



A Good Servant

l a u r a s . f o x

A Good Servant

by

Laura S. Fox

Acknowledgements

For all the fantastic people who helped this story become a novel

*J, Z'Gameron, Adam, tai mau, Christopher, Nina, Green TreeMan, Joseph Sh,
Brandon, Mark, Craig, Ron P, Justin, Tod, Evette, EurghSireAwe,*

*Candace, Judith, Vanessa, John, Annie, Joshua, Laura, Ilze, Anthony T, Erin,
Shanon, Joseph, Anthony S, Maria, David, M D, Katie, Away Throw, Nash,
Curtis, Ron C, T Ko, Derrick, Kate, Peethree, Douglas, Zerane,*

*Justin, Jirina, Darryl, Adam P, Gicquel, Earnest, Doug, Ethan, Tw, Sarah,
Thomas, William, Leanne, P Ber, James, Herbert, Leyton, redaerara, Joseph S,
Greg, McAlister, Sari, Tony, Timothy, Jasmine, oja bella, John, Chloe, C P, DJ,
Alissa, Muhammad, Mayur, Evan*

*Special thanks go to Craig, for helping me make half of this book as good as it
could be*

Copyright © 2018 Laura S. Fox

All Rights Reserved

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this published work may be reproduced, stored, in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means without the prior permission of the copyright owner and the publisher.

A Good Servant is a work of fiction. Any names, places, events, characters and everything else mentioned in the book are the result of the author's imagination, and are purely used for fictitious purposes. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places, events and everything else is a pure coincidence.

M/M Erotica

Intended for Mature Audiences Only

This book contains graphic depictions of sexual intercourse, strong language, graphic depictions of violence, and it is not meant for readers who are less than 18 years of age.

Prologue

Too few people could still remember how it all started. And even for them, memories felt as if they had been planted there, read someplace, or just imagined. The world was flat, and the vast continent didn't drift. It was all still, in balance, as it was supposed to be.

The word of the Trainers was law.

Sweet weather was bestowed upon Drena all year round. Little was spoken about of what laid all over the vast desert, far away, or the people living there. Several state cities, with which Drena carried much-treasured trade relationships, were scattered along the coast. Rumor had it that there were places far from the continent across the vast sea. But no one knew anyone to have ever traveled there and come back to tell the story.

They were privileged. That was what they were taught. When exactly had been decided for males to be separated from females, no one knew for sure. But since the Trainers had been the ones to choose it, no one questioned it. There were savages far away out there, of course, but such beasts lived barbaric lives, without care or love for balance. It was not the type of thing someone would have spoken about in polite society.

A lot of traders traveled to Drena. The most beautiful silk was produced there, while the factories built just outside the gates made the most beautiful jewelry, using the metals and gems stolen from the depths dug just near the city walls. If anyone had been able to scrutinize the future, they would have said one day Drena was going to fall into the sea, its foundation rendered frail by the relentless digging carried on around the clock.

Or maybe the history was going to tell people a different story.

The mines were the toughest place to work. In comparison, factories were decent enough; workers there had it easy. If anyone died in the mines, they remained buried there, to contribute with their bones, flesh, and blood to the riches that made Drena not only the most beautiful city on the coast but also the richest.

The Trainers had thought it well. The Masters were on top of the food chain. They were selected from the brightest minds resulting from the carefully planned conceptions the Trainers decided using the genetic material harvested from the males in Drena and implanted in the females from Tresalt. To protect the women, they said Tresalt had to be placed deeper inside the continent; the women's city was not as rich or beautiful as Drena. It served a function, and no one complained since they did not know any better.

The word of the Trainers was love.

The most intelligent were thus chosen to be trained, educated and taught how to rule. Even among them, there were sometimes individuals that were remarkable in every way. Maybe the day Lord Xavier was born, little people knew, not even the Trainers, that he was going to be one of the most outstanding Rulers Drena had ever known. Through training and education, his mind became polished like the most beautiful gemstone, and before time, he had been moved from the education facility inside the city so that he could see from there to Drena's prosperity.

Xavier had been just 15 years of age when the decision to rule Drena came. For years after that glorious event, he focused on making Drena even more vibrant than she was, through shrewd trade and wise investments.

The Trainers were pleased.

There was just one little peculiarity that the Trainers found a bit disturbing about Xavier. The society in Drena was well thought so that the Masters could have everything they wanted. For them, the most beautiful, sensual beings were selected and carefully honed into becoming the most entertaining slaves. Whatever a Master could wish for in a slave, it could be provided. Strength, beauty, lust, and even the usually less desirable traits, such as greed, pride or sexual addiction, could all be melted in one being or more so that the Masters could enjoy them.

And after that came the servants. They were educated right in the heart of the Institution. If the Masters were the head of Drena, the few Rulers chosen from their midst, the servants were supposed to be the backbone. Perhaps the right definition was a backbone made of tiny bones that could be replaced as the need arose. Servants were a commodity, much like the slaves. Their role was to keep everyone

happy, but their training had to be different. In due time, the Trainers had noticed how even the most lustful slaves lost their shine, and their Masters seemed to grow bored with them.

A diversion had to be provided. The Trainers had turned to the utilitarian servants and decided to have them molded as the opposite of slaves. Where the latter were lecherous and perverted, down to their very core, the servants had to be kept pure. For them, any sexual activity was strictly forbidden and punished accordingly.

Like everything in Drena, they had to be beautiful. And like everything in Drena, they had to succumb to the simplest of the rules: they had to understand that punishment was love, whether their Masters or the slaves they had to serve chose to use them in inappropriate ways.

Punishment was love, the Trainers taught.

The experiment proved successful. Although servants were never thought to be used as slaves, the idea of doing something not so openly accepted proved refreshing. Apathetic Masters never made a good impression on trading partners. Their wellbeing was paramount.

Offering them innocents, allowing them to do what was customarily forbidden, empowered the Masters. The poor servants taught so painstakingly that pleasures of the flesh were not permitted, were often in shock with the mistreatment.

All the Masters and Rulers in Drena had slaves. Or, better said, almost all. The Masters' dealings with servants were always kept under wraps, and, eventually, they still preferred their beautiful slaves.

Exceptions were, however, what made the rule. Lord Xavier didn't care for pleasure slaves at all. By the time he had reached the age of 21, the Trainers had gathered to talk about his lack of interest in such activities that most males preferred so much. Fear for the integrity of his bright mind had begun to sip in.

The decision to send him the most beautiful servants came from the Head Trainer. It was worth experimenting with possibilities, to entertain Drena's most ambitious prodigy. When Xavier was eventually commanded to stop spending all his waking

hours, from dawn till dusk, buried in work and go for a relaxing bath, at home, where his new servant was waiting, eventually proved fruitful.

It had been satisfactory that Xavier didn't prove to be a deviant. His new servant's shyness, accompanied by his outstanding beauty, made the young Master come out of his shell eventually. Xavier's behavior from that point forward became predictable.

Predictable was good.

Xavier did get bored with his servants and sent them on their way, and then he began to look for pleasure himself. He still took no slaves, but at least, the Trainers could be satisfied with his interest in engaging in temporary couplings with his servants.

Lastly, the lowest of the low were the boys sent to work outside the city gates. Remarkable through nothing, not intellect, nor physical beauty, they were good enough to serve as the city's workforce, in the mines and the factories. All the hard work of the mind exerted from the Masters had to be fueled with goods to be sold across the continent.

The Trainers' plan was in motion.

The small world of Drena was created as the perfect experiment. Mistakes had a habit of appearing from time to time, so the Trainers were quick to correct them. Sometimes ugly ducks evolved into beautiful swans; brilliant minds happened to wither before their time. Plucking the weeds and replanting the roses was among the Trainers' most arduous tasks.

Yes, mistakes did happen, but what the Trainers could not see, was how a single, small mistake could create myriads of possibilities. How even correcting an error could lead to unexpected consequences.

The history would teach the world about the Trainers.

Cory watched impassibly as the Trainers walked around, looking over one shoulder or another. They came from time to time to inspect the factories. He had

been here from the age of 12. At 18, he could say he was taking great pride in his work and that he had enough experience to teach others.

One grey shadow stopped behind him. He would have been a liar to say that it wasn't making him nervous, to have someone, a Trainer above else, examine his work from so up close. He half turned, his curiosity getting the better of him. Maybe he could steal a glance; they weren't supposed to look the Trainers in the eyes.

Bony fingers grabbed his chin, and he was forced to do precisely that, to stare into two deep black holes, swirling with shades of grey. He felt too horrified to move or even breathe.

“This one,” he heard the Trainer speak in a deep, unnatural voice. “He’s to be moved.”

Two workers almost instantly appeared to his sides.

“Where am I going?” he dared to ask, despite his better judgment.

The grey hood moved imperceptibly.

“From this moment, you are in training to become a servant.”

Chapter One

He was waiting patiently for his turn. He knew he could control nothing of what was followed, but still, he held a modicum of hope that he would not end up serving a mean master. The training had been hard enough; all the young men prepared to help in the lavish houses of Drena were talking endlessly about the life of luxury and delights waiting for them behind the iron wrought doors of the Institution. As soon as they reached 21 years of age, they were considered old enough and trained enough to serve the Masters.

The last three years had been hell, as far as Cory could remember. When the Trainers had come to take him from the factories, where he had worked since he was 13, he had no idea what awaited him. They had said he was too pretty to be there.

Cory seriously doubted that things would change once they were sent to their Masters. What kind of Masters needed that kind of unforgiving training? After all this time, he still had felt a chill down his spine, remembering how the wooden device was shoved slowly down his throat, forcing him to ignore his gag reflex.

He vaguely knew that this kind of training was needed for entertaining the Masters' stables of pleasure slaves. On the other hand, any manifestation of sexual desires within the walls of the Institution was severely punished. When two of the servants in training had been caught kissing, they had been beaten so severely by the servant wranglers that they had to be sent eventually to work down at the factories, with their beauty compromised forever. What had been worse, the rest had been forced to watch their punishment and learn what disobedience meant.

What stood behind that reasoning of keeping them pure yet shameless was beyond Cory's comprehension. But he knew one thing, unlike the others. That any Master they would get, the hell would continue.

They were sitting in lines, apart from one another, so that their would be Masters would have plenty of room to examine them thoroughly. The fact that they were naked was the least of their concern. They would be touched everywhere. The biggest fear, after all, was that they would be deemed unfit. A certain percentage was always rejected. Some went back to training. Others were sent to hard work, at

the factories, a fate that seemed a death of some sort to many of them. Cory had no such fear. He would have preferred working hard but honestly to being trained and taught to fawn over empty-headed slaves and their hypocritical Masters.

It was not a matter of choice, though. Others had already drawn his fate, and he held no control over it. It didn't help, either, that he was quite a sensual being, by nature. Being forced to perceive any sexual activity they had been trained for as just duty, a necessity with no further consequences for a task well done had been particularly painful. He had almost had a lover a long time ago, in a life that had happened before being sent to be chewed and spit by the bowels of the Institution. He still had his regrets that he hadn't lost his virginity back then, to the boy he'd been in love with.

Arousal of any kind was strictly forbidden. Any sign of such a thing was strictly punished. Cory could vouch that a cane over an aroused member was the worst kind of pain.

“You are nothing but a convenience, a utility, molded to serve. Such lewd desires will be defeated.”

Those were just some of the words the Trainers at the Institution kept on telling them. And many of them were turned into senseless dummies, as a result of the grueling training. Cory was not, unfortunately for him, one of them.

He hadn't dared to stimulate himself in a long time, but that didn't mean they could enter his mind, deny him the desire he still nurtured inside himself that someday he would be held, embraced and loved by another human being.

As he grew up and turned into a young man, dark desires began assaulting his mind; surrounded by beautiful boys the same age as him, he started fantasizing. Sometimes he thought about being held down and penetrated by the others, used as a recipient of their repressed desires. He dreamed about sucking their beautiful cocks until his mouth was full of their essence.

He never acted on his desires, though. Being forced into abstinence was a harsh punishment for Cory. Knowing that a life without sex was waiting for him made him desperate.

He was pulled out of his musings by low murmurs. It was a clear sign that the Masters were there. All the servants assumed the position, their eyes cast down, their hands tightly held together at their back, their legs parted. It was an unforgivable impudence for a servant to raise his eyes, and look at the Masters.

The soft swish sound of clothes was the only sign that the Masters were already present. Questions were never asked; it was assumed that the Trainers had done a perfect job, so the single procedure applied was this. If a Master liked what he saw, he took. That was all.

He could tell by the sound of steps that some of the young men around him were already being taken away. Finally, someone stopped next to him. A gloved hand touched his chest slowly, insisting slightly on the nipples. Cory could not breathe. It was finally there, the moment when he was going to be taken away, and condemned forever to serve as an appliance in some Master's home.

The hand continued, steadily, its explorations. It was now touching the small of his back, just under his clasped hands, then it suddenly descended on his buttocks, squeezing one hard.

He knew he should have stood still. But, despite his better judgment, he jolted and snapped his head up, looking straight at the manhandling him like he was nothing but a toy. If the man was surprised, he didn't show it. Cory stared into a pair of grey eyes for a couple of long seconds, before he was grabbed by strong hands to be taken away.

He could hear the Trainer's low voice apologizing, like through a haze. But then he noticed the owner of those steel eyes making a small gesture, and he was let go. He breathed heavily through his mouth. He'd been close to being rejected; he'd missed his chance. Desperately, he searched for the grey eyes again. He opened his mouth to say something, to yell, or do something outrageous, but the gloved hand covered it swiftly, and a short change of glances determined him to keep it shut. He nodded imperceptibly, and the hand moved, caressing his cheek briefly.

The custom demanded that the servant was going to be prepared by the Trainers and sent to the Master's house. So Cory was surprised to see himself pushed to move behind his new Master, completely naked. He didn't say anything. After all,

shame was not something servants knew or understood. So he started ambling behind the man who now owned him. His soles felt the ground he was stepping on as if it was trying to bind him, but he forced his feet to move, and follow his fate.

Now he was standing in front of his new Master who was comfortably seated on a lavish chair, his hands crossed on his lap, and sporting what seemed an amused look on his face. Cory could not help staring. The man was handsome, much more beautiful than any other he had seen in his short life. He had short brown hair, neatly combed over his head, and high cheekbones, lovingly balanced by sensual lips. The gray eyes no longer looked so cold. They even had certain warmth in them.

“So, do I pass the test?” a deep, baritone voice asked, and Cory blushed deeply. Being fair skinned, with blond hair and light blue eyes, his embarrassment was easy to read.

“I ... I don't understand the question, Master.”

“Oh, but I think you do. Cory, why did you raise your eyes? You know the punishment for it.”

Cory's forehead became all wrinkles.

“Do not over think it. Just tell me.”

“I ... Master touched me.”

He looked with frightened eyes at the man on the chair. Even seated, he seemed so tall, compared to Cory's smaller frame. Did the man want to learn the truth?

“And? Am I not allowed to touch you?” The man seemed amused.

Cory shook his head. “Forgive me, Master. I have no idea what got into me.”

He fell to his knees, letting his head touch the man's shoes in a sign of obedience.

“I didn't tell you that you could kneel,” the man's voice became thicker.

Cory got up, trembling. He felt fear, pure and deep, turning his blood into ice. He knew what the Trainers could do to him. What a Master could do with a worthless servant he didn't. And that lack of knowledge was worse, in a way.

“Speak. Loud and clear. Don't even think about lying.”

“I wanted ... not to be touched. I wanted to be free,” he said with difficulty, swaying slightly on his feet.

Laughter made him stop. He looked at the man, not sure if he could believe his ears. His new Master was laughing so hard, it caused the chair to creak. In the end, the laughter subdued.

“Well, Cory, you certainly are entertaining. I somehow felt you would be different. So, to make things clear, come closer.”

Cory moved, although his feet felt like lead. He noticed how the man's hands were still donning the black leather gloves, so tightly that he could see the outlines of the knuckles through the material. Like a magician trying to warm up before a trick, the hands stretched, flexing long, elegant fingers.

“Let's see,” the voice grew deeper, laced with promises.

Cory was pulled closer by the gloved hands firmly grabbing his buttocks. He gasped. He closed his eyes tightly, trying to focus on letting his mind go blank, as his Master started kneading his buttocks, parting them and getting closer and closer to his rear entrance. He felt his organ twitching; he knew he was expected to behave like a sexless being. Soon, his new Master would learn the truth, and he would be shamed, sent back to training or worse.

“Stop,” he begged. “Master, please.”

“Why? Open your eyes, Cory.”

With great difficulty, he did. The gray eyes stared into his and then traveled down to his groin. When their eyes met again, the Master of the house was smiling.

“So, no amount of training at the Institution was enough to drive sensuality out of you ... Is this what you are trying to hide?”

Cory nodded, lost for words.

“Good,” the man said shortly. “Let's set some ground rules, Cory. My name is Xavier, and I am your Master. My first request is that you forget about what you were taught about having to hide your arousal.”

The look on his face must have been priceless because Lord Xavier chuckled softly.

“They should not insist so much on forcing servants against their nature as males. Sooner or later, they are all used for this, by slaves and even their Masters.”

By their Masters? Cory stared at Lord Xavier in disbelief.

“But masters have their pleasure slaves, who are much more beautiful,” he blurted out.

“Glad to see that the cat didn't get your tongue, Cory. I do not keep such slaves. I found them utterly boring.”

“But ... isn't it ... odd?”

Lord Xavier laughed again.

“What does the color of my clothes tell you, Cory?”

It was only then that Cory looked closer at the man's attire. He was dressed entirely in black, austere clothes. Surrounded by luxury, slaves, and servants, the Rulers, the highest class of Masters, had only one restriction to abide by. Their clothes could be no other color but black.

“Master, you are one of the Rulers,” he whispered.

“Finally,” Xavier chuckled. “However, the point is that I can do everything I want. I can have fun with my new servant, should I be so inclined.”

Cory gulped.

“I have just one curiosity,” the man's hands started moving again, this time going upwards, caressing Cory's flanks. “How did you manage to fool them? A simple touch is making you hot like this.”

Lord Xavier changed his tactic, this time choosing to touch Cory's nipples, rubbing them between his index fingers and thumbs, mercilessly.

“Master,” the young servant almost shouted. “No one touched me ... so no one knew I didn't ... respond to training.”

“No one has ever touched you?”

Cory hesitated. Keen gray eyes didn't miss it.

“Who touched you?” Lord Xavier's voice became suddenly harsh. “I don't intend to tolerate this. If you are not a virgin, I will send you back.”

The servant felt a pang in his chest. He didn't want to be sent back. A single tear fell on his cheek.

“I had a lover once. But he didn't, ... we didn't go all the way.”

