

SPICE IN UP

SPIKENARD:
Freedom to Fly

WINNIE
JEROME

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Spikenard:

Freedom to Fly

Written By Winnie Jerome

Zhong Shi is a young dragon in the early days of China, known for being headstrong and a little vain. His lover, Chen Jing, keeps him out of trouble, and keeps him happy, at least until he and Chen Jing are assigned to meddle in the affairs of humans. When a terrible accident befalls Chen Jing, though, Zhong Shi worries he'll never be happy again.

In modern America, Sebastian has boyfriend problems when he meets David. He's definitely attracted, but trying to be true to Luke, who spends more time fighting with Sebastian than loving him. When things start to go horribly wrong, Sebastian finds himself turning to David, looking for the kind of understanding only a soul mate can give. The stories of the two couples begin to intertwine in the way of myth and magic, but will Sebastian and David be able to make things right in time?

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Chapter 1

400 B.C., China

Zhong Shi twisted his serpentine body and bellowed with joy as he soared through the sky. He felt pity for the humans, because they were confined to the ground. They could never feel their blood surge as they ascended toward the heavens, or experience the rush of the wind through their hair.

He hoped the humans were looking up, so that they could see the way the sunlight broke into a kaleidoscopic display when it reflected off his red scales. They could also admire the way his small horns had been polished until they shone like the sun, and how the hair gracing his chin and the tip of his tail was as lustrous as silk.

He paused during his flight to groom again, since he wanted to ensure that not a single strand of his green hair was out of place. Zhong Shi never tired of hearing the people below praising his beauty, but it annoyed him when less attractive dragons were also spoken of with high accolades for their appearance. He wondered if this was because the humans were awestruck by any member of his species, or if they were simply cursed with a staggering inability to judge true handsomeness.

He decided that it must be the latter. That was of no consequence—he would preen some more, and then he would be the only dragon who garnered appreciation. He had just finished his tidying when he heard a thrashing noise from the cloud bank above him. The next moment, a copious amount of rain drenched him from head to tail.

Zhong Shi sputtered and dove forward to escape the deluge. He was still too young to control the weather, which caused him no end of consternation. Once he was clear, he shouted out, “Who dares?”

A calm voice replied, “Must you create such a large fuss, Little One?”

The owner of the voice drifted out from behind the clouds. He was an azure dragon—unlike Zhong Shi, his horns had several branches, and he had an air of dignity and wisdom that suited his three thousand five hundred years of age.

Zhong Shi glared at Chen Jing with the most baleful expression he could manage. “You know I despise getting my beard wet after I spent so many hours making it look just right! That was childish!”

"Little One ... what have I said about thinking too much of yourself?"

Zhong Shi growled and turned his back to his lover before he flicked the fluffy part of his tail upward in a gesture of contempt. He regretted doing that a moment later when Chen Jing roared, which caused a bolt of lightning to crackle down just beside his head.

"Ai ya!" Zhong Shi exclaimed.

"Have you learned your lesson, or must I summon more lightning?"

"No!" Zhong Shi said, and then he hastily amended, "You don't need to do that again. I'll behave!"

He trembled for a moment, but then Chen Jing pressed against him and let out a long sigh. "Some days, you are such an unruly hatchling. What am I to do with you?"

"I'm sure you can think of many things to ... punish me. Especially when we're in human form."

Chen Jing rolled his large eyes. "You're incorrigible. Perhaps I was better off with my wives."

Zhong Shi chuckled. Although their relationship was never acknowledged, it wasn't forbidden if certain rules of propriety were followed. They couldn't show affection in front of their peers, but as long as they married and produced offspring, the other dragons were content to leave them be.

Cheng Jing had two wives, and he had sired two fine male hatchlings. Zhong Shi was glad that he had only reached adulthood five years ago—he could delay getting married for at least another decade.

Zhong Shi coiled around his mate and his long tongue flicked at Chen Jing's ear. "Your wives can't satisfy you as I can."

"Agreed; you are the most enthusiastic lover I've had."

"But not the best?" Zhong Shi replied. He prepared himself for another cloudburst to open up, but Chen Jing quickly separated from him instead.

He glanced in the distance and saw the reason for Chen Jing's hasty retreat; a golden dragon that measured a *yin* long, thrice Chen Jing's length, was approaching them. The newcomer's beard was as white as the clouds and he had wings on the side of his body. Zhong Shi recognized their teacher, Tai Gong, at once. It was a great honor to be taught by one of the eldest *shen lung*, but he was very strict.

Zhong Shi realized that Tai Gong's approach meant that he had some sort of work for them. He furrowed his brow and tried to concentrate.

Chen Jing looked at him in a disapproving fashion. "Are you trying to change into a mouse so that you can hide from Sifu Tai Gong?"

"Of course I am."

"And the fact that we are very far off the ground has escaped you?"

"I can't be hurt by the fall." Tai Gong was getting quite close, so Zhong Shi tried to hurry the process along. However, he was too agitated by the prospect of getting caught, and an excited dragon couldn't switch forms.

Tai Gong was now within speaking distance, so Zhong Shi abandoned his efforts. "Chen Jing, Zhong Shi ... greetings."

"Greetings, Sifu," they said in unison and bowed their heads in respect.

"I have a task that I am entrusting to you two—the humans have been unusually warlike lately, and one of the King's advisers is suspicious."

"Why should we care about the humans?" Zhong Shi asked. He paid no heed when Chen Jing nipped his side in warning. "Their activities do not affect our kind."

Zhong Shi regretted his impulsiveness because Tai Gong gave him a stare that would wither the entire surface of the Earth with its disapproval. "You are not to question my judgment, Zhong Shi, is that clear?"

"Yes, Sifu."

"I want the two of you to go to the King of Qin's court and observe his activities."

"Very good, Sifu," the two of them said in unison.

"Zhong Shi," Tai Gong barked.

"Yes, Sifu?"

"Before you leave for Qin, you are to assume human form and offer to clean the pig sties of every farmer in the village below. Is that clear?"

Zhong Shi gritted his teeth. He hated doing anything that required him to get dirty and Tai Gong knew it. He bobbed his head and said, "Yes, Sifu."

"I will expect a full report. Farewell." Tai Gong gave each of them a curt nod before he looped around and glided away.

After Tai Gong's form was swallowed up by the clouds, Zhong Shi snarled out a foul string of curses. He felt as if he had been singled out unfairly—he was just stating the obvious; he didn't deserve that level of punishment.

Chen Jing shook his head and gazed at Zhong Shi with a mixture of exasperation and fondness. "What am I to do with you, Little One? You know that you are supposed to obey your elders."

"And what if they're wrong?"

Chen Jing wound his upper half around Zhong Shi. "You are so unruly—you question your elders, and you are rude and brash. When will you learn that you should obey those wiser than yourself?"

Zhong Shi opened his mouth to reply, but Chen Jing interrupted him. "Perhaps you shouldn't answer that question. You need to stop acting with your heart. Things will go ill with you otherwise."

The anger drained out of Zhong Shi, and he lowered his head in shame. "You're right."

* * * *

Zhong Shi wiped at the sweat beading on his human form's brow and stared at the moisture on his fingers. It was still such a unique sensation to him no matter how many times it happened.

He looked up and noticed that some of the peasant women plucking chickens nearby had paused in their work to stare and titter. He grinned at them—this form was as comely as he could make it. Smooth, tanned skin covered a sturdy body. His chest was as muscled as a seasoned warrior's, and each segment of his abdomen was well-defined. A square-jawed, handsome face completed a perfect picture. The only sign of Zhong Shi's true nature were his eyes, which were the color of jade.

A lean man standing outside the sty was watching him with amusement. Zhong Shi turned and smiled at Chen Jing, whose human form was also beautiful, but in a different fashion. He possessed delicate features and long, slender fingers. The tell-tale green of his irises were hidden by the brim of a wide straw hat that he pulled down over his face.

The two of them were dressed as mere travelers. They never wanted to attract attention to themselves, because humans often altered their behavior when they realized that important entities were observing them.

To this day, Zhong Shi could not understand why Chen Jing considered the humans to be worth associating with. They seemed like fragile, short-lived creatures. The one advantage they had over the dragons was that they could reincarnate, which did not seem to be that much of a gain in his eyes.

The day was growing hotter, so Zhong Shi removed his shirt. A thought popped into his head, one that he couldn't resist. He flexed his chest muscles and stretched in a way that made his biceps stand out in strong relief. The peasant women blushed and scurried away.

"You're shameless. You'll bask in any admiration lavished on you, even if you have no interest in the people granting it," Chen Jing said.

"That would be a waste of the beauty that I have been gifted with. I would like to point out that it was my charms that prevented the humans who own this farm from questioning us too closely. Iron implements are becoming more common than I would like, and insisting on a wooden shovel would arouse suspicions."

"It's not good to be so vain and prideful. I think you haven't been punished enough."

Zhong Shi ignored that comment because he wanted to finish his task. When he shoveled the last bit of muck out of the pig sty, he returned the farmer's hut so that he could take his leave. The man's wife insisted on sending them on their way with two *joong* —folded bamboo leaves stuffed with glutinous rice and pork.

The two dragons thanked the woman for her gift and started walking toward a bamboo forest in the distance. As they traveled, sweat beaded on Zhong Shi's forehead again and his shirt developed a large wet stain. Out of curiosity, he sniffed at his armpit and immediately regretted it. "Ai ya, I stink."

Chen Jing replied, "There's a creek about nine *li* past the forest, and it's quite secluded."

That was the best news Zhong Shi had heard all day. He could leap great distances in his human form, and he could cover nine *li* in a short amount of time. He was about to jump when Chen Jing grabbed his arm.

"Not here ... the humans are still watching."

Zhong Shi growled. Having to shovel muck was bad enough, but denying him the chance to cleanse himself was intolerable.

He felt a light touch to his shoulder. "The day is pleasant and the walk will do you good. Besides, you can go without your shirt again and the women will stare at you and admire you the entire way there."

"You are very devious," Zhong Shi replied. Cheng Jing always knew how to best persuade him.

The jaunt was indeed pleasant; it took them past many farms before they wandered into the forest. Now that they were away from prying eyes, Zhong Shi leaped into the air until he reached the top of the nearest plant. His feet barely touched a branch before he jumped again, covering a great distance.

Chen Jing was behind him; they reached the lake in a quarter of the time it would take a human to travel. Zhong Shi practically tore his clothes off his body when he saw the water. He dove in and sighed when the liquid surrounded him.

He beckoned to Chen Jing, and his lover wasted no time in removing his garments and diving in. As soon as Chen Jing's head broke the surface, Zhong Shi seized him and pressed their lips together. He groaned at the feel of Chen Jing's soft mouth against his

own. They couldn't kiss in dragon form, and every time they performed this act, a thrill raced through his body.

Chen Jing's tongue snaked out and swiped against Zhong Shi's neck, licking up the stray drops of water that clung to his skin. He lapped the liquid up with unparalleled eagerness, as if he didn't want to waste any of the precious fluid. When he reached Zhong Shi's jaw, he began to nip the edge, and each tiny bite sent a jolt more powerful than a bolt of lightning through the younger dragon. Every sensation was intensified in his human form, and he hungered for more.

Zhong Shi's hands roamed over Chen Jing's chest, and he reveled in the glide of his hands over smooth skin, so different from the feeling of hard scales. Chen Jing pressed closer, and Zhong Shi dipped his head so that he could tease more drops of water off the peaked nipples with his tongue. He enjoyed hearing the hiss of pleasure coming from Chen Jing, and he sucked the taut flesh into his mouth, thickening when Chen Jing quivered in his arms. He ended the torment with a final swipe of his tongue against the nub.

Suddenly, strong fingers laced through his hair and yanked his head back. "You forget your place, stripling," Chen Jing growled.

"Yes, master," Zhong Shi said in a hushed voice. His shaft hardened even more at the commanding tone.

Chen Jing gestured at the sack that he had left on the bank. A small breeze issued from his fingertips and plucked a small coil of rope from the inside of the bag. The length of hemp was deposited into his palm and he used the cord to bind Zhong Shi's arms behind his back.

He waded up to a shallower area and dragged Zhong Shi along. When the water was only up to their calves, Chen Jing said, "You know what to do."

Zhong Shi licked his lips and slid down to his knees. He gazed up in adoration before he opened his mouth and swallowed as much as he could.

Chen Jing gasped and thrust forward, which caused him to bury his entire length into Zhong Shi's mouth. Zhong Shi gasped, but he managed to relax his throat. He mewled around Chen Jing's erection and started suckling; he didn't put up any resistance when Chen Jing continued to pump into his mouth. He loved being used like this, and he pressed his tongue into the slit, taking the time to enjoy the musky, slightly peppery taste of Chen Jing's flesh.

