



The Jewels of Bangkok

A Tale From The Infinitum Government

Megan Derr

Less Than Three Press

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PLANET 2147151 - BANGKOK

Elton dodged a group of hyperactive children, wincing as their roughhousing took them tumbling toward a priceless vase—and letting out an audible sigh of relief when they were taken in hand by a displeased-looking security guard.

He was not above being amused and pleased when the guard then dragged them back to their inattentive parents and proceeded to give children and parents a very firm, very loud dressing down.

"Ellie!" Lana said, tugging impatiently at his shirt sleeve. "*Look* at this, Ellie."

Turning away from the reprimand, Elton obediently looked where his sister indicated. She was staring, enthralled, at a glass-encased robe of some sort. It was made entirely of hand-embroidered silk. A brilliant scarlet, decorated with flowers in an impressive variety of colors. He glanced at the placard tucked discreetly into one corner of the glass case and saw that the robe came from some ancient country on Earth, thousands of years before the planet had been ruined beyond repair and turned into Rehab.

Huh. He had not known they had been capable of such intricate work that long ago. But, then again, fabrics were not his thing. Fabric, clothes—those was the passion Lana had shared with their mother. Elton's interests had always fallen elsewhere.

His gut twisted, thinking of their mother, and he forced his thoughts off that dark path. They were here to try and learn how to be happy again, god damn it. All the trials and tribulations, all the betrayal and hate and ostracism were behind them now. Five years of hell were finally over and done; they could move on and put it firmly in the past. All dreams came true in Bangkok, the saying went. He hoped their dream of successfully starting a new life worked.

Especially for Lana; his sister had taken it all even harder than he had. Elton hadn't lost many friends in the mess, for he had always been something of a loner. Bad enough their father had murdered their mother and then killed himself, never mind the damage the murders had done to their businesses, boutique and the jewelry store, and their reputations... but Lana had lost all her friends, discovered the most painful way possible she had no *real* friends, on top of everything else. He hoped she found better ones in their new home.

But first, they would spend time together, big sister and little brother, all that was left of their family, and see if they could not mend the broken pieces.

All dreams come true in Bangkok, he thought again and turned his head to look out the glass windows that lined one wall at the bright, colorful chaos of Bangkok. He doubted it was true, about dreams, but they had nothing to lose at this point. To see Lana happy again, he would do anything, even this ridiculous vacation.

Lana looked up, as if sensing his thoughts, and smiled at him. He smiled back, though neither of their smiles were great—a weary, bitter, two steps from broken. But they were not broken yet, and there was a trace of their genuine desire to move.

"Come on," Lana said, and only a small part of the cheer in her voice was forced. "I want to see your face in the next room." She took his hand, and dragged him off, and Elton let himself be dragged obediently along.

He had not thought she would want to spend so much time in a museum, of all places, given all that there was to do in Bangkok, but far be it for him to complain.

In the next room, though, he could suddenly think of no better place to be. He barely noticed as he pulled away from Lana, eyes only for the nearest display case. "Vrill pearls," he breathed, eyes on the beautiful necklace set off by perfect lighting, displayed on black velvet. "Do you know how *rare* these are?" he asked, not speaking to anyone in particular. The pearls were a perfect, beautiful creamy white, with a luster only real pearls possessed—and the honey-luster of real Vrill pearls, nothing like the cream luster of Earth or the snow-luster of Morden pearls.

Lost in admiration, he tore himself from the triple-row of pearls only to admire a beautiful teardrop sapphire, then a collection of Cela diamonds and a choker of Fornarian rubi

But it was the Last Empress Necklace that really took his breath away. "This necklace is priceless," he said, barely aware he was speaking at all. "It's the last remaining piece from the Crown Jewels of the Earth Empire." It was often called the Last Empress because that tragic figure had been fond of the crown jewels and, according to legend, had been wearing them when she died in the Last War.

After the Last War, Earth had been unfit to sustain real life. Useless for anything else, it had been turned into a rehabilitation planet. Precious few were the artifacts of Earth, one of only thirty planets in the Infinitum Government that had been declared uninhabitable.

The necklace was a true masterpiece, an elaborate arrangement of emeralds, sapphires, and diamonds all from Earth. He would know the hard shine and glitter of Earth gems anywhere.

Lana giggled, coming to stand beside him. "You stare at that necklace the way most people stare at their lovers, Ellie."

"The jewels would certainly be warmer and more faithful," Elton said bitterly, then winced as he realized what he had said. "Sorry, Lana."

"It's alright," Lana said quietly, smiling sadly at him. "Maybe on Kreska that won't be so true, but... well, it's been all too true of late everywhere else, hasn't it?"

Elton hugged her tightly. "It can't be true everywhere, damn it. I promise you'll be happy again, Lana."

"And you too," Lana said, sniffing and whipping her eyes, then lifting her chin and scowling at him. "We'll both be happy again."

"As long as you're happy, I'm happy," Elton replied, then smiled before she could harp on him. "Though if someone wanted to buy me the black pearl chokers going to auction at the end of the week, I would not complain."

Lana rolled her eyes, but laughed. "You and those chokers. You have coveted them since you first saw them on Lady Matley's neck ten years ago."

Elton's lip curled. "She and her daughter did not suit those pearls at all." He grimaced. "Not that they would suit me, but at least I've the good sense to know that." He just wanted them for his collection, diminished though it was. Turning away from that thought, because thinking of the jewels he had been forced to sell to make things right and help them start their new life would just mire him in despair, he focused on his sister and the jewels on exhibit.

Giggling again, Lana reached out to ruffle his hair, blonde and wavy like her own. They also shared their mother's green eyes, her slender form and modest height.

Their father had been tall, broad, and of dark coloring. Elton had always felt bad, growing up, that they got none of their fathers looks. It had been a silly thing for a kid to worry about, especially since his parents had been rather eccentric in opting to have both their children completely naturally and leave everything up to chance. Besides, what he had not gotten in his father's looks, he had gotten at least twice over in his father's talent.

Nowadays, he was grateful he bore practically no resemblance to his father and resented even the talent they shared. The fewer connections to the lying bastard, the better.

"So what do you think?" Lana asked, looking at the Last Empress.

Elton looked at it again himself, pulled by it, absorbed by it, and eventually said, "It's a tragedy the other pieces were lost. The entire collection was a masterpiece beyond all reckoning, better than even the IG Crown Jewels, and those are composed of the only remaining gems of Lost Zero. The Empress Necklace alone is beyond price; having even more pieces of the collection..."

"I think it's more a pity you'll never get to recreate them the way you've been planning to for what, your entire life? That's the real crime."

Elton shrugged, trying to pretend the memory did not hurt, even if *all* the memories hurt. He had spent his life studying gemstones, but Earth gems were his specialty, and he would have solidified his reputation by recreating the lost crown jewels of Earth. "They would have been subpar anyway. The number of earth gems I would have needed simply do not exist anymore. I could have made excellent facsimiles, but that's all." He indicated the necklace. "There are four hundred gems in the necklace alone, and it's said at least 1500 are in the entire collection, possibly more."

"I cannot imagine carrying so much weight, and god only knows how much more she wore in clothing."

"Weren't they genetically enhanced, though?" Elton asked. "She could have born the weight easily."

"That's her there," Lana said, though they both knew what she looked like already. But the portrait of her in the museum was impressive, one of the few showing her wearing the entire collection of crown

jewels—tiara, necklace, bracelets, arm cuffs, earrings, rings, and even a chain around her waist setting off an elaborate green and gold robe.

"She was beautiful," Elton said, admiring how well she wore the jewels. Though they had been made at least a century before her birth, she suited them so perfectly, they might have been made just for her.

"Very," Lana agreed. "Look at her dress—I do not care how skilled and advanced the sew-machines are now, nothing gets a fit like hand-stitching, and that embroidery! I've been doing this for almost thirty years, and I can't embroider that prettily."

Elton laughed. "Yes, you can. The way everyone keeps looking at you, I think they would agree with me."

"Hush you," Lana said, but smiled. "As if I'm the only one being looked at."

"Eh. They wouldn't get very far with me," Elton said with a shrug. He had never been very good with people, and he preferred not to try these days. "You know me; I have eyes only for jewels."

Lana laughed again. "That makes me wonder what you'd think of the Jewels of Bangkok if we were actually lucky enough to see them."

Elton frowned. "What are you talking about? Bangkok possesses no special jewels other than those hosted in their museums. There is no collection known as the Jewels of Bangkok." In reply, Lana only doubled over, laughing harder than ever. Scowling, Elton jabbed her in the ribs, which only made Lana laugh still harder. "You're not being a very nice big sister."