“Turn and bend,” the Master demanded, and he did as told.

A finger entered him harshly, and he cried out. He was pushed on his fours on the plush carpet, and his butt cheeks were parted roughly.

“You are saying that you are still a virgin?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Then we must remedy this situation. I will take you now, Cory.”

“Yes, Master.”

“I wasn't asking for your approval. Come and make my cock wet. This is your first punishment. For letting someone touch you.”

Cory felt weak in his knees. He felt as if he should have argued, but he knew better. As he turned, on his hands and knees, he was faced with the man's organ, released from tight black pants. It was engorged, angry looking, a thick vein on its tight surface. What made him tremble with fear was the size, though. He used his mouth to grab the head and engulf it in his hot cavern. He was shaking on the inside, but at the same time, he was feeling familiar warmth in his belly. He was aroused, his organ bobbing between his legs, painful in its needy desire.

The servant moaned with the head of his Master's cock in his mouth. He lapped at it, sucking it. Lord Xavier caressed his hair and laughed softly.

“I should not be mad at you ... shouldn't I? Tell me, Cory, do you want your Master inside you? You're still a virgin, don't forget.”

Cory let the hard organ out of his mouth to reply.

“Please, Master, I want all of you inside me,” he whispered.

Long thick eyelashes fluttered, as Cory got back to his task. This time, he took more into his mouth, pushing the man's cock deep inside, down his throat, reveling in the sensation of being filled completely. His Master allowed his ministrations, his breath becoming ragged, as well.

He was taken by surprise when the long hard cock was pulled away from his mouth. He whimpered at the loss.

“Don't worry, Cory, you will serve your Master later with your mouth. I am looking forward to enjoying your oral skills. You seem to have a knack for it, too. Now, lie on your back and part your legs. Pray that you did a good job at getting my cock wet enough.”

Cory felt as if he didn't mind anything. But when the blunt head pushed against his entrance, his fear got back in full force, making his erection wane.

“Master, please, I'll die!”

“Use your saliva,” Lord Xavier demanded curtly, withdrawing a little.

Cory hurriedly complied.

When his Master pushed inside again, he closed his eyes tightly, trying hard to relax. He felt a warm breath on his face, ghostly like.

“You will not die. You will love it,” his Master cooed, and he felt a little less fear.

Yes, the first real push made him scream, his body revolting against the sudden intrusion. Lord Xavier seemed to be, however, a man ready to comply to the need of avoiding to destroy his servant from the first day. He inched in, incrementally, seemingly ignoring Cory's pleas, until he stopped.

The man remained still, letting the smaller body adjust to his hardness, length, and girth. Cory felt the pain receding and slowly opened his eyes. His Master was looming over him, watching him intently.

“I will move now, Cory. Trust me; you will grow to love this.”

And he did. As his Master moved inside him, his pain turned into discomfort, then slowly into an unfamiliar ache. Suddenly, the man changed the angle, and Cory grabbed at the strong arms, crying out, this time in pleasure. It felt as if his stiff organ was rubbed at its roots from the inside and he let himself prey to the sensation.

“Don't touch yourself,” the command came, and he bit his lip.

It was nothing he wanted more right now. His Master was slamming hard inside him, thrusting with incredible force, and he felt helpless. Liquid came unbound, spewed from his untouched organ, filling him with a pleasure so intense his eyes rolled in his head.

“You came without being allowed to,” Lord Xavier commented through his groans of pleasure.

It didn't look like his Master was upset, though. If anything, the servant's disobedience seemed to have triggered a new level of arousal in Lord Xavier, who was now moving so fast, it made Cory's back rub against the thick carpet. When his Master voiced his release, Cory felt happy. Fulfilled.

Withdrawing slowly from his servant's lovely body, Lord Xavier commented.

“A natural bottom, this is what you are, Cory. Now open your mouth.”

His essence was gathered from his belly by gloved fingers and then pushed into his mouth, while he was still trying to catch his breath. He sucked at the fingers, tasting himself and expensive leather. That earned him another appreciative chuckle from his Master.

“Have you ever tasted a man's essence?”

“No, Master. They trained my mouth, but not with the real thing.”

“So, what do you think?”

“I want to taste Master's, too.”

“Cory, you sly fox, you just got accepted into my household.”

He must have looked surprised because his Master continued.

“I never hire servants unless I test them personally. And I must say you are the first to pass this test with flying colors.”

“Do you have many servants, Master?”

“Not at the moment, no. I am afraid you will have to look after the household on your own. And, of course, after me,” Lord Xavier added.

Cory looked at his Master with admiration in his eyes. His forehead was caressed briefly.

“You belong to me now, Cory. You will like it here. Now, prepare the bath. I seemed to have exerted myself a little,” the Master said with a smug smile.

Chapter Two

Finding his way around the house was not difficult. The setup was intuitive, and everything was in order, so Cory felt his daily chores would not be too much of a burden. Except, of course, Cory blushed, taking care of the Master's needs.

He felt strangely liberated. Humming cheerfully, he filled the enormous in-ground bathtub and used a few scented powders from the nicely arranged recipients. Feeling the stickiness between his butt cheeks, he grimaced a little. He would need a bath, too, but he would have to ask his Master for allowance.

So far, no clothes had been provided, but he didn't feel cold at all. The climate all around the house seemed perfect.

Lost in his thoughts, he missed Lord Xavier getting close to him, from behind.

“What a nice sight,” the Master of the house spoke casually, and Cory turned, blushing. “They should have sent you to train at the Pleasure Academy, not the Institution. I guess the Trainers no longer have good eyes for true beauty.”

“Master is too kind,” Cory bowed.

“No, I am not; I am quite difficult to please. Such perfect fair skin,” Lord Xavier commented, grabbing the young man's chin and tilting it upwards. “Eyes blue as the summer sky, and perfect blond hair, soft to the touch. Broad shoulders, small waist, perfect round buttocks. And for those who like having their slaves take them, a nice cock to go along with the rest.”

Cory's eyes grew wide. What kind of Masters debased themselves in such a way?

“Don't get any ideas into your lovely head. Your holes will be used, but your cock will serve just as side entertainment,” Lord Xavier patted his nose playfully with the tips of his fingers.

The servant's mind was in turmoil. What was his Master trying to say with that?

Lord Xavier let the black silk bathrobe slide from his shoulders, allowing his servant to admire him in all his naked glory. Cory stared, completely dumbfounded. His new Master had a perfect body, lean, but muscular. He was tall and graceful, like the statues towering over the city gates, a symbol of dominance

over the rest of the world. The servant licked his lips, with a wanton expression on his face.

“You do realize you are openly lusting over your Master while you should see to his needs,” Lord Xavier teased, and Cory blushed again. “Such an exquisite gem I found,” he added while descending into the in-ground bathtub. “I know at least someone else who will enjoy you. You will meet him soon enough.”

Cory cast his eyes down. He had expected something completely different. Not to be taken from the first day by his beautiful Master.

“I think a bath would be good for you, too, my lovely servant. Come here, join me,” Lord Xavier urged him.

The servant stared at his Master in disbelief for a brief second, but he quickly complied. He could not suppress a moan of satisfaction while joining Lord Xavier in the bathtub.

“Such a sensual being,” his Master whispered while gesturing to him to get closer.

Lord Xavier didn't waste any time and made his servant to impale himself into his hot spear again, coaxing him inch by inch.

Cory grabbed his master's neck, for balance, and started moving up and down on his own accord, trying hard to refrain himself from shouting out his pleasure. The stickiness inside his ass served a purpose now.

“Don't keep your voice down. I want to hear you,” Lord Xavier encouraged him.

It was all Cory needed for voicing his pleasure loudly, lewdly, emitting sounds and grunts like an animal in heat. He felt well used. He was quite sure he would not be able to walk, as he felt the delicious pain of getting stuffed by his Master's colossal member over and over again.

“Can I touch myself, Master?” he pleaded while he could not stop moaning.

“No,” came the cruel reply, and a frustrated gasp was the answer. “I want to fuck your beautiful ass until you lose your voice.”

Cory whimpered, letting his head fall on his Master's shoulder, allowing the deep penetration that was making him mad with desire. He could not go any higher. His cock was so hard, on the verge of exploding, he was sure something was bound to give in, to break inside him.

Luckily for him, Lord Xavier came with a low, masculine growl, and his limp body was gently released from the tight embrace.

“It is hard not to be allowed to come, isn't it, Cory?”

“Yes, Master,” he said in a small voice.

“Do you think I'm cruel?”

“No, Master. You are good to me.”

“You certainly know how to flatter my ego. But I'll have you know that I'll always do as I please, regardless of what you do or say.”

“My Master's wish is my command.”

“You have a sweet tongue to go with a beautiful face. You did great today. So you have earned a kiss.”

Cory stood still, his mouth agape. A kiss? From his beautiful Master? He had to be dreaming.

“Well? What are you waiting for?” Lord Xavier smiled, seemingly pleased with the look of amazement on his sexy servant's face. “Do not wash too thoroughly. I want to know that at least part of my essence remains inside you,” he said curtly.

“I don't understand what could not wait,” Lucas reproached while walking through the door.

“You'll see, and then you'll let me know if your boring work could be abandoned for one hour to witness what I am about to show you,” Xavier said with a mysterious smile.

Like on cue, the door opened, allowing the young servant to step in, completely naked. Cory advanced slowly, searching his master's eyes for approval. He did not dare to look at the guest, and Xavier smiled.

“Lucas, this is Cory, my new servant. Cory, you are allowed to look at Lord Lucas.”

Green eyes met his, and the young servant stared in astonishment. Just in a single day, he was meeting another gorgeous man. The black hair almost shined blue, while the emerald pools looked inquisitive and demanding. He was all dressed in black, just like his Master, but his features looked softer, although manly. A bit shorter in height than Lord Xavier, Lord Lucas looked a bit heavier, as well. While Lord Xavier was aristocratic to the tip of his fingers, Lord Lucas looked as if he didn't mind doing things with his hands. Cory examined the man curiously. His curiosity was answered in kind. Eventually, Lord Lucas smiled.

“Well, Xavier, I am still waiting. He is as beautiful as all your acquisitions.”

Cory blushed at the compliment. It didn't matter that they were talking about him as if he was not in the room.

“I assume you started his training, or should I say, reverse training?”

“My friend, with Cory, I didn't have to work at all.”

“Really?” the inquisitive eyes returned to the young servant. “How come?”

“I think I'll better show you. Cory, touch yourself.”

The servant touched his organ gingerly. Although his cheeks were in flames, he could not stop becoming aroused at the idea of having to masturbate while being watched by two gorgeous men. For a brief second, he imagined himself squirming in pleasure between them, and he closed his eyes, moaning softly.

Lord Lucas stared at Lord Xavier.

“You are tricking me. He is as lewd as if he came straight out of the Pleasure Academy. Was he trained at the Institution? Please, do keep in mind that I am

familiar with their procedures. The poor creatures are so tainted and twisted inside at the end of their training that they can barely remember having any sexual organs at all.”

At the mentioning of the Institution, Cory felt his erection waning. He frowned, trying to get back to his fantasy.

“Well, Lucas, it looks like I found a diamond in the rough. Cory is particularly sensitive and sensual. He even wanted to be rejected at the selection, to escape the fate of a life without sex.”

Lord Lucas snorted.

“With his looks? The slaves would have fought over him from day one. If it weren't for you, I doubt he would have ended the day without being mounted by an entire stable.”

Cory gasped. Instead of causing him fear, the image evoked by Lord Lucas made him even harder. The two Masters turned both at the same time to look at him.

“Would you have liked that, Cory?” his Master's voice dropped a few notes. “To have men lined up for you, wanting nothing but to fill your holes with their cocks? Admit it, don't be shy.”

“Yes, Master,” Cory whispered.

Lord Xavier turned to Lord Lucas, with a triumphant look on his face.

“I'll be damned,” Lord Lucas whispered. “Should I gather that you have already tested his nymphomaniac tendencies?”

“I had the pleasure of having him twice today.”

“Was he used before?” Lord Lucas asked.

“No, Lucas. He was a virgin. Well, he's not one anymore.”

“You should have called for me then,” Lord Lucas reproached.

“So you do not want to enjoy him? He knows how to deepthroat, although he has to be taught all the ropes. He is a fast learner. Plus, he is enjoying it extremely,” Lord Xavier explained.

Their conversation was cut short by a low whimper. Lord Xavier had forgotten about the order given to Cory to masturbate.

“Master, can I come, please?” the servant begged.

“I only allowed him to come once today, and that could not be helped. What do you say, Lucas? Would you like a taste of him?”

Cory clenched his hand desperately over his organ. His Master was keen on letting him suffer. What he saw next made him even more desperate. Lord Xavier suddenly grabbed Lord Lucas and pulled him into an arduous kiss. He looked as dominant as in his relationship with Cory, and that was incredibly arousing. Interrupting the kiss, allowing Lord Lucas the luxury of breathing, Lord Xavier spoke.

“Tell us what you were thinking of right now, Cory.”

“Me, being taken ...” Cory spoke with difficulty, “... by both Masters...”

Lord Xavier laughed softly.

“Don't you think you had enough for today?”

“I want more, Master.”

“Lucas,” the Master of the house touched his friend's shoulder. “Should we help Cory out of his predicament?”

The other Master nodded, his eyes fixed on the young servant's body.

“Here is the deal, Cory. I will let you come only if you manage both of us in your tight little ass at the same time,” Lord Xavier promised.

Cory emitted such a longing sound that both Masters laughed.

“Stretching him would not be a good idea,” Lord Lucas spoke, pushing his friend slowly aside. “I don’t think double anal penetration should be in the cards for now.”

Lord Xavier smiled, watching the other lord intently. Cory’s eyes traveled from one to another, his mind too fogged with lust to care about what they wanted to do with him. His Master gently gestured for him to come closer.

“Kneel, Cory,” Lord Xavier asked, and he carefully sat in front of the two good-looking men, waiting for further instructions.

His Master seemed to like being in charge more than anything because he slowly unzipped Lord Lucas’s pants to take out the man’s engorged organ.

“Do you like this, Cory?” Lord Xavier’s voice was loaded with desire, and Cory nodded, his eyes taking in the glorious sight of Lord Lucas’s erection.

Gently, Lord Xavier pushed his friend’s cock into the young mouth, and Cory took it in, his eyelashes fluttering nervously. It had a slightly different taste, and it made him ache even more, deep inside his groin, his delayed release tormenting him.

A gentle hand came to rest on his nape, and then, there was another cock near his mouth, battling to get inside, as well. He gave up reluctantly to Lord Lucas’s hard cock to lavish his Master with attention.

“Just look at him, Lucas, look at his aroused face,” Lord Xavier encouraged his friend, as his desire was intensifying.

Lost in sensations, Cory began using both hands so he could stuff his mouth better. His lips and tongue caressed the silky heads, as he licked them in turn.

Lord Lucas was staring at him, and Cory looked up as if drawn out of a sudden from his lustful stupor. When his eyes met the other’s, a small moan vibrating in his throat made the man smile.

“Can I fuck your servant, Xavier?” Lord Lucas asked, his eyes still meeting Cory’s, as the young man’s mouth was filled with cock.

“That is why I wanted you here, you know how much I love sharing everything with you,” Lord Xavier said with tenderness in his voice.

What kind of relationship was between the two? Cory could tell they were not just simple friends. He lay on his back, waiting to be penetrated, his chest rising and falling, anticipation growing in his belly.

Before his eyes, Lord Xavier was kissing Lord Lucas with renewed passion. The two men seemed so similar, due to their station and dark clothes, yet there were so many differences that Cory could barely wait to discover them all. He had always liked to watch people, when he was in training, to find out what made every one unique, despite the Trainers' efforts to make them conform, think and behave like the results of the same pattern.

In the two perfect men now frantically undressing before his eyes, he saw more. He noticed the slight reluctance in Lord Lucas's moves, as Lord Xavier was trying hard to get his attention, by rubbing his buttocks through his clothes. Could it be that Lord Xavier wanted more and Lord Lucas didn't care to offer? Cory observed how his Master was undressing the other like he was unpacking a long-awaited gift. It was funny to think how even the most powerful could not always have what they wanted.

Lord Lucas's attention, however, seemed to be focused on Cory's lithe form, waiting, legs parted, on the plush carpet. Unconsciously, driven by desire, Cory moved his hands to his nipples and touched them. Their instant reaction made him gasp, and Lord Lucas gently, but firmly, disentangled himself from Lord Xavier's arms, to place himself between the slender legs.

"Xavier, please help me with some lubricant, I want to be inside Cory so badly," he asked, as his shiny eyes were inspecting the servant like they wanted to devour every inch of skin on display.

Smiling, Lord Xavier whispered something into Lord Lucas's ear, and the man smiled back, amused.

"Even so, I believe it would be common courtesy to provide ..."

Lord Xavier retook his mouth. Cory did not wait any longer. Despite knowing that he should behave and expect to do as told, he grabbed the man's hard cock and placed it at his entrance, trying to impale himself in it.

“Cory here seems impatient,” his Master joked.

Lord Lucas grunted at the sudden move. When Lord Xavier offered him the vial, he used it with curt movements and plunged into the beautiful body.

“Oh, yes, Cory, you are exquisite,” he hissed.

He wanted to thank the man for the compliment, but his mouth was soon filled with his Master’s cock, and he hurried to serve, letting himself drown in the sensation of having two gorgeous men pound him from both ends.

Lord Lucas grabbed the servant’s neglected cock and started to rub it. Cory was moaning helplessly, with his mouth full, as his ass was stretched and used and he could feel his cock getting harder and harder.

“Don’t come just yet, Cory,” Lord Lucas demanded gently, and he felt as if he could just die that instant. What was with these Masters and their obsession to deny a humble servant’s needs so cruelly?

What followed took Cory entirely by surprise.

“I want to taste you,” Lord Lucas said.

When the man withdrew from the compliant body, Lord Xavier moved, as well.

“Go fetch a glass for Lord Lucas, Cory,” his Master asked with a mysterious smile.

Barely on his feet, he stumbled towards the kitchen. He picked a flute and rushed back, his cock bobbing in all directions, now impossible to cool down by any means.

He stopped for a second, to watch how his Master was slowly masturbating Lord Lucas who was now seated on the lavish sofa, his legs parted, and his beautiful eyes unfocused.

“Pour your seed into that glass, Cory,” the Master of the house demanded, without sparing him a glance, too caught up in pleasuring his friend.

He didn’t need any more encouragement. Feeling his toes curling at the sight before his eyes, he came in waves, trying hard to do as told.

With unsteady moves, he offered his Master the glass. Lord Xavier took it, and Cory watched in amazement how he handed the flute to Lord Lucas. As Lord Xavier continued to masturbate Lord Lucas, with longer, harder strokes, the handsome man raised the flute to his lips and started tasting Cory's precious liquid, with an expression of pure bliss on his face. His seed spewed from his cock, spreading on his chiseled chest and abs.