He tried not to protest when Chen Jing pulled out. He was pushed to the bank, and he felt another breeze whipping nearby. His groin throbbed when he heard the slap of a bottle against Chen Jing's palm, and the smell of cypress-scented oil tickled his nostrils. His sharp ears picked up the sounds of Chen Jing preparing himself, and he whimpered, "Please..."

His entreaty was choked off when Chen Jing slammed into him. He didn't have time to adjust before Chen Jing began to drive in with all of his strength. Zhong Shi lost himself in the maddening rhythm, and his passion spiraled out of control until he found his release. Chen Jing climaxed at the same time and his writhing caused a cloud bank overhead to release its water.

Zhong Shi giggled when he felt the rain cascading down his cheeks. Chen Jing followed suit with a throaty rumble before he pulled out and rolled onto his back. Zhong Shi's wrists were still bound, but that was easily remedied. He snapped the rope in a twinkling and then joined Chen Jing.

"I could stay here forever, my love," Zhong Shi said.

Chen Jing gave him a long, sweet kiss and then pressed their foreheads together. "As could I, but we can't be seen. The humans wouldn't understand."

They dried off and after ascertaining that there were still alone, both of them changed back to dragon form. Zhong Shi bellowed in happiness once they ascended into the sky. As much as he enjoyed toying with his human form, he did not enjoy being bound to the Earth—it felt like a prison to him.

Once they were close to the palace, they landed and resumed their disguises. Zhong Shi looked at imposing wall which surrounded the complex. “Won’t it be difficult to gain access to the palace?”

"It shouldn't be. Kings are always in need of servants."

"Very well. But this time, you will clean out the pig sties."

* * * *

San Francisco, January 2008

Sebastian Crawford expected the fog when he returned to his cramped apartment after spending the month at his Dad's. What he didn't expect was the overwhelming scent that assaulted his nostrils. It was so bad that he almost dropped his suitcase on top of his foot.

"Uh, Elise. What's that smell?"

The petite woman with hair dyed an atomic red color looked up from the sofa. “My parents gave me a huge set of essential oils for Christmas. You're smelling blue tansy and rosemary—it's supposed to be a focusing scent."

Sebastian tried not to blurt out that she messed up on the blend this time. Elise was a great housemate—she was easy to get along with, wasn't noisy when her boyfriend was over, and wanted things as clean as Sebastian did. Her one fault was that she was

obsessed with aromatherapy. Up until now, Sebastian didn't mind—the place usually reeked of something herbal, but nothing too bad.

This new thing she cooked up ... He wasn't sure to make of the smell. It was kind of sweet, but rancid at the same time, like rotten apple and honey. Sort of.

"It's nice," he said in the same tone of voice that he used whenever his aunt gave him a fugly piece of clothing for Christmas.

Fortunately, Elise didn't seem to notice his white lie. "So how was your Christmas vacation?"

Sebastian was glad that she asked—he needed to rant about everything he had suffered through. "It was *such* the suck. I hate going back to my Dad's place—my stepmom keeps trying to fatten me up because she says I'm too skinny."

"Well, you are the one of the few guys I know that could almost wear my jeans."

Sebastian stuck his tongue out at her. It was true that he was waif-thin, but he didn't like it. "If that's not bad enough, some of my stepmom's relatives keep asking me if I've met any nice girls yet. They're like three million years old, so I have to keep doing the stupid tap dance."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Your Dad's at least cool with Luke?"

"Kinda. He thinks that I'm too young to settle down."

Elise rolled her eyes at Sebastian's declaration. "He's mental. You're twenty-one, that's totally old enough to have a boyfriend."

"If I still have a boyfriend," Sebastian replied.

Things had been rocky between them before he left, and they both agreed that having a breather over Christmas break would be good.

"Shut up! You know he totally missed you."

Sebastian pointed to the ball of black and white fur curled up in Elise's lap. "I think he missed me as much as Hector did—not at all."

He leaned closer to glare at his cat, but Hector didn't even stir. "Jesus, no response. Maybe I should have left him out in the street."

Elise bit back a snuffle of laughter. "As if. You spoil him sooo much. You should have adopted a dog if you wanted a pet to tackle you when you got back."

"Dogs have too much slobber," Sebastian said before he reached down and stroked Hector's back. Hector arched and reached for some sort of phantom prey. He racked up a bunch of cute points for doing that, and then blew his score out of the water by making a small chirruping noise and smiling in utter contentment.

"Yeah, you're having a nice dream about catching mice, aren't you?" Sebastian cooed.

"He was looking out the window a lot today. Couldn't you just let him out for a little bit?"

Sebastian actually wondered if Hector just wanted to escape the smell of whatever it was Elise had concocted; the stuff was bad enough to make him consider staying over at Luke's. He killed that thought as soon as it popped into his head—to say that Luke's housemates were tough to deal with was like saying the San Francisco Bay reeked a little.

It appeared that he'd just have to bite the bullet and hope that an evening of hot sex would distract the two of them. Hector was awake now, and he was going through his usual routine of yawning and stretching. After he was done, Hector finally noticed Sebastian and gazed at him with a pleading, wide-eyed look.

Sebastian said, “Yeah, yeah, I know you want out. Tough shit—indoor/outdoor cats just don't live as long.”

He knew better than to fall for Hector's pitiful expressions, but he couldn't say the same for Elise. “Aw, c'mon, Sebastian ... look at that little face.”

“He can give me the stinkeye all day but he still won't be getting out. Besides, I need to unpack and get a hold of Luke.”

“Uh-oh. I guess I'll need my headphones.”

“You're partly responsible for us becoming more than friends,” Sebastian replied.

“Sort of. I guess if you wanted to like, give him any credit, that stupid asshole Mason was responsible.”

Sebastian was relieved to see that Elise didn't look like she was about to throttle someone. Even as late as two months ago, the mention of her ex's name would cause her to go ballistic. "How's the new guy working out?"

"He's great. Couldn't ask for better." Hector appeared to have grown tired of the conversation because he jumped off of Elise's lap and started wandering over to the kitchenette. That was Sebastian's signal to hustle his ass so that he could serve the Furry Devil. If he didn't produce an offering soon, his ears were going to be assaulted by an endless barrage of meows.

"Whoops, duty calls."

Elise nodded and went back to watching the TV. Meanwhile, Sebastian made a beeline for the cupboard and grabbed a can of wet food. He thought he would be able to feed Hector without a single mew for once, but he couldn't find the can opener.

Sebastian yanked open several drawers, but after the first few unsuccessful tries, he braced himself for the inevitable. Sure enough, Hector had caught up to him and looked very displeased that his food wasn't in his dish.

"Mrow!" He glared at Sebastian with a disdain that only a cat could produce. Sebastian considered placating Hector with some treats, but then he spotted the missing can opener sitting in the drying rack.

Sebastian lunged for it, only to stumble forward and almost face-plant into the linoleum because Hector had chosen that moment to wind around his ankle.

"You're going to fucking kill me one day," Sebastian muttered. Hector let out a plaintive mew.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You're starving to death. If you'd let me go, I could feed you."

Hector didn't listen and refused to get out from underfoot, so Sebastian had to shuffle around a bit before he could get to his goal. Once Sebastian plopped the food into the dish, his ankle was released from captivity. True to his feline nature, once Hector got what he wanted, he completely ignored Sebastian and concentrated instead on devouring his food.

"You're welcome. Not." Now that he had finished appeasing the little tyrant, Sebastian could take care of his own business. He cleaned up and then hauled his bags back into his room. Texting Luke took longer than usual because his hands were shaking with anticipation. *"Back now, come over? S."*

Seconds later, his phone beeped. *"Sorry, can't leave yet. Give me half an hour. L."*

Sebastian groaned when he read the message. His time away had made him realize how much he missed Luke, and he hoped that the feeling was mutual. How long had he tossed and turned on the fold-out couch at his Dad's place? Sure, they had been arguing more than Sebastian liked before he took off, but now he realized that it was all petty stuff—nothing worth breaking up over.

Sebastian decided that he couldn't wait any longer, so he stripped and grabbed the necessary supplies from his nightstand. He pulled back the covers on his bed and sprawled onto the cool sheets, letting images of Luke drift through his mind.

He uncapped the bottle and applied the lube to his fingers; he waited just long enough for the gel to warm up before he reached down and teased his hole with light touches. When he couldn't stand it any longer, he pushed the tip in and gasped at the contact—it had been far too long since he had anything inside of him, and his body trembled in response.

He hissed at the slight burn, but he needed to forge ahead. Luke had a sizable prick, and Sebastian wanted to be fucked hard. He moaned when he worked a finger in, and then used two.

He was drifting in bliss when he heard the doorbell ring. His hard cock twitched in anticipation when he heard the front door opening and then a set of familiar footsteps walking down the hall. Sebastian spread his legs as wide as he could manage and used his free hand to pull one of his ass cheeks back just as Luke came in.

He got the effect he wanted, because Luke's brown eyes darkened with lust. Luke immediately slammed the door shut and raked his gaze over every inch of Sebastian's body while he removed his clothes as fast as he could manage.

While Luke was getting naked, Sebastian did some eyefucking of his own. Luke was covered with just the right amount of sculpted muscle—defined biceps and chest, a nice six-pack, and a butt to die for. It worked well with his square jaw and strong face.

Sebastian licked his lips when Luke crawled into bed beside him. He pulled his fingers out so that he could wrap his arms around Luke's neck. "Jesus, I missed you."

"I missed you, too, babe." He looked down at Sebastian's dripping cock. "You look like you're about to explode."

"Couldn't even jerk off. I need you, please."

Luke didn't need any more prompting—he grabbed the condom that Sebastian had left on the pillow and rolled it on. He then positioned himself on top of Sebastian and pushed in slowly before he started thrusting in earnest. Sebastian cried out—it had been too long for him, and his body reacted to the intense stimulation. Try as he might, he couldn't hold on, not with Luke fucking the stuffing out of him.

"Oh, God!" he screamed before his orgasm hit. All of his pent-up spunk splattered out and covered his nipples with thick, fat streaks of white fluid.

When Sebastian came back to Earth, Luke was still pumping away. "Got another one in you?" Luke asked.

"I don't think I can ... Oh!"

"Come on, baby ... I know you're dying for one more." Luke continued to brush again Sebastian's prostate, hitting just the right spot until Sebastian hardened again.

"That's it," Luke said. The thrusts gained speed, and although Sebastian didn't think it was possible, he came a second time and added to the mess on his stomach. While he was still gasping, Luke finally climaxed with a loud grunt.

Sebastian was still dizzy, but he needed to clean them up before they stuck to each other. He had just finished wiping himself off when Luke pulled out and disposed of the condom. Once the last of the mess was dealt with, Luke climbed into bed and spooned against Sebastian's back.

"Mmm, missed this," Sebastian said.

They had another round before the night was over, and as much as Sebastian's time away had sucked, he couldn't argue with the hot make-up sex. While Sebastian drifted off to sleep, he thought about how good it was to be back—the two of them had almost a month before the new semester started, and he intended to make the most of it.

Chapter 2

Summer, 400 B.C., Qin Province

"Son of a diseased whore, humans are as bad as the pigs," Zhong Shi muttered while he scrubbed out the remains of the King's lavish banquet from a serving dish. His good looks had benefited them again when he had approached one of the King's gardeners and asked for work. The man had secured positions in the kitchen for himself and Chen Jing—it wasn't the best of jobs, but it gave them access.

Chen Jing had not remained idle. He befriended some of the servants in the main household, and was able glean much information about the workings of the palace. Nothing unusual had occurred in the two weeks they had been toiling, though.

Zhong Shi glanced over at the enormous stack of dishes piled next to the sink and wondered if he would be able to finish cleaning without drying out his hands. The skin in any of his forms was tougher than average, but even his flesh had a limit.

His nose picked up a particular scent and he tried to filter it through the other smells of the kitchen. He signaled Chen Jing over and said, "There's a large amount of uneaten shark fin soup. Who has the King been entertaining?"

Chen Jing replied in a voice so quiet that only Zhong Shi's dragon ears could pick up his words. "He has been celebrating his latest victory with General Lao Yu."

"And how is this odd?"

"To be celebrating so often and lavishly with a general is uncommon. Rumor has it that the King is so pleased with Lao Yu's performance that he is giving Tsiu Tsing to him."

"Really?" Tsiu Tsing was a great beauty and one of the King's favorite concubines. Lao Yu must have excelled on the battlefield to be granted such an honor.

"And there's something else that is unusual..."

"What?"

"Lao Yu wants all servants dismissed from his presence. We are not allowed to go in until after he leaves his chambers."

"We should question him." Anything was better than washing dishes.

"No, Little One. I don't have more than a suspicion. I will try to gain access to his quarters in the Eastern Hall while he is dining tomorrow night."

After Chen Jing left to finish his tasks, Zhong Shi started to formulate a plan. Gossip was prevalent in the palace, and it would only be a matter of time before rumors about the new, over-curious kitchen servants reached Lao Yu. He needed to act now, while the opportunity was still fresh.

