A Torquere Press Single Shot by Lorne Rodman

Chaos.

That was the best way to describe it, thought Tim.

But a good sort of chaos. One filled with lights and velvet and gold trim and laughter.

Carnival in New Orleans. It was all he had imagined and more.

He'd seen Mardi Gras in movies and on the news, so he'd known to expect the parades and the beads and the crowds, the wine and love flowing easily.

He never would have guessed, though, how the smell of wine and sweet incense would pervade the air. How the music would flow from the big houses that lined the streets. Cajun music here, classical there, rock at the next one.

And the costumes!

Some were as simple as a plain mask, eyes shining behind the black plastic, but most were elaborate: costumes and jewelry and glittering masks with beads and feathers and bells.

His own was fairly simple: he was dressed as an old-fashioned dandy in deep green. His mask, made up of scarlet feathers, covered his eyes and nose but left his dark curls free.

He'd felt quite silly in his little hotel room, but when he stepped out onto the streets he fit right in. He'd been given a kiss and a rose by a beautiful woman in a very sexy

harlequin's costume and at first he'd gaped open-mouthed and then he remembered why he'd come, why he was here, and he'd thrown his natural reticence into the wind and kissed her back enthusiastically.

Oh, he wasn't going to suddenly turn straight, but if he could kiss a strange woman like that, surely he could manage to do it with a man he found attractive.

He strolled along the streets, finding his way toward the French Quarter with its huge houses and it really felt like he was stepping into the past, with everyone in costume. There was an air of yesteryear about the place.

And when a young man with very green eyes stopped and offered him some beads, he put them around his neck and kissed the surprised young man hard. Laughing, he continued on his way. Oh, he was giddy.

It was a good thing he was open to new experiences, was a little high on his own boldness, for just about then someone grabbed him, a man wearing a black frock coat who kissed both of his cheeks. "Welcome to New Orleans." The voice had just the slightest accent, neither Southern nor French, but charming all the same.

He felt the heat in his cheeks, but he beamed at the man, meeting the dark eyes behind the mask. "Thank you! But how did you know?"

"Oh, darling, it is most obvious, no? You are new to this decadence." The man took his hand, and the skin against his was smooth and dry, warm.

He blushed harder and this time his eyes did drop. Yes, he was new to such things; he just hadn't realized he stuck out so much.

"What have you done so far? Have you seen a parade?" They walked down the street holding hands, as if they were old friends.

"It's my first day," Tim admitted, feeling a little more at ease. "I've only just come out into the streets, really."

"Oh! Then we must get you one of those amazing cocktails ... a hurricane, yes? And get you more beads." Oh, the eyes behind that mask were so dark they almost disappeared in the shadow, making a shiver go up his spine.

"I've never had a hurricane," he admitted. "I'd like to try one."

"Come, then."

Tim thought maybe his self-appointed guide would take him to the busiest jazz club on Bourbon street, but instead they turned off on a side street, going to an old pub-style club with an immense wooden bar.

It was charming and no less crowded for its tucked-out-of-the-way location. It was also warm and somehow intimate, despite the many people talking and laughing and flirting.

"Order us drinks, will you?" Money was pressed into his hand, his companion taking a booth in the back and waiting for him.

He blinked, a little surprised, and then went to the bar. "Two hurricanes, please."

It wasn't long before he had the two large glasses in front of him. "Don't drink 'em all at once," warned the bartender with a wink. "Gotta pace yourself."

"Right." He left the man a tip and headed for the table his mysterious companion had claimed.

The masked, old-fashioned-looking man seemed right in keeping with the bar's atmosphere. He got a smile, and the man's long, slender fingers stopped tapping the table as he sat. "They still make the best drinks here. You must tell me what you think."

"I will, but only if you tell me what your name is."

"Rene. Rene Gaudet." Eyes brighter now, in the different light, Rene leaned his elbows on the table, propping his chin on his hands. "What is yours, darling?"

"Tim Dawson." He smiled at Rene, utterly enchanted.

"And now you must try the drink and tell me what you think. The rum gives it quite a kick."

"Of course." He took a sip, eyes widening. A kick, indeed. He sipped again. "Wow."

"Yes, it is intoxicating." Rene pulled the second drink over and took a sip, eyes closing as he hummed.

Tim thought perhaps that such blatant sensuality was more intoxicating than the drink itself. He took another sip and then another, feeling the warmth spreading from his belly.

"You must be careful though. Becoming too tipsy at Mardi Gras might be dangerous." Tim didn't think his companion was dangerous, but there was that glint...

Another sip fortified him enough to be bold. "Are you after my virtue?"

"Naturally. Every young man on his first tour should be seduced." The smile that accompanied those words was wide, but the dark eyes were serious.

Tim was blushing again, but smiling also. This, after all, was why he had come to New Orleans. He had promised himself to throw caution to the winds and to put an end to his shyness, his ... innocence.

There was nothing innocent about Rene's eyes.

One finger came to trace his hand where it rested against his glass. "Are you not here for that?"

He nodded, the liquor or the place or the man himself loosening all his inhibitions. "I am, Rene."

"That is what I thought." Rene sat back, sipped his drink some more, his gaze warm, inviting. "There is no shame in it. I hope you will consider me for the very great honor."

Tim nodded again, suddenly sure that he could contemplate no one else in Rene's place. "I would like that very much." It made him vibrate, knowing what they had just negotiated.

"Wonderful. But first you must let me show you the Quarter, and the festival."

He nodded eagerly. "Oh yes. I want to see it all—to have the full experience."

"Of course you do. And so you should." The straw was removed from Rene's drink, the entire thing going down in a few long swallows.

His eyes widened, but he took it as a challenge and removed his own straw. Taking a breath, he tipped his glass and drank deeply. The alcohol left him gasping, blinking back tears.

"Oh." Rene clapped his hands, looking delighted. It was amazing how mobile the man's face was, even with the mask. "Excellent. Come on then."

He reached for Rene's hand, enjoying the warmth of it as their fingers twined, palms sliding together.

They went back out into the night, the noise and crowd a shock after the relative quiet of the little bar. People pressed at them from all sides, pushing them together. He found Rene's body to be solid and warm against his own, the heat in his belly from the drink spreading quickly.

They went to bars and stores, including voodoo shops where chicken feet and black cloth dolls vied for space with herbs and little jars of Lake Ponchatrain clay. Rene took him past women lifting their shirts for beads and men dancing in the streets with little on but a coat of paint. He saw old fashioned jazz quartets and a Goth band at a tiny club full of children half his age, and finally, a gay strip club, hidden back in a corner street behind an iron grille.

All the while Rene chatted with him, touched him. Flirted with him.

"Are you enjoying yourself, darling?"

He shivered just a little, enjoying the way Rene called him darling, with just a little accent. "I am, Rene. Very much."

"Good. I very much hoped you were." Rene brought their joined hands up, kissed his fingers. "What did you think of the dancing boys? What a marvelous modern thing that is!"

He laughed softly, smiling at Rene. To be honest, he'd hardly noticed the boys with their wild gyrations. Rene's charm and sophistication were far more appealing.

"Oh! Well, it is time for a late dessert, hmm? We must have coffee and pastry. Have you had coffee here yet? It is most strong." Laughing, Rene towed him off down yet another dizzying array of narrow streets, finally stopping at a tiny pastry shop that promised to be open twenty four hours a day during Mardi Gras.

Rene made him dizzy, giddy. Though that might be the leftover of the hurricane he'd chugged down. He had a feeling strong coffee was just what he needed.

Once again, Rene pressed money into his palm. "They are usually for breakfast, but you must try the beignets, and I think I will have a chocolate croissant. And coffee. I will wait for you there." Rene pointed to a small, intimate table by the window.

"All right." Feeling brave, he reached up and pressed a quick kiss to Rene's cheek and then went to order their food, wondering at Rene. Was the man unwelcome at these establishments for some reason?

The scent of coffee and pastries distracted him from the question as he ordered their beverages and their sweets.

The delight in Rene's eyes distracted him even more, as did the warm hand that closed over his. "So now what would you like to do, Tim?"

"After we eat?" He blushed hard at the words that wanted to spill from him.

"Yes. After we eat." One finger slid under his curled fingers, traced along his palm. "I am entirely at your disposal."

He licked his lips. "Would there be somewhere ... where we could be close? Dance maybe?" he tacked on quickly.

"Oh. Yes ... we might. Well. Would it be presumptuous to ask to go back to your hotel?"

He felt himself blushing, but he shook his head. "No, it wouldn't be."

"Wonderful." That settled, Rene seemed to relax, sitting back and sipping the coffee, watching a group of wildly dressed teens go by the window.

He wondered if he'd get a chance to see Rene's home. He suspected it would be something old and grand, but for now he would be more than happy to have the man back to his hotel room.

And here he was planning not just the rest of their night but the rest of his week as well. He thought perhaps it was New Orleans itself prompting these flights of fancy.

The coffee was strong enough to melt steel, the pastries melting in his mouth by comparison. Together they were irresistible.

Like the man who had paid for them. Rene was delicious and Tim found himself, now that they'd spent a few hours together, quite eager to return to his hotel room.

"Are you ready to go?" As if reading his mind, Rene sipped the last bit of coffee, licked a bit of chocolate off those well shaped lips. "I should like to see you without your mask."

He'd almost forgotten he was wearing it, it had become such a part of him. But now his heart began to thump at the thought of removing it, of exposing himself to Rene. "And I want to see you naked, too. I mean unmasked."

That got him a delighted laugh, the sound true, deep and husky. It sent more heat through him than the hurricane and the coffee combined, making him squirm. "Then we should go, so we do not keep you waiting, hmm?"

He nodded and bounced up, nearly tripping over his own feet.