"Sorry, sorry," Lana said and slowly regained control of herself. "It's just that I always forget how oblivious you are to everything. It's so cute! Bangkok, as you know, is a privately owned planet. It was bought ages ago by the Daie family, who came from Mars, actually. The latest Lord of Bangkok is Tresnor Daie. He is, however, mostly retired. The active running of the planet is left to his sons who are nicknamed the Jewels of Bangkok for their beauty and flash. Honestly, Ellie, I would have thought that even you would have heard of them, with a name like that."

"I'm only interested in real jewels," Elton replied with another shrug, refusing to be curious. "How much of this museum do we have left?"

"Hours," Lana said. "Why don't we stop for dinner and come back in the morning before we head off for the tower tour?"

"Alright," Elton said and held out his arm for Lana to take. Casting one last look at the Last Empress, he led Lana out of the museum and back to their rooms in Blue Dragon Tower.

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Elton yawned. "Why are we here so early?"

"Because we won't have another chance to go through the entire museum, not with only five days left and our schedule full. I really love Earth history, and god knows Mars can't afford to house the treasures

on display here. The founder of Bangkok was from Mars, did you know that? That's why this museum is here."

"Fascinating," Elton said and rolled his eyes when she wasn't looking, not bothering to tell her that she'd told him only about fifty times. He hated mornings; couldn't he go back to bed? Maybe he could catch a nap on one of the sofas scattered about.

But then they were in the jewelry exhibit again, and sleep was suddenly the last thing on his mind. He strode back to the Last Empress display and drew a sharp, dismayed breath, feeling suddenly cold and sick to his stomach. "Lana."

"What?" she asked, levity fading as his tone and manner struck her.

"This isn't the necklace I looked at yesterday," Elton said. "It's beautiful, but it's a fraud. Those are Cela diamonds, Zero sapphires, and Kreska emeralds. Not a single carat is Earth."

Lana swore softly. "Maybe it's a substitute while they care for the real thing?"

"No," Elton said. "There is no certified copy of this necklace registered. I still hold the permissions to make the copies until the end of this term. If anyone else had made a certified copy, they'd have had to get permission from me. It's a beautiful copy, nearly perfect, and the gems are real—but they're not Earth."

Lana swore again, with all the skill and color of a dockworker—but she didn't ask if he was certain. God bless her, she'd always known better than to waste their time by asking such a stupid question. "We need to speak with security. Come on."

Turning sharply, heels clacking, she walked back into the previous room and strode to the guard tucked unobtrusively into one corner. "Sir, I'm afraid we have to report a theft."

"What?" the guard asked, looking at them as if they were crazy. "I think we'd know if something had been stolen, begging your pardon, ma'am."

"The Last Empress is gone," Lana said. "The necklace in the case is a fake."

Frowning, looking more annoyed than concerned, the guard strode into the jewelry room and to the necklace. "Well, I sure as stars can't tell," he muttered. He turned back to them. "Breaking into this museum is impossible. You two want to tell me how the hell you know that's a fake? Sure looks real to me."

"They're all wrong," Elton said. "Those aren't Earth gems, not even close."

"He's a jewel expert," Lana said quietly. "Please, sir. In thefts like this, every minute lost makes it harder to find the jewels again. If we're wrong, arrest us."

Swearing, the guard activated his in-lens with silent command, lights and words flashing across his right eye as he communicated with the museum, other parts of Bangkok, likely his boss and stars knew who else. All around them, doors, windows, and display cases began to close.

"You two," the guard finally said, voice terse. "Come with me."

Stifling a sigh, Elton took Lana's hand and obediently followed the guard. Why, he thought morosely, could nothing in their life ever go right anymore?

The guard led them through the empty, shut up museum, all the way to the back where the offices and work rooms were located. In the foyer, he jabbed a finger in the direction of a pair of seats, and ordered them to sit.

They sat. Elton kept hold of Lana's hand and slid his other arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Lana made a soft noise of protest. "Don't be silly, Ellie. You should be proud of yourself, you know that. Thanks to you, it's entirely possible they'll catch the thief. There's no one else in the stars who can tell all those jewels at a glance the way you can, Ellie."

Elton snorted and said the same thing he always said. "That's not true, and all it takes is *looking* and paying attention to detail."

"I wish sometimes I could see everything you do," Lana said wistfully. "There's not a detail you miss in anything."

There was a lie if ever he had heard one, Elton thought bitterly. He had not seen his father had been living a lie his entire life; he had not seen the authorities were using him to destroy his father. He had not seen that all the people they knew would stop knowing them the minute the scandal broke. He had not seen they would have to give up everything they knew and move two quadrants away to try and start over. There were thousands of details he had missed.

But all he said was, "Your talent is in your hands. Far better to have mother's hands than father's eyes."

Lana fell silent, but rested her head against his shoulder and squeezed his hand tightly. They sat there in silence for a long time until the sudden opening of a door caused them both to jump.

Lana drew a sharp breath, eyes wide as she stared. Elton supposed he could not blame her; the man was impressive, if somewhat intimidating in appearance. He had dark brown skin and pale brown eyes. His head was shaved smooth, and he had the five-dragon crest of Bangkok inked into his right cheek. He was dressed all in black, in an outfit that reminded Elton slightly of the uniforms worn by Rehab guards. Rather than the more normal in-lens, he wore full in-specs, which even now filled with words and figures and numbers. It didn't take the badge clipped to the front of his jacket to identify him as the head of security for Bangkok.

"You're the two who claim the Last Empress necklace was stolen and replaced with a fake," the man said. "You want to tell me how you know that?"

"The jewels are wrong," Elton said.

"You can tell that how?" the man asked flatly, hands on his hips.

"Elton is a jewel expert," Lana said before Elton could speak, standing up and bracing her hands on her own hips, perfectly mimicking the guard, chin tilted up in that stubborn, challenging way of hers. "He's helped in thousands of case of theft and fraud. He can tell the difference between a Cela diamond and an Earth diamond in a glance. You test that necklace with your stupid machines, and they'll tell you the same thing we're trying to tell you—you've been had."

The man's stony expression cracked slightly, a small smile slipping through as he looked Lana up and down. "We're working on it, Princess."

"My name isn't Princess," Lana said coolly.

"No, it's Lana Witmer. You're Elton Witmer," He said, pointing at Elton. "Room 277165 in Blue Dragon Tower. You purchased a Grade Two vacation package and have five days remaining. Your IG files are sealed. Why?"

"If you don't have the clearance to open our personal files," Lana said, "then it's none of your damn business."

"If I need permission, Highness, I'll get it," the man replied.

Lana sneered at him. "Our records were sealed by Lower Chancellor Kavalarov. He promised us no one would be permitted access without his express permission, and we've done nothing to merit his giving you that permission."

The man said nothing for a moment, clearly more interested in whatever his in-specs were telling him, then asked, "So why are you on Bangkok?"

"What sort of stupid question is that?" Lana demanded.

Elton covered his face with one hand.

The man regarded her coolly, but not without some amusement. "A legitimate one, Princess. You're here in a museum awfully early, and I'm supposed to believe your brother can tell by *looking* that the jewels are—"

He stopped as his in-specs exploded with images and information. "Shit. The jewels *are* wrong. Lock down Bangkok. Get me the IG now—and summon their lordships."

Finished giving orders, he looked at Lana and Elton. "Come with me, Princess, Sir."

"My name isn't Princess," Lana said again, moving in front of the man, forcing him to halt. "Use my name or address me more respectfully."

"I *am*," the man said, grinning briefly. "You've got too fine a bearing and too much fire to be anything less. Now come on, I haven't got all day—" His in-specs flashed again. "And you're expected."

Startled into silence, Lana let Elton take her hand and lead her along.

Leaving the museum, the guard led them to a transporter just behind it, in-specs flashing again as he silently gave the transporter commands. There was the usual flash of blue-white light, and they left the museum entirely, arriving in a moment in an elegant lobby of black marble decorated with touches of white and silver."

Every lobby of the dragon towers matched its namesake color—blue, yellow, red, green. If this lobby was black, then they could only be in the most elite and private of the five towers—Black Dragon Tower. Elton shared a look with Lana, but she was too busy scowling at the guard's back to pay Elton any mind.

The guard led them to an elevator, then into a room decorated in more black and silver, though here there were touches of color in the throw pillows, the decorations, and the array of bottles set beneath a bar made entirely of glass.

"What's going on?" Lana demanded.

Before the guard could reply, the door slid open again, and the most beautiful person Elton had ever seen stepped inside. He was... Elton could not find the right words to describe him. Not even the jewels he had always loved could compare to the man before him.