"Now, Cory, come and clean up," Lord Xavier demanded, and Cory knelt almost trembling between Lord Lucas's legs, so he could start licking the semen from the man's body.

His Master did not waste any time, and Cory felt his ass cheeks spread apart as Lord Xavier's cock penetrated him violently, as if the man wanted to split the servant in two.

He gasped, and his head was pushed back so he could see to his task. His master exploded inside him right away. Apparently, not even his otherwise cool owner could delay his gratification for long.

As the three lay spent, Lord Lucas was the first to speak.

"I love his taste, Xavier. Care to sell him?" he asked casually.

"No," came the curt reply, and Cory felt his heart beat faster.

Chapter Three

“Xavier, I fail to understand you,” Lord Lucas commented, looking somewhat vexed with his friend’s determination. “You usually get bored rather fast with your servants. Please at least promise me he can be mine once you are through with him.”

They were talking over dinner, while Cory was tending the table quietly, trying hard to ignore the butterflies in his stomach upon hearing the Masters’ conversation. It was a strange thing to be the cause of the disquieting atmosphere in the room.

“I believe that it would be no issue for a repeat performance if you come to visit us,” Lord Xavier sipped wine from his glass, frowning. “What I do not understand,” he emphasized the ‘I’, “is why you are so keen on acquiring him all of a sudden. Never before have you expressed interest in any of my servants.”

“You know I always speak my mind,” Lord Lucas answered. “We’re not so different, you and I. We both take what we like when we like. Of course, in this case, I could never insist more than it is socially acceptable. If this is your final word, I will respect it,” he added sternly while cutting the steak on his plate with measured gestures.

Cory was observing the two Masters in silence. Lord Xavier was graceful to the tip of his fingers, even as he ate, while it looked like Lord Lucas was not paying as much attention to his table manners. If he didn’t know better, he would have suspected the guest to have struggled to climb the social ladder to reach his current position, as opposed to Lord Xavier who looked blue-blooded and born to rule.

“I do not usually tell you ‘no’, and you know it,” Lord Xavier’s voice grew softer.

“Only when it’s about the not so little things,” Lord Lucas commented, looking somewhat disappointed.

“You see, I have taken quite a liking at Cory, and I would hate to part with him so soon. Plus, it is highly unusual for you to show so much interest in another human being, let alone a servant.”

There was something in his Master's voice Cory wished he could understand. Could there be a chip in the man's armor? Was he nurturing more intimate feelings towards his friend? Was Lord Lucas not responding in kind? He was so deep in thought that he forgot he was supposed to bring dessert.

His Master looked at him, his half ironic, half indulgent smile back on his lips. Lord Lucas coughed discreetly, to draw his attention.

He murmured an apology and rushed to the kitchen to bring the two servings of mocha pots de crème he had especially and carefully struggled with, while the Masters were recovering from the sensual session from earlier. He had used the heart shape he'd found among the utensils. Somehow, his Master's choice had rung to him as romantic, so he had wanted to please him with a proper layout, as well.

As he placed the dessert in front of the two Masters, Lord Lucas chuckled softly.

"You are always trying to seduce me with food, Xavier."

"This is not food, my friend, this is a pure delight," Lord Xavier commented, digging a small scoop of chocolate pudding and tasting it, half closing his eyes. "He is great as a cook, too," he added and stared at Lord Lucas with a meaningful look.

"That is to be expected," the other waved like such aspects were trivial. "They are trained to serve."

However, as he tasted his dessert, his green eyes grew a bit wider.

"Well, I suppose this is something ..." he mused, and using his teaspoon to get another mouthful of pudding, he held it towards Cory. "Come here, Cory, have a bite, too. I suppose you deserve it. Doesn't he, Xavier?" he challenged his friend.

Cory felt like a deer caught in the headlights. He looked at his Master, feeling uncertain. Wasn't it a breach of protocol to accept something from another Master? So far, Lord Xavier had been in charge, even in much more intimate matters, but right now, he felt as if Lord Lucas was crossing an invisible line.

“Go ahead, Cory, let Lord Lucas feed you,” Lord Xavier ordered shortly, pushing his plate aside, his appetite for dessert seemingly gone.

Cory tried to take the teaspoon from Lord Lucas’s hand, but the man stopped him.

“Not like this, Cory. You will have to take it with your mouth.”

The servant could feel his cheeks ablaze. He half closed his eyes, afraid he was going to embarrass himself. He gently took the teaspoon in his mouth and used his tongue to clean everything. He tried to straighten up right away as if he could feel his Master’s eyes watching him.

Lord Lucas grabbed him all of a sudden and placed the servant on his lap.

“It is delicious, isn’t it, Cory?” the man placed the utensil on the table so he could caress the servant’s thigh.

“Yes, Lord Lucas,” he said sheepishly.

“Do you know how it tastes better?”

He shook his head slowly, trying hard not to look at Lord Lucas, overly conscious of the hand that had slowly caressed him, now resting on his waist.

“From a pair of beautiful lips.”

He watched, not even daring to breathe, how Lord Lucas unceremoniously dipped his fingers in the small pot. He stood there as his lips were gently painted with chocolate, and moaned softly when Lord Lucas’s lips closed over his.

When he opened his eyes again, and Lord Lucas gently put him down so he could stand, he noticed his Master was no longer in the room.

“I didn’t peg you for the jealous type,” Lord Lucas commented while preparing to walk out the door.

Behind the door to the giant hallway, Cory listened. He knew he was not supposed to be there, as his Master had ordered him to his quarters while he was going to see his friend out.

“Jealous?” Lord Xavier seemed to struggle to keep his cool.

“You are so easily provoked.”

“Or you are probably doing a fine job at provoking me.”

“A simple kiss? Really, Xavier?”

Cory could not stop thinking Lord Lucas was cruel. There was anxiety in his Master’s voice, and he could not fathom why.

“It was not a simple kiss, Lucas, and you know it,” Lord Xavier said accusingly.

“You always invite me to partake, and I usually decline. I thought you would be happy to see me so enthralled with your little toy.”

“I thought so, too,” Lord Xavier’s voice dropped a few notes.

There were kissing sounds, and Cory could only picture the two good-looking men in a tight embrace.

“Why?” he heard Lord Xavier speaking again.

“You know very well why,” Lord Lucas said matter-of-factly. “I’d rather be your friend forever, then your lover for a day.”

“It wouldn’t be that way between us,” Lord Xavier denied the veiled accusation.

“You always say that,” Lord Lucas laughed. “But you forget that I know you very well. Xavier, you burn too hot, too fast. The only reason why you still want me is that except for these little trysts, I always say ‘no’. Plus, I would be a fool to give my heart to you. You are ruthless. You step on broken hearts like it is the most natural thing in the world.”

“You’re painting me in such bad colors,” Lord Xavier complained.

“They are your true colors,” the other stated. “As a friend, I could not ask for anything more. You’re trustworthy, reliable, always ready to help or listen. But when it comes to love, you’re cold.”

“At least, let me have you once,” the Master’s voice grew hotter.

Lord Xavier's demand was received with a low chuckle.

"Don't even think about it, Xavier. No one fucks me. Not even my best friend."

Cory hurried to reach his room. His suspicions had been confirmed, and now he was starting to feel afraid that his Master's frustration and anger with being so bluntly refused by his beautiful friend were going to have a target in his weak little person.

He heard the bell ring, and he knew he was summoned. He walked towards the master bedroom, with a nasty sensation curling in his belly. Lord Lucas had commented on Lord Xavier being ruthless with his lovers. Not that he was his Master's lover, which only meant the man could not even be bothered to have mercy while applying punishment.

He knocked softly, and then he entered.

"Have you called for me, Master?"

Lord Xavier looked amazing, his pale skin a beautiful contrast against the black silk sheets. He was completely naked, in a relaxed pose, but Cory could not let his guard down. The man was undoubtedly upset with what had happened over dinner, and there were not going to be pleasantries being exchanged between the two of them before going to bed.

"I must have you know, Cory, that my appetite is quite difficult to quench. I usually require service before bedtime."

He gestured for the young servant to approach, and Cory's eyes traveled the harmonious, worthy of a statue, body, to rest atop the erection the man was sporting.

"Yes, I see you know exactly what I mean. Use your mouth. I promised you I'll feed you some more, didn't I?"

Cory nodded and climbed the bed to sit between his Master's legs. He carefully took the engorged head into his mouth, but Lord Xavier's firm hand pushed him all

the way down, making him choke in surprise. He struggled against the man's thighs and focused hard on stopping his heaving.

"He likes you," Lord Xavier commented, and the servant could not tell whether he was angered or bored while saying so. "Lord Lucas doesn't like anyone," he continued while pushing Cory again to swallow him whole. "He is too busy with his work to care about such trivial things. It is rare to see him so worked up."

Cory could sense an old fear growing deep and dark inside. Suddenly, he felt again as if he was in that strange dark room at the Institution while that long and hard device was steadily stuffed down his throat, to pass over his gag reflex. It drove fear into him, dark and thick, and now he felt the same, as his Master was using his throat mercilessly.

Suddenly, his head was captured by two strong hands, and he was forced to look into his Master's eyes.

"You are crying," the man said, and Cory blinked, and tried to wipe his tears away. "You are beautiful even when you cry," his Master brought his lips closer and kissed him, long and deeply, with a gentleness he had not had before.

He had Lord Xavier on top of him. His Master made room for himself between the slender legs and kissed him slowly.

"He will never have you. He doesn't realize it, but by singling you out, he made a terrible mistake. For as long as he will want you, I will not let you go. I will fuck you every day, use you as I please, and only let him have morsels to keep him interested."

Cory said nothing, trying hard not to tremble. His Master seemed to be a dangerous, vengeful man. He knew nothing about him; nothing, except the fact that he was going to be used as a pawn in the strange game the two men played.

"He will learn how difficult it can be to desire someone you cannot have. It is the only way that he will understand my pain."

Cory arched his back, as his Master penetrated him with little preamble. The pleasure was there, naked, but cruel. He didn't feel elated, like the first time; he

was afraid, his body just responding to the new conditioning of being invaded like that.

Lord Xavier moved inside him, slamming hard, but he didn't cry out.

“Does it hurt, Cory?” he demanded, his eyes burning.

Cory opened his eyes to look at him.

“I take everything my Master wishes to give me,” he said, and Lord Xavier's eyes grew wide for a split second.

Hot lips descended over his mouth, as his Master settled for a more forgiving rhythm, making him squirm in growing pleasure this time.

His cock was pressed between their hard bodies, the delicious friction making him spew his load. He felt the now familiar sensation of having his insides coated with hot manly seed. Lord Xavier withdrew a little, and rested his head on his chest, breathing heavily.

“You are brilliant, Cory. You know what buttons to push. Then I will tell you just one time because I know there will be no reason to repeat myself. Cross me, let Lucas have you behind my back, and the consequences will be dire. Understood?”

“Yes, Master,” he said softly.

It felt unnatural to be threatened just after having sex with his beautiful Master, but now he understood once more his place in the world. He had no high hopes. After all, the Rulers were Masters to everyone else. They were above the law, and ruthless.

“Do I frighten you?” Lord Xavier demanded, letting his body slide to one side to let Cory breathe.

“Yes, Master,” he said in a small voice.

“Fear is a good thing, Cory. It keeps you alive,” his Master commented.

“May I go to my room now, Master?” the servant asked carefully.

“No, it’s been a while since my bed was kept warm for the entire night. Stay here,” Lord Xavier dragged him closer and placed the servant’s head on his firm chest.

“May I wash?” Cory asked hesitantly, although he knew the answer.

“No, I want you marked by me,” Lord Xavier spoke, while gently caressing his servant’s back.

Cory could not understand how his Master could be so gentle with his gestures and so cruel with his words. He stood there, listening to Lord Xavier’s steady heartbeat for a long time before he could fall asleep.

Preparations for a large party were underway, and Cory was buried in chores head over heels. Other servants had been brought along with their Masters, and his otherwise calm kitchen was all a ruckus. He saw to his tasks with his eyes down, trying hard not to look at the young servants around him. He expected expressionless faces, like the ones they were trained to achieve while being educated at the Institution, but he saw nothing of the kind.

The young men seemed boisterous and carefree, and there was gossip flying in all directions. From the stolen glances, he could tell none of them had been with him at the Institution at the same time. They were probably from other units, he mused, as strict rules commanded that no servant in training was to roam the area as he saw fit. So, except for the dozen boys he had been housed along in the same room at the Institution, he did not know anyone else.

“Isn’t he pretty?” he heard a tall, beautiful redhead commenting.

He continued to stack plates, just looking once at the young man talking. The servant was staring at him, but he could not say whether he was the subject of the conversation or not. The other three servants had stopped from their activities, and they were looking at him, as well.

He blushed and cast his eyes down.

“Wow, so virginal,” another, with fair hair, like Cory, commented. “How can you be in Lord Xavier’s service and still be able to blush?”

The redhead punched the other in the arm. “Stop it, Kain. He’s new.”

A smaller, attractive male, with a mop of black hair getting in his eyes, joined the conversation. “Cory, tell us, has your Master fucked you?”

The question didn’t sound like an insult; actually, the offensive word sounded utterly natural, and the youngster’s question seemed just pure curiosity.

The rest laughed seeing his hesitation. The redhead took him by the shoulders.

“Come now, Cory, we’re dying to know. All the servants in Lord Xavier’s service so far have been so thoroughly fucked, that you cannot believe the stories they say. So, please, please, with sugar on top, tell us all the dirty details!” he made a dramatic gesture as if their whole lives depended on Cory’s confession.

“I ...” Cory started, “I cannot say anything.”

“You’re afraid,” the redhead commented. “How could you be? Your Master has made the happiest servants in Drena so far. When he’s done with one, he sets him free with a pile of gifts. You could not believe those cocksuckers now, how they go to parties, and wiggle their tails to rich people, just because they had the chance to be in Lord Xavier’s bed,” he commented, expressing his disgust.

“Your Masters ...,” Cory blushed, “don’t they all ...?”

Another unanimous laughter was the answer.

“No, sweetie. They have pleasure slaves trained at the Academy to satisfy their cocks. We’re just some glorified housemaids, that’s all.”

Despite the brazen attitude, Cory could tell the redhead was disappointed, and he understood why everyone was so interested in what he had to say. But he was still afraid. They had no idea how scary the man could be. They had not been threatened as he had been.

The bell made them all stand to attention for a second, and then hurry to see to their tasks again. Cory went first to set the table.

Firm hands grabbed him from behind, as he bent over the table to place utensils next to the plates.

“Hello, Cory,” he heard Lord Lucas whispering in his ear.

Chapter Four

To say he felt nothing while his hips were held still by strong, firm hands, would have been a lie. Despite his sudden need to push his ass against the owner of the said hands, his conscience told him to straighten up and assume the proper servant-like attitude, as he turned to face Lord Lucas.

“Good evening, Lord Lucas,” he bowed politely, his eyes traveling from the man’s chin along the black silk shirt to find a point to stare in the subtle black diamond tie needle, one of the few pieces of jewelry the Rulers were allowed to wear.

The man did not seem to be taken aback by the servant’s attitude. A low chuckle was the answer, and Cory’s chin was gently tipped, determining the young man to look up. He knew he was blushing as his eyes sank in the emerald pools. The fact that Lord Lucas was so beautiful it hurt didn’t help. Mustering all his courage, he cast his eyes down, avoiding the direct look.

“Can I help you with anything, Lord Lucas?”

He could almost congratulate himself for keeping his voice steady as he spoke.

“Oh, Cory,” Lord Lucas whispered seductively, “you can help you me with a lot of things.”

The young man was saved by the rest of the servants, marching from the kitchen with all kinds of delicious treats on their trays.

Cory took advantage of the brief interruption and scurried away, murmuring an apology. No matter how much he wanted to stay right there and lose himself in Lord Lucas’s amazingly hypnotic gaze, he knew his Master’s words could not be taken as idle threats.

He was aware that the man would not follow him to the servants’ quarters, so he hurried to his room to catch a breather. He needed to wash his face, as a servant with cheeks ablaze would have made, for sure, a strange subject for conversation in the lavishly appointed dining room.

As he went back to the hallways again, he almost head-butted the redhead servant from earlier.

“Cory,” the servant said, looking a bit worried, “your Master is a bit dissatisfied with your sudden disappearance.”

“I will be right there,” he said quickly and tried to get fast past the redhead.

“My name is Dion,” the servant said, catching his arm.

He turned to smile at the other.

“Nice name,” he commented, and the other winked at him in return.

“I’ll help you out tonight,” the redhead walked side by side with him. “It is your first party? Of this size, I mean?”

“Yes, it is,” Cory admitted, while still walking fast.

“Sorry about earlier, we were way too nosy. But a servant’s life does not have that many highlights, except for gossip. We want to know everything when there’s a newcomer around.”

“That’s all right,” Cory shook his head a bit.

Dion seemed to be a nice guy, and he could use a friend close to his age and station.

“After we tend the tables, we will have to get the slaves prepared for the show,” Dion dropped his voice, and looked at Cory, trying to gauge his reaction.

But Cory remained silent, not knowing if a reply was required to that or not.

Hesitantly, Dion continued.

“Does your master allow you to ... help?”

“Help?” Cory shrugged. “I don’t know; I guess I’ll have to ask.”

Cory could not say whether the Masters were genuinely enjoying themselves as the atmosphere around the table seemed to be subdued. There were engaged in quiet conversations, and it looked as if those seated at the table were interested only in the people located within proximity and nothing else.

As they finished serving the courses, he noticed how their Masters called the other servants and then sent away with a short nod. He caught Dion's eyes for a second, and the redhead made a small gesture towards Cory's Master.

The young servant understood. He had spent almost the entire evening behind Lord Xavier, trying hard to ignore how intimate he and Lord Lucas seemed. They were talking sotto voce, just like everyone else, their heads almost touching, while, in turn, they barely touched the food placed in front of them.

Somewhat reluctantly, he got closer and leaned in, so his Master could hear him.

"Master, I apologize for interrupting," he whispered.

Lord Xavier turned with a somewhat displeased expression on his face.

"Speak," he said shortly.

"I was wondering if I should go help the others prepare the slaves," he continued, keeping his eyes down.

There was a tiny glint in his Master's grey eyes that Cory almost missed. A quick glance was shared between the two Rulers. Lord Lucas's lips pursed in displeasure.

"Yes, of course. After all, you need the training, and since I don't keep any slaves, it would be hard for you to achieve that kind of knowledge otherwise. Go with the others. I look forward to seeing what you have learned tonight," he added with a mysterious smile, again looking more at Lord Lucas, and then at Cory.