Rene rose more gracefully, once more taking his hand and leading him out, the night winding down. There were still plenty of people out, but they looked tired, feathers and beads drooping. In contrast, he felt as if were bouncing, vibrating with life and nerves and eagerness. He squeezed Rene's hand and led him into the modest hotel that was still costing him an arm and a leg.

"Did you know this used to be a residence? It belonged to an octoroon who kept so many lovers she had to keep a schedule so they would not run into one another as they came and went."

"Really? I suppose she was terribly beautiful."

"Oh, yes." Rene took him all the way to his door, waiting patiently for him to fumble with his key card. "She was stunning. And so very smart."

"Yeah?" He was only half listening, most of his attention on trying to get in and what they were going to do once they were there.

"Yes. She finally retired to the country, having bought the house of the man who once owned her grandmother." The door finally gave way, and Rene pushed him inside, closing the door and immediately reaching for Tim's mask.

"I wish to see you."

"Oh. Okay." Tim blinked and swallowed, unaccountably nervous. Hadn't he and Rene had a lovely night so far? Why would the man suddenly turn tail and run just because he was unmasked?

The mask slid away leaving him feeling truly naked for an odd, sliding moment. Then Rene was tracing his brow, his cheeks, smiling at him. He smiled back, his own fingers reaching for Rene's mask. Rene nodded, hands dropping to his sides to allow Tim access.

Tim reached up and slowly pulled off Rene's mask. Oh, those dark eyes were brown, so very dark brown. There was an olive tone to Rene's skin, and his brows were dark and heavy above his eyes. The cheekbones were sharp as blades, but smile lines softened them.

He reached again and slid his fingers over the high cheekbones, gazing down at the man who was about to become his lover. He thought.

"You're very pretty." Rene's voice now matched the laugh Tim had heard earlier; it was deep and husky, full of what sounded like longing.

He blushed again, eyes dropping. "I'm average."

"You're lovely, darling. And you deserve a kiss." Coming right to him, right up against him, Rene put a hand behind his neck and pulled him down, lips pressing against his.

Tim's eyes were wide open as their mouths met, Rene's lips warm and smooth and soft and oh. It felt good.

"Mmmmyes." The sound was soft, spoken right against his mouth, Rene pushing him back against the door, pressing against him.

His breath caught in his throat and his hands slid behind Rene as their lips met again. Rene's body was warm, firm under the frock coat and trousers he wore. The clothing felt expensive, like silk and velvet and not like synthetic costuming.

The man's body was hard in front, too, hard where it pressed against him, pushing him against the door. It felt good.

When they were both breathless, both moaning, Rene pulled away, stepping a few paces back. "You said you wished to see me unclothed. Shall I undress, or would you like to do it?"

"Oh. Oh." He reached out, fingers fumbling with the old-fashioned buttons on Rene's coat, and in the end he pressed his hands against the door at his back. "I'll watch."

"Are you sure?" Rene smiled, came to him again, pulling Tim's hands out and leading him toward the bed. "I do not find you awkward, if that is what you worry about, my darling."

"I worry about not getting you naked," he admitted.

"Oh, I will help." That smile was devastating without the mask to obscure it. "Here." Tim's hands were placed on the buttons again, Rene stroking his wrists.

"Oh." He shivered, swallowed. His fingers were shaking badly—no great seducer he—but he managed to get the first and then the second button undone.

"You see? There is something to be said for a leisurely pace. It heightens the anticipation." What a marvelously kind way to put it.

"I'm not sure my ... anticipation can be heightened any further."

He gave Rene a wry smile and kept himself from apologizing for his ineptitude. Perhaps it was his very innocence that had drawn Rene to him.

"Oh, my dear one. You are young enough that there will be more than one little death this night." Rene drew Tim's hands lower, leading him to still more buttons.

He tugged them open one after the other, eagerness far outweighing his nervousness. Would Rene be smooth like himself? Warm? Soft?

There was a fine linen shirt under the coat and waistcoat, and the trouser placket had tiny buttons hidden beneath. Finally, though, Rene stood nude in front of him, skin smooth and only lightly dusted with hair, cock jutting out proudly.

"Oh." Tim shivered, hand reaching out to touch.

"Yes." Hands at his side, Rene spread his stance, inviting Tim to touch him anywhere, everywhere, just with his body language.

"Oh." He repeated the word, feasting first with his eyes and then stepping closer and laying his hands on Rene's chest. He met the dark eyes and smiled. "You're very handsome."

"Thank you." Reaching out, Rene stroked his cheek. "I am glad you approve." There was no irony or meanness, just pleasure in that caramel voice.

It made him bold, and he let his hands slide, fingertips stuttering over the bumps of Rene's little brown nipples. A soft moan greeted that movement, Rene's body seeming to ripple under his hands. "Oh. There."

He moved his fingers back and forth, tickling with his fingertips, watching Rene's face. A deep flush rose in Rene's skin, from his throat to his cheeks, and those dark eyes drooped, lashes surprisingly thick against Rene's cheekbones.

Oh, God, it made him feel sexy, made him feel smooth, special. "You like this."

"Yes. Very much. I like that you like it, as well. I can smell you, Tim."

"Smell me?" He had to stop himself from sniffing his pits. He'd been sweating, but his deodorant should have done the job.

Rene laughed, the sound delighted. "Yes. Your need. It is all heat, my darling. All man." Rene reached for his buttons, now, beginning the process of getting him naked.

He shivered, fingers curling on Rene's skin. "Oh."

"What a delight you are." His coat slid off, then his shirt, Rene's fingers curling into his waistband.

He gasped, pressing closer, eyes flying to meet Rene's. Would he pass muster?

"You're lovely, but now I would see all of you." Rene smiled, letting go, letting Tim do it himself.

"Oh. Oh." He nodded, fingers trembling as badly as they had when he'd undressed Rene. He got his pants open and undone, pushing them shyly off his hips.

"So pretty." The response was immediate, and, he thought, heartfelt. The touch of Rene's hand certainly made him feel good.

His cock was hard, red-tipped and leaking. It was familiar to him, but it was unfamiliar being exposed to another's eyes. He stepped closer to Rene, drawn to the man's warmth, to his body.

One arm slid around his waist, Rene drawing him close, Rene's lips settling on his neck. The full-body contact made him jump, made him burn all up and down. He wrapped his arms around Rene's waist, holding on to keep from falling down.

A huff of laughter warmed his throat, Rene kissing his neck. "We should make use of the bed, yes?"

He nodded. "Yes. Please."

He whimpered as Rene stepped back, following, eager and beginning to feel wanton.

Rene drew back the covers and sat at the edge of the bed as if testing it. "This will do quite well. Come here to me and kiss me."

He went and stood between Rene's legs, bending to bring their mouths together. His cock slid against Rene's chest, making him cry out.

"Ah, yes. We were going to relieve the urgency." That sweet mouth took his in a kiss before Rene pulled him hard, making him tumble to the bed. That lean body held deceptive strength. Rene pushed him flat on his back, kneeling between his legs, stroking his thighs. "I want to put my mouth on you."

He shuddered. "Oh! Yes, please." It was supposed to be amazing. Would it really be amazing?

"So brave." The short hairs on Tim's thighs caught on Rene's fingers, making his skin draw up. Hot breath washed over him, and Rene touched the tip of his cock so lightly with open lips, licking him delicately.

"Oh god!" He'd never felt anything like it, not the kiss of his own hand, not the glide of water or of lube.

"Mmm." Oh, even the vibration of that moan was a caress. Rene's lips slid down over him, rough tongue working the underside of his cock.

He cried out, hands fisting in the sheets as pleasure shot through him. The dark head began to bob up and down, Rene's mouth taking him in all the way, then backing off. The sight of it added to the unbelievable sensations; it was absolutely devastating and he cried out again, nearly in tears because it was so good.

"Rene ... Oh." He reached out, his hand sliding over Rene's hair.

Rene's eyes, when he looked up, were so dark Tim could tell no difference between iris and pupil. Holding his gaze, Rene sank down upon him again. And swallowed.

He screamed as he came, the pleasure almost a pain.

Sliding up his body, Rene smiled down at him, licking his lips. "You're beautiful."

"Oh." He blushed, smiling lazily at Rene, feeling melted and enervated at the same time. "Oh! You shouldn't have ... I have condoms. In the drawer."

Stroking his hair off his forehead, Rene nodded. "If you prefer, we will use them. But I have no fear of that with you."

"But..."

"But what, darling?" Petting, stroking, Rene looked at him seriously, waiting.

"It's not safe. You shouldn't just take my word for it—what if you caught something?" Tim might not have had sex with anyone before, but he'd read all the literature, he knew the dangers of unprotected sex. And it wasn't very romantic or sexy but it was important

"Then we will be more careful from now on, yes?" He couldn't see how Rene could be so cavalier, but Rene just seemed to shrug it off, bending to kiss Tim gently.

He looked at Rene, really looked, and then nodded. "All right."

He got one of those stunning smiles, a sweet kiss just under his mouth. "Now may we play some more? I want to enjoy you in all ways."

"Oh, yes, please." He nodded. Yes. That sounded lovely.

Rene laughed, the sound sweet and true, the muscles in Rene's body moving along his. It felt natural. Right.

He wriggled, liking Rene's weight on top of him.

Rene kissed his throat, and he could feel Rene hard against his hip. "What would you like, beautiful one?"

"Me? What about you? I already got to come." It was Rene's turn.

"Of course, but what makes you happy will give me pleasure, I assure you." Rene just started rocking, rubbing, making happy noises.

"I ... I want to try everything." It made him shiver to admit it.

"Of course you do. Tonight, though, I think we will ease you into it." Reaching between them, Rene stroked down his chest, pinching one of his nipples.

He gasped, bucking beneath Rene.

