



OF SUITS AND SWORDS

ANDRA SASHNER

Of Suits and Swords
By Andra Sashner

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CHAPTER 1 – EXACTLY

"Male," Alexis said quietly but firmly. "I want to be entertained by a man."

"Of course, Mr Grayson," Jake, the front desk gentleman replied, his Customer Relations name tag glinting from the lapel of his suit jacket. He'd obviously had his job a while now, he didn't even bat an eye at the request and simply asked, "Are there any other important stipulations, sir?"

"Confident." With a little wrinkle of his nose he said, "I don't want one of those nervous little greenhorns who laugh funny because they're so tense." He pursed his lips a moment, "Or who are uncomfortable hosting a man." He pressed two fingertips to his own chest, adding, "And I'm rather quiet so I want someone who'll talk." He gestured away from his chest, generally indicating someone very different from himself. "But not a chatterbox, I don't want someone who is just trying to fill the silence. I want someone with control." He lifted one shoulder in a shrug and asked as though already expecting an answer in the negative, "Do you have anyone who isn't going to waste my time?"

"I believe we may have someone suitable, sir," Jake nodded. He gave one of those refined, accommodating little smiles and gestured politely. "If you'll have a seat, allow me to have him brought here to escort you in."

"Thank you." Alexis turned smartly on his heel and marched over to the couches lining the front room and its floor to ceiling walls of windows. He unbuttoned his dinner jacket as he sat and angled himself to look outside and admire the sparkling lights of the city below, pushing a lock of his ice blond hair from his face.

Trademark's Club, a new and fast-becoming popular place, was situated at the top floor of the Tower Majestic Hotel building, affording many simple luxuries height could bring. Alexis had heard the club included a pool, and as he quite enjoyed those, it was another feature that'd drawn him here this evening... but maybe not that tonight. Tonight, he had more interest for the main reason he'd decided to come here.

Hosts.

He'd been told he could be hosted here and there were *extensive* choices. The way Basil had told him about this place, he'd expected a sleazy front hall in a buffet selection of people. Instead, the place seemed refined and classy, subdued though not quiet. The front hall, mostly empty save for passing staff, had pale marble floors, polished and shining; the décor and furniture coordinated in dark and light tones in a low-key and classy contemporary style. Minimalistic but contrasted with colours and patterns—

"Sir?"

Alexis stood unhurriedly, refastening his jacket as two sets of glossy shoes stepped into view. He looked expectantly at Jake, ignoring the host for the moment, noticing faintly that the man seemed nervous. Jake's over-confident demeanour was gone, but he still flawlessly gestured, presenting his companion, and Alexis slid his eyes over to the host...

Tall, he noted with a little furrow of his brows, eyes following the row of buttons up. He himself stood five feet and nine inches, but this man cleared well over six feet tall.

Dark gray suit, tailored to fit, silver pocket kerchief and silver pin, a red shirt just a shade shy of being loud, no tie and throat bare save for a simple silver chain. Firm-jawed, not quite square but definitely held that angle of stubbornness, thin lips and slender nose, dark hair cropped short and moulded into miniature spikes, pale hazel eyes.

"Good evening, sir," the host said, pulling one hand from his pocket and holding it out. "My name is Gage. It's my pleasure to host you this evening." His voice, deep and resonant should belong to a singer.

But Alexis frowned a little; he would be considered the 'senior' as a guest and should be first to hold out his hand... and then only if he agreed to choose this man. His face still tilted up at Gage, he slid his gaze sideways. Jake nodded imperceptibly, a small and reassuring smile on his face. Darting his gaze back to the host, he relented and held out his own hand.

"Alexis." But just when Jake turned away and Alexis relaxed into the initial pleasantries, Gage suddenly gripped his hand harder and yanked him forward. He only just managed to keep his more dangerous reflexes in check and let himself be pulled flush against Gage's chest. Frown deepening, he glared up at Gage, "Perhaps it's a useless question but what do you think you're doing?"

"Getting to know you better," Gage rumbled easily, lips quirked. He slid an arm around Alexis's waist, curling himself almost possessively around Alexis and kept him near as they crossed past the front desk and through the doors into the club.

Alexis glared up at him the entire way. The nerve of this host? But at least it wasn't boring, which was what his evening should have been, and so he tolerated the audacity. And judging by the way Gage flashed him a smug smile, perhaps the host really did know what he was doing. At any rate, he conceded, Gage seemed to cross off the list of all he'd requested; there was potential he'd gotten exactly what he wanted.

Good. He detested wasting his time.

They stepped between a pair of bouncers through a door into the main club, instrumental lounge beats playing at a pitch just right to fill the place with sound yet not require people to shout over it to be heard. The lighting had been lowered to half-shadows, candles burning in flat bowls of water, glowing lights on the walls to provide a glow of illumination but no direct spotlight. Décor, lighting and music combined to give the venue a feel of being an understated place of lounging, to relax and unwind.

Alexis dipped his chin once in approval. He liked it. He glanced up at his companion, noting the satisfaction Gage seemed to find in his approval, but said nothing.

"Quiet, I understand," Gage murmured, eyes studying Alexis carefully. "But there is a wealth of knowledge in your eyes. A mind at constant work, I see. And yet you prefer to be spoken to, not speak yourself when you have much to say?"

"Even if I were to open my mouth and said what I wanted to," Alexis returned, trying to bait the man, "if you did not understand them then there would be no point."

"So you dislike small talk." Gage's lips quirked again in amusement, accurately reading between the lines, "I do believe your words were: do you have anyone who isn't going to waste my time?"

Alexis frowned slightly, "How do you know I said that?"

"There's a video and sound feed from the front hall to the hosts' private lounges," Gage replied, smile widening into a wicked grin. "You can't see us but we can see you. It helps us decide who should host our guests. In your case it helped me decide if I would be able to handle you," he leaned in closer to whisper suggestively into Alexis's ear, "be able to please you."

"I was led to believe this was not a venue that catered to anything but entertainment," Alexis said sharply, annoyed at the forward move. He hadn't expected that implication..

"Oh, Trademark doesn't," Gage replied easily, eyes twinkling with amusement, and yet his expression showed he understood he'd startled his guest. "But you see, you're so delicious I couldn't help but tease you a little."

"I came here to unwind, not be wound up," Alexis retorted. He didn't move from Gage's grip, much as the conversation seemed heated, because he could lose his temper if he wanted to, yet still enjoy the simple pleasure of being touched, being held.

Gage's grip tightened briefly, eyes flashing with more inferences, "We've only just met and yet I would so love to... *unwind* you." He laughed, loosening his hold, when Alexis glowered up at him for that. "Ahh, don't mind me too much, I'm enjoying myself teasing you. But this isn't about me, is it?" He smiled again, this time without the desire and teasing, "It's about you. Come, let us sit and lounge, and I'll see to your relaxation, hm?"

Following the direction Gage put into the arm about his waist Alexis followed to a separated and secluded corner of the club. His eyes roved appreciatively over the splendid view this corner offered, tucked behind a freestanding partition wall to face the evening sky and the sparkling lights of the city below. Gage directed him to recline in the overstuffed couch, pulling Alexis flush against his body.

"I love this view," Gage murmured, silently holding up a finger then pointing at himself when a waiter came to take their order. "I spend as much of my evenings as I can here and often sit here after work."

Alexis remained quiet, this was what he'd come for, to listen to someone else and forget his own life. He wondered a bit about the waiter; he hadn't decided what he wanted, but Gage was taking control and really, Alexis made hard decisions all day so if someone wanted to take a few away, as small as they were, he would give it up. Here was a place he did not have to be in control.

"I'm often accused of having an over-active imagination, you see," Gage continued, still speaking of the view. "Because I like to say that sitting here is like sitting on top of the world. Like a King. I have everything I want." He smiled suddenly, chuckling at himself, "Well, maybe almost everything because I am still missing a few very important things." He looked over at Alexis. "There are times you think you have what you want and yet really don't. Because what you want and think you want, differ greatly from what you really need." With a self-exasperated sort of shrug, "What you want may not always be what you need, may not be what will make you happy."

Alexis nodded. He felt like that all the time. He got something he wanted being where he was now in his life, but while he'd thought it would bring him happiness –and it had, make no mistake—it brought so much unhappiness in other aspects. He could sympathise with Gage. He understood.

The waiter appeared again, cradling a tall and slender bottle in his hands, presenting it not to Alexis but to Gage, who nodded and said, "Perfect," indicating the waiter to serve it. The first flute, Gage turned to hand to Alexis, his other arm still securely around Alexis's waist, leaning in to him as though cradling him as he handed the glass over.

Taking a quick sip, Alexis rolled the champagne around on his tongue. It tasted sweet yet sharp, fuller in flavour than he expected of a usually rather vapid drink, headier than most he'd had before, but he liked it and nodded.

"Now, I suppose the next step is to decide what those missing things are," Gage decided firmly, accepting his own glass from the waiter, who bowed then left. "And then establish how to get them." He grinned suddenly, lifting his glass in a toast, eyes flashing with mischief, "That's the fun part, I think. The point when it's time to prepare tactics to acquire one's goals. Chases are thrilling, make no mistake, but unless the prize is precious then I do not see the point. I prefer to save my efforts for such endeavours, for the more important fights, shall we say." With that, he tilted his glass toward Alexis'.

Again Alexis agreed. He let many offensive things go by often because in the grand scheme of things the results or the people were not important to any of his goals. Hmm, he was turning out to have values in common with a host. He shrugged the thought away; he did not disrespect this man for his profession. He met Gage's gaze, chinked his glass against the host's and inclined his head in whole-hearted agreement.

They drank to it.

The next two hours passed lazily by, Gage discussing his pursuits in leisure things and covering topics across movies, performances, sports. Alexis listened, lulled into a waking daze at the stories. He found himself chuckling at a few stories, of experiences shared that he would likely never have himself; he wasn't so companionable a character as Gage –who lapped his responses up. The host certainly knew what he was doing, holding a less than single-sided conversation though he did most of the talking. All the while, Alexis paid attention and imagined, snorted in some places for more than a few reasons, and smiled or frowned in others.

The waiter came by regularly to help them refill their glasses, careful to remain as unnoticeable as possible. Gage remained the entire time leaning into Alexis' side, arm still curled tightly around his guest's waist, and Alexis could not help but turn into the touch, enjoying every moment of it since he got so little of it in his daytime life.

When conversation relaxed, a comfortable silence descending, Gage smiled and without looking, set his glass down on the couch-side table.

"Tell me, Alexis," Gage murmured. "May I beg a favour?"

"Tell me what the favour is first," Alexis responded quietly, barely giving the question voice, enjoying the heady effects of the champagne.

"Your scent reminded me of this champagne, hence why I chose it. I still think it suits you," Gage replied softly, leaning in close to brush his nose over Alexis' hair. He pulled back a little, "And I would like to taste it on your lips, if you please." He sighed, angling his head in his interest, eyes intently studying Alexis' lips. He implored on a whispering breath, "I beg you."

"Surely it would be improper of you to kiss your clients?" Alexis returned, not quite certain he wanted to refuse, pulling the glass up and closer to himself between them.

Gage's eyes flashed, gaze quickly meeting and holding Alexis' own. He said firmly, "I have never kissed any of my clients." He solemnly entreated, "But I want to kiss you. And I would like to kiss you for who you are, not because you are my client. Perhaps I should say, in spite of it." Expression becoming intense, he asked again, "May I taste you, Alexis?"

Held tightly, cradled against Gage as he'd been all evening, Alexis stilled. He remained there pressed into the crook of Gage's arm, bodies flush against the other's from shoulder to knee, not moving but thinking.

Gage waited, lounging on his side, curling his much larger frame against Alexis, one arm still looping the smaller man's waist. The other hand, now free from the champagne glass, stroked ghostly touches over Alexis' jaw, skimmed up to touch over his ear then brushed over his hair. Gentle, fleeting touches meant to put Alexis at ease.

The grip on him wasn't frightening, he realised. Alexis normally avoided being touched by people, keeping his distance and hiding his personal thoughts away until night fell, and he paid for a host to keep him company. Sometimes he would be lucky enough to find one who would touch him voluntarily.

But Gage wanted him. Without knowing who he was, or maybe Gage did know, but that was beside the point; this host wanted him. Hosts were bound by contracts and the codes of conduct within at their places of employment, which made them the most ideal to suit Alexis' purposes. And it would always be up to Alexis to accept or reject. The security of that made him bold now, lifting his glass to his lips;

"Yes." He tilted it up and drained it then handed it to Gage. "Yes, I will let you taste me."

Eyes formerly shining with interest now burned bright and hot with desire. Gage reached and set the glass down, again without looking, and instead of leaning back in to claim his favour, he remained leaning a little away, eyes roving over Alexis' face.

Alexis knew what Gage would see, his long and slender frame, fitted closely by his tailored dinner jacket and shirt, his matching trousers. He didn't try to hide his elfin features, his pale complexion and hair, instead emphasizing it by wearing dark suits in sharp cuts. But he didn't want to be looked at and so he aimed to distract: tilting his head, his fringe slipped over onto his forehead, a faint curtain over one eye, eyelids slipping heavily half-over his gaze, lips parting a little in anticipative invitation.

Gage smiled, a half warm, half wicked, curve, and leaned close. His lips touched at Alexis' chin, brushed lightly up his jaw to his ear where he whispered, "You're very handsome, Alexis. I fear a kiss will only make me hunger for more of you but I cannot seem to restrain myself now that you have given consent." Then he dragged his lips over Alexis' cheek and slowly over Alexis' mouth, a light and barely-there presence without movement, breathing softly against each other then he whispered on a breathless moan, "Alexis."

Then suddenly Alexis was being pressed into the couch by Gage's body, mouth suddenly plundered, a strong and knowing tongue stroking over his own. He gasped, lips parting further and Gage took the advantage to slant his head and deepen the kiss that much more, stealing Alexis' breath.

Mindlessly, Alexis reached, arms clinging around Gage's shoulders, hands pressing at the broad back above him, arching to press back against the weight against him. He responded to the heat and sweeping sensation of the kisses, dizzying mad fire racing in his veins and making his skin tingle, sensitive to Gage's touch. He shivered at the tightening grip of the arm around his waist, obeyed when the other hand captured his jaw, demandingly angling his face to receive the kisses, and groaned when it moved, stroked downward firmly over his chest and to his stomach.

Tangled in his clothes and in Gage's arms, Alexis felt as though he were drowning in desire and want. He revelled in being held like this, possessively by one in control, who so obviously knew what he was doing, who knew how to dominate and demand submission. Alexis moaned at the firm touches, the bold hands, the skilful kisses. It was not enough... and yet too much.

With one arm holding him in place at his waist, body pressed against him, Alexis was almost powerless when that hand skimmed over his trouser front and stroked the evidence of his response there.

Almost.

He wrenched his lips free, arms pulling back to grip at Gage's shoulders and push, and he stated, "Enough!"

Gage froze. Then relaxed, loosening his hold, hand withdrawing its intimate touch, and he leaned up to meet Alexis' gaze. "I apologise for taking more than I should."

The instant apology assuaged Alexis' temper. He nodded, "Too much."

"Thank you, pretty elfling," Gage whispered, pulling away to his former hold that while still too close, was certainly better, gave Alexis room to breathe. "I hope I haven't frightened you off. I do want to see you again."

"I'm not easily frightened," Alexis returned snappishly, unable to help it, accustomed to being irritated by people who treated him delicately because of his delicate appearance. He ignored the little nick name, appeased by the tender way it had been spoken, the lack of mocking.

"Hm, no," Gage agreed. "You're more than capable, I think, of handling yourself." He tilted his head, "Do you practice a martial art? Your body is firm with the evidence of a discipline, not of visits to a gym."

"I do," Alexis answered, relaxing again, glancing briefly over at the champagne glasses and wishing he could have some more to continue as they were. He smoothed his hand over one of Gage's tall shoulders, considering how the man had guessed about him and asked, "Do you?"

"Yes, I do as well," came the quiet response, reaching to press a button by the side table which Alexis hadn't noticed was there until now. "But first, tell me what you do."

Hesitation, just a moment, then he replied, "Aikido and tai chi chuan. Yourself?"

"Kenjitsu," Gage answered, "And some tae kwon do. It appears we both take a mix of arts." He smiled, a touch of satisfaction in it, "We seem to have quite a few things in common."

"It seems so," Alexis agreed vaguely.

A waiter appeared, summoned by the button Gage had pushed. He poured their last glassfuls then slipped away.

Alexis sipped this last drink slowly, suddenly loathe to have this night end. But he had determined and made the front desk aware that he was having only one bottle. And surely, without the promise of further income from the purchasing of drinks, the host would soon excuse himself and attend someone else.

He pushed the thought from his mind. He didn't want to think of Gage as a host or that would only bring out his more jaded side. This was his time, the only time he had for himself and company he did not need to fear would rat him out later.

"Your thoughts seem heavy, elfling," Gage murmured, leaning in to brush a feather-light kiss over Alexis' cheek. "I must not be doing a sufficient job at distracting you."

"I apologise," Alexis murmured, sipping his drink. "I was just thinking that our night is coming to an end."

"And you do not wish it so, I see," Gage commented, looking very pleased. He grinned, "So of course you should come back. Tonight can be the first of many more nights."

Trying to frown, "You're audacious; you do know that, don't you?"

"Of course!" Grinning, Gage dipped his head and stole a quick kiss. "I hear it's one of my more frustrating qualities but I assure you, it's worth it if I can prod a rise out of a non-talker like you and get to steal kisses as well."

Shaking his head, Alexis found he was too amused to be truly upset. "You shouldn't steal too many or they may lose their novelty."

Feigning a shocked expression, Gage pressed a hand to his chest, "Out of the question! I don't think I could ever grow weary of your kisses." He swiftly stole yet another one.

Alexis found himself smiling, half-heartedly trying to hide it behind his glass as he drank. It might only be a ploy, a little entertainment in a darkened corner but perhaps because it was so, it held no pressure and there were no demands of him. "Very audacious," he corrected himself. "But I enjoy it and you, you smug imp, know it."

"Ahh," Gage sighed with theatrical woe. "Alas for you, I do." Grinning suddenly, he drained his glass and took Alexis' own when he finished his, then set them aside. With a small and rather mysterious smile, he wrapped himself over his guest once more. "I'm going to kiss you now Alexis." The smile held a touch of reluctant parting to it now, "And at the end of it, while your eyes are still closed and you whisper my name, I will get up and slip away."

Startled, Alexis blinked a questioning look at him, allowing himself to be gathered close.

"I will do so because I don't want to say goodbye to you," Gage continued, stroking Alexis' hair back from his face. "And then you will come back another night, and we'll talk some more, and this night will never seem to have ended." He stroked fingertips gently down Alexi's jaw and over his neck to his pulse-point, pausing there to feel the steady throb of his heartbeat. "Do you understand?"

Alexis nodded.

"Good night, my little elfling," Gage whispered and bent, mouth possessing Alexis suddenly, tongue parting his lips and reaching in to pour heat into his mouth.