Zhong Shi sighed in relief when he placed the last of the dishes on the stack. Now that he had completed his task, he could leave this stuffy kitchen. He took a moment to enjoy the fresh air before he checked for the presence of guards with his keen eyes. When he saw that the way was clear, he leaped into the air and landed without a sound on the roof of the kitchen.

The palace grounds consisted of a number of separated halls built over a large open area, but the distance between the structures was not a concern to Zhong Shi. From his new

vantage point, it was easy for him to leap from building to building to travel to the Eastern Hall without being detected. He found the General's room with ease—the windows had been left open, which allowed him to peer inside.

The General's chambers were lavishly appointed. They were decorated with the finest silk tapestries; small objects carved in jade; and lacquered cabinets painted with twisting, elaborate designs. Zhong Shi grinned when he saw that dragons were composed the majority of the images, and he couldn't resist the urge to see if any of the illustrations bore a resemblance to him. A zither rested in front of a low table, but the room otherwise appeared to be empty.

Zhong Shi vaulted into the room and the first thing he noticed was the overwhelming scent of incense that stung his nose. He shook his head—the richer humans always burned too much, and he hated it because the aroma overwhelmed his sense of smell.

A whistling sound caught his attention and he dodged to the side. An arrow missed his head by a whisker's length; and the flint tip thudded into the wall behind him. Zhong Shi pivoted around so that he could see who his attacker was, and he was bewildered to see that General Lao Yu was standing at the other end of the room. Lao Yu was armed with a bow, and his stern face was contorted in fury.

Zhong Shi was confused—how had he missed Lao Yu's presence? He didn't see anything unusual before he came in. The only way Lao Yu could have escaped detection was through magical means, but none of the humans had that kind of power. His draconic vision would have shown him if another supernatural being was masquerading as a human.

He concluded that Lao Yu must have obtained some sort of mystic artifact. Fortunately, the other man did not give any indication that he recognized Zhong Shi as anything other than an intruding human.

He decided to keep pressing his advantage. He fell to the ground in a kowtow and said, “A thousand pardons, master! Please do not kill me! My betrothed cleans your chambers,

but her parents have forbidden her to marry me. I was trying to find her so that we could elope."

"You are fortunate that I am feeling merciful—leave and I will forget about punishing you." Lao Yu didn't even spare a glance at Zhong Shi before he turned on his heel and started walking away.

That was the opening Zhong Shi was waiting for. He let out a full-throated roar and hurled a *chi* blast at Lao Yu. Lao Yu cried out in pain and slumped to the ground.

Zhong Shi grinned at his quick thinking—now he could examine this human at his leisure. When Zhong Shi touched the unconscious form, Lao Yu's eyes suddenly flicked open and his jaw gaped wide as if he was about to scream. Multi-colored cords of black, red, blue-green, white, and yellow silk exploded out from his mouth; the thick strands arced into the air before they twined together and wrapped around Zhong Shi's exposed throat.

"No!" Zhong Shi screamed before the silk brushed against his skin. He hissed in pain and the smell of his burning flesh permeated the air. The cords extended down to wrap over his wrists and ankles, searing him again.

He tried to bounce his *chi* off the floor in an attempt to destroy the bindings, but it caused the strands to tighten. He started to panic—the threads could cut through his tough hide as easily as a metal weapon slicing into undefended flesh. He was about to struggle when he realized that he should have been cut to the bone by now.

He took a deep breath and hoped that he was correct before he stilled his movements. To his relief, the silk ceased their motion and relaxed somewhat. The burning stopped; the construct that looked like Lao Yu grew blurry and faded away, leaving just thin air behind.

The air shimmered in another corner of the room and what Zhong Shi hoped was the real Lao Yu stepped forward. He gazed at Zhong Shi with a smirk on his face, and when he spoke, his voice was tinged with haughtiness. "Greetings, *shen lung* . I know of your kind—and what your weaknesses are. Do not attempt to change form; the rope will move with you. My people have been studying this area for a while."

Lao Yu gestured and his form grew. Fur sprouted out of his skin and his features became longer, more feline. His hands reversed themselves on their wrists.

"W-what are you?"

"That is solace that I refuse to grant to you. I prefer that you die slowly and painfully without knowing the truth."

"I won't give you the satisfaction of listening to me scream," Zhong Shi spat out.

"No one will hear you, regardless. I've masked the sounds issuing from this room with a spell."

Zhong Shi couldn't stop himself from wincing. He had hoped that someone would hear the fighting and send the guards to investigate. He was trapped, something that he didn't think was possible.

A sudden knock caused Lao Yu to gaze at the door with suspicion. Instead of answering it, he closed the distance between himself and Zhong Shi. His mouth hovered close to Zhong Shi's ear while he whispered an incantation in a strange language. As Lao Yu spoke, the silk that was coiled around Zhong Shi's neck glowed with a purplish light.

The feline creature sat back and said, "Not a single word shall escape your lips, nor shall there be a single attempt from another being to break or loosen the cord. If that occurs, the loop around your neck will tighten and sever your head."

Lao Yu gestured, and to Zhong Shi's eyes, it looked as if a veil of gauzy cloth had dropped between them. Another series of gestures restored his human guise.

When he opened the door, a female servant greeted him. She appeared to be oblivious to Zhong Shi's presence. "Honored guest, your bath has been drawn."

"You're early," Lao Yu said in a gruff voice. "I am not ready."

"Then I will send Tsiu Tsing away, since she is to help wash your back."

"Very well, I will come."

The door swung closed behind them, leaving Zhong Shi alone. He needed to take this opportunity to free himself, but how was he going to do so? If he moved, the silk would eat through his flesh like acid etching a bronze plate.

He heard a soft noise at the window and his heart skipped a beat. Chen Jing had arrived—but he didn't seem to notice Zhong Shi, either. Zhong Shi inwardly cursed—if Chen Jing could only see him, he could communicate what had happened. All hatchlings were deaf before their horns came in, so they had devised a language involving gestures and eye movements to "speak" with each other.

Zhong Shi was about to give up hope when he noticed that there was a hornet flying around at the periphery of the illusion covering him. A flash of inspiration hit Zhong Shi and he puffed hard at the insect.

He blew it into the room and it buzzed in anger. That wasn't enough, so he buffeted the hornet again with more air from his cheeks. The hornet started darting around in an erratic flight path, which caused it to weave in and out of the illusion cloaking Zhong Shi.

Chen Jing's head swiveled around and he approached the insect with caution. After observing it for a few seconds, he carefully reached out to touch the area in front of him. Once Chen Jing's hand came in contact with the spell, it dissolved away like mist.

"Little One!"

Now that Chen Jing was in plain sight, Zhong Shi switched to the silent language. *"I will die if I struggle, or speak. If you try to free me, I will also perish."*

"Can you even change?"

"The cord will tighten around me if I shrink."

"We don't have much time. I dispatched the servant to distract Lao Yu, but I don't know how long we have before he gets suspicious."

He looked around the room, and Zhong Shi saw Chen Jing's face light up. He watched Chen Jing approach one of the lacquered tables and shatter it with a single blow from his hand. Chen Jing picked through the debris, and pulled out several large sections of wood.

Chen Jing returned to Zhong Shi's side and changed into an ape. Once he was done shifting, he put a stick in each of his hands and feet and worked the wood underneath the thread. "Now, change slowly. I will keep the tension on the silk, thereby preventing it from shrinking with your body."

"I can't do it!"

"Little One ... quiet your mind. Concentrate on the sound of my voice. Focus ... allow yourself to grow shorter..."

Zhong Shi closed his eyes, and followed Chen Jing's instructions. He had never tried changing in small increments to a dog's form before, and it taxed his concentration. Chen Jing maintained the tension throughout this laborious process, and Zhong Shi breathed a sigh of relief when the rope no longer touched his body. Now that the threat was removed, it was a simple matter for him to pull his head out and wriggle free.

After they had phased back to their servants' guises, Chen Jing grabbed Zhong Shi's arm and scowled when he saw the burns. "We need to flee and get you to Sifu Tai Gong immediately. Lao Yu is too powerful to engage."

"I've heard enough," Lao Yu's voice said from out of thin air. The next moment, his form shimmered into view and he muttered something under his breath. A black nimbus of energy glowed around his hand for a split second before he cast a dark bolt at Chen Jing. Zhong Shi moved as swift as the wind to deflect it.

"Don't!" Chen Jing shouted, but Zhong Shi didn't listen and he promptly countered the attack with a full-force *chi* blast. When his energy came in contact with Lao Yu's spell, there was a blinding flash of light and Lao Yu's bolt shattered into dozens of glowing metal fragments. The shards flew back with unerring precision toward Zhong Shi.

He knew at that moment that he was doomed, but then Chen Jing knocked him out of the way. The fragments smashed into the older dragon's face, and he howled in agony. His cries caused several bolts of lightning to strike Lao Yu, dazing him.

Zhong Shi wasted no time and scooped up Chen Jing before he vaulted out of the window. The lightning was still crashing down, so he used the flashes to cover his escape. Once he was far enough away, he resumed his natural form and flew with all of the speed that he could manage. He gazed down nervously at Chen Jing's still form and emptied his mind of the fears that were threatening to overwhelm him.

* * * *

Mid-February 2008, San Francisco

Sebastian hit the snooze button as soon as it went off and groaned. He still hadn't gotten used to waking up so early, even though he was three weeks into the new semester. On the other hand, it was hard to get motivated when Luke's erection was poking him in the butt. It was a crime to move, but he couldn't just blow off his writing class.

He decided that if he skipped his shower, he had time to mess around a little before he had to go. He rocked backward and bit his lip at the jolt that shot through his body. He started grinding his hips in a slow circle, and his own cock stirred to life when Luke's steel-hard dick rubbed against just the right spots.

Luke mumbled in his sleep and grabbed Sebastian's pelvis in a firm grip. He pressed forward and heat surged through Sebastian's core, making him feel as if he was inside of a furnace. Sebastian immediately pushed the blankets away before he increased the speed of his grinding. Time suspended while he lost himself in sensation, only to have the mood shattered when Hector suddenly landed right on top of Luke's hip.

"Ow! Fuck, those claws hurt!" Luke yelled before he pushed Hector off the bed.

Hector glowered at Luke and then walked away with his tail in the air. Sebastian groaned because the tail meant that he'd have to give Hector some damn good treats today. If he didn't, he'd have to listen to a marathon round of meowing.

Sebastian turned around and looked at the site of the injury. "You're fine. He didn't even break the skin."

"Stupid cat. Does he have to sleep in here?"

"You know he'll bitch all night outside the door if he doesn't," Sebastian replied. "You're lucky he puts up with you being in bed with me."

"You spoil that cat too much," Luke said and shot a glare in Hector's direction. The cat didn't seem to notice since he was busy washing his face.

Sebastian noticed the time and groaned. "Damn, I need to blow out of here."

"Don't get up." Luke tightened his grip around Sebastian's waist. "Now, where were we?"

"Let me go!"

"It's just writing class," Luke said. "You can screw off."

"Says you. It's a breadth requirement and this is the only semester that fucking Elias Taylor isn't teaching it. Every time I've had him, I've had to drop the class before he flunked my skinny butt. I can't afford to blow it this time."

Luke's hand dipped down and he ran a finger up Sebastian's still-hard cock, which caused a delicious thrill to pulse through Sebastian's veins.

"We still have time for a quickie," Luke whispered into his ear in a husky voice.

It was so tempting to stay, but he really couldn't. "I know I'm being a tool, but I really have to go. Make it up to you later?"

"Fine," Luke replied. He flipped over without even looking in Sebastian's direction, making it clear that the conversation was over.

Sebastian wanted to smack Luke, but he had to hustle. He was going to miss the bus if he didn't leave right now. It took him only a few minutes to jump into his clothes, grab his backpack and laptop, and then zip out the door.

Sebastian walked at a brisk pace to a stop for one of the electric streetcars and hoped that the one he wanted to take wasn't running early. Luck was on his side, though, and he reached his destination with two minutes to spare. He rode up to 19th Avenue before he hopped out and took the connecting bus.

There was a buttload of people crammed inside, and Sebastian was almost crushed by the sheer mass of people surrounding him. He tried to edge away from the Catholic school girls because they smelled like they had bathed in cheap perfume, but there was no room to move. It sucked, but he was forced to stay in place while they gossiped about some unpopular girl.

The rapid-fire conversation made Sebastian wince. He had been an unpopular kid himself—he wasn't at the bottom where you got your ass kicked daily, but he still had been picked on a lot. Sebastian had even asked the teachers to call him "Sam" because his first name caused an endless amount of jeering.

Things improved a little in high school, but not by much. He wasn't geeky enough for the science club or talented enough for the drama club. It wasn't until he got accepted into college that he broke the trend.