"Oh, yes, you like that." Bending, Rene licked at the hard little bit of flesh.

Tim made a noise, hands sliding to Rene's hair, stroking through it, not holding Rene's head down, not really.

Rene licked and nibbled and tortured his nipple thoroughly, looking up at him with glinting eyes before moving to the other. "You taste good. Like pecan pralines. Sweet and salty."

He laughed softly. "And you're feasting on me."

"Of course I am, darling. Lovers should feast." Rene's cheek was smooth against his chest, warm where it rubbed.

He took a long, slow breath, letting out the moan that pushed up from his chest. He had a feeling Rene could teach him all about being lovers. Rene shifted, moving so that hard

prick rubbed along his own, sliding up to take a delicate bite out of his neck. Moaning, he arched, head going back automatically, giving Rene room.

He gave and Rene took, teeth scraping, tongue soothing the sting. It made him jerk and gasp, made him push up against Rene, which slid their cocks together. Oh! Who'd have thought that would be so good?

"Yes. Just like that, my darling." Rene slid against him, licking his neck.

"It's good," he told Rene, pushing up again. So good. The friction and heat made him gasp, made him pant.

Rene was just moaning, rolling on him, begging him with those sweet, dark eyes. He was as hard as Rene, even though he'd already come, but this man was addictive, sexy. They moved together faster and faster, Rene pressing down on him, biting at his chin, his lips, one hand sliding between them to grasp their cocks.

"Oh!" Oh, it was good. He slid his hand between them as well, fingers twining with Rene's, helping. His eyes held Rene's, making sure he was doing okay.

He must have been doing more than okay. Rene jerked, and the hot flesh in his hand throbbed as well. He could feel Rene's heartbeat.

"I can feel you," he whispered.

"Yes. I want you to. So lovely." Rene smiled, a drop of sweat trickling down the side of his face.

Suddenly bold, Tim leaned up and licked at it, gasping at the salt and spice flavor.

"Oh." Those dark eyes went wide, and Rene convulsed against him, hips rolling as wet heat spread across his hand.

That was more than enough to trigger his own orgasm, and he came with a cry, hips bucking up against Rene.

"Oh. Darling. Wonderful."

He blushed, burying his face against Rene's neck.

He got a kiss to his cheek, his chin, Rene pulling him up for a kiss to his mouth. "How marvelous you are."

"Me? I'm just ... me."

"And that is all I can ask." Rene looked toward the window, grimacing. "May I see you again tomorrow night?"

"Oh, you can't stay?" He tried not to sound too disappointed, but he was.

"How I wish I might." Sitting up, Rene petted his belly. "Can you forgive me?"

"I can see you tomorrow night?" He hated to sound needy, but he didn't want what was between them to end.

"Yes." Wow. Rene practically glowed, bouncing and clasping his hands. "Yes, we can go to the river, walk and see sights. Come back and do this all over again?"

"I'd like that. When can we meet?"

"Just after sundown? Meet me at the mask shop at the Rue St. Louis."

"All right. In costume?"

"Oh, no. Let us buy costumes together." Something wicked flashed in those dark eyes. "Something that pleases us both."

A lovely shiver of anticipation moved through him. "Yes, Rene."

Rene raised each of his hands and kissed them. "I will see you then. I will think of nothing else."

He squeezed Rene's hands. "Are you sure you have to go now?"

"I am, my darling. Tomorrow." Slipping from the bed, Rene dressed, bending for one last kiss before assuming his mask. "I promise. Good night."

"Good night, Rene. I'll see you tomorrow."

He watched as the man disappeared out the door.

Then he curled up, smiling. Wow. So far? New Orleans and Mardi Gras were more than living up to their billing.

* * * *

Tim slept most of the day away, having been up most of the night with Rene, first exploring New Orleans and then making love. And making love and making love.

Oh, how he'd enjoyed that.

He woke up with a wide smile and a growling stomach. Room service provided waffles with whipped cream and chocolate syrup and a large glass of milk. A shower and his hand and reliving a few choice moments from the night before made his smile even wider and left him feeling loose and ready, eager to experience more of New Orleans and more of the lovemaking.

It was Friday night, and the streets were even busier than they'd been the night before. He understood that the partying wouldn't stop all weekend, day or night from now on and would just go and go until it culminated at midnight on Tuesday.

He slowly made his way to Rue St. Louis, taking everything in. He found the mask shop, the Little Shop of Fantasy, with little trouble and peeked in the window. Rene didn't seem to be there yet, but Tim was a little early, the sun only just setting, painting the sky deep pink and a dark, bruised purple. So he waited, watching people come out of the shop in elaborate costumes and masks.

The sun had firmly set a half hour later, when he was surprised by a soft touch on his shoulder. "Good evening, my darling."

He spun and beamed at Rene, who looked more handsome this evening than he had the last. His frock coat was scarlet velvet with gold trim, his black leggings hugging his legs like a second skin. Tim swallowed and smiled. "Good evening, Rene. You look wonderful."

"Thank you, my love." Rene kissed his cheek, took his hand to lead him into the shop. "Let us find you something outrageous to wear that will compliment your lovely form."

He laughed and ducked his head. "I don't think I could pull off a costume as elaborate as yours. Maybe something less ... tight?"

Rene's face fell. "You don't like it."

"Oh, no! I didn't say that. I couldn't carry it off, but you look wonderful!"

"You needn't say so you if you do not think it." But Rene was smiling, cheeks flushed with pleasure, that hand squeezing his.

"I think it, Rene. I think it very much." He squeezed back, smiling at Rene.

"Good. We will make your trousers less tight. Though I want something that will show this off." He jumped and blushed as Rene stroked his butt on the way in the door.

"Rene!" Despite what they'd done yesterday, he was somewhat scandalized. But he also liked it, liked the way Rene made him feel.

"Yes, my darling? Oh, look! A priest." Rene held up a cassock, laughing delightedly.

He giggled. He'd be covered in the costume at any rate. "Am I innocent enough?"

He got an arch look. "Not anymore." They moved on, Rene exclaiming over the brightly colored masks and the crazier modern costumes. And the skimpier ones. Rene was so enthusiastic, smiling, pulling him along. Rubbing against him.

Tim found himself breathless and needy, so hard, despite their being in public. He watched Rene more than he looked at the costumes, feeling rather drunk, though he'd had nothing alcoholic to drink.

"What about a pirate? You can be Jean Lafitte." The costume was not one of the cheap striped-shirt-and-eye-patch things. It came with a skirted frock coat, trousers and tall boots, with a flamboyant tricorn hat.

Oh, no, he could never carry off anything that flamboyant. But that wasn't what he said. "I'll try it on."

Rene's eyes lit up, and Tim would swear the man bounced. "Excellent. Come. I will help you."

"H ... help me?" He squeaked, but he was swept up in Rene's enthusiasm and in a matter of moments he found

himself in a small changing room with three mirrors. And Rene.

"Now, isn't this delightfully private?" Those clever hands were on him immediately, working the buttons of his shirt, pushing at his clothing.

He gasped, hard and needy, feeling like a wanton. "We can't!"

"You must undress to try on the outfit, yes?" Rene's look was so perfectly innocent it had to be false. Had to be.

He blinked and then nodded slowly. He did. That was true enough.

"I am only helping." His pants slid down his legs, leaving him feeling ... breezy.

"Oh." Well, that would be all right. And not at all what he'd thought Rene was doing. He blushed hard.

Of course, the way Rene looked at him once he was standing in the dressing room in nothing but his shorts was not innocent at all. Rene stroked his belly. "You are so pretty, Tim. So very pretty."

"Oh. Rene ... You're making me hard." Had already made him hard before they'd even come in here, but now ... oh, his shorts hid nothing.

"Well, naturally. I wish to touch you, to taste you." The pretense dropped just that easily, Rene moving close. "I am tempted, my love, to take you in my mouth right here."

His eyes widened, he knew they did, he could feel them and he couldn't say a word, he was that shocked. Shocked not only that Rene would contemplate such a thing, would say it, but shocked also that he would be so taken with the idea

himself that he wished Rene would, damned be the consequences.

"Yes. You see why." Rene touched his cheeks, fingers lingering on the heated blush that had sprung up. "I think perhaps I must. You must remember to be quiet." And just like that, Rene dropped to his knees and opened Tim's shorts, pulling his cock out and wrapping soft, hot lips around it.

Tim gasped loudly, a moan threatening. Stuffing his hand into his mouth, he bit down on his skin, trying his very hardest not to cry out. It felt so good, the knowledge that they could be caught at any moment sending a thrill down his spine.

Rene's mouth moved up and down, hot and wet, voracious. The touch of Rene's hands on his balls sent more shivers up his spine. So good. So good. The words echoed in his head, stuck inside him and repeated over and over.

A moan vibrated around him, muffled by his own flesh, and he could see Rene's eyes when he looked down, wide open and staring at him. Begging him. It was the look, along with the vibrations and the sucking heat that sent him over, spilling his seed into Rene's mouth. It was a good thing he'd stuffed his hand into his mouth, for he was shouting quite enthusiastically.

Taking it all, Rene stayed on him, licking his sensitized cock until he was soft, then pulled back, licking his lips. "Oh, Tim. Lovely."

Tim leaned back against the wall of the changing room, head hitting the wood with a thump. "Oh. Oh, Rene, that was

... incredible." So incredible he didn't even care that he was hanging out of his shorts in a public changing room.

"You are incredible, my darling." Tenderly, Rene tucked him back into his shorts and stood. "I love the way you taste."

"Oh! You didn't use a condom again!" Rene was going to get sick if he wasn't more careful; it worried Tim.

"So worried. I am hardly likely to be the one to become ill. Should you want to do that to me, we will be careful, I swear it."