Alexis groaned, arching and pressing close, arms reaching, clinging, and his chin tilting to kiss back. He could feel the same quality of lust as earlier pour through him, a pure and pristine sort of want, the effortless kind that demanded a little too much unless you mindfully tempered it.

Gage gave a soft groan, perhaps sensing how Alexis wanted to surrender control to him, hands insistently roving, touching and demanding. Then the kiss gentled, making Alexis moan into it, the tender slipping of lips over his, the soft clinging bites at his mouth, the gentle hand smoothing over his face and hair.

"Gage," he whispered when the kiss broke, and he obediently kept his eyes shut. A regretful sigh escaped when he felt Gage's weight finally shift and move away. His hands clung to Gage's clothes as much as the host's did to him, but finally the host pulled completely away and he let his hands drop to his side on the couch. He didn't hear footfalls.

In. Out. He breathed, calming himself and once he felt more like himself, never mind the alcohol he had imbibed, he snapped his eyes open and glanced around.

He was alone.

Slowly he stood, straightened his clothes, smiling slightly to himself. It had been worth it to come here, and he half-wondered if perhaps he should never return, so the memory might never be marred. It was a possibility, since he had so few memories he could look back on and smile about. He would think on that.

Admiring the view one last time he carefully, mindful of his slightly unbalanced gait, left this beautiful little corner, walked through the club and made his way out.

In the elevator, he stuck his hands into his pockets and whistled a sprightly and happy little tune.

CHAPTER 2 - SLEIGHT

"I understand you've changed venues of preference for your weekly little escapes," Jonathan Grayson murmured off hand, all the more dangerous for such a controlled and lazy tone.

Alexis, long since schooled in keeping his thoughts from his own father, didn't so much as have a change of breath; he knew the old geezer kept tabs on him. "Why, yes," he acknowledged, sounding absent, eyes still on the report in his hands. "I did." But then he did look up, smiling slightly and a little sarcastically to say, "Perhaps you might find a visit there beneficial yourself, sir, since they cater to varied tastes."

Jonathan's eyes flickered with approval.

Alexis knew his response covered all the subtle little bases; an instant acknowledgement of the probing personal question so as not to allow your opponent to know he had one on you, to make the information they had painstakingly gathered seem instantly worthless. And the sudden personal invitation, the friendly overture, to throw a malicious person off guard. But always... there was a loophole: to be called on the bluff.

"Perhaps I will," Jonathan said. He paused then thrust, "When are you available?"

Alexis' smile widened the tiniest fraction and he resisted the urge to gesticulate as he pointed out, "I don't recall inviting myself to be your escort, sir." Eyes sparkling, he looked back down at the report.

Touché said the inclination of Jonathan's head.

Alexis only continued to smile. Was it sad he loved these little exchanges?

Tone turning business-like Jonathan returned to matters at hand, "But you did commit yourself to working on the venture with the Kerrigan Corp." His gaze turned pointed, "I have received word that Monday suits them best. You have only four more days to prepare but I think that sufficient."

"Yes sir." Alexis' smile fell off his face and tension slipped into his posture, and he forced himself to look up at the indifferent expression on his father's face. Studiously he resisted the urge to clench his fists, would not give away he'd hoped his father wouldn't push that one and instead thought wistfully back to the host who'd let him sit by, who'd talked to him and made him feel comfortable.

Jonathan pulled out a somewhat thick document envelope from his desk and handed it over, "Be sure you review him. That point you and I were discussing is true, by the way, Gregory Kerrigan takes lovers of both genders."

Suppressing a shudder at the blank tone in his father's voice, Alexis accepted the profile and added it to his pile.

"The boys," Jonathan began, referring to his lawyers, "tell me that he may seem lazy and laid back when you first meet him. They tell me it's a cover. He's best likened to a sleeping tiger, best left alone and dangerous when provoked. He won't be like anyone else you've encountered before."

"Why, sir," Alexis crooned in a return jab of his own, "You sound worried about me. Afraid your training won't hold?"

Pausing a moment, chin angled in consideration as he looked his son over, Jonathan thoughtfully commented, "You look regal in moonlight and in four nights' time, Monday, is the full moon." He ignored his son's question, obviously tired of the games, and reached to make a note in his diary. "I'll let you know where the meeting will be."

Alexis refrained from gritting his teeth.

Jonathan passed a sheaf of papers to his son, addressing a new issue. "Here. On this, I agree with your assessments. The percentage of decline in the north is becoming noticeable. Before we reach a point of needing to cut losses, let us trim what we can to avoid such a situation."

"Yes sir." Alexis murmured, gathering the papers, "We were profitable enough with the food shipping before we built the other contracts. I'll see if I can find a way out of a few of the least profitable ones." He headed off his father before the man could speak, "And if I can't get us out, I will make sure we at least get rid of the dead weight." He met his father's gaze, "Personally, if I have to."

Jonathan nodded and Alexis stood.

Shutting the office door carefully behind himself, Alexis rolled his eyes when he spotted his right hand man and executive assistant, Basil, chatting up the new consultant in the far corner. The very stoic, very no-nonsense, very *male* consultant who'd recently been contracted by the Grayson Group as an expert in programming and integration of security technology –and who also happened to have come very highly recommended from one of Alexis' few personal friends in the business world.

He wanted to keep both that friend and the consultant.

Alexis calmly walked the few steps over to the receptionist's desk right by his father's office door. He set his armload down and began to shift the papers, rearranging his armful. "Beth?"

"Yes, Alexis."

"How long has Basil been terrorizing Mr Mori?"

Her lips twitched. "About seven minutes now, sir."

"Let's not hit the eight minute mark," Alexis sighed, slanting her a look. "Kindly have a quick walk over to Basil and tell him I might like to castrate him today."

"Yes, sir." Not even bothering to disguise her smile, Beth disconnected her headset and quickly got to her feet. She gleefully crossed the office and tapped Basil on the shoulder –Alexis watched this in his peripheral vision—and pulled him down so she could speak in his ear.

Mr Mori, however, appeared to have very good hearing because he said, just loud enough that Alexis heard him, "Sir Alexis should just let me know. I'd quite like permission to do it myself."

Amidst the chuckles, Basil slunk miserably back in Beth's tow. "Did you really have to humiliate me like that?"

"I sincerely doubt Mr Mori thought you were doing a lesser job before I arrived," Alexis reprimanded, finally looking up from the papers. "Did you bring the bag I asked for these?"

"Hm? Oh, here." Basil swept up the leather case from behind the front room couch. He helped pack the bag as he complained, "You know, Kazuhi might not like my style of approach, man, but you know I grow on people. I just wanted to get to know the guy first... the other stuff doesn't have to follow right away."

"But you do expect things to follow, don't you?" Alexis muttered leading the way to the lifts, fingertips dancing in the air in general reference to those 'things' and with his irritation.

They fell into step together and walked right by the young man Basil thought, for this week anyway, was the most darling creature on the face of the planet—even if the darling young man had only one open eye and the closed one had sunken in as it obviously contained no eyeball. Alexis nodded as they passed him, receiving a nod in return but also a quick roll of the eye that made Alexis' lips twitch in favour of a smile.

Basil did have good taste... and he was also painfully fun to prank on.

"Wouldn't you?" Basil smiled cheerfully at his object of affection... who glared hard then casually dismissed him, going back to his computer and work.

"Did you even ask if he was seeing anyone?" Alexis pressed the elevator button, Basil already moping at the way he'd been so easily disregarded, and dragged his fingertips along the interior banister.

"He wouldn't even answer. Said it was none of my business." Basil smiled softly to himself, "Maybe there isn't anyone and he's totally single. He's temperamental, you know? One of those misunderstood types. And you know, he gets so *expressive* with me, it could mean--"

Much as he was painfully fun to prank on, Alexis figured he'd better rush the week's usual crash-and-burn schedule ahead. He flattened his hand in the air, palm down, and interrupted to say, "Actually, Basil, he hooked up with one of the people he worked with on his last contract."

Basil's head snapped up just as the elevator pinged – and oh, the effect was a little funny. "Huh?"

Leading the way in, Alexis clarified with a wave of his hand, "He's taken."

Following doggedly and a little wide-eyed, "You're sure?"

Two fingertips of one hand pressed to his own chest, Alexis firmly reiterated, "I know because I'm acquainted with his lover."

Silence. Then, "Why the hell didn't you say anything?!"

Smiling, he gave an off hand gesture and slight shrug, "It was rather fun to listen to you liken his eye to onyx, his skin to porcelain, his hair to—"

"Okay, shut up." Basil glowered, one hand clenching with frustration. "You may be my boss but just shut up."

"I'm just saying, you have excellent taste," Alexis smiled faintly, more than a little amused. "Just really horrible timing."

Basil grumbled for a bit before finally speaking up, "Who's his lover anyway? Do I know the guy?"

"Frost," came the quiet reply.

"Ian?" Basil blinked. "He's gay?" Shaking his head in disbelief, "And he bagged *that* Sex Incarnate? Shit. I could have sworn Ian was a ladies' man through and through." He paused then sighed, rolling his eyes at himself, "Well, I can still see it. At least I know now why he's such a charmer. Damn."

"Sorry," Alexis murmured. He froze a moment when the lift slowed then nodded distantly to a pair of secretaries when they stepped onto the lift.

The entire demeanour between the two men changed in the presence of unknown company; it wouldn't do if one of them were part of Jonathan Grayson's network on his son and discovered Alexis was a little too friendly with the 'help.' Thankfully, Basil knew this.

"Thank you, sir." Basil sighed then seemed a bit startled, "If you don't mind my asking," He looked over the console quickly, "Why are we going to the marketing level?"

"Because marketing is where we need to tighten our belts first," Alexis replied softly with a gentle snap of his fingers, mindful of the secretaries' sharp little gossip ears. "Fetching new business is all well and dandy but according to the quarterly reports and the last ten years' worth of statistics, this company would survive just fine on half its existing contracts." He frowned thoughtfully, one fingertip at his chin, "The rest of the earning contracts, especially the ones toward the bottom twenty percent where there's actual client turnover, where contracts change, end or begin, are the contracts where revenue equals what goes into the marketing budget."

"So trimming things down in marketing," Basil mused, "and allowing old contracts to cycle as they will and phase out, without working on acquiring on new ones to replace them... basically means the company cycles out into a new plateau, and keeps it's 'usual' money in its accounts. I get it, sir." He paused then mysteriously asked, "Do you?"

"Hmm," Alexis hummed unconcernedly, waving a dismissive hand. The elevator pinged, the two secretaries scurried off, shooting worried glances at Alexis as they did and already gossiping before they'd even gotten out of ear shot. Sighing with quiet relief they were gone and the doors closed, he muttered, "I hate it when you call me sir."

Basil just grinned as if to say that was precisely why he did it.

Straightening his clothes and adjusting his tie, Alexis asked, "How do I look?"

"Spotless as always." Basil rolled his eyes then sighed, "You knew you were going to war, didn't you?"

"I studied a few contracts before meeting with my father," he admitted. "I'm ready."

The next level –marketing department. The whispers *there* started the moment Alexis was recognised, who made straight for the head of department's office and ignored every single gaze on him. One of the older, more familiar secretaries came quickly up to Basil and raised a questioning eye brow.

Basil pursed his lips and made a gun shot noise. "Ice Prince, armed and dangerous. Mind the casualties."

She nodded grimly and trotted away. The whispers grew louder.

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"Toying with your food is probably a very ungrateful thing to do right now," Basil muttered, digging into his BLT on rye. His usual goofy smile was non-existent and his brows were drawn downward over his eyes in a tense expression.

"Probably not," Alexis mused, setting his own sandwich down. He even nudged his salt & vinegar chips aside, and he never usually turned down salt & vinegar chips. "I'm not heartless, you know."

"I do know. Why do you think I even said what I just did? You're supposed to understand what I mean." Basil huffed and snatched up his soda.

Alexis sat looking out his office window at the front drive below, one hand cradling his chin as the other drummed idly on the table, watching the people leaving through the front doors. He had on his face a slight but intense frown, an expression most people mistook for irritation. When there began to depart slow-stepping people carrying boxes of personal possessions, he turned away and sighed.

"I'm not hungry. But I'll eat this later."

Basil watched him make for his desk, watched him sit and begin to pull paperwork toward himself, looking like he was settling in for the rest of the afternoon. Basil, on the other hand, had the afternoon off. He wouldn't be here to make sure Alexis didn't torture himself with guilt.

"Hey, are you going to be alright by yourself here?"

"I'm always alright by myself," Alexis answered distantly, writing something in the margin of one of the reports and continuing with his reading. A knock came on the door. "Come in." He looked up, "Something the matter, Amanda?"

"Ye mentioned ye wanted ta' see what anything came from tha' Trademark's Club, sir," Amanda, one of Alexis' personal secretaries replied in her rather stiff Irish brogue. She held out an A5 card, "This came in the mornin' post, it did."

Alexis sat up expectantly, and she trotted in to quickly hand it over, "Thank you."

"Ye welcome." With a wink, she left.

Turning the card over in his hands, Alexis read what it said, a small smile coming to his lips. His other hand danced light tapping fingertips over the paper as he considered its message.

"Well, well, well," Basil murmured, suddenly much closer than he had been a few moments ago. "Looks like you took my recommendation and went, after all. So? How was it, then?"

"Enjoyable," Alexis replied, turning the card over to read the other side. "I believe I'll be visiting again at the end of the week." He nodded in thanks and held out the card, "And you, in appreciation and since you enjoy the place yourself, should take this."

Basil quickly snatched it up and began to read it himself, "That and you can't go yourself. This is a mid-week special voucher!" He smiled wryly at his friend and boss. "Sneaky, you." He held it out of reach when Alexis, in good humour, made to take it back, "But I'll take it anyway." He waved the voucher in the air, "This thing is marked with Gold-status access. I don't know what you did or how much you spent, but this is a bloody good thing to receive and if you're letting me use it then I'll be very happy to."

"Well, off with you, then," Alexis smirked, giving Basil a little shoo-off. "Get your afternoon over and done with so you can get to that tonight. Tell me all about it tomorrow, okay?"

"Yes sir!" Chuckling, Basil finished up his lunch and cleared up after himself before practically skipping out the door. Alexis gave him a quick nod as he left, elbow deep in work. "Have a good one, ladies," he declared to the secretary pool as he left, "Make sure he doesn't over work himself again, okay?"

Cheerfully, he went to enjoy the rest of his afternoon.

...And that night, he presented the card at the Trademark's Club reception, dressed in his favourite suit, dabbed with his favourite aftershave and his light brown hair slicked back.

The young man behind the counter looked up from his console from where he'd swiped the barcode of the card, "Sir? This card has been coded for a special status and a note has come up on my screen. Would you please be so kind as to have a seat while I notify the staff?"

"Of course, of course," Basil agreed genially, grinning. Gold-status, here we come! He threw himself onto one of the couches and sat back to wait.

A few moments later, the deskman came back with a very tall, very handsome host with him. Basil had never seen him before. He'd remember such a man so good looking it made his throat dry; those rugged, square good features of face, expressive thin lips, sharp hazel eyes, and dark hair that had been gelled stylishly into spikes. And the host's body... Basil had never seen a man so tall and wide of frame built so slender yet hold the muscle he did. He most definitely would remember a man like this—

--especially if he looked as dangerous as he did now.

"Good evening, sir," said the host warmly, in a most entrancing baritone. "I was told I was here to meet Alexis Grayson but," he gestured to the surprised deskman, "there seems to have been a misunderstanding."

"Oh," Basil realised he was standing suddenly and he flustered a bit. "Ah, well, Alexis was busy tonight so he handed his card over to me. Kind of in thanks, I suppose, since I told him about this place." Strangely nervous, he murmured, "I hope that's not going to be a problem? I've been looking forward to the gold-status treatment all day."

The host studied Basil carefully before nodding to the hovering, nervous deskman, "Leave this matter with me."

"Yes, sir," piped the young deskman before scurrying back behind the reception.

Basil almost wilted. Was he going to be turned away? "I didn't realise that the card was a gift to Alexis or I wouldn't have accepted..."

"We are happy to have you as our guest regardless that the card had indeed been a gift," the host said. "It was sent especially to Alexis as the owners had been quite happy to have him here and wanted to encourage a repeat visit."

"Oh!" Basil beamed. "Well, that's not going to be a problem. He's planning to be here at the end of the week. He goes out only once a week anyway."

The host stilled suddenly. But in a moment, he smiled softly, a devastatingly handsome smile that made Basil fantasize all sorts of improper things. "Then that is good news indeed," he commented. "Thank you for sharing it with me."

"It's nothing. I'm Basil, by the way." He stuck out his hand, freezing when the host's larger and warmer hand completely enveloped his with a gentle touch that belied his slightly rough looks.

"My name is Gage." The introduction came with a slightly apologetic smile. "And you must excuse me, I will not be your host this evening. But it was a pleasure to meet you and I hope you enjoy your evening here." He turned to go.

Unwilling to allow this gorgeous man to just leave him lusting like this, Basil hurried to say, "But I would be happy if you would." He could feel embarrassment thread through him, the sensation doubling when Gage turned back to look at him. "Host me, I mean." He chuckled a little at himself, "It would really be unfair to have met you and not get to know you a bit better."

"I apologise, sir," Gage murmured, his smile apologetic once more. "To be honest, I'm not very good company this evening and have been busying myself with other work." He shook his head, "I will not be able to host you well at all."

"Even for just half an hour?" Basil nearly begged. "I don't mind if you don't keep me company the whole night. But even just a short chat would be nice." Gage seemed to hesitate so he pressed his advantage, "We don't even have to talk about my—" He waved a hand dismissively, "--*stuff*, if you don't wish to."

"I see." Gage glanced back at the deskman, who Basil suddenly realised was watching them as surreptitiously as possible. The young man startled and darted his eyes back to his console. Gage gave a charming smile when he said, "Then if half an hour is acceptable, far be it for me to refuse a Gold-status guest, would it?"

Basil sighed in relief then said on a fake lofty tone, "That's right." He adjusted his collar in a showy manner and declared, "Gold-status, sir, right you are."

Gage chuckled and held out a hand—and that completely startled Basil. "Then, if it pleases you, gold-status sir, allow me to escort you in?"

Feeling ridiculously giddy, Basil allowed the handsome host to pull him closer and walk him into the club. The waiter who led them to their table gave Basil a curious look as he went over the welcoming pleasantries. Basil furrowed his brows when the man turned to Gage questioningly instead of handing them menus, watched as Gage shook his head, and puzzled a bit when the waiter blinked then quickly laid out a menu before Basil before bowing and leaving him time to decide.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

Gage lounged comfortably on his side of the love seat. "I'm... something of a rarely seen face in here. Usually, when I have a guest, I am expected to make the decisions. You could say I'm bossy like that."

"You actually boss your guests around?" Basil teased with a severe tone, a warm clench in his stomach a result of understanding the obvious definition of what kind of host Gage was. "Bad host," he reprimanded insincerely, humour in his tone. "Aren't guests to be pandered to?"

"Not mine," Gage airily replied, making Basil chuckle.

"So what are you?" Basil prodded, "A kind of special-level host or something? I was thinking earlier myself, that I haven't seen you before."