The bus was about to pull up to his stop, so Sebastian had to put a lid on his woolgathering and wrestle his way out. He had just enough time to grab an espresso from the coffee cart before he plopped down in one of the seats in the lecture hall.

As usual, the class was boring as shit. Sebastian tried to pay attention, but he eventually gave up and started surfing on the Net.

He had just finished catching up on his e-mail when their assignments were handed out. They were supposed to find a random business and interview the people in it. The interview was supposed to "be interesting and have a lot of flavor to it."

Sebastian wanted to hit his head on the desk. Someone should have warned him that his prof was a frustrated journalist. Still, it was either this or flunk one more time. He decided to spare himself the agony and start working ASAP.

He wound up taking the bus to an upscale area located just north of the Exploratorium. It was a good place to start; there were a lot of businesses in this district, and he was sure he'd find something different.

However, the yoga studio, the theater, and the coffee shop he scoped out didn't really fit his criteria. The baristas and cashiers didn't have much to say. The yoga studio wasn't open yet, but while he was wandering around, he passed by an office where a new IT consulting business had set up shop.

A light went on in his head. As bad as Sebastian had it in high school, the nerds really had gotten picked on. And if there was anything he had learned about bullshitting on papers, it was that more leeway was given if you could write an article that tugged on heartstrings.

Sebastian opened the door and stepped into a clean office with bright fluorescent lighting. There were several standard pieces of furniture, and a table set up with a coffee maker. Books littered several shelves, and there was a workstation in pieces on a desk. Sebastian couldn't see the man fiddling with it, but then the guy took a step back and came into view.

He was in his late forties, but he was still lean and fit. There wasn't a single ounce of spare fat on his body, and the firm muscled biceps peeking out from underneath his T-shirt indicated that he visited the gym on a regular basis. He was also gorgeous—sandy blond hair, piercing blue eyes, and the kind of face that just got better with age.

Sebastian felt as if the world had stopped at that moment, and he just stared at this total hottie like an overeager teenager.

"May I help you?" the man asked. His voice was deep, with a bit of a husk. Sebastian felt a shiver traveling through his body.

"Uh, hi. I'm Sebastian Crawford, and I'd ... uh, you know, like to talk to you for, uh, class stuff."

Sebastian kicked himself as soon as the words left his mouth. He thought he was so done with the shy shit after he left high school.

"Nice to meet you. I'm David Peterson. I'm surprised that you'd want an interview—I didn't think IT consultants were considered interesting subjects since the Bust."

"I ... um," Sebastian felt like a complete dork. "Uh ... it's like this, I wanted to do ... you know, something different."

The smile that lit up David's face made Sebastian's heart skip another beat. "Well, then, I can't disappoint your teacher for ... high school?"

"Professor," Sebastian said.

"Oh, God, I'm terribly sorry," David replied. "That was insensitive of me."

"Enh, I'm used to it. It's just a bitch when I get carded at the bars."

David let out a low chuckle and indicated to Sebastian that he should pull up a chair. "Once you turn forty, you'll wish that was true again."

"Forty? Turning thirty is already way old ... I mean, not that you're old or anything ... you're pretty hot for someone your age ... not that I'm lusting after you, you know, I have a boyfriend." Sebastian felt his face heating up. He just seemed to be digging a deeper and deeper hole for himself. "Fuck, I'm being such a spaz."

David didn't help matters by reaching over and patting Sebastian's shoulder. "It's all right. I didn't really start off on the right foot, either. Coffee?"

Sebastian felt as if he had been electrified by the contact. He pushed that to the back of his mind and replied, "Please. I haven't had my caffeine fix for today."

David walked over to the coffee maker and said, "Why don't I make a fresh pot? This stuff has been standing for a while. How do you take it?"

"Do you have soy milk?"

"Sorry, no. I can run out and get some, though."

"It's okay; just put in five sugars."

Sebastian waited until David brought his cup over before he began. "So, where are you from?"

"I was born and raised in Colorado. I moved here to get a fresh start."

"Fresh start? Was business bad?"

For the first time, Sebastian noticed that David's smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "I had a messy divorce."

Sebastian knew that he should have leaped onto that tidbit, but he was feeling like a total douche. "If you don't want to talk about why, it's okay."

"No ... You're doing the interview, and I should get comfortable with it. I ... I discovered two years ago that I wasn't attracted to women." While David was saying this, his assumed smile faded and a pained look replaced it.

"It must have been hard for you," Sebastian said. "I mean that."

David started fidgeting with the pens on his desk, and an uncomfortable silence fell between them. Sebastian decided to fill the gap by asking, "Did your boyfriend move out here with you?"

"We would have if Martin hadn't developed cold feet." Sebastian noticed that David had clenched one of the pens with such force that he almost snapped it in two.

"Oh, my God, I'm sorry. I'm being a tool."

"It's all right."

Sebastian put his cup down; he really wanted to pat David's hand, but he squelched the urge. "It's not all right. Let me make it up to you—how about I take you out to a pub and show you around the city?"

"I don't know..."

"Please? It'll be fun—you're new around here and getting around will fry your brain. I can totally show you the best routes and we've got a little something for everyone. Pleeeaaazzz?"

Luke had always said that Sebastian looked like a lost puppy when he begged. Sebastian poured it on as thick as he could until David flashed him a genuine smile. "All right, how about next Monday?"

"Deal."

Chapter 3

Zhong Shi was relieved when he came within sight of the lair he shared with Chen Jing. He had worried during the entire way back that Lao Yu would regain his bearings and chase them. He had never seen such a powerful creature—especially one with illusions that could fool his draconic sight.

The two dragons lived in a large cavern that had been carved out of the side of a mountain of jade. A ledge was located at the entrance, sizable enough for one or both dragons to lie upon and sun themselves. Rare flowers of incomparable beauty grew along the surface of the precious rock, giving a hint at the riches within.

Elaborate statues sculpted out of ivory and embellished with gold decorated the lair; strips of the finest silk edged with black pearls were arranged to drape in an attractive fashion from the ceiling, and large gold vessels decorated each corner of their lair.

Chen Jing's wives lived in smaller caves that were located lower in the mountain. The Number One Wife saw them approaching, but Zhong Shi cut off her questions and immediately sent her to fetch Tai Gong. He didn't hate Chen Jing's spouses, but they were jealous of him. By unspoken agreement, Zhong Shi and the two females spoke to each other as little as possible and kept their interactions short.

He laid Chen Jing down on the floor of the cavern, and coiled around his lover's human body as best as he could. He didn't even bother moving when his Sifu arrived—he just couldn't bring himself to put any distance between them.

If Tai Gong was offended by this lack of propriety, he didn't show it. “Tell me what has happened.”

After taking a deep breath, Zhong Shi recounted the events in Lao Yu's quarters. His voice broke when he described Chen Jing leaping in the way to save him.

After Zhong Shi finished his story, Tai Gong lifted Chen Jing's eyelid with one of his claws. The bright green iris was clouded over, as if a cataract had formed, but the skin of his face was unmarred.

"It appears that Chen Jing has been struck with iron," Tai Gong replied in a calm voice. "And from your descriptions, the metal may have been enchanted."

"No!" Zhong Shi cried out. If the spells on the iron prevented it from being extracted, Chen Jing's blindness would be permanent.

"Zhong Shi, you are to leave us. Do not come back until I send for you, do you understand?"

"Yes, Sifu," Zhong Shi said.

He could barely control his anger while he touched his forehead to the ground. Once he had taken his leave and flown out of their lair, he redirected his path up to the stars. When he reached his destination, he roared at the top of his lungs and thrashed around in the sky in rage, not stopping until his fury was spent.

Mere moments after he had finished, Chen Jing's Number Two Wife approached him. "Sifu Tai Gong wishes to speak with you."

"Very well," Zhong Shi replied. He braced himself and hoped for the best.

A knot formed in Zhong Shi's stomach after he returned to the lair and prostrated himself; Chen Jing was back in his normal form, but he was still unconscious. The

concern etched on Tai Gong's face spoke volumes about how successful the attempt at curing Chen Jing had been.

Tai Gong indicated that Zhong Shi should rise up. "I tried my best spells, but I could only restore his form. The iron is still in his body."

"A thousand pardons, Sifu, but are you certain?"

"The metal shattered into pieces smaller than dust when they impacted, which is why he appears uninjured. I am sorry, Zhong Shi."

Zhong Shi dug his claws into the floor in order to avoid smashing the wall in rage. This seemed unfair beyond all belief—what had his lover done to deserve this fate? "Thank you, Sifu. Will that be all?"

"I should heal your wounds." He indicated the burn marks on Zhong Shi's neck, wrists, and ankles.

Zhong Shi curled in upon himself and shook his head. "No. It is my fault that he is in this state. Until he recovers, these will remain as a reminder of my shame."

"As you wish. Please keep him under observation tonight and report to me immediately if he suffers any other ill effects."

Once Tai Gong left, Zhong Shi pressed the full length of his body against Chen Jing's. Try as he might, he couldn't bring himself to sleep. He lay awake all night and watched Chen Jing's face with a huge amount of anxiety. Fears that Chen Jing's condition would worsen, or that he might never wake up gnawed at Zhong Shi.

When the sun finally peeked over the horizon, there was movement next to him. His heart soared when Chen Jing's eyes fluttered open. "You're awake!"

"Why is it dark?"

Zhong Shi swallowed and tried to think of a gentle way to inform Chen Jing of his disability. After many long minutes, he couldn't think of anything and settled for the blunt truth. "You were struck with iron ... You've been blinded."

To his surprise, Chen Jing merely said, "Can you still see, Little One?"

"Y-yes."

"Then that is all that matters." Chen Jing must have sensed his lover's confusion, because he fumbled around until his claw touched Zhong Shi's flank.

"How can you remain so calm?"

"We spend many hundreds of years without hearing as young dragons and we make no note of it. How is the loss of sight any different?"

"Thank you for being so understanding," Zhong Shi replied. He nuzzled Chen Jing affectionately.

"I would prefer to linger, but I must speak with our Sifu about Lao Yu."

Zhong Shi wanted to stay where they were, but he knew that Chen Jing was right. He slid away with reluctance and guided Chen Jing outside. He waited for Chen Jing to rebuff him for helping, but no protest was forthcoming from the other dragon. Halfway to Tai Gong's lair, Chen Jing suddenly stopped in mid-air.

"My love?" Zhong Shi asked. Chen Jing didn't appear to notice that he had spoken. His long neck swiveled back and forth and he seemed to be gazing at thin air. Zhong Shi tried to get Chen Jing's attention, but he didn't respond to Zhong Shi's touches.

Zhong Shi realized that something was quite wrong and he ushered Chen Jing back as best as he could, although feelings of dread were taking shape in his mind. Once they returned, Chen Jing said that he was exhausted and he fell into a deep slumber.

Zhong Shi lay down next to Chen Jing and watched him like a hawk all day. The Number One Wife came to investigate, but Zhong Shi sent her running with a curse so foul that it would have set fire to the sky.

He didn't move by even the slightest amount after that, and failed to note the passing of time. In fact, he didn't realize that it was evening until one of Tai Gong's new disciples requested an audience. It was then that he noticed the darkness outside.

"Greetings," Zhong Shi said.

The young green dragon touched his forehead to the ground. "Sifu Tai Gong sent me to look in on Chen Jing. He sends his sincere regrets that he cannot come in person, but the King requires his presence."

Zhong Shi wasn't sure as to how he should respond, since he didn't know if Chen Jing's confusion had passed or not. He was about to extend his thanks when Chen Jing stirred and woke up.

His sightless eyes blinked and his head made the same aimless motions they had before. "Hello, Little One. What time of the day is it?"

Zhong Shi ignored the wince on the disciple's face. "As I was telling this young one, it is evening."

"Ah, I see. And when are we leaving to celebrate the New Year?"

"That is months in the future," the disciple replied. He looked at Zhong Shi with an expression of complete bewilderment.

"You are mistaken," Chen Jing replied. "Do not play tricks with me!"

The young dragon started backing away, as if he was concerned that Chen Jing's mental state was contagious. He remained polite, but Zhong Shi could tell by his body language that he wanted to be as far away as possible.

Zhong Shi decided to alleviate the young one's misery. "You may go and report to Sifu Tai Gong that I will be staying here to care for my friend. I will continue observing him for several days and I will send a report when I am certain of his condition."

The disciple withdrew with the requisite politeness. However, Zhong Shi noticed that once he was outside, he flew as fast as possible to put distance between himself and the lair.

With a heavy sigh, Zhong Shi turned around to look at his lover. He noticed that Chen Jing was staring with unblinking eyes at some far distant point, and one of his claws was lifted in the air for no reason.

"Are you ... what were you doing?" Zhong Shi said.

He received a smile, but it was not the smile of the wise dragon he had known all of his life. It was a simpleton's absent expression. "I was doing something?"

