

For J'na and M'sa,

何時までも.

## Part One

### In Which Our Hero Meets His Matchmaker

VINCENT jumped when the office door closed behind him. It barely made a snick, but to him it sounded like a gunshot. A gavel. A guillotine. He'd never noticed how many deadly words started with G before. Maybe G should be erased from the alphabet. *Except then we wouldn't have G-strings, and that would never work. I'd lose half my wardrobe.*

The Director took one look at him and arched a sharp eyebrow. Her lacquered nails tapped impatiently on the surface of her highly polished desk, and Vincent idly noted how sturdy the mahogany furniture was. In fact it would be just perfect for—

“I trust you know why you're here, Vincent.” The Director had a smooth, mellow voice that Vincent thought would sound nice reading the telephone directory. He just wasn't in the mood to hear her read his death sentence. He swallowed.

“Yes, ma'am, and I'm sorry. I swear on my fuzzy white tail it will never happen again.”

A muscle in her jaw jumped, and Vincent worried. Had that not been the right thing to say? He loved his fuzzy white tail. It was one of his favorite parts of being in the Easter

Bunny Department at the Corporation of Mythical Beings. It always drew attention to his ass, and he rather thought his ass was one of his best features. He was too slender to have a lot of impressive muscles, but a twitch of his tail could bring all the boys to the yard, as the song went. Unfortunately, it also brought the Satyrs to the supply room, and Vincent was just a boy who couldn't say no. It wasn't his fault the Head Bunny had needed a new stapler at that very moment and had seen more than he'd bargained for.

"Be that as it may, Vincent, you're on probation from the Easter Bunny Department for now." At his stricken look, she continued. "If you complete this assignment to our satisfaction, you may even be off probation in time for the Easter season. You've got a few months. It isn't until April this year."

She slid a manila folder across the desk to him. He picked it up nervously, but the neat black and white label seemed innocuous enough. "Charles Ross?"

"He's in the Cupid Department," the Director said, sounding exasperated. Vincent's long white ears pricked forward in interest.

"I'm being assigned to the Cupid Department?" That sounded like a great idea. Hell, it wasn't even really probation. He wanted to meet the genius who had thought of transferring him to the department of love. And all those Cupids around...! He'd never had a Cupid before. He wondered if they were better than Satyrs.

"Not quite," the Director said, bursting his shiny little bubble of lust-filled musings. "You're being assigned to Mr. Ross."

Vincent felt his fine white eyebrows pull together in confusion. "I don't understand."

"You see, Mr. Ross is currently underperforming at an alarming level. None of his cases are going out. He hasn't turned in the paperwork on his last eighteen assignments. It's Valentine's Day in less than a month, and he is, for all intents and purposes, on strike."

Vincent was silently horrified. A Cupid who didn't want to be cupidizing?

"But... what am I supposed to do?"

"That, Mr. Furnier, is up to you." She smiled, and Vincent felt a chill run down his spine. She almost never addressed him so formally. He suddenly had a bad feeling about his new assignment. "Our main concern is that Mr. Ross returns to his duties as a Cupid. We are less interested in what methods you use."

Cold dread settled in his stomach. If the Director was giving him an ends-justify-the-means speech, this was going to be difficult.

"Shouldn't you be assigning this to another Cupid?" he asked, feeling an involuntary twitch start up in his right ear. "It's not like this is exactly my area of specialty."

"On the contrary, Vincent." The Director chuckled, leaning back in her chair and looking very smug indeed. "I think this is right up your alley. You may keep the file."

Understanding he'd been dismissed, Vincent took the file marked *Charles Ross* and left the Director's office, closing the door gently behind himself. He hoped Dionysus was

feeling generous with the contents of his wine cellar; Vincent had a feeling he was going to need it.

VINCENT had made sure he looked his best before heading over to meet his recalcitrant romance specialist. Aside from being theme-appropriate to the Cupid Department's particular holiday, his tight white leather pants and sparkly pink shirt looked amazing on him. The white pants coordinated with his ears and tail, not to mention the untameable fluff of snow-white hair on his head, and the pink brought out color in his otherwise alarmingly pale skin. The whole "white rabbit" thing had gotten a bit out of hand where he was concerned. Not that he minded, of course. He pulled it off better than most in the department.

He passed the Greek houses on his way to the Cupid Department, grinning and winking when he saw Damon, the insatiable Satyr who had joined him for that now-infamous supply-closet rendezvous. Damon had one of the Nymphs on his lap and a beer in his hand, laughing at something Pan had just said. Those Greeks were incorrigible, every last one of them. They'd long ago corrupted the Romans to their ways, and by now the two departments were virtually indistinguishable in their philandering. Vincent adored them.

Damon met his eyes briefly but looked away without returning the smile, and Vincent sighed. He had work to do. He couldn't spend time wondering why a Satyr was having a fit of misplaced guilt. He had bigger fish to fry.

He stopped at the front desk in the Cupid Department and asked the cute redhead where he could find Charles Ross's office. She seemed surprised that he would be looking for the man but stopped just short of saying so.

"Down that hallway, last door on your left."

Vincent gave her a brilliant smile and a wink as he thanked her and headed off toward his destination. Charles's door was standing open, but Vincent knocked on the doorframe anyway just to be polite. He heard a sweet tenor rumble something he assumed was "come in" and hid a smile. If this Cupid was half as cute as he sounded, Vincent was going to enjoy at least part of this assignment, no matter how difficult it turned out to be.

He pasted on his million-dollar smile and swung into the office, pulling up short when he saw the figure behind the desk. Charles Ross was the picture-perfect Cupid, with warm golden-brown hair that hung in Victorian ringlets over his forehead, big brown eyes, and the sweetest, most perfectly shaped mouth Vincent had ever seen. The feathers on his wings were such a light brown that they looked like they were made of gold.

But when Charles looked up at him, Vincent could tell the features were deceptive. The jaw was stronger than it had seemed at first, and those chocolate brown eyes were anything but dewy and welcoming.

"I said go away."

"Oh." Vincent blinked, momentarily flustered. "Sorry, I could've sworn you said 'come in'." Vincent tried his charming smile again, but Ross was having none of it, going

back to his paperwork with a dismissive air. Vincent waited for a moment, but when the Cupid seemed determined to ignore him, he moved a pile of books from the overstuffed armchair in front of the desk and made himself comfortable. Ross did look up at that.

“What the hell are you doing? I said go away.”

“Sorry, Charlie,” Vincent said with a smile, instantly liking the sound of the new nickname. “I’m your new assistant.”

“I don’t need an assistant.” Charlie’s eyes brushed over him now, and Vincent was miffed to notice that he didn’t linger on anything but the white ears. “I think you’re in the wrong department.”

“No,” Vincent said, trying to sound regretful and sincere. “I’ve been sent on special assignment to help you out.” Before Charlie could argue again, Vincent shifted in the chair, crossing his long legs and folding his hands over his flat belly. “The Director seems to think that with your massive case backlog, you could use some help.”

Charlie stared at him for long seconds, and Vincent thought maybe he’d finally made a dent, but the Cupid just went back to his paperwork with a shrug. “Whatever,” he said. “Knock yourself out.”

Vincent looked around the office, wondering where to start. Decorating, if he had anything to say about it, but he had a feeling neither Charlie nor the Director would take too kindly to that.

Dusting, though, was a different story. Nobody could argue with getting rid of the dust, especially when it was two



inches thick on most of the surfaces. Vincent almost expected Charlie to become incensed at his presumption as he moved around the office, dusting and straightening, putting things away and organizing them. But Charlie never looked up, never said anything else until five o'clock chimed on the hearts-and-arrows clock on the wall. Then Charlie stood from his desk, tucked his papers into his briefcase, and shrugged a trench coat on over his suit and wings.

"Time to go," he said. "It's five o'clock. Do you want to go grab a drink?"

A small thrill went through Vincent. Was Charlie asking him to the bar? Everyone knew "grabbing a drink" was code for going home and boinking like... well, like bunnies. Maybe Charlie wasn't quite as on strike as he'd thought.

"Yeah, that'd be great." Vincent beamed.

"Good. Go get it so I can lock up my office and go home."

Stunned, Vincent let Charlie shoo him into the hallway and stared while the Cupid locked up his office. Without any sort of farewell or acknowledgment, Charlie turned and went striding down the hallway that led to the Pegasus Line. Curious—all right, nosy, if he admitted it—Vincent followed.

As they approached, Vincent could hear the winged horses complaining to each other where they stood hitched to the chariots.

"I say we form a union."

"Celeris! We can't form a union against *Dad*."

“Why not? I’m tired of everyone calling me *Pegasus* like that’s my name. What do they mean they can’t tell us apart? Nobody even knows Uncle Chrysaor’s name anymore. It’s all *Pegasus* this, *Pegasus* that—”

The complaining pterippus broke off suddenly when he saw Vincent and Charlie approaching. Vincent hung back, but Charlie stepped up and swiped his card through the card reading system.

“Good day, Mr. Ross,” the machine purred at him.

“Good day, Bellerophon.” He climbed into the chariot behind the pterippus who had been griping and nodded at the other one. “Have a good day, Melanippe. Celeris, take me home, please.”

Celeris nodded once, stretched his wings, and was off in a flurry of white. Vincent watched, dumbfounded, as they disappeared. Since locking his office, Charlie had not even acknowledged him, not even to say goodbye. The Bellerophon machine made a throat-clearing noise.

“Did you need a ride home, sir?”

“Oh!” Vincent jumped back from the machine, glancing between it and the remaining pterippus. “No, no, thank you. I’ll, um, I’ll walk home. Thanks.”

“If you require another service, the Valkyrie Line just down the way is—”

“That’s quite all right. Thank you, though. Really.” The Valkyrie Line was practically a death trap. No way was he going there.

Vincent left Pegasus Station behind with a shake of his head. Every lock had a combination, but Vincent could already tell Charlie's was going to be tough to crack.

He was determined to be up for the challenge.

THE next week followed a similar pattern until Vincent was ready to go on strike himself. He'd never been so sex-deprived in his life, and working with Charlie was dampening his usual drive to go out and find some. Not because Charlie turned him off—no, quite the opposite. But spending all day every day in the office with a sulky, sour Cupid and being ignored in favor of crossword puzzles—that was the “paperwork” he'd been so involved in—was throwing off Vincent's natural vibe.

Friday night, instead of heading over to Bakcheia like he usually did for strobe lights, cosmopolitans, and dirty dancing, he spent his evening in the attached lounge known as The Cellar. Dionysus kept a rack of fine wines, a warm ambiance, and soothing music going. Slouched on a barstool, Vincent let the mahogany bar prop him up as he toyed with the stem of his wine glass. Dionysus had poured him a nice rosé, the house special, and although he was enjoying the fruity bouquet, he was distracted. The beat from the club next door could be heard faintly through the wall, and he was unconsciously tapping his fingers in time to it.

“I swear,” he said to Dionysus, sitting up long enough to let the god wipe down the bar with his towel before sprawling forward again. “It's like all his depressed anti-sex aura just

rubbed right off on me. I haven't gone this long without sex since... well, since."

Dionysus gave him a wry grin, saying without words he knew exactly what Vincent meant.

"Could just be a case of needing a little encouragement," the god said, tucking his bar towel into his belt. "The Satyrs are always up for a little fun."

"Been there, done them," Vincent replied glumly, propping his chin up on his hands.

"Nymphs?"

"Too common," Vincent sighed.

"There are always the Cupids." Dionysus didn't even flinch when Vincent glared at him. He just shrugged. "They really do make good partners," he said. "Demanding sometimes. Usually shy. But if you ever get to one's heart...."

"Shy?" Vincent's eyebrows crawled up his forehead. "They're Cupids. You can't tell me they're shy. They're all about"—he waved one hand vaguely—"sex and love and hearts and flowers."