"Something like that," Gage smiled. "I usually accompany very special guests, those whom the owner has handpicked."

"Ohh?" Basil hummed, feeling a little envious of his friend who should have been here where he was. "I take it Alexis is one of those then."

"He is," Gage murmured, eyes lighting with something that made Basil's heart beat a little faster. "In fact, it was I who hosted him when he was first... or shall we say, last, here."

That nasty little envy bit harder. "So that's how you knew I wasn't Alexis. Did you... did you guys enjoy yourselves?" The words left an odd taste in Basil's mouth and he chased that question with, "Well you see, he's not a really sociable guy. Makes a friend worry, you know."

"I know." Gage's expression seemed a lot more solemn all of a sudden.

Basil looked him over carefully. The envy retreated and a smile pulled one corner of his lips upward, "Got a good idea on him already, do you?"

"Fairly," Gage murmured confidently. He paused then said, "Since you're his friend then I'll say this, his detachment bothered me a little. I hope you won't tell him I said that."

Having worked with Alexis for so long, Basil saw it for the test it was. "Of course not." How could he? He spoke honestly now, "I'm just glad someone else seems to realise it's rare to see him open up. Don't let that detachment bother you, it's not personal. He's... a reclusive one, he is. Not his fault, just the way he was raised." Basil smiled more easily, feeling his earlier green feelings slip completely away under his compassion, "He seemed to enjoy his time here. And he needs a place he feels comfortable in, a place he can come and just relax in."

"Hm," Gage hummed, smiling in return, eyes warming another few degrees and sparkling with interest. "You really are his friend."

"Wha—?" Scowling, Basil snorted. "I said I was. And how would I have his promo card if he wasn't a personal friend. Such things aren't shared with casual acquaintances, you know."

"True, true," conceded Gage, chuckling. "But one should never assume things. It wasn't until you spoke so caringly of him that I was certain."

"Huh." Basil quirked a brow, "You almost sound like Alexis with that statement."

"If you don't mind my asking, what do you mean by that?"

"Alexis," Basil waved a hand, "always plotting and scheming, looking out for little jabs to block. He grew up with that too –from his father of all people. He doesn't trust anything until he has proof to do so." Gage watched him appraisingly as he spoke, in a manner Basil found so familiar that he smiled faintly and added, "He does that, too."

Blinking, "What, if I may ask?"

"Watching." Basil shrugged, "That careful watching as though gauging a speaker's very intonation and speech pattern as much as his actual words."

"I see." Gage smiled now, warmly and fully, making Basil almost forget all about Alexis. "Perhaps, gold-status sir," his eyes twinkled with humour, "we should conduct another kind of conversation? I am a poor host indeed to be discussing another guest with you."

Laughing, Basil happily settled in to do just that.

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Blinking slowly, Alexis braced his arm on the panel of the full length window and stared out at the city of London. Bright lights, moving cars, people in different levels of inebriation. It was already the wee hours of the morning and yet he wasn't sleepy. Tired, yes. Not sleepy.

Such days did not do him good, he knew.

But the worry and stress of setting good people on their way and out of the company always got to him; they were hard workers. They just weren't the most profitable. Facts and reports made that clear, no one could dispute the numbers. But in the current economical crisis, things just had to be done and Alexis was always... always the person to do the dirty work.

He walked past the little bag of take-away food one of the secretaries had brought after she'd been unable to convince him to go home when she did in the early evening. Instead he went to liberate that lovely bottle of aged whiskey from his desk, lightly sliding his palm over the edge of the glossy desk. He thought as he poured that people, especially employees, knew Jonathan Grayson to be a jolly, quietly jovial man, who always smiled and nodded, who kindly sent flowers when people were ill or spared a few minutes to thank you for your hard work.

Alexis took a healthy swallow; they didn't know that Jonathan spent all such time listening to people pour their hearts out to judge personal instability that might affect one's status in the company, didn't know that he sent flowers or thanked people because that made these people like him, made them a little bit more loyal to him. They didn't know the level of calculation that went into everything Jonathan Grayson did, nor the calculated build up of it all either.

They didn't know how he shifted the distasteful work to his son nor how ruthless the man really was.

Carrying his glass over to the window, Alexis tucked a hand in his pocket and resumed staring out at the world. The pale glow of the clouds had him looking up and admiring the moon... and brought to mind what his father had told him this morning. It hadn't been a compliment; it had been a suggestion to use to his advantage... especially in the 'meeting' Jonathan had set up for him in four nights' time, a full moon.

A meeting set to be conducted at the restaurant called The Greenhouse, thusly named for its artfully arranged foliage in a rooftop glass enclosure. Clear under the moon.

Alexis refused to allow his mouth to twist, instead withdrawing his free hand from his pocket and tapping his fingertips over the wood panelling of the windows to dispel his agitation. He knew he should have expected something like this. 'One usually has more playing pieces on the board than one thinks', Jonathan had been fond of saying, 'and one should use each of them to the fullest.'

Including one's looks.

Whoever Gregory Kerrigan was, Alexis thought uncharitably, he had better be ugly. The confirmation from their end had arrived much too soon after his meeting with his father –a prime indication the Kerrigans likely had a file on Alexis; the man was clearly interested. That did not bode well at all.

Gritting his teeth, Alexis decided that whatever happened, it wouldn't do to let the man have too much self confidence and think he might actually have a chance, and Alexis had long ago armed himself with an arsenal of ways to both politely and rudely rebuff an over-ardent man.

Let the idiot lust.

His ringing phone pulled his attention away from his thoughts. Not even looking, he flipped it open and answered, "Grayson."

"Alexis, my dear friend," came Basil's slightly slurred but very cheerful speech. "You're still at the office, aren't you?"

"You sound happy," he said, reclining in his leather armchair. He didn't bother answering the question. "I trust you enjoyed yourself last night?"

"Immensely!" Basil sounded blissful. It meant he'd enjoyed getting as inebriated as he was. "Had a host named Carrrrrlos," he over-rolled the r in the name with a soft chuckle. "From Spain. Very good looking. Very sneaky with his hands." No small amount of delight infused that last statement.

Amused, Alexis closed his eyes and listened to his friend's sloshed ramblings, "It sounds like he's a keeper."

"Oh yes," Basil suddenly sounded solemn. "I'm definitely dragging him off into a dark corner the next time I go." He paused, "And you should drag off that Gage character. Really seems to like you."

Alexis froze. "Pardon me?"

"That card you gave me was some special edition what," Basil tried to explain. "Gage came right out. Was disappointed it wasn't you. But he and I talked for a bit, just a little bit. I weaselled out of him that he took care of you when you were here." Chuckling, he sing-songed, "He misses you!"

The earlier weight in Alexis' chest returned and settled in a little deeper, his hand closing tightly around the arm rest. "I see."

"Hey? Are you alright? We didn't mean anything." Basil sounded truly apologetic.

And right now, much as Alexis wanted to smack his friend over the head or at least yell at him but now wasn't the time. "Go home, you idiot. We'll talk about this when you get into work."

"But Alexis, I swear—"

Tucking the phone away, Alexis got up and collected his belongings. He needed to at least get home and have a shower. Not worry whether or not Gage was a spy of his father's or if someone – anyone—at The Trademark's was either.

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CHAPTER 3 - SLIPSTREAM

"I understand you're the one responsible for the massive reduction of personnel in the marketing department," Sir Ashton commented calmly, accepting the documents Alexis held out to him and capturing the younger man's eye.

Sir Ashton reminded Alexis of his father with his crafty little ways, if more arrogant but a lot less annoying. "I am, sir." This was old play between the two men; Sir Ashton occasionally attempting to get one up on his fellow shareholder's son... controlling-shares holder's son. "Is there a problem?"

"There is when you let go of some very profitable people," came the reply, accompanied by a narrowing of cool gray eyes.

The implications upset Alexis instantly and his tone turned stiff, "I reviewed the reports myself, sir. The facts clearly stated they were amongst the least profitable. Those were my grounds for dismissing them."

An odd sort of stillness seemed to descend on Sir Ashton. He seemed to hesitate then slowly and very quietly asked, "If you don't mind my asking, would you be so kind as to send me a photocopy of the reports you do have?"

Alexis instantly understood the man supposed they had both been looking at different versions of the same thing. He replied just as softly, studiously trying not to gesticulate as he usually did, "And would you be so kind as to discuss what you find with me?"

The older gentleman looked him over in an assessing manner. He stepped a half pace closer, hand coming up to rest on Alexis' arm as he said, "I like you young Grayson. You usually have both the company and the people's interests at heart. That move wasn't like you but I realise now you had your reasons." He quirked a brow, "And I have suspicions. So tell me, is it safe to share my knowledge with you?"

"My interests are precisely where you said they lie, sir," Alexis said quietly. He knew that while he could not trust everything about Sir Ashton, he could at least rest easy that the man was not in his father's pocket. "That is all I can honestly say."

"Then let us speak after I have had a chance to review your report." Sir Ashton nodded to him then turned away.

Alexis stared at the departing shareholder with increasing apprehension. As he turned away, he considered this was not the first time someone had suggested he had acted on incorrect facts... but that was the first time someone had suggested there was proof.

He entered his office, shutting the door behind him and as he made for his desk he glanced down at the papers in his hand, sifting through them to pull out a report he'd requested himself; something on the side and by a personally-contacted investigator, away from the current matters at hand... which after a few moments' reading instead began to have something to do with them.

Trademark's Club.

Since the drunken conversation with Basil the day before, Alexis had advised his friend to have an extra day of rest... while he carefully and quietly set one of his contacts to putting together a quick background check. And this morning, just over a full twenty-four hours since Basil's visit to the establishment, the report had come in.

Alexis was supposed to visit them tonight, Friday night, his time for himself and that handsome host he couldn't get out of his head... and who wasn't on the list of employees.

He sat down and frowned, drumming his fingers on the table, recalling how his father had even mentioned he'd visited the place at all. Normally, Grayson Sr never bothered to discuss his son's choice of company... but he had this time. Resisting the urge to scowl, Alexis realised there was one thing such a conversation—indeed the only thing—would have provided his father.

Confirmation.

Alexis tensed when he caught sight of Basil slinking into his office, looking up from the report and giving his friend an acknowledging nod even as he casually slipped the folder under other papers. They eyed each other warily.

"So I realised what got your pants in a twist when I cleared my head yesterday." Basil moved slowly closer, rubbing at his jaw in a nervous gesture. "But you should know, I was sober when I ascertained he wasn't a threat before hand. He wasn't digging about you, I thought he was genuinely concerned. He meant well, I really believe that."

"He also doesn't exist," Alexis murmured, already having forgiven his friend. He leaned back in his chair, dragging the fingertips of one hand over the leather arm rest, watching his hand's progress. "So pardon me for not trusting a spectre." When he looked up, Basil quirked a questioning brow and he continued, "According to their roster of employees, there is no one by the name of Gage employed by the club. It occurred to me he could be using an alias," he frowned again, one hand coming down flat on his desk. "But the background check is accompanied by company ID photos. He's not in them."

"Plant," Basil breathed, looking up from the documents.

Dancing the fingertips of one hand idly in the air, he murmured, "Possibly."

"Oh my God, I swear I would never have guessed."

Alexis' lips did twist, "That's usually how it works."

Basil took a seat, wiping a hand over his brow. He seemed to be turning the news over in his head. Finally he asked, "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing." Alexis sat up and returned to his papers, clearly settling in to resume his work, "I will continue as always. It's always best to leave an opponent's pieces where they are until you ascertain what the opponent means to do with them." He looked up and quirked his lips at the disgusted expression on Basil's face. "Better to keep the pieces one can see than allow for new ones to have to search out all over again." His work drew his attention once more, "Besides, they'll form a pattern

eventually. When you find one pawn, it's easier to spot the others. They always move in formation, after all."

With a grimace, Basil murmured, "I swear I've learned more about secret machinations and underhanded manoeuvres in my three years of employment here than I have in my entire life." He shook his head, "How did you ever come to trust me, anyway?"

Alexis didn't answer.

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By the time night fell, early enough to still have dinner and late enough that some people were already congregating in the lounges for an early night cap, Alexis sat at the Tower Majestic Hotel lobby bar over a glass of cognac, reconsidering whether or not he wanted to go up to Trademark's.

If he went, it wouldn't be as enjoyable as the first time, and he'd have to play the game.

In the past, he'd flirted with his father's plants, the little spies who pandered to him with their fake smiles and carefully but not completely hidden distaste for courting a man. He'd once joked to Basil that for all of his money, it seemed his father found it difficult to find and employ a truly gay spy.

But now... now he faced a true opponent. And Alexis found he did not have the patience to accept another level of intrigue into his life. This was supposed to be his time, his own, personal time. Not another instance to play word games or block friendly questions into his private life. Not time to deal with his father's little games.

Bastard old man, what the fuck did he want now?

Alexis sighed, curling his hand around his drink and ignoring the rest of the room. He took a mouthful of the Scottish rum and savoured it. For some odd reason, he thought of the heady champagne he'd been served last time he'd been to Trademark's. The rum could possibly be considered its complete opposite but... and that kiss—

Romantic idiot, he thought.

Bastard, he mentally hissed at the memory of Gage.

But in the next breath he remembered, to be fair, Gage hadn't pried into his life; the self-proclaimed host had been entertaining and interesting, had done exactly as he'd been asked. And, running over scene in his mind, Alexis couldn't find any indication that the host had played him.

...So if he went now, Alexis reasoned, he could always just excuse himself if things got unpleasant this time around. He didn't have to suffer the man's presence if he didn't want to, if it became more evident that this was all a game; an expensive game but a game nonetheless. He could afford it anyway, he thought, dragging an index fingertip over the edges of his coaster.

Maybe it was time to test things, he wondered, signing for his drink, getting up and making for the lift.

There stood a different receptionist at the desk when he arrived at the top floor, attending to a male guest. Unlike the first time he had been here, there lined up a trio of women and a pair of gentlemen, as well as another single man, all waiting to be attended to. Alexis joined the queue,

casually slipping his hands into his pockets as he occupied himself with trying to spot where the cameras were, the ones Gage had admitted were there.

He couldn't help but glare at the black glass half-balls, one embedded into the ceiling in the far corner and another directly beside the overhead light above the front desk.

"Married?" asked an amused voice.

Alexis shifted his glare to the young man ahead of him, who had turned around to smile in that friendly manner so common to people who didn't know how to mind their own business.

"Just asking," shrugged the man, blue eyes shining. "And a little curious, since it's usually only married people who glare at security cameras in places where company can be bought."

"I wonder how you would know such a thing," Alexis murmured in a tone of voice that implied he didn't wonder at all and knew exactly why. He did not have the patience to deal with this man.

"Touché," said the man, smiling still. He shrugged, giving a companionable smile, "But I'm divorced now. And no, it didn't have anything to do with buying company, because see, I'm not glaring."

To be sure he wasn't insulting someone related to anyone powerful, Alexis allowed an escape and said, "Is there a particular reason you felt the need to speak to someone as rude as I?"

The man blinked then laughed, "You're delightful. You look quiet and gentle, and yet I knew from the way you were glaring at the cameras that you had a temper in you." He smiled, "And my, what a temper. You're positively on fire... you're just beautiful."

Blinking himself, it was only then that Alexis realised the man had been looking for an opening to flirt with him. This explained the divorce. Before he could stop the words, they slipped out, "And you're much too nosy."

The man laughed again and held out a hand, "I'm Alan. Alan Keller, at your service."

Unable to resist the amusement seeping into him, Alexis lifted his hand and settled his grip in Alan's. "Alexis Grayson." He didn't miss the way Alan's eyes widened fractionally. "I see you know my name."

"The name, yes." Alan seemed suddenly less jovial. "I know your father."

"It seems you and I share the same sentiments about him," Alexis murmured honestly, calculating the way Alan's gaze had changed. At the very least, he might discover a new player to the game. At worst, Alan was another plant. No big deal.

Alan tilted his head at Alexis in surprise, "Is that so?"

"Perhaps," Alexis returned, affecting boredom. He really wasn't interested in games tonight but he'd play if need be... and just as soon not. He noticed the trio of ladies ahead had gone and the pair of gentlemen still waited to be escorted into the club, thoughts already wandering.

"Have dinner with me," Alan said suddenly.

Alexis returned his gaze and quirked a brow, "Excuse me?"

"You said we share the same sentiments about your father." He shrugged, a quirk of his lips picking up that earlier humour he'd lost, "anyone who seems to share my feelings is someone I would like to get to know. After all, that shows you have good judgement."

"I am here this evening to be happily entertained," Alexis sighed. "I do not wish to discuss business or my father, or anything at all, actually." He noticed a door opening off to one side of the reception desk ahead and it drew his eyes, a familiar and handsome visage suddenly in sight, hazel eyes warm and a small, secretive smile already in place, welcoming and happy to see him—

"Not even if I can tell you fine details about the K-Sat merger?" Alan quietly asked.

Alexis' gaze wrenched from Gage and back to Alan's, words slipping from him on a breathless whisper, "What?"

The K-Sat merger had been the talk of the town the year before, the company which had come to exist when two hi-tech security firms had come harmoniously together. The new corporation had by all accounts been set for a steep rise to power, contracts to build everything from commercial bank vaults to personal home security systems already lined up...

... and failed.

"I'm one of the Kellers from the K side of things," Alan explained. "From the K10 Corp before it merged with Sat from—"

"Satellite. I know." Alexis stilled, a reflex against the urge to fidget in indecision.

The Satellite Corp had belonged to the Arctic Holdings Group, the firm which Ian Frost, one of his closest friends, skilfully headed. For weeks after the fall of K-Sat, Ian had not spoken to him. And even now, though Ian had apologised for his hand in suspending their friendship, the man would not discuss the reasons behind the failure nor of why he had withdrawn from their friendship the way he had. Alexis would not have thought anything of it, would not have thought the matters related, except...

Kazuhi Mori.

The security consultant he'd employed was also Ian's lover. And Kazuhi had asked him if he knew his father had been involved with the K10 corporation right up until and only until the merger.

He hadn't. And everything he'd done to find out more had yielded nothing.

"The restaurant on the third floor is open until midnight," Alan suggested softly, sensing the scales had begun to tip in his favour, hand reaching to gently cup Alexis' elbow. He took a deep breath and slowly blew it out, a technique he looked to use to dispel tension because he seemed to relax. He met Alexis' eyes and smiled, the expression strangely hopeful and weary at the same time, "It would be a pleasure to speak even briefly with you, on this or other matters."

Alexis glanced over at Gage, caught the furrowed brows and calculating expression, and decided that one option or the other, both were going to try his patience. He wondered briefly if he should explain himself to Gage. After all, the man didn't know he'd been caught.

Never mind, he told himself firmly, watching Gage's smile slip away. Games are games. Time to play; Alan or Gage?

Alexis' stomach turned over and it seemed suddenly easier to suppose he'd do better with the option that might shed a bit more light on something useful. He turned and nodded to Alan, allowing his new acquaintance to escort him back to the elevators.

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At midnight, the restaurant closing behind them, Alexis accompanied Alan out to the elevators again, both quiet and contemplative.