He was tall, but not excessively so, with skin that was pale without being sickly. His hair was the true blue-black of Jupiter ink, feathery soft and fine, falling just barely to his chin. Pretty, elegant, but definitely masculine. His clothes were probably making Lana all but hyperventilate—a suit to match his hair, made from Parthion silk, a crisp white shirt and a tie of jewel-bright aquamarine silk that...

That perfectly matched the man's aquamarine eyes. Elton had never seen such eyes. They were like jewels come to life.

"Lord Baxter," the guard said, breaking Elton's stupefied state. Who was Lord Baxter? Obviously someone important to have the authority to summon them to Black Dragon. Someone in charge of the museum? All of the museums? Perhaps he was the Jeweler Premier for Bangkok.

Beside Elton, Lana was looking distinctly bug-eyed, so 'Lord Baxter' must mean something to her. Probably to everyone, save him. He really never had cared to pay attention to the world beyond his jewels; he had even less a desire to do so now.

"So these are the two who realized the necklace was a fake?" Lord Baxter asked, and his voice made Elton shiver, and he fervently hoped no one noticed.

"Elton did," Lana said. "He admired it yesterday. We went back today, and he saw it had been changed out for a fake."

"How?"

Lana looked like she was about to well and truly lose her temper, so Elton stepped forward and said, "The way they look."

The man's face hardened. "The way they look," he repeated. "That isn't possible. No one can tell the origin of a gem just by *looking*."

Elton frowned and strode closer to the man, annoyed even though he was long used to no one believing him. Despite his ire, he was briefly distracted by Lord Baxter. This close, he was even more beautiful, and gods have mercy he smelled so good. Elton had never in his life been so painfully aware of another person.

Struggling to ignore the way the man affected him, he focused on the jewels Lord Baxter wore—no small fortune's worth. "Your diamond earrings are Cela, from the southern mine to judge by that particular shade of blue. The aquamarines are from Tredad, and the onyx and diamonds in your tie-pin are from Zero." He made himself look up into the aquamarine eyes, and for a moment could not remember how to breathe, but at last managed to say, "Your bracelet is a mixture of Cela and Zero diamonds, but the one in your ring is an Earth diamond."

The man regarded him in silence for a long, torturous moment, then said quietly, "Correct, on all counts. Either you are privy to a dismaying amount of information, or you speak the truth about your abilities. But I've never known a man who needed only his eyes to tell the origin of a gemstone."

Elton shrugged and dropped his gaze, unable to endure the eyes; he had never been as brave and bold and bright as Lana. "It's a family trait; I got it from my father."

"I see," Baxter said softly, something in his voice that Elton did not understand. "Cadence, clear them. They aren't our thieves. Chancellor Kavalarov is sending his experts, but I think we might have an expert all our own, right here..." He smiled briefly at Elton then returned his full attention to Cadence. "Hopefully our new friends here have allowed us to trap the bastard on Bangkok. See these two are given accommodations here in Black Dragon, in case—" He broke off as the in-lens in his left eye flashed. "I'll be right back. Why do all the problems crop up at once?" Then he smiled at Elton again. "We'll resume this discussion in a moment, pretty. Thank you for the help." He cupped Elton's chin and tugged him forward, then kissed him, hard and brief.

Then he was gone.

Elton stared at the door and strove to ignore the way his face heated, the way that short but forceful kiss lingering on his mouth, warm and tingling. The man tasted the way he smelled—like a fine, dark and spicy Bangkok rum. "Who—who was that?" He turned to Cadence, who looked at him as if he had lost his mind. Then he looked at Lana, who was clearly struggling not to laugh.

"Oh, Ellie—"

"Never mind," Elton snapped and moved to sit down on one of the sofas. "I think I'm happier not knowing." He slumped on the sofa, shoulders hunching. All he had wanted was a quiet vacation, to recharge and learn how to be happy again.

Instead, he had wound up in yet another mess, and why was his stupid ability always the source of his problems? Why had they not all just left him in his backroom, quietly identifying gems and creating pieces for his family to sell?

"Ellie—"

"Just forget it," he said tightly. "I'm fine. I just want this all to be over."

"Your new accommodations are being prepared," Cadence said. "They should be ready shortly."

"Why are we being moved?" Lana demanded. "Who the hell are you, anyway? Cadence, was that what he called you?"

"You can call me Warden, Princess," Cadence replied. "Lord Baxter said move you, so I'm moving you. When their lordships give orders, I obey."

Lana expressed her opinion on that with several choice words, but before Elton had to worry about whether they would be spending the night in a cell somewhere, the door opened again.

He must be losing his mind. There was no other way to explain the fact that it seemed Lord Baxter had a twin. One man of such impossible beauty should not exist; how in the stars could there be two of them?

But it seemed there *were* two of them. Stars be merciful, he was as beautiful and breathtaking and perfect as his brother.

"I'm sorry I had to leave so abruptly," the man said smoothly. He smiled at Elton, and the tilt to it was not quite the same as Baxter's smile. "Now, pretty, I'd like to hear more about this family trait of yours."

They were screwing with him, Elton realized, and began to grow truly angered. He knew he was strange, nothing like the rest of his family. He knew his ability confused people, that everyone thought him a liar at first. He had spend his entire damned *life* being subjected to tricks and pranks and tests from people who wanted to see him be wrong just once, from people who wanted to prove him a liar, who had been thrilled when the scandal of his father had ruined his family's reputation forever. And it was bad enough the authorities had used him against his own father, and the scandal had driven his father to kill both himself and their mother—

All they wanted was to be *happy* again, and he had just tried to *help* by telling them the necklace was wrong, and all they wanted was to fuck with him.

He was tired of it.

Surging up from the couch, he stalked across the room and jabbed the man in the chest. "You are *not* the one he called Lord Baxter," he snapped, pointing at Cadence.

"What?" the man asked, sounding startled.

"Don't play games with me!" Elton snarled, hands trembling with anger. "Why do people always have to fuck with me? I was trying to *help*, and all I get is harassed and tested! You're not the one your stupid Warden called Lord Baxter. I don't know who the hell you are other than Lord Baxter's twin, but that's all you are. If you want to prove I'm lying about my abilities, you're going to have to try a hell of a lot harder than this."

He glared, trying to still his trembling, but then realized the man was staring at him with naked shock, eyes wide, mouth parted. "You—how did you know I wasn't Baxter? Even Cadence can't tell us apart."

Cadence grimaced, making it clear that *he* had not known it was not Baxter standing with them.

"You're alike," Elton said, still angry, "but you're not *that* alike. That's like trying to claim all diamonds look the same."

"But they do look the same, pretty," the man said softly, aquamarine eyes locked on his face, something in them that Elton just could not understand. "Except to you, it seems. My name is Lucid." He tilted his head in curiosity when his name evoked no reaction in Elton other than a polite nod. "You... don't know who we are, do you? Baxter was right: your every thought and feeling is plain upon your face."

Elton flushed and recoiled, lingering anger immediately banished by pure panic. Why did he *always* lose his temper at the worst time and with the worst possible persons?

Lucid reached out and snagged his arm, pulling him close—so very, very close, and why were they only more beautiful every time he looked at them?

"Calm down, pretty," Lucid said and kissed him as briefly as Baxter had before, but more softly. Where Baxter had been dark and spicy, Lucid was tart and sweet, like a good Vrill wine.

"S-stop doing that," Elton managed, face hot, and he was *never* going to museums again. What else had he wanted to say? Oh. "My name isn't pretty."

"That seems to be a problem around here," Lana muttered, shooting Cadence a scathing look.

Lucid laughed softly. "Sorry, pretty." He shook his head and laughed again. "Sorry, Elton. But you *are* pretty." He smiled in a way that made Elton think he and his brother got out of a lot of trouble with those smiles. "If you don't mind, I would like to have you look at something else. If one necklace has been stolen so neatly, we must assume other things have been as well. We've pulled all our major exhibits and displays. You've proven that you can identify *all* jewels at a glance. Would you assist us by identifying a few more pieces?"

Elton's chest hurt. It was too much like the old days that were really not so old at all. Once upon a time, people had brought jewels into the shop all the time. They would ask him what they were, and he would tell them, and they would go away and leave him alone again. He had hated the people, the fuss, but he had loved every single gem they had brought to him.

Then his father had ruined everything.

He could not seem to make himself speak, so he finally just nodded. "Splendid," Lucid replied and turned to Lana. "My lady, though I am certain you prefer to accompany your brother, I must ask you remain here for now, or permit Cadence to escort you to your rooms. Security measures, you understand. I promise we will return your brother unharmed."

To Elton's surprise, Lana laughed. "After what Ellie just did, I'm not worried about your taking him. But you had better not hurt him, in anyway."