"That's where you got it wrong, Vincent." Dionysus poured another couple of inches of wine into Vincent's glass. "Cupids aren't about sex and love. They're about romance. Of course, each of them has a different idea of what's romantic, but there you go. Shyness and romance go hand in hand. It's the most socially awkward ideal ever aspired to." The god chuckled as he put the wine bottle back in the chilled case below the bar. "You ever meet Eros? The first Cupid?"

Vincent shook his head. He'd heard of him, of course. The demi-god who lent his name to the term *erotic* was one Vincent was going to make note of.

"He fell in love with a mortal a long time ago. Always doing that, those crazy Cupids. Fall in love with some human, get their hearts broken, end up in here crying to me about it.... Anyway, Eros. He fell for this girl, Psyche—the only human ever to be as pretty as his momma."

Vincent snorted. He had heard Eros was a momma's boy, but he hadn't pegged him as being that bad. Then again, if Oedipus could do it....

"So what's he do? Kidnaps the chick, marries her, and then won't let her see him. Ever. Forbids her to have a single lamp in the place and only visits her after dark."

"What happened?"

Dionysus shrugged, using his towel to wipe imaginary water spots off a tumbler. "Depends on who's telling. Some people say she broke her promise and sneaked a peek, and he divorced her then spent the rest of his career moping because he'd lost her. Other people say they had a fight about it, went to couple's counseling, got it straightened out. There was a rumor for a while that she got tired of not being able to see him and ran off with one of the messenger boys."

Vincent frowned. "What's the real story?"

"Who knows? He retired early and moved off to that lonely mountain. It's anybody's guess whether she still lives there or not. She *was* mortal, after all. Though I think I heard some time back that one of the goddesses decided to

make her immortal. Had a grudge against Aphrodite. Figured she'd prolong the whole mother-in-law tension."

The idea of Aphrodite as a mother-in-law made Vincent shiver.

"Anyway, Bunny, my point is: Cupids are sweet but neurotic. Keep that in mind if you decide to go for one."

"Thanks." Vincent sighed, upending the wine glass and quaffing the contents. The soft clink when he set it back down on the bar sounded like a lock clicking shut, but Vincent ignored that thought as he paid Dionysus and left The Cellar, not even bothering to look into Bakcheia when he passed the doorway. He knew one thing: he had to get back to his own department before his inner party animal gave way to a home-bunny.

## Part Two

### ***or These Tickets Are Round-Trip, Right?***

MONDAY, Vincent woke up dreading the very thought of going to work. He had begun to worry that he wouldn't be able to get Charlie to complete a job by Valentine's Day or even by Easter. Vincent really needed to be off probation in time to get back to his job. If they replaced him permanently, it could mean bad things for his career. No way would the Cupid Department allow him to stay on full-time, and a myth without a job had only one place to go: the Hall.

The Hall of Forgotten Myths was like death row for mythical beings. Any being found guilty of a crime or simply deemed irrelevant in the human world was sentenced to two weeks in the Hall. If he wasn't redeemed by the end of the two weeks, he disappeared. Just... vanished, no coming back. There was a reason old Kris Kringle spent so much on his marketing and advertising campaign. That old man wasn't going anywhere near the Hall for a long, long time. Some of his reindeer, on the other hand, were only hanging on to his red velvet coattails by the skin of their antlers.

All weekend, Vincent had thought over the situation and what Dionysus had said. He'd decided that, no matter how hot his reluctant Cupid was, getting Charlie to like him was

a lost cause. He'd finally hit on an idea, and he hoped it would work. Monday morning, he dressed impeccably: white suit complete with jacket, pale pink shirt, dark pink tie. Not a sequin in sight. Charles Ross was going to take him seriously, or he was going to eat his hat.

Not that he owned any hats. They were hell on his hair.

Well, maybe a white top hat wouldn't go awry. That could look rather dashing. *Hm. Something to consider for next time.*

Vincent knew he looked good, but if he hadn't, the whistles and cat-calls he got on his way across the Corporate Headquarters to the Cupid Department would have told him so. One of the Satyrs—still drunk from the weekend, no doubt—called out, "Lookin' good, baby!" and Vincent put a little extra shake in his tail.

He was feeling good about his plan, the swing in his hips sure to win over any recalcitrant romance specialist, no matter how neurotic, when he strutted into Charlie's office at nine o'clock sharp.

"Good morning!" he sang out, flashing his brightest, sexiest smile.

For his troubles, he got what might loosely resemble a greeting—if one were cataloging "Noises Made by Animals" in the category "Grunts." Vincent forged on undeterred.

"I've got a case for us," he chirped, hefting himself onto Charlie's desk so that his ass was perilously perched in perfect line with Charlie's peripheral vision. He crossed his legs at the knees and swung one foot cheerfully. "I think



you'll like this one. It's got everything: danger, fame, and true love!"

He opened the folder he held and flipped through the items inside. He held up the photograph of the target—a tragically thin beauty queen with a certain glazed emptiness behind her eyes—and examined it. Resting on top of the case file documents was the photo of her intended match, a shy young reporter who insisted on telling the truth, even when it was about the beauty queen's abusive ex-boyfriend.

He dropped the file on top of Charlie's crossword so he could get a look at it. Vincent's hopes skyrocketed as Charlie actually glanced at the contents, but then the Cupid closed the folder and pushed it to the side.

"I don't do abuse. Give it to Andy."

Vincent blinked. So Charlie hadn't gone for the case, but he'd spoken two complete sentences—subject, predicate, prepositions. No modifiers, but everybody had to start somewhere.

"Oh," Vincent said blankly. "You've never taken an abuse case, then?"

Charlie didn't answer, but there was something particularly stony in his silence that made Vincent curious. He opened his mouth, but before he could even take a breath, Charlie interrupted him.

"No."

At that moment, Vincent would have given almost anything he owned—including his very favorite pair of handcuffs—to know the story he could sense behind that

curt answer. By that point, though, he knew Charlie well enough to intuit that asking would guarantee he never found out.

Instead, Vincent took the folder, rearranged the contents gently, and placed it on the edge of Charlie's desk. He'd been cleaning Charlie's office steadily for want of anything else to do, and the one place he hadn't tackled yet was the closet. Most closets were hiding places for all kinds of messes, and he suspected Charlie's wasn't going to be any different. He also knew that rummaging in someone's closet without their permission was the quickest way to get under their skin, and Vincent was dying to get a reaction out of his Cupid.

Charlie didn't say a word when Vincent opened the closet door, and he didn't even flinch when Vincent began to push his way into the clutter—Vincent looked over his shoulder to check. The closet was mostly full of old boxes—case files, from what he could tell—and one dusty old raincoat crumpled in the back corner. Vincent stretched as far as he could and bent over boxes in an attempt to snag the coat. He gave his tail a little twitch, hoping that Charlie was watching despite knowing he probably wasn't.

Almost anyone else in the Corporation would have been taking the opportunity to ogle the most gorgeous set of glutes this side of the River Styx. Vincent's ego sulked and pouted to know that Charlie couldn't care less. Vincent would have thought the Cupid wasn't interested in the male of the species if he hadn't already heard differently.

Rumor had it that the handsome cherub had been going through a long dry spell since his last paramour had moved

on to other pastures. Just who that paramour had been was the subject of much speculation—everyone from the original Eros to Bigfoot had been linked to Charlie's name at one time or another. It wasn't so much that Charlie was such a celebrity as that the Corporation loved gossip, and the mystery was too much for them to resist.

Vincent sighed as he opened an unlabeled box and peered inside at several rows of dusty glass bottles filled with pink liquid. *Love potion*. Contrary to popular belief, Cupids didn't actually have to shoot people that often. The bows and arrows were last resorts, used only when nothing else worked. Recently, due to ethical questions that had been raised, shooting people with love-potion-tipped arrows was suspended until a committee could decide whether or not it violated free will.

Simply ingesting love potion didn't have quite the overwhelming effect that being shot with an arrow did. The body's digestive process diluted the strength of the potion until it only put a temporary rosy glow on the target's perception of their intended other—something akin to beer goggles, someone had joked once. Arrows introduced the potion directly into the blood stream, inducing something approaching a biological need for the intended partner.

Vincent closed the box back up but thought it should probably be labeled. Love potion wasn't something to be left to chance.

"Do you have a marker?" he called over his shoulder, but Charlie didn't answer him. Irritated, Vincent backed out of the closet, shaking his hair out of his eyes. Charlie wasn't at the desk—or anywhere else in the office, for that matter.

Rolling his eyes, Vincent marched over to the desk and started rummaging around for a marker. There weren't any on the desk top, so the logical next step was to look in the desk drawers.

The first one Vincent pulled open held nothing but a bag of sunflower seeds and a few dusty paperclips. The sunflower seeds attracted his attention for a brief moment. He'd never witnessed Charlie eating anything at all, since he'd never been invited along on the Cupid's lunch breaks, but he could imagine how that wonderfully pouty mouth would look as it worked a seed loose from the salty shell, Charlie's pink tongue prying the shell open and coaxing the kernel into his mouth....

Vincent shook himself from his fantasy and closed the drawer, moving on to the next one. The next drawer was empty, and the next one... wouldn't open. Bemused, Vincent tugged again, thinking perhaps it was just stuck. A metal rattle clued him in that the drawer was locked.

*What on earth would Charles Ross keep in a locked drawer?*

"Looking for something?"

Charlie's voice at the door made Vincent jump, and he backed away from the desk, struggling to remind himself that his little snooping venture had begun innocently.

"A marker," he managed to answer, hoping he didn't look too guilty.

"Here." Charlie came over to the desk and opened the middle drawer, reaching deep into the back. He came out with a black magic marker and handed it to Vincent. Vincent

was slow to take it, waiting for Charlie to ask him why he needed a marker. Charlie didn't seem to be curious, though, and an inquiry wasn't forthcoming.

Vincent took the marker, still feeling unaccountably ashamed, and returned to the closet. He took his time labeling the box, carefully shaping the letters, reluctant to have to face Charlie again. When he glanced over his shoulder at Charlie, the Cupid was engrossed in another crossword, oblivious to Vincent or his discomfort.

Vincent sighed and kept working, feeling as if all the dust in Charlie's closet was beginning to settle on him.

VINCENT was so worried about his recent lack of enthusiasm that when Mizu, a sexy, dark-eyed water sprite, called him up three weeks into his assignment and invited him to a pool party after work, he said yes without a second thought. Mizu's parties were infamous, and Vincent knew it was just the cure for what ailed him. He took the Pegasus Line to Mizu's place, humming to himself all the while. Mizu had a huge house, practically a mansion, dominated by the pool in the back. Surrounded as it was by lush vegetation and several waterfalls, it was more accurately called a lagoon.

Mizu met him at the door, sultry eyes gleaming.

"Vincent! Glad you could make it, baby. Everyone's been asking where you are. I was starting to think they'd sent you to the Hall."

They shared a laugh, and Vincent accepted a friendly kiss on his mouth. Mmm, that was nicer than Vincent remembered. Mizu left him to greet another guest, and Vincent wandered over to the pool. Several other Kappas were there, along with Nymphs, Incubi, and Succubi. Mizu hadn't disappointed.

He heard his name called from several different corners, but before he was forced to decide who to favor with his presence, he felt one arm rest across his shoulder and another slither across his back from the opposite direction.

"Castor," he greeted the twin on his left and then caught his breath as the twin on his right nipped at his earlobe. "Pollux, that tickles."

Pollux chuckled, the sound deep and low in his throat as he nuzzled Vincent's neck. "You like it."

Before Vincent could form a response, Castor started in on the other side of his neck and Vincent summarily gave up. He didn't know why he was resisting anyway. For the first time since being assigned to Charles Ross, he felt the stirrings of amorous attraction.

"Mizu never skimps on the guest list," Castor noted with satisfaction.

"There are certainly enough stars here," Vincent joked weakly. Pollux groaned, but Castor just chuckled and licked his way up the side of Vincent's neck.