For Alexis, a quick call to Ian before settling down to dinner had confirmed Alan Keller's worth and trustworthiness. Ian had not one ill word to say about the man, and the descriptions had matched perfectly. Frost had always been a little too observant for his own good.

The night had been filled with thoughts and revelations, of possible truths and insider knowledge. Ian had not been pleased the two had met, had issued an apology before ending the call... and Alexis now knew why. Or possibly why. And possibly why Sir Ashton had been suspicious over his actions in ridding the company of the people he had. The layers and implications were startling and shocking... and to know he'd unwittingly played a hand in so many of these little strategies—

This was a mess. Jobs could be lost and lives ruined, including his own.

He noticed Alan seemed regretful when looking at him, and he turned to offer as attentive expression as he could, an invitation to speak.

"I'd wanted to get to know you when I saw you upstairs earlier," Alan murmured, moving close, voice soft and personal. "To hear you were the son of... well, I had not expected that at all." He paused a moment then said, "I apologise that you had to hear all you did from me. And I regret that we met under these circumstances."

Nodding, Alexis returned, "As do I."

"Is there any way that you can allow me to make it up to you?" Alan gave him that smile again, the hopeful open smile he'd had earlier when they'd been discussing what kinds of people glared at security cameras. "I would be honoured if you would."

"You're a born charmer, aren't you?" Alexis mused, some hope that this evening wasn't completely ruined returning.

"I try," came the wry reply. "Is it working?"

"Maybe a little." Alexis led the way into the lift and punched the button for the top floor. He angled his head in an acknowledging gesture at Alan, "It's the only place open in this building that's quiet enough. And I'd prefer to stay here."

Alan nodded, quickly picking up on that Alexis was a guest of the hotel tonight. "I never did get to visit the place. Won't it seem odd to be here together, though?"

"Do you intend to have a host?"

"Well, no. I believe the intention was to get to know you." Alan smiled again.

"Then I don't perceive a reason for this visit to be odd."

They were smiling slightly at each other as they exited the lifts and approached the reception desk. Alan nodded to the young man behind the counter, "We're not here to be hosted. May we have a table off to one side? A quiet place to talk, if you please."

"Of course, sir," the man said, quickly checking over his computer.

They were efficiently led into the club moments later, past the bar and main club area toward the rear where the set up was more a lounge-area. "Your table, Mr Grayson," the waiter half-bowed to Alexis, "Sir," again a bow to Alan before leaving them with menus, "Enjoy your evening."

"They know you by name here?" Alan asked, teasing and surprised.

"It appears so." Alexis knew that waiter; he'd been the one to attend to him and Gage. The meanings and possibilities behind the recognition had the potential to give him a severe headache. But he rejected them and tried to enjoy his present company.

Just over an hour later, pleasantly buzzed on good wine, relaxed from enjoyable company, and contented by friendly conversation on things in common, Alexis made his way to the men's room. He did his business and washed his hands then bent to put his face into a handful of cold water. He rinsed his mouth free of the cloying alcoholic after tastes then stood to smooth back his hair, catching the reflection of the mirror, breath snagging in his throat, spinning around to face—

"Gage!" Alexis narrowed his eyes at the man, "You startled me." He had not sensed the man's approach. "How did you do that?"

"I'm aware of your arts," Gage spoke slowly, remaining where he was and not advancing, looking contrite but tense and clearly displeased... and looking far too handsome, too good, too delicious for Alexis' peace of mind. "It was unfair of me to use such knowledge but I knew..." He sighed softly, "I apologise. I did not mean to alarm you." He solemnly searched Alexis' gaze before stepping slowly forward, looking wistful and longing, "I have missed you. Yet you're not here to see me."

"It has come to light that I had *visited* with a ghost." Alexis did not bother hiding his irritation; irritation at the situation and his own reaction, hyperaware and longing, to the charismatic host.

"You looked me up," Gage observed, surprised and pausing in his step a moment before he resumed his pace. He finally stopped a half-step before Alexis, hands by his sides and looking down into Alexis' upturned, stormy gaze. He seemed to relax, marginally, and a quirk of his lips was the only warning before he asked, "You were interested in me?"

"Nonsense," Alexis refuted, irritated Gage did not even bother to deny the subtle accusation. "I simply dislike it when people prod first." For some reason, Gage relaxed further, reminding him of the man he had first met, the controlled and intelligent person he'd been attracted to.

"You mean Basil." Gage gently cupped his cheek, apology in his eyes and tone. "I did not realise I had given reason to alarm you in speaking with him. Had I known, I would have kept well away from him." A small smile tugged at his lips, "And he had that special card I sent you—"

"That is beside the point," snapped Alexis. Trying to calm himself, he drew a deep breath... only to inhale Gage's spicy scent and his head began to spin with the heady aroma of cologne and that undertone that was all Gage. Rebelliously, he refused to surrender his temper; was this fool not even going to feel the slightest bit guilty? Or was it really because he had nothing to fear? The confusion, the irritation and yearning, set Alexis on edge and—

Gage's eyes had turned molten. "Indeed it is."

And then he noticed that somewhere Gage had moved that small space forward, whenever it was, but he did not know when, only he knew that it was Gage's arm circling around his waist and the infuriating man was bending toward his mouth and—

Oh.

Oh.

It was better than he remembered. The hot, slow way Gage moulded his lips to Alexis' own, the heavy tongue that invaded his mouth, and the press of a tall, firm body against his smaller one... the kiss on the couch had not been this intense, had it? But then Gage bit gently down onto his bottom lip and an uncontrolled moan escaped his throat, breathless with want, forgetting all thoughts of comparison because he couldn't think straight anymore. Those broad shoulders felt large and expansive under his hands, smooth and warm, sculpted with muscle the way he remembered. He followed them with his fingertips, his hands, smoothing upward to where he could grasp on. Gage's body cradled him gently, pressed him into the embrace so completely that...

When Gage lifted his head, Alexis knew he was a wreck. He didn't bother moving, he remained tightly pressed against Gage, stretched up along the man's taller frame, his arms draped high over Gage's shoulders and completely propped up this way because if he wasn't then he'd have crumpled to the floor.

His frustration mounted and he murmured, "I hate you."

"I like you," Gage returned calmly, looking pleased and completely relaxed. "I like you very, very much." He stole another kiss, quick, possessive and passionate, the desperation in it confusing Alexis even more. He convulsively swallowed as his hungry eyes traced Alexis' kiss-swollen lips and he seemed to be forcing himself to regain control.

"Who are you?" Alexis asked softly, angry and confused. "I don't like kissing ghosts."

"A man," Gage replied on a teasing tone. But then the smile slipped away and he said softly, "Before anything else happens, Elfling, I should tell you the truth about me."

Alexis froze, waking from his dazed submission as though he'd been doused in cold water. He refused to heed the tender tone of the endearment. He withdrew his arms.

Catching the change, Gage kept him close and quickly chased up with, "I don't work for your father and I never will. And I don't have anything to do with him." He breathed regretfully, "Not yet."

"I don't want to hear it." Carefully, Alexis resettled his weight and tried to withdraw from the embrace, heart beating heavily, disappointment suddenly thick in his chest; tried, mind you, because Gage wasn't letting him go.

"You should. Hear me out, Alexis, please," Gage said softly into Alexis' ear, arms still wound tightly around his captive, holding Alexis in place and making clear all his intensity and earnestness. "I don't care about whatever business my family has with yours. What matters to me right now is that you give me a chance. I swear I—"

The men's room door swung open and Alan stood suddenly frozen in the doorway. His surprised gaze swept over Alexis' arms raised, hands at Gage's chest to push away and escape, and the way Gage seemed to be pinning him in place. His expression turned hard, "I say, Kerrigan, get your hands off him."

Kerrigan; Alexis reeled. "Gage," he murmured disbelievingly, shocked and shaken. "Short for Gregory, perhaps?"

Guilt seeped into Gage's expression and Alexis felt a cold fist close tightly in his gut, his vision going a little too bright. "Elfling, please, I didn't know until—"

"Shut up. Don't call me that." His voice came out hoarse and he wanted to bash his own head in with amazement at his stupidity. Whatever he had imagined Gage to be... this was much worse. "Let me go."

Alan growled as he stepped forward, "You heard him."

Watching them stare each other down, Alexis remembered one thing Alan had admitted as they'd talked over dinner: the man had no experience in hand to hand combat; Gage might hurt him for trying to help. Instinct took over, and Alexis bent his knees, slipping just slightly under Gage's hold, quickly closed his hand around one of Gage's wrists and squeeze enough to surprise, enough to twist and bend and slide under it and get away. He blocked the arm that reached for him and jabbed an attack meant only to force Gage to move defensively away.

They stood staring at each other, two metres of space and a flood of hurt between them. Gage's brows had furrowed with cheerless distress, and he still had one hand in the air half-reaching for Alexis. And Alexis, refusing to acknowledge the heavy clench in his stomach, the overwhelming disappointment, backed away enough to get to Alan's side and to the door before he dared to even partially turn his back.

Gage called quietly, sadly, after him, "See you Monday."

Hurt poured through him amidst a pang Alexis fervently denied could be from loss.

CHAPTER 4 - WHIRLWIND

"Wait, what?" Basil demanded, aghast.

"I said," Alexis wearily repeated, "That my father has been blackmailing people." He tapped the report in his hands, a copy of Sir Ashton's paperwork carefully marked against a print out of Alexis' own version that he'd sent over for comparison. "My father fed me false information; I've been running this company wrongly, based on false input. My father manipulated these figures according to what he wanted me to do, how he wanted me to react. I have been his unwitting pawn."

"That sounds plainly evil, you realise," Basil said, appalled. "So that was why no one revealed these things to you, why people are angry at you for seemingly no reason."

"I had thought it was anger by extension, as I'm my father's son," Alexis admitted, "Or that I'm always the one to fire people, give bad news, announce budget cuts, that sort of thing."

"And now we know the truth."

Alexis agreed, "And now we know the truth." He sighed, "People thought I was in on it. My father basically turned me into his attack dog. Set me loose on people who would not bow to his will." He grimaced, "Even, to an extent, including the K-Sat merger. No wonder Ian didn't talk to me for weeks afterward, he probably thought I had been gleaning secrets from his office or something or that I'd been spying on him."

"We know nothing of that sort ever happened," Basil protested, faithfully a friend. "You're not that kind of person."

"No, but the poison had been laid. Whatever father said to Ian, it was enough to plant a seed of doubt. It kept Ian distracted and concerned," Alexis murmured. "Anyway, now we know who is that kind of person." Giving a dismissive wave of his hand, he nudged a stack of folders across his desk, "I need you to see to these. I want them transferred out of the Grayson Corp as soon as possible."

Basil quickly looked the documents over, a puzzled look coming over his face. "Why are you doing this? Sorry, I realise he's your father, but aren't you going to take that bastard up to task?"

"My father is too quick," Alexis admitted, scratching at the leather edges of his desk blotter. "He's too clever, too sharp. Too far ahead in the game. He will be suspicious by tonight and tomorrow he'll uncover everything."

Basil asked quietly, "Are you leaving?"

"I hope I don't have to," Alexis muttered. "But while I can't do anything about him on my own, I can take care of what is mine and of the people I do have remaining me."

Basil looked the papers over again. "This is a... pretty brave move."

"Cowardice," Alexis corrected with a grimace. "I can't do much but get out of the way." He drummed his fingers on his desk, a dim light beginning to reignite in his eyes, he knew, when he looked over at his friend and winked. "And I can ask for help."

Basil smiled.

--

"I was thinking you weren't going to show up," Gage murmured as he retook his seat, hazel eyes hungrily roving over Alexis' face.

Alexis felt like he'd been socked in the gut looking across the table at this man. Gage had one of those rich coloured shirts on again, this time in matte gold to match his eyes. His ebony-black suit brought the colour of the shirt out, a complementing kerchief in his jacket breast pocket, black tie fastened with a gold pin. No necklace, silver hoop earring replaced with a gold stud, glossy black belt and matching shoes.

Throat dry, Alexis took a sip of water to distract himself a moment before suddenly speaking, "You were one of the contract holders of the K-Sat merger. That's why Alan knew you. That's why you've been picking at my father's business." He scowled, "That's why you've been interested in getting to the bottom of this. Am I right?"

"Half right," Gage admitted, looking tired and a little miserable. He curled his fingers around the wine glass he'd been nursing before Alexis had arrived, swirling the contents about and studying the oil cling in the interior. "I did not expect you to visit my humble little club. The plan wasn't so elaborate. I really did admire you when you walked in, was truly attracted to—"

"Let's cut to the chase, Gregory." Alexis hated the way that stiff name moved over his tongue. And from the stiffening of his posture, Gage did too. "As far as my father knows, I'm here to get you to sign this," he flapped the thin folder of paper onto the table, "And you're here to stall and ask me questions. We're going to play coy and talk and hopefully get somewhere, but it's probably going to be fine with both our families if we don't. My father will simply reschedule us another dinner in another restaurant I can be made up again to be served to you on a platter."

Gage's hand tightened on his glass, a hard light coming to his eyes.

"What? You didn't think he was so callous?" Alexis gave a quiet snort, trying to ignore that it sounded disillusioned and that the handsome man across the table looked entirely too sympathetic. He flatly stated, "Well, since we're past all this weary subterfuge, ask away. I'll tell you everything I know though it's not going to amount to much." He shrugged, "I didn't know what he was doing so I'm not privy to his little schemes. You could even say I'm just another of his pawns." Anger wound its way tight into his belly, snaking up even into the expression on his face, turning it tight and pinched. He tried to cover it with a sip of his water and when silence prevailed, he waved his hand in a gesture to proceed, "Well? We only have so much time."

"I spoke to Ian," Gage said instead, downing the last of his wine. "I know you don't know anything. There's no point in asking you about K-Sat or your father now."

"Then are we to waste each other's time?" Alexis snarled, unable to stop himself from losing his temper, from clenching his fists, but at least he managed to keep his voice from rising.

"I did not deceive you," Gage said quietly, reaching across the table for one of Alexis' hands.

He pulled away.

With a soft sigh, Gage explained, "This game-play is not in my agenda. I'm here to tell you I was honestly attracted to you the night we met. I didn't use you. I've missed you and I—" He searched Alexis' face, "—honestly didn't want to say goodbye. I don't ever want to. And when I realised who you were, that has been what I feared most. That you would fare me well and I'd never see you again."

"What kind of man are you," Alexis hissed, outraged and baffled, "to say these things to me? Do you think me some kind of fool?"

"If I don't say them now and here," Gage growled, leaning over the table, "then you will never know. After tonight, the next time I see you may very well be in a court room."

Shaking with humiliation and confusion, Alexis demanded, "Then what do you want from me?"

"Talk to me, Elfling," came the quiet, desperate plea. "Tell me why you've pushed everyone away. What strikes are you waiting, watching for? How are you able, now that you realise what you've been played for, to make an effort to pool resources?" He sighed, "Tell me anything. I don't care what it is."

For a horrible, tense moment, Alexis did not move. He almost didn't breathe. And then he narrowed his eyes, a red haze clouding his vision, but he spoke carefully, softly, mindful of the other people in the restaurant, "My mother died in childbirth of me. I look just like her. My father was always a sadistic bastard and she was the one person who kept him in line. Without her, since I am unable to measure up to her, my father has no need for morals and has sabotaged and cheated his way in nearly every business deal he's been directly involved in."

Gage sat back in his seat looking sad and compassionate.

Shaking, Alexis pulled his eyes away from the infuriating man and took another drink of water, "And now, you and Sir Ashton—don't look so surprised, Gregory, I do have my own contacts—have been seeking out a way to gather proof. Ian Frost has been working on and off with you as well." He gave a bitter laugh at the startled and mournful expression on Gage's face. "Oh? You didn't think I'd find that out either. Ahh, yes. How about Kazuhi Mori? Hm, from the expression on your face, you didn't think I'd find out about him either." He growled, "You forget I am actually human, never mind my parentage, because Ian is my friend. *Mine*." With a snort, "Alan was just sheer dumb luck. He's not even part of your plan though his father is."

Gage looked miserable. "I must apologise for—"

"Save it, *Gregory*, there isn't anything—"

"Stop calling me that."

"—*anything* you can say that will make me believe you actually—"

"I don't want to say goodbye."

"—ever meant anything you've said to me." Alexis was breathing harshly by this point, a hairsbreadth away from completely losing control of his temper. "You're a liar by omission. And for all that I was used by my own father, I at least have never lied, I've never wilfully deceived anyone—"

"You have my respect for that," Gage joked, looking helpless and hating it. "Now I just have to convince you I'm worth—"

"Shut up."

"I don't care about this plot or the money involved, I don't." He actually pleaded, eyes soft and yielding in his hard and proud face, "All I ask is that you—"

Alexis shrug off the thought that he didn't like seeing Gage this way. "Well then you and I will never see eye to eye because that is *all* I care about right now." He slapped his hand onto the table when Gage made to speak again. "I'm willing to work with your little consortium, all of you. You can take my father down the way you planned. Just tell me what to do to help you but I want nothing to do with *you*." On an angry snarl he added, "I don't want to hear anything more of your unhinged idea of romance."

"Do you actually think," Gage growled, looking stung, "That I could kiss you, hold you, or want you this way if I cared more about getting revenge? For—"

"I have no idea," Alexis said icily, finally signalling for a waiter, "I've only met you tonight, haven't I, Gregory?" He waved his hand in the air and sarcastically, flatly, said, "Hello. Abominable to meet you." Gage caught that hand and pressed a fleeting, warm kiss to his knuckles before he thought to snatch it back. His glare had no effect. "I don't know you."

"Since we met at Trademark's, all that time we've had—"

"Means nothing," Alexis cut in brutally, forcibly ignoring the pang in his chest at the disappointed sadness on Gage's face. Softly but steel in his tone, he repeated, "Nothing at all."

And for the next hour after they'd placed their orders, they sat together in perfect silence. Anger made Alexis able to eat his entire dinner, never mind the cold fist in his stomach at the sight of Gage's inability to do the same and instead listlessly pushing the pieces about on his plate.

But when he got back to his office, he barely made it to the toilet in time to vomit it all out anyway.

--

Alexis clicked his mobile phone shut and set it back down on his desk, eyes skimming over the notes he'd just written for himself—the name and password crucial to covering certain tracks. He sighed as he sat back in his chair.

In the two days since his pseudo pledge of allegiance, Alexis had received the list of projects and companies that Ian and Sir Ashton had identified as possible proof of ill-doings, had dismissed several calls from an unknown number, had learned to interpret Mr Mori's occasional long looks, and received an email from the Kerrigan Corp president and Ga—*Gregory's* father.

The wheels had begun to turn and his part would soon be over.

"Good morning?" Basil asked as he stepped in at nine o'clock. His eyes clearly stated he knew Alexis had spent the night at the office again.

"Good morning," Alexis replied, not bothering to adjust the old greeting to something more appropriate.

"So... uhh, Day Two. You said it ends tonight. Has everything gone according to plan?"