"We won't," Lucid said. "We promise."

"Then I'll see you later, Ellie," Lana said and crossed the room to give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Have fun."

"I don't even understand what's going on," Elton said, but was dragged away before he could hear Lana's reply—though he *did* catch that she was laughing again. He turned hesitantly to Lucid and forced himself to speak. "I'm probably going to regret asking this, and obviously I should know the answer, but who are you?"

Lucid shook his head, that look of wonder sliding over his face again. "You really don't know; I can scarcely believe it." Elton frowned. "Oh, don't pout," Lucid said, smiling. "I'm not trying to upset you, pretty. It really is just that you leave us feeling... awed."

"I doubt that," Elton said flatly. "Between the clothes and the jewels, you're wearing over 100,000 points apiece. You're obviously wealthy and powerful, not to mention beautiful. Nothing about *me* could possibly awe *you*."

Lucid only smiled, then stopped in front of a door, his in-lens flashing, and then the door slid open. Lightly taking hold of Elton's arm, he tugged Elton inside.

Ordinarily, Elton's attention would have been exclusively for the gems and jewels upon the table, and he would have been oblivious to everything else in the room. But he could not drag his eyes away from the impossible sight of Lucid and Baxter as Baxter walked across the room to join them and stood next to his brother. Knowing there was two of them had been bad enough, but seeing them side by side...

He was going to embarrass himself—worse than he already had—but oh god, he thought they might be more addictive than all the Earth gems combined.

"Hello again, pretty," Baxter said softly. "I'm sorry it seemed like we were trying to trick you."

"You were trying to trick me," Elton said, some of his earlier ire returning.

"No," Lucid said. "We wanted to see if it was actually impossible to trick you."

"Huh?" Elton said, feeling stupid. "What does that mean?"

"No one can tell us apart," Baxter said. "I do mean no one. But I believe you when you say you can."

Elton frowned, irritated. "Like I said before, you're not *that* alike. Close, very close, but not quite perfect." He fought down a wild, half-hysterical impulse to tell them they tasted different. "Why am I here?"

"To examine these," Baxter said and seemed to drop the strange conversation—but, Elton sensed, only for the moment.

Looking where Baxter indicated, Elton moved to the table to examine the glittering array set on velvet across it. Necklaces, diadems, tiaras, bracelets, rings, earrings, slave bracelets, belly chains, anklets, broaches, cuff links—everything. There was virtually enough wealth in the jewels to buy a large planet, or two small ones.

He recognized every piece set out. How could he not? They were coveted pieces, as priceless or very nearly, as the Last Empress. They were the kinds of pieces he had always wanted to create. Costly, one of a kind works of art worn by a precious few in the whole of the IG. He had worked for years to obtain permission to recreate the crown jewels and had only managed it, he suspected, because his mother was friends with Lower Chancellor Kavalarov.

"These are all precisely as they should be," he said with a frown. "Not so much as a pearl is wrong. That seems strange to me, unless we caught the thief right as he was beginning to work."

"Unlikely," said a new voice, making Elton jump, and he realized he had been staring at the jewels so hard and so long, he had not noticed the new arrival. The man continued, "A thief of this caliber must have been operating for some time." He smiled at Elton, one of those thin, condescending smiles people always gave Elton before he managed to prove himself. "You are the man about whom I've already heard so much, but I confess my doubts. You only glanced at that table; how could you know any of them are right? Oh." He stopped suddenly and held out his hand. "I do apologize. My name is Myer Cantz. I am Jeweler Premier here on Bangkok."

Elton barely heard him, attention only for ring on the hand held out to him. It was a very handsome, very elegant sapphire surrounded by square-cut diamonds. He grabbed Myer's hand and looked at him. "What are you doing with this? Where did you get it? This is part of the Star of the Empire! Where in the hell did you get it! Who destroyed—destroyed—" He couldn't finish the sentence, could barely finish the *thought*.

The Star of the Empire had been a gift from Earth to the then Grand Chancellor of the Infinitum Government as a show of gratitude for permitting Earth to join the IG. Five terms ago, the necklace had been stolen while being transported from one museum to another along with a dozen other pieces. It had been a blow to the jewelry world, the historical world.

"What's wrong pretty?" Lucid asked.

"This is an Earth sapphire," Elton replied, still holding tightly to Myer's hand, completely uncaring that he was probably hurting Myer. "Only eight such Earth sapphires exist in this size, clarity, and cut, and they were *all* part of a necklace—a choker—called the Star of the Empire. Its crowing piece was a sapphire twice the size of this one. He could only have this sapphire if he took it from the Star of the Empire."

The idea that someone had destroyed that necklace made him want to cry. That choker had been a masterpiece of its time, and it was irreplaceable now.

"You're mistaken," Myer said coldly.

"No!" Elton said, turning angry again. "I was the reigning expert on Earth gems, before—" He choked the words off. "I know Earth gems. I know them better than anyone. I've spent my life studying them. I was Jeweler Troisieme on Mars, and my specialty is Earth gems! Only ten thousand still exist in all of the IG,

and only three thousand are in stand-alone pieces; the rest of them are in pieces like the Star of the Empire. I know all of them, and where they should be. You should not have that sapphire. You—you destroyed the Star of the Empire." He roughly let go of Myer's hand and curled his own hands into fists, trembling.

Myer regarded him coldly. "Even if that were true, there is no way I was responsible for destroying that necklace. I'm the Jeweler Premier for Bangkok! I would never do such a thing!"

"But as our Jeweler Premier, you should have recognized that sapphire, or had it thoroughly examined before purchasing it," Baxter said, voice even more frigid than Myer's. "It is more than a little suspicious that you never realized what it was and now deny it, without even showing a bit of concern."

"Why would you believe him over me!" Myer demanded, face turning red with anger now. "I would know such a gem if I saw it; there is no way this is a sapphire from the Star of the Empire."

"I don't believe you," Lucid said.

"Why do you believe him?" Myer demanded again.

"Because he is good enough to correctly identify every jewel put in front of him," Baxter answered, "including the Jewels of Bangkok."

Myer stopped at that, clearly startled, but before Elton could figure out what was happening this time, the door slid open and Cadence stepped inside, looking more ominous than he had even back in the museum.

For a moment, it looked as though Myer would do something violent, but then he only slumped and went along quietly as Cadence secured him and led him away.

Elton stared miserably at the jewels upon the table. If Myer had destroyed the Star of the Empire, what else had he stolen and destroyed? The list of stolen and missing pieces was a long one; he wanted to cry at the thought of someone breaking them down just so the individual gems could be reset and sold without the trouble that came with selling a hot stolen item.

A hand settled on the small of his back, startling him, and he looked up into Baxter's face, surprised by the concern on the pretty features. "Are you alright, pretty?"

"Stop calling me that," Elton said, but he wasn't able to inject the words with real ire. "It's well beyond ridiculous that the two of you call me that."

Fingers touched his face, and he turned from Baxter to stare at Lucid, who said, "But you are pretty. Stunning, in fact. You've eyes like nothing we've ever seen."

"They're barely peridot-green," Elton replied flatly. "Hardly remarkable." Nothing at all like the twin sets of aquamarine currently wreaking havoc with his lungs. "What do you want from me?" he asked. "Haven't I caused enough trouble today?"

The twins laughed. "Oh, pretty. This is Bangkok. There's always a problem, if not a hundred." Baxter moved his hand up and down, then back and forth, across Elton's back, and Elton tried not to let it affect him. "We are sorry, again, that we were so rude before. People come every term, by the tens, the hundreds, claiming to be able to tell us apart—"

"—but they always lie and cheat their way through it, and eventually we catch them out," Lucid finished.

It was, Elton caught himself thinking, sort of cute how they did that. "Through what?" he asked. He tried not to shiver as Lucid's hand slid down his back then, too, and tangled at the small of his back with Baxter's fingers.

Strange, so very strange, being trapped between them this way. He felt as though he were the diamond being thoroughly examined.

"Telling us apart," Lucid replied.

Baxter said, "No one can—except you."

Elton shrugged. "It's just a matter of details. Telling a Cela from an Earth isn't that hard if you just pay attention to the details. They... sparkle differently."

"Mm," Baxter murmured. "I think you do not appreciate how special you are."

Memories flooded Elton at his words. Special. Ha.

He heard that first phone call all over again, of his father being arrested for scamming clients on what kind of jewels they were getting. He remembered his realization that the consultations he had been doing for the authorities over the past few months had all been to help convict his father.

Getting the call that his father and mother were dead and by his father's hand.

The shame. The humiliation. Finding his reputation in tatters because of things his father had done. Losing the shop, the boutique. Losing *everything* to fix his father's mistakes, to pay for his father's crimes. Selling everything else to leave Mars forever, to start a new life two quadrants away.