He stroked Rene's cheeks. "I do want to do it to you, Rene. I want to make you feel as good as you make me feel."

"You will." Rene adjusted himself in the tight trousers. "But first we will dress you, and I will take you out and show you off."

"I think everyone will be looking at you, Rene." Like anyone would notice him beside the handsome and flamboyant Rene.

"Oh, we shall see." The pants and shirt came first, Rene dressing him like an old fashioned valet.

He let Rene dress him, bemused and a little pleased, for Rene's hands slid along his body as if he were something special.

The last were the tall boots, which fit him as if they were made for him, and Rene turned him to look in the mirror.

"You are a fine pirate."

"Wow. I can hardly believe that's me." He cut a very dashing figure, like he belonged next to Rene's fancy elegance.

"There, you see? All you need is a small black mask, and you will be the most interesting man about."

"The second most," he insisted.

"Oh. Charmer." Rene kissed him again, then did the oddest thing, just as he had the previous night. Pressed money into his hand. "Tell them you will wear it out."

"You could tell them," he suggested.

"No. I ... please, Tim. I promise I have done nothing wrong, but I prefer not to deal with shopkeepers." There was a pleading look in those dark eyes, Rene's hand soft on his arm. "Please?"

He stroked Rene's cheek, marveling at this one chink in the suave, sexy man. "All right. I'll tell them I'll wear it out."

"Thank you." There. There was the brilliant smile, the sweet press of Rene's hand. "I shall just wait for you outside."

He took a quick kiss and then followed Rene from the changing room, his own clothes under his arm. Rene headed for the door as he went to the register to pay. "I'd like to wear the costume out."

"Oh, very sexy, childe. You want a bag for your own clothes?"

He nodded and paid for the clothes, pocketing Rene's change. He wasn't renting this costume, he discovered. He owned it now. Goodness. He wasn't sure what he would do with it after Mardi Gras was over. Perhaps he would wear it when he wanted to remember Rene...

But he had days yet before his trip was over and he had to go home again, so he left the store with his clothes in a bag, searching for Rene.

"There you are." Rene came to him right away, linking their arms. "We should go and drop those off at your hotel. I have much to show you."

"Oh, I can't wait." He walked with Rene, everything glittering and bright as they made their way back to his hotel.

"So, tell me what you did today?"

"Oh, I'm not very exciting, I'm afraid—I slept until it was time to get ready to come and meet you." He hoped that didn't make him seem overly eager.

Or pathetic.

"Oh. Well, I am glad you remembered to come." They dodged a woman dressed like a Las Vegas showgirl as she tried to kiss them, but Rene managed to snag some beads and throw them over Tim's hat. "Very jaunty."

He chuckled, but stopped Rene, cupped one cheek. "I wouldn't have missed coming for anything."

That cheek heated under his palm, desire rising in Rene's eyes. "Good. You're very special, Tim. We should hurry." Rene's voice lowered. "I need to make love to you."

"Oh." He nodded and hurried into the hotel, holding tight to Rene's hand.

They made a fine repeat of the night before, making it just inside the door before coming together for a kiss. The door was cool against his back, Rene hot and hard at his front.

The kiss was hard, invasive, the sweet gentleness melting under the force of Rene's need. Tim felt his head spin, his vision gray with his need to breathe. He wrapped his arms around Rene, hands finding Rene's ass and holding on.

They rocked, Rene pushing and pushing, panting into his mouth. Finally Rene pushed him away, fumbling desperately with those skintight trousers. He tried to help, but his own fingers were trembling and clumsy and he was getting in the way.

Rene got the pants open and grabbed Tim's hand, pulling it down to close around the hard, hot flesh that pushed out. He went Rene one better, dropping to his knees and licking tentatively at Rene's cock.

"Oh. Tim. My darling. The bed ... your rubber sheaths..."

He nodded, taking another lick and then pushing Rene toward the bed. Rene stumbled, managed to make it to the bed, sitting hard and looking at him. He went to his backpack, searching for the condoms he'd bought, finally finding the box and tearing it to get it open.

Oh. Rene looked decadent, cock red and long and hard, sticking out of his pants. The red coat shimmered softly, Rene's cheeks flushed almost as dark above it.

He swallowed hard and took a long look before climbing onto the bed. "Lie back," he whispered.

Rene leaned back, stretching out, watching him hungrily all the while. He climbed up, ripping open the condom wrapper with trembling fingers.

He got a smile, hot and so very, very male. Rene reached down, holding that straining cock steady for him. "Please."

He nodded and worked the condom down smoothly, all that work practicing on himself paying off.

Rene's hands trembled, stroking over his hands, up his arms to his shoulders. Stroking. Petting. Tim nuzzled and

pushed into the touches and then bent and licked again at Rene's cock. It tasted like the condom now, instead of musky and male like the first few licks against Rene's skin had.

Still, he gamely wrapped his lips around the head and started to suck.

"Oh. Oh, Tim." The nasty taste was worth that moan, worth the way Rene jerked beneath him.

He let his mouth go down further, taking more in and then pulling back off, lips tight. The moans grew louder, Rene's hips starting to rock slowly, gently. At first he backed off, but slowly he took more of Rene's cock in, tongue sliding on the hot flesh beneath the latex.

"Close, Tim. Very close." Rene was just panting, hands on his shoulders, muscles twitching.

He sucked harder, hand sliding to touch Rene's balls, remembering how much that had sparked the sensations inside him. A long, thin cry met his touch, and Rene shot hard, reminding him that while he might have come in that changing room, Rene hadn't.

He pulled off and started putting an open mouthed kiss on Rene's belly, eager to get the taste of plastic off his tongue.

Heat. Sweat. The little patch of skin was all male. Rene pulled him up, stroked his face. "Thank you."

"I liked making you come like that. Wish I could taste you, though," he admitted. He didn't think it was worth risking disease, but he understood a little more why Rene didn't like to use a condom

"I know, darling. That is why I do not use one. I can understand your caution, though. It is good you care for

yourself in this way." He got a quick, strong hug, a sly wink.
"And now what would you like to do?"

He wriggled against Rene, blushing just a tiny bit at being so hard again. "You mentioned making love..."

"I did. Would you like to be inside me, Tim? I would like that very much."

Oh. Oh man.

He swallowed and nodded, unable to answer right away. His cock felt so, so hard all of a sudden and he was having trouble catching his breath. He nodded again. "Yes."

"Then let us get undressed. We would not wish to ruin our costumes." They were laughing, tumbling all over the bed, and he knew Rene was helping to ease him, to make it possible for him to slow down some, get his breath back. It was very sweet.

Soon enough they were both naked, and he was distracted by Rene's trim body. He hadn't had time to really explore it the night before, so now he took the time, fingers sliding over the light hair on Rene's chest, teasing the small nipples.

"Oh. You have wonderful hands." There was nothing about him, it seemed, that Rene did not enjoy. So sensual. Rene shifted, moved under him. He was compact, with pale, smooth skin. Lean muscles moved under that skin, shifting as Tim touched, jumping as he licked and nibbled.

Rene smelled and tasted good, very male.

Very addictive.

He whimpered and rubbed, fingers sliding to wrap around Rene's hardening cock, encouraging it back to full hardness.

It didn't take much. The shaft of Rene's prick filled quickly, rising easily for him as Rene wiggled and moaned. "Yes. Oh, Tim."

"We need slippery stuff, right?" He had some. He'd bought it along with the condoms.

"Yes, we do. You will need to open me up first. It is most pleasant." Yes. Rene obviously really thought so, because his cheeks and chest were flushed, his cock just jumping.

His own cheeks had high color at this point, but he nodded and went to his pack to pull out the tube of lubricant.

"Oh, you are wonderfully prepared." Rene flopped back on the bed, spreading his legs wide, feet planted. He looked so open, so exposed, balls hanging low and flushed cock bobbing. He was beautiful.

Tim crawled up between Rene's legs and planted a kiss on the man's inner thigh. "You're beautiful," he said softly.

"Thank you, darling." Rene stroked his hair, wrapping a hand around his neck, petting lightly. It was an unbelievably erotic sensation.

He bent and kissed Rene, moaning as his tongue slid in.

He got an answering moan, Rene stroking down his back, trailing over every bump of his spine. "All right, darling. Get your fingers good and wet."

He nodded and got the tube of slick open, getting it all over his hands as it spurted out far easier than he was expecting. His hands slid along Rene's ass, skating along the man's crack and right past his hole.

"Tim. You tease." Rene laughed, pushing up against him.

He shook his head. "I didn't mean to! Everything's just so slippery."

"Sometimes it is good to tease. Breathe, my love. You will not hurt me." Rene spread even more, opening to him, making it easier to get his fingers lined up with that tiny, hot hole.

"Oh..." He blinked hard and pushed. There was resistance at first, but just as he was about to give up, his finger slid right into the tightest, hottest silk he'd ever imagined.

A long, indrawn breath swelled Rene's chest, and as he let it out Tim felt the muscles around his finger loosen, warm, let him in further. He moaned as his finger slid deeper.

"Now two, darling one. Stretch me more."

He pulled his finger out and spread more lube over his fingers and this time pushed two in, watching in amazement as they slid right in.

So hot, so warm and deep. Rene's breath was coming short and sharp, his chest heaving, muscles shaking. "Soon, Tim. I need you soon."

"I'm not going to fit." He wasn't. Rene was so tight around just his two fingers, and he wasn't huge or anything, but he was much bigger than two fingers.

"Yes, you are. I once saw a man take another man's hand entirely inside him. I will stretch." Rene held out his hand. "Come, put on one of your sheaths and come here to me."

"A whole hand?" He looked down at Rene's hand, at his own, at where his two fingers disappeared into Rene's body and shook his head. "I don't see how."

But then he blinked away the images and put on a condom, managing not to shake too much.