"Something like that." He slid a fingertip along the smooth plastic of his phone, thoughts wandering to all that he had arranged. "We have much to accomplish today." He picked up and held out the list he'd made sometime at two o'clock this morning. "These documents need to be compiled. You don't need to fish through other things to disguise what you're doing, just straight up pull these documents off the system. Mr Mori has kindly guaranteed that your searches will trigger no flags, he's made all the arrangements. Just be sure you don't use your own username." He pushed over the little note he'd just made during his phone call. "Use this access."

Basil plucked it up and accepted the list, turning to go before thinking of something—whatever it was that was meant to add another layer to his already tired brain—and turning back to quickly say, "I had a quick chat with Ian as you asked. After we discussed all the business things he said to tell you, 'one last mess wouldn't be so bad, would it? If you get exactly what you want at the end' ...and he refused to tell me what it meant. Said you'd know."

"I do know," Alexis tiredly admitted. He returned to his papers, "But I don't care. Go on," he made shooing motions, "off with you."

Much too perceptively, Basil's expression went from confused to startled to calculating to understanding and, ultimately, knowing. He snapped a salute before heading out, "Yessir!"

--

Jonathan Grayson would have failed his reputation had he not had any warning. But it was a bit too late for him by the time the signals went up, with so many people on the inside, including his own son.

By then, Alexis' companies had been transferred out of the family incorporation, evidence files had been compiled and proofed, truths had been uncovered and the substantiations collected.

The K-Sat solicitors practically frothed at the mouth the night Alexis personally delivered the boxes upon boxes of CDs and paperwork to the Mason & Chase Law Offices, practically snatching up all the material the moment he'd walked in and whisking it away to begin reviewing them.

A harried secretary ushered him down a quiet hall and into a board room. The two occupants could have been twins save that just over a quarter of a decade aged one over the other.

"Good evening, Mr Kerrigan," Alexis said quietly, pausing uncomfortably just inside the doorway and ignoring the younger and more familiar twin-like man seated at the large table. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Good evening, Grayson," Mr Kerrigan returned politely, standing to offer his hand and a small but friendly smile. He appeared hesitant, studying Alexis' expression, and concerned.

As they shook hands, Alexis met and held the man's eyes, the same hazel as his son's and just as warm. For a moment, all thoughts of the older man's kind reception flew out of his head and right at that moment, he could almost feel the guillotine's blade falling down.

There was no turning back now.

Some of his feelings must have showed on his face because Mr Kerrigan reached with his other hand to lay it hesitantly on Alexis' shoulder.

"I'm going to be cliché and tell you I think you're doing the right thing," Mr Kerrigan said quietly. "But that's not going to change how you feel."

"I understand that, sir," Alexis murmured, trying to get his expression under control. "I do feel this is the correct course to take. It's simply that, like a lot of my other correct decisions lately, I do not like it."

"And for that," Mr Kerrigan smiled gently, hands dropping away, "you have my respect and thanks. I realise this is hard for you and I apologise."

Alexis searched the older man's face for any trace of mocking or indulgence but he found only concern and warmth in those familiar scotch eyes. He caught movement in the corner of his eye and turned to look, his shoulders tensing as Gage slowly stood.

"Thank you," Alexis said, eyes back on Mr Kerrigan, voice losing its steady tone but holding a note of ending in it, offering a hand to shake goodbye. "I wish you all well. I doubt that I can do much for you after today, I'm certain my father knows now what has happened. Next we meet will likely be in Chambers."

"Indeed," Mr Kerrigan sighed. He paused before taking Alexis' hand and indicated the board room table, "Are you sure you will not join us? I realise you know almost nothing of what we have prepared..."

He trailed off for Alexis already started shaking his head, "No, thank you, sir. I believe I will leave you and the professionals to this. I... honestly, I don't have much stomach for this anymore."

"Of course," Mr Kerrigan appeared apologetic. "Forgive me, I hadn't considered that. I—"

He broke off when Alexis took a step backward, eyes distracted by Gage, who had begun to slowly approach. Breathlessly he gestured, waving the apologies aside and hurriedly said, "Thank you and it was a pleasure to meet you, Mr Kerrigan. If you will excuse me?"

"Grayson?" Mr Kerrigan's gaze swept back over his shoulder to his son. When he looked back at Alexis, the confusion in them cleared a little and turned sad. "Of course. It was a pleasure. Good night."

"Good night." Alexis breathed, and turned quickly away to flee. He did not care what assumptions Mr Kerrigan drew from his behaviour but he had to offer a silent prayer of thanks when no one chased after him.

--

In the weeks that followed, the evidence proved damning and it dragged down both Basil and Alexis with it. Or, rather, Jonathan Grayson dramatically claimed stress and woe, setting himself up for a plea bargain right from the start... and named the two as part of his network.

But before a judge, sworn in and all, both Keller and Kerrigan seniors as well as Gregory Kerrigan testified to their innocence and presented with such support even Grayson Sr had to admit that maybe he was mistaken; old age and all that.

The next months would be trying, they all knew it and would prepare accordingly.

Alexis considered that while everyone involved in the case might have time to prepare for the hearing, there would be no personal preparation at all; he slammed hard backward into his desk, almost feeling every grain of the wood imprinting into his back with the force. Blinking up at his father he wondered how he'd never considered the man might turn violent... or that it would hurt to know he would never strike back.

"Insolent fool!" Jonathan hissed, "You've torn it all down, the entire empire is at risk because of you. All my planning and preparations brought to naught by my own son!"

"Betrayal is something we all must live with, father," Alexis mused, heart-sore, but his voice rang so much calmer than he felt as he picked himself up off the floor. He rubbed a hand over his sore jaw where the hit had struck.

"I have done no such thing," Jonathan hissed, "It was supposed to be yet another trick you were meant to catch me at, another way to prove—"

"Another test?" Alexis laughed humourlessly, adjusting his clothes because he couldn't bear to raise his head and let his father see his burning eyes. His hands dropped to hang still by his sides. "Yet more hurdles to jump, is that it? I suppose I failed spectacularly, then."

"Failed?!" Jonathan raved, not hearing the hurt and pain in his son's voice, and Alexis wasn't sure he should be thankful or saddened. "This goes beyond failure into catastrophic *idiocy*! You ruined us! And to think you were supposed to lead us into our all-time prime. You've failed me in almost everything I had expected of you." And he drew out the most painful knife of all, "Your mother would have cried at your faithlessness."

Alexis couldn't help it when his eyes slid sidelong over to the lovely little portrait by the window; the warm-eyed, delicately structured woman with her lovingly arranged blonde locks falling artlessly and beautifully over her tiny shoulders, sparkling gray eyes looking like a sky about to break open for sunshine, and a loving smile pulling her lips with that almost infinitesimal quirk to them hinting at a sense of humour.

A smile that, for all the world they could have been twins, Alexis had never worn himself.

"She would never have cried," Alexis refuted quietly, firmly, staring at the face so similar to his own. "She'd have pouted or turned away. She may have been disappointed," he turned his gaze back to his father knowing that his eyes, his mother's eyes, bore the same intense look she must have sometimes worn. "But I don't think it would have been with me."

Jonathan Grayson stared at his son in stony silence. But the hardness in his expression did not fade, and Alexis mourned these moments where all he'd worked for to be for his father, all the things he'd

done to make the man happy; the secrets, the games, subterfuge and planning, the lack of friends and the limited social life... had all come to mean nothing.

When he spoke, it was with the coldest tone Alexis had ever heard, "Goodbye."

He watched his father walk out of his office with firm, purposeful steps, each footfall the echo of every stab to his chest; to his heart. And when the door closed he felt so horribly alone.

Much too soon there came a light tapping on his door. "Come in."

Kazuhi Mori stepped in holding a large rectangle of folded cardboard Alexis quickly realised was a flat-packed document box. Kazuhi nodded solemnly to him and went to the desk, unfolded the box and set it on the surface. In an almost toneless voice he said, "Don't look back anymore."

In that instant Alexis knew the advice was personally given, the box individually delivered, and it was just another option on the list, a very handsome option; he nodded.

Kazuhi gave him a long and calculating look before nodding, an air of approval to it, and left as quietly as he'd come.

Forty minutes later when he paused by the door on his final way out, box three-quarters full in his arms, Alexis looked over his office and realised he would hardly miss anything of this place. The only person who had made it all mean anything had sent him on his way. His last glance was at the wall by the window where the wallpaper remained bright within a rectangular space upon which his mother's portrait had once hung.

Nodding, he shut the door behind him with a final click.

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It was a month later that Alexis finally managed to settle in at his new office and greet one of his senior personnel.

"Thank you for coming to work here," he said quietly, feeling almost unable to look Mr Arthur Brand in the eye. "After the last time we spoke, I did not think you would return my call." Who would? When Alexis had been the one to hand this tireless, brilliant worker his redundancy notice —a measure meant to hurt someone Jonathan Grayson had disliked on the Board of Directors.

"Think nothing of it, Grayson," Brand said. He sighed, "I saw the news. I read the Times. I don't blame you at all. I'm just glad that you've offered me this job. In this climate, I thought I might have to settle for a more junior position."

Thankful and admiring, and trying not to show either, "I'm glad that you seem to have put it behind us."

Brand was quiet for a moment then said, "Perhaps you should too." He winked at Alexis' surprised expression, "Sir."

A tentative smile pulling his lips, Alexis nodded and let the man depart. He finally took his seat behind his desk, a monstrous mahogany that looked like it took up half his office. It had been a gift from Ian.

He looked to his left, past one of the panels of clear glass enclosing his office, out over the open plan hallway of an office and assembled desks clustered in threes along the windows, admiring the bustle and business. High above the beige carpeting and white walls, from the ceiling hung three signs, equally spaced down the office, the logos of the two companies Basil had transferred out of the Grayson Corp umbrella... and one new one.

Alexis' companies.

Farthest from him, on the other end of the office, was the Margarita King* area. That branch dealt in the sales and distribution of pre-mixed vodka margaritas in a rainbow of flavours that were rapidly becoming a hit in the UK club scenes. From that area, phone set pressed to his ear, Basil noticed him looking and raised an arm in an excited wave.

Alexis raised a hand in return, glad to see his friend looking happy at his new job.

Midway down the office, closest to reception, was the area designated to Blank, a small company that dealt in minimalistic, simply but ergonomically contoured furniture. The name struck somewhat of an antonym to its Zen-inspired style; classy but unencumbered, elegant but strong. Alexis had furnished his new apartment from its first catalogue.

And closest to his desk, in need of the most direction, was the newest company, Gauge.

He was appalled at his own helplessness to name the club-wear company anything else, pronounced the same way as the name of a man he'd tried not think about. All too often he found himself looking up at the sign, done in Parchment script, mentally erasing the extra 'u' in the word then cursing himself for it.

"Sir?"

He pulled his gaze away from the sign and offered a small smile to his secretary, "Yes, Amanda?"

"Yer friend Ian Frost be here to see ye," she said, smile warmer than he had ever seen on her when she'd been working for his father.

Alexis nodded, and got up to approach his office sideboard while she trotted off to let Ian in. Setting the kettle on, he wondered what inquisition he'd be in for now. Ga—*Gregory* would have most likely shared his personal agenda with Ian, and Alexis did not look forward to arguing over it. He knew where Ian stood on it, and it did not please him, especially since this was none of Ian's business.

"Do try not to clench that tea pot too hard, Grayson," Ian spoke from behind him. "One might think you weren't happy to see me."

Alexis continued with his ministrations upon the sideboard, back still turned. He tried for nonchalantly sarcastic when he said, "Nonsense. Your little consortium managed to break me apart from my last remaining family; how could I not be welcoming?"

Giving a heavy sigh, Ian theatrically moaned, "Ahh yes, orphaned little child now, aren't you?" There passed a long silence as Alexis waited for the water to boil, refusing to turn around. Ian quietly reminded, "You're not alone, you know."

"I'm always alright by myself," Alexis said honestly. The words brought back the instant he had last said those precise words—to Basil when he'd been off to take an afternoon off—and along with that, almost every other occasion he'd spoken them in the past how many years.

A warm presence came up behind him to stand reassuringly close, a hand settling onto his shoulder. "Alright isn't a state of living, Alexis," Ian quietly murmured. "I always blamed myself for the breakdown in our friendship. You're right, of course, I did suspect you for a time. And you never forgave me that betrayal; that slip in my trust after you had so completely given me yours."

Alexis froze, and the hand on his shoulder squeezed momentarily.

"You set me aside like the many others you feared would hurt you. Once was enough." Ian sighed, "Once has always been the limit for you, if you can't cut them out when you see a betrayal coming."

The kettle whistled then shut itself off, and Alexis mechanically poured the water into the teapot, letting the bags within steep. When he spoke, it was with the quietest voice he'd ever heard from himself, "I don't have anything left to give."

"Then take," Ian said gently. "Take from me. Take my friendship and my trust, and my promise that I will not mindfully disappoint you again. Take something. *Anything*." He snorted, "Don't think it hasn't escaped me that you sent Basil to the other side of the office to a position that will barely bring you into contact anymore. You can't keep us all away from you, you know."

"I... I don't know how." Miserable loss clouded Alexis' mind. All he could do was stand there, attention on the little clock before him waiting for the two minute mark to pour the steeped tea.

"Let's have tea, my friend."

And it was only then that Alexis looked up, meeting Ian's golden gaze, just those few shades too pale to be the kind of hazel he most appreciated. Hope and uncertainty warred in him.

"Let's have tea," Ian repeated gently. "And put the past behind us."

Minutes later, sitting in a chair across from his friend and cradling his cup, the silence felt comfortable if tentative to Alexis. "So." He found a smile somewhere, and it ghosted over his lips, "You owe me that story on how you met Kazuhi." For the first time in a long time, his hands moved without intent, one fingertip tracing the edge of his teacup handle.

The movement caught Ian's eye and he smiled warmly, sitting back and taking a sip of his tea before he began to speak.

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**This company exists in South Asia, distributed by a friend of mine; seriously strong and very deceptively yummy stuff.*

CHAPTER 5 - COMMENCEMENT

"Ian says I'm lucky you even agreed to meet with me again," Alan said quietly into the silence at the end of their recent thread of conversation.

Startled, Alexis looked up from his last forkful of sirloin steak, over the candlesticks and into Alan's cautiously expectant gaze. He paused before carefully setting his utensils down and slowly saying, "I'm still learning, still finding my life out here away from my father and the work I used to do."

Alan smiled understandingly, encouraging him to continue.

So Alexis said, with a self depreciating little snort and embarrassed enough by the thought but determined to say them because it means opening up, even just a little, "I'm still tempted to closet myself in my office and just work every minute I'm awake. It sometimes seems a lot easier to just avoid everything. There's still an idea in my head of taking out a lease in the next door residential building."

"Then you'd disappear and the world would mourn its loss," Alan teased. He smiled and said, "Well, I certainly would. Mourn, that is." His earnest gaze begged to close the distance between them across the table. "I hope you will continue to see me." He too hesitated before, "I'm aware you know how my interest runs where you're concerned. Please don't let that stand against me."

"Of course," Alexis murmured, feeling less brave than he sounded. He already knew that Alan was nice... but wasn't what he wanted. He met Alan's eyes anyway and spoke as honestly as before, "But please don't let my aversion to getting involved stand against me. You and I, at this point in time, are aiming for opposite things." He gave an apologetic smile, could feel it tinged with resignation, "I keep thinking you will become very frustrated at some point."

"I suppose I will," came the surprisingly honest answer. "But I will try not to be." He added quietly, "Thank you for trying."

Alexis paused, wine glass aloft. He studied the way Alan looked at him a moment before saying softly, "Thank you for putting up with me." Pulling a small smile up from somewhere, he pasted it on before turning back to his dinner.

The food was fantastic, just as the reviews had stated. If company could not be entirely comfortable then at least the trappings could exceed expectations; perfect service, rated food and relaxing ambience.

But even now, Alexis questioned his decision. He knew he'd only agreed to go out with Alan because he'd already decided he wasn't attracted to the man. It was a harmless decision, pushed none of his limits or tested his boundaries.

Safe.

After a polite length of time and a last sip of his red wine, he excused himself and went to the men's room.

The water cooled his face as always but could not wash away the humiliation of the evening. He was trying, damn it. And this time, when he looked up into the mirror to meet too beautiful hazel eyes, it felt like he'd been waiting for the *déjà vu* for years instead of months.

Hot and cold, dreading and excited, Alexis murmured, "When will you cease haunting me?"

"When will you remember I'm flesh and blood?" Gage wryly asked in return, tone lightly tinted with sarcasm and a little frustration, hands comfortably in his pockets though his shoulders were tense. "I made mistakes but you were never one of them. I'm sorry you got hurt." Quietly, he added, "I miss you."

Studiously returning his eyes to his own reflection, Alexis searched out the markers in his expression that returned that sentiment and tried to erase them. "We've only met—really met—just once."

Gage gave him a meaningful look, one brow tipped in emphasis.

Ignoring that, Alexis dipped his face into his handful of cold water, wishing his thoughts and feelings would run down the drain as easily as the cool liquid. He wished it would all leave him alone, leave him his dark little apartment and the small space of his new company. "You know nothing about me. I know nothing about you."

"And I know," Gage said quietly, "that you haven't once throughout your conversation with Alan gestured with your hands as you spoke." He shouldered himself away from the wall, looking hesitant but determined, approaching the sink beside Alexis. "I know you've had only a glass and a half of your red wine. You don't really like it but it's what Alan ordered so you haven't said anything. You would have, under normal circumstances." He leaned his hip on the marble of the counter, eyes turning from the mirror and now straight on at Alexis' profile. His gaze burned. "I know your eyes haven't danced with light as you listened to him speak. You didn't scoff, your brows barely moved, and you didn't even tap your fingers on the table. You're bored."

Alexis studiously dried his hands and face on a paper towel before watching Ga—Gregory... *Gregory*, damn it—Gregory's reflection. Shit. How could this man read him so well? "Your companions must think you incredibly rude if you were watching me all through dinner."

"Hardly." Gage shrugged, "This restaurant is one of mine and I'd finished my work shortly before you arrived." His lips quirked in genuine amusement and something else, something that meant he didn't like what he was about to say but he said it anyway, "Alan brought you here because he's a silver member and gets a discount."

It shouldn't have meant anything, should have been nothing at all, but for some reason Alexis felt a dull pang at being brought somewhere because it was efficient to do so. The practicality made sense. But for a moment he felt, still heart-sore and raw, that it stung just the slightest bit.

"Does it matter so much?" Gage had that intense look in his eyes, the one that Alexis recognised in himself sometimes.

"It really shouldn't," he said softly, hesitating a moment before turning his head the slightest bit to finally sidelong meet that sharp hazel gaze. "But for a moment it felt as though I were a bother." As he spoke, Alexis understood what he was feeling a little better and continued, "That taking me out to

dinner is some kind of necessary step and that it should be accomplished as economically as possible." The oddity of the confession struck him then, and he internally gave a sigh of exasperation at himself; such dramatics! Pushing his thoughts away he turned to check his hair, determined to leave. Dismissively he said, "It's just an odd reaction, never mind."