Then they had come here to Bangkok to enjoy a vacation and try to learn to be happy again, and leave their ruined old lives behind forever.

"I'm not special," he said bitterly. "Not even close. What do you want with me?"

"Dinner," Lucid said quietly, gently running fingers through Elton's hair. "Have dinner with us."

"Who *are* you?" Elton asked, feeling tired, and only then did something they had just said a few minutes before come back to him and the full force of the words strike him. "Jewels!" he burst out. "You-you're the-the owners. That Lana talked about. She said everyone calls you the Jewels of Bangkok. She said you were *brothers*; she didn't say you were twins—" He cut the words off, feeling horribly stupid. Lana was right; it really was silly how oblivious he was to everything.

Baxter and Lucid smiled, though, so fucking pretty and perfect and—he did not know what, just that they made him happy and miserable all once.

"Come have dinner," Lucid said again, taking Elton's hand and holding tightly when Elton tried to pull away. Then Lucid tugged him close and curled his fingers into the hair at the nape of Elton's neck.

Elton jerked in surprise as Lucid kissed him, and tried to pull away—but only wound up yelping as a mouth brushed along the back of his neck, just to the side of the fingers buried in his hair. Then Lucid took his mouth again, and Elton could only think that the few times he had tried to venture from his workshop for such things had never been anything like this. In the end, he had always returned, humiliated and dejected by his inability to do more than try to smile shyly or attract men who were nothing but trouble.

He had always watched Lana in awe and envy as she interacted with people, flirted and played and argued as if it was the easiest thing in the world, before he finally slunk off to the back again to work with the gems that were the only thing that made sense to him.

He moaned, startling himself with it, because he had never made a sound like that before.

Lucid finally broke the kiss, but Elton had scarcely caught his breath before he was turned and Baxter took his turn plundering Elton's mouth.

And he moaned again, or maybe whimpered. Twins. Kissing him. There was no way *he*—shy, quiet, boring, disgraced, nobody—was being kissed by the Jewels of Bangkok. They owned Bangkok! One of the most notorious planets in the IG!

All dreams come true in Bangkok he suddenly recalled the slogan. Except even his wildest dreams never went this far. He had not known *this* was a possibility.

Two pairs of hands tangled at his hips, two unmistakably hard cocks grinded against him, and he was dizzy on the scent of dark, spicy Bangkok rum, the way it blended into the scent of a tart, sweet Vrrill wine.

Elton fumbled for something to grip, and his fingers tangled in costly Parthon silk. He whimpered again as the twins only grew more fevered in their kissing, touching, and he tried to figure out again how this was happening, what he had eaten or drunk that was causing such dreams—

Then a sudden burst of light on the twins' in-lenses startled all three of them.

Baxter grimaced. "Go ahead to dinner," he told them. "I'll take care of this latest problem, then make certain we're left alone the rest of the night. It'll take them that long, at least, to put together what in the stars is going on with the jewel thefts."

Lucid nodded. "Very well, but clear us until late morning."

"Of course," Baxter said, then leaned forward and caught Lucid's mouth in a kiss that was anything but brotherly.

Elton whimpered again, but before he could say or do anything, Baxter broke away from Lucid and kissed him, and oh god, tasting Lucid in Baxter's mouth—

He drew a sharp, shuddering breath as Baxter broke the kiss. "See you soon, pretty. Luce."

"My name isn't pretty," Elton said, though he had a sense the words were futile.

Lucid smiled. "No, but pretty is an endearment. Come on, pretty, dinner awaits."

Elton tried to protest, but he just could not get the words out. So he followed alongside Lucid, silent and anxious but still semi-hard, and he just knew this whole crazy thing was a mistake. But Baxter and Lucid wanted to have dinner with him, and unless he was mistaken, whatever had just happened seemed to say they wanted a lot more than dinner.

Things like this did not happen to him. He was not the sort for it. But...

It was so very pleasant a change from all the terrible events of the last two and a half terms. He had expected nothing but trouble when he had realized the Last Empress had been stolen, and trouble had seemed to be what they had gotten—

And perhaps this was just a different kind of trouble, and the smart thing would be to run away now while he could. He should runaway. He would.

But he wanted to see how much longer the dream lasted before it turned into a nightmare, no matter how stupid a decision that was to make.

He almost panicked and fled after all, when they entered an elaborate dining room made of glass and gold and crystals, and it seemed like every pair of eyes in the place fell upon them. He was painfully aware of the sudden lull in conversation. Such silences would always be deafening to him.

"Relax, pretty," Lucid murmured in his ear, then tilted his face up and kissed him softly. "They'll be whispering about you with envy for the rest of the night, at least."

"I don't want any more whispers," Elton said before he thought, voice strained. "I've had enough whispers to last a lifetime."

Lucid kissed him again. "Then ignore them. Don't look at anyone but me."

Elton *did* look at him. He could not help it. "I don't understand any of this."

"Mm," Lucid murmured. "That's okay, pretty. We didn't think you existed. We're as stunned as you."

"I doubt that," Elton muttered, making Lucid chuckle and kiss him again before they resumed walking, making straight for the hexagon-shaped stage in the middle of the like-shaped room. It was high enough that there was clearly a room or something beneath it, to judge by the door that slid open as they approached.

"There's nothing special about me," he said as they entered the room. "Why am I here?"

"Because you see two people, not one," Lucid said. "Amongst other things."

So it was all about his talent, in the end. It always was, though. He tried not to feel disappointed, though, because this was by far the best thing his talent had ever brought him. He should not care that was the only reason the twins wanted him—he should be grateful there was a reason they wanted him, as beautiful and powerful and wealthy as they were. They owned Bangkok; they could literally have whoever they wanted.

That they even knew he existed was remarkable enough, and they were inviting him to dinner. It sounded like a good start to his new life. He should be thrilled.

He was thrilled, he told himself. He had never be as bright and charming and vivacious as his sister. He had definitely never been as comfortably powerful and stunning as Baxter and Lucid. He had never be anything except the quiet little jeweler who spotted fakes and created the sparkling masterpieces that made other people shine.

Except maybe for just this one night, when not one, but two living Jewels kissed him and dragged him to dinner and made him feel like a precious stone instead of a forgotten bit of gravel.

Lucid turned then and smiled at him. Elton tried to smile back, determined not to waste this one night of his, because he did not see how it could ever last longer than that, for one reason or another.

"This way, pretty," Lucid said and pulled him across the room, which had to cost as much as Elton's old house four times over. It was obviously a private dining room, in the space beneath the hexagon stage, the walls made of some sort of high-quality glass. It was also the type of glass that they could see out, but no one could see in.

The room was beautiful, like being caught inside a diamond. Glass, clear and colored, comprised almost everything, with only touches of white wood and pastel-rainbow fabrics for the furniture. "Do you like it, pretty?" Lucid asked.

"It's beautiful," Elton said.

Lucid smiled. "It's one of our favorites, of the public dining rooms, anyway. Have you been to Black Dragon Tower before?"

Elton laughed, the idea was so absurd. Even before his family had fallen into disgrace, they had not made enough money to afford to spend any amount of time in Black Dragon Tower. If he had been able to recreate the lost crown jewels of Earth, that probably would have put his family into the top tier of IG society, but it would have taken him years to complete the entire set.

"Of course not," he finally said.

"That's a pity," Lucid replied, "but you'll be seeing plenty of it from now on."

Elton frowned at that, but didn't ask what Lucid meant. Instead, he tried to bring the conversation back to something he could handle. "So will you be able to find the Last Empress?"

"Yes," Lucid replied. "We're already finding a great deal of suspicious activity on Myer that we never noticed before—and probably never would have, if not for you, pretty. We think he must still have the necklace near to hand. Cadence will keep us updated." He looped an arm around Elton's shoulders and pulled him close.

Elton was constantly startled by the touching. No one had ever really touched him except for Lana and their mother. Someone like Lucid or Baxter touching was more than a little disconcerting, and he had no idea how to handle it.

"Do you think he would have broken down the Last Empress, pretty?"

"Yes," Elton said, feeling cold at the very thought. "As the Last Empress, those gems are priceless—impossible to sell, even on the black market. Some items are simply too well known, too hot, for anyone to take the risk. Broken down, though, the individual gems could be sold for ridiculous sums to private dealers and some of the seedier jewelers willing to play with fire. No one would ever notice the extra jewels floating around, not if people were careful not to let it be known they were Earth gems. It was pure chance I saw his ring at all. If not for that..." He shrugged and grimaced. "The Start of the Empire is probably gone forever now, scattered across the IG. It would take a lifetime to track down all the gems again, even pretending for a moment there was enough money to buy them back."