"Now get it wet as well. And we will see how well we fit." That smile was impossible to resist.

Smiling back, he squirted the lube out over his cock. "How do I?"

"Hold yourself steady, and line up, then push forward. I will help, I promise." Goodness. Rene pulled his knees up to his chest, and Tim thought he might have a heart attack.

Panting, he pushed closer until his own knees cupped Rene's buttocks. Then he leaned forward, hand guiding his prick to Rene's hole. He took a deep breath and pushed in.

So tight. Goodness, it was so tight, and burning hot, even through the condom. Rene moaned, belly and thighs twitching, hands urging him on. Sweat ran down Rene's face, which was set in harsh lines. "Feels ... oh."

"Are you okay?" Tim asked, worried. He pet Rene with his hands, one hand on the man's belly, the other sliding along one hip.

"I am quite wonderfully well. You feel ... hard. Large. So good in me." Rene's hands closed over his, twining their fingers together.

He kept pushing until his hips were pressed against Rene's ass. It was. Rene was. Oh, hot and tight and almost too much. He whimpered, squeezing Rene's fingers.

"Sh. Sh. Breathe. Think of something else for a moment." Squeezing his fingers back, Rene crooned to him, soothed him until he thought he might be able to hold himself in. He didn't think he could possibly think of anything else, though.

This was ... too all-encompassing. The feeling of Rene around his cock filled his entire body with pleasure.

"There. Now move, see how amazing a thing this is." Rene sounded so calm. He didn't look calm, though. He looked decadent. Well loved.

Tim moved, hips pulling back out, sliding in again; his body knew what it was doing.

He cried out as the pleasure shot through his cock, settling in his balls.

"Yes." Rene arched under him, pushing up at him, riding his cock. It was the most intense sensation.

His eyes fell closed, but he forced them open again, wanting to watch Rene's face as he moved, as the pleasure built inside him. They moved faster and faster, so good, Rene's legs wrapping about his waist to pull him even closer. Demanding man.

He did his best to do it right, to do what Rene wanted, but his own body's needs were driving him and soon he was just pushing in hard and fast, eyes rolling in his head at how good it felt.

"Tim!" That made his eyes pop open again, just in time to see Rene reach down and pump his own cock, pulling hard at it. It took maybe three good yanks for Rene to cry out and shoot, covering their bellies with spunk. Rene clamped down on him. Hard.

Tim's eyes went wide, and he cried out as the tightness around him milked his cock and pulled his orgasm right out of him. Rene held him as he fell forward, stroking, murmuring to him how lovely he was, how good.

"Oh, that was. It. I. So good, Rene. Like the best thing I've felt ever." Even better than Rene's mouth had felt around his cock.

"You were wonderful, my love. Simply wonderful. I knew you would be."

He buried his warm cheek in Rene's neck. "Thank you."

"Thank you, love." Laughing, Rene pinched his butt. "But now I am hungry for food."

Tim's cock came out of Rene as he jerked from the pinch and he laughed, rolling away and trying to figure out a suave way of getting rid of the condom. Too bad there wasn't one. The only way was to slide it off and tie it up and, oh, messy. Rene did not seem bothered, just sat up and leaned in to kiss him. He tossed the condom toward the garbage and turned his head up, mouth opening beneath Rene's.

Rene tasted him thoroughly, tongue pushing in, lips firm and damp on his. Those amazing hands stayed on him, petting him, letting him know how pleased Rene was with him. He moaned, opening wider, just giving it all to Rene.

They kissed for a long, lovely while, both of them lying back on the bed, just feeling, touching. When they finally broke apart, Rene looked at him, and there was something very like sadness in those dark eyes. "I cannot tell you how much I am enjoying you."

"I'm enjoying you, too, Rene." He took another kiss. "And we have 4 more days to enjoy before Ash Wednesday, right?"

"Yes. The night of Fat Tuesday, I am afraid, will be my last night in town, and I will need to leave before the dawn." Rene

laughed, the sound forced in its gaiety. "You can give me up for Lent, my darling."

Sadness filled him, even though he'd known that would be their last night. His own flight was early Wednesday morning. "Let's not think about that. Let's enjoy the time we have." Fill it with love making and laughter.

"Yes." Rene kissed his cheek, rolled away, off the bed. "And now I must take you out and show you off. We will go to the Pygmalion parade and eat our weight in barbeque shrimp."

He laughed, breathless and horny again. "Okay." It sounded like a fun way to spend the evening. And who knew, maybe they would find a quiet corner to grope each other in.

* * * *

Tim couldn't believe it was Tuesday already.

He and Rene had spent a whirlwind four days, and now it was Mardi Gras. Fat Tuesday.

The night to end all nights in New Orleans.

Tomorrow, everyone would don their somber clothes and give up chocolate and sex for Lent, but for tonight? No indulgence was too extravagant, no perversion forbidden.

Tim slept the day away, as he had the previous four, choosing to be awake for the nights. And oh, what nights they had been.

Rene showed him everything, New Orleans' nooks and crannies, the high spots, the hidden away spots.

They'd gone to parades and made out in alleys.

Each night, Rene came to him in a new brightly colored outfit, each night the man bought him a new costume. He'd had to buy a suitcase to pack them into.

He'd grown used to Rene's habit of pressing money into his hand—and the man never let him pay for anything, treating him to food and clothing, absolutely everything.

It had been so much fun.

And then they would retire to his hotel room and make love until Rene snuck away at dawn.

They'd done it all, everything but have Rene fuck him. Tonight he wanted that, he wanted to feel what it was like to have another man inside him. To have *Rene* inside him.

Because, truth be told, he was falling in love with the dapper Cajun.

Tim had supper in the hotel dining room, or rather breakfast—all-you-can-eat pancakes with sausages and bacon and biscuits dripping in honey—and then he made his way out to the French Quarter, to a tailor's called Madame Aunoire's. A tailor's. He wondered what Rene was up to, what the man had planned for their last evening together.

The shop had a sign that said "Closed—Ring Bell for Appointment Only". It was in the Rue Royale, and a small brass sign proclaimed that the shop had been in continuous business since 1860.

Wow. Rene found the neatest places—he'd been cagey about where he was from, but Tim knew the man had to come to New Orleans often.

He rang the bell, hearing it sound deep inside the building.

Before long, an elderly man came and unlocked the door, eyebrows like little fuzzy caterpillars rising at the sight of him. "Yes?"

He cleared his throat. "I. Um. I'm supposed to meet Rene Gaudet here."

"Oh! Yes, yes, come in, young man. Oh, I cannot tell you how pleased I was to have a commission from Rene. Even if it was last minute." The old man let him in and locked up behind him, jerking his head to indicate that Tim was to follow. The man had what Tim thought of as a true New Orleans accent, oddly swinging from southern to a more ... maybe guttural was the word. It had a certain exotic quality to it.

He followed, intrigued and a little nervous at being drawn so deeply into the house.

The shop smelled of dust and fabric and glue, and bolts of cloth and dressmaker's dummies stood everywhere. It certainly was different from the few impersonal tailors he'd been to that department stores provided when they sold you a hundred dollar suit.

He wondered if Rene would be here and looked for his lover as he they moved deeper and deeper into the house.

"Here we are." The old man chuckled. "La, forgive me, my name is Gerard Aunoire. The original Madame was my ancestress. She started this business all those years ago by taking in sewing."

"Here" was a small parlor with a settee, an occasional table and an old gaslight fixture converted to electricity. "Wait here," he was instructed.

"Okay."

He swallowed as he was left alone, looking around to see if he could find some hint of the costume Rene had prepared for him. If that was indeed why he was here.

There was hardly any sound to prepare him, just a brush of air on his neck before gloved hands slipped over his eyes and hot breath fanned his cheek. "Hello, my darling."

His cock leapt, a shiver going through him. "Rene."

"Yes. Did you wait long? The monsieur's wife just let me in the back." Rene came around, leaning up to kiss him hello.

"No, I haven't been waiting long at all." He kissed Rene again. "I am *very* curious though."

"Are you? Will you just burst if you do not soon see?" Rene sounded young, carefree. Happy.

He laughed. "I might, Rene. Though I hope I'll be bursting anyway. If you know what I mean." Being with Rene night after night had made him bold.

The laughter turned to something more serious, a familiar need lighting those dark eyes. "Good. I shall hope so as well." Rene danced away from him, and he noticed that compared to his bright attire the entire week, Rene looked almost somber. His coat was dark superfine, charcoal perhaps, it was hard to tell. His breeches were unrelieved black, his boots high and polished to a mirror shine.

"You look very handsome tonight, Rene." Perhaps it was the severity of the outfit, but Rene seemed more sexy than ever.

"Thank you, my love. I hope you like your outfit as well. I know it was presumptuous, but I am nothing if not imperious,

no? Gerard!" Rene called out the door for the old tailor. "We are ready." Rene gave him another kiss, sweet and light.

"As long as it's not a dress, I'm sure I will," Tim teased, hiding his nerves.

Rene took his hand, gloved fingers sliding over his palm. "Of course not. You are not a man who would look well in a dress, Tim."

He chuckled. "I'm not sure if that's a compliment or an insult..."

"A compliment to be sure. You look like a man! Does he not, Gerard?"

"Oh, yes, monsieur. He is a fine figure. And I can see that your measurements are perfect." The old man appeared, a muslin-wrapped suit-sized bundle over his arm. "I will leave you to try on, and if it does not fit, you will call me."

Tim took the bundle from the little man. "Thank you."

He smiled at Rene. "Shall I open it?"

"Yes, yes please." Rene watched him, eyes twinkling, as he opened the package.

Oh. It was the most beautiful suit of clothes he had ever seen. A sober dark blue frock coat sat atop a pair of deep brown superfine trousers. A cream waistcoat and a linen shirt with a detached collar and cuffs rounded out the attire.