"Maybe it shouldn't matter," Gregory... Gage... said softly. "But you do deserve everything a lover can give you, served wholeheartedly at least as much as you have given of yourself before."

"Money is meaningless," Alexis sniped. "I don't care about his discount."

"It doesn't have anything to do with money," Gage agreed. "I simply meant the effort. You deserve someone to reach out to you the way you need them to."

In the mirror Alexis caught sight of Gage's hand reaching slowly toward him. He stiffened and that hand barely more than paused at his initial reaction before continuing on its way, fingertips bridging the distance to ghost light over his hair then his neck, making gooseflesh rise all over the side of Alexis' face and shoulder.

He only distantly realised he gasped in a breath at the touch, attention drawn away by the rush of awareness to the left side of his body where Gage was, and oh my God would the tangle of thought and emotion never end...?

"You can't," he said stonily, pressure building behind his eyes. "No one can. I can't reach back. There isn't anything left."

At the sad look Gage gave him, he stepped away quickly, startled and skittish, and he knew it. He missed the touch instantly, watched the hand fall as it withdrew.

He fled.

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He wished he could flee this lunch.

There had to be something illegal about the way Ian and Kazuhi moved, the way they walked together side by side, in rhythm despite their difference in strides; each of Ian's steps matched a step and a half of his lover's. They were fluid together, aware and woven and belonging.

Alexis refused to sigh when they picked a round table instead of a square one and sat closely together.

Initially they conversed easily on personal topics, Alexis without much to say except that he was thinking about purchasing a piano sometime soon because now he had more time that he'd like to resume playing. He muttered a bit about the qualities of pianos and how he wanted a baby grand for his living room and it cost quite a lot of money now... and feeling painfully aware of the fact the couple knew next to nothing about pianos and his passion for playing but the two listened carefully anyway, supportive.

He hardly ever spoke about himself, and it felt awkward, but their patience made it easier.

They regaled him with stories of their tennis matches and a recent trip to the Swiss Alps where they had been skiing. They mentioned they'd moved in together recently... and what Ian's sister Eileen

had had to say about *that*. That is to say, what *cackling* Eileen had indulged in about that, and Alexis had to smile at the repeat of Eileen's lectures they regaled him with.

A smile he lost when the conversation turned, without his consent, to the state of his own love life. He was certain the two were teaming up on him over this;

"So what did you tell him?" Ian asked carefully, referring to Alan.

Resisting that urge to sigh again, Alexis haltingly answered, "I explained that I'd enjoyed our dinners—"

"How many had you been on?" Kazuhi interrupted quietly to ask.

"Two and they were—"

"Enjoyable?" Ian prodded.

"Yes, quite, and the conversation—"

"You were bored, weren't you?" Ian's tone was a bit too statement-like for Alexis' liking.

"Why does everyone keep—"

"Did you run into Gage?" Kazuhi barged in, stealing Alexis away from the start of his lecture.

Alexis couldn't help the rush of warm embarrassment, "That's none of your—"

"What did you say?" Kazuhi broke in again.

Alexis blinked.

"Not what did *he* say," Ian agreed. "What did *you* say?"

"I..." What had he said? "That we barely know each other..."

"Don't you want to remedy that?" A smile floated about Kazuhi's lips; the most worrisome smile Alexis had ever, in his life, seen.

"I most certainly do not wish to—"

"You get along, don't you?" Ian asked, "I remember you said something about visiting his club."

"He tricked me into thinking he was—"

"But he did take good care of you, didn't he?" Kazuhi asked.

"That was an entirely false situation and not a basis for—"

"The next time could be under more honest circumstances, of course," Ian rushed to placate.

Alexis began to simmer, "Now *see here*—"

"Denial," the couple quietly decided together, sharing a meaningful look.

"I give up." Reclining in his seat, resigned to eternal embarrassment, Alexis looked away from his much too smug companions and drank his port. They couldn't understand... could they?

"That would be best," Kazuhi sagely commented.

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"I agree," Basil grinned as he pushed the door open. "Just admit that you ought to give things with him another go."

"Mind your own business," Alexis muttered quietly as he followed.

"Look," Basil pressed, stepping close as they waited for the lift. "He misses you. And you miss him, admit it."

"I don't know him," came the stubborn reply.

"You're nit-picking," Basil parried. "You read his file anyway—don't look at me like that, you did! And you mentioned yourself they probably had a file on you. Just crossing off the untruths should be a game on itself, see which father had the better investigator."

Alexis rolled his eyes as they stepped into the lift cabin and pressed the button for their floor.

"Forget for a moment here," Basil insisted, "That I'm being nosy." Alexis gave a rude snort. "Okay, very nosy. But forget it a moment. Can't I want to see you happy? You had the brightest glow on your face the day after you met him and I do recall how crestfallen Gage looked that Wednesday I went when he was expecting you." He chased after Alexis as they exited, "You could give the bloke a break."

"None of your observations are conclusive." Alexis gave a cutting motion with his hand. "You were swayed by the evidence of his non-existence initially, how can you so easily change your mind?" He ducked his head when their voices drew attention, more embarrassed than annoyed Basil still pushed to discuss this right in the damn office, take out lunches in hand. He led the way to his private office studiously looking down at his feet and refrained from catching anyone's eye. He grumbled, "You know what, never mind. It's still none of your business."

"But it is our business," Amanda piped in, jumping up from her desk to intercept him, looking both hesitant and eager. She handed Alexis some mail and then stood her ground, "We worry about ye, we do." She paused then quietly admitted, "That Kerrigan chap called ye here, he did, an' he was right polite about it. I told him ye was in a meeting an' he says not to bother ye. I dinna tell ye he called because he asked me not to but I reckon now I ought to 'ave."

"I wouldn't have spoken to him anyway," Alexis said flatly, a bit annoyed that she stood directly in his way, Basil to his left, and it didn't give him any room to walk around her and end this stupid conversation in the middle of his damn office. "Will you kindly let me pass?"

"I think ye ought to give him a chance, sir," Amanda insisted, not moving and looking more apprehensive by the second. "One last one, if ye can."

Something snapped into place in Alexis' head.

His gaze instantly gravitated to his office... past one of the clear panels and right to where he could see a foot suspended in mid air from a crossed over leg, the toe of the second foot just barely visible from his perspective; very shiny shoes, and in conjunction with the current awkward conversation, likely belonged to someone he did not want to speak to.

His breathing tripped then sped up, and he about-faced quickly only to come up short... because before him stood four of his employees, looking wary, arms folded and lined up between him and the doorway. He stared at them in shock.

This could not happen.

He turned back to look at Amanda and his dismay must have been entirely too evident because she sighed and stepped closer before quietly, reassuringly, saying, "We'd just as quickly toss 'im out on his ear if he hurt ye, sir." Her brows lowered, "Ye just have to say."

"You've been talking to Kazuhi, haven't you?" Alexis muttered accusingly, stomach roiling.

She blinked in surprise then smiled gently, taking his bag of lunch from him and then his arm, leading him to his inner office door and through the glass he saw Gage catch sight of him and stand up. He balked a moment before the door but Basil was there and flinging it open and Amanda gave him a little push.

"Good afternoon," he stiffly greeted, standing stock still and completely not knowing what to do or say next, the only means of escape closing quietly behind him but feeling too much like the slamming of a prison cell.

Gage looked him carefully over, tired and tense; looking just the way Alexis felt and that comparison was not helping. "Good afternoon, Elfling."

Stiffening at the endearment, Alexis needed precisely half a second to decide that out of self-preservation alone, it might be best to seek shelter –behind his desk. He barely turned his back as he rounded it, having to shuffle a bit sideways to put the monstrosity between himself and the source of all his self-doubt.

He heard a chorus of muted groans in the distance... and resisted the urge to check for an audience.

Gage sighed, stepping up to the other side of the desk until his legs were pressed right up against it as close as possible; he may as well go into the damn thing. "How have you been?"

Hands awkwardly moving over the table, Alexis remained standing and uncertainly replied, "About the same way you look. But less tense. Until about half a minute ago, at least. But better." He gestured jerkily to the rest of his office outside his inner domain, "I have my own group now."

"I heard." Gage gave a gently proud smile that warmed his eyes and softened his brows, "I'm happy for you. I was a little worried after I... after I'd heard a little about how you've been after you left your father's."

No words came to mind in reply and Alexis refused to ask why he'd been speaking to Ian or Alan about him –the only two possible sources of such information. He didn't want to hear what else those idiots might have told this man.

"How was the move?" Gage asked conversationally, gesturing at Alexis' seat and waiting for Alexis to move toward it before settling in one of his own. "I heard you moved out of your family penthouse."

Amidst the fidgeting with the armrests and all the little components that held it together came his discomfited answer, "It was fine." Alexis paused then offered, "I like where I've moved to though I live alone. Two bedroom. Comfortable. Maybe a little too big but I like it and the view is of the Thames. Quite pleasant."

"Good to hear." Gage smiled again, comforting and reassuring, reclining in his seat and looking like he was relaxing now the initial pleasantries were past and the ice broken.

"And how..." Alexis dreaded asking this but he wanted to know, if he was honest with himself, so he pushed the words out, "How have you been?"

Gage blinked. "Well. I'm well. I can't say I have my own group but I'm still happy where I am. My own family and I do not have the same relationship as you did with yours." He inclined his head in acknowledgement, "I must say I admire you for stepping out on your own like this. It's a bold move and I wish you well. If there is anything I can do to support you then you should, of course, let me know."

"Thank you." The offer should have been an expected one, a possibility for Gage to exploit to remain in Alexis' life, but he seemed sincere.

"My father told me off after you left." Gage smiled, "Asked me what I'd done to you to scare you off."

Fidgeting, Alexis blurted, "I don't suppose you told him you kissed me?"

"I don't kiss and tell," Gage murmured, something alight in his eyes that made Alexis both worried and warm. "And besides, he might have thought I'd seduced your cooperation out of you."

"He'd have to have a lot of faith in you," Alexis commented wryly with a twist of his lips. Gage grinned. "And I didn't mean it that way. Well, what did you tell him?"

"That the little lamb isn't comfortable with the big bad wolf."

A snort escaped him, "You're impossible." Gage just grinned again. Then with hesitation, Alexis sought to draw the conversation away from there and blurted out, "Happy Birthday. In advance, anyway."

After a briefly startled moment, understanding flickered in Gage's eyes and then a warm, slow smile swept over his lips, lighting his eyes with a different, warmer light and shoving tension off his shoulders down his arms and off his hands. "You read your father's file on me?"

Staggered by the changes, Alexis's eyes hopelessly fixed on the suddenly stunning expression, he only managed to say, "Unfortunately."

"Then you *do* know me at least to some degree." Gage got up and put both hands flat on Alexis' table—could he please not do that and kindly keep away—and said, "While I know next to nothing about you. I should like to remedy that."

"If I were to believe that you do not have a file on me then the fact you know nothing about me would be precisely my point," Alexis tried to argue back but his tone came out not quite firm or even

argumentative. He tried again, this time to be forceful, "I do not wish to pursue a relationship with you. And you don't know me so what reason do you have to want to even—*what are you doing?*" He jumped to his feet when Gage lifted his hands and, Gods be damned, came round the table toward him. "Don't you come any closer, you..." He trailed off when Gage froze, actually stopped advancing. "You...?"

Standing stiffly and face tense Gage quietly asked, "Are you afraid of me, Elfling?"

"I—" Alexis huffed and waved a hand in negation. "No. Don't be ridiculous."

Gage took a step forward.

Alexis scooted back a pace to match.

His shoulders sagged the tiniest bit, "You are."

"I'm not," Alexis contradicted, squaring his own shoulders and forcibly putting back down the hand that had risen to ward Gage off.

Another step.

Finally, Alexis managed to hold his ground.

One more.

"I think that's close enough," Alexis choked out on a strangled tone.

"I rather think it's not." There was something in those hazel eyes, something challenging but also yielding, pleading and yet somehow demanding.

"I think, for today," Alexis couldn't resist moving a step to the left and behind his chair, no longer in fear of Gage rushing him but at the shocking response flooding his body at the sight of all those emotions on Gage's face; the want to answer them in a way he knew he wasn't ready to. "For today, that it is enough."

"And tomorrow?" Gage prodded, one corner of his lips pulling up into a soft smile, no mocking in it or amusement, just gentle reassurance enough to begin to calm Alexis' racing heartbeat.

"We'll see." Alexis fiddled with the piping across the top of his leather chair and tried not to think that everything in his life was getting turned on its ear. He remained bravely meeting those warm hazel eyes, continued resisting their call.

"Lunch tomorrow?"

Alexis couldn't back down from the suddenly challenging light in those eyes. "One o'clock," he agreed solemnly, inclining his head.

When Gage held out a hand, he looked it over warily before putting his own in it, mindful of what had happened when he did this that first time they'd met. When nothing happened, he stupidly stepped out from behind his chair... and promptly got hauled right up against Gage—

Annoyance wiped everything from his mind, but he held back from striking out; this wasn't that kind of self defence but— "You cheated, you nasty little—"

"Just sealing the deal," Gage murmured, looking satisfied, head bowing and oh he was going to skin the brute alive and... wow...

Irritation made him stiffen in the embrace.

The warm rush of relief in his chest and whooping cheers outside his office made him kiss roughly back.

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CHAPTER 6 - GRAVITATE

Frustrated and impatient, a little embarrassed but much more irritated, Alexis stood in Trademark's front lobby glaring at yet another unfamiliar receptionist behind the counter. The man didn't cower but he certainly looked uncomfortable.

"When is he here then?" Alexis snappishly asked.

"I'm not aware of his schedule—"

"Then kindly speak to someone who does because I would prefer a straight answer," Alexis slowly instructed, tone just barely touched with sarcasm.

The man seemed to find his balls, "Pardon me, sir but I—"

"No, pardon *me*, Mark," Alexis had taken the name off the man's tag, "I must insist that you find me a straight answer because I've just about had it with Gage-- that *Gregory*-- idiot hunting me down in various men's toilets as well as at my office to embarrass me in front of my employees."

Mark looked flabbergasted at the men's toilets part and now struggled to regain some semblance of composure.

Alexis slapped both hands down on the marble top counter and glowered. "I'm here. And if he isn't then you had better find out and tell me when he is or I will hold *you* responsible for the results of the next opportunity he takes to make my life miserable." Huffing a frustrated snort, he snarled, "Do you understand me?"

The poor receptionist blinked rapidly a few times then managed a faint, "Yes sir." He snatched up his telephone unit, "I need someone to cover the front desk, please." Pause, and before putting the handset down, "Thank you."

When the replacement arrived, Mark dashed off to wherever the back offices were and Alexis finally stepped aside to allow the next guest—looking completely bemused—to be served. Still glowering he stalked over to the bay windows he'd admired that long ago night and flung himself down into them.

He didn't have Gage's phone number; the idea rankled at him.

How could a man who pursued him so stubbornly not once hand him a calling card? Alexis internally snarled. Why, the man must be positively arrogant to come to him only when in need or want of his company...! What was Alexis to him? A convenience? He would turn that grinning, shameless man away the next time he came to his office, he really would. That idiot could be doing who knows *what*... or who knows *who*.

Alexis could feel his facial muscles rearrange into a darker expression.

"Ah... Mr Grayson?"

Alexis turned the expression up at—"Jake." It was the receptionist the first night he'd been here. He stood, trying to calm himself and his raging temper. "Good evening." He paused. "Or it will be if you have an answer for me."

Jake gave the best smile he could, given the circumstances. "Sir, allow me to say that is quite a pleasure to have you return—"

"Where is he?" he demanded flatly.

"Ah... I beg your pardon, sir," Jake appeared quite uncomfortable. "But we do not know where he is and we have not been able to contact Mr Kerrigan's secretary as it is now out of office hours." The man looked ready to need to contain an explosion.

Instead, Alexis growled, "Tell *Gage* that if he shows his face at my office uninvited one more time, I will take great pleasure in having security escort him from the building, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you." He made for the elevators but Jake kept pace with him,

"Please sir, you have been provided for if you would care to stay a while this evening."

Alexis stopped, feeling something stir unpleasantly in his gut at that. "What?" He stared at Jake, "He's already selected a host to sit with me and waste my time?"

"No sir," Jake looked surprised at the idea. Shaking his head, "I mean that you are welcome to dine here and spend time. Tonight is a live band night and there is a table we reserve for VIPs or the Kerrigans when they are here." He offered a smile, "Sir Gregory mentioned... well..." his smile faded back into that hesitant line, "that you are someone important to him and that we should... ah... see to all your needs when you visit." He didn't seem sure he had chosen the right words and belatedly added, "Sir."

Alexis shook his head, ingrained manners dictating he reply as he turned away, "No, thank you."

When he turned back around in the elevator and pressed the lobby button, he noticed the faint horror on Jake's face, as though someone might be out for his hide.

--

Gage showed up around three in the morning, the ping of the elevator the only warning and even then it could have been Basil come to drag him away from his desk again.

"I'm not here," Alexis grumbled after having only flittingly glanced up from his paperwork to identify the interruption. He ignored the thumping in his chest his heart beat had become. "I'm a figment of your imagination. You can turn right back around and take yourself off."

"Work is a poor replacement for what you really want," Gage said quietly, ignoring him, voice carrying in the dead silence amidst the vague paper rustling. He looked devastatingly handsome in his suit despite the day's worth of wrinkles it had incurred.

"I happen to think it's excellent therapy," Alexis replied, still working on the document before him and determined to *sound* determined and not at all seeming like he was trying to convince himself.

Gage sighed very quietly before stepping into the room and taking one of the guest seats before Alexis' desk. "I heard you visited Trademark's earlier."

Why couldn't this be over? Gage could get bored and leave. Stop chasing. Go.

Like everyone else.

Alexis knew he seemed like he was too busy to answer, finishing the jotting of the coherent sentence he'd been writing before setting the paper aside to reply, "I did." He reached for another letter. "So what?"

"I am sorry I missed you. I should have been there."

There was something in that tone Alexis knew he couldn't live with. The words slid stiffly off his tongue, "If you had engagements elsewhere then it would not make any kind of sense to be at the club, now would it?" He attempted to sneer, "You make it sound like it was some kind of life or death situation you'd let me down on." Managing to actually apply himself to reading what he was looking at, Alexis was barely able to chase his own words with, "Ridiculous."

"It *is* Life or Death," Gage said, still in the infuriatingly quiet but firm voice, "The life or death of us, of our relationship, of what we could be."

"We are not anything," Alexis said firmly, distracted from the report and looking away from it to glare at his visitor. He felt very foolish in this entire situation; upset at something he shouldn't be upset about. "Not anything at all."

"I won't knowingly hurt you, Elfling," Gage murmured softly. "I wouldn't want to ever see you like that again, the way you did at The Greenhouse." He paused, his demeanour changing in that subtle way it did to something protective and hot, "I want to *keep* you from ever looking like that again."

"In case you haven't noticed," Alexis said, ignoring the hot rush at Gage's words, rearranging his desk and reshuffling papers because that was all he could do with most of his attention focused on the conversation than on the printed words, "I am in no danger of ever looking like that again. You can leave me alone. I do know how to take care of myself."