Lucid sat them down and poured out three glasses of a wine that was a deep, deep purple in color. Treadad ice wine, Elton realized. Costly, but what had he expected? Lucid handed one of the crystal glasses to him and sipped his own. He looked curious as he asked, "But say we could find and buy back all the gems. Could you restore the Star of the Empire?"

Elton hesitated.

"Don't be shy," Lucid said. "I suspect you could restore it. You said you were Jeweler Troisieme for Mars. No one gets that far with mediocre abilities. I remember when we obtained the Last Empress, someone told us a Mars jewel expert had been granted license to create official replicas. We'd discussed bidding for them once the set was complete, but we never heard anything further about it. Was that you?"

"It was me," Elton said flatly. "Not anymore. The license will lapse at the end of this term."

"That seems a pity," Lucid said. "I'm sorry, pretty."

"Stop calling me that."

Lucid smiled over the rim of his wine glass. "Would you prefer 'lovely'?"

Elton scowled, making Lucid laugh, but before he could say anything the door opened, and Baxter slipped inside. "Luce. Pretty." He crossed the room and joined them, sitting on Elton's other side, putting him between the twins. Baxter murmured a quiet thanks as he accepted the wine glass Lucid held out to him. He kissed Elton's cheek then asked, "Have I missed anything?"

"We were just discussing his restoring the Star of the Empire. There are probably other pieces that will need his skills as well, hmm?"

"I—there are better jewelers than me," Elton said. "I'm not a jeweler anymore, anyway. That was the deal." No matter how much it hurt to leave it all behind, a chance at a fresh start was infinitely more precious.

"This is Bangkok, pretty," Baxter said. "We make our own rules."

"Even Bangkok has to obey the strictures of the IG," Elton replied. "I *was* the Jeweler Troisieme. I *was* a professional jeweler. I *used* to own a jewelry store. Now I am none of those things and own nothing save a little house in Kreska."

"Alright," Lucid said quietly. "So what do you do now that are you are retired from the jewelry business?"

"Right now I'm simply trying to enjoy my vacation before I begin settling into my new home," Elton replied. "That's all."

Lucid sipped his wine then set it aside and removed the cover from one of the myriad dishes upon the table. Selecting a stuffed mushroom, he bit into it then said, "We'll have to see you get a proper housewarming gift, then." He shared a look and a smile with his brother.

Elton said nothing, only sipped at his wine.

Baxter and Lucid laughed. "So what else do you like, pretty?" Baxter asked. "You must like more than gems."

"Um. Gemstones are all I really know."

Lucid made a soft, disbelieving noise. "What do you like to drink? Wine? Champagne? Spirits?"

Elton turned scarlet, unable to think of anything except Bangkok rum and Vrill wine. "Umm—I don't really drink much. The most I ever really indulge in is a bit of wine at the end of term and the occasional bottle of Bangkok rum."

Baxter smiled, slow and hot. "My personal favorite. Lucid prefers wine."

"Vrill?" Elton asked before he could catch himself.

"Yes, actually," Lucid replied, looking surprised. "How did you know?"

"Um—" Elton shook his head, feeling hot from embarrassment and wine. He took another sip of the wine, not certain what else to do, hoping they would change the subject, but they only continued to look at him and wait patiently, until he finally mumbled, "I could taste it."

Lucid's smile then matched Baxter's, and Elton suddenly found himself once more the focus of dizzying kisses, one after another, combined with bold hands touching him in ways no one ever had until it was hard to keep up with who was doing what, and there was no possible way this was actually happening to *him*.

"I do think you are quite the treasure, pretty," Lucid said, licking his lips in a way that made Elton shudder *hard* and his breath lodge in his chest.

But the words jarred him, and he again spoke without thinking. "Because I can tell you apart?" He snapped his mouth shut and decided it was long past time he stopped drinking the wine. But when he went to set the glass down, he instead only wound up taking another sip.

Baxter took the glass away then took his hand, kissing the back of it, nibbling on his fingers. "Pretty, make no mistake. Once we knew you weren't tied to the thefts, we started making plans to have you. Whatever you might think, you're beautiful and more than a little desirable. We didn't expect you to know the difference between us. That was simply..."

"More than we could have hoped for," Lucid finished. "I don't know that we can express what it's like to see recognition in someone's face, to know that someone sees me, sees Baxter, sees we are two separate people."

"Instead of interchangeable persons with two names. Did you know someone once suggested we just pick one name?"

"Someone else said we should quit whining and accept there is no difference between us."

"But—but—" Elton started at them in horror. "Why would they such things? That's the stupidest, cruelest thing I've ever heard. You're different. It cannot be that hard for people to tell you apart."

And suddenly he could see why they would be so happy to discover he *could* tell them apart. It still made him sad that was the only reason they wanted him, but he could understand it better. "You're not that alike," He said. "I don't understand why people can't tell you apart. You walk differently. Your smiles tilt differently. You don't hold your heads the same way. You tas—" He flushed hot. "Umm. You're different. You... sparkle differently," he finished, feeling silly and stupid for phrasing it that way, but it was the best way he could think to describe it.

"Oh, pretty," Lucid breathed against his ear. "You really are more precious than any of the diamonds you adore."

Elton shook his head. "Hardly."

Baxter nibbled at his neck. "So genuinely modest—I daresay oblivious. Nothing as fine as you ever comes to Bangkok. If we'd known being robbed was all it took to get you, we would have hired the thieves ourselves a long time ago."

At that, Elton managed a shaky laugh. "You're both idiots, you know. Being able to tell you apart doesn't mean anything. I could be a terrible person, or, um, annoying. Something."

"Details, pretty," Lucid said, licking his lips again, and Elton really hoped that whimpering sound had been in his head and he had not let it out. The way Lucid smiled, though, he probably had whimpered. "Just details. If I can stand my idiot brother, you are certainly no chore."

Baxter laughed then reached over and pinched Lucid hard.

"Ow!" Lucid said, jerking and knocking over his wine, spilling it everywhere across the table, his own lap, and part of Elton's pants.

Lucid leaned over Elton and jabbed Baxter hard in the chest. "Troublemaker."

"You started it," Baxter retorted, rubbing at the spot Lucid had poked, snickering.

"That is a lie," Lucid said in mock-haughty tones. "Come and clean me up."

Baxter rolled his eyes, but finished his own wine and then obediently stood up. Moving behind Elton, he leaned over Lucid, hands braced on the arms of Lucid's chair, and bent to kiss him. Elton watched them with wide-eyes, unable to tear away from the sight, wondering how in the stars it was possible he got to see such a thing at all.

Incest was a tricky issue in the IG—some cultures practiced it, like the Parthons. Some forbade it, like Mars. Others, like the Fornarians, had no concept or comprehension of it. On those grounds, the IG could not forbid it, but the arguments ever waged.

Elton had never realized just how capable he was of supporting the practice.

When the twins finally drew apart, Lucid said, "That is not where you spilled the wine."

"Getting there, brat," Baxter murmured. "But I think the rule is guests first."

Lucid smile, and slid his gaze toward Elton, aquamarine eyes bright and hot. "True. Very well. Tend our guests."

"What—" Elton immediately forgot what he'd been about to say as Baxter kissed him, pulling him out of his seat and taking firm hold of his ass. Elton moaned and held fast, fingers tight in the silk of Baxter's jacket, and he really wished he had the temerity to do some touching of his own.

He cried out in surprise as he was abruptly shifted, then dragged across the room to the white sofa with rainbow hints in the fabric. Baxter pushed him down into the deep, soft cushions, following him down, then kissed him long and deep, making Elton moan and whimper.

Then Baxter drew back and smiled, slow and hot, making Elton shiver. "Nothing in Bangkok compares to you, pretty," he murmured, fingers moving to the buttons of Elton's shirt, pushing up beneath his undershirt, extracting more shivers and shudders from Elton.

Elton tried to say something, anything, completely confounded as to how *he* was here with *them*—

Baxter chuckled softly, though what amused him Elton did not know, and then there was a brief confusion as Elton's shirts were removed completely and carelessly tossed aside. When the word righted itself again, Baxter was kneeling before him, and Elton jerked hard as Baxter cupped him through his pants, smile hotter than ever, a little smug and a lot provocative as he then went to work on Elton's belt and buttons, pushing everything out of the way as he finally took Elton's cock in hand.

He almost came then and there, only barely managing not to, biting his lip against a hoarse cry—

That slipped out anyway, so loud he clapped a hand over his mouth as Baxter's hands were replaced by his mouth.

Elton whimpered and scrabbled for purchase on the smooth fabric of the couch, hips jerking without permission, body eager for more of the wet, warm heat of Baxter's mouth.