A knot formed in Zhong Shi's belly, but he chastised himself. He pushed his irrational feelings down and rubbed his head against his mate's. This was a temporary condition—it would pass soon enough.

* * * *

Sebastian was glad that David had agreed to hang out with him. Tonight was one of the nights that Luke wanted to do his own thing. Sebastian didn't mind—it wasn't like he and Luke were joined at the hip, but he wondered if he should be feeling so damn happy at the prospect of being around David again.

He hopped off the bus and made his way to the coffee shop. A broad grin broke out on his face when he saw David sitting outside, taking a sip from his cappuccino. David would have looked dressy in his long-sleeved blue shirt, if he hadn't left the cuffs and the top two buttons undone. The jeans and flip-flops on top of that pushed him into the "casual wear" category. "Hey there. Aren't you cold?"

"Compared to Colorado, this weather isn't even chilly," David replied.

"I hate you. I'm always freezing."

A spark of humor lit up in David's eyes. "I'm not surprised—you're pretty thin."

"Whatever. I always keep an extra shirt in here." Sebastian patted his backpack. "At least I can eat anything I want."

"You've got me there." He swirled his coffee and walked back into the shop. "Let me get a lid for this. Did you bring your car?"

"I don't have one. I was planning on the two of us taking the MUNI."

"You're kidding me," David said while he pressed the lid onto his cup.

"Parking's a bitch and it's expensive downtown. And don't get me started on what an SUV does to the environment."

He noticed that David looked skeptical, so he decided to argue his point a little more. "The bus isn't that sucky ... besides, why rush around? It'll be better if you can sit and relax; the one-way streets downtown will drive you up a fucking wall. C'mon, don't make me beg."

A wide grin broke out on David's face and Sebastian ignored the little flutter in his stomach. He was just being friendly, nothing more. "All right, since you asked so nicely. But parking's not a problem for me—I live above my work and I own a motorcycle."

"You own a bike? Then it sucks ass that you don't know where anything is. I'd love to ride it."

"Maybe some other day. Lead the way—I'm following you."

Since it was past the rush hour, the bus wasn't jam-packed and they were able to sit next to each other. Sebastian was grateful for that, because he wasn't sure how he was going to handle being pressed up against David's firm body for the entire trip. Goosebumps were already breaking out on his skin where his thigh brushed against David's.

He needed to distract himself, fast. "It's too bad that I couldn't have hauled Luke out tonight."

"Your boyfriend?"

"Yeah. Tonight is sports night, though. I could totally light a stick of dynamite under his butt, and he'd still be super-glued to the TV."

"You don't like sports?"

"Not really. Or bar crawling. Ew."

David seemed puzzled by Sebastian's reactions. "That's odd, I thought someone your age would be really into that."

"Ugh, not me, man. Uh ... it's not like it's a deal-breaker or anything. It's just that Luke's into a couple of things that drive me batshit." Actually, there were more than a few things that set Sebastian's teeth on edge, but he didn't want to complain about it because he'd come off sounding like a whiny bitch.

Their conversation was interrupted by a small argument between the bus driver and a grumpy passenger. Once things had settled down, David spoke again. "How did you two get together?"

"Well ... my housemate Elise had this nutcase of a boyfriend. He had started out okay, but then he started to do things like bring knives into the house and throw them at the wall because it was cool to watch them stick. And sometimes his eyes would glaze over and he would start trying to damage public property."

"That doesn't sound good at all. Uh, he didn't ... get more serious than that, did he?"

"Thank God, no. He was just full of it. Talked a good game, but he never did anything to back it up. He got rid of the knife after Elise threatened to dump him, and things were quiet until he went ballistic at work."

"Do I even want to ask?"

"Mason's boss gave him a dressing down, so he took a swing at the guy. He got fired on the spot and Elise kicked him to the curb the same day."

David looked very concerned and Sebastian said, "Relax. Nothing bad happened. Elise asked me if Luke could stay over—we were best friends and I'm too skinny to scare a bastard like Mason."

"And Luke isn't?"

"Not even. He's built like a linebacker. Mason's big, but he had a beer gut and he moved so slow you could time him with a calendar. Besides, he never showed up on our doorstep—he just slinked away."

"I'm going to avoid sounding old by saying that when I was your age, I probably would have done the same thing. I knew somebody like that in Colorado."

"Really?" Sebastian was impressed. When he had told his Mom about it, she had lectured him until his ear fell off over how he should have called the police. It pissed Sebastian off that she just didn't understand that SFPD was overloaded, and there's no

way they would have paid attention to a loudmouth who had never even raised his voice at Elise.

Sebastian glanced out the window at this point and saw that they were about a block away. "We're getting close. What's cool for you to eat?"

"I'll try pretty much anything once."

"You sure about that, man? I've had people want to kill me for some of my choices."

"I'm sure."

Sebastian mumbled out that it was David's funeral before he rang the bell. Once they got off, it was only a short walk to Sebastian's favorite pub. The place was small and kind of cramped, but the somewhat worn booths were comfortable as all hell. A dart board and a pool table had been set up in one corner, and the bartender greeted Sebastian when he came in. They were seated immediately, and Sebastian ordered a pint of his favorite pale ale with a basket of garlic fries.

The waiter paused and said, "May I see your ID?"

Sebastian rolled his eyes before he pulled out his wallet. The waiter must have been new, because the regular staff had stopped carding him. After the waiter had returned Sebastian's driver's license, he finished taking their orders and left.

"I so hate that," Sebastian muttered once the guy was out of earshot.

David laughed, which caused his eyes to crinkle in an attractive fashion. Way too attractive, because Sebastian abruptly had the urge to plant a quick kiss on David's lips. He took a hasty gulp of his water and decided that he needed some air. "Scuse me ... restroom."

He didn't wait for David to say anything before he scurried away. The bathroom was as disgusting as usual, but at least it was empty—just the thing he needed.

He let the door bang shut behind him before he leaned on the sink and glared at himself in the mirror. This didn't make sense, he had a boyfriend. So what in *hell* was he doing drooling over another man? It wasn't like Sebastian believed in open relationships; he was definitely a one-man guy.

This just wasn't right, and he wondered if he was pissed off at Luke for anything. He thought hard, but he came up with jack. Yes, he was annoyed at Luke, but nothing that would cause his eye to wander.

Maybe he just didn't expect someone as old as David to be so hot. Sebastian groaned—he needed to stop thinking of David as hot. Or attractive. Or even cute. David was an assignment, nothing more.

He kept invoking the mantra of "David's an assignment" when he returned to the table. To his relief, no stomach butterflies or tingling feelings came back. "So ... how about we work on the interview? I promise that I won't get personal."

David shook his head. "The personal facts are what brought me out here. And as I said before, I need to get comfortable with what happened, or it'll eat at me."

"Okay." Sebastian pulled out a pad of paper from his backpack. "What?"

"Don't all of you kids have laptops nowadays?"

"I have one—but it was like, hot shit in 1998. It's heavy as hell and my parents couldn't afford anything else, so I only use it for boring classes. And watch who you're calling 'kid,' I may have a baby face, but I know some stuff that will make your hair curl." The last was an exaggeration, but he didn't care.

"Oh, really?" David's voice had a playful tone to it, and Sebastian realized that the last sentence out of his mouth must have sounded like a come-on.

"Uh, right ... we were talking about Colorado?"

He was thankful that David didn't tease him about the obvious change in subject. "I'd been doing IT for most of my life, but I've always programmed on the side. I finally managed to land a job as a software developer, but I was scared shitless. It was in an area of network security that was complicated as hell—I could get eaten alive if I screwed up."

"Whoa, sounds like a big deal."

"Martin took me under his wing. We had a lot in common, so we started becoming friends. It was great—after a fourteen hour day slaving away, we'd go grab a beer together, and just blow steam off. I really needed an ear to bend because I was having troubles with my wife."

"What kind of trouble?"

"She was a gold digger—married me for my money. I was pretty shy around women, and she was the first one I dated. She was an angel until after the honeymoon—then she quit her job, starting sleeping around, and bought things as fast as she could manage with

my money.” David toyed with his napkin. “I know that I should have divorced her, but I couldn't. My parents had been pressuring me to get married, and I figured that I should stay with Gail because no one else wanted me.”

Sebastian took a sip of beer. “So what changed with Martin?”

"After our product released, he dared me to play Deprivation with him."

"Uh, I don't think I've heard that one."

"It's a drinking game. You start out with saying 'I'm so deprived I've never...' and then you name something you haven't done. If other people have done it, they drink."

"Duh! You mean, 'I've Never!'"

"It figures that the names have changed," David said with a laugh. "Anyway, I said that I had never kissed a guy before. Then, Martin confessed to never having fallen in love with a guy before. And, well ... there was something about the way he was looking at me..."

"So that's when you realized that he was the One?"

"Yes. We were together for three months before Gail found out. She served me the papers two days later. The lawyers had a field day and she pretty much walked off with everything." David sounded so bitter and looked so miserable that Sebastian reached out and gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

After a few minutes, the tenseness in David's body eased up. "I'm okay ... let's keep on going."

"All right. What happened with Martin?"

"I suggested that we move to California. Martin was all for it—our plan was to keep a low profile while I made all of the arrangements to leave. I was going to get a place and find a job first, and then I was going to support him while he found work."

"What changed?"

"He received a promotion right before we were going to serve notice, and, well ... you can't play in management at my ex-company if you're anything but straight."

David looked down, and Sebastian caught a glimpse of that haunted look again. He wondered if he should carry this any further when their order arrived. The food couldn't have come at a better time; Sebastian took the fries from the waiter and tried to keep himself from drooling over them. They were curled, crisp as hell, and had so much garlic that he knew that he'd reek for days from the pungent scent.

"These are the fucking best fries in the world. Dig in, man." Sebastian grabbed the ketchup and squirted a giant dollop over the top.

"Oh, my God, those are an instant heart attack. I haven't had bad food since I gave up role-playing games."

Sebastian almost dropped the ketchup bottle. "You role-play? You've got to be fucking kidding me!"

"Played. My last group fell apart because everyone was either overworking or had kids to care for."

"Dude, I've, like, been trying to find someone who's willing to run for a newbie. All the other groups sneered at me when they found out that I didn't know anything."

The tension on David's face eased a little at the change in subject. "I'd be happy to help you create a character and go over the rules—if you can help me get a group together."

"Deal."

Once role-playing games were brought up, the awkward pauses stopped. During the rest of dinner and Sebastian's impromptu tour, the two men chatted easily from topics that ranged from politics to their families to pets. At each point, Sebastian found that David's thinking meshed with his own, and he really appreciated conversing with someone who understood him more than Luke did. As the hours rolled by, Sebastian could see the haunted look in David's eyes fading a little.

The evening passed far too quickly—it seemed like they had only been talking for a short amount of time when David told Sebastian that he needed to get some sleep. They had a pleasant bus ride back, and they continued to enjoy each other's company until they reached David's apartment. It was a walk-up located above his office, with a recessed entrance. A large iron security gate was installed at the forefront of the doorway, to prevent muggers from hiding in the shadows.

"I had a great time, man," Sebastian said.

"So did I. We should get together again." David reached up and patted Sebastian on the shoulder.

A current of electricity shot through Sebastian's body at the touch and he clamped down on the sensation. He thought that the damn tingles were gone, but here they were, back again in full force. "Yeah ... call me, okay? Mondays work for you?"

"Monday is great." They said their goodbyes and then David let himself into his apartment.

Sebastian somehow kept his eyes from dipping down to ogle David's ass. He tried to think of other things as he made his way back to his place, but all his stupid brain could come up with was boner-inducing images of David. He wasn't sure how he made it back to his room without embarrassing himself.

Even though his skin still felt like it was burning, Sebastian ignored it while he undressed. He slid into his bed and lay awake for a while before he managed to calm down enough to sleep. Before he drifted off, he imagined that a phantom pair of lips was brushing against the sensitive column of his throat, but he wasn't sure if they belonged to Luke or David.

Chapter 4

Zhong Shi was a picture of dishevelment—his scales were dull in color and his beard had many tangles and knots. He had no time to pay attention to his personal appearance, since it required all of his energy to care for Chen Jing. He did not find relief from his exhaustion at the end of the day—when he dreamed, he had nightmares of being bound, his flesh sizzling and melting away while Chen Jing laughed.

It had been months since their fight with Lao Yu, and Chen Jing's absent-mindedness had grown worse as the days went by. He now needed someone to look after him all day, because he couldn't be trusted to stay by himself. Zhong Shi had misjudged this once when he left his slumbering lover to speak with Tai Gong. Chen Jing had woken up and tried to fly outside, convinced that he could maneuver despite the fact that he was blind. His stubbornness caused him to almost collide into another mountain, and he had thrashed around in panic. This had caused torrents of rain to fall from the sky, and the water had almost flooded a human village.