The servant nodded in the same fashion he had noticed the others doing and walked away, without looking at his Master or his companion.

Lucas voiced his protest as soon as Cory was no longer within earshot.

"Xavier, is this a way for you to torment me?"

"What are you saying?" Xavier feigned innocence. "He just needs the practice."

"He needs the practice ..." Lucas mirrored his words. "... he in particular, of all the servants you had."

“You know I’ve never kept anyone on a tight leash,” Xavier’s grey eyes turned into slits, as he continued to smile. “My servants are allowed ... how should I put this? ... a bit of leeway to compensate for their otherwise boring lives spent dusting and cooking all day long.”

Lucas straightened his back and moved slightly away from his friend as if he no longer cared for companionship.

“Leeway ...” he sneered while repeating the word. “He has no clue about what to expect, has he, Xavier? You know his conditioning will force him to serve. What would you possibly hope to achieve with this? With his looks, he will be used.”

“And why shouldn’t he?”

“Don’t you mind having your bed warmer spread and thoroughly fucked by some low life slaves? Or others’ cum is just your choice for lubricant?” Lucas spat the words while grabbing his champagne flute in front of him, in lack of anything else. The strong fingers flexed against the glass as if their owner was trying to strangle the poor object happening in his way.

“Come now, Lucas, don’t be crass. This is so not like you,” Xavier chided, ignoring the tension in the man’s shoulders.

“That only proves how little you know me,” Lucas’s voice to almost a pained whisper.

Xavier’s eyes flashed in anger. Lucas was cruel to treat him like this! And for what? For a servant? He touched the man’s hand, caressing the small patch of skin between the black glove and the hem of his shirt.

“Why?” came the barely audible question. “Just because you can?”

Xavier sighed.

“No, because every little thing in this world is set, and a servant does not belong in a Ruler’s heart.”

“But he does belong in a Ruler’s bed,” Lucas continued to ignore Xavier’s touch.

“Why not? They are prepared and trained to serve.”

“Not like this and you know it.”

“Yet there are many ignoring this so-called rule you are talking about,” Xavier shrugged as if they were talking matters of minor importance.

“With all due respect, Xavier, you are in a class of your own when it comes to this. You ostentatiously refuse to take any slaves, to debase these creatures and make them yield. Is conquest the only thing you care about? Is this why are you insisting so much on trying to get me in your bed?”

Xavier frowned. Lucas seemed quite disturbed. It was unlike Drena’s brightest scientific mind to judge his best friend in such a manner.

“I told you it would be different between us,” he said sternly, withdrawing his hand and stopping the caress. His fingers itched for the touch, but they had to behave for now. “I could even let you ...” he leaned forward and whispered something in Lucas’s ear.

The man didn’t look pleased.

“I would still not be interested,” the words poured acid on Xavier’s pride. “Do not mistake the little liberties we take for something else. I’ve never been, and I never will be interested in being more than friends.”

Xavier feigned a small yawn, to hide his unease. Lucas was a passionate human being; it was one of the things he loved about his best friend. But getting on his wrong side had never felt like this before; it was not like he was afraid.

Friends or not, there was no one above him, no one. Xavier had been born to rule, and any other position than number one was beneath him. In dealing with other diplomats, or with his many lovers, it didn’t matter; he was the one in charge. Lucas just had to be taught, despite his overbearing pride. Even if Xavier had to crush him, he had to make the handsome man his.

Cory stepped into the large living room, transformed into the slaves’ headquarters for the evening, his head in the clouds. Getting away from Lucas made it easier to

think of him, so when he took in the scene before his eyes, he just stood stuck in the middle of the room, his mouth agape.

Several males, completely naked, were relaxing in various provocative positions on the sofas brought to the room specifically for the event. The servants Cory had met earlier were fawning over them, making their perfectly tanned bodies glisten with special oils they had probably brought from their masters' homes.

He noticed how Dion was carefully massaging the round buttocks of a beautiful brunet with long hair. When the slave's eyes lazily opened, he saw they were the deepest blue.

The slave shifted and watched him with interest. Cory just stared, finding it impossible to unglue his eyes from the brunet's steady gaze.

"Who's the new bitch?" the slave drawled the words, and Cory felt an unfamiliar sting somewhere right in the middle of his chest.

Dion slapped the man's buttocks.

"Play nice, Antoine. He belongs to Lord Xavier," the redhead warned.

"So?" the slave got up, followed by other pairs of curious eyes, as he got closer to the object of his interest.

Suddenly, it was silence; Cory could feel it, thick and dangerous around him. The slave called Antoine stopped in front of him. He was a few good inches taller than the servant, so Cory had to tip his head a bit backward to keep his eyes on him.

"Pretty," Antoine commented while catching a few strands of blond hair and playing with them, by rolling them on his fingers. "Since you're Xavier's toy, I suppose you know well how to suck cock," he said with a small smile that made Cory shift a bit nervously.

Fortunately, Dion came to the rescue.

"Don't bully him. He's new. And just because he belongs to Lord Xavier – don't ever forget to add the honorific, Antoine, or one day you'll pay – it does not mean that he is supposed to be your toy, too."

“What?” Antoine crossed his arms over a perfectly chiseled torso. “I am only asking to be prepared by him,” he smiled and winked at Cory.

“I think I am perfectly capable of doing that,” Dion’s eyes grew dark.

“I am bored of you,” Antoine flicked his mane of hair over a shoulder, trying to dismiss Dion from his view. “With you, it’s always the same routine. I want something new. Can you give me something new?” he asked, lifting his chin in disdain, and watching Dion through his eyelashes.

“What a melodrama queen,” Dion hissed. “Any hot orifice will do for you. Stop being difficult.”

“I can tell my Master my performance lost its shine because you failed to prepare me,” Antoine warned, making Dion roll his eyes in exasperation.

Cory felt compelled to intervene.

“There is no problem, Dion. I came here to help, after all. Please let me know what I have to do, and I will do my best.”

His small speech made the two turn their heads in surprise at the same time. Cory could tell the others in the room, slaves and servants alike, were now staring at him. Again, he was shown his place. His Master was one thing, though; a powerful man, capable of crushing Cory within a blink of an eye, while this slave was nothing but one of the many toys groomed to please the rich, just like him.

“Then suck my cock,” the slave said, grabbing his cock and giving it a tentative rub.

Cory’s clear eyes clashed for a brief second with the deeper blues.

“Please make yourself comfortable,” he said with a small smile.

Dion was looking at him, wide-eyed, saying nothing, and, in passing, as he followed Antoine to the sofa the slave had been sprawled until earlier, he winked at the redhead.

He had to meet these famous slaves, after all, and his Master was right that he needed the practice. He was a fast learner, and he was not going to let Antoine see him ashamed or embarrassed.

The slave lay on his back, parting his legs, and raising his lean, muscular arms above his head.

“Make it hard and wet. I have some fucking to do tonight to please the Masters. So don’t give me some lame blowjob, bitch,” he said with a sneer.

Calmly, Cory took a seat between the long legs and touched the slave’s organ, carefully drawing back the skin and caressing it.

“Your humble servant’s name is Cory,” he looked Antoine in the eyes, as he descended to engulf the round head in his mouth.

The short hitch in the slave’s breathing, as their eyes remained locked let him know he had won. Even small victories were worth taking into consideration, for a young servant who was expected to please and nothing else.

His eyes at half-mast, he incrementally pushed the growing organ into his mouth, letting it slide down his throat. The well-known familiar stir in his groin made him shift a little, to adjust his position. If he wanted to survive tonight, without fear for embarrassment and worthlessness, he had to keep his head in the game. So he thought of the harsh training at the Institution, to will his erection down.

The slave did not seem to care that Cory’s skillful technique was lacking in enthusiasm. He grabbed the servant’s head and pushed inside, deeper and deeper. Cory took the reins once more as he squeezed the base of Antoine’s cock hard and withdrew.

Antoine whimpered, as he felt cold air hitting the skin that had been so lavished until then.

“You are properly stimulated now,” Cory politely bowed and stood up.

The slave followed him with his eyes, as Dion hurried to pamper him some more.

“I want him,” the slave said like a petulant child.

“And?” Dion shrugged, but he looked after the blond as he took a seat at the far end of the room, the same serene look on his face he’d had as sucking Antoine.

“What do you mean ‘and’?” Antoine spoke annoyed. “He’d better be here after the party, or else ...”

“Else what?” the redhead challenged.

“Or it will be you passed around tonight. And I know how much you hate it when I let all of them have a go at you.”

Dion pretended to be unaffected.

“Have it your way. I do not mind as much as you think I do.”

“Watch it, Dion,” Antoine’s voice dropped a few notes. “I can always make the game more interesting. Maybe we should test how much you can resist with your head under water, this time?”

The redhead stiffened visibly.

“You wouldn’t dare,” he warned, but his confidence from earlier was visibly shaken.

“My Master doesn’t care. He can always replace you with some new face. I’m not sure if he even knows your name ...” the slave seemed to ponder, with an evil grin.

“He’ll be here,” Dion blurted out, the corners of his mouth falling and his eyes looking down.

Antoine patted his head, in a fake gesture of affection.

“Good boy. That’s what’s keeping you interesting and alive, Dion. Your ability to execute orders. Don’t forget.”

Dion looked grimly over the place where Cory sat, seemingly unaffected by the slurping sounds and moans filling the room, as the servants were getting the beautiful slaves ready for the show.

Antoine suddenly took his hand and placed it over his now softening erection.

“C’mon, Dion. Give it a few rubs, for luck.”

“It’s not like you need it,” the redhead regained some of his composure, but did as told, making the supple organ lengthen in his hand again.

The slave laughed and grabbed Dion’s head to place a quick, hard kiss on the servant’s mouth.

From his place, Cory watched. He could tell Dion was afraid. Despite the beauty, the luxury, fear was ever present, and he could only guess what Antoine wanted as he gestured towards the place where he sat.

If he could live through his Master’s threats, he could live through the whims of a pampered slave. His back straight, his eyes looking ahead, he stood there, as if nothing mattered in the world.

The servants were not necessary during the performance, so they chose to remain in the living room after the slaves took their leave.

Cory sat next to Dion who looked lost in thought.

“So, Dion,” he asked the redhead, “what is the performance all about?”

The other servant threw him a furtive look.

“The Masters enjoy seeing their slaves battling for dominance in a ring. And, of course, after that, they fuck,” came the explanation.

Cory nodded. Dion made a small gesture as if he wanted to say something else, but then returned to his sullen silence.

Cory knew something was amiss. He gently touched the other’s shoulder.

“What did Antoine say to you that you are so afraid right now?”

The redhead almost jumped.

“N-nothing,” he stammered, but his face scrunched in a painful grimace. “Look, Cory,” he just blurted out, “you should just go.”

“And where should I go?” Cory asked with a small smile. “This is my Master’s home.”

“Antoine ...” Dion breathed out, on the verge of panicking, “he wants to ...”

Cory squeezed Dion’s shoulder. “I guess I know what he wants.”

“No, you don’t,” the redhead said sharply. “He’ll force you to do it with everyone else. He gets off on making others feel miserable and useless. He’ll make you feel like a cheap whore, and you will not be able to say ‘no’, because ...”

“Dion,” Cory warned. “Is your Master letting him do it? Debase you and feel bad about yourself? Use you?”

“He doesn’t care,” Dion’s eyes were wet with tears. “Please don’t let it happen to you.”

Cory’s shoulders tensed.

“Thank you for the warning, Dion. But sooner or later, it will happen anyway. It may be Antoine or someone else. And I was warned before this may happen.”

Dion sniffled.

“Aren’t you afraid? You may still be ... a virgin?” the redhead asked, unsure.

Cory shook his head slowly.

“Were you when it happened?” Cory asked hesitantly, and the other nodded. “Don’t worry. He’s a stupid one. And I saw you dealing with him. You can have power over him.”

“I can?” Dion stared at him, wide-eyed.

“I may be new here, but there is one lesson I learned since I came here. Tell them what they want to hear, do what they want you to do, and you will have a fair chance to survive. Deep inside, be true to your own self.”

The redhead stared at him in awe.

“How old are you, Cory?”

“21.”

“And how come you’re so smart?”

“I doubt I’m smart. But I know one thing. That I enjoy living, even if it means suffering or being treated like you matter less than anything else.”

Dion looked around, with a sad expression in his eyes.

“Drena is the most beautiful city on the coast. So few people can enjoy its riches. Among all, we are the worst. Slaves to the slaves, we are nothing but a commodity that, once useless, can be thrown away.”

“What happens to the servants? How long are they supposed to serve?”

“When we get too tired or too used, we are usually sent to work down at the factories. I heard life is bad there,” Dion said with a whisper.

“It’s hard out there, but you are also free,” Cory said with melancholy. “Freer than here.”

“You were taken from there? I was raised here, within the city limits,” Dion said with unbound curiosity.

“Yes, I was. And I wanted to remain there. I was too good looking for hard labor. Isn’t that a bummer?” he added as if he was talking to himself. “I ... loved someone there,” he said hesitantly, suddenly feeling the need to confess, to let another human being know about his thoughts, his feelings, his life before becoming a utility and nothing more.

“For real?” Dion was the one to squeeze his arm now, a bit excited. “How was he?”

“He was ...” Cory realized he was having a hard time remembering his lover’s face. “He was a bit older. But he was good to me. A hard worker. Not as beautiful as any of the people around here. But he was kind, and ...” his words died on his lips, seeing the doors opening and Antoine and the others walking in.

Some of the slaves looked a bit shaken. There were marks on their skin that hadn't been there before. Of them all, the long-haired brunet was marching in, as victorious.

Dion's hand squeezed at Cory's arm tighter, but he was prepared. He watched with feigned indifference, as Antoine slumped on one of the sofas, and his eyes traveled the beautiful muscular body now glistening with sweat and rested on the massive organ which, even soft, looked impressive. He could tell the other slaves had lost and had to service the beast.

Servants were slaves to the slaves, Cory mused, thinking about Dion's words. So, he was expected to be a whore. That was not as heavy a task as others thought. After all, when his Master and Lucas had spoken about the possibility to have him service an entire stable, he had felt excited at the thought.

Sex was power. But power had to be yielded by a skilled individual, to reach its potential. Cory was not sure of all its intricacies, but he knew he was a fast learner. He stood up, touching Dion's shoulder briefly, and headed straight for Antoine who was watching him with burning eyes.

He sat casually on the arm of the sofa and leaned in to whisper in Antoine's ear.

"I heard you wanted me."

Blues eyes turned to watch him with growing interest. Cory touched the man's right shoulder and started caressing the long sinewy arm.

"Was it a good night for you so far?"

"It's only getting better," the slave grinned and suddenly grabbed Cory to have him sit in his lap. "Tell me," he whispered, "has Xavier fucked you?"

Cory smiled and caressed the slave's cheek.

"Yes, he has."

The small nervous flutter in the man's eyelashes told him it was the answer he was expecting. A cruel smile stretched on the slave's lips, as he spoke loud enough for the everybody in the room to hear him.

“Who wants to empty his balls in Lord Xavier’s new fuck toy?”

Cory remained relaxed in Antoine’s arms, as he could hear the cheers booming from every slave’s chest in the room. That earned him a surprised look from the slave.

He slowly closed the distance between their lips and brushed over Antoine’s mouth.

“And I thought you only wanted me for yourself. What a shame,” he feigned regret.

Antoine’s arms gripped him tightly. A meaningful look was exchanged between them. Cory disentangled himself from the man’s embrace and rose to face the naked slaves who were drawing closer, making a partial circle around him and Antoine.

One grabbed him and pulled at his uniform, but he carefully freed his arm from his hands.

“There is no need for that,” he said.

With slow moves, he started to unbutton his shirt. He let it slide on slender shoulders, and looked back at Antoine who was staring at him with an indecipherable expression on his face. His eyes became sultry, as he continued to undress, looking at no one else but Antoine.

Completely naked, he knelt, inviting the slaves to come closer. His actions had taken all by surprise, and they were now a bit nervous. He grabbed a cock near to him in his hand and engulfed it in one go in his mouth. His Master had said he needed the practice; so he was doing nothing else but better his skills as a servant.

Soon enough, there were cocks of different shapes and sizes battling for entrance to his mouth. He caressed hairless sacks as he moved to taste every one, with his eyes at half-mast. Antoine’s hot gaze was drilling his back. He knew it, and he could bet his life he knew what the slave was thinking now.

Strong arms lifted him from the floor, making one cock slide effortlessly from his mouth. He did not need to turn his head to know. As he was placed on the sofa, and

impatient fingers pushed inside him, lubricated with nothing but saliva, he exhaled and closed his eyes.

“You could have said earlier you wanted only me,” he heard the accusatory whisper in his ear, as a large cock was pushed inside him, without too much preparation. “Now I have to let these losers have you, for fuck’s sake.”

Antoine sounded angry; Cory loved it. Emotions were good; if he was the only one capable of keeping a clear head while enjoying having his backside hammered by the best cocks in all Drena, he was the winner, and no one else.

And Lord Xavier and Lord Lucas were no different from the horny slaves, lining up behind him to have a go at him. To know that was a relief; for a little while, he thought his Master to be different. But in this world, it looked as if everyone was thinking with his cock.

That gave him enough to work with. With a small frustrated grunt, Antoine spent himself inside the servant’s body and then a sharp sting burned his right butt cheek, as the slave slapped him.

“He’s a natural bottom, guys. Enjoy him now, ‘cause after this, his ass is mine.”

Cory smiled inwardly. Having another cock pushed inside him, after being made slick by Antoine’s cum, was easier. He could focus on the pleasure alone, as he grabbed his cock and started pumping it. At least Dion would deal with a satiated, less of a prick, slave tonight.

He sensed someone moving in front of him, as the slaves continued to hammer him one after another.

He languidly opened his eyes, to see Antoine crouched in front of him and looked at him with reproach in his big beautiful eyes.

“Are you enjoying this?” the slave spat.

“I was trained to serve,” he whispered between moans, as his prostate was brushed over and over again.

“This is not what I’m asking,” Antoine added.

“I told you. I would have rather had you and you alone,” Cory whispered back, as he came and his eyes became unfocused.

“Why?” the slave tried to look oblivious to Cory’s manifestations of pleasure as he was thoroughly fucked.

“Because you are the most good-looking man I’ve ever seen,” Cory lied, as his mind traveled for a brief second to a pair of hypnotic green eyes.

“Really?” Antoine grinned.

Oh, boy, not the smartest tool in the shed, are you? Cory thought, as he slowly nodded and arched his back to receive the next cock owner directly into his well-used ass.

“More beautiful than your Master?”