"Oh, Rene ... it's ... it's exquisite." His fingers slid along the material. "Just exquisite."

"I think you will find, too, that a custom-tailored fit is like nothing else. Undress for me, my darling?"

A thrill went through him. He loved the way Rene looked at him, the way he spoke of being naked.

"Would you like some help?" Those strong fingers found his buttons, working them free.

He nodded, not even trying to help, just letting Rene take off his clothes.

His shirt slid down off his arms, just like the first night they had been together, and Rene started on his pants. "Do you wish to stay in the Quarter this evening, Tim, or would you like to escape the craziness for a bit?"

"Honestly, Rene? I would be honored if you would make love to me."

"Oh." Rene stroked his cheek with one hand, the other hand at his waist. "Of course I will. I hope you do not mind, I have taken the liberty of arranging a meal."

He nuzzled into the touch. "I leave myself entirely in your hands tonight, Rene."

"So trusting. But I thank you, my love."

The rest of his clothes went quickly by the wayside, Rene's hands smoothing all over him. Tim moaned, pushing into the touches, his own hands reaching for Rene.

Rene smiled, pushed his hands away. "We need to get you dressed first, so the monsieur can go home."

"Oh." He tried not to be too disappointed. Rene had a point after all. It was just he was naked, and Rene was there and usually that meant love-making. He nodded though, reaching for his new garments.

"Do not worry, my darling. we will be quite alone at supper. There will be much time to play." Rene helped him dress, showing him how to attach the starched collar and cuffs, how to tie his neckcloth.

When he was finished, Rene stepped aside and let Tim see himself in the full length mirror.

He gasped.

It was as if he'd been transported in time. It wasn't just his own outfit, but Rene too wore a costume from the same period, the room around them equally old-fashioned.

"Do you like it? I know I certainly do." Rene stepped up beside him, leaning on him cheek to cheek.

"I do. It's very ... we are very dashing together." It was an old-fashioned word and it certainly suited them.

"We are." Rene kissed his cheek then and patted his bottom through coat and trousers. "You look very fine, and I think there is no need for alteration. Oh! I forgot your boots."

A box was pulled out from under the chair in the room, Rene handing it over. "I shall just go and pay monsieur. You put those on."

"You'll pay monsieur?" He couldn't help focusing on that, given that Rene had pressed money into his hands for every single purchase before this one.

"Why, yes." He got a glinting smile from over Rene's shoulder. "Monsieur has known my family for ... a long, long time. We are friends."

Grinning, Tim shook his head. Rene was an excellent tour guide and a wonderful lover, but the man was also different from everyone Tim knew.

He opened the box, gasping at the scent of leather. The boots were exquisite—black leather that shone, felt supple and soft beneath his fingers. He pulled them on, almost

moaning at the way they hugged his calves, ankles and feet. He had never owned anything so lovely.

When he looked up, Rene was back, standing in the doorway and watching him with eyes almost black with desire. "You quite take my breath."

"Then we're even, because you leave me breathless all the time, Rene." He stood, feeling even more handsome with the boots on. He'd never felt like this before.

One gloved hand reached out to him. "Will you go with me now, love? I have a surprise. Monsieur arranged it at my request."

He nodded, hand sliding into Rene's. The truth was, he'd follow Rene just about anywhere.

Rene tugged him outside, and there on the side of the street was a horse-drawn carriage, the kind you always saw in the advertisements. Rene vaulted up inside. "Foot on the step and I will pull."

"Oh. Oh, Rene!" He put his foot on the step, reaching up for Rene's hand, just delighted. It truly was as if they had been transported to the past.

The seat was plush, the night just seeming even more magical as they sat close, Rene reaching for his hand again as if unable to stop touching him. He rested his head on Rene's shoulder, twining their fingers together.

"The night is so wonderful, and this is the best way to escape the press of people. We will go to the Garden District, where I might have you all to myself."

"I like the sound of that, Rene." He reached over, stroking Rene's thigh, feeling bold and wanton.

Rene hummed low, shifted for him, legs falling open. With the tightness of Rene's trousers, it was easy to see how hard the man became under his ministrations. Tim moaned softly, hand drifting to slide along that hardness.

"Oh." Rene's mouth went slack, rosy, his tongue sliding out to lick his lips. "So bold. I like it."

"You have made me bold. And no one can see us, right?"

"No one but the sky." Rene turned, kissed his neck. "And the driver, of course, so we must not be *too* bold."

"Oh." He turned to look at the driver, but the man's attention was on the horses so he turned back to Rene and wickedly grabbed hold of his cock.

Rene gasped, teeth sinking into his lower lip. "Tim. Yes."

He stroked Rene's cock through his trousers, the heat incredible, even with the layers between his hand and Rene's cock.

The clip-clop of the horse's hooves almost covered the tiny, raw sounds Rene made, and the creak of the carriage wheels insured the driver would not hear the rest. Rene just looked at him, hands clenched, cheeks bright. It was wonderful, doing this to Rene, making him lose his sense, losing his own sense.

Rene pressed one hand over his, pushing down, asking silently for more friction, more strength. Those eyes ... oh, they promised such wickedness. He gave Rene what he needed, pressing hard, bringing their lips together for a brief kiss.

The gasp washed over his lips, hot breath fanning him as Rene arched up into his touch.

"Oh, Rene. You are beautiful."

"Thank you, my darling." The carriage rolled to a stop, causing them to break apart. They had pulled up in front of a stately, if shabby, old mansion.

Tim's own need throbbed within his pants, but he ignored it, stepping down and turning, holding his arms open for Rene. Rene took his hands, and obviously the tailor had paid the driver, for off he went, clip-clopping into the night, leaving them to go up the broad steps. "Come, our supper should be laid out."

"Oh, we aren't eating each other, then?" Tim was only half teasing.

"That will be dessert, my darling."

The place looked abandoned. In fact, there was little to recommend it, the only furnishings in the foyer and front room a large side table tilting on three legs, and the curtains.

"Are we at the right place, Rene?"

"Yes. I know." A deprecating laugh. "It seems not so romantic. But come ... the boudoir upstairs has all we could desire."

"Oh, boudoir. That sounds promising, Rene." He smiled and squeezed Rene's hand. There was something to be said for off the beaten path, and so far Rene had not steered him wrong.

"Yes. The stairs are stone, so you need not worry." The staircase was old, grand, and had once had gilded railings. He could still see flecks of gold. They went up its twisting length, stopping at a carved cypress door at the end of the hall.

Tim found himself grinning at Rene, anticipation making his stomach flutter. Rene kissed the corner of his mouth, smiling, eyes twinkling. Then he opened the latch and led Tim inside the bedroom.

Oh. Oh, goodness. The room was just as shabby as the rest of the house, all but for the bed, which was an enormous full tester with burgundy velvet hangings and pristine white mosquito netting. And the table, which was a carved, curved-legged beauty, set with fine china, a snowy linen cloth and large silver candelabras. The candlelight covered the worst of the house's decay, making it charming.

It suited Rene, and tonight himself, to a T. "This is lovely, Rene. I can't decide whether I want to feast on the food or you first."

"Oh, I think the food. Eating can be such a sensual experience." Rene led him to the table, and in a courtly gesture, held his chair for him.

Smiling, he sat and let Rene put the elegant cloth napkin in his lap. His smile grew as Rene's hand lingered. Rene bent and kissed his neck, the touch fleeting, but the hint of Rene's teeth and tongue making him shiver. Rene sat in the chair to his right, pulling up close, their legs brushing.

"Shall we start with the shellfish?"

"I am at your disposal, Rene." He had learned over their days together that if he followed Rene's lead, allowed Rene to choose for him, he was never disappointed.

"How lovely it is when you say that." One by one the soft kid gloves on Rene's hands were pulled off, and Rene reached

out to stroke the back of Tim's hand for a moment before lifting the cover off a dish of spicy shrimp and crawfish.

Rene fed him, pulling off the most tender morsels and rubbing them over his lips, the burn followed by an explosion of flavor. Moaning, Tim opened his mouth, taking in the tender flesh, capturing Rene's fingers and sucking them into his mouth as well, cleaning them thoroughly.

Rene hummed. "You like that, yes? I love the spice mixed with the mild flesh of the shrimp."

"It tastes good with your flesh as well, Rene." He was flirting madly, bold and eager, having been taught over these last four days to be so.

"Does it?" Those long, black eyelashes drooped, covering Rene's eyes for a moment, bright spots of color rising in Rene's cheeks. "It makes me hard when you tease me, my darling."

"Oh, I'm not teasing, Rene. I mean it. And I like being able to make you hard." It made him hard, knowing that his words turned Rene on.

The spicy shellfish was followed by a piece of dense, European style bread, and then some sort of vegetable dish, surprisingly green and sharp. It was like foreplay, Rene feeding him, the flavors dark and rich in his mouth.

"What do we have to drink?" he asked, noticing the elegant goblets.

"Some mulled wine. I know it is rather old fashioned, but it is what I ... think our ancestors would have had, yes?" Rene took up a goblet, holding it to Tim's mouth.

It was a little awkward, drinking from a cup you weren't holding, but it was also very romantic and charming and he drank deeply, the spiced wine warm and flavorful.

"It's not too strong?" Wow. It might go to his head a bit, but the taste was perfect.

"No, it's just right." He took the goblet from Rene and put it to Rene's lips.

"Mmm." Rene sipped, eyes closing again, a smile forming. So sensual. So decadent.

A drop of liquid sat on Rene's lower lip, and Tim put down the glass, leaning in to lick it away.

"Oh." Those almost black eyes flew open, Rene leaning even closer to take a kiss.