Zhong Shi returned quickly and coaxed Chen Jing back to their lair. From that point on, he refused to leave, and consulted with Tai Gong from the confines of their home. The elder dragon visited often, since he needed information on Lao Yu.

Zhong Shi couldn't tell his Sifu much, but what little he could provide caused the King to request help from his other allies. Finding Lao Yu or others like him became of the utmost importance. However, the King's warriors had yet to succeed, and the humans had in five States were now waging a full scale war against each other.

None of this was of any importance to Zhong Shi. He was too enmeshed in the day to day task of caring for Chen Jing. Since Chen Jing's condition was his fault, honor demanded that he became his mate's sole caretaker. As much as Zhong Shi wanted to join in the hunt for Lao Yu, his primary duty was to see to Chen Jing's needs. To do otherwise was to go against all the principles he was raised with.

Zhong Shi gazed at the night sky and grimaced when he saw the position of the moon. It was almost the New Year, and he was going to miss the celebration.

Chen Jing had introduced him to this festive day. It was a common practice to pair an older *shen lung* with the deaf younger ones. Chen Jing had been assigned as Zhong Shi's mentor, and he still remembered his heart soaring as soon as he laid eyes on his future mate. It happened to be New Year's that very same day, so Chen Jing suggested that they attend the celebration at a local village in their human guises.

Zhong Shi had been ecstatic the entire day. There was so much excitement and joy radiating from the peasants. Many delectable sweets were available, and Chen Jing indulged him by purchasing one of everything. Moon cakes soon became his favorite, and Chen Jing teased Zhong Shi about the fact that he would now have to compete with Chang-O's rabbit for the treat, since the goddess' pet was quite fond of the delicacy.

Zhong Shi had also been enthralled by some kung-fu students from a local *kwoon* performing the lion dance. Although he couldn't hear, Chen Jing would guide him close to the drummers so that he could feel the beat of the music through the ground. He loved watching the rhythmic, staccato movements of the dancers, and the driving thud of the drums made his body sing.

But now that privilege was denied. He watched Chen Jing sleeping, and realized that his lover would be up soon. And another long, dreary day of being cheerful and helping him along would be facing him.

Chen Jing was beginning to stir and Zhong Shi banished his negative thoughts away. It was a common practice for him, since Chen Jing could pick up any stress or doubt in his voice. "Good evening, my love."

The blue head turned from side to side at a languid pace and there was a long pause before he spoke. "It doesn't feel as if it is nighttime."

"It is. If you come outside, you can bask in the moonlight."

"Why can't we fly down the mountain tonight? I want to feel the wind against me."

Zhong Shi suppressed a growl. He didn't think Chen Jing could be trusted to leave at this point, and trying to explain it would be futile. Chen Jing would not comprehend it if he was experiencing one of his bouts of confusion, or else he would become angry if he were lucid. "It isn't a good idea."

"I don't see any reason why we can't," Chen Jing replied. "Is there a reason why you are denying me something this simple?"

"Quiet!" Zhong Shi barked. The shocked look on Chen Jing's face made him realize what he had said, and he mumbled out an excuse before he scrambled outside.

Zhong Shi felt as if he were going to burst. Some days, he wanted to fly until he couldn't climb any higher and bellow his outrage to the gods. Chen Jing was becoming more and more difficult to deal with, because he was unaware that there was anything wrong with him.

They had received some visitors over the past few months, but the other dragons were obviously uncomfortable around Chen Jing. Zhong Shi could see that they were picturing themselves in Chen Jing's place and it disturbed them. The concept of their minds being robbed unsettled all of the dragons, since their wisdom was what set them above all other beings.

A few of them flinched when Chen Jing drew too close. Zhong Shi had made those visits short, and he still had to retain a cheerful disposition throughout it all. The constant forced happiness was taking its toll on him, wearing him down until he felt as if his nerves had been stretched to the breaking point.

He snarled at himself for being a weakling before he went back into the lair. "I am sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"What are you apologizing for, Little One? I was surprised to find that you weren't by my side when I woke up."

Zhong Shi shook his head tiredly and tried to convince Chen Jing to come outside again. It took several minutes of gentle persuasion, but he was able to coax Chen Jing to perch on the ledge.

Zhong Shi frowned when he noticed two dragons in the distance. He could see that one was Tai Gong, but he didn't recognize the blue youngling accompanying his Sifu. After some thought, Zhong Shi concluded that it was probably an older student. He wondered what had merited this visit—his Sifu had been quite busy with advising the King about the beings that had attacked them and had not graced their lair for some time.

When they arrived, Zhong Shi extended the proper salutations and nudged the blue form next to his side. He was dismayed to see that Chen Jing didn't respond at all; he just stared at the air in front of him instead. Zhong Shi was glad that the disciple remained stoic; the last thing he wanted was to have another panic-stricken youngling to make things worse.

Tai Gong said, "Greetings, my students. Zhong Shi, may I have a word with you?"

"I can't leave him alone." Hong Shi knew that he was being extremely impolite by addressing his Sifu in this fashion, but he didn't want Chen Jing to hear their conversation.

"He will be fine." Tai Gong nodded his head at the youngling. *"This one can look after him."*

Zhong Shi was about to contest the point, but Tai Gong was gazing at him with a look that indicated that his last statement was not a request.

"Very well."

Tai Gong brushed Chen Jing's flank. "I will be away for a few moments. Someone else will be here for you."

"Thank you, I will manage," Chen Jing replied. He had a smile that was as naive as a human baby's on his face.

Zhong Shi wished that he could rub his head against Chen Jing's, but he couldn't do that now that they were in public. He settled for touching Chen Jing one more time before he flew off with Tai Gong.

Once the mountain faded into the distance, Tai Gong asked, "How has Chen Jing been faring?"

Zhong Shi shook his head. "Sometimes he is quite lucid, but then the madness sinks in. He will forget certain facts, or he will start something and act confused. It's as if a fog has passed over his mind."

"Have courage. The King's operatives will eventually be able to capture one of the demons. Their powers of illusion are making them difficult to discover."

"I am not surprised."

Tai Gong sighed and said, "Zhong Shi, I know that I have asked you many times, but perhaps there is a detail that can help us find the creatures we're looking for?"

Zhong Shi wracked his brain. He had given a physical description of Lao Yu's natural form and all of his powers, down to the last detail. He had even mentioned Lao Yu's interest in Tsiu Tsing. "I can't. We have an impossible task—how can you find a creature with spells potent enough to deceive our own senses?"

Tai Gong replied, "Lao Yu cannot think of every detail. We will discover where his plans lapsed."

"He has been very thorough, I can't think of a way to more completely destroy both our lives. It is hopeless."

Tai Gong's expression softened and for the first time, Zhong Shi saw the concern etched into his face. Before he could comment on this oddity, Tai Gong muttered a quick spell. A small jade bottle with elaborate carvings appeared in his golden claw. "My student, you have suffered much under Lao Yu's hands. Please accept this gift for your hardship—a perfume made from spikenard."

Zhong Shi could not believe what he had just heard, and he stared at Tai Gong for several seconds. He knew of this rare perfume's existence, but he had never smelled it. A small vial of this scent was worth eight taels of gold, and Tai Gong had given him much more than that.

When the shock faded, Zhong Shi bowed as many times as he could manage. "Thank you, Sifu! I am not worthy of this honor."

Tai Gong placed the container in Zhong Shi's claws. "Now perhaps you will pay more attention to your disgraceful appearance."

"Yes, Sifu," Zhong Shi replied. He was grinning from ear to ear—even though Tai Gong's words were harsh, there was no sting to them. Since he couldn't wait to get back to his home, he pulled out the stopper on the bottle. A mossy scent wafted out, and he went pale as a ghost. "I know this perfume! Lao Yu was wearing it!"

Tai Gong looked Zhong Shi directly in the eyes. "Are you certain?"

"Yes! But I only smelled it when he came close to enchant the five-colored silk. There was so much incense burning in the room that my eyes almost watered. And something else occurred to me..."

"Yes?"

"There was a hint of a ... rotten smell underneath all of the perfume."

"But why would a creature with such powerful illusions use scents? Unless ... Zhong Shi, I think we have the insight that we needed. Their illusions cannot conceal odors."

Zhong Shi couldn't contain his excitement—they had finally ascertained a weakness, which meant that this nightmare was approaching the end. He was glad, because he didn't think that he could bear the daily hell his life had turned into any longer.

* * * *

When Monday nights rolled around, Sebastian usually looked forward to them. At first, it had just been him and David. David spent half the time teaching Sebastian how to role-play and the other half talking to him about whatever was on his mind.

It was during this period that Sebastian managed to coax David out of his shell, and help him come to terms with the damage that Martin had caused. David started to brood less

and he began to laugh a little more, which gave Sebastian a warm, fuzzy feeling inside. They grew very close, and Sebastian was glad to have a confidant, because it seemed like he and Luke spent more time bickering than talking.

Once Sebastian had finally gotten comfortable with the rules, he sent out a general call for gamers on his Facebook account. Finding people who were interested had been easy. Getting people who didn't annoy the living fuck out of him was the hard part. Tonight's gaming session at David's apartment was a prime example. The party had almost been put to death two weeks ago because of a traitor in their ranks, so they became cautious about new teammates. The new player that joined them tonight knew about this fact, and yet his character kept acting like he had something to hide.

David had to end the session early to keep Sebastian from leaping across the table and strangling the newbie. Sebastian realized that he needed to take a time-out, since he had an unrelated ax to grind. He decided to help with the clean-up. He bussed the trash from the small, battered kitchen table and made sure that nothing was left on the well-used furniture that dotted the living room.

David had just ushered out the last player when Sebastian finished. "You look tired."

"I'm trying to figure out if that newbie's bullshit is normal in a gaming group," Sebastian replied.

"More than I would like ... But that can't be all that's bothering you."

Sebastian let out a long sigh and leaned against David. The little flips in his stomach had thankfully faded over time, and he was able to maintain physical contact without reacting. "It's nothing."

"I can tell from the sound of your voice that it's not 'nothing.'"

"I'm just being way too emo." He turned around to pack up his dice, but David seized his arm and stopped him.

"Is it something with Luke?"

Sebastian wanted to say no, but he knew that David wouldn't buy it. "Today's our anniversary, that's all."

"Anniversary? He isn't taking you out to celebrate?"

"I don't think Luke even knows what date we got together," Sebastian replied. He felt like he needed a drink, so he stopped packing up and started rummaging in David's fridge for a beer.

"Stop doing that and come out on a ride with me."

"Are you mental? You only have one helmet."

Sebastian had barely finished his sentence when David pulled a box out of his closet and opened it. "Past tense. I bought another helmet last Saturday."

"You ... Why?"

"You told me that it would be easier to score if I could offer someone a ride."

"Oh yeah ... I did." Sebastian wondered why he was disappointed by David's reply. He'd been needling his friend lately about the fact that the only action in the apartment was gaming night. He should have been glad that David was thinking of getting out into the dating scene again.

At least, that's what Sebastian told himself. He trotted over to the sofa, pulled on his jacket, and popped on the helmet before he followed David outside.

David had all of his protective riding gear on—leather jacket, short gloves, sneakers instead of his usual flip-flops. After he locked up, he led Sebastian down the street and around the corner. A 750 cc Buell was parked in a small spot between residences. David straddled the bike and flipped up the kickstand before he started the engine. He waited a minute or two before he motioned for Sebastian to join him.

Sebastian hopped onto the passenger seat, but he was at a loss as to where he should put his hands. It was uncomfortable to lean back and hold onto the "bitch handle", but the only other position he could assume would get him way too close to David's body.

David turned around and said, "Go ahead and grab me. You won't get too many lice."

"Fuck you," Sebastian joked back while he wrapped his arms around David's waist. The damn tingles returned at that moment, causing every inch of Sebastian's skin to prickle.

"Damn it," Sebastian muttered under his helmet.

Before Sebastian could beat himself up over his body going haywire, David said, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah. Go easy on me, huh? I'm a bike virgin."

"No problem." David flipped down the shield on his helmet before he put the motorcycle into gear. He revved the engine again and then began to drive at a slow speed down the street. Sebastian's heart thudded out of control, but when he noticed that he wasn't instant road pizza, his fear was replaced by a rush of euphoria.

He spurred David on, and soon they were going full speed on the highway. Sebastian let out a loud whoop—he felt like he was mainlining adrenaline, and he loved every second of it. They crossed over the Golden Gate Bridge, and Sebastian couldn't get enough of the scenery rushing by him, the feel of wind against his body, and the powerful motor throbbing underneath his legs.

He was laughing when David pulled over at one of the spots for tourists. He jumped off the bike and crushed David in a killer hug after they had removed their helmets. "That was fucking awesome!"

"You deserve it," David said. He cupped Sebastian's chin between his fingers. He gazed intently at Sebastian's face, as if he was committing every little detail to memory.