"Grab his hair," Lucid said suddenly, and Elton burned redder than ever as he was suddenly reminded that there were two of them. He jerked his head up from the sight of Baxter's mouth around his cock to see Lucid watching them from the chair opposite the couch, legs spread as he lazily stroked himself while watching them.

Elton came then, hard and fast, so suddenly he could not breathe for a moment.

Baxter slowly released him, then abruptly surged up to kiss him, rough and thorough, and Elton had no words for the way he could taste himself in Baxter's warm, spicy mouth.

Then Baxter tore away, murmuring something about pretty and sweet, and crawled over to immediately subject Lucid to the same exquisite torture.

Elton groaned loudly, hands balling into fists, and his just-spent cock jerked at the sight of one twin sucking off the other, Lucid's hands fisted in Baxter's hair, words spilling out, filthy and fond all at once, until Lucid finally came with a shudder, crying Baxter's name.

"Mm, you are as beautiful as ever, brother," Lucid said softly, carding his fingers through the hair he had just been gripping. "I think our pretty agrees." They both shifted their attention to look at Elton.

He swallowed and managed to say, "Uh. You're both beautiful. Stunning. Far too much for me."

The twins made soft, amused, protesting noises and stood up, moving back to the couch and he whimpered at how decadent they looked, still mostly dressed, cocks hanging out of the fancy, costly clothes, Baxter still hard and leaking.

He went easily as he was dragged close to kiss Lucid, moaning loud and long as Baxter crowded in behind him, practically on top of him, trapping Elton between them and it should not make him so hard, but stars, did it.

"I—" But he couldn't form words. How, he wondered dizzily as Baxter took his mouth again, how had he gone from hiding in his room, too anxious to even try a bit of flirting, to being pinned between the two most beautiful, perfectly matched jewels to ever exist?

He shuddered as his pants were pulled away entirely, and he was left naked between the still fully dressed twins. He gasped as Baxter ground against him, fingers digging into Lucid's shoulders for purchase as they all three rubbed and thrust and pressed.

Hot, he was so very hot, and it was hard to breathe, harder to think, and nothing else in the rest of his life would ever compare to this strange night—

Baxter came with a cry behind him, pushing him harder into Lucid, sending all three of them over the edge, until they finally collapsed in a sweaty, stick mess.

"Shall we go to our room?" Lucid asked eventually, laughter in his voice. He was even more beautiful tousled and sated than he had been the first time Elton saw him. They both were.

"Mmm," Baxter agreed. "It will be much easier to continue there, and I have every intention of fucking our pretty until he is incapable of leaving.

Elton swallowed, not quite able to look at either of them, but he did not shy or turn away when they kissed him either.

Oh, he really was a fool.

"Coming, pretty?" Lucid asked, "or have you have had enough?"

Elton laughed, the question too absurd. "How could anyone have enough?" he asked, without thinking, then flushed at his own words and tried to hide his head.

But Baxter and Lucid only smiled and kissed him again, then each other, before moving to sort things out to retire to their room for the night.

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After three days he should have sort of been used to it, but he still felt disconcerted and out of place every time he woke in Baxter and Lucid's bed. Such finery, such luxury, were well beyond even the means to which his family had once laid claim. He did not think the Chancellors lived half as well as the Lords of Bangkok.

He rolled onto his back and winced at the various aches that presented themselves. His face flushed hot as he thought he should also be used to waking up sore in interesting places.

Climbing out of the massive bed, he made his way slowly to the washroom and cleaned himself up for the day. Like the past two mornings, there were clothes waiting for him; he had not seen his own clothes since Baxter and Lucid had removed them that first night.

There was also a note waiting for him, and he smiled at the way the twins had laid out their schedules, jotting in where they hoped to see him and what they would do. It warmed him all the way through, far more than he should permit.

So far, it had simply carried on like a dream vacation. He could not believe they had kept him around for three nights now. Elton flushed and tried to ignore the way his body reacted as he thought about how he spent those three nights. He really needed to stop thinking about it, lingering over it. In two days his vacation ended, and he would have to face reality and leave this impossible dream world behind.

Tucking the note containing the schedules away, he finished dressing in the beautiful clothes he should not be wearing and left the washroom. Back in the bedroom, he tried to gather his equilibrium. More and more people were noticing him, pestering him, some more subtle than others. Though he tried to avoid it, really it was impossible—whether he liked it or not, people noticed when the Jewels of Bangkok took a lover, even a brief one.

Morbid curiosity was better than the hateful abuse of all the people his father had wronged, those who had blamed Elton after word got out he had been the one helping the police. That he had not known had never seemed to matter.

Shaking the memories off, he finally made himself leave the bedroom, leave the apartment altogether, and venture down to the public floors of Black Dragon Tower.

The smaller of the three main dining rooms had rapidly become his favorite, though like everything else, it remained unnerving that he was immediately escorted to a separate, private table on a raised dais, reserved for the Daie family and a short list of approved guests.

Lana was already there when he arrived and giggled at him. "Have I mentioned how different you look, little brother, when you're getting laid every night? By twins!"

"Lana!" Elton hissed, glaring at her, and really, he wished his face would stop turning red. All he had done the past three nights, he rather thought he would be past the blushing thing finally. "Shut up," he continued, then smirked. "Princesses should not say such crude things."

"You shut up," Lana retorted, scowling at him and stabbing at a piece of fruit.

"Where is your Warden, by the way?" Elton asked.

"With your twins," Lana replied. "Bax was here briefly, but then he was summoned away." Her face softened then, suddenly, and she smiled at him. "They really do adore you, Ellie."

"I—" Elton frowned at his tea, which was his favorite blend, a Saturn black rose tea. "It can't last."

Lana was silent for a long moment before saying with quiet hesitation. "All we wanted was a new life, Ellie. This life seems a good one, don't you think? I'm telling you, they adore you. We could try to start over here, couldn't we?"

"And accept money and clothes and everything else we haven't earned? Live a lifestyle we don't fit? No, that's not fair—you live it beautifully." He sighed, knowing he was being stupid, but...

"They offered me a job," Lana said, voice still low and quiet. "Head of their in-house fashion firm."

That was Lana's dream job on a platter, far above and beyond simply owning her own little boutique. "I'm glad," Elton said, feeling wretched for more reasons than he could sort out. "It's a good thing you didn't sign papers saying you'd never again touch or deal in what you love."

Lana's cautious, hopeful expression collapsed. "Ellie—I'm sorry. It wasn't fair of them to do all of that to you, first tricking you and then taking it all away because you're even better than dad ever was. I wish you'd gotten a lawyer, or told the Lower Chancellor—"

"And turn five years of hell into ten? Into twenty? While our reputations suffered still more and we endured more and more harassment? Forget it. I'm done in the jewelry world; no one will ever trust me, not after what father did, not after the way I helped get him arrested."

"We could still stay here," Lana said, but weakly.

Elton shook his head. How? He could not work with jewelry anymore, and he was useless for everything else. Jewelry had been his whole life; he did not know how to do anything else.

Besides, they would grow tired of him. Baxter and Lucid were too much of everything to keep him forever. The novelty would wear off eventually, and then where would he be? Even worse off than he was now.

"Ellie..."

"We're only here at this table, in these clothes, eating this food, because of my stupid little talent," Elton said. "If I hadn't noticed the necklaces had been switched, no one here would care about us. If not for me, father—"

He could not say it, could not think about, could not handle any of it. Standing up, he fled the table, ignoring Lana's calling after him, ignoring everything and everyone.

Outside, it was easy to lose himself in the throngs of people—young, old, rich, poor, watchers, fighters, visitors, workers, quiet, flashy. Every star flocked to Bangkok; even Zero, home of the IG, could not compete with Bangkok.

Elton shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants, lowered his head, and just walked.

Though he tried to turn his thoughts off, they rattled around in his head, loud and painful.

His father.

His poor mother.

His own unwitting betrayal.

His stupid fucking talent.

Lana, who had only been looking for happiness, and she was right—they were being handed this chance, and Lana deserved the opportunity being offered her, and he should stop fretting and whining and accept the good fortune while it lasted.

Except he did not really believe in good fortune, and this entire situation did not make sense, and he did not want to be the well-kept novelty pet of the Lords of Bangkok—even if the benefits of that position blew his mind.

All he had wanted was a quiet little fresh start on Kreska, but after three days with the Jewels, that little life only seemed dreary, dull, and maybe *that* was what bothered him the most. He had gone his entire life too shy and awkward to try for anything, for anyone. Then he had identified a pair of gems like nothing he would ever find again. Nothing else would ever compare to the past three days. No one else would ever match Baxter and Lucid for shine, for sparkle—for life.