He moaned into Rene's mouth. "You taste so much better than any food."

"But that just enhances the food." Gently, Rene pulled away, finding another tidbit to feed him, something with rice and meat. "It is good to prolong the anticipation, my love."

"I have been anticipating having you inside me since we met, Rene." He spoke softly, partly from shyness, partly from solemnity. He wanted Rene to know he was not teasing, not flirting—it was how he felt.

"I too, have looked forward to it. Very much. I simply wish to make it special for you, Tim." Rene kissed him again, sharing the taste of wine and cayenne pepper.

He whimpered, deepening the kiss. "It will be special, Rene. It will be with you."

"Oh. Sweet darling. How I ... Let us try the cakes, hmm?" Something dark and sad flashed in Rene's eyes and was gone just as quickly.

He smiled at Rene and nodded. "I don't wish to rush you through the meal, Rene. But I ... I want you."

"There will be more time later to eat when we have worked up an appetite." Rene stood, held out a hand. "Come, love."

He took Rene's hand, feeling excitement and nerves, eagerness and shyness.

Rene led him to the bed, sitting on it with him, side by side, turning for a kiss. It was oddly old fashioned, terribly sweet. He opened up for Rene, eager and wanting, but more than ready to let Rene take the lead. Those long fingers traced his cheeks, his throat, down his arms to twine with his own fingers. Rene held his hands, warm and firm, the kiss going slow and deep and suddenly as hot as the spicy shrimp.

He moaned, opening wide, feeling like he was the main course in a grand banquet and Rene was going to eat him up. It was very heady, having the focus of this man.

They broke apart slowly, both of them blinking, a slow smile dawning on Rene's face. "Now shall I show you how to play gentleman's valet?"

He laughed softly. "Is that what you call it?"

"Yes, of course." Those long eyelashes fluttered innocently. "Here. I shall start with the boots."

Rene stood, bending to pull one of his legs straight out from the bed. Then Rene straddled his leg, presenting that tight male butt for his inspection.

"Oh ... Rene..." He reached out, fingers sliding along Rene's ass.

Those trousers left absolutely nothing to the imagination, and he could feel Rene's heat through the fabric. Rene purred under his touch. "You need to use your other foot to push me, my darling."

"What?"

He got a merry chuckle, a flash of dark eyes as Rene looked back at him. "Put your other foot on my bottom and give me a push. The boot will pop right off."

His eyes widened. "You want me to kick you in the ass?" He laughed and did as he'd been instructed, carefully so as not to injure Rene with his boot.

When he pushed, Rene moved, and so did his boot, just sliding right off, as promised. "There. You see?"

He nodded, chuckling. "Oh, what fun, Rene!" And he would be able to feel Rene's ass with his foot when they did the other one.

"Yes. And just think, I get to do it to you." Rene moved to straddle his other leg, caressing his thigh before moving down to grasp his boot.

"Oh, am I supposed to be paying attention?" he teased. He raised his freed foot and slid it over Rene's ass in a caress.

A visible shiver went through Rene's body. "Oh. Tim. That feels lovely."

"I must be doing it right then." He continued to caress the sweet ass with his foot, quite enjoying the uniqueness of it.

"Yes. I believe you are." Back arching, Rene pushed into the touch, rubbing along his boot.

"Oh. Oh, Rene, you are sexy." Tim swallowed, his cock throbbing.

"Push, darling. I want you." Tim pushed gently, toes curling.

The boot finally popped off after much wiggling and rubbing. Rene tossed the boot aside and turned, taking off the topcoat, and Tim could see Rene's need, clearly outlined in his trousers. "Your turn."

He leaned forward, rubbing at the bulge in Rene's pants before standing and indicating that Rene should take his place on the bed.

Rene sat, holding one leg out straight, giving him an impish grin. "Come on, then."

Grinning back, he turned and straddled Rene's leg, getting a grip on the man's boot. He wriggled his ass.

"Make sure you have a good hold." The solid sole of Rene's boot planted against his ass, and Rene pushed. His prick rubbed against Rene's leg as the boot slid off, popping right into his hands.

"Oh, this is definitely fun," he murmured, tossing the boot over where his own were. He smiled back at Rene.

"Now the other. I want to ... how is it you say? Feel you up?"

He grinned, blushing. "Yeah, that's how you say it."

He turned and grabbed Rene's other boot, happily presenting his ass. Rene's stockinged foot slid up the back of his thigh, Rene's toes trailing. It dipped between his legs, touched on his balls, before sliding up to flatten on his ass.

Tim swallowed, moaning low in the back of his throat, and his hands trembled where they held on to Rene's shoe. Rene pushed, the heel just under the curve of his ass, and oh, the friction on his cock as it pressed.

"Rene..." He moaned and pushed back against Rene's foot and then forward, cock rubbing along Rene's boot.

"Yes. You see, hmm?" Rene caressed him again, toes moving on him.

"Oh yes, Rene. I do." He kept pushing back into Rene's touch and then letting the pressure of Rene's foot push him back along the leather boot.

"You like that, don't you? Like how it makes you feel." Rene's voice was like molasses, dark and sweet.

"Yes. Yes, Rene, I do." His own voice was husky, breathless. He was getting off on a foot and a boot. He wasn't sure what that made him, but he didn't really care just at the moment.

Rene seemed content to let him, too, pushing him higher and higher, toes occasionally touching his balls from behind.

"Rene. Oh. I'm going to come if you don't stop." It was true, too. He was going to come just from this. Foot, boot, foot, boot. Oh. He shuddered, so close.

"I should like to see that. But perhaps you should open your trousers so you don't stain them?" Rene did not let up, simply pressed against him even harder.

Gasping, he nodded, letting go of Rene's boot long enough to fumble open the buttons on the strange trousers he wore.

Rene held that heavy boot up effortlessly, the other foot teasing him. "Oh, I can smell you."

"Rene!" He gasped and moaned; Rene said the most shocking things, the most arousing things.

He wrapped his hands around Rene's booted foot again, shuddering as his naked cock touched the leather. "Oh! I'll ruin your boot."

"No, my darling. Boots clean much more easily than superfine. Please. I want to see you. Come for me, darling." One toe pushed against him, pressing against his ass.

He cried out, hands tightening on Rene's boots as his cock slid along the leather and come sprayed from him. The pleasure went all through him, making him shiver.

"Tim." Rene's voice was deep, husky, full of promise. "Take the boot off now, darling, and come here to me."

He nodded, tugging it off himself and then turning, standing between Rene's legs, hands sliding up along Rene's shoulders. His cock was hanging out of his trousers, as if begging for attention. Rene pulled him close, kissed him deeply, hands busy on his clothing, stripping him off.

"Is this what valets do as well?" Tim asked, voice thick.

"Only the very best kind, my love. How beautiful you are, all flushed and wanting." The last of his clothing slid away, his trousers pooling at his feet. "Would you like to finish mine?"

He nodded. "I would indeed." His fingers were trembling as he began to remove Rene's clothing.

The coat was gone, so all he had to worry about was the waistcoat, the shirt, the trousers and underclothes. It seemed forever, but finally Rene sat nude before him, practically glowing in the candlelight.

"Oh, Rene, you are a beautiful man." His hands slid on Rene's skin, so warm and smooth.

A pleased smile dawned on Rene's face. "Thank you. Kiss me, love." Rene touched his cheek, pulled him close.

He smiled and happily complied, leaning down to bring their mouths together. Rene tasted of their meal and of something that was unique to Rene himself. Spicy. Male. And he could smell Rene now. Strong and musky, Rene's scent rose between them, making him throb even as Rene began to touch him.

His cock was hardening again, body so eager for each of Rene's touches.

Smiling as if he knew, Rene reached between them, touching his cock lightly. "Are you ready for me to be inside you, Tim?"

"Oh! Oh, yes, Rene. It is the only thing we haven't done, and I wish very much to do it." He nodded, smiling and pushing against Rene.

"Good." Rene huffed out a little laugh, pulling him, then pushing so he was on his back. Rene knelt between his legs, touching his belly. "I even got monsieur to buy some of your sheaths."

"Oh, Rene, you thought of everything, thank you." He reached up, stroking Rene's face.

"I tried." Bending, Rene kissed his belly, the tip of his wet cock. "I want it to be good."

"I'm sure it will be. It already is." Rene had brought him so much pleasure over the last days.

Rene pressed down against him, kissing him, stroking him. Those strong hands slipped over his body, from his throat down to his nipples, fingers plucking at them. Moaning, he pushed up into the touches, body on fire. It felt so good, the way Rene touched him. Better than he could have ever imagined.

"You taste so good." Rene licked the salt on his throat, moving across his chest to nuzzle one armpit. "Smell so good."

He moaned again, fingers sliding over Rene's skin. "I love the way you feast on me."

"You have no idea, my darling, what a feast for my senses you truly are." Rene nuzzled the curve of his hip, breath hot on his cock. "It has been so long."

"For me, too." Although Rene was obviously a man of the world, experienced. Whereas he'd just been innocent.

"We are, indeed, well matched." His whole body drew up tight when Rene cupped his cock, his balls, in one hand, lifting them so that sweet mouth could touch them, tongue pushing into his slit. He shuddered and jerked, entire body going taut from the sensation. A soft whimper left him.

"I ache for you, Tim. Tell me you are ready for me to prepare you."

"I am ready, Rene. Please, I want to feel you inside me like I was inside you."

Rene sat up with a soft smile, petting his belly, reaching off to one side to grab a little foil packet and a tiny tube of lube. He arched up into the touches, eyes on Rene's fingers, licking his lips in anticipation.

Before he even opened the lube, Rene smoothed the condom on, hiding that flushed prick, which was a shame. Then he had no time to mourn the loss of it, because Rene's fingers were slick and pressing against him, one pushing gently inside.