Sebastian suddenly felt as if he had stepped into a furnace. He was seized by the urge to grab David and grind against him until they were both moaning. He knew that he shouldn't give in to the desire racing through his body, but the ride had charged him up, and the hot, pure need that shot through him was too much to resist. He leaned closer, and paused with his mouth hovering just about David's. He was about to close the distance between them when his cell phone went off.

It was a text from Luke. *"Hey, are you done yet? I'm hungry. L."*

That message was like a dash of cold water in Sebastian's face. He looked at David and said, "Um ... it's Luke. I need to go."

David paused for several tense moments, but he released Sebastian in the end. "All right."

They rode back in silence, and Sebastian packed his stuff in a hurry before he blew out of David's apartment without even so much as a goodbye. He caught a bus without any trouble, and once he sat down in one of the hard seats, Sebastian wondered where his head had gone. What in hell was he thinking?

When he returned home, Luke was waiting for him in his bedroom. "What the fuck, Sebastian?"

"Oh shit, I never replied to your text. Sorry ... I got busy."

"Busy? How busy can you get rolling dice?"

The acid in Luke's voice was just something Sebastian so didn't want to deal with. "Listen, I've got a lot of things to think about right now. Just can it."

"Why is it that you always cut me off when things aren't going the way you want? Jesus H. Christ, you are such a fucking girl!"

"And why do you always call me a girl when I want to do something other than grunt at steroid-inflated jocks beating each other up on TV? If being a girl means actually caring about important things, then hand me a pair of tits!"

"What? What do you mean, I don't care? I put up with a hell of a lot of shit from you!"

"Like what?"

"Like sleeping in your goddamned tiny apartment. I'm sick of my knees banging into the wall whenever I have to sit down to take a dump."

Sebastian felt like his blood pressure just jumped a hundred points. "Oh, like your place with your psycho housemates is any better. Simone complains that my breathing keeps her awake at night, Steve doesn't want me to even breathe on his utensils, and Justin keeps playing with his fucking butterfly knife around me. I keep thinking I'm going to get stabbed in the eye because he keeps tossing it in the air."

"That's better than Elise trying to gas me to death with her Stanky Thing of the Day and being clawed by that mangy-ass cat of yours."

"He's not mangy! And he wouldn't scratch you if you'd be nicer to him!"

"What? Why is he more important than I am? You should just toss the little shit outside at night so he stays out of my hair."

That was the last straw. He thought that after all this time Luke understood how he felt about Hector. "Fuck you! I'm keeping him indoors! Deal with it or take a hike!"

"Fine," Luke said. "We're over."

After Luke left, Sebastian fell to the ground. He pulled out his cell phone with shaking hands and hit David's number on the speed dial. It was irrational in light of what had happened earlier, but Sebastian felt he had no one else to turn to.

"Sebastian?" He was relieved that David sounded concerned instead of angry.

"I need you to come to my place." He couldn't keep his voice from breaking. "Hurry."

"I'm leaving right now. Sit tight."

* * * *

Zhong Shi was awakened from his nightmare by Chen Jing's thrashing. He nudged Chen Jing and murmured, "It's all right, my love."

Chen Jing's eyes snapped open and he flailed out with his claws. Zhong Shi dodged away just in time, because the blow went wild and shattered one of the statues.

"Stop fighting! There is nothing to worry about!" He coiled his body tightly around Chen Jing's to prevent his lover from striking out further; Chen Jing retaliated by sinking his teeth into the scales just above the burn mark on Zhong Shi's neck.

He hissed in pain, but he forced himself to sound calm. "Please, no one will hurt you ... I assure you that you are completely safe, and nothing else will happen to you."

The grip on his neck eased after many tense moments, and Chen Jing stopped struggling. He fell heavily to the ground and stared into thin air.

"Did you have a nightmare?" It took even more effort to sound cheerful, but Zhong Shi somehow managed it.

Chen Jing's lips curled into a meaningless smile. "Will the lions be out today?"

Zhong Shi swallowed and tried to speak in composed voice. "Did you hear my question? Do you even know who I am?"

He choked back a sob when Chen Jing ignored him and started scratching at a wall. Zhong Shi sat back and waited; he hoped that this new bout of madness would pass, and that Chen Jing would return to some semblance of comprehension.

Time passed, and nothing of the sort happened. Chen Jing would either babble nonsense, or he would just lie there, staring at nothing. When Chen Jing's Number One Wife arrived with their meals, Zhong Shi quickly grabbed the food and shooed her away—he knew this latest development would cause her much alarm, and he did not want to have to reassure her, too.

Chen Jing made no attempt to feed himself, even though the breakfast was placed under his nose. Zhong Shi tried coaxing Chen Jing, but it was to no avail; he finally had to resort to putting the food in his claw and nudging it at Chen Jing's lips.

As the day wore on, it was apparent that Chen Jing's mind had deteriorated quite a bit. He couldn't even perform the most basic of tasks; he tried to stick inedible substances into his mouth; and he threw temper tantrums when Zhong Shi tried to stop him. It was a blessing at the end of the day when Chen Jing fell into a fitful sleep.

The lair felt stifling now, because Zhong Shi had spent all day inside. He needed to get out, to feel the wind against his scales again ... but he couldn't leave Chen Jing. After contemplating his options, he decided that he could hover outside, which would allow him to keep Chen Jing within sight.

He slipped out as quietly as he could manage. The cool breeze against his face was a blessed relief, and he made several slow turns in the air. His mind cleared somewhat, and he tried to calculate how long it would take Tai Gong to deliver the information to the King's operatives. He let out a groan when he realized that his Sifu would be gone for a minimum of another day.

He wasn't sure how much more of this he could endure. As soon as the thought formed in his head, he tried to dismiss it. Chen Jing was his responsibility, and no one else's. He flew back inside, and hoped that Lao Yu would be captured sooner than later.

The next day was just as trying for the two of them, as was the next. Zhong Shi soon lost track of the days. They blurred into a never-ending cycle of soothing Chen Jing in the morning, feeding and grooming him, making sure that he didn't blunder over the ledge or drink out of stagnant puddles, and then coaxing him to sleep. Zhong Shi often collapsed from pure exhaustion once Chen Jing slumbered; he had never been so tired before, so weary that he felt it in his bones.

He didn't find relief when he slept—the nightmare still plagued him, and it was fresh in his mind when Chen Jing's flailing jolted him awake. “Quiet!” he snarled.

Chen Jing keened in his sleep and his tail struck Zhong Shi with a sizable amount of force. This shattered the last of Zhong Shi's patience and he roared hard enough to shake the walls.

His anger deflated when Chen Jing woke up and cowered away from him. He cursed his lack of control and began to make soft nonsense noises. After many long minutes, Chen Jing crawled forward with tentative steps. It took more cajoling before he settled down and his eyes closed again.

Zhong Shi took a deep breath and tried to center himself. He needed to be strong for the both of them; he couldn't lose heart, not while Lao Yu remained free. He continued reciting this mantra to himself until his rage dulled down.

A loud rush of air just outside the mouth of the cave caused Zhong Shi's eyes to snap open. Lightness formed in his heart when he saw a golden form swooping down and landing on the ledge. He scurried out to meet Tai Gong as fast as he could manage.

Even though he was bubbling with excitement, he tried to keep it contained. "Greetings, Sifu. What news do you have?"

"The King's warriors were successful; they have captured Lao Yu and an accomplice of his. They readily gave information on the curse once we questioned them."

"Really? And what can be done?"

Tai Gong touched his shoulder gently. "Zhong Shi, not even the King can reverse the effects. The particles are too scattered to retrieve."

"What?" He knew it was disrespectful to snap at his Sifu like this, but he was beyond caring about propriety. "There must be a counter-spell to the curse! He can't live like this!"

"Zhong Shi, please accept my apologies..."

"I refuse! You have no idea of what I have to endure! I've been bitten and scratched because he panics and does not recognize the sound of my voice! He has become a halfwit and can't even perform basic grooming tasks! I have to do everything for him, as if he were a newly hatched youngling!"

"Calm yourself."

"No! Not when my love for him has died, Sifu!"

"Silence!"

"No!" He couldn't take it any longer. With a loud bellow, he surged upward, climbing as high as he could. When he couldn't fly any further, he thrashed around and cursed Lao Yu until he was hoarse. Zhong Shi felt so impotent—he was trapped, and he could do nothing to alleviate Chen Jing's misery. The night sky looked pale compared to the darkness he felt in his soul.

"Zhong Shi, I am not unaware of your suffering," Tai Gong's voice said from beneath him after his anger had been spent. Zhong Shi inverted himself so that he could look at his Sifu. "I know that this is difficult for you, but you must accept Chen Jing's fate."

Just then, he realized how rude he had been earlier and he dipped his head. "Forgive me for my manners, Sifu."

"You are forgiven. You have had to endure much for such a young dragon."

Zhong Shi rose and was about to fly back to his lair in disappointment, but Tai Gong stopped him with a touch. "Student, I think I may have a solution to your dilemma. But it does not come without price."

"I will do whatever it takes for Chen Jing to be cured," Zhong Shi replied.

"Then listen carefully..."

* * * *

It seemed like forever before he heard David's bike pulling up outside. Sebastian ran to the door and whipped it open, clamping David in a fierce hug.

"Luke just left me."

Sebastian didn't expect David to stiffen in his arms. "What's that smell?"

"Oh ... huh? Sorry, Elise mixed something again..." David seemed to be looking into the distance. He must have had an allergic reaction, because he quickly turned white as a sheet.

Sebastian hustled him over to the couch and eased him onto the cushions. "David? Talk to me?"

"Spikenard..." was all David said before he clutched his head and screamed.

Sebastian panicked. He didn't know what to do, except to hug David and hope for the best. David's muscles locked up for several minutes and then, without warning, he threw his head back and roared. Sebastian didn't have time to process this before David clutched him in a fierce grip and smashed their lips together. He tried to resist at first when David's tongue coiled around his own, but all of the feelings that he was holding in check suddenly came rushing to the surface.

He pressed himself against David, even as his brain was assaulted by a rush of images. Wind whistled past his sides while he climbed higher in the sky, and adrenaline surged through him when he thrashed around and caused rain to fall.

The storms were his to control—he could take the rolling, untamed energy and mold it to his will. His body throbbed with power, so much that he thought he would burst ... Unable to contain the emotions swirling through him, Sebastian tore his lips away and howled loud enough to wake the dead.

"Sebastian, are you okay?" Elise's voice called out from her room.

"Uh yeah, sorry. Hector got excited and scratched me." Sebastian realized that he and David needed some privacy to talk, so he grabbed his jacket and motioned for them to go outside.

Once the cool night air hit them, Sebastian turned around and cupped David's cheek. "Zhong Shi ... after all these years ... holy fuck. I don't understand—how did we get here?"

Sebastian was startled when David wrenched away—that was so not the reaction he was expecting. "You should have never made me remember."

"Are you mental? Why aren't you glad that we're together again?"

That haunted look which Sebastian had worked so hard to get rid of re-appeared in David's eyes. He jumped onto his motorcycle and pulled his helmet on. "Go back to Luke, Sebastian. He'll give you what you need—I can't do this anymore."

"What? You can't..."

"I don't want to see you again."

Before Sebastian could press for an explanation, David started the engine and pulled away, leaving him alone on the darkened street.

Chapter 5

Zhong Shi had trouble sleeping all night and remained coiled against Chen Jing. Sifu Tai Gong told him that the iron had been coated with phoenix blood, which had caused an excess of Yin to enter Chen Jing's body. Because dragons were composed of pure Yang, the opposing force was slowly driving Chen Jing mad.

Draconic enchantments were useless against phoenix blood, but if Chen Jing could be transformed into a creature with more balanced energies, such as a human, the curse would cease its destructive influence. However, that would mean that Chen Jing would age and die within an amount of time that was but an eyeblink to a dragon.

Zhong Shi pressed closer to Chen Jing and closed his eyes. He was determined to share Chen Jing's fate, so he had asked Tai Gong to prepare the spell for both of them. He had been sure when he made his request, but now doubts flitted through his mind.

Being human meant that he would never fly again, would never be free of the pull of the Earth. He would have one form and he would grow feeble before he died. The humans would never accept their relationship, and they could potentially be executed if they were discovered together.

And even if these grim things did not occur, he didn't think that they could resume their usual love-play. He stared at the burn marks marring his scales. What use was there to changing?

Chen Jing suddenly let out a piercing wail and began to thrash around. It took all of Zhong Shi's energy to restrain and calm him down. Once the attack was over, Zhong Shi knew that there was no other choice—he would accept his short life if it meant an end to this hell.

Dawn was just breaking, which meant that it was time. Zhong Shi coaxed Chen Jing awake and guided him to Tai Gong's lair. They were ushered in by a pair of disciples and then left alone.

Tai Gong said, "Are you still certain that you wish to be transformed?"

"Yes, Sifu."