There were many reasons to understand why vanity was considered a deadly sin by the ancients. Cory slowly opened his eyes to look into Antoine’s deep blues.

“Don’t let anyone know I told you that,” he breathed out, as he wiggled his ass to enhance his pleasure.

Antoine’s smile was brighter than the sun. The slave jumped to his feet.

“Party’s over!” he yelled, and sounds of protest were the immediate reply.

“But we haven’t gotten to fuck him yet,” one slave protested.

“I am the only one that gets to fuck him from now on,” Antoine spoke. “Be thankful I let any of you touch him.”

He brusquely pulled Cory up into his arms.

“If anyone touches what’s mine ...” he let the threat float in the still air of the room.

Disgruntled slaves turned their backs to search for other servants to vent off their steam. For a brief second, Cory’s eyes crossed with Dion’s. He winked at the other, and the redhead’s look of amazement was priceless.

“We don’t have much time left,” Antoine grabbed Cory’s head to kiss him.

The servant averted his lips.

“They had their cocks in my mouth,” he explained, as Antoine’s embrace became impossible tight. “I suppose you don’t want to taste them all,” he added with an innocent look, as he stared into the slave’s eyes.

With a low growl, Antoine embraced him even more.

“Next time I see you, Cory, I want you all to myself.”

In the meantime, the Masters were starting to leave. As Cory headed for the main hallway, to join the others, he suddenly crossed paths with the last man he wanted to see that night.

“Are you all right, Cory?” Lord Lucas gestured to caress his head, but Cory quickly bowed to avert the touch.

“A Master should not be concerned with a servant’s well-being. It’s against the protocol,” he said quickly and hurried to move along.

The man’s firm grip stopped him.

“A Master does what he pleases, servant,” Lord Lucas’s voice became low and dangerous.

Cory suddenly felt his arm go free. He raised his eyes to see his one true Master. He bowed, and Lord Xavier commented.

“Everyone has left. Would you care to stay a while longer, Lucas?” his Master asked.

“No. I should get going, too,” Lord Lucas’s voice sounded annoyed.

“Cory,” his Master caressed his hair, as they both sat on the bed. “How many cocks did you have in your ass tonight?”

There was no real need for confirmation, but Cory was glad to have it. Lord Xavier had known what was going to happen.

“I didn’t know I had to count,” he said innocently, and Lord Xavier laughed.

“You’re such a good servant, Cory, such as good servant. Do you still have any energy left for you to serve your Master, then?”

“Of course, Master. I always do,” he raised his blue eyes to look at Lord Xavier.

Grey eyes searched his face for the slightest sign of rebellion. Not finding one, the man’s beautiful features relaxed.

“You’re good at following orders, Cory. It’s all you need to do. Don’t ever forget who your Master is, and the world will be yours.”

He had a mind of asking what that meant, but as Lord Xavier moved against his body, letting his intentions know, he allowed the world around him to fade away.

Chapter Five

Sampling the merchandise was not a habit for Vachiari. The merchant was used to see attractive males walking around naked, but this time, he felt more tempted than any other time. He touched the chained man, asking his assistants to turn him around, while he was feeling up the muscled body, the chiseled chest, and the round mounds, where his hands remained a bit more than he had first intended. He eventually pushed them apart, curious to see if the specimen had been used. The tight puckered hole showed no signs of assault, and Vachiari could count on his experience to safely say that the captured male still had a virgin ass.

Not for long, the middle-aged man mused and stopped his ministrations. The slave was now writhing against his restraints, and the muffled sounds that could be heard, despite the mouth gag, were a clear indication that the young man was not happy with being handled.

Vachiari took a step back and asked his assistants to turn the slave around again so he could take a good look at his front, too. The longish, raven strands, the deep, charcoal-like eyes, and his dark skin made him exotic. Slaves born and raised to please had their benefits, but a beautiful specimen like this one could only be found outside of Drena, in the remote camps located far inside the mainland. And that was where he had been captured while attacking a caravan.

The merchant had little respect for the people living far away from the coastal cities. They were just uncivilized apes, but, from time to time, such beauties would emerge, and he knew how to recognize value when he saw it. Staring at the chained male some more, he thought about how the Master purchasing the young slave would have a tough time teaching this one not to bite. Still, his exquisite beauty naturally made any obstacle pale in comparison.

It was not just the young man's beauty that was making him stand out. There was something about him; he exuded sex like he was made for it. His rebellious attitude was making things even more exciting. Vachiari shook his head. No matter how much he felt the need to use the beautiful body, he was a man of numbers. Profit, substantial profit, could be made with this one, especially if left untouched.

He signaled the men to take the slave away. He had some phone calls to make.

It was unusual for Xavier to receive such a call.

“Vachiari, as much as I value your business,” he said in a tone that suggested the exact opposite, “I do not see why I should move just to see this captured slave you are talking about.”

He listened, utterly bored, to the merchant’s well-crafted praise. “All right,” he eventually said with an exasperated sigh. “I suppose I could resell him for a profit if he is as beautiful as you say. Please do arrange the sighting at my home. I have no intention to mingle with commoners at the slave market. A cage? Is he dangerous? Are you trying to assassinate me?”

He smiled thinly while taking his time to hear the man’s long string of apologies. Only a seasoned money handler like Vachiari could put together so many words to say a simple thing.

He put the phone down and called for Cory. A new task was to be added to the servant’s chores.

Cory looked fearfully at the heavy irons bars keeping the young male caged inside, and the ones outside out of harm’s way. Lord Xavier was strolling around the cage, seemingly trying to see the slave from all angles. The servant knew he was not supposed to stare, but he felt drawn in, compelled to look at the dangerous man inside.

To say the slave was beautiful would have been an understatement. He was dark, much darker than anyone Cory knew, although Lucas’s black hair touched his thoughts briefly. His skin was almost shining and the way he moved reminded the servant of the nature documentaries he sometimes watched featuring wild beasts observed in their natural habitat. Only the one inside the cage was not a beast, but human and this was far from the places he used to roam.

The slave stood stubbornly with his back to the audience, and both Cory’s and his master’s eyes traveled along the gracious back, on the round buttocks and lean, long legs. This was no ordinary slave. His muscles had not been trained by

individual devices requiring mindless repetitions until the desired form was achieved. He was a creature of the wild, shaped by hardship. He looked a bit underfed, too, Cory thought. He wanted to ask his Master if they could give the slave something to eat. When he had been a child, he had known hunger. He could not stand the sight of someone going through that.

Lord Xavier hummed in appreciation. He took a long cane and pushed it through the bars to touch the slave. His sudden move finally made the other turn, and Cory's mouth formed a perfect silent 'O'. The long dark hair moved against the shoulders as if it was made of silk. For someone born and raised in the wild, that seemed impossible. He doubted the slave took the time to brush or wash his hair. Or maybe he had just been pampered to be presented to his new master.

The man's face was carved in dark marble. The hard planes of his face made him harsh and masculine, but the delicate nose and almond-shaped eyes could put him against the most beautiful odalisque in the empire. His mouth was sensual, with full lips, and Cory could not stop thinking about how they would feel if the slave was to be kissed.

The cane hissed through the air, hitting the slave's legs.

"Kneel," Xavier boomed, making Cory jump.

His Master had never hit him. Threatened, yes, asserted dominance, yes. But he was not violent like this. He stared in stupefaction at his Master's eyes, that were now shining with something new and frightful, as he continued to hit the slave, as much as the bars and the distance allowed, trying to make the male inside yield. But the slave stood still, only a small flinch in the muscles of his face a sign that he was registering every hit.

Without thinking, he grabbed his Master's arm, eyes full of fear as Lord Xavier turned to look at him, seemingly too surprised with Cory's actions to do something right away.

"Please, Master, I don't think he understands," he cooed, caressing Lord Xavier's tense arm in apology.

“Of course, he doesn’t know the language. But this,” the lord of the house gestured towards the cane, “he can understand. He is nothing but an animal, and has to be trained.”

Lord Xavier made a gesture to shake Cory off his arm, but the servant didn’t back down.

“He may be uncivilized, but he doesn’t look stupid. I think there are other ways.”

“Then why don’t you show him, Cory?” his Master whispered menacingly.

Cory turned towards the cage and looked the slave in the eyes, begging without words. He made a gesture pointing at Lord Xavier; then he slowly knelt in front of his Master. After that, he gestured at the slave. The charcoal eyes watched him with interest. A small smile lit the handsome face. He closed his fist and slammed it into his chest in a proud gesture.

Cory felt his insides torn. The slave understood everything. But what he meant, without words, was that he was a free man.

Lord Xavier smiled thinly.

“See where your good intentions lead, Cory? The animal thinks he has a say, although he is locked up in a cage. Rest assured. I will make him yield.”

Cory kept his head down.

“Why, Master?”

“Why what?” the Ruler asked annoyed.

“Why take a slave now? He is not good for this, either. Why not release him?”

The servant had no idea how he dared to challenge his Master like that. But seeing that beautiful male, a free man, locked in a cage, was making scream on the inside.

“You are quite chatty all of a sudden, Cory. What has gotten into you today?”

“He may be dangerous. He may hurt you,” Cory continued. “Why keep someone so dangerous in your home?”

“I doubt he could hurt me, Cory. As you can see, he is caged. He cannot do anything. He doesn’t have a weapon, and he is completely naked. And he could be no match for me.”

You cannot know that, Cory thought, keeping his head down.

“Now you just ruined the mood,” Lord Xavier threw the cane on the sofa, apparently dissatisfied. “Let’s watch the specimen and observe him now since you are so sure you know everything about him.”

Xavier sent Cory to the kitchen to bring some food and sat on the sofa.

In his cage, the slave was watching him almost without blinking. Xavier could tell he was tense and ready to pounce. He chuckled and watched him, too. His eyes rested on the man’s organ. Quite endowed, he thought, and suddenly felt the need to adjust his position.

The beast inside the cage was making him hard with just his mere presence. Xavier wondered how that supple skin would feel under his fingers. For once, Vachiari hadn’t lied. This was a beautiful male, barely over 20, untouched, as the merchant vouched, although he had his doubts. He wanted to see for himself.

He stood up and touched the iron bars slowly. There was enough room for the slave to draw away from his Master’s touch, but he didn’t move when Xavier extended his right arm through the bars.

The ruler caressed the taut abdomen slowly, going lower. The slave’s breath became more labored when Xavier grabbed his cock and pushed the skin back to play with the sensitive head. The beast didn’t mind being touched.

Cory felt his jaw go slack as he took in the scene in front of his eyes. His Master, one of the most influential men in Drena, was slowly stimulating the slave who stood still, his eyes at half-mast, an expression of unhidden bliss on his face.

Lord Xavier turned towards Cory.

“See, Cory, maybe I know other methods, too.”

The servant placed the tray filled with goodies on the small coffee table and stood there, not knowing what to do.

“As much as this creature excites me, I would not get my mouth dirty. So, Cory, come here,” his Master gestured for him to approach. “On your knees,” he whispered, gently this time, and Cory obeyed. “What do you say, Cory? Would you like a taste of this?”

Cory nodded slowly, fascinated with the dark cock rubbed steadily by Lord Xavier’s elegant fingers. His Master pulled the slave closer to the bars, to allow Cory easier access.

The servant didn’t need any more encouragement. His smaller hand closed over his master’s, taking over. As Xavier let go, he licked the engorged head slowly, reveling in the slave’s needy whimper.

“I think he likes it, Cory,” his Master said satisfied. “Take care of me, as well.”

He stopped to take his Master’s cock out and sucked on it greedily, too. The slave seemed to mind being neglected like that, as his hand pulled a bit clumsily at Cory’s hair, to draw his attention.

Cory obliged right away, and, unconsciously, made the two move closer to one another. Soon, he was switching from his Master’s long, thinner member to the dark, meaty one, taking one, then the other, deep in his throat, and using his hands to increase stimulation.

He saw Xavier sneaking a hand inside the cage again to grab the slave’s buttocks. It seemed that the sudden move triggered something in the young male, as Cory felt right away the tangy taste of ejaculate on his tongue. He swallowed quickly and turned to enjoy his Master’s seed, too.

But Lord Xavier took his cock from his servant’s hand and whispered.

“I think I want to mark my slave a little, Cory. Come on up and help me keep him steady.”

He stood up and grabbed the slave's naked ass, mirroring his Master's gesture from earlier. The slave's skin was supple and silky everywhere. Xavier grabbed the young man's neck to draw him into a kiss, and started to come, through the bars, over the man's taut abdomen.

The slave fought a bit against the kiss, but he slowly relaxed, as Lord Xavier slowly spread his seed over the dark skin with his fingers.

"Cory," Lord Xavier spoke, "you are allowed to touch him only when I say so. Do not do anything other than what is necessary to keep him fed and well taken care of. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master," he nodded, and Lord Xavier rewarded him with a short kiss.

The slave blinked, a bit confused. Maybe he could not understand the relationship between the two. Or perhaps he could not understand his role just yet.

It felt strange to serve Lord Lucas when his Master was not at home. He could not take any threats lightly. But he could not quench the longing he felt each time he saw Lord Xavier's beautiful friend.

"Cory, why are you so cold towards me?" Lord Lucas asked.

The man loved asking direct questions.

"Please cut the crap about protocol," the Ruler added.

Cory's eyes grew wide. Lord Lucas did not care about etiquette indeed. He had yet to hear such words from his Master's mouth.

"I ..." he stuttered. "My Master ..."

Lord Lucas shook his head.

"I suppose there is no more need for words, then. But, he is not here. So do not fear. Come a bit closer. It has been a while since I looked at your lovely face."

Getting closer was indeed not an option. He felt his knees turning to butter when Lord Lucas was around, and even from afar he could not stop daydreaming about him.

“Please, forgive me, if I cannot follow through with your request, Master,” he bowed, to hide his red cheeks.

“You should use the honorific sparingly with me, Cory. Unless you want me to consider myself your true Master and whisk you away from here.”

Cory looked up a bit, surprised, once more, with Lord Lucas’s direct manner of speaking his mind.

“What do you fear?”

“Myself,” Cory answered, and this time, he looked straight at the other.

“Oh,” the man eased back on the sofa. “Now that is an interesting problem... Why should you fear yourself?”

“Why do you want me, Lord Lucas?” Cory blurted out. “I am nothing but a servant, worse than a slave. I am everyone’s toy and ...”

“Hush,” a strong hand caressed his head. “I know. But would you not believe me, at least one tiny bit, when I tell you that I would be hard-pressed to name one person who caught my eye in a very long time?”

“I am nothing special,” he continued, keeping his head down.

“Even the fact that you say that makes you unique. In a world full of arrogant pricks, from Masters to the most insignificant slaves, and even some servants, you see yourself like this. Xavier has always brought some new toys home, and despite their beauty, I have never found someone to my liking. It’s not the case with you. Join me on the sofa?”

“I don’t think I should,” Cory whispered.

“Then stay where it’s comfortable for you. I want to talk a little with you.”

Cory took a large pillow and placed it on the floor, sitting gracefully on it, trying hard to ignore the green eyes following his every move. Lord Lucas continued.

“I am a man of numbers, of cold hard facts. Emotions have always bewildered me, so I’ve preferred to push them away. But, ever since I met you, and Xavier allowed me to taste you, I cannot seem to be myself. Even when I am running an experiment, and my head should be focused, your face appears before my eyes like you are there, with me. You do realize you could compromise some very delicate data?” Lord Lucas laughed softly.

Cory felt his mind in turmoil. No one had ever spoken to him like that. Not even his lover from before being sent to the Institution. He sat up brusquely.

“I am not worthy of your interest, Lord Lucas,” he said, his voice shaking. “I am nothing but a whore.”

“Because you are forced to copulate with anyone your Master wishes?” Lord Lucas rose and grabbed Cory’s arm, shaking him gently, as if he was trying to make him see reason.

“No, because I enjoy it,” the servant blurted out, and Lord Lucas let him go, in surprise. “Please forgive this lowly servant,” he hurriedly added and almost ran out of the room, leaving the other to stare at him, in disbelief.

“You are indeed making my young servant lose his head,” Lord Xavier commented, while entering the room, as he had just seen Cory pushing angrily against the kitchen doors without noticing his Master coming home.

“No, he is making me lose mine,” Lucas murmured. “Please, Xavier, name your price. I cannot take him out of my mind.”

“Good,” Xavier said sharply.

“How can you be this cruel with your best friend?” Lucas complained.

“It serves to taste your own medicine, doesn’t it, Lucas?” Xavier sat next to his friend and placed a small kiss on his cheek. “Plus, why would you want a hole as well used as his? You know I hold nothing back. And I let anyone who wants him have him.”

“Do you think debasing him will make me think less of him?”

“He is just a nymphomaniac. Don’t you think it would hurt your research, having to deal with his constant need for sex?”

“It seems to me you forget something, Xavier. I am qualified to appreciate Cory’s appetite as healthy.”

“You were the one using the term first. About his nymphomaniac tendencies, remember?”

“Well, I did not know him then. It was a simple statement based on information provided by you.”

“Forget about him, Lucas. He enjoys enough attention from slaves. Plus, he has his place in my bed. Don’t just go for a prostitute like him.”

“I believe you are overestimating how many are fucking him. Or do you suppose he is gangbanged at every party you attend?”

“Why not? He is beautiful enough to make those overly sexualized creatures lose their heads.”

Lucas laughed.

“You are wrong, Xavier, and that proves how little you care. Rumor has it that Lord Arnaud’s prized slave, Antoine, is interested in him. He put the word out that no one should touch Cory, or else, he would strangle them to death. See? You throw him to the wolves, and he becomes the alpha’s favorite ...”

Xavier looked surprised.

“I should talk to Arnaud.”

“And tell him what? That he should command Antoine to stay away from Cory? And let the others fuck him? You know how much Arnaud is infatuated with that bawdy slave. People even say that it’s like he is running the household, that much power he has over his Master.”

Xavier was displeased.

“Cory stands out. It cannot be helped, even if he tries to keep his head down. Stop torturing him. Stop abusing him. Do you want me? Is that it? Then you can have me. But give him to me,” Lucas pressed.

Xavier stared at Lucas in disbelief.

“You are serious,” he said, frowning. “You are willing to become my lover so that you can have that in your bed?”

“Not your lover,” Lucas spat. “I would let you top me if you let me have him.”

“Once?”

“Preferably yes,” Lucas grimaced, in apparent displeasure over the subject.

Xavier laughed.

“It is obvious why you didn’t make it in politics, Lucas. Your negotiating skills are appalling. No deal,” he added shortly.

“What?” Lucas looked surprised. “I should have known it’s just a game for you. You have never really wanted me, then?”

“Oh, no, I have always wanted you. I still do. But your terms are unacceptable. I can offer something else, though. A more beneficial arrangement ... for me, at least. If your desire for Cory is so strong, then you should pay the right price. One night with me equals one night of having him in your bed. And don’t expect leniency. I will be ruthless.”

“As many times I want?” Lucas seemed to ponder, a dark look on his face.

“As many times as your body can handle,” Xavier added with a small mischievous smile.

Cory took the food tray to take it to the slave. The exotic beauty locked in the cage had seemed pretty tame over the few days he had been there, making his job easy.

He placed the tray on the table and called softly for the male.

“Hey, I brought you some tasty treats.”

The man moved closer, and Cory brought a plate, keeping it up to allow the other to help himself at the neatly arranged appetizers.

“You like these, don’t you?” the servant said affectionately. He knew the slave could not understand a thing, but he liked talking to him nonetheless.

The slave was looking at him, as he ate like he was expecting Cory to take the plate away at any time.

“Don’t worry, there is plenty,” Cory tried to alleviate the slave’s fears.

He turned a bit to look what he should bring next. Strong arms suddenly grabbed him, and the plate fell from his hands. He tried to scream, but his mouth was covered with one hand, while the other arm was plastering his back against the iron bars. He was held in such a fierce grip that he could not move at all, even his feet being off the ground. The man seemed much stronger than he looked.

A silky whisper caressed his ear.

“Now tell me, fuck toy, how the hell I open this cage? I’ll let your mouth free, but if you scream, I’ll break your neck in an instant.”

Chapter Six

Cory stood still, to let his assailant know he had no intention to fight. Slowly, the hand on his mouth moved away.

“I cannot open the cage,” he whispered, trying to rein in his trembling. “My Master has the key. And even if you could get away, how far do you think you can get? Without any clothes, sticking out like that? You won’t make it too far. Master is home, by the way.”

The slave seemed to ponder, his arms going a bit slack.

“I guess there’s more to you than just your looks. So, now should I just let you go and alert your Master?”

Soft lips caressed Cory’s ears. He’d seen much better and more sophisticated attempts at manipulating him. His heart was beating wildly, but for once, he wanted to do what his own heart dictated.

“No, I won’t.”

“Really?” the lips continued touching his ear. “I can make it worth your while.”

“I am ... not interested in that. But I hate seeing a free man as you locked in a cage. Let me down, and we could talk.”

The slave released him and then watched Cory as the servant was picking up the spilled food.

“Who are you?” Cory asked.

“My name?”

“That would be a start.”

“I’m called Ayn.”

“There are few free men in Drena. Are you from another city?”

“No, I am ... from far away.”

“How did you become a slave?”

“They caught me. I’ve been robbing their transports for years, so I guess it’s only natural to pay what’s due,” Ayn shook his head while laughing, mostly to himself.

“What are you going to do?”

“Well, since you’re not going to rat me out, I think I’ll stick around here for a while.”

“If you earn our Master’s trust, he will let you out of the cage.”

“You’re sure? He seems to be a class A pervert to me. I think he likes it that I’m trapped like this. It makes him feel almighty and shit. The problem is that staying locked up like this makes me a bit crazy.”

“I’ll see what I can do. In the meantime, just let our Master do what he wants. I will try to convince him that it’s not good for your health to keep you like this.”

“Why are you helping me?”

“Don’t you see?” Cory smiled. “I am nothing but a servant. But by helping you, I can do something different from what I usually do. Something that may be just a bit more meaningful than everything else I do as a servant.”

“Oh, ok. I guess,” the man shrugged.

The door opened, and both fell silent. With a frown, Lord Xavier noticed the spilled food.

“What happened?”

“I stumbled and trashed the tray. I am so sorry, Master,” Cory bowed. “I was just cleaning up.”

“All right. Don’t fret over such a thing. How’s our guest of honor doing?” Lord Xavier got closer to the cage and touched the bars, as he looked at the beautiful slave locked inside, who was watching him with apprehension.

“I think he could use some time outside the cage,” Cory said simply. “He needs a thorough cleaning, and also to move around for a bit. He is going to lose muscle mass if kept like this for too long.”

Cory was perfectly calm as he said all that. Lord Xavier seemed to think it over for a while, but then, for a moment that stretched to eternity, in Cory's mind, he spoke.

“All right. Shackle him. Then let's take a bath together.”

Cory and Ayn exchanged a short, meaningful look.

With his hands bound together in the front, the slave could not do much. Cory helped him get inside the bathtub, naked himself. Lord Xavier was watching them with burning eyes.

“What's your educated guess, Cory, now that you have seen plenty of slaves used for pleasure: has this one been used before?”

“I don't think so, Master. He is still uncomfortable with being touched, especially in the intimate areas of his body.”

“Good,” Lord Xavier smiled and dropped the dark silk robe he was wearing to descend in the in-ground bathtub.

Cory made Ayn sit, and started pouring water over his beautiful black hair. The young man laughed as water got into his eyes. He shook his head, splashing water everywhere. Lord Xavier laid back, relaxed, and watched his servant going about his business.

Above the water, the beautiful curve of Cory's ass made Xavier's organ stir. His arrangement with Lucas had yet to be detailed, and he was not a man of postponed pleasures. In front of him, two gorgeous young bodies, one golden, one dark, were inviting him to take over and prove himself as Master.

Cory was manipulating the slave, making sure to wash him everywhere. The slave had to get up, to allow Cory to clean his lower part of the body. When hands filled with soap suds rubbed against his buttocks, he jolted. Xavier smiled, amused. As the servant knelt in the water to wash the dark youth's front, he let out a small sound.

Cory stopped to look at his Master.

“Is there anything wrong, Master?” he asked dutifully.

“No, not at all. Just finish your job.”

“All done,” Cory got up, waiting for orders.

“Kiss him,” Xavier ordered curtly.

Almond shaped eyes flinched for a split of a second. The Master of the house looked at the young slave, a bit pensive.

Cory grabbed the other’s neck gently and clamped their mouths together. With his hands bound, the slave could not do much, but whimper woefully, as his lips were slowly kissed, with infinite tenderness.

Xavier got up and grabbed both young men’s asses with his strong hands. His erection was standing up proudly, and he pushed it between the slender bodies, enjoying the warmth and the friction. Being taller than both, his weapon of choice was practically getting a full-length massage from the two young men’s taut belly muscles.

Never a man to wait being served, he moved his right hand from Cory’s buttocks to the servant’s golden hair. He used his leverage to have the servant move his head, and let his Master ravage his mouth.

Xavier’s left hand grabbed a fistful of dark hair, mirroring its sibling’s wanderings. The slave, unlike Cory, seemed caught unawares, as the Master abandoned the servant’s pliant lips, to attack less responsive ones.

Cory was slowly caressing Ayn’s back, to assure him. He knew Lord Xavier could be a considerate lover if he wanted, but Cory could feel how tense the slave was. He watched as the Master was kissing Ayn with brute force. There was a war of dominance there Lord Xavier hadn’t had to fight when taking Cory. But a slave made from a free man was a different matter.

“Show him,” Lord Xavier demanded, without even taking his eyes off his prize, as he interrupted the kiss.

The slave was breathing heavily, his eyes at half-mast.

“What, Master?” Cory asked, licking his lips unconsciously.

“How to suck my cock properly. I think there is no better teacher than you.”

Ayn was pushed to his knees, while Cory knelt on his own accord. He touched his Master’s engorged organ and pushed the skin downwards to give the head an experimental lick. He gently guided the majestic cock towards Ayn. The slave was staring at him, his eyes wide. He blinked and pursed his lips; then he grabbed the young man’s neck to get him closer. He didn’t like it, either, to force the other like that, but it meant more time outside the cage and making his Master more lenient towards the slave’s condition.

Reluctantly, the slave mimicked Cory’s move and licked the head a little. He withdrew with a small grimace, but Cory caught him and kissed him. He guided their entwined mouths towards their Master’s cock. Ayn seemed more accepting of taking Lord Xavier’s cock into his mouth, as Cory coaxed him.

Now Xavier could feel it, the glorious feeling of having two young mouths, one skillful, with perfect training, one inexperienced, reluctant, but more and more willing. Tongues and lips were now playing with his shaft, but his need was growing stronger, and he wanted nothing more but to stick his hardness in something hot and wet, applying just the right amount of pressure.

“Let him do it,” he ordered shortly, and Cory hesitantly withdrew.

Xavier grabbed the dark head and pushed through silky lips, only to be met with resistance. The young man writhed and tried to struggle against the invasion, but his bound hands didn’t allow him too much freedom to move and fight the assault on his mouth.

The Master could not care less now what the slave was feeling or thinking. Cory watched, biting his lips, as Ayn tried to fight back, to no avail. Soon enough, his nape was against the edge of the bathtub, and his mouth was forced to open, his throat made to accommodate the giant cock.

Without thinking much, he rose and embraced his Master from behind. His hands traveled to the base of the man's cock to pull back.

"What are you ...?" Lord Xavier whispered angrily, and Cory sank his teeth into his Master's shoulder, licking the bite and sucking at it right away.

"Take me, Master, please," he begged in a sultry voice. "I cannot ... anymore ..."

"Cory, you slut," his Master scolded him, but he let go of his prey, who immediately started to gasp for air and cough.

Lord Xavier's eyes were burning darkly. Cory felt fear nestling in the pit of his stomach. The servant was turned roughly, pushed with his buttocks up, his chest resting on the edge. Cory took a deep breath. He knew that was going to hurt and voiced his pain, as Lord Xavier impaled him without caring for any lubrication.

"Why are you crying, Cory?" his Master asked, his voice thick with desire. "You wanted it, didn't you?"

"Yes, Master, don't stop," Cory breathed out, wiggling his ass and adjusting, as fast as he could, to the uninvited invasion.

"I have no intention to," Lord Xavier slammed against the lithe body, again and again, like possessed.

There were far too many temptations around him, Xavier had a distant afterthought, as he slumped on Cory's body, as the fading ebbs of his orgasm were leaving his body. He would have usually let Cory at least adjust a little, but this time, his body impaling the other's felt so right and so fulfilling that he couldn't stop. Wouldn't, he thought and kissed a damp smooth cheek in apology.

"Don't tempt me like this ever again, Cory. Don't bite me if you don't want to see my beast," he whispered in the servant's ear.

Next to them, the slave was looking at Xavier with pure hatred in his dark eyes. He was lucky Xavier was too busy kissing his servant.

“There,” Antoine exhaled sharply as Dion was massaging his back.

It felt amazing to have the familiar hands working his body after a workout.

“When is the next party on?” he asked, enjoying his neck being skillfully massaged. Dion’s hands were wonderful.

“I believe there is still a week until then. The Masters seem to be busy with something important, so they don’t have time to play.”

“What a bummer,” Antoine stretched and yawned. “I haven’t seen Cory in a while. What do you know of him?”

“His Master took a slave, so Cory has his hands full now,” Dion said while using a towel to get rid of the massage oil on his hands.

“Xavier took a slave?!” Antoine’s good mood dissipated in an instant, his sudden move making Dion cringe. “Is he fucking my Cory?”

“Highly unlikely,” Dion said with a small sigh. There was going to be a cold day in hell when a slave more spoiled than Antoine was going to be born. “From what I’ve heard, there is no ordinary slave Lord Xavier ordered to be delivered to his penthouse.”

“What does Cory say?” Antoine straightened up, his eyes shining at the prospect of hearing some juicy gossip.

“The slave is kept in a cage ...”

“Why? Is he a wild animal?”

“He was captured from the wild, it seems. He doesn’t speak the language, but he is gorgeous.”

Antoine’s blue eyes darkened with jealousy.

“Did Cory say he was beautiful? Did he use this exact word to describe him?” he grabbed Dion’s arm.

It was funny to pull Antoine’s chain once in a while, but Dion knew he was going to be the one paying for the slave’s frustration.

“I think he said ‘exotic’.”

“Does Cory like him?”

If he hadn’t known what a bastard Antoine could be, Dion would have almost pitied him. The poor guy was jealous.

“He means more work for Cory. I don’t think so,” Dion said pensively. “Plus, his Master wants to train the slave himself, and he is very adamant about no one touching his slave without permission. What? Do you think Cory’s that easy to fall for another slave so quickly?” he teased, smiling.

Rough hands were suddenly in his red mane, as Antoine got dangerously close.

“Do you mean he fell for me?” he whispered against Dion’s lips, making the servant tremble slightly.

“You should know better,” Dion whispered back, trying hard to quench the familiar fear in his gut. Antoine could be cruel when angered.

“I know, of course I know,” Antoine said haughtily. “I’m so horny right now. I want Cory so badly,” he climbed on top of Dion, pushing the servant back on the bed and forcing his legs open wide.

“Let me suck you off,” Dion offered, hating how Antoine was ready to claim him, again. He did not enjoy sex, and he doubted he ever could. There was nothing but dominance on Antoine’s part and humiliation on his, every time it happened.

“No,” Antoine refused like a petulant child. “Your ass, or nothing. And get ready fast, or I will tell master you burned the food today.”

“I didn’t ...” Dion tried to protest feebly.

“You sure?” Antoine said menacingly.

Dion hurried to push down his pants. He was walking a thin line with his Master lately, Antoine being the main cause. He was not ready to be sent down to the factories to work. Cory said it was not so bad, but he had been born inside the city gates, and he knew no other life.

As Antoine pushed inside, uncaring, he bit his lips hard, fighting the tears streaming down his cheeks. At least, this time, Antoine seemed to be in a hurry to finish, without playing cruel games. He just slammed into Dion's lithe body, over and over again, until his breathing became ragged and he voiced his climax with a howl.

He rose, feeling dirty as usual.

"Where do you think you're going?" Antoine grabbed him and forced him back on the bed.

"I need to wash," he said curtly. "Master has to be home soon."

"No, you won't wash. Keep my jizz inside. Know it's there," Antoine said, his beautiful face twisted by a nasty smile. "Know who owns you, bitch."

Dion's lips trembled. He'd been too fast to think Antoine would finish with him so quickly.

"Please, Antoine," he begged, his eyes shiny with tears. "Master gets mad if I do not look perfect. He'll know you and me..."

"So? Let him know. That keeps him on his toes. This is the difference between you and me, Dion. I don't let anyone make a bitch out of me."

Ayn was resting his head against the cold bars of his cage, with a bleak look on his face. He jolted when Cory walked in.

"He's going to do this until he's satisfied, isn't he?" he murmured, and Cory nodded.

"He wants to give you a name," the servant spoke, looking sideways.

"Like hell he does," Ayn spat.

"A name is nothing but a word," Cory tried to appease the slave.

"I refuse," the slave uttered through clenched teeth.

Cory sighed.

“Look, I know it’s hard.”

“No, you don’t. He fucked you like an animal in front of me, and you got up from there as nothing happened.”

Cory cringed.

“It’s not like I ...”

“No, it’s admirable, I think. You have a strength inside you, Cory, which I don’t. I won’t let him have his way with me. He’ll have to kill me to do that.”

“Shut up,” Cory’s voice became sharp. “You know nothing. Do you think he’ll care if you die? He may get frustrated over it, but otherwise, you’ll be nothing but a stupid slave who’s never really cared about freeing himself. I will teach you how to enjoy it. Don’t waste your life over a fuck!”

Ayn stared at Cory in disbelief. Cory seemed surprised with his own harsh words, too. Breathing a bit faster, he continued.

“We’ll pretend I’m teaching you the language. I’ll let him know your name. I will tell him anything needed so that he goes easy on you, but you will have to do your part. Once you are out of the cage for good, we can start planning your escape. It won’t be easy, and there will be danger ahead. But I won’t let you ...”

For some reason, his mouth became dry. Ayn looked at him in awe.

“You are something, Cory,” he said with something akin to affection in his voice. “I’ve never let anyone, you know ... I mean, I have friends, but I’ve never depended on someone else like this. But with you, I feel like I can trust you with my life.”

Cory was waiting for his Master to come home, sitting quietly in the large living room. He had to play his part convincingly. Lord Xavier was not a stupid man.

When his Master entered the house, he hurried to welcome him.

“Great news, Master,” he said excitedly. “I learned your slave’s name!”

“Really?” Lord Xavier stopped from taking out his gloves to hand them to his servant.

“I am trying to teach him our language so that you can communicate with him.”

“That’s very thoughtful, Cory,” Lord Xavier caressed the servant’s head. “So what’s his name?”

“He’s called Ayn,” Cory looked up, his face all a smile.

“Ayn ...” the Master let the name roll on his tongue. “What did you teach him so far?”

“I taught him the word ‘Master’,” Cory added and was rewarded with a smile.

“Very good, Cory, very good. You are, indeed, the best servant any Master could wish for. Please prepare the master bedroom. I want something erotic, but not romantic. Behind the drapes on the left, you will find a hidden closet. Take what you find there, and use your imagination to prepare the room. I am counting on you.”

“But, Master, Ayn needs more preparation to ...” Cory started, alarmed.

“Worried about your friend?” Lord Xavier smiled, and Cory made himself small. Luckily, there was no afterthought in that casually spoken word. “It’s not for Ayn,” he said mysteriously.

Cory felt his heart beating fast.

“It’s not for you, either,” Lord Xavier added. “I can get you to do anything I want with a snap of my fingers. No, it is for someone who must be taught a lesson. Someone I have to fight with to make him submit.”

The servant felt a cold chill on his back. He did not dare to guess who Lord Xavier was talking about.

Chapter Seven

Cory could not stop the feeling of dread engulfing him, as he was taking out the items from the hidden safe in the wall, as indicated by his Master. He had seen some of them before; others, he could only guess what they were for. His knowledge on inflicting pain while striving to chase fleeting pleasure was marginal, at best. Lord Xavier hadn't seemed bent on playing rough, except for his usual domineering and arrogant attitude. His position in the world made the man feel like he was entitled to everything and everyone happening in his path.

He started by draping the room in deep vibrant red. New curtains had been delivered, and he knew what they were for. He threw the black silk cover on the bed, making sure to tuck it in, and adjusted a few creases. What was Lord Xavier planning with his mysterious visitor?

Lifting the strange iron stand from its box, he mused where to place it. Eventually, he opted for a side wall. He checked the cuffs and trembled while imagining a muscular, virile body bound to the contraption, taut with apprehension while the man in charge could approach it and test all its vulnerabilities. Take a man his ability to move, and he would be nothing but a toy. Fallen in the wrong hands, even a sturdy toy could break. Cory's fingers fluttered for a second over the cold metal.

He took the silk blindfold in his hand, feeling the smooth fabric. After a short moment, he decided to let it hang on the iron stand. Most probably Lord Xavier intended to take the man not only the power to move his limbs, but also his ability to see what was happening to him.

He examined a collection of objects that could be mistaken for jewelry if they hadn't been so heavy. The crop whip didn't look too menacing, but a short, tentative slap over his open palm convinced Cory it would hurt to suffer a hit with it. He opted out the flail whip, though.

After arranging everything on the bed, he withdrew quietly. He hoped Lord Xavier would be pleased. His Master had lately become the victim of mood changes, and he did not want to get on his bad side.

Lord Lucas's bright green eyes looked serene as Cory took his coat and invited him in. He might not suspect what Lord Xavier plans, the servant thought, and he stole a furtive glance at the guest.

"Lord Lucas," he whispered. "Are you ... are you planning to spend the night?"

Under normal circumstances, the question would have seemed out of line. But Lord Lucas looked straight at Cory as he spoke.

"Yes, Cory, and I hope you will be able to join us," he smiled. "Of course, if your Master allows it."

"But," Cory's face turned into a worried frown. "My Master ..."

He had no idea what he could say. It was not his place to say anything. A large warm hand came to rest atop his head. His eyes were a bit moist, and he blinked to look at the man he was secretly lusting for. In a world full of beautiful males, when he lay in his bed at night, his thoughts still wandered to the warm green eyes, the harsh, yet handsome features of Lord Lucas's face, and the god-like body he had seen only once before in all its naked glory. There was no measure for the attraction and adoration he felt towards the man, and it made him wonder why in the whole world, he was singling this one out. And, why, oh why, the man was singling him out in return. It felt unfair. But, seeing how the ways of the world went, what didn't?

Maybe it was all happening because Lord Lucas was showing a genuine interest in him and that was entirely new for Cory in this harsh world coquettishly draped in silk and glitter. Lord Lucas was not like Lord Xavier, who cared only for dominance; he was not like Antoine, who wanted his ego boosted by sleeping with a servant belonging to the most potent Ruler in Drena. He was not like the rest, who seemed to have their heads empty or better said, filled with ambitions and perverted desires. In a world where he had so few friends, Ayn and Dion being the only ones not damaged and twisted to their core, Lord Lucas seemed different, way above anyone else.

But it was so wrong to want him. Cory knew it, and he knew it well. He could feel it in the marrow of his bones, in the last thread of self-preservation and common sense telling him to stop thinking about the man. But Lord Lucas wanted him, too,

and that made his dreams even more painful. Between them stood his Master, never satisfied, always wanting and demanding more. Cory envied Lord Xavier. He had Lord Lucas's friendship, and he didn't care for it. The servant could not understand the rich and powerful. Lord Xavier was nothing but a spoiled brat, forever unhappy with everything that was handed to him on a golden platter.

"Don't worry, Cory. I've known Xavier for a long time. There is nothing he can do or say to make me feel or think otherwise. Tonight won't change a thing. But it may help me get the one I have desired for so long."

Cory's eyes grew wide. Lord Lucas's hand descended on his cheek, caressing it with tenderness.

"Xavier is a man of honor. For tonight, for everything he wants to do to me, you will be mine for an entire night as a fair exchange."

There were no words to describe Cory's surprise.

"Lord Lucas, please," he grabbed at the man's arm, confused and scared at the same time. "I am not worthy of ..."

His words were cut short by the sound of the main door opening and closing. Lord Xavier was home. Lord Lucas stood up, throwing a last meaningful look at Cory, and he exited the room, to join his longtime friend.

"So, what are you thinking?" Xavier sneaked on Lucas from behind, while letting his friend take in the setup before his eyes.

Lucas just shrugged.

"I was expecting this. As always, you fail to surprise me," he said, his voice laced with sarcasm.

"Really?" Xavier's voice gained slithering tones, as he cupped Lucas's cheek with one hand, forcing him to turn and look him in the eyes.

"Yes, really," Lucas confronted him. "Everything must be a conquest with you, Xavier. Otherwise, you grow bored. But you fail to see a simple truth."

“What’s that?” Xavier asked, a bit taken aback by his friend’s determination.

“That force does not equal seduction. That you can approach one slowly, with kind words and soft touches, and get more than what you would by simply demanding submission.”

“Submission ...” Xavier echoed Lucas’s last word. “Funny you say that. Because this is the only thing I care for.”

“So, are we going through with this or not?” Lucas asked, his head held high.

“And I thought you’d never ask,” Xavier mocked and pushed Lucas away from him. “Undress.”

With short, efficient moves, Lucas removed his shirt and pants. Xavier watched him, while his hands caressed the items carefully displayed on the bed.

“You know, I had Cory arrange the room for our rendezvous,” Xavier spoke, watching Lucas closely to gauge his reactions.

The man just sighed.

“I told you. You have to do better than this to surprise me. Of course, you had him do that. He is your servant. Will he join us?” he asked.

Xavier chuckled.

“Trying to play games with me, Lucas? You know you are as swift as a brick when you try your hand at manipulation. Please leave that to me. I hope you will have no problem getting it up for me, even without Cory around.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Lucas said stubbornly, as he stood completely naked, his legs slightly parted, his hands to the side, not in surrender, but ready as if their owner was prepared for an attack.

“Not until it’s due, my friend, not until it’s due. Cory will be here, at the right moment, to face your absolute surrender to me.”

“Absolute?” Lucas’s beautiful lips twisted into a snarl. “Don’t flatter yourself, Xavier. If I haven’t fallen for you until now, it is highly unlikely some rough play will change that.”

“Fall for me? Do you think this is what I am after? I only want your body. And once you reach your limit, and have nothing but blinding desire engulfing whatever shreds of rational thinking you may still have, you will beg. Only then, I will have what I want. I want you to submit, I want to have you in my power, and know that I can deny you what you have denied me for years.”

“Is this about revenge?” Lucas continued to stare at Xavier, unflinching.

“Yes, I think you could call it that. You want Cory, and you will have to pay a heavy price for him. I doubt your body will want the same amount of pain and desire ever again, after tonight. Unless you come to crave it.”

“You underestimate my resolve, Xavier. The mind is superior to flesh. There are places you cannot touch. They will remain closed to you, regardless of what you say or do.”

“But the mind cannot live without the body,” Xavier answered back. “And the conditioning you will feel growing into the very essence of your soul, the more you pin for that young piece of ass happening to be my servant, will eventually dictate, and you will be turned, just like anyone else, into a slave to my desire.”

Lucas snorted.

“I think you should have your head checked, my friend. I will let you have my body. For the rest, I don’t think there is something you can do to convince me otherwise.”

“Do you want to fight me?” Xavier approached Lucas with a small strange device in his hand.

“I think we are well past the ‘wanting’ stage. Isn’t it happening right now?” Lucas mocked.

With precise gestures, Xavier grabbed Lucas’s flaccid cock and started pushing something cold and hard into the small hole. Lucas hissed.

“Never been teased here before?” Xavier asked with a smile, only to be rewarded right away with a proud glance from Lucas. “This is a simple, yet very efficient device. It keeps everything inside, you see. And with the cage on top of it,” he

continued as he slapped the small metal cage in his hand over Lucas's member, fitting it snugly under the man's balls, "I will make sure that you will not be able to act on your desire. I hope you won't strain yourself," he chuckled. "Consider it a friendly warning."

"If you think you will be able to make me aroused so that this would feel uncomfortable, you are wrong," Lucas replied, although the corners of his mouth were starting to set in a thick, harsh line.

"We will see about that," Xavier took Lucas's hand and guided him slowly towards the iron stand. "Please, be my guest."

Lucas looked utterly impassive as he stood straight, letting Xavier use the cuffs to tie up his hands, then his legs, while spreading them wide.

His chest was rising and falling rhythmically. Xavier traced Lucas's collarbone with one finger, descending on pert nipples.

"If you don't feel anything, how come your body is standing up to attention?" Xavier teased.

"If I'm a bit cold, being undressed, it cannot be helped," Lucas continued stubbornly.

Xavier's hands traveled on taut abdomen muscles, feeling every edge and flat plane on his friend's body.

"You are so beautiful, Lucas," he whispered. "I would hate to wreck you. But, after tonight, you will prove what kind of man you are. Don't worry. If you give up, I will take care of you. You will be mine forever."

"Such big words," Lucas commented. "I thought you better than this. Do you realize one thing, Xavier?"

"What's that?" Xavier almost glued himself to the naked body, stretched over the stand.

"That I will not be the only losing something tonight."

"Is that so?"

For a short moment, green eyes clashed with grey ones, heavy with the storm lurking inside.

“I won’t be your friend anymore. At night, when you’re alone, you’ll have to think if satisfying a mere fling was worth destroying the special bond we used to have.”

For a brief moment, it looked as if Xavier was ready to think everything over.

“A mere fling? I’ve wanted you for years. It is your newly acquired obsession with my Cory that is destroying our bond,” he hissed.

“He may be your servant, but he is not yours. I won’t be yours, either, no matter what you do,” Lucas said with his head held high, while Xavier took the silken scarf left on the stand to turn his friend blind for what was to come.

Nothing could be heard from the perfectly insulated master bedroom, and Cory felt his heart growing smaller and smaller. Was Lord Xavier going to hurt Lord Lucas? Why was the handsome man doing that for the likes of Cory?

He chose to roam to Ayn’s room, to ease his restlessness a bit. He found the slave stretched on the bed, with a gamepad in his hands, watching closely whatever action was happening on the small holographic screen summoned in front of his eyes.

The cage had been removed, but Ayn was kept on an iron leash welded to the bed so that he could move around, but not much.

“Hey, Ayn,” he greeted the man and sat on the bed next to him.

“We’re alone, or something, Cory?” the slave immediately straightened up. “What the hell is he up to with this fucking leash?” he pulled annoyed at his collar to no avail.

“It’s better than the cage, right?” Cory examined Ayn’s neck, to see if the collar was not causing any chafing.

“Yes and no,” Ayn said with a frustrated sigh. “At least, in the cage, I did not feel something pulling at my neck all the time.”

Turning to look at the servant, Ayn noticed Cory's frown.

"What's with you? Why the long face?"

"Master is home. He is now in his bedroom."

"Good for him. Let him stay there," Ayn plopped down on the fluffy pillows. "Please don't tell me he wants to be entertained tonight. I could do another day without him trying to stuff that huge thing of his down my throat."

"No, rest assured he won't call on you tonight. He ... I guess he is plenty entertained right now."

"Something's off. What's with you? Who is he entertaining himself with?"

"Lord Lucas," Cory said softly.

"That Lord Lucas," realization dawned on Ayn.

Cory had told Ayn about his crush, feeling good to talk to someone about what he felt.

"So, Xavier and him ... You told me they were down with some kinky threesome. Why aren't you there with them?"

Like on cue, the servant just poured his heart out at Ayn. Was Lord Xavier going to hurt Lord Lucas? What was happening there? What were they doing?

"Wow, Cory, slow down," Ayn raised his hands in surrender. "Frankly, I don't know much about butt sex, to begin with, because no one fucked me. But that looks like some batshit crazy stuff Xavier is doing over there. Still, you tell me Lucas is a tough guy, proud and everything. He'll pull it off; who knows, maybe he'll rip Xavier a new one," Ayn winked at Cory, managing to draw a small smile from him.

"Ayn, is it really ... you've never been with anyone?" Cory asked, blushing a bit.

Ayn seemed comfortable talking about sex, but he was a virgin. At least, an ass virgin.

“I’ve been with girls. Plenty. Back home, they’ve always been fighting over me,” Ayn smiled. “Got a lot of guys interested, too, but I was like, nah, fucking a girl is much too awesome.”

Cory’s eyes were as big as saucers.

“You don’t have many girls around here, do you?” Ayn asked.

“No, the women are in a distant city. I don’t know why. They are brought here, to give birth, and, if it is a boy, the child is kept here, but, if it is a girl, the mother takes the baby with her.”

“Shit,” Ayn commented. “That’s fucked up. Now I think I should have let some guy top me or something. Xavier is going to put that in my ass, eventually, right?”

Cory nodded.

“Damn,” Ayn felt frustrated. “Does it hurt?”

The servant cocked his head to a side.

“I thought so,” Ayn rolled his eyes. “I hope my ass will be so hard that his dick will break when he tries to enter.”

Cory burst into laughter. Just imagining the almighty Lord Xavier, with a pained and surprised expression on his face, looking at his broken dick, was too much. Ayn joined him.

“Shit. I should try to take him more seriously,” the slave said, once they stopped laughing.

“Well, Master told me to get you a bit adjusted. So, we can try some stuff, if you want to,” Cory said, blushing a little.

“What? Are you going to stuff things up my ass?” Ayn said, unconsciously shifting in his place. As usual, he was completely naked, but, apparently, he was getting used to that.

“Be grateful. There was no adjusting for me. He pushed it right up my ass. Well, I liked it, even if it hurt at first,” Cory admitted.

“And why is he so generous with me?” Ayn asked.

“He has this idea that you’re an innocent and he wants to break you in slowly. Of course, he has no idea what a potty mouth you have there,” Cory replied, with a grin.

“So, now I have to get some ass action?” Ayn asked, parting his legs slowly. “Should I ask you to be gentle or something?”

“No need to ask. You know I won’t hurt you,” Cory said sternly while slapping Ayn playfully on his right shoulder.

He searched the nearby drawer for the smallest dildo he could find, and some lube.

“So, are you ready?”

“That thing looks big,” Ayn’s eyes were glued to the dildo.

“This little thing? Come on, Ayn, you’ll have to take Lord Xavier, don’t be a coward.”

He gestured for Ayn to get on his fours, and the slave complied. He giggled as the cold lube made contact with his puckered hole. Cory pushed a finger slowly inside.

“Ouch,” Ayn wiggled his ass.

“Really, now, it’s just my finger,” Cory chided.

“Yeah, that’s one finger too many in my ass,” Ayn replied.

“It will feel better at some point,” Cory tried to assure the slave, but Ayn was just too tight.

The servant caressed the beautiful ass, as he tried to push a little more inside. Between Ayn’s legs, his dark member stood flaccidly. Without overthinking, Cory bent and took the dangling balls in his mouth.

A surprised gasp came from Ayn, as his member started to lengthen.

“Wow, Cory,” he whispered. “You’re good. I only had one girlfriend who used to do that to me.”

Taking advantage of having Ayn a bit distracted, he took the dildo and pushed it inside. This time, the phallic object slid in with ease. It was not much thicker than Cory's finger, and it was a good start for a beginner like Ayn.

Cory continued to tease Ayn's balls with his mouth and tongue while using the dildo to get the slave used to the sensation.

In the meantime, frustration was growing in Xavier's mind, expanding like a tumor. He was touching Lucas everywhere, teasing him with his fingers, but the stubborn man did not seem to react in any way.

He turned for the bed to seek what he was looking for. Grabbing the crop whip, he suddenly lashed over Lucas's abdomen. A hiss was the only reply.

"Since I don't seem to get anywhere with you the soft way, I think the hard way is much recommended."

"What exactly do you want, Xavier?" Lucas replied, and gasped when the whip connected with his right nipple, this time.

No reply came from Xavier, as he was fascinated with the red welt making its appearance on Lucas's flawless skin. He released his guest from the iron stand and made him kneel next to the bed. With angry gestures, he pushed the man's knees aside and took a step back, to admire Lucas's round ass, sticking up in the air.

He came closer and pushed two fingers inside Lucas. This time, the man reacted, by clamping his butt cheeks hard on Xavier's hand.

"No one had you, right, Lucas?" Xavier's voice was growing thicker.

"You know that very well," came the muffled reply.

Most probably, Lucas had to bite the pillow, Xavier thought dispassionately. He was going to take his best friend, and he was not going to regret it. But, for some reason, the thought did not appeal as much as he thought he would. There was something amiss.

“Since you are all almighty and in control, I think I must do something to tip the balance in my favor,” he commented icily.

Lucas heard him walking away, opening and closing the door briskly.

Cory was nowhere in sight, Xavier noticed. He could have just called for him, but some curiosity pushed the Master of the house throughout the main hall until he reached the door to the slave’s room. It was most probably natural for Cory to seek the slave’s company, especially since Xavier demanded him to train Ayn in learning the language, as well as in other ways.

When he opened the door, the scene before his eyes made him hard almost instantly, something he had been struggling to acquire for the entire evening, while trying to get Lucas and himself in the mood. His servant was laying on one side, teasing the servant’s balls with his tongue, while Ayn was positioned on his fours, with a small dildo up his sexy ass.

“Cory,” he said sternly.

Desire was dictating him now to forget all about the man knelt on the luxurious red carpet in the master bedroom, and climb the much simpler bed in his slave’s room and claim the young body presenting itself like that, ready for taking. He could have used Cory’s skill to play with both his and Ayn’s balls, to heighten his lust. But he had a promise to fulfill, and there was no time to play for now.

Cory looked a bit flushed, as he got up to greet his Master.

“How is Ayn doing?”

The slave had moved, as well, taking out the dildo from his ass and throwing it on the floor, as if he feared the object could have continued to penetrate him, despite no longer having someone manipulating it.

“He is just starting to get accustomed with it, Master,” Cory said breathily.

“I thought I told you to help him get used to it, but I don’t remember allowing you to touch him with your mouth,” he tried to quench his frustration by taking it out on his servant.

“I apologize, Master, but he was so afraid that I thought I could convince him with a bit more stimulation,” Cory said hurriedly.

A bit more stimulation was precisely what Xavier needed to solve the conundrum in the master bedroom, so he just gestured for Cory to follow him, not without throwing a meaningful look in Ayn’s direction.

The slave tensed as their eyes met. Xavier smiled. Suddenly, he felt warmth where there had been ice. Maybe he could use a consolation prize in a few days.

Cory’s mouth went slack when he saw Lord Lucas bent so unceremoniously over the bed, waiting for Lord Xavier’s return. His Master wanted to make the man realize who was on top. There was no seduction there, no sweet surrender. Lord Xavier wished to hurt Lord Lucas.

“Go give him the same treatment you were giving Ayn just now,” Lord Xavier ordered.

Cory obeyed and knelt between Lord Lucas’s parted knees. He touched the perfect mounds with reverence and slid his tongue on the ass crack, making sure to apply enough pressure so that Lord Lucas could feel him. His head was spinning, filled with the sensation of touching the man ever present in his dreams, in such an intimate manner. Except for that first encounter, he had never been so close to the man.

He kissed and licked the man’s secret entrance. He had heard how Lord Lucas had never let anyone in there. He knew it was a matter of minutes until that was going to change.

Under his ministrations, Lord Lucas’s breath grew deeper, ragged. Cory closed his eyes and caressed the man’s hole with his lips. He was not just giving a rim job; he was making love to his beloved’s prized entrance.

“Enough,” he heard Lord Xavier, and suddenly he was pushed aside, to let his Master enter the knelt man in one go, making him gasp. “Don’t try to keep your voice down, Lucas. Feel free to scream or curse, or blame me for having Cory prepare you so you can get your body ravaged by me.”

No sound came, except for a few grunts here and there.

“Quite the stoic, aren’t you?” Lord Xavier slammed inside his friend’s body over and over again, like a madman.

Beside him, Cory was turning livid. The servant felt his chest aching, witnessing the vile ways of his Master. His heart went to Lucas, but he could do nothing. Nothing. It was what he was, after all. Nothing else but a tool, to be used by an unforgiving Master who held nothing holy in his heart. Not even friendship.

His Master’s quickened breathing let him know that Lord Xavier was close. As the man stood up, one minute later, he heard the barked order.

“Clean up this mess.”

He hurried to comply. With trembled hands, he caressed Lord Lucas’s ass again and closed his lips on the now ravaged entrance, to suck out the liquid pumped by force into him. Most probably, Lord Xavier thought that was humiliating to them both. Little he knew that Cory thought of it as at least an attempt at healing. There was going to be no trace of Lord Xavier in Lord Lucas’s body. Not if Cory could help it, so he just pushed the man’s ass cheeks apart to gain better access inside, and clean the abused hole as much as possible.

“What do you say, Lucas?” he heard Lord Xavier’s mocking voice again. “How does it feel to have your little toy thing clean up after I had you like the lowest of all slaves?”

“I only have one thing to say,” Lord Lucas’s voice was proud and determined. “Are we done here already?”

The words seemed to have the effect of a bucket of ice water on Lord Xavier’s mood if Cory was reading the signs right.

“I fucked you. I think we’re through,” he spat. “Help him get dressed and get out,” he ordered Cory and turned on his heels to leave the room.

Chapter Eight

There was a bad taste in his mouth he could not get rid of. As so many times before, he looked across the conference room to search for his friend's eyes. But Lucas, unlike the said many times, did not show any sign he felt Xavier's eyes searching for his.

He felt a short pang of hurt right in the middle of his chest. He had no idea he had been dependent on Lucas's most simple gestures, such as meeting his gaze, whenever he needed support or encouragement. An acute sensation that he was in the same room with a pack of wolves took over.

Xavier sighed, running a hand through his hair. Every Master in Drena was expected to try at least to become the most important Ruler in the city. There was a fragile balance, thin as a thread, seemingly kept by an invisible hand that was dictating the fights for power. Since forever, he had been in charge, and he was the one chosen by the Trainers to rule.

Fate was not kind to losers. Lucas had often said that he didn't care about becoming the First Ruler because it would mean the end for him. He preferred his lab experiments to power plays. Xavier had hurried to point out it would have been impossible for Lucas to be assigned the supreme function, as he was not born and raised in Drena. Nonetheless, he now knew Lucas had been right all alone.

He had to send Cory to Lucas. He was stalling for no reason. Lucas was not pressing the matter, either. The conversations between them had been kept short, always focused on state affairs and nothing more. Xavier had tried to look at Lucas and imagine him as he had laid there, bent over the bed, with Xavier's semen pouring off his ass. It was supposed to be humiliating for Lucas. The man seemed as dignified as ever; instead, Xavier felt the one humiliated.

It was not even making him mad. If anything, he felt sadness, pity toward himself even. He had always been alone, but it had taken his ambition and obsession to drive him to the point of destroying the only thing that was durable and real in his world.

He could not stand the emptiness he felt inside. It stood there, like a hole growing larger and larger, gnawing at him from the inside. The only moments he had

managed to put the sensation to rest had been when he had had Cory next to him in bed. The only person who was not judging him; but Cory had obedience forced into him, so his acceptance meant nothing. He needed something else. Someone else.

“Cory, please have Ayn washed and ready for tonight,” he ordered shortly while taking out his coat.

The servant tensed a bit, but, as always, bowed his head and replied. “Yes, Master.”

It had to be done sooner or later. In his search for a remedy, Xavier believed more and more that having his slave would set things straight once more.

Cory tried to put on a neutral face as he broke Ayn the news. The beautiful man bit on his lower lip in annoyance.

“Shit. What am I going to do?”

“You do what I told you. Relax, let him do his thing, and it will be over. There is no point in fighting. You will only end up hurt.”

“I’m going to end up hurt anyway,” Ayn pouted. “There is no way he can put his fucking cock inside me, without breaking me.”

Cory sighed. Ayn could not understand, and he was incredibly stubborn, on top of it all. Cory had tried to tell him that it could be pleasurable, but the slave had just frowned and shook his head.

“I’ll fucking bleed to death,” the slave added, and Cory caressed his shoulder briefly.

“If he’s pleased with you, he’ll let you roam free. Even give you some clothes. At some point, he will let you come shopping with me. Then I will show you all the ins and outs of the city. You will be able to plan your escape.”

Ayn seemed to feel a bit encouraged by Cory’s words.

“All right, all right, I’ll try. But I’m so sure he will have to strangle me first before fucking me.”

“Stop talking like that,” Cory chided him. “It hurts at first, but remember to relax. He is going to use lube; it’s not like he’s going in dry. Just think of something nice while he’s fucking you and it will be over in no time.”

The servant didn’t have the heart to tell Ayn Lord Xavier had great staying power. The slave was way too scared to hear about that.

Xavier was naked in his bed when Ayn was gently pushed inside by Cory. His eyes lingered on the beautiful young body, his cock stirring in anticipation.

“You can go now, Cory.”

He sensed the hesitation in his servant for a brief moment. Cory was growing attached to the slave. He was behaving quite like a mother hen around Ayn, and Xavier was finding it amusing. Right now, however, he had to send Cory off. He wanted to be alone with his property.

Almond shaped eyes followed him with apprehension as he rose from the bed and got closer. He could tell Ayn’s eyes were drawn to his sex, although the slave tried hard to avert them as soon as they got there.

The young slave was scared. Unlike the first days, when he had been clueless, now he knew what was going to happen. Xavier wanted to bury himself in that virgin ass and claim ownership. That would make him feel whole.

Still, Ayn’s lovely eyes filled with worry were forcing him to look back, at the moment he had taken Lucas despite the man’s warnings about loss. With Ayn, he didn’t want to lose.

He caressed the sinewy arms, going upwards until his hands reached the young man’s neck. His thumbs stroked a very nervous Adam’s apple, bobbing up and down. Then he cupped Ayn’s cheeks in his palms and drew him slowly in, for a kiss.

It had not been what the slave had expected. A small whimper escaped his lips, as he was being kissed slowly, tenderly. Their eyes met briefly as Xavier broke the kiss.

“Cory tells me you are learning the language,” Xavier said softly.

The slave did not seem to understand. His face scrunched into a frown. Xavier caressed his chest slowly.

“Ayn,” he whispered and took the slave’s hand and placed it over his heart.

“Master,” the slave whispered back, and Xavier pulled him back into his arms to kiss him again.

Slowly, he guided the young man towards the bed, until they landed on it, Xavier on top, ravenous with desire. He loved kissing the men he brought to bed, but, in Ayn’s lips, reluctant, yet hungry, he felt something else that was fueling his desire for tongue and kisses, instead of quenching it. He was not willing, at least not yet, to move forward.

His left hand traveled lower, finding purchase in Ayn’s member. He noted with satisfaction how the young man was starting to get hard. Slowly peeling back the foreskin, he gave Ayn’s cock a tentative tug, and the slave arched into his touch.

Xavier pushed Ayn’s knees apart, to get closer. His engorged cock pushed inside the slave’s thigh, making the slave stiffen all of a sudden.

“I won’t hurt you,” he murmured, but the slave did not seem to understand, regardless of how softly the words had been spoken.

His hand searched blindly for the lube he had placed next to the bed earlier. He coated his fingers while trying to distract Ayn’s attention with another long kiss. At least this was something the slave seemed to enjoy.

Pushing between firm butt cheeks, his fingers found purchase in the tight puckered hole. The slave’s body showed no sign of giving in, though. It remained hard and unyielding, and Xavier was starting to grow frustrated.

He wasn’t going to repeat the same mistake he had done with Lucas. He wanted the beautiful hard body beneath him to surrender on its owner’s accord, without the

use of force. He withdrew his hand, resting it on the young man's ball sack, caressing it.

"Waiting is maddening, you know, Ayn," he spoke, while his deft fingers rolled the slave's testes in circular motions. "But I will try," he promised, oblivious to the small sparkle of surprise in deep dark eyes.

Soon enough, they were embraced tightly, rubbing their bodies against one another, Ayn merely clinging on Xavier's slightly larger frame, as the Master of the house was dry humping him with all his might.

There was a clash of wills there, and soon enough, the slave picked up the pace, meeting each heavy thrust with his own. The tender flesh of their organs was being abused in the process, yet it looked like they did not care.

Breathing heavily, Xavier let himself slide on Ayn's body until he reached the floor with his knees. Unceremoniously, he dragged the slave by one leg, forcing him to stand on his ass on the edge of the bed.

There was a short moment, of acceptance from Xavier's part, and of realization from Ayn's, as the most powerful man in Drena sank to his knees, and buried his head in his slave's crotch. When wet lips connected with the smooth skin on the slave's luscious with precum cock head, Ayn voiced his pleasure from the top of his lungs.

The door opened slowly, without a sound. Cory stood there, fresh towels in his hands, taking in the scene before his eyes, his mouth agape. His Master, the man he feared, along with most people in Drena, was servicing his slave with his mouth, while Ayn's strong hands were guiding his head to take him in deeper.

The servant let the towels next to the door. He was supposed to act like a savior or something like that, to stop Xavier from ravaging Ayn. It seemed that there was no need for that.

"What do you mean, that was all?" Cory whispered, not believing his ears. Although he had seen some of it with his own eyes, that didn't mean he was ready to accept it.

“I am telling you, man, he just sucked me off, swallowed everything like a good boy, and then jerked off and came all over my feet,” Ayn stretched and yawned. “He’s a fucking great cocksucker, this Master of yours.”

“He’s your Master, too,” Cory kicked him playfully in the ribs.

“Not when it comes to bedroom affairs, he’s not,” Ayn said triumphantly, raising enough from the bed to tickle Cory in response. “I am telling you, he’s a bit fucked up or something.”

“I don’t get it,” Cory shook his head. “He’s always so domineering and ...”

He was lost for words.

“Maybe he could not resist my sword fighting technique,” Ayn grabbed his cock through his pants and squeezed it.

Cory snorted. “It’s so uncanny, but since it’s true, I cannot argue with you. I hope you didn’t give yourself away by saying something.”

“Of course not. I’m playing the dumb as a brick routine like a pro,” Ayn smirked, seemingly very pleased with himself. “And he’s falling for it, which is nice.”

“He is falling for you, which is ... strange,” Cory commented.

“Nah, he’s just a fucking perv,” Ayn replied, but the servant could tell there was something the young slave was not so keen on saying. Something he probably preferred to keep to himself for now. “All you guys ever did was to make nice to him, and he got bored. Now he wants to play for the other team a little.”

Cory laughed.

“If you manage to top him, I am giving you the cock of the year award.”

“Well, thank you in advance.”

“Hey, you haven’t done it yet!” the servant said, somewhat alarmed.

“Maybe it’s all a matter of time,” Ayn grinned, naturally delighted with himself.

There was a short moment of silence, and Cory touched Ayn’s elbow gently.

“So, how was it?”

Ayn squirmed a little.

“A blowjob’s a blowjob. In other words, fucking awesome.”

“Besides that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, Ayn, you know what,” Cory insisted. “Do you like him, at least a little?”

“I fucking love his mouth, that’s what I like,” Ayn stood up briskly and started walking back and forth. The leash was gone so that he could move with ease, and he had been even given some clothes. Very tight and revealing, but clothes nonetheless. “As long as he keeps it up like this, he’s a winner in my book. If he makes a move for my ass, though, I’ll chop his dick.”

“You like him,” Cory teased.

“Shut the fuck up. I hate his guts. I barely wait to get out of this place.”

“Well, I guess you’ll need to put up with his blowjobs a bit more until he’s ready to leave you to roam the city.”

“Fine by me,” Ayn shrugged, but Cory could swear the slave’s resolve was wavering.

“No matter how hot he is, don’t fall for him, Ayn. He’s my Master and I respect him, but staying because of him would not be a great idea. I heard he doesn’t care much for his toys.”

“Don’t worry, Cory, I have no intention to become one,” Ayn said sourly.

“You will be spending the night at Lucas’s place,” his Master let him know as if he was dropping a casual note that he was to pick up the laundry.

Cory almost dropped the tray he was carrying in his hands.

“Whatever he asks, make sure he gets,” Lord Xavier added, and turned on his feet.

Those were some famous last words, Cory thought. What did Lord Lucas want? If he was to believe the man’s blatant seduction, Lord Lucas wanted Cory whole, and the servant had no idea what that meant. He was going to enjoy a fantastic night, in the arms of the one he was dreaming of all the time, but what was going to happen after that?

He was glad Lord Xavier was no longer demanding his services in bed. Each night, the Master of the house was asking for his slave, and Ayn’s bedroom remained empty until the break of dawn when an exhausted slave was leaving the master bedroom to rest in his bed until late afternoon.

According to Ayn, things weren’t evolving too much between Master and slave. Xavier had developed quite a taste for taking care of Ayn’s needs with his mouth, and there had been no more attacks on his virginity.

“Man, I’ve never thought I was going to say that, but I’m getting sick of getting blowjobs. Can you fucking believe it?” Ayn interrupted his thoughts while walking through the door to the living room.

“How come you are up so early?”

“I’m hungry,” Ayn yawned and let himself fall on the sofa. “Make me a sandwich. Or two. Or more.”

“What on earth is happening between you two the whole night, if he only sucks you off?” Cory asked while setting the tray on the small coffee table.

“Well, first he is driving me mad by kissing me. Cory, this guy has spent like seven lives or so without kissing or something. He is so much into kissing that he’s making me nuts.”

“You like it,” Cory grinned. “He is a great kisser, though,” he mused.

A small frown clouded Ayn’s face for a second.

“He no longer fucks you, right?” he asked, looking a bit worried.

Cory’s eyes grew wide, and then he burst into laughter.

“You’re jealous, Ayn, I cannot believe it.”

“I’m not jealous, what the hell ...” Ayn murmured, but he was upset. “Anyway, we kiss and dry hump for like forever, and then he goes down on me, and starts to blow me. I think I’ll be able to write a book on oral sex, that’s how many techniques he has. He varies things lately, by licking my balls and my ass, too. I guess he still doesn’t realize he’s knocking at the wrong door, but whatever. So I have his tongue in my ass, on my balls, and my dick until I cannot anymore, and I blow my load in his mouth. He’s eating everything like it’s his last meal ... Just seeing him doing that almost makes me hard again. Only that I fucking can’t, because he’s emptied my balls. After that, he starts talking.”

“Talking?” Cory seemed surprised. “About what?”

“About all kinds of crazy shit. Of course, I pretend I understand squat, so I stay there, while he keeps my hand and goes about his stuff.”

“Could you please tell me more?” Cory sat on the sofa, next to Ayn, his curiosity piqued.

“Yeah, it’s the same stuff, with some variations. He starts by telling me about his day at work like I’m his wife. Then he starts talking about the jerk-offs in a committee or something like that.”

Ayn stopped for a second. Cory pushed him a little to make him talk again. Like awakening from a dream, the slave continued.

“He sounds a bit ... scared sometimes. And sad. He talks about how some monks or something like that raised him.”

“The Trainers?” Cory could not believe his ears.

“Yeah, them. By the way, your Lucas is not from around here.”

“Good to know,” Cory murmured.

“After he talks and talks until I almost fall asleep, he jumps me again. This time, it’s about him though. He loves coming all over me. I think he’s trying to mark me; I think one day I’ll get out of there with spunk in my ears. And he comes like a hose, the perv,” Ayn added, a bit embarrassed all of a sudden.

“That is so strange,” Cory mused.

“Hey, those sandwiches?” Ayn pushed him playfully. “They won’t make themselves. Just kidding, let’s go to the kitchen together.”

Cory’s heart was beating wildly against his chest as the doorbell chimed playfully. He had no idea who else was going to be around Lord Lucas’s penthouse. Lord Lucas most probably had his servants, so that was announcing to be an awkward experience. Was all right for the Masters to flaunt their preferences like that? Servants were not on the same footing with slaves who were meant for pleasure and could be used by Masters inclined to do so.

Making use of servants was tolerated, but somewhat frowned upon. He had heard on more than one occasion how Lord Xavier’s proclivities with servants, in particular, were quite a gossip subject in most homes in Drena. Being the First Ruler had its perks, though, so Lord Xavier didn’t care about what others were saying. Or so Cory thought. Ayn was telling him some crazy things he didn’t know about his Master, like the fact that he was questioning his role in ruling the city.

It was Lord Lucas, not a servant, as he expected, who opened the door. There was a short, intense moment, during which Cory’s baby blues sank in Lord Lucas’s beautiful green eyes. The young servant was dragged inside by a steady hand, and he was pushed against the wall, as he heard the entrance door slamming shut with a loud thump. There were lips everywhere as he was lifted off the ground as if he weighed nothing.

There were no other pairs of eyes to witness their long waited communion. So Cory kissed back, allowing himself to pour all the passion he had kept secret for such a long time. He felt strong hands cupping his ass, parting his butt cheeks, digging into the thin fabric of his uniform, almost ripping it. He whimpered against Lord Lucas’s deft tongue that was skillfully probing his hot cavern. Cory wanted out of his clothes too, to be utterly naked against the man’s sturdy frame.

Slowly, Lord Lucas put him down.

“Sorry, Cory,” his voice sounded hoarse, uneven, “I seem to have lost control for a bit.”

Cory didn't care. He wanted Lord Lucas to lose control over him. There was nothing more fulfilling, mind-blowing than to think that a man as beautiful and smart and kind as Lord Lucas wanted him so badly that he was willing to forget his manners.

The Master of the house led him by the hand inside a lavish dining room. The dinner table had been arranged for two, and Cory felt uneasiness washing over him. There had to be a servant around, ready to wait on them. What was that servant going to think, seeing Cory being showered in so much attention by one of the most potent Rulers of the city?

It looked as if Lord Lucas could read his mind.

“There will only be the two of us tonight. No one will interrupt us.”

Cory's eyes grew wide, and then he bit his lower lip.

“What is it?” Lord Lucas asked, suddenly concerned.

“Would it be all right, Lord Lucas, if I said ...” Cory gulped, blushing, but continued, “that I do not care about food?”

Lord Lucas turned him so they could face each other. Calloused fingers caressed Cory's well-defined lips.

“Are you anxious to see my bedroom, Cory? And please drop the Lord part, I'm just Lucas here,” he joked, but his voice dropped low, silk-like, filled with innuendo.

The servant did not offer an answer. Instead, he sank