He reached down to hold his legs apart, fingers digging into his skin as he squirmed on Rene's fingertip.

"You must tell me if this becomes uncomfortable. I would not hurt you, my darling." That one finger pushed past the resistance and slid into his body deeply, his hole closing around it.

"Oh! Oh, Rene, I can feel you inside me. Wow." It was slightly uncomfortable, but mostly just amazing, and he moaned softly, body rippling.

"It is like nothing else in life." Rene's cheeks flushed, his eyes sparkled, and Tim could tell it gave Rene great pleasure to see him like this, to hold him this way. More lube was applied, and then another finger worked in beside the first, slowly. So slowly.

"Oh..." This was more uncomfortable, almost a burning sensation as the fingers stretched him in a way that wasn't natural. He could feel the pleasure chasing the burn, though, and he remembered Rene's face when he'd done it to him and he breathed through it.

"Yes. Breathe deep and it will ease the way." That hand was back, petting his stomach in soft, slow strokes as the other hand gently stretched him. Rene crooned to him, the words making no sense, but they sounded oh, so pretty.

It relaxed him, too. Or, rather, it made him less aware of the burning sensation in his ass. By the time he remembered it again, the pain was gone and there was only pleasure, sharp and good and yet not enough. His hips moved restlessly. "More, Rene. Please."

"Soon, love. I do not wish to push you too quickly." But Rene heeded his request, a finger from Rene's other hand pushing in as well, just opening him up inexorably.

His eyes widened and he bucked on Rene's fingers. So wide, so good. Moaning, he reached to touch Rene's face. So good.

Rene kissed his fingers. "Soon, love. I promise, soon."

He moaned softly. "Oh, Rene. So good."

Finally, finally Rene pulled his fingers loose and settled between Tim's legs, the broad head of his cock pressing in. Tim's eyes rolled back in his head, his legs spreading further to give Rene more room.

It was slow going, and it took his breath, but eventually Rene was fully inside him, hips resting against his bottom.

"Oh. Tim."

He whimpered, holding tight to Rene's shoulders, gasping for each breath. So big, so hot.

Rene pushed in, pulled out, moving gently, one hand on his hip, the other coming up to cup his cheek. "Beautiful one."

"Oh. Rene, it feels..." Unlike anything he'd ever experienced. "Please don't stop."

"Yes, it does. And I will not. I promise." They moved together, and Rene did not stop, not even a little bit. He just kept thrusting, pushing, driving Tim higher and higher.

He found himself moving with Rene, pushing into each thrust. Then Rene's cock hit something inside him and his whole body arched, a scream leaving him.

"Yes. There." Rene rubbed over it again, pushing and pushing.

He screamed until he was hoarse, body bucking, shaking. It felt as if he was going to break apart, explode into a million pieces. When he thought he couldn't take anymore, when he thought he would simply burst, Rene grabbed his cock and started stroking, keeping time with his thrusts as they sped into something deep and needy and almost harsh.

Tim's scream was soundless, his body going completely and absolutely tight as a deep, deep pleasure shot through him. His come shot from him as he shook, the pleasure unbelievable.

Rene cried out, loud and strong, and those lean hips snapped against his ass as Rene filled him, throbbed in him, only the condom keeping him from feeling the rush of wet heat.

His body was twitching, shivering with little bolts of pleasure like echoes of his orgasm. His hands were still tight on Rene's shoulders, just holding on. Body heavy against his, Rene sank down on him, licking sweat from his skin. Tim moaned, wrapping his arms and his legs around Rene, absolutely exhausted and utterly boneless. He wasn't going to move for a week and he didn't care at all.

"Oh, Tim. Thank you." Rene stroked his hair, his face, little kisses landing all over his cheeks.

"No, Rene, thank you." It had been all he could have dreamed and so much more besides.

"This has been a magical week, my darling. And I am so glad you chose to spend it with me." It was a sad reminder that tomorrow he would be leaving, but it was also utterly sincere. He could see it in Rene's eyes.

"Me, too. I can't imagine anyone else managing to show me New Orleans and Mardi Gras as you have." It certainly was a far cry from the parties and back alley quickies he'd been expecting.

Rene nodded, and that sad look flashed in Rene's eyes once more. "I have enjoyed myself more than I have in ... years. You should sleep, my darling. You have an early flight. I will stay with you until I must leave."

He didn't want to sleep, wanted to spend the rest of his time with Rene, but strangely he found his eyelids getting heavy, his body sinking into sleep.

He might have whispered "love you," or it might have been Rene.

Then again, maybe he just dreamed the words.

* * * *

Tim checked out of his room at seven AM and waited in the lobby for his taxi. There was a quiet in the air, an absence of the noise and buzz and excitement of the last days, as if all of New Orleans itself was sleeping off the party.

He'd woken from his own slumber just a half hour ago, already back in his own room, his fancy dress neatly folded over the back of a chair, the boots standing next to them.

Rene had taken the valet theme to the highest level. He couldn't for the life of him remember how he'd gotten back to his hotel. He supposed the mulled wine had affected him more strongly than he'd realized.

He'd had to call down to the front desk for a bag large enough to carry his new outfit, the new suitcase he'd bought already bulging with the different costumes Rene had bought him.

Rene ... he hadn't even gotten the man's number, didn't know where he lived, only that he was also leaving today. There was no chance of reconnecting, unless maybe he returned to New Orleans in a year's time.

He had to laugh at himself. He'd come to enjoy a little hedonism, to lose his virginity and learn a few things so that he could be more confident in that area back home. He hadn't expected to find Rene.

His musings were cut short when the hotel's doorman called his name. His cab was ready to take him to the airport and away from New Orleans, away from Rene and the many sites where they'd taken pleasure together.

He tossed his bags in the trunk and climbed into the back seat. "The airport, please. Delta terminal."

The cabbie nodded. He looked like Barry White. And he had the same voice, too, deep and raspy and seriously surreal. There were Mardi Gras beads on the rearview mirror, and a little plaster Virgin Mary sat on the dashboard. They took off like a bat out of Hell, the cabbie meeting his eyes in the mirror.

"You enjoy your stay in the city, then?"

He couldn't have stopped the grin that came to his face if he'd wanted to. "I did. It's like magic."

"This city has a lot of mojo." They whipped around a traffic circle so fast he almost got a crick in his neck. "You stayed down in Storyville, yeah? You see that ghostman?"

"Yeah, Storyville. What's that about a ghostman?"

"Oh, yeah, buddy. There's this ghostman, yeah? Don't come out 'til Mardi Gras every year. Used to go, back in the day, to that Madame Danois' whorehouse and make it wit' the boys. Ain't nobody seen him for maybe five years now, but this year they say he done come back."

He chuckled. It sounded like a good story and involving one of the places Rene had taken him to, how fun. If he remembered correctly, they had a half hour to kill, or perhaps twenty minutes with the way this guy was driving.

"So does he still make it with the boys at Madame Danois'?"

"Now they say he picks a tourist." The cabbie had a laugh like a piece of sandpaper. "That he shows them how Mardi Gras should be. Sad story, the way he died jus' before the war and all."

Tim tilted his head, the story became more intriguing by the moment. "We've a few minutes, don't we? You could tell me your sad story."

"It's your dime, mister." They took a turn around a street vendor with a broken down cart. "Son of a rich man. A Creole, yeah? By all accounts a no good ... just played and played. Done broke his neck one night, jus' right after he started to see the error of his ways. Done bought him a house, right

down in the Garden District, yeah? Done invested in a tailor shop run by a woman..."

The man made a noise, sort of like an ooowee. "Well, he got thrown from his horse. Got killed. Now he haunts the city."

The Garden District. The tailor shop run by a woman. This tale of his cabbie's was beginning to sound awfully familiar.

He sat forward, leaning his head between the two front seats. "And how does he haunt the city?"

"He goes to the parties. Shows the tourist boys the city. Some say he been looking for someone to settle down in his old house. You know they say it was all lit up last night? Nobody had the gumption to go in and see, though."

Tim swallowed hard, heart just thumping. "Does he have a name, this ghost of yours?"

"He does. Rene Gaudet, he was. The Gaudet house is still out by the river. One of the few that done not sunk."

He gasped softly and shook his head. No. It couldn't be. He didn't believe in ghosts and, more than that, Rene had been no ghost. No, Rene had been very real indeed. "Are you sure of the name?"

The cabbie nodded, pulling right up in front of the airport entrance. He hadn't even noticed they were there. "I am. Grew up on that story, yeah? You said Delta ... here you are."

He blinked and looked from the front door to the cabbie. "Oh! I'm sorry, yes. Delta."

He nodded and fumbled with his wallet, hands shaking badly as he pulled some bills from it, passing them over to

the cabbie, remembering how Rene would push money into his hand to pay the sales clerks.

"You have a good flight, sir. And you come on back down here sometime. You get used to this way of life, sure enough, and sooner or later, you be buying a house down here or something crazy like that."

"Maybe I will at that," Tim murmured, climbing out of the cab.

He grabbed his bags from the back and carried them into the counter, getting into the line. The bag with last night's costume was heavy, the boots weighing it down.

His ass twinged at the memory of the things they'd done the night before. He and Rene. Rene Gaudet. The ghostman of Storyville.

He looked at his watch, but there was no way he could make his flight if he went back into the city and found the Gaudet House. And he couldn't leave tomorrow; he was expected back at work for the rest of the week.

Still, that didn't mean he couldn't come back.

After all, you got used to the New Orleans way of life and sooner or later you were buying a house down here or something crazy like that.

Yes, crazy was indeed the word for it.

He booked his flight back before he checked in for his flight home.

He could have sworn he felt a pat to his ass and the words "that's the way, darling," breathed across the back of his neck as his credit card went through.

End

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