Tai Gong opened an ornate chest and pulled out two golden pearls. He ground them up and mixed the powder in a tea steeped from rare herbs for the two of them to drink. Once it was consumed, Tai Gong drew back and began to chant the words to the spell. Energy crackled through the air and Zhong Shi could feel his hair standing on end. The jade walls of the cave shifted color, changing from green to indigo.

Chen Jing whimpered something under his breath that was incomprehensible. Zhong Shi nuzzled him and said, "Hush, my love. Be still and it will be over soon."

A scintillating globe formed around the two dragons, and Zhong Shi observed words of power flickering across the semi-transparent surface. The ideograms moved rapidly, crossing over each other until the characters blurred together.

The bubble collapsed around them and Zhong Shi felt as if his very soul was being ripped out. He let out a blood-curdling shriek and fell to the ground in agony. While he convulsed in pain, his scales shimmered and an unseen force yanked them off his skin. He saw his claws receding, and he felt his body growing smaller and compressing. That was the last thing he remembered before he blacked out.

When he came to, he shivered at the feeling of cool air passing over his bare flesh. Chen Jing's naked and very human form lay next to him.

He saw Chen Jing stirring and he held his breath in anticipation. His heart skipped a beat when his mate woke up with unclouded eyes. "My love?" he asked.

After many tense moments, his worse fears came true when Chen Jing lips curled into an childlike smile. "No!" Zhong Shi screamed. "It failed!"

Tai Gong gazed at Zhong Shi with a sympathetic expression. "I am very, very sorry, my student. We can provide the two of you with enough gold and jewels so that you can buy yourself a large plot of land and live out the rest of your lives in comfort."

Zhong Shi could not hear Tai Gong's platitudes and barely mumbled out a farewell after his Sifu returned them to their lair. All he could think of was the fact that he would have to live the rest of his life caring for Chen Jing.

In a moment of clarity, he realized that there was only one solution left. He kissed Chen Jing's brow and steeled himself for the dishonorable act he was about to commit. Chen Jing would never forgive his selfishness, but he ceased to care—he needed to be free, regardless of the consequences.

* * * *

Sebastian barely noticed when Hector jumped onto his bed and meowed plaintively for attention. It had been a week since he had regained his memories, and the only time he left the bed was to feed them or use the bathroom.

It had been strange, trying to reconcile his past life with his present life. The memories of all of the experiences he had as a dragon seemed unreal; as if he was watching a movie and been told that what he saw on the screen actually happened to him.

He didn't remember much after Lao Yu blinded him. Try as he might, all he could come up with were jumbled fragments that he couldn't make sense out of. And the only person who could explain it all wasn't speaking to him. He didn't know how many text and e-

mails he sent David, but none of them were ever returned. What had happened to cause David to hate him so much? Try as he might, he couldn't figure it out.

Sebastian decided at that point that the smart thing to do would be to make up with Luke and try to fix their relationship. He pulled out his cell and his finger hovered over the speed dial for Luke's number for several minutes before he decided that he couldn't leave things as they were. Sebastian called up the taxi company and asked them to send a cab over. When his ride arrived, he gave David's address to the driver.

Sebastian heart was racing when he stepped out onto the curb in front of David's apartment. It was after three am; he wasn't even sure if David would answer the door, but he had to try. There was no response at first when he rang the doorbell on the outer gate, but Sebastian didn't let that discourage him; he was about to call David when the door swung open.

It looked like he wasn't the only one having trouble sleeping—he was still wearing his jeans and shirt. "I thought I told you that I never wanted to see you again."

"And I'm going to camp out here until I get some answers. You know that I'm not shitting about that."

"I'll call the police and have you removed for trespassing."

Sebastian rolled his eyes and said, "Look, you nimrod—you know I can leave before the cops get here, but I'll just come back again. I want to settle this right now; I promise that I'll get the hell out of your life if you just let me in."

"No," David said.

He turned around and was about to go back into his apartment when Sebastian grabbed the metal bars in front of him and said, "Damn it, I'm begging you! I know you paid off your debt of honor so I can't force you to let me in..."

As soon as the words left Sebastian's mouth, David reeled as if he had been struck by a physical blow. Pain was etched on his face and Sebastian had an idea why David ran away from him. "You did something squiddly, didn't you?"

David didn't reply; his fingers clutched at the gate and he bit his lip so hard that he started to draw blood.

"Let me in, and I'll consider us squared away," Sebastian said.

He didn't say anything when David unlocked the gate and ushered him in. David flopped down on his couch and hugged his arms around his body. He was trembling, and he clutched himself so hard that his knuckles turned white.

Sebastian shucked his jacket before he took a seat next to David. He hummed a song while he rubbed David's back. The lyrics were in Mandarin—it was a tune he learned from one of the humans, a song that spoke of the love a mother had for her child. He continued to run his hands in languid, soothing motions until he felt David's muscles unlocking.

"Tell me what happened after that asshole cursed me. I promise that I won't get angry."

After a few more minutes of gentle coaxing, David finally opened up. He told Sebastian about everything that happened since Lao Yu's curse had struck—the madness, the strain of being Sebastian's sole caregiver, his own trauma from being bound, and Tai Gong's proposed solution.

David stopped abruptly at that point and started biting his lips. Sebastian said, "What happened? Did you let him change us?"

There was no response from David except that his muscles tensed even more. "And the spell fucked up?"

David shook his head, but didn't otherwise speak. Sebastian took a deep breath and said, "Please tell me."

"I..." David began. He seemed to lose his nerve, and he turned his head away.

"Please. I promise that I won't hate you."

"Sifu Tai Gong transformed us, but you didn't recover. I ... I couldn't take it any longer. I waited until everyone was asleep and then I..."

David's voice broke and he let out a broken sob. Sebastian wrapped his arms around David and hugged as hard as he could manage; he rocked them back and forth and murmured soothing phrases until David calmed down. "What happened?"

"I took you outside, to the ledge outside our lair ... Once we were near the edge, I grabbed you and jumped." David wrenched out of Sebastian's arms and launched to his feet. "Do you see why I don't want to be around you any longer?"

Sebastian stood up and grabbed David's shoulder. "And what if I told you that I don't remember a fucking thing?"

"What?"

"I'm serious—I don't remember anything. And even if I did—I forgive you." David was avoiding eye contact, so Sebastian cupped David's chin and turned his face so that they could look at each other.

David slapped Sebastian's hand away. "It still won't work, Sebastian! The things I said to you..."

His eyes contained an expression of such painful grief that Sebastian's heart broke. "As if I wouldn't do the same thing if I was in your shoes. You were too young to be saddled with my mental scaly hide."

"You deserve Luke."

"Shut the fuck up and stop telling me that. Even after everything you had been through, you still let yourself be transformed. Why?"

"You know it was a matter of honor."

Sebastian snorted under his breath. "That's bullshit and you know it. You could have stayed as a dragon to take care of me. Why did you let Sifu Tai Gong change you? Even after everything you had been through, you still refused to abandon me."

David didn't answer. He was shaking again, so Sebastian wrapped his skinny arms around him and pressed their bodies together. "I know why ... and I can't think of a truer demonstration of your love."

His mouth brushed against David's. "Please ... don't turn me away. You are my heart's only desire, Little One."

Sebastian's tongue flicked out for the briefest of contact before he leaned in and pressed their lips together. There was no hesitation when David responded, kissing Sebastian with a tenderness that made his head spin.

"I want you," he breathed when they parted.

In response to Sebastian's words, David scooped him up and carried him into the bedroom. He was lowered onto the mattress with care, as if he was a delicate piece of china. Sebastian began to make a sarcastic remark, but it faded off into a needy moan when he felt David nipping the sensitive column of his neck. David's hands were just as busy—he pushed up Sebastian's T-shirt and ran his hands over each inch of smooth skin with unhurried, reverent motions.

Heat sped through Sebastian's flesh like a wildfire. This wasn't enough, he wanted to feel more of David, and he wanted it *now*. He yanked off his shirt and removed David's about two seconds later. He was about to shimmy out of his jeans when David grabbed his wrist to stop him.

"Let me," David said.

Sebastian wanted to argue, but those wonderful lips were back on his, moving in a way that caused his brain to short-circuit. He forgot about everything—he lost himself in the woodsy scent of David's aftershave, the flick of a tongue against his own, and the weight of David's strong body.

When Sebastian felt a cool breeze against his hard-on, he realized that David had taken advantage of the distraction to finish stripping. He lifted up so that David could remove the last of his clothing; once the last sock was tossed to the floor, David's mouth latched onto one of Sebastian's nipples.

A ragged cry escaped Sebastian's mouth, and he clutched David's head to his chest. The hot, wet swipes caused something to shift in Sebastian's mind, and suddenly the memory of Zhong Shi performing this very same act flashed before his eyes. More images followed, each of them more explicit than the last. Every recollection was so vivid that he felt as if he was experiencing every single touch and caress in real time.

While this cascade of sensation was overwhelming him, Sebastian was only somewhat aware of what was happening in the present. He knew that David had reached over to pull lube from the nightstand, but it seemed like he was observing it from afar.

A brush of fingertips against his hole brought him back to the present. David circled the skin with his slick fingers, touching Sebastian with the utmost of care before he pressed a finger inside.

"Oh, God..." Sebastian moaned. "Please ... I need you."

David bent down to capture Sebastian's lips again, while his free hand retrieved a condom from the nightstand drawer. He sat back and tore the wrapper open with his teeth before he rolled the latex onto his dripping hard-on. Once he was done, he removed his finger and positioned himself between Sebastian's splayed legs.

He pressed his forehead to Sebastian's, and gazed at him with a look of utter adoration. "*Chen Jing ... my love ...*" he whispered in Mandarin.

"You have always had my heart, Little One."

David responded with a passionate kiss that took Sebastian's breath away. Their tongues were still sliding against each other when David pushed forward and eased the head of his shaft inside Sebastian.

Desire spiked through Sebastian's body and he clamped his hands down on David's shoulders. Even though he was tempted to close his eyes, he forced them to remain open so that he could look at his beloved's face.

David continued to move ahead at a tortuous pace while his hands mapped every inch of Sebastian's flesh, each caress mending the connection that Lao Yu had shattered. When David touched bottom, Sebastian didn't dare speak, because he was afraid of saying something that would destroy this precious, fragile moment.

He touched the back of his knuckles to David's face, and David kissed his fingers before he began to move, pulling back and then pushing forward with shallow thrusts. Every inch of Sebastian's flesh immediately electrified and he writhed on top of the sheets. His broken moans grew in volume as he urged David on.

To his frustration, David maintained his languid pace. Sebastian decided to take the initiative—he planted his feet flat on the mattress and slammed his pelvis down.

"Fuck!" He choked out in a ragged gasp.

That maneuver broke David's iron control and he grabbed Sebastian's hips hard enough to cause bruises. With a snarl, he started plunging into Sebastian at a brutal pace, filling him over and over again.

Sebastian howled and dug his nails into David's skin; every thrust caused shockwaves of desire to rip through him. The world around him faded down to the feel of David's lips on his throat, and the relentless pounding rocking his body. His blood thundered in his ears as he climbed higher, and as he reached the peak, he grabbed David's face and kissed him hard.

White light filled Sebastian's vision when his orgasm tore through his body. He felt like he was flying again, free from the bounds of gravity as he soared toward the heavens. He screamed out loud, voicing his pleasure at being reunited with his lost love.

When he regained his senses, he felt a break in the rhythm of David's thrusting. He clamped down and said in a low, throaty voice, "Do it. Mark me as yours, now and forever."

David suddenly jabbed Sebastian once more before he threw his head back and howled at the top of his lungs. He convulsed, and every muscle in his body stood out in bold relief before he sagged down on top of Sebastian.

"Whoa, easy there!" Sebastian giggled. "You can't pass out yet!"

"What?" David said. His eyes looked sort of glazed over.

"Hel-lo. Earth to David—the condom's going to spill if you don't do something."

That seemed to get through to him. David managed to pull out and remove the condom even though he had problems with coordination. He tossed it into a nearby wastebasket and then flopped back onto the bed.

White fluid was spattered over Sebastian's abdomen and chest, so he grabbed some tissues to clean up. Once he was done, he snuggled against David. "I'm sorry for putting you through so much shit."

"It wasn't your fault." David took Sebastian's fingers in his own and kissed them. "Although I still did all the work this time."

Sebastian laughed and said, "Tell you what; I'll be in charge from now on."

"Hmm, you know I've never bottomed in this body?"

"Really? I haven't topped yet. Guess we both get to lose our cherries ... uh, that is, if you still want to stay with me."

"Always," David said before he leaned over to press his lips to Sebastian's.

While Sebastian returned the kiss with enthusiasm, dawn began to break outside. Streaks of sunlight danced across the bodies of the two lovers as they pledged their love to each other, vowing to stay with each other throughout the many lives they would live, until the end of time.

The End.

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