"Let's find something for you to... lie down on," Castor suggested. Vincent didn't argue. On their way to one of the comfortable, cushion-laden benches on the far side of the lagoon, Castor snatched the drink tray from a passing waiter

and carried it easily along. Once Vincent was stretched out on the bench and comfortably propped up on the softest pillows in existence, the twins stretched out on either side of him, each with a drink in their hand.

Pollux handed Vincent his very own glass of champagne and smiled as Vincent took his first sip. Vincent felt fingers working open the buttons on his shirt and gasped as the cool trickle of champagne pooled in the hollow of his throat.

“Drink up,” Pollux said to his brother, quaffing the contents of his glass that hadn’t ended up on Vincent’s collarbones. Castor didn’t wait to be told twice, and Vincent arched into the warm tongue lapping up the alcohol on his skin.

Oh yes, this had been a very good idea.

“THIS was a very bad idea,” Vincent groaned. Even to his own ears, he could hear that he was slurring.

He heard a soothing murmur in his ear, but he couldn’t tell who it belonged to. *Mizu*? He’d had way too much to drink, and he was so fucked out he wasn’t sure he was ever going to walk again. After the twins had had their way with him—once each, once together—he’d pretty much taken all comers, so to speak. He was beginning to wish he hadn’t. Not only was he sore, he felt dirty. He was used to being something of a slut—what was wrong with liking a little sex now and then? Or a lot?—but this set a new record even for him. He wasn’t even sure who his last partner had been.

He felt sick in the pit of his stomach, and he wasn't sure if it was intoxication or shame that was making him nauseated. Possibly both.

"I'm pathetic," he moaned, not even sure if there was anybody to hear him but hoping that speaking would give his throat something to do other than try to puke up everything he'd ingested. It seemed to help a little. "Now I'm really going to get it. Charlie's never even going to want to *speak* to me again, and I'll lose my job, and the Director's going to send me to the Hall...."

He felt more than heard someone shushing him, the breath skittering over his ear.

"You'll be all right. Come on, let's get you home."

That sounded like a damn fine idea. "Wanna go home." Who was this brilliant person with such good ideas? "I love you. You're the best ever, an' I love you so much. But I'm not gonna have sex with you, 'cause I'm too tired."

The wonderful person, whoever it was, slid an arm behind his shoulders and hauled him upright, slinging his weight over their arm like an unwieldy sack of potatoes. Or something more attractive than potatoes. No, come to think of it, he was probably less attractive than potatoes right now, all dirty and stinking of booze and sex.

This time when his stomach lurched, he couldn't stop it, and the person holding him paused long enough to let him be sick in the bushes.

"Sorry, Mizu," he whispered when he could, making a face at the taste of his own mouth. "So sorry." And then, mercifully, he passed out.



A PASSEL of pixies scattered in a flurry of giggles and glitter as Vincent dragged himself down the hallway, his feet scuffing over the patterned pink carpet. Candy, the redheaded receptionist Vincent had briefly spoken to on the first day of his assignment, watched him with pitying eyes.

“Good morning, Mr. Furnier,” she called, injecting a note of cheer into her voice. Vincent appreciated the effort, but it wasn’t enough to put any perk into his ears. Even his tail was drooping.

“Morning, Candy.” His lackluster greeting put a frown on her pretty face, but he didn’t stop to reassure her. He just moved on into Charlie’s office, not bothering to knock.

It wasn’t like Charlie would bother to answer.

Charlie looked up briefly when Vincent came in, but his usual curt greeting died on his perfect Cupid’s-bow lips.

“Cripes, who pissed in your Easter basket?”

Vincent stared at him in disbelief. If he’d known misery was the way to the man’s frozen heart, he would have brought out the gloom and doom ages ago. Except he would have picked different circumstances for it. He was still feeling the effects of his unwise choices the night before, despite having downed the aspirin and glass of water his unknown benefactor—most likely Mizu—had left for him on his bedside table.

“Bad night,” Vincent temporized.

"I'll say." Charlie eyed him suspiciously. "There's coffee in the break room."

Vincent's stomach lurched at the thought of extra acid, and he shook his head. He got the distinct feeling that his pale complexion was turning a sickly green. "No, thank you." After a moment, the Cupid's words sank in, and Vincent stared at him. "Am I in the right office?"

Charlie's eyebrow—perfectly shaped, as if it had been carefully painted with a fine brush—arched sharply. "Do you want me to answer that question?"

"Quite frankly, if you do, I'll just be convinced I never actually got out of bed this morning and I'm still dreaming."

Charlie's lips twitched—it wasn't quite a smile, but it was close enough to convince Vincent that, yes, he really was still asleep. Although what good was being unconscious if he could still have a hangover?

"Well, if you wake up later, try to remember what we talked about, because I don't want to go through this again." Charlie leaned across his desk just enough to toss a folder to the edge. "I have a solution for you."

Vincent eyed the folder with distrust. Had Charlie dusted it with anthrax? Was he planning to get rid of the nuisance with a quick and dirty cover-up? It wasn't like Charon couldn't be bought off if Charlie really wanted to dump his body in the Styx.

"It's a case," Charlie said flatly, impatience creeping into his tone. "One case, an easy in-and-out job. We do it, we get out, you go back to your egg-hiding or whatever it is you do, and I can live the rest of my life in peace."

Carefully Vincent edged forward and opened the folder. He read the details of the case—once the letters formed words instead of swimming in an alphabet soup—and then read them again. Charlie was right. From what he could tell, it was a simple case of two people who would be perfect for each other if only their paths would collide. They kept missing each other by minutes, sometimes less, and ending up in doomed relationships with other people. All it would take was a little nudge in the right direction.

“Shouldn’t take more than a couple of weeks on Earth, a month at the outside.”

“And you’ll do your paperwork for it properly?” Vincent pressed. It was too much to hope for, even in a dream world.

“Cross my heart.”

Vincent stared at the case file.

“Take it with you, if you want. You can look over it while you’re packing for the trip.”

Oh fuck. The trip.

TRIPS to Earth were, contrary to popular opinion, quite infrequent for most office workers at the Corporation. Each department had envoys who spent most of their time on the planet, taking care of assignments and reporting back to the department heads. Most office workers would never make the journey, but if they did, it was only once or twice every few millennia.

The Cupid Department was the one notable exception. Every Cupid on active duty was Earthbound for almost every case they took on. This of course meant that while Charlie was resting on his frequent flyer laurels, Vincent was trying not to hyperventilate.

"Sure, it's fine for *him*," Vincent wailed, throwing his arms wide. "He's got wings. I don't have wings! How is that fair?"

"He won't be using his wings, dear." Dina, sitting on his bed watching him pack, was one of the nicer faeries about. He was uncertain exactly which division of the Faerie Department she was in—Tooth? Woodland? Sugar Plum?—but she was the closest thing he had to a friend. He wondered if that was because they'd never slept together.

"What do you mean he won't be using his wings? Isn't that what they're *for*?"

"Maybe in the older days." Dina shrugged. "Now there's much better technology. And anyway, his wings will disappear as soon as you enter Earth's atmosphere."

"They will?" Vincent blinked.

"Yep. And so will your ears and tail."

Vincent couldn't help the reflexive grab for said ears, and he felt his tail twitch as if trying to tuck itself between his legs. "You're *kidding*."

"What, you thought you were going to walk around on Earth amongst humans with those waving about for all to see? They'd put you in the circus."

She had a point. He didn't have to like her point, but she had one.

Vincent groaned and fell forward onto the bed. His face landed on one of the silk shirts he'd laid out for packing, and he snuggled into it.

"What was I thinking?"

Dina rubbed his back soothingly and chuckled. "You'll be fine."

Famous last words.

## Part Three

### **or Sex, Drugs, And Really Loud Techno-Pop**

“THERE must be a mistake.”

Vincent looked around the room in abject horror. If he'd still had his *other* ears, they would have drooped in disappointment and disapproval.

Charlie gave a short, harsh laugh as he tossed his suitcase onto one of the double beds. The bedspreads were patterned in a chintzy floral design of chocolate brown and brick red with hints of goldenrod in the stitching. Vincent could practically see the germs crawling on them.

“What, you actually thought the Department was going to put us up in a nice place?” Charlie scoffed. “They’re going easy on you—no roaches in this one. Well, not as long as the lights are on, anyway.”

Vincent felt the blood drain from his face. “Roaches?” He had a feeling he was going to be sleeping with the lights on if that would keep the bugs away.

Charlie didn't seem to share his concern, stretching out beside his suitcase on the gaudy bedspread and reaching for the TV remote. It was chained to the end table between the

beds, and Vincent wondered who on Earth would want to steal a television remote.

Charlie turned on the television and flipped the channels restlessly until he settled on an old black and white science fiction movie. Feeling trapped in a horror flick of his own, Vincent carefully moved into the room, taking each step slowly as if he was afraid the carpet was going to devour his feet.

The carpet. *Oh fuck.* He wished he'd never noticed the carpet, but now that he had, he very much wanted to not be touching it anymore, even through rubber-soled shoes. Not that he exactly wanted to be touching the bedspread on the empty bed, either.

Grateful that Charlie seemed to be ignoring him, Vincent stripped the bedspread off the mattress and let it pool on the offending carpet. Underneath, the cheap imitation-fleece blanket bore a couple of black, round holes that couldn't be anything but cigarette burns.

"I thought this was a no-smoking room," Vincent muttered to himself. He peeled back the fleece as well and was satisfied that at least the sheets were sparkling white and appeared to be clean. He hated the thought that undressing would mean his feet would touch the carpet, however briefly, but one simply did not sleep in one's new traveling suit, tailored specially to his newly tailless buttocks.

One glance at Charlie stretched out so languidly on top of the disturbing comforter gave Vincent an unexpected attack of modesty so intense that he gathered up his

pajamas and made his way to the bathroom where he could undress in privacy.

He flipped on the light and gasped when a small, dark shape scuttled down the drain in the bathtub. Leaving the light on—because he sure as hell wasn't encouraging the creature to come back out—he beat a hasty retreat to the relative safety of the larger room, where the most nefarious shadows he had to contend with were the ones that would be growing under his eyes from not being able to sleep.

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell Charlie that he was no way, no how going to sleep in this sorry excuse for a room, but at the last moment he decided that he didn't want to sound like the spoiled rotten wuss that he was and swallowed his protest. Charlie said this place was actually pretty good for planet-side trips, and he'd had to come on these missions far more than Vincent had.

Still, Vincent had been sort of curious to see what Earth was like—after he was over the vertigo and nausea of their interdimensional trip—and this dingy little place was a disappointment.

He felt a frisson of shyness when he pulled his shirt off, but he firmly told his modesty it could go fuck itself in the bathroom with that giant cockroach and continued undressing. As soon as he was changed, he hopped into bed, tucking his feet under himself as he folded the clothes he had taken off. The suit really should be hung up, but Vincent just couldn't force himself to open the closet and see what might be hiding in there.

He was dropping his carefully folded clothes onto his suitcase when he noticed Charlie staring at him from the



other bed. It wasn't his usual scowl, nor was it even a mildly annoyed frown. In fact, if it had been anyone, and Vincent did mean *anyone* else, he would have thought the expression was one of—dare he even think it?—lust.

“Sorry,” Vincent blurted. “There was a giant roach in the bathroom.”

Charlie shut his mouth, which had been ever-so-slightly open, and frowned. “Is it still there?”

“It ran down the drain when I turned the light on.” Vincent gave an involuntary shudder. “I just couldn't stand the thought....” He gave Charlie a sidelong glance, bracing himself for some kind of mockery, but none was forthcoming.

Charlie turned back to the television, his eyes fixed on the screen. Vincent looked to see what he was watching and felt himself recoil at the image of a man with the head of a fly stumbling out of some kind of contraption to the horror of an elegant young blonde. The young woman screamed, and Vincent found himself sympathizing with her.