"You look that way still," Gage breathed, leaning forward, hand coming up to rest on the desk and Alexis glared at it. "You carry the vague expression of it on your face everyday and each day it looks a little worse, a little more frantic." He sighed, "How can you do this to yourself and expect me to do nothing?"

Alexis had nothing to say, frozen for a breathless moment. His chest felt like it had been ripped open and he slumped back into the leather feeling so very alone. He remained seated when Gage slowly stood and came around the table, did nothing when Gage swung the chair around to turn him so they faced each other, and only finally met those lovely hazel eyes when the man knelt before him.

"I want you to stay with me," Gage whispered, taking one hand in his. "I want to stay with you." He clutched Alexis' hand so carefully, thumb rubbing slowly back and forth, his other hand reaching to cup a cheek. "I hope that you will let me be near you at least, if you will not be by my side."

"I don't want to say goodbye," was all Alexis could say, the words hard to get out and stiff despite everything... but layered underneath with fear and longing and hope and despair and—

"I won't say it," Gage promised, lips brushing whisper-soft over Alexis' hand. "And I won't let *you*."

--

Two days later he slowly approached the Trademark's front desk queue, hands in his pockets as he stared over the shoulders and between the people ahead of him at Jake the receptionist. If he felt a little belligerent about this (his employees had hardly shut up, making supposedly random suggestions he pay Trademark's another visit) and all his friends had been just as pesky.

Not bothering to hide his ill mood, he scowled.

And he must have been in range of the cameras and caught someone's attention because scant minutes later, Gage was stepping out of that hidden side door and striding quickly, grinning, across the floor toward him.

The idiot man had dressed sharply, as usual, the steel-grey suit complimented by a shirt pressure-patterned with vertical stripes in a colour that seemed both deep brown and ash gray—a shade Alexis had recently seen in a swatch labelled 'gunmetal'. No tie. A silver pin held his matching pocket kerchief in place and a silver hoop adorned that piercing in his left ear, both his shoes and belt a matching off-black. He looked delicious.

Alexis swallowed down a throat gone dry.

"Welcome back, Elfling," Gage murmured, immediately taking Alexis' arm and leading him from the queue and completely ignoring the stares his presence had drawn.

Just as the door to the club swung shut behind them Alexis heard one woman say, "If all the hosts are that hot, I am never leaving this place!" And the words made a green streak of nasty emotion shoot across his abdomen, his hand tightening possessively on the arm he held.

"I'm all yours," Gage bent to murmur into one ear, too perceptive for Alexis' peace of mind.

He led them to the hidden corner sitting space they had taken up that wondrous night so many months ago. The air could have crackled with awareness as they shed their flimsy suit jackets this time and curled in together, eyes meeting and holding. When their waiter arrived, without breaking the stare, Gage called for the same champagne they'd shared that first night.

And like before, Alexis relaxed and listened as Gage talked about recent lunches with friends, the board of directors for his father's company and the reasons he wanted to broil them, the tennis matches, the funny things he'd witnessed in going about his day, even the hilarious excuses some employees came up with to get out of trouble for being late for work.

Alexis found himself laughing more often than he would care to admit. And he enjoyed being here, maybe leaning in a little closer and drinking a little more. The champagne got quickly to his head, hard enough that Gage noticed and ordered food for him to balance things out, looking concerned and perfect but darling as ever because he went right back to the storytelling like their time together depended on it.

This time, when it came time to part, Alexis kissed back harder, moulded himself closer, and moaned the name a little more heart-wrenchingly, could feel the emotion loose itself in his chest, and he could feel Gage hesitate before finally vanishing.

And just as that first night had ended, he breathed. He waited until all had calmed, mindful that the sense of loss gripped him stronger this time but never mind that. Never mind the ache and the longing had risen sharply this time.

He took care not to pitch himself to the floor as he stood before making for the lift. But this time he only had enough energy left to get to his hotel room and fall into bed fully clothed, lips tasting of Gage, the flavour of those kisses on his tongue.

--

He returned the second night after. Again Gage met him, again they settled into their new routine. And again the second night, plus the second one following.

Routine.

It seemed right to Alexis now, something that could fit into his life like a snug little puzzle piece but the piece was too small, *too small*, and there were other places in his life that still had holes with tiny hesitant *This Man* written all over it. This could fill those other blanks, too, couldn't it...?

But Alexis said nothing. He listened. He talked. Talked a lot more than each visit previous, that's for certain. He couldn't sit any closer, couldn't just meld them both into one but it seemed good to share, like a balm to so many worries he'd been carrying around for so long.

It felt good to be so wanted.

But Routine was supposed to mean that one day it would get boring; this would become predictable.

The thought felt a little disturbing, especially since Gage seemed to be the type of person who tackled new things almost everyday, who saw things to their end and moved on to the next Big Thing. Alexis uneasily wondered if the same idea would apply to relationships as well. He'd been listening, and he understood such character traits; he'd accepted people like that into his workforce in the past.

And so— accustomed, so accepted of the idea that he should probably maximise what time he did have, he could not help but ask, "How long was your last relationship?"

But Gage, the bastard, saw right through him all over again and said, "I'm rather hoping you might be my last."

What answer was there to that?

Except Alexis seemed to think of every little way he could express an answer because he ended up literally across Gage's lap, unshod feet propped up on the couch and legs draped over the man's lap, gathered close and pressing closer, and there wasn't supposed to be a time to get up and leave each other, they should just stay there for the rest of their lives. Really, his thoughts were becoming pathetically dependent.

It alarmed him.

The kiss at the end of the night drew out longer, the tongue tangling with his demanding a little more, hands pushing more insistently at him almost to the desperation of lust and want and... Alexis had to tear his mouth away to exert his last control, the trigger to end tonight,

"Gage."

And then Gage was gone, slipping quietly, silently away as he always did because neither of them wanted to say goodbye.

--

A comfortable silence had descended, Alexis sitting between Gage's knees on the couch and reclining into his chest and Gage leaning back against an arm rest with the couch backrest on their left. From beyond the partition behind them there drifted the muted chatter of the rest of Trademark's patrons.

Alexis had been thinking about his parents earlier today and so he bluntly asked, "Are you and your father close?"

"A bit," Gage admitted. He smiled, tucking Alexis in around him and rewrapping his arms about Alexis' waist. "I didn't get sent away to boarding school and I didn't go very far for Uni. My parents are both alive and well, and get along very well so perhaps that's another factor."

Alexis nodded, appreciating that Gage didn't look at him with pity for his own lack of such a background, nor did Gage apologise he hadn't been so fortunate. It must be nice to have supportive family around you, and he felt glad for Gage to some extent for that.

"I learned to play sports at my father's clubs growing up," Gage continued thoughtfully, eyes seeing past the windows and the night time scenery outside. "We all did."

"We?" Alexis prodded, honestly curious.

"My brother, my sister and I."

"Siblings," Alexis blinked, tilting his head to the left and against the couch back rest enough to look over his shoulder at Gage. He thought of Ian and his bull-headed sister Eileen. "Do you all get along as well?"

"Mainly we try to drive each other insane," Gage corrected, grinning. Alexis had to smile at that; Ian and Eileen behaved the same way. "But I'm told that's normal behaviour for three siblings all born within a five-year span."

"You must be able to relate to each other well, then," Alexis mused. "Do they work in the family business like you?"

"My brother does," Gage replied. He appeared to be distracted from the conversation because his eyes withdrew from whatever past he had been looking into and returned to the present, back to admiring the expanse of neck and the bit of shoulder bared right before him. "My sister, on the other hand, is a marine biologist so she's off around the world more often than not."

"Do you miss her?" Alexis asked.

"Of course," Gage murmured, leaning forward to press his nose into Alexis' shoulder and breathe. "I'm the middle child and she's my little sister."

Alexis hummed to acknowledge the reply, touching his temple to Gage's cheek, and the silence descended once more.

"Do you...?"

"No," Alexis answered. "I don't have anyone."

Gage paused then leaned in, pressing up against Alexis' back and wrapping his arms all the tighter around Alexis to say, "You have me." He brushed a kiss over Alexis' cheek. "It's okay. You don't have to answer that now." Another kiss. "You'll realise it soon enough by yourself."

--

There eventually came the day Alexis had too many meetings, too many things to do, and the realisation that he would need to stay at work instead of head to Trademark's dropped onto his head with such force he almost blinked in surprise.

He debated calling Trademark's and leaving a message but then he remembered he had Gage's private mobile number saved in his own mobile phone's contacts list. Should he call that? He never had before. And he stared at his mobile phone on his desk so hard that one of his assistants noticed and gently ribbed him about it, urging him to call.

Gage picked up on the fourth ring. "Hello, Elfing."

"Hello," Alexis said quietly, uncertain.

"How are you?" Gage asked cheerfully, sincerity in his voice.

"I'm... fine." Awkwardness settled and Alexis wasn't certain what to say so he politely returned the question with, "And you?"

"Very well, thanks." Alexis could hear the smile in Gage's voice. "I'm looking forward to seeing you tonight."

"I... actually that's why I'm calling." Alexis unclenched his hands from his arm rest and took a deep breath. "I'm not going to make it tonight. I'm at the office and some issues have come up that I need to address so I wanted to let you know that I... well, that I wouldn't be able to make it." He almost cringed at the vague and business-like terminology he'd used.

"Hmm, 'that so?' Gage murmured, smile still in his voice and it puzzled Alexis a bit.

He paused. "Am I interrupting something?"

"Hm? No." Gage said softly, "I'm just pleased you rang me. You could have called Trademark's but instead you called me. I'm glad."

"I..." Alexis floundered. "Well, suppose you weren't at Trademark's but somewhere else and then went all the way there only to find I wouldn't be showing up? Better to tell you directly."

"Thank you for your concern." Yes, Alexis decided, Gage sounded quite amused for some reason.

Alexis tried to dismiss his awkwardness before he asked, "So. That's alright?"

"Of course," Gage answered. "Not like you can drop your work for me."

"Well, I—" *would*. Shaking his head at himself, Alexis instead commented, leaning back in his chair, "—will see tomorrow. And you're awfully pleased to be hearing from me."

"I'm always pleased to hear from you," Gage said firmly. "Don't ever forget that." He asked, "So what're you up to that it's taking time away from us?"

"Mm. A few things. One of them is a shipment delay from China," Alexis replied, reaching to move a few papers around on his desk, checking out the documents concerned. "Air-freight costs too much on the initial quote so I'm staying up into the east Asian time difference to contact another company there directly and get a comparison." He skimmed the fingertips of his free hand over his papers. "The shipment needs to leave by four in the afternoon tomorrow, our time, to make it here on schedule. I really need to get it sorted in time."

"Call me later after work perhaps?" Gage asked hopefully.

"Perhaps."

"Then again, I don't think I can wait that long." Before Alexis could say anything to that, Gage cheerfully declared, "Well I suppose I should leave you to your work then."

"Yes. Thank you." Alexis nodded even if Gage couldn't see. "I'll see you tomorrow."

And really, he should have realised that Gage had accepted things all too well enough to not be surprised when the man showed up with coffees and sandwiches around midnight, prompting a cheer and flood of thanks from the staff.

Gage grinned at the sight of him fighting his smile. "Hello, Elfling."

"You're incorrigible," he admonished, giving up and smiling back.

With a flourishing half-bow, "Why, thank you."

--

When Alexis stepped out of his weekly team meeting, he checked his mobile and found a missed call. Debating whether or not to ring back, he took an unusually long time to get back into his office.

Once there, he pressed the call-back and Gage picked up within three rings. "Hello, Elfling."

"Hi."

"Thank you for the journal and pen," Gage said softly, genuine thanks in his voice.

"You're welcome," Alexis said off-handed, awkward because he hardly gave anyone gifts and he wasn't certain what to say next. "I recalled you mentioned liking that particular Mont Blanc edition."

Gage gave a soft laugh and added, "The inscription is lovely."

Alexis paused. And then he began to nervously fiddle with the corner of his desk blotter. He said quietly, "Happy Birthday."

"Thank you," Gage said softly, honey-thick warmth in his tone. "I can't wait to see you tonight and express it properly."

"You shouldn't say things like that in the middle of the day," Alexis berated, a chuckle escaping from him.

"Why not?" Gage chuckled. "You'll miss me all the harder." He lowered his voice to a faux out-to-rule-the-world inflection, "It's all part of my grand evil scheme."

"And now you have a journal to help you manage it," Alexis commented drolly.

Gage just laughed.

--

"Hi."

Alexis looked up from his computer with surprise to find Gage at his door. "Hello." He frowned slightly, "We aren't scheduled to meet, are we?"

"No," Gage smiled. "This is a surprise."

Alexis blinked. No one had ever given him a surprise before and it must have showed because Gage's expression turned very tender.

"Lunch?" Gage asked quietly, smiling softly.

"Kind of early isn't..." Alexis trailed off at the sight of his computer clock. "Oh."

"Come on," Gage cajoled. "Lunch with me?"

Alexis paused in indecision before thinking, *fuck it*. "Alright."

And afterwards, when Gage walked him back, they noticed there weren't any cameras in the lifts and they indulged in a quick kiss... or two. Or sixteen.

If his staff noticed he returned with not-so-pale cheeks, they gave no indication.

--

Surrender.

It was all he could do. They hadn't even been able to calculate anything, prepare anything, because all artifice and planning had gone out the window so very long ago, and now all the pent-up feelings had simply broken free of all their restraints.

There had been no goodbye kiss. There had been a kiss, yes, but not in farewell and not another earmark suspension in time until their next evening together. No, the kiss had become a desperate clutch of a fist in Gage's shirt, lost eyes lifting to silently plead and Gage had smiled and gathered Alexis close.

Alexis had curved himself into Gage's hold as they walked, held on and would not let go until finally he tore one hand free to fetch his key and press it into Gage's own. And then Gage's hands began to shake, his smile became infinitely tender, and the final traces of Alexis' fear vanished.

Surrender.

With a sigh, Alexis tilted his head back into the pillow and stared up at the tasteful beige of the hotel ceiling and murmured, "You've stripped everything away."

"I love the way you're bared for me," Gage whispered back, the breath of his words sliding over Alexis' collarbones, hands on Alexis' chest to push the shirt out of the way, thumbs following the lines of pectoral muscles.

"There's nothing left in the way." Alexis' eyes burned and the ceiling blurred but there came a gentle touch to his cheek, the soft smile against his chin, and it pushed the worry back.

"I will be," Gage said quietly, firmly, lips pressing a tender kiss to one cheek. "I will stand in the way to I've uncovered. I bared you to me to cherish you, not for the world to see and hurt you with." He raised his head, met Alexis' eyes, his own hard and possessive. "Mine, Alexis. You will be mine alone."

"I don't know how to give," Alexis said instead, remembering what Ian had said, the way his few friends treated him so carefully still. He tightening his hold on Gage's shirt even as he pulled off those high shouldered, looking worriedly up at Gage, the emotion making his belly clench. *I wouldn't know how to give myself to you.*

Comprehension slid into those hazel eyes but a moment later the expression was replaced with something far warmer, something tender and hopeful. He cupped a cheek, "Do you want me?"

"Always."

"Will you let me love you?"

Alexis froze. He stared. "You—What?"

"Let me," Gage whispered, looking confident and uncertain, both determined and hesitant. The words were spoken carefully, a gift Alexis didn't know what to do with except it couldn't not be accepted and...

"I... I don't know," Alexis almost wailed, trying to sit up. "I don't know what to..."

"Shh," Gage murmured, hands stroking, soothing, cradling Alexis close, covering Alexis with his weight like a blanket of a shield and pushing him back down.

"Gage," Alexis whispered, arms circling the broad shoulder above him, lifting up into the heavier weight, legs parting a little more to welcome the hips that slid between his naked legs and—"Ah!" There curved a hardness at his bottom nudging oh so briefly at where he would accept Gage into himself, "Gage."

Kisses. Hot, passionate kisses that sent heat pouring through him. How had he ever thought he could keep in a little bit of himself?

One hand buried in Gage's hair, he angled his hips upward and the groan it drew from Gage making him shudder. "Please."

"Mine," came the soft agreement. Gage released his hold but slid downward, kissing softly slowly as he went, taking too long and making Alexis moan and writhe. His hands refit themselves to Alexis as he studied every angle and each line with his lips, licked every ridge and mouthed at each corner.

Bruises. Alexis knew there would be lovely coloured marks all over him come morning and please hurry, now please, *there...*! He arched when Gage bit the underside of one pectoral and gasped when those lips traced down his side.

He squirmed at the teasing kisses to his sternum and gasped again when they mouthed at his navel. A soft moan escaped his lips when Gage nibbled down one hipbone and he cried out when that soft, wet, velvet tongue licked down to—

A shout tore itself free from his throat, his back arching completely off the bed when Gage's mouth fitted over his hardness and slid *down*.

He had to look, had to watch. Had to see those beautiful lips stretched tightly over him, around him, hazel eyes meeting his, dark with want and lust and *love* in a way that made the breath freeze in Alexis' throat. He reached, hands tangling in the soft fall of hair, fingertips dusting over Gage's cheeks, panting and watching and when Gage bobbed his head slowly, he tensed and cried out.

Firm hands held Alexis down, Gage's head moving rhythmically but slowly. Gage touched him in ways he'd never thought would be so wonderful, thumbs moving his balls within their sac carefully and slowly, mouthing at them gently before licking lower.

A brief release, hands moving elsewhere and those long fingers parted his cheeks, slicked digits slipping down lower, tested the natural resistance of his opening. Yet even as Gage stroked there, his lips followed down Alexis' thighs, tasting and lapping at the sensitive skin.

All Gage's movements remained unhurried and seemingly determined to make Alexis' brain melt into goo to slide out his ears from the pleasure. Then the fingers slid into him, one by one and each just as gently inserted as the first, stroking in all the right places and there quickly came a point where Alexis could remember only one name and it wasn't his own.

Then... only then did Gage finally slide his fingers free, reaching for the bottle on the side stand for more lube to slick himself before gathering Alexis' legs over his arms, pressing them back toward Alexis' chest and lining himself up.

"Elfling," he murmured gently, mouth wet, panting and looking a little desperate. "Are you ready?"

Alexis reached with a shaking hand to stroke his fingertips along one strong jaw and murmured mindlessly, "I've been waiting a long time for you, haven't I?"

"But we finally found each other," Gage said softly, cheek tilting into the touch and then he drew a quick deep breath then *leaned* and Alexis grabbed the bed sheets tight as he gasped.

Gentle nudge after gentle nudge and Gage sank slowly deeper and deeper in, while Alexis could do nothing but breathe along with the rhythm, making both complaining and impatient noises, and *push* to open himself up to receive his lover. He gasped as they crossed the half way point, feeling full, heaviness settling deep in his lower back, that quiet ache of pain rising a little now.

"Ah!" he gasped, clenching his knees about Gage's hips, lifting his legs a little more, hands clutching reflexively at the blankets as he arched his back. "Gage...!"

And with a small, final thrust, they were fully joined, Gage bowing his head to pant into Alexis' shoulder in the struggle to regain his composure. Skin to skin they pressed against each other, tense and waiting and anticipation *sang* in Alexis' blood, how could he not shift?