His heart could not take any more breaking, but that was precisely what he was setting it up for, and he really had no one to blame but himself. Was it not bad enough, he thought miserably, that he had lost everything else? Did he really have to lose what little he had left?

Shaking his head, impatient and angry and afraid and confused, he just kept walking.

And walking.

When he finally stopped, it was only because he was too exhausted to keep going. He sat on a bench in the star-gazing park, leaning back to enjoy the breathtaking view—the glittering stars, the odd flashes and burst of light that were ships arriving and departing.

Stupid. He only had today and tomorrow left, and he had squandered today sulking and feeling sorry for himself. Lana was probably feeling awful.

Elton flat-out refused to wonder if Baxter and Lucid had missed him. Paper crinkled in his pocket as he pulled out the schedule they had left him, smiling faintly. Baxter looked to have spent most of his day in hearings. He was the one who had focused on law throughout his schooling alongside all the business courses they had both taken. Someone had told him the twins' father was also a talented IG lawyer.

Of the two, Baxter was the better in matters of law and government, similar matters. It was he who largely handled contracts, negotiations, and other such things with other planets in the IG. When they were required to pay special attention to particular guests, it was Baxter who handled the ambassadors and other government officials.

Lucid had focused on entertainment and the arts; he handled the museums, the shows, and Elton had seen evidence that he dabbled in architecture as well, a sort of hobby. So far as special guests went, he handled the actors, the spoiled royals, flashy nobles, and other good-time visitors.

Baxter was better at numbers. Lucid was better at languages. It was Baxter who most often chose their clothing, but Lucid who chose the accessories. Baxter preferred spicy foods, Lucid sweeter. They could sing remarkably well and dance even better.

When they actually had time to relax, Baxter liked to read and Lucid liked simply to sit and listen to music. Unless, of course, they spent their free time in bed which they often did. Baxter liked to suck and would do pretty much anything Lucid told him, and he loved when Lucid watched. Lucid loved to watch Baxter and was game for anything. It had been Lucid who had first kissed and touched his twin and crossed the line for both of them.

Three days after meeting them, Elton still could not comprehend how no one could tell them apart.

On the other hand, he thought with reluctantly fond amusement, he had seen them trick people on half a dozen occasions already. As different as they were, they could obviously imitate one another sufficiently to fool... well, it really did seem as if they fooled everyone except Elton.

He sighed, hating his confusion, but mostly hating that he was so weak, so addicted to them already. Everything had been easier when all he had cared about was his family and his jewels. Then again, caring for his family had seemed only to end in destroying nearly all of it.

The sound of footsteps drew him from his thoughts, and Elton looked up to see Cadence. "Yes?"

"Their lordships request your presence at a meeting as the meeting cannot begin without you."

A meeting? He had not recalled anything like that on the list. His gut clenched. Was this it, then? Was it finally time for him to wake up? But Elton only stood and said, "All right." He winced as his legs flared with pain, protesting at being used again after being overworked.

Cadence looked at him, frowning slightly, but said nothing. Instead, he only turned and led the way to the nearest transport, keying in the special code that would take them directly to the private floors of Black Dragon Tower.

Inside Black Dragon, Cadence led him to the door of what Elton knew was a conference room, then departed with a half-bow.

Feeling sick with anxiety, Elton stepped closer to the door which immediately slid open to admit him. As he stepped inside the conference room, he did not know where to let his eyes rest first and simply hovered near the door, intimidated.

Sitting in one of the two chairs placed in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows was a man who could only be the father of Baxter and Lucid. If not for the obvious age difference, he could have been a triplet. The twins would obviously only grow more impressive with age, to judge by their beautiful, striking father.

Beside him in the other chair, dressed in the sharp, deep blue uniform of the Infinitum Government, was a broad-shouldered man with pale skin and hair, and the sharpest blue eyes Elton had ever seen. But he also had a kind smile, and Elton remembered it even better than he remembered the eyes. "Lower Chancellor Kavalero," he finally greeted. "I did not think I would ever see you again."

Kavalero laughed. "Most hope never to see me twice if they cannot avoid seeing me once." He winked. "You seem to be doing much better than Kreska."

Elton flushed and looked at the twins—and drew up short at how much anxiety was actually showing in their posture, in their smiles. That was not like them. Come to that, they had not greeted him, nor made any more toward him.

Oh, stars. It really was *over*. They must have been granted access to his sealed file or something and no longer wanted him.

It hurt even more than he had thought it would.

Turning away from Baxter and Lucid, he ignored Kavalero's comment and simply asked, "What's wrong?"

Kavalero and the twins' father looked surprised.

"Nothing is wrong," Kavalero said. "Tresnor and I have been smoothing out the last details to make certain not a one was missed."

Tresnor smiled, and it was so easy to see where the twins had gotten their mischief and charm, just in that one smile. "I see my sons have not mentioned to you what they have been doing. The paperwork is complete, minus your signature. We will leave the three of you to discuss it in private. Pyotr, let us go find a late dinner. Baxter, Lucid, Elton, it was nice to finally meet you for myself, if only briefly. We will have to schedule a longer meeting at a later date."

Then they were gone, leaving Elton alone with Baxter and Lucid. Silence fell, awkward, awful. Elton hated it.

"Pretty, are you that unhappy—"

"So is it finally over—"

They all stopped, startled back into silence.

Then Baxter strode across the room and snatched Elton close, bending to take Elton's mouth in a bruising kiss. "Pretty," he breathed against Elton's mouth. "Don't leave us."

"I—" But before Elton could say anything, Lucid was taking his own kiss, and it was several minutes before Elton was permitted enough air to speak. "You're not getting rid of me?"

"No, pretty," Baxter said, restlessly raking a hand through his hair. "Why is it I can argue my way through Trellamoran law with ease or convince a Kreskan to join the military, but I cannot get it through your lovely head that we want to keep you. Forever."

Elton opened his mouth then closed it again. Finally he said, "Nothing like you ever actually happens to someone like me."

"Pretty..." Lucid said softly and embraced him. "You have it the wrong way around. You're the dream too good to be true. People who have known us our entire lives don't know any of the things you've learned in just three days. No one else we've tried to get close to has accepted *us* so readily, so easily. Try as we might, though, we cannot seem to convince you to stay."

"We've finally finished our grand plan, though," Baxter said, actually sounding nervous, which was too strange for Elton to comprehend. Baxter held out a simple black folder, the screen dark.

Touching the screen to activate the folder, Elton read through the contents with ever-increasing shock. "This—this—" His eyes stung. "This is a rescinding order of the papers I signed voluntarily banning myself from ever having anything to do with gems and jewelry again. It's a reinstatement of my professional standing. But—they said—I'm not supposed to do this—my reputation was left in tatters, I *can't* do it anymore."

Baxter snorted softly. "It was a very sloppy investigation, pretty, and Pyotr has had insiders investigating the matter still further. The corruption runs deep—with you out of the way, it was free and clear to run deeper still. Pyotr was under the impression you'd chosen to leave the profession; he was not informed you had signed those papers until we brought it to his attention."

"In his words," Lucid continued, "You are an asset to your profession and a gem in your own right. You should not be punished for your father's crimes. Should you so desire, he has granted IG approval to appoint you to the position of Bangkok Jeweler Premier."

"What—that—" Elton barely realized he had dropped the folder, which Baxter caught just in time and set aside on a table. "I—"

He could not speak. It was too much.

They looked at him anxiously. "Do you want it, pretty?"

"No—I mean—of *course* I do," Elton said. "But all I really want is you, even though it still feels like I shouldn't have you. Jeweler Premier—that's a powerful post, especially the Premier of Bangkok. I was only Jeweler Troisieme on Mars—"

Baxter cut him off with a snort. "Only because your father was Premier. You would have made Second easily, otherwise."

"Stay, pretty," Lucid said softly, pleadingly. "Stay and give us a chance. And even if you don't want us, stay and be our Jeweler Premier. No one could be better than you, and as Premier you can work on whatever you choose, even begin restoring the stolen and destroyed pieces as we reacquire the lost gems."

Elton shook his head, unable to believe all that he was hearing, but completely incapable of telling these two men no. Maybe, just maybe, he had come to the right place to learn how to be happy again, after all. "Idiots," he finally said. "There are only two jewels in the stars I want, and they're right here in Bangkok."

Baxter and Lucid smiled, matching bright, happy, delighted smiles that echoed Elton's feelings exactly. "The Jewels of Bangkok belonged to you the moment you picked them out, pretty—all you had to do was accept them."

"Then I accept," Elton said, only just getting the words out before his Jewels were upon him.