*Great, now I'll probably dream about Charlie turning into a cockroach. Just what I needed.*

Vincent yawned. The interdimensional travel had, quite frankly, worn him out, and sleep was looking better every second. He snuggled down into the mediocre pillow and pulled the top sheet up over his shoulders. Charlie looked like he was settling into his movie-watching for the duration, and it wasn't like Vincent was going to take a chance on turning out any of the lights, anyway. Besides, he felt a little safer knowing that Charlie was awake and keeping watch.

He wouldn't let any mutant insects carry Vincent off in the night.

Probably.

VINCENT woke to darkness and disorientation. A thin sliver of light glowed meekly at the corners of the ugliest set of drapes Vincent had ever seen in his life. *At least they match the carpet.* If he hadn't known where he was at first, the sight of those curtains resolved that immediately. Only one place he had ever seen had curtains that ugly.

It also had huge cockroaches, a memory that had Vincent sitting up sharply in bed and looking frantically around the sheets and pillows to be sure he didn't have some six-legged version of John Marley's beheaded equine waiting for him.

To his great relief, Vincent found that he was alone in the room, and he heaved a great sigh. A second perusal of his surroundings revealed that he was, disturbingly, *completely* alone in the room. Charlie was nowhere to be seen.

Somehow Charlie's absence was even more frightening than the roach's presence had been—being in a hotel room with an infestation was bad enough without being *abandoned* in said hotel room—and Vincent shot out of bed like a roman candle.

He was hopping around bare-assed naked, one foot in his pants and the other struggling to join it, when the door

swung open, bathing his pale skin in paler light. Vincent yelped and stumbled, feeling his entire body grow warm with embarrassment as Charlie stepped into the room and shut the door behind himself.

“I—” Charlie choked, cleared his throat, and carefully averted his eyes. “I spoke with the Corporation. Make sure all your bags are packed. We’ll be moving to another hotel. We need to be out in less than an hour.”

“We... what?” Vincent managed to wriggle into his white pants, pulling them up over his ass—and wow, it felt weird not to have a tail there—and fastening them quickly, giving himself a modicum of decency. The sound of the zipper was obscenely loud, and he noticed that Charlie didn’t look at him again until he’d shrugged into his shirt and had it more than halfway buttoned.

“We’re moving to a new hotel. The Corporation gave us a special dispensation since you aren’t a regular part of the Cupid Department. It won’t be five-star, but it probably won’t have roaches, either.”

Gratefulness flooded through Vincent, turning his bones to jelly. All he wanted at that moment was to prostrate himself at Charlie’s feet and kiss the man’s stylishly cut boots—but he could wait until they got to the other hotel. Maybe it would have cleaner carpet.

THE second hotel did indeed have cleaner carpet, and it was all Vincent could do to restrain himself from kneeling down to kiss it in gratitude. Before he even dropped his bags, he

peeked into the bathroom, feeling crazily euphoric when there was not even a hint of anything scurrying into the crevices.

“Better?” On the surface, Charlie’s voice might have sounded gruff and impatient, even annoyed, but as far as Vincent was concerned, it was sweeter than a choir of angels singing.

“So much better,” Vincent purred in a voice usually reserved for asking “When can I see you again?” while lying in bed sweaty and naked with a particularly talented lover.

Charlie made a noise that anyone else might have called a grunt, but Vincent, who was becoming fluent in Charlie-speak, recognized as being pleased but vaguely embarrassed. Or at least that’s what he was taking it for. It could have really been anything from “I’m glad I could make you happy, Vincent” to “Die in a fire, Vincent.” Unfortunately, his Charlie-to-English dictionary wasn’t entirely comprehensive yet.

Vincent dropped his suitcase beside one of the double beds and flopped backward onto the comforter, stretching his arms out wide and luxuriating in the unstained, uncracked ceiling above him. He was just getting comfortable when he felt something land on his stomach. Startled, he grabbed for it. It was a small, rectangular piece of plastic with his picture—sans Bunny ears—on it. It also included his name, address, and vital statistics on it.

“Nineteen-eighty?” he asked, confused. “I was around way before 1980.”

"People don't live forever down here, you know," Charlie said. "You look about twenty-nine, so that's what got put on your ID."

"How old does yours say you are?"

"Thirty-two."

"How come you're older than me?" Vincent fiddled with the identification card, watching as the light caught it from different angles. "And why do we need these?" He picked at the edge of the card with his fingernail.

"Stop that. Put it in your pocket. In your wallet, if you have one." Charlie had his suitcase on the other bed and was pulling out clothing. "You need it because the club we're going to checks ID at the door."

Charlie gathered up clothes in his arms and disappeared into the bathroom. The door had closed behind him before Vincent fully processed what he'd just said.

"Wait—club?" He scrambled to his feet. "He can't expect me to go like this! I have to get dressed!"

Just then the bathroom door opened, and Charlie stepped out, barefoot and shirtless. Vincent's heart felt like it stopped, which did nothing to explain the sudden fluttery pulse he could feel at the base of his throat, and he froze, stunned.

Without a word, Charlie dug a manila folder out of his suitcase and then slapped it against Vincent's chest as he stalked back to the bathroom.

“Read it this time. I refuse to go out if you don’t even know what we’re doing.” Charlie didn’t wait for an answer, and Vincent obediently sat on the bed and opened the folder.

He’d just read the first sentence in Amy Huffaker’s bio when he heard the shower come on. Unbidden, his mind conjured up an image of Charlie, sans the pants he’d just been wearing, and he had to pinch himself hard to focus on the case file again.

By the time Charlie returned to the main room—fully dressed, Vincent noticed with some sadness, though the well-fitting jeans and flattering wine-red button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up almost made up for it—Vincent had read the file twice and retained maybe half of it.

“So I take it Amy is supposed to be at this club tonight, and somehow we have to get Chris there to meet her?”

Charlie looked up at him through damp, dripping ringlets of hair that looked like they’d been arranged especially for a sexy-underwear-ad photoshoot. “That’s the general plan, yes. You’re going to make sure Amy doesn’t leave while I try to get Chris inside.”

“How come—”

“Because I’m in charge of this mission, and you fit more naturally into the club atmosphere.”

The bitch of it was that Vincent couldn’t really argue with that.

“The only problem is going to be that you have to be in charge of this.” Charlie tossed something to him, and Vincent fumbled to catch it. He recognized the shape of the

bottle in his hands before he actually saw it. It was half the size of the bottles he'd found in Charlie's office closet, but it was still unmistakable.

"Love potion?"

"That's a pre-measured portion. Should be just right for spiking Amy's drink once we have Chris in the club." Another bottle came flying at him and luckily landed on the mattress, since Vincent couldn't get a hand free to catch it in time. "There's one for Chris's drink."

Vincent picked up both bottles and looked at them. "This seems a little wrong," he mused. "Can't we try it naturally first? You know, see if they're attracted to each other without chemical assistance?"

Vincent couldn't read the expression on Charlie's face, but it wasn't a terribly happy one. He wondered if Charlie was offended that Vincent was questioning his methods—and, by extension, his job.

"Sure," Charlie said, voice brimming with sarcasm. "And you can be the one to explain to the Corporation why we're late and over budget when we're still hanging around waiting six months later."

Vincent frowned at the bottles again but shook his head. "No, I don't think that would be a good idea." He smiled wryly. "Seeing as I'm already on probation and all. One more offense, and it's the Hall for me."

Vincent secretly hoped that Charlie wouldn't ask him why he was on probation. Suddenly he was too ashamed to admit it. He'd never been bothered by his free-wheeling behavior before, but after Mizu's party, Vincent wasn't sure

he ever wanted to hear the words “casual sex” again. He was also fairly sure he’d never be able to smell champagne again without getting violently ill. He was suddenly hyper-aware of how immature and unprofessional it had been to drop trou and bend over in the supply closet in the middle of the workday, and how badly Charlie might think of him if he knew.

Of course, the true test would be whether he could remember that the next time his body was begging him to take up a horny hero on his offer.

“Well?” Charlie’s voice broke through his musings. “Hurry up and get dressed. We don’t have all day.”



## Part Four

### **In Which Viewer Discretion Is Advised**

THE pulse of the music felt like it was taking over for his heart, aching and arching and turning him inside out. Beside him, Charlie looked peevish and uncomfortable, the colored lights sweeping across his face to show a frown and a tightly clenched jaw. Other than that, the man looked like sex on legs, with his dark red button-down shirt untucked from ass-hugging jeans, the sleeves rolled up his forearms and two broad leather cuffs on his wrists drawing attention to his strong hands. If Vincent thought the man had any sex drive at all, he would have already been flirting his ass off.

Unfortunately, Charlie showed no more interest in the baser side of his desires than he did in lessons from Miss Manners, and Vincent had already decided that if a sexy human was offering, Vincent was going to be taking—a dance, anyway.

“Do you see her?” Charlie had to lean close to Vincent and shout to be heard, and Vincent tried not to be affected by how close the man was to him. He turned his head to answer and caught a glimpse of artfully tousled hair and eyes rimmed with darker, longer lashes than any being had a right to, mortal or mythical.

“Not yet,” Vincent shouted back. “Wanna split up?”

Charlie looked like that was the last thing he wanted to do, but he nodded anyway. Without waiting to see where Charlie went, Vincent made a beeline for the dance floor. He was dying to get his groove on. He'd keep an eye out for Amy, of course, but there was a writhing mass of hot, sexy bodies on that floor, and his fine ass belonged in the middle of them.

He'd only been dancing for about five minutes, as best as he could tell, when their target walked in and took a seat at the bar. She was cute as a button, but she looked woefully out of place in the sex-hyped club, and Vincent understood why she wasn't getting any dates. She was going to have to grow a set, figuratively speaking, if she was going to keep someone who was used to this atmosphere. Vincent secretly thought she looked like she belonged in a sunny garden with a book—just the kind of girl you wanted to go home to on your lunch break for a little afternoon delight, but not the kind of girl you took prowling the clubs.

Across the room, he saw Charlie sprawled in a booth with a glass of something sitting in front of him, and he tilted his head toward Amy. Charlie nodded in response and held Vincent's gaze for about six beats of the pulsing song. Sexual energy arced through Vincent like he'd touched two live wires together, and he wanted to drag Charlie onto the floor—or else just go crawl on top of him in that booth—but then Charlie looked away, his eyes focused somewhere else entirely.

A surge of irritation had Vincent grabbing the guy closest to him and wriggling against his sweaty body. The

man, big and tall with broad shoulders and gym-carved muscles flexing under his sleeveless white tee, looked surprised but pleased and pulled Vincent closer without much finesse. Vincent suddenly felt overdressed in his sparkly pink shirt and skin-tight white pants.

He wasn't the kind of guy Vincent normally would have gone for—close-cropped blond hair, military tattoos, a square face with a couple of dangerous-looking scars—but Vincent could see the appeal nonetheless. Not that Vincent had chosen him for any reason other than showing off his moves.

He stole a couple of glances at Charlie as he danced, but the Cupid was never looking at him. It just made Vincent all the more furious. If he'd still had his fuzzy white tail, he would have danced it right off. He writhed and slithered and gyrated until he finally stepped away from his dance partner with a smile and a brief thank-you kiss. He needed something to drink if he was going to survive tonight. He'd been hyper-aware of Charlie ever since... well, ever since the first time he'd walked into the Cupid's office.

In this atmosphere, surrounded by people in various stages of hooking up, Vincent could admit to himself that he wanted Charlie, and not being able to have him was only making it worse.

It turned out that Vincent's break was well-timed, as Amy was just getting up from the bar as he approached. Guilt lanced through him. He'd been so distracted by trying to make Charlie jealous that he'd forgotten that they were on a job. *So much for your newly turned professional leaf, Furnier.* He scowled to himself. It looked like Amy was bored with the atmosphere and ready to go home. Where was

Chris? Wasn't Charlie supposed to be handling that? Quickly, Vincent stepped in front of her and put a hand on her arm.

"Excuse me," he shouted. "I don't mean to bother you, but can I buy you a drink?"

She gave him a look that went right past confused and landed on offended, and he almost laughed. He knew sometimes straight guys came to gay clubs to hit on the lesbians, but it should be obvious from one glance that he didn't fall into that category. No self-respecting straight man Vincent had ever met could pull off this many sequins with this much panache. The jury was still out on Neil Diamond. He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"You look like you could use a listening ear," he shouted again, and she gave him a wry smile.

"Over there," she shouted, pointing to a corner of the bar away from the dance floor and the speakers. He saw several couples sitting in the booths over there, leaning toward each other, talking. "Quieter," she explained, and he nodded.

He followed her over and ordered them both Cosmos before settling onto a stool. "You don't look like you're finding what you were looking for," he said, and she shook her head.

"Not exactly."

"Wanna talk about it?"

She hesitated but nodded as the waitress set their drinks down in front of them. "Might as well, I guess. I'd

been dating this girl for four years. We were pretty serious, you know? We hadn't moved in together 'cause I was in grad school and needed my space to study in quiet, but we were planning on maybe finding someplace together once I graduated."

She toyed with the stem of the glass for a moment before she picked it up and took a sip, licking the moisture off her lips. Vincent saw the way she moved, controlled and elegant, and thought again that she belonged someplace other than a club like this one.

"Anyway, my thesis was up for review, so I went a few weeks without talking to her, you know? Busy. I thought she understood." She took a deep breath. "Apparently it was too long for her to wait. She moved in with someone else the day before I had to defend my thesis."

Vincent's eyebrows arched sharply. He was the last Bunny who was going to point fingers at anyone for having voracious tastes, but being sexually liberated was one thing. Cheating on a committed partner was another entirely. "Heifer."

"Yeah." Amy's voice sounded bitter, and she drained her drink suddenly. Vincent signaled the cocktail waitress for another. "Anyway, I wasn't going to worry about finding anyone else, but I started feeling lonely and decided maybe I'd try to meet someone, you know? I've never really been into the dating scene much—Vicky found me at the library, I mean—but... well, you know."

Vincent did know, at least a little.

"These places aren't good for much besides a date with someone you already know or finding a quick hook-up," Vincent agreed. "But you never know; you could get lucky."

"How about you?" Amy smiled. "Are you here with someone you know, or are you looking for a hook-up?"

Vincent wrinkled his nose. "Not really either one. I mean, I'm here with a co-worker, but he's not really interested in me, and I'm not really interested in finding anyone else."

Amy seemed to perk up at his phrasing. "But you *are* interested in him?"

Vincent cursed his slip of tongue and gave her what he hoped was a misdirecting smile. "I believe we sat down to discuss you, not my pathetic love life," he chuckled.

She waved dismissively. "You're more interesting. I already know all about my problems!"

They shared a laugh, and Vincent looked over his shoulder to see if he could spot Charlie—both to see if he might be bringing Chris in soon and to make sure he wouldn't accidentally overhear their conversation.

Of course, that would be difficult, seeing as *Vincent* could barely hear it, and he was sitting right there, but better safe than sorry, right? As it was, he didn't see Charlie anywhere, and there was no sign of Chris either, so he turned around and leaned farther in so Amy could hear him better, pausing to let the cocktail waitress set Amy's new drink down in front of her.

“We’re not even from the same department at work. He was behind on some paperwork and I was... at loose ends,”—a pinch of prevarication never hurt anyone—“so I was asked to help him out.” Vincent realized he was toying with the cocktail napkin under his drink and forced his hands to be still. “He’s really cute, but—”

“But he doesn’t appreciate having someone from another department come rescue him?”

Vincent hadn’t thought of that angle before, but then again Charlie had already been slacking on his work in the first place.

“I don’t think he likes his job anymore,” Vincent said slowly. “And yeah, I think he might resent me for coming in and trying to motivate him.”

Why hadn’t he ever thought to ask Charlie why he wasn’t taking cases or completing his paperwork? Had he just assumed the Cupid wouldn’t tell him?

“You are at a disadvantage,” Amy acknowledged. “But that doesn’t mean it’s hopeless.” She jumped, looked startled, and held up a finger to tell him to wait one moment as she turned to dig in her purse and pulled out a cell phone. Vincent took the opportunity to look for Charlie again, and when he saw the Cupid coming in the door, Vincent took a chance and quickly emptied the bottle of love potion into Amy’s drink. He couldn’t see Chris behind Charlie, but it might be the last chance he got while Amy was distracted.

“Sorry,” Amy said, looking up from where she had apparently been reading and responding to a text message

on her cell phone. "I've got to go. My babysitter needs to go home." She looked at the untouched Cosmo and smiled wistfully, oblivious to Vincent's look of surprise. "I guess I'd better not drink this now. I don't like Kevin to see me drunk. Here, enjoy yourself." She pushed the glass toward Vincent and hopped down off the chair, waving to him as she turned to go and shouting her farewell over the music. "Good luck with your co-worker, and thanks for the drink!"

Amy walked out of the bar, already on the phone, probably to tell her babysitter she was coming home. Vincent watched as she walked out onto the sidewalk and hailed a cab, a somber mood settling over him in the midst of the loud music and colorful lights as he watched the taxi drive off. A mass of confusion tumbled through him. The Corporation's file on Amy hadn't mentioned anything about her having a child nor the circumstances under which her last girlfriend had left her.

As far as Vincent was concerned, both of those things were very important considerations, and he suddenly felt a sharp swell of resentment. Dating with children deserved special attention to detail, and the thought that the Corporation hadn't cared enough about Amy or her child to include that information was enough to make him furious. When Charlie suddenly appeared at the table, alone, Vincent whirled on him.

"They never said anything about her having a kid!" Charlie stared at him, obviously struggling to understand him over the music. "They just sent us down here with a couple of bottles of love potion and enough rope to hang ourselves with! It could have been a disaster!"



Charlie made a shushing motion, and Vincent suddenly remembered where they were.

"I know," Charlie said, though Vincent read his lips and expression more than he actually heard. "Finish your drink. It helps."

Vincent wasn't sure *what* it would help, but Charlie was the expert here, so Vincent tossed the rest of his Cosmo like he was doing shots. *Mm, body shots*. He couldn't help the way his eyes slid across Charlie at the thought. Vincent had only seen Charlie without a shirt once, but it was enough to know that the Cupid was hiding a torso that would be just terrific for licking alcohol off of.

Suddenly embarrassed at the track his thoughts were taking, especially since the unknowing and probably unwilling object was standing right there, Vincent quickly directed his eyes upward to Charlie's face. Charlie looked momentarily uncomfortable, and Vincent realized that the Cupid had probably read his face like a book. Before he could apologize, Charlie shouted, "You want another one?" He pointed to Vincent's empty glass.

"Surprise me," Vincent said with a shake of his head. Charlie gave him a thumbs-up sign and escaped in the general direction of the bar.

"Good going, Vincent," he muttered to himself. "Terrify the poor man when he's actually trying to be nice to you."

Why was Charlie trying to be nice to him, anyway? That was just weird. Vincent had definitely gotten the impression that Charlie hated his guts, but suddenly he was fetching drinks like an eager-to-please house spirit.

Vincent let his head fall forward onto the table, suddenly feeling drained and unhappy. He felt a nudge to his elbow and looked up to see Charlie holding out an outrageously purple drink.

“What’s this?”

Charlie shrugged, looking embarrassed. “The guy at the bar said it’s a Grateful Dead.”

Vincent laughed. Appropriate, that. He took it from Charlie and tried it, wincing just a little when the flavor exploded over his tongue in a supernova of sugar and alcohol. “This tastes like ninety-proof Kool-Aid,” he said and then took another sip. “Addictive.”

Charlie looked a little relieved and took a sip of his own drink, which Vincent noticed looked very plain indeed. “Vodka tonic?” he guessed, eyeing the lime slice on the rim of the glass.

Charlie shook his head. “Gin.”

Vincent gave an exaggerated shudder and went back to his top-shelf suicide. Bitter and dry—he should have guessed Charlie would be a gin man.

The music on the dance floor shifted to a mellower soft-electronica sound, and Vincent felt deafened by the relative silence. Charlie was studying him in a way that made Vincent feel even more uncomfortable than he usually did in the Director’s office.

“What?” He wished he didn’t sound so defensive, but there was no helping it.

“I was just... it’s nothing.”

Vincent perked up—he could feel his missing rabbit ears, like ghost limbs, pricking forward in interest—and leaned toward Charlie, holding himself back at the last moment so as not to frighten the poor Cupid. “No—what? Really.”

Charlie stared down into his gin and tonic, scowling as if the lime wedge had spectacularly insulted his mother. Who *was* Charlie’s mother, anyway? Did all the Cupids have to come from a lineage like Aphrodite’s, or were they qualified for their jobs some other way? Charlie took a deep breath, pulling Vincent’s attention back from his sidetrack.

“I’m surprised you reacted the way you did to Amy’s kid.”

Thinking Charlie had seen Vincent’s reaction as disapproval of Amy, Vincent rushed to explain. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with her having a child—I just wish the file had mentioned something about it. Relationships progress differently when there’s a child involved. There needs to be a little extra trust, not just hooking up in a bar for a fun night and seeing if you still like the person the next morning over breakfast.”

“No, that’s what I mean. See, this is the kind of thing that happens all the time, and sometimes it’s even worse.” Charlie looked around as if trying to determine if there were any other incognito agents from the Cupid Department listening in. “The business has gotten so big that they’re trying to maximize their rate of ‘successful’ cases, and the process isn’t as subtle as it once was. Love potion used to be a last resort. It used to be that we could spend weeks slowly maneuvering a couple toward each other, observing them,

working up a psychological profile. In the cases of same-sex couples, we had to be especially careful. We couldn't just find two cute girls like Chris and Amy and hook them up in a queer bar." Charlie looked away for a moment. "Not that everyone with that specialty was always so subtle. It ended pretty badly a few times."

Vincent could just imagine—he'd heard stories about some of the behaviors that had gone on during certain eras, and he knew enough from his own life to know that it wasn't always as fun as some people made it look. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, thinking about Mizu's party with a fresh wave of dissatisfaction.

"Anyway, the Cupid Department's budget is determined by the Board of Directors based on how many successful cases were reported in the previous year, so they've started grasping for sheer quantity. Quality has, sadly, fallen by the wayside. Sometimes it's even dangerous. They don't take enough time to evaluate the individuals, and people end up getting... hurt."

Vincent remembered Charlie saying that he didn't take abuse cases, and his heart plummeted into his stomach. He wanted to look into his drink, to avoid Charlie's eyes, but he couldn't seem to look away from the bitter scowl on the Cupid's face. "Is that why you went on strike?"

For a moment, Vincent wasn't sure he'd spoken loudly enough. Charlie didn't look at him. His expression didn't change. While Vincent was trying to decide whether he wanted to repeat the question or change the subject, Charlie gave a quick, almost imperceptible nod and drained his gin and tonic.

Remembering what Amy had said about Charlie possibly resenting him for coming in to take over without knowing anything about why Charlie was behind on his work in the first place, Vincent decided to take a leap of faith. “Do you... want to talk about it?”

Charlie gave him a hard look and turned up his now gin-less glass, scowling when there was nothing but a little ice left in it.

“Not here,” Charlie said, and Vincent wondered if he was imagining how strangled the words were, as if Charlie had nearly choked on them. “Finish your drink and let’s go.”

Vincent had a moment of sadness over the thought that he wouldn’t get a chance to try to drag Charlie onto the dance floor, but maybe one miracle at a time was a wise limit to observe.

“Cheers,” Vincent said, lifting his glass in a faux toast. To his everlasting surprise, Charlie grabbed the only glass with a drink remaining and returned the toast. Vincent tipped his glass back and drank the rest of his ninety-proof Kool-Aid with relish, nearly choking on the sweet alcohol when he saw Charlie take a long sip of Amy’s leftover Cosmo.

Vincent cringed inside. The thing had to be warm and gross by now—like lukewarm sugar water.

“Ugh,” Charlie said, confirming Vincent’s suspicions. He set the drink down. “That’s disgusting. How do you drink those?”

“Usually not at room temperature,” Vincent pointed out, wrinkling his nose.

"I can see why." Charlie gave a visible shudder and pushed the glass away from him. He stood up from the table, and Vincent followed his lead, tottering backward as his knees felt a little more rubbery than usual.

"Whoa," he said, casting a distrustful glare at the empty cocktail glasses on the table. Those had hit him faster than he was used to. He would lay money on the Grateful Dead being to blame. He'd never been this affected by Cosmos.

Charlie gave him an amused smirk, the expression transforming his face from awkward and gloomy to something that set Vincent's blood boiling. He looked almost predatory.

*Rowr.*

"C'mon," Charlie purred. "Let's go back to the hotel."

Vincent willed himself not to hear any hidden messages in that, but he had a feeling that "strength of will" wasn't getting listed on his character references anytime soon. Especially not when this was a different side of Charlie than anything Vincent had seen. Maybe the Cupid was feeling more relaxed now that he knew Vincent wasn't a spy sent by the Corporation—now that he knew Vincent was on his side.

However, by the time they got back to the hotel, Charlie's "new side" was starting to creep Vincent out.

Vincent, still feeling fuzzy from the alcohol, was fumbling with the door and the electronic key card when he felt something brush up against his backside. He paused for a moment, but when it didn't happen again, he figured Charlie was just as drunk as he was and was off balance. He

didn't remember seeing Charlie drinking a lot, but he hadn't been watching that closely, either.

He tried the key again, scowling when the LED light blinked smugly red at him. He held the key card up close to his face, examining it for clues as to why it wasn't working. The printing on the card was ambiguous as to which side was actually meant to be facing outward, so he flipped it over to try again.

Just as he jammed it back into the card reader, the light pressure against his ass became a lot less innocent and a lot more interesting. The card skidded ineffectually across the door instead. Charlie's arms went around Vincent's waist, his hands petting across Vincent's stomach, tugging at the shirt and making the buttons pull. Vincent couldn't help thinking of how much of a pain in the ass it would be to get that shirt fixed if Charlie managed to pop the buttons off with his pawing.

Almost before the thought made it through his head, he wondered what the hell could be wrong with him. The sexiest Cupid he'd ever seen in his life was groping him, and he was worried about his shirt buttons?

Then there was a purposeful, unmistakable roll of Charlie's hips, and Vincent groaned low in his throat. Charlie's cock, obviously in an advanced state of arousal, was rubbing right up against the upper swell of his ass, right where his tail would have been if they'd still been in their mythical forms. As far as Vincent was concerned, there was a magical button right on that spot that skipped "turned on" and went straight to "find me a flat surface right the hell now."

His breath caught in his throat, and he arched backward as he felt Charlie's teeth against the side of his neck, nibbling so lightly as to be almost ticklish. Charlie's hand found the bottom edge of his shirt and slid up, fingers splaying against the bare skin of Vincent's stomach, and Vincent clutched at the key card that was still in his hand. *I need to get us inside.*

With a concerted effort, he managed to find the card reader and slid the card into it, hoping he had it turned the right direction. To his relief, the LED glowed graciously, invitingly green, and he pushed down on the handle with a gusty sigh. The door swung inward, and Charlie's weight against his back pushed him forward. He stumbled, catching himself on the foot of the bed as the door fell shut behind them. He silently thanked humans for having doors that automatically closed and locked.

Charlie's hands were growing more insistent, roaming over his body, and Vincent felt whatever good intentions he had slipping away into a mess of pleasurable sensation. He told himself not to feel guilty; after all, even Achilles had his vulnerabilities. Of course Achilles's was his heel, and Vincent's was that one spot on the side of his neck that—oh *fuck*—Charlie was currently kissing. Or anywhere else Charlie was touching him, which at the moment, felt like everywhere.

"Are you—" Vincent shuddered as Charlie sucked his earlobe into his mouth, teasing the sensitive flesh with his teeth and tongue. "Oh... *oh*... um... Charlie, wait. Are you—oh yes, please—are you sure you—right there!—want to do this?"



Charlie didn't answer him in words, but his hands had finally managed to open Vincent's trousers and he was shoving them down Vincent's legs. Shivering with anticipation, Vincent helped get himself free of the cloth. A soft noise of pleasure worked its way out of his throat as Charlie palmed his ass, rubbing and massaging.

He'd been well on his way to fully aroused before, but he was *there* now. He wasn't sure what this sudden change in Charlie's demeanor was, but he wasn't going to argue. The silent, commanding thing the Cupid had going on was pushing all of Vincent's buttons, and that was even *before* Charlie starting doing very interesting things with his tongue.

Charlie put one hand on Vincent's shoulder and pushed, making Vincent lean over the bed. Vincent braced his hands shoulder-width apart and pushed back eagerly, arching in pleasure as Charlie's tongue danced over his flesh. It wasn't long before Charlie had maneuvered Vincent farther up on the bed and climbed up over him.

Vincent was close to being completely incoherent with bliss when Charlie plastered himself to Vincent's back, his rigid cock riding the crack of Vincent's ass. He couldn't escape the feeling that he was forgetting or overlooking something very important, but when Charlie humped against him, one hand sliding around Vincent's hip and seeking out Vincent's swollen cock, the nagging feeling slipped away in a rush of pleasure.

The head of Charlie's cock bumped against Vincent's hole, and he quivered, reaching back to hold himself open to encourage the Cupid. Charlie's chest, hot and already damp

with sweat, pressed against Vincent's shoulder blades, and Vincent savored the moment as Charlie paused.

When Charlie hadn't moved after several seconds, Vincent shifted a little. He didn't mind Charlie savoring the moment as well, but he'd like to have another moment to savor soon. When Vincent's wiggle didn't work, he reached up with the hand he'd been using to hold himself open and touched Charlie's hip.

"Charlie?"

There was no response. The remaining arm that Vincent had been propping himself up on was starting to quiver with the strain of holding up his and Charlie's combined weight, and he lowered himself to the bed, rolling a little so that Charlie wouldn't be right on top of him. Charlie didn't resist at all—in fact, he didn't even catch himself and went tumbling to the bed beside Vincent.

"Charlie, are you all right?" Panicked, Vincent ran his hands over Charlie's skin. He was flushed and sweating, but his skin felt cool, almost clammy. Charlie's eyes were closed, and his breath was coming in shallow pants, his perfectly curled hair sticking to his forehead with the sweat that was forming on his face. "Shit! Charlie!"

Vincent fumbled for Charlie's throat, laying two fingers along the artery to feel for a pulse. He forced himself to hold his breath, trying to slow his own heartbeat so that he could feel Charlie's better, and then exhaled in relief when he felt a pulse—faint and fluttering but there nonetheless.

Frantically he dug in Charlie's discarded pants for the cell phone that he knew the Cupid carried. It had the

number for the Corporation in it, and Vincent fumbled with the buttons until he found it. He held his breath as he dialed and waited for someone to pick up, one hand resting on Charlie's throat to reassure himself with the steady feel of Charlie's heartbeat.

He wasn't sure who he expected to answer the phone at the Corporation, but he certainly didn't expect to hear the Director's pleasant voice drawling a sleepy, "Hello?"

Vincent froze for a moment until a shuddering sigh from Charlie brought his attention back to the urgency of the situation. "Director? This is Vincent."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Vincent? Are you calling from Charles's phone? Where are you? What's wrong?"

Vincent took a deep, shaky breath and let it out slowly. "We're at the hotel. On Earth. Um... something's wrong with Charlie."

"What? Tell me what's going on." The Director didn't sound sleepy at all but alert and awake. Vincent thought he could hear her moving around. He described Charlie's symptoms to her and waited anxiously. He could hear muted conversations in the background now.

"Before this started happening—was he behaving in a sexual manner at all?"

Vincent blinked. "Y-yes."

"And is there any chance that he might have come into contact with or ingested any of the love potion that was sent with you?"

"No, I don't think—oh wait." Amy's drink. The lukewarm Cosmo. "Yeah, I think he did. A little."

"How much?"

"Less than a full human dose."

"How much less?"

"I don't know! It was mixed in a drink. He picked up the wrong glass accidentally." It wasn't exactly a lie, but it was close enough to the truth and took less time than explaining the whole thing.

"All right. Keep him cool and as hydrated as possible. He won't be able to drink and most likely won't regain consciousness, but drip a little water into his mouth every now and then. We're coming to get you. Someone will be there in less than an hour. If you haven't heard from us in that time, call me back."

"Will he be all right?" Vincent's heart was thudding up in his throat. Any arousal he'd felt earlier had disappeared entirely, and he felt starkly sober. The Cosmos and the Grateful Dead might as well have never existed.

The Director hesitated just a moment too long. "I hope so."

On that encouraging note, she disconnected the call. Vincent felt a yawning loneliness open up in his chest, edged with fear. Charlie's breath kept getting shallower. Vincent remembered what the Director had said about keeping him cool and hydrated and went to the bathroom to acquire a wet washcloth.

He found his pants on the way and pulled them back on, unwilling to be naked when the Corporation's rescue team showed up. After he'd bathed Charlie, he wondered if he should put Charlie's pants back on too, but Charlie's erection was still straining toward his stomach, dark with blood, and he had a feeling that would be painful. He didn't know whether he should try to relieve Charlie of the pressure or leave him alone, but he decided that since he didn't really know what was going on, he probably shouldn't do anything at all.

The rescue team was there in thirty minutes, looking harried and rushed. They bundled Charlie onto a stretcher, draped a sheet over him from his shoulders to his feet, and strapped him down. Vincent was watching them carry him out the door when he heard a *snick* and felt the unmistakable pressure of handcuffs around his wrists. Once you'd been cuffed once, you never forgot the feeling, even if this was a much different situation than the time he'd been cuffed to a djinn's headboard.

"Vincent Furnier, you are under arrest for the misuse of Corporation property and illegally administering a controlled substance to an employee of the Cupid Department. You will remain in custody until the time of your trial, at which time you will be asked to give an account of yourself and your activities. We recommend that you wait until we have arrived back at the Corporation before you speak about this issue to prevent you from inadvertently condemning yourself."

"Wait—illegal substance? What illegal substance?"

"Mr. Furnier, we recommend—"

“That I wait, I know what you said. Please just tell me what illegal substance you’re talking about.”

The law enforcement officer behind him hesitated, his breath hitching for a moment. “Love potion, Mr. Furnier. Love potion is poisonous to Cupids.”

Vincent felt all the fight go out of his body, and he collapsed back against the officer. Suddenly all the Director’s questions made sense. Vincent thought of Charlie’s erratic behavior, the urgency of his lust, and the frightening non-responsiveness. *Love potion is poisonous to Cupids.*

And wasn’t that just fucking ironic?

It was going to be a long trip back home.

## Part Five

### **In Which We Learn Our Heroes' Fates (a.k.a., *So Long, And Thanks For All The Fish*)**

THE Corporation's holding facilities weren't the best in the world, but Vincent supposed he couldn't complain. He was being tried for poisoning Charlie—it felt like a yeti was squeezing his heart when he thought of that—and they were waiting until they had a better idea of whether Charlie was even going to survive, just in case they needed to add a murder rap to his charges. Vincent came close to throwing up when they told him that.

Sitting in his one-room cell on the thin cot that was bolted to the wall, Vincent pulled his knees up to his chest and tried hard not to think about anything at all. He had his long white ears and his fuzzy white tail back, but he felt no joy in them. He would have traded them along with his entire wardrobe, G-strings and all, if he could only know that Charlie was going to pull through.

There was a rhythmic clinking sound, like keys jingling together, and Vincent rallied enough energy to look up. Hades was approaching his cell door, and Vincent didn't bother trying to smile.

"You look miserable, Vince," Hades noted, turning the key in the lock. He was carrying a tray of food that Vincent regarded without enthusiasm.

"Wouldn't you be?" Vincent mumbled. "And of course they're all going to think I did it on purpose to try to make him sleep with me."

Hades gave him a cautious look. "Did you?"

Any other time in his life, Vincent would have thrown such a tantrum at the accusation that he would have put every diva in the Corporation to shame. Now, thinking of Charlie on the verge of death, he just didn't have it in him. "No."

Hades set the tray down on the floor beside Vincent's cot and gave him what was supposed to be an encouraging smile. "They'll give you a fair trial, Vince, with witnesses and a jury and—"

"There were no witnesses to the event," Vincent said gloomily. "And I'm afraid character witnesses won't work in my favor on this occasion. And I was already on probation."

Hades paused, but Vincent could tell the god knew he was right. "Well, good luck. And be careful with the meals after this one—the wicked stepmothers have the next few shifts. You never know when one of them's going to poison an apple just for the hell of it."

"Thanks, Hades."

Vincent ate the meal despite the knot in his stomach, if only because he knew he'd be hungry later, and he didn't want to risk poisoning himself with one of the stepmothers'



apples. Although, he supposed, it would be a rather fitting punishment.

As it turned out, he didn't have to wait for the stepmothers. Not long after Hades left the food tray, he was back, unlocking the door to Vincent's cell again.

"Hey, Vince. They're ready for you."

"They are? What—is Charlie—did Charlie—"

"No change. But the doctors are saying that he's stabilized into a coma. He may stay like that for months, even years, so the Board has decided they're not going to put off your trial any longer."

"Oh gods."

"If you're on good terms with any, you might want to ask for them to be present at the trial." Before Vincent could ask, Hades shook his head. "Not me, man. I have to stay neutral. It's part of my job description." He shrugged. "Sorry."

Vincent just nodded forlornly and let Hades lead him out.

THE trial went exactly as Vincent expected it to, aside from one unpleasant surprise. Damon, the Satyr who had been involved in the supply-closet rendezvous, testified—in a blatant *lie*, Vincent would like to point out—that Vincent had tricked him into that little act of indiscretion. He was supposedly uncertain, because the memory was allegedly fuzzy, but maybe, perhaps, Vincent might have even used a bit of chemical assistance to persuade him.

“Not unless the sight of my fine ass counts as chemical assistance,” Vincent grumbled under his breath. His defense attorney—a good, earnest, honest lawyer, on loan from the Urban Legends Department—shushed him nervously.

Despite his attorney’s best efforts, the evidence against Vincent was overwhelming, especially since Charlie was lying comatose in the hospital. The jury, made up of such wise souls as Odin, Athena, and King Solomon, who was only a part-timer at the Corporation, was unanimous in its decision. There were a lot of other jurors that Vincent didn’t recognize, including a very old, very foreboding-looking owl who kept staring down his beak at Vincent like he was thinking he might want bunny rabbit for an after-dinner snack.

Several of the witnesses gave Vincent apologetic glances as they gave their testimonies, but Vincent was already resigned to his fate. As he’d told Hades, his past wasn’t going to help him out, not when he’d already been on probation anyway.

In the end, the jury had conferred and handed their decision to the Director, who read it aloud with a profound look of sadness.

“Vincent Furnier, in light of your probationary status along with the serious nature of your crime, you are hereby stripped of your position in the Easter Department and—” Her voice broke, but she cleared her throat and continued bravely. “And sentenced to the Hall of Forgotten Myths. You will be taken there without delay.”

The courtroom was filled with gasps and soft murmurs of sympathy, but Vincent barely heard any of it. He felt his

ears and tail disappear as his Easter Bunny status crumbled to nothing, but even that was of little consequence when compared to the rest of it. Charlie was in a coma, and Vincent had just been assigned an expiration date.

“Sorry,” Vincent’s attorney said, holding out his hand. “We tried.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Vincent told the man. “Thanks for everything.”

Two huge dogs appeared, one with three heads and the other with only one head but four eyes, and Vincent tried for a brave smile. He might not officially be a Bunny anymore, but one did not outgrow an entire lifetime of instincts when it came to what dangers to flee.

“Hello, Cerberus. Hello, Garm.” The dogs gave quiet growls in response, and Vincent glanced over at the jury. For a moment, he wished very uncharitably that Fenris had been sent to retrieve him instead of Garm. It would have been a bit satisfying to see Odin looking uncomfortable, and those two were never going to get along while the prophecy of Odin’s death was still unfulfilled.

With another warning growl from his canine escorts, Vincent allowed himself to be herded down, down, down the long, winding stairs to the River Styx and the Hall of Forgotten Myths.

TWO weeks, Vincent discovered, was a very long time when one had nothing to do but also very short when one knew one was going to be disappearing when the time was up.

Vincent spent his time playing cards with Charon. He'd started out with his own meager two-penny ante, but he'd been lucky for a couple of hands and had been racking up enough winnings to pay for several Styx crossings.

"So if I have enough money, can I pay you to ferry me *back* over?" Vincent asked once, examining the cards in his hand.

Charon gave him an unreadable look over his own cards. "No."

Vincent sighed and put two cards face down on the table. Charon slid him a couple of replacements, and Vincent scowled when he saw what they were.

"Your poker face needs work."

"Yeah, well, forgive me if I don't think it will come in handy anytime soon."

"You've got three days left." Charon shrugged and laid down his hand. Full house.

Vincent groaned and dropped his own three-of-a-kind. "How can you keep track of time down here?" He conveniently ignored Charon's morbid countdown. Three more days, and Vincent would be nothing but a memory—assuming anyone remembered him at all. It *was* called the Hall of Forgotten Myths. He'd never thought to ask how that worked, exactly.

"Are you tired of cards?" Charon gathered up the deck and tucked it into a pocket in his robes. "I've got dice if you want." He tossed the gamepieces onto the table between them, and Vincent stared at them in horror.

"Are those...?"

“Bones. Yup.”

Vincent shuddered. “No, thanks.” He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, wondering what it was going to feel like when he disappeared. Would he even know it? Would it hurt, or would he just cease to exist? “Hey, Charon?”

“Yeah?”

“Is there any hope at all that I won’t... you know... disappear?”

The sound Charon made didn’t invoke any kind of confidence. “Sorry, buddy. Not likely.”

Vincent latched onto the word and cracked one eye open to peer at Styx’s ferryman. “Not *likely* or not *possible*?”

Charon was rolling the bone dice over and over, and they made a rattling sound that ratcheted Vincent’s nervousness higher.

“Not *likely*. The Director would have to send down a reprieve—a reversal of the jury’s decision.”

“Fuck.” Vincent drew the word out slowly. “I’m a goner.”

A sad, lonely bell rang upriver, and Charon stood, leaving his dice on the table. “That’s me. Sounds like we’ve got another ferry-load ready to go over. If I’m not back before your three days are up... well, it’s been nice knowing you.”

Vincent put his face in his hands. “Yeah, you too.”

When Charon was gone, Vincent was left alone with just the table and the dice and the creepy, wet sound of the Styx. After a while—it could have been minutes or hours; it was impossible to tell—Vincent heard footsteps on the stairs.

It didn't sound like the dogs, and Hades was on shift in the holding facility and wouldn't be coming back for a while. Persephone was keeping an eye on the Underworld while he was gone, so she wouldn't be coming from that direction, either. Vincent supposed it might be the Grim Reaper, coming down to see what was going on.

The last thing he expected to hear was a hoarse but unmistakable voice of an agent of love.

"What, you haven't demanded better accommodations than this yet?"

Vincent's entire body snapped to attention, but he was afraid to open his eyes. He wasn't in the Pits of Tartarus. This couldn't possibly be a dirty trick Hades was playing on him, could it? Still with his eyes closed, he ventured, "It's a little dank, but there haven't been any roaches, at least."

The raspy chuckle that greeted his words finally pried his eyes open, and he gasped at what he saw. Charlie, looking pale and gaunt but absolutely beautiful, was leaning against the wall at the foot of the stairwell. His wings, perhaps even more golden than the last time Vincent had seen them, rustled as he folded and unfolded them nervously.

"You're alive!"

Charlie gave him a sheepish grin. "Yeah. Woke up a couple of days ago and was all pissed off that you hadn't come to see me while I was in the hospital. Then I found out that they'd sent you down here. Nobody could remember whether they'd given you the full two weeks or not, so I...." Charlie's voice trailed off as his smile faltered. "I really wasn't sure if you'd still be here or not."

Vincent finally found the coordination to push himself up out of the chair. He approached Charlie, not really sure what he was going to do but wanting to be closer to the Cupid.

"I, um.... Yeah, I only have three days left. Maybe two now. I don't know how long it's been since Charon told me that." He smiled sadly. "I'm glad you came to see me before I... before. It makes me feel better to know you didn't die." That reminded him, suddenly, why he was even here in the first place, and he gave Charlie a horrified look. "Oh! I—I didn't do it on purpose. I want... I need you to know that I didn't do it to make you sleep with me. I'm sorry. I had put the potion in Amy's drink, and then she didn't drink it, and then I forgot about it, and...."

"It's all right, Vincent," Charlie said quietly. "I know you didn't mean it. And you didn't know that it was poisonous to Cupids, did you?"

Vincent shook his head silently. Even though it wasn't a reversal of his sentence, having Charlie's forgiveness meant a lot to him. It took a lot of the weight off his chest. At least, Vincent thought, he would be able to disappear peacefully. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all.

"Well, I... um. Thanks for coming to see me. I'm sure you don't want to hang around and see me disappear, but it really means a lot to me that you came all the way down here." He frowned suddenly. "Do you have someone to help you back up the stairs? You look like you're still recovering, and that's a long way up."

Charlie gave him such a bashful smile that Vincent's heart stuttered in his chest. "I was rather hoping you'd help me back up, actually."

Disappointment crashed through Vincent's stomach. This was what he'd expected a Cupid to be like all along—sweet and romantic and full of thoughtful gestures and kind words that made his heart flutter—and he was so very sorry that he wouldn't be around to see Charlie like this for much longer.

"I wish I could, Charlie, but I can't leave here. I'm sure I could call someone... or Charon or Hades should be by in a while. Persephone or the Reaper might even—"

Charlie was shaking his head, and Vincent broke off with a frustrated sigh. "I'd really rather it be you, Vincent." He held out a piece of paper tied with a ribbon that bore the Director's seal. Vincent stared at it distrustfully for a long moment before Charlie thrust it at him again.

With shaking hands Vincent took the parchment and carefully broke the seal, crumpling the ribbon in his fist and clutching at it like a lifeline while he unrolled the scroll.

*Upon the admittance of new evidence and the testimony of one Charles Ross, I hereby reverse the verdict of "guilty" for Vincent Furnier and order that he be reinstated....*

Vincent couldn't read past the first sentence, his eyes were so full of moisture. "I... is this...? I'm not.... Is it true?"

Charlie was smiling at him, looking young and vulnerable and nothing like the guarded Cupid he'd met in a dusty, messy office all those weeks ago. "Yeah. I told her all about the assignment, about the incomplete information in



the file, about the conditions of the hotel room they sent us to at first—about everything. And I told her that it had been an accident... that you hadn't known."

Charlie reached out with one unsteady hand and touched Vincent's hair, trailing his fingers down along Vincent's cheek.

"And I told her that you wouldn't have had to use the potion to get me to sleep with you, so you had no motive, either."

Vincent blinked. That was news to him. "I... wouldn't?"

Charlie looked embarrassed but maintained eye contact. "Once I saw that you cared, that you were on my side... I already liked you, Vincent. I just needed to trust you." The hand touching Vincent's face fell away, and Vincent missed the contact instantly. "I might not have planned to sleep with you *that night*, but I was already starting to think about it. You're very attractive." Charlie looked away. "Not that I had any delusions that you would want me. I mean, I know you can—and do—have anyone you want, so...."

"Please don't think that about me," Vincent said quietly. "It might have been true in the past, but I was... well, I was getting tired of it. Sex isn't really all that fun with random strangers."

"Not even when they're celebrity twins?"

"What did Pollux and Castor tell you? That was just once! And I was frustrated! And I was miserable and regretted it, anyway."

Charlie grinned, sharklike, and Vincent thought that maybe he hadn't changed so much after all. "Yeah, you were

pretty pathetic. I felt kind of bad about leaving you alone—I was afraid you'd throw up and choke yourself or something."

Vincent blinked again and wished he hadn't walked away from his chair. He could have done with something to sit down on right then. "You—you were the one who came and got me from Mizu's party?"

Charlie shrugged again, his wings fluttering softly behind him. "Mizu called me. She said you'd been asking for me."

Vincent vaguely recalled that he might have said that he wanted to see Charlie a time or six. "Oh gods, I'm so embarrassed."

Charlie fixed him with a serious look and cleared his throat. "So, um. You're back in the Easter Bunny Department, and the Director has promised that she would order an audit of the Cupid Department's ethics committee, assisted by the records I was keeping in my desk drawer. And... I'd be really happy if you'd help me get home."

Vincent clutched at the document in his hand and forced himself to relax his grip so he wouldn't crinkle this proof of his freedom.

"I think I owe you that much at least," Vincent murmured quietly. He stepped closer, intending to let Charlie lean against his shoulder, but the Cupid reached out and pulled him into an embrace.

With his face buried in Vincent's neck, Charlie murmured, "I know you're not used to having to wait for things, and I hate to ask you to be patient with me after all this, but...."

Vincent laughed and clutched Charlie to him, being careful of his golden wings. “My life would be over in three days if it weren’t for you,” he said, and his voice sounded thick and maybe a little wet. “As far as I’m concerned, the rest of it belongs to you. We can take as much time as you need.”

Charlie relaxed into Vincent’s body and breathed a deep sigh of relief. “Thank you,” he said, turning his face to press a shy kiss just under Vincent’s ear. Vincent pulled back just enough to look into Charlie’s eyes and smiled.

“Thank *you*.”

Their first kiss was sweet and gentle and perfect, everything a first kiss should be, and Vincent couldn’t help feeling like his heart had suddenly grown wings. But when Charlie nuzzled his face and kissed him again, Vincent groaned and broke away, resting his forehead against Charlie’s.

“What is it?” Charlie sounded nervous and insecure, and Vincent kissed him again just to reassure him.

“It’s nothing. I was just thinking of how much crap Dionysus is going to give me over this.”

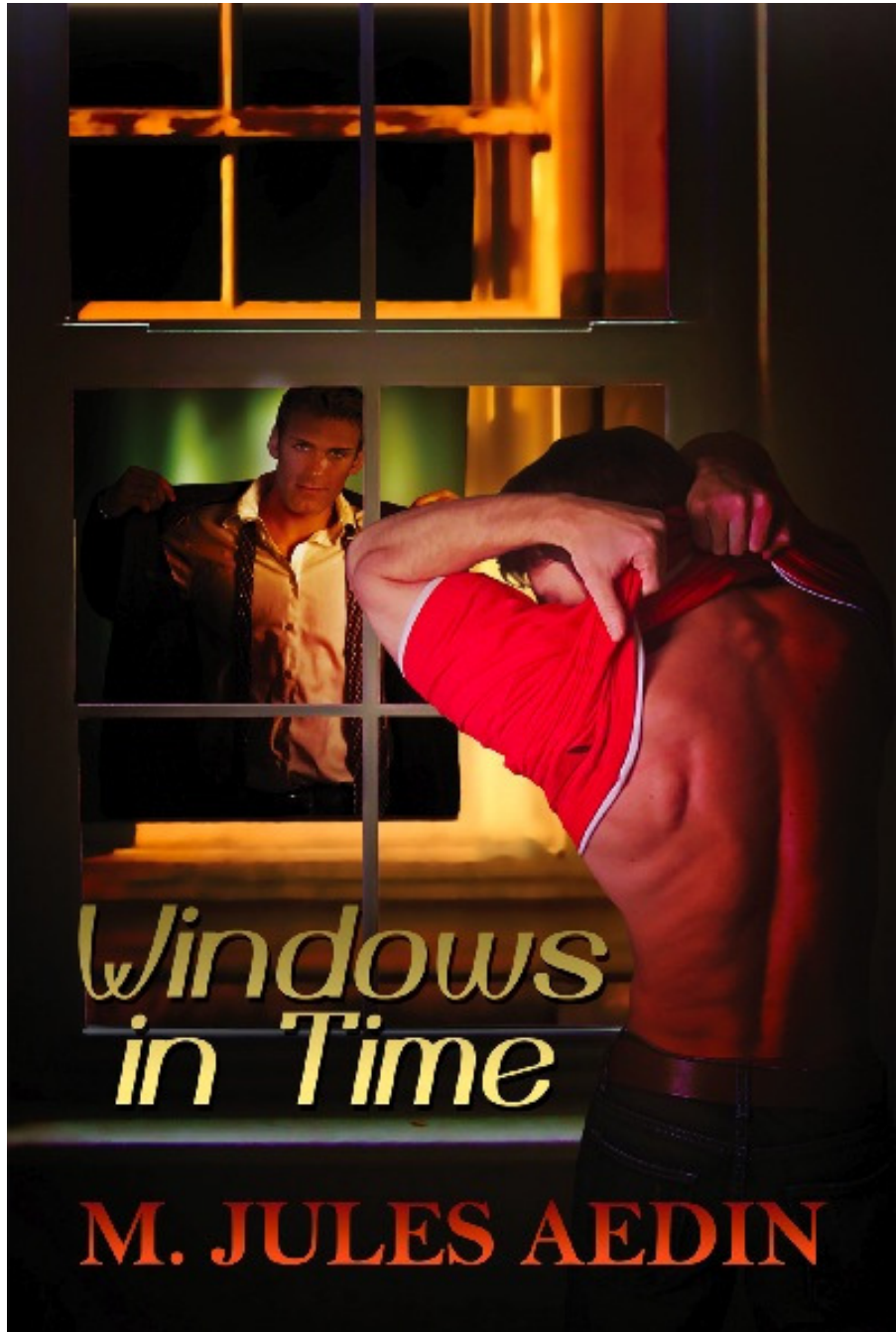
Charlie laughed and turned in Vincent’s arms. “Well, let’s go give him a chance to do just that.”

And slowly, carefully, side by side, they began their climb.

Growing up Southern has been an interesting experience for M. JULES AEDIN, whose philosophy is best summed up by Joni Mitchell: "I don't know who I am, but life's for learning." When not reading or playing video games or writing (or doing all three at once!) Jules is generally trying to pretend to be a responsible adult and at least do laundry once in a while.

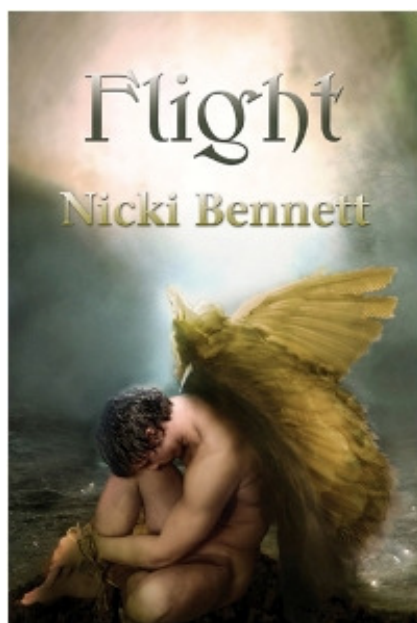
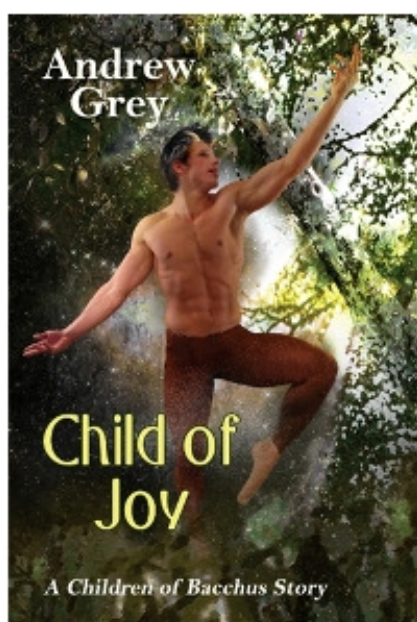
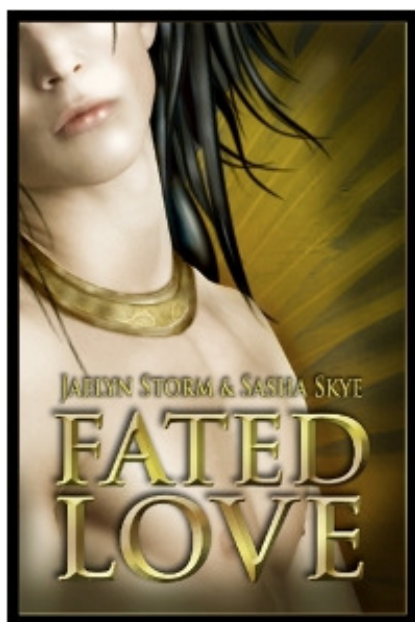
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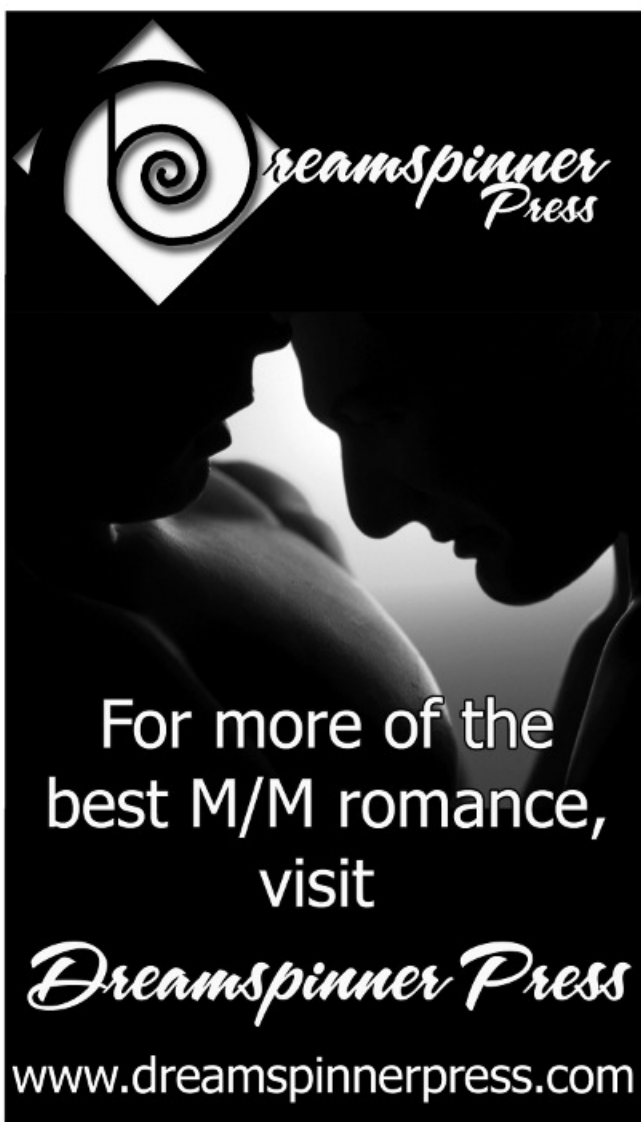


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