How could he not shake and reach and demand, "*Move*, dammit."

Gage choked out a laugh and slowly, gently withdrew before lunging slowly back in and breathlessly—"A... Alexis, love."

But Alexis had cried out, drowning the words and couldn't think, too shocked to be joined like this but eventually, it could have been moments or minutes, he managed, "You're mine. I'm yours but you're mine."

"Yes," Gage murmured back gently, beginning to set an excruciatingly slow pace; fully in and then almost all the way out... but then he withdrew slowly then suddenly *slammed* back in.

A scream rent the air, and Alexis realised afterward it had been his.

"Mine," Gage hissed; thrust, withdrew. "Yours," back in. Joined.

Alexis couldn't breathe, only release the sheets and cling to his lover, curling his back and lifting his hips up to receive each push and let his mind shatter because there was no other way.

Gage groaned as he kept the rhythm, as though just maintaining the movements was killing him, eyes slipping half-way shut with pleasure, mouth going a little slack. He bent and licked at a collarbone once, lips curving a little in an awe-filled and pleased smile.

Alexis stared, amazed and captivated, moving up as they slid into each other once more and— "Oh my God, *there*," he could have sworn his eyes rolled up in his head.

"Elfin, you're perfect," Gage murmured, pleased. He focused now, angling himself so he kept hitting that spot inside Alexis that scattered all remaining coherency, throat choking out the most pleased sounds. He leaned into a few of the thrusts, pressing down enough to reach Alexis' lips with his own, kidding deeply.

The pleasure wound together, rising, coiling, higher and higher, and tighter and tighter. Alexis panted, barely keeping pace, trying to keep up because he was rising up that mountain of pleasure, cresting the peak and then for a suspended breathless moment he stared into Gage's eyes, saw the warmth returned there... and then he fell.

He came crashing down, pleasure drowning everything out, a shout tearing free from his through it was just so *good*.

Collapse. White buzz filled brain, tingling nerves and sated body. Muscles tired and lungs burning, quivering and panting still, Alexis let himself go boneless.

Gage crumpled atop him, angling to one shoulder to keep the weight a little off him, warm and wet, panting just as heavily. Fingers reached for his and their hands intertwined, and it seemed so very natural to turn his head and trade sloppy, relaxed kisses. There burned something in those kisses; something bright and wonderful.

"Stay," he whispered when the kiss broke.

"Stay," Gage asked back, arms tightening a moment before loosening but it was just so he could pull carefully out and settle into Alexis' side. Alexis would have frowned at that answer but then he softly answered, "Always."

"Home," Alexis whispered, earning a startled and happy smile from his lover and wrapped up in loving arms, he fell asleep.

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EPILOGUE

It was a week later over pre-dinner drinks at a dinner party, standing with Kazuhi and Ian and their wineglasses in hand, that Alexis' world tilted on its axis.

He hadn't noticed the whispers but he had noticed Kazuhi tensing, eye darting to one side and mouth thinning. The looks thrown his way had also gone unnoticed, and those busybodies trying to stir up trouble by coming over and smashing it in his face were intercepted by a few of Gage's family and friends. Alexis remained oblivious for only so long, however, because the central figure to the entire disaster himself came strolling up and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Good evening, son."

"Father," Alexis murmured politely, fingers tightening around his glass, his breath holding a moment at the same time as all those within a twenty metre radius. He didn't want to say the man looked well, not as a standard greeting even, because he knew Jonathan Grayson had recently become involved in legal proceedings in a fight to keep his shares and position in the family company. They couldn't discuss the weather; that was just mundane talk and a waste of time –which they both hated. He settled for returning the original greeting, "Good evening."

"Do you have a moment to talk?" Jonathan asked calmly, his fake smile mask in place. The tone wasn't quite a request, despite the words, and neither was it an order. Detachedly, Alexis identified it as a kind of guide, a tone the father used to prompt his son to obey him yet spoken with words meant to sound as though it were a request... to subtly suggest that perhaps they were on equal footing.

Which they were not.

"Of course." Alexis hesitated then said, "Perhaps after dinner, if that would suit you?" A parry; a polite response and difficult to argue with. Could be a quiet, public appearance answer or meant well, one could never tell between family... except Alexis could tell, most especially by the tightening of the hand on his shoulder and the tense little furrow between Jonathan's eyebrows.

Walking right past the staring audience from Alexis' left, Gage came to stand behind him and put a hand on his other shoulder, gossip be damned and to hell with appearances. Outwardly, Alexis gave no indication that anything had happened but internally he could feel the tight coil of apprehension unwind. He watched his father's eyes shift from him to the new presence. Whatever expression Gage was wearing, Alexis would never know, but to his relief, his father withdrew.

"Of course," Jonathan's hand fell away, "After dinner when we're all relaxed and well-fed, hmm?" He gave a slight smile and a nod then left.

Alexis turned toward his lover, eyes falling to his wineglass, "I was sort of hoping we wouldn't ever speak again," he admitted quietly, meant only for Gage's ears. When Gage only sighed, hand moving to grasp one of his free hands, he looked up. "Cowardly hope, isn't it?"

A wry smile twisted Gage's lips. "What are you going to do?"

"Have dinner with you," Alexis promptly replied. "And when it's time to meet with him, I will do so. I don't know what he has to say or what he wants, but I think it will not be what I want to hear." He shrugged, "Regardless, I will listen." He gave Ian and Kazuhi an apologetic smile, relieved and startled to find them still standing quite close by in support.

"What if he wants you to return to Grayson Corp?" came the quiet query.

"Well, that's impossible now, isn't it?" Alexis replied almost absently. "I have my own interests now, my own group." With a sigh of his own, he drained his glass. "I am sure he knows that I will not return. I don't just go back on my decisions lightly."

Gage hesitated then said, "I don't believe he has come to discuss family matters with you, Elfling."

Startled, Alexis looked up at him, "But there's nothing else to discuss."

Ian spoke up to ask, "Have you seen the news since we were out to lunch earlier?"

Alexis blinked. "I—no."

"He's lost Grayson Corp," Kazuhi muttered. "He still has about six companies left in his ownership but," a careless gesture, "they're worth only a chunk more than half of Grayson Corp after this economic downturn."

"Half is better than nothing," Alexis muttered distantly, frowning as he craned his neck to search in the direction he'd seen his father go. That old geezer was up to something then. He looked back at his friends just in time to catch the look Ian traded with Gage. "What?"

Kazuhi nonchalantly mused, "Your group is worth another half." He ignored the quick glare Ian shot his way.

Alexis scowled and said firmly, "Not happening." Matter done with, he gave a quiet snort and waved for another glass of that lovely white wine he'd been drinking. He spared the waiter a small smile of thanks. Catching yet another look between Ian and his lover he exasperatedly asked, "What now?"

"He's your father," Ian shrugged.

"He is," Alexis slowly agreed, "But the time I might have yielded to such a merger is past. I cannot really afford the losses his companies will take in the next year or so—yes, Gage, don't give me that look, I know which ones he retained ownership of, those were my mother's. And I am sure he knows it." He sipped his wine, "It's why I thought the discussion would be personal. Not business." He glowered into his glass, "And even if he asked very nicely, I would rather stick with my current partners and the decisions I have made." He shrugged as he looked up, "He doesn't fit into my working life anymore."

Gage seemed pleased, a small smile on his lips. "That's good."

"That's sensible," Alexis corrected. Ian was smiling at him, "What's with the smile?" Ian shook his head, indicating a lack of intent to answer. He frowned a bit at them and declared, "You're both behaving strangely."

Kazuhi shifted, drawing Alexis' attention. "Perhaps you're quite capable of making your own decisions."

"Bloody well am," he agreed. Then it hit. He glared at Ian then Gage, Ian raising hands to sheepishly ward him off as Gage grinned right back at him, "You idiots. Did you think I needed you as some kind of crutch or something? That I couldn't handle telling my father 'no' or other such nonsense?" He half turned away, sarcastically muttering into his drink, "How wonderful to know you trust me with myself."

Gage laughed and even Kazuhi snickered. Ian looked nervous, "I thought nothing of the sort! I was simply wondering if—"

"If you would be alright dealing with him alone, as you seemed to intend to," Gage finished smoothly, one hand coming to rest on Alexis' hip and leaning close, lips brushing over Alexis' temple.

"You don't fool me, you charmer," Alexis grumbled, taking another sip of his drink but leaning into his lover's touch anyway. Kazuhi and Ian watched them, looking very amused. "And you two," he snapped, "Quit it."

"Quit what?" Kazuhi raised a lofty brow, an expression in his eyes that spelled dire teasing consequences.

Alexis decided his drink made a better focus of attention. Beside him, Gage let out a low chuckle.

"Gage, dear," said a sugary sweet female voice, making Gage tense before turning and stepping away.

Obeying the silent indication, Alexis turned away from the person approaching and with both Ian and Kazuhi, moved a few paces away to leave Gage to it. Still within ear shot but refusing to look, he heard the sugary voice say, "Oh, I was going to ask who that *darling* man you're with is."

Sure you were. He ignored the woman, kept his back turned and sipped his wine.

"He's mine, Lavonia," Gage said bluntly.

A rush of warm affection washed over Alexis though could hear the controlled calm in his lover's voice, and rolled his eyes at Ian when his friend cast him a worried look.

"Oh?" asked Lavonia with clearly feigned surprise. Alexis could almost imagine the hand to her collarbone and very raised brows. "But I thought we had such a good time, you and I. Remember that lovely dinner we had and the *fun* afterward? Oh," she laughed a tinkering roll of noise that could probably be described as lovely but it made Alexis' ears ache. Then she said in silky tones, "I enjoyed myself immensely!" Her voice lowered but not enough not to carry, heavy with secretive eagerness, "I was hoping we could *indulge* ourselves again. And again...?"

Alexis' fingers tightened around his glass enough he wondered if it might shatter. The nerve of the woman! Ian darted another look in his direction, moving casually closer as he sipped from his glass. As for Kazuhi, not a muscle moved on his impassive face as he stared past Alexis at the woman, but Alexis had the inclination to move away. Far away.

"I do recall that night," Gage said smoothly, at the same volume the foolish Lavonia had spoken. "But you must pardon me, I don't think I enjoyed myself as much as you." There was a quiet gasp from the

woman. Nearby, someone choked. "Such indulgences, as you call them," he ruthlessly continued in a tone Alexis had never heard from him before, "Are no longer to my taste."

There was a tense, breathless moment before he heard a nasty sound too much like a slap to have been anything else and his face tightened into a stern frown. Irritated because Gage could have avoided it, what with his martial arts reflexes, Alexis whirled to face them –Kazuhi calmly restraining his lover when Ian moved to stop him.

She was beautiful. About his own age, slender and pale, long chocolate waves falling about her bare slim shoulders, her strapless dress sparkly silver and embroidered with crystals, as shiny as her dramatically moist blue eyes. Gage's face was still turned from the strike, he stood a little to one side to Alexis' right, and so it was so easy to quickly extend his arm...

She shrieked as the arc of liquid descended upon her. "Why, you...!" Her pretty face twisted into a horribly nasty expression, blue eyes suddenly cold and vicious. Her wet state made her look like an irritated cat.

"Mine," Alexis hissed under his breath then snarled, "How dare you strike him?" He flashed a scowl at Gage, "What the hell are you doing?"

"I could ask you the same thing," came the quietly and –damn him—amused reply.

Alexis didn't have time to answer because Lavonia had snatched up a full glass from a passing waiter and had drawn her back to toss it on him in return. But when she let fly it was with too much force, the liquid a grouped mass in the air and easy enough to avoid –which Alexis did, flashing the woman a wry smirk as he stepped closer to Gage's side.

A nervous floor manager came dashing into the centre of their little fight circle, and Alexis, rolling his eyes, put his fingertips to Gage's red cheek and snapped at the poor man, "Kindly escort this woman out." He spoke with such authority, the manager's eyes quickly glancing over the hand-shaped print on Gage's face, that he was quickly obeyed.

"Get your hands off me!" shrieked the hussy, despite the fact the manager had only bent to speak quietly to her. Her unreasonable exclamation prompted the two security guards to close imposingly into her personal space.

Turning to his lover, Alexis glared so fiercely that Gage winced. "You. With me. *Now.*"

And he marched off toward one of the private salons in the back hallway of the hotel. He did not check behind him if his lover followed for if Gage hadn't then he would go home and that would be the damn end of that. He glowered distantly. Why, if Gage didn't follow, he would never speak to the man again!

He snatched open the door of the first unmarked meeting room he found and held it open before turning around. Gage had followed, trailing meekly into the room. The sharp flash of relief startled him. Had this... been a sort of test? Was he really so uncertain? He couldn't think much on it because in the next moment he knew—

Gage had seen it.

Alexis quietly shut the door but couldn't quite let go of the handle yet, eyes falling to the wood panelled wall of the small meeting room. A hand snaked past him and locked it, and only then was he able to look up.

"You thought I would let you march off on your own," Gage murmured, much too near and too clever for Alexis' peace of mind. His tone seemed sad, "I promised you, you know. You can trust me."

Eyes dropping to Gage's collar, Alexis mutely nodded, the fight going out of him and sudden fear making him lose grasp of his anger.

"Elfling."

Alexis looked up, heeding the quiet request in his lover's voice.

"Are you angry with me?" Gage's hazel eyes were shadowed with uncertainty and hard with determination. He looked and sounded prepared to have to argue his innocence.

"No," Alexis whispered, letting go of the doorknob and leaning back on the door. He sighed, brows furrowing with pensive agitation, requesting, "Tell me she was before me."

Gage probably hadn't missed the plaintive touch to his voice because he relaxed suddenly, moving forward and pinning Alexis to the door with his body. A hand rose to cup a cheek, a smile curved his lips, "She was long before you." He sighed too, "She wasn't anything special. Nothing like what you are to me."

"I... know," and Alexis was surprised he did. The truth of Gage's words shone through in his eyes, it wasn't difficult to discern now. "I'm sorry for thinking that she was."

"Elfling," Gage murmured, hand stroking over Alexis' cheek, "You're only human to doubt." He rolled his eyes, "Believe me, for a moment there as I spoke with her I was wondering back there if I would have to deal with any of your past lovers."

"Is that what sidetracked you?" Alexis wryly asked.

"Hm," Gage distractedly responded, leaning closer, "Let's go with that reason."

Scowling, he accused, "Trickster."

Gage responded to that by pinning him harder against the door, the wood making a soft sound as it settled a little harder into its frame.

Alexis glowered as he reached up to twine his arms around his lover's neck. "I have a nickname for you, then. Loki."

Gage only smiled and bent his head to kiss Alexis silly.

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Tiredly surrendering his keys to his lover, Alexis yawned as he followed into the apartment foyer. Gage helped him out of his coat, hanging it beside his own on the row of hooks. He toed off his shoes and put them away, and since he was bent over already, he put Gage's away as well.

He padded down the hall to the bedroom, Gage splitting off to head toward the kitchen. He put his cufflinks and pin away, hung up his tie and belt. Fetching his sleeping clothes, he set them on the foot of the bed before ambling back to the kitchen when he heard the kettle whistle. Covering his mouth again as another yawn overtook him, he plopped into a stool at the kitchen bar table, making a thankful noise when Gage set a cup of decaf tea before him, and leaned into the kiss pressed to his temple.

Taking his own seat, hands curled around his cup, Gage asked, "Well?"

"Disappointing," Alexis murmured, taking a drink then propping his chin up on a palm. "He wanted a merger. I was so surprised I didn't know what to say at first. He tried to pitch a few ideas at me in between subtly reminding me I'm supposed to owe him for ruining the family business." He gave a quiet snort and gulped a huge swallow of tea, "I think I was almost disdainful."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault." He shrugged and took a swallow of tea, "I was rather disappointed with him, actually. I told him what I told you, that I couldn't afford the merge. And then I... well I suddenly said I hadn't thought he would show weakness to me since he thought me to be such an ungrateful son."

Gage tensed, brows furrowing.

Waving a dismissive hand, "I wasn't thinking before I spoke that last bit, the words sort of... popped out. But then you know what he said? That family are about the only people you can be yourself with." He took a thoughtful drink of his tea then slowly said, "He didn't say anything for the longest time before he admitted the penthouse was very quiet now without me in it. He didn't say it but he almost said he felt alone." He grasped back at the hand that reached for his. "Rendered me speechless, he did."

Eyes going soft and warm, Gage murmured, "Do you think things will mend between you?"

"I don't know," Alexis replied softly, drinking up the last of his tea. He set the mug aside and reached to lay it over where his and his lover's hands were clasped. "I suppose we will fix things eventually. Eventually."

"I love you."

Alexis stared.

"You're absolutely wonderful that I have no idea why no one has snapped you up to keep for themselves," Gage said, eyes bright and loving.

"That would be you, and what you're doing now," Alexis joked on a shaky tone. Warmth rushed through him from scalp to toes at the thought that Gage loved him. Then in the next breath there came a torrent of fear; a washout burn of frightened dread that Gage would leave him one day. He looked down at where his hands clutched at one of his lover's.

"Look at me," Gage whispered. His one free hand lifted to gently caress Alexis' cheek when he obeyed. "I'm not going to leave you."

Alexis nodded. He couldn't give a snarky reply to such words anymore. They were too sincere.

"Hey."

"I know," he breathed. "It's... just new to me."

"You can love me too, you know," Gage teased. "Then we can match."

"We match," Alexis stated carefully and Gage froze. He was still for so long that Alexis dropped his gaze back down to their hands and resisted the urge to pull one free so he could fidget. That was... it had sort of slipped out, too.

When Gage suddenly stood, coming around the bar table, Alexis looked up wide eyed. Gage grabbed him, one hand into his hair and tilting his head back, the other sweeping around his waist and holding him in place for a heated, thorough kiss. It took only a few hot swipes of his lover's tongue to clear his mind of all thought, a low moan slipping loose. He reached up and clutched at those broad shoulders, leaning into the kisses, parting his knees so Gage could stand between them and press them ever closer together.

He gasped when he was suddenly swept up into the air. "Oh my God, don't carry me like this!"

"Like a bride?" Gage teased, marching down the hall to the bedroom.

Alexis flushed and he tried to cover it with a scowl, "That's worse. I was only thinking you carried me like a woman. Damn it."

"Carrying you," Gage rolled his eyes, "I'm simply carrying you, that's all."

"You overgrown—" The words were cut off when he got dumped on the bed. "What the hell?"

"Since I picked you up like a woman," Gage's eyes positively sparkled, "I figured I should put you down you like a man."

"Without warning?" Alexis sniped, sitting up.

"Emphatically," Gage corrected, crawling onto the bed and pushing Alexis back down. "Hard." He punctuated the word with a snatching, rough kiss. "Without preamble," another hot kiss, "Unrestrained," bite, "Because you can take it."

Already writhing, Alexis reached up and pulled Gage down onto him, kissing his lover demandingly and making a pleased little noise when Gage complied and kissed back.

"You," he said breathlessly when the kiss broke, "Talk too damn much."

And he pulled Gage down again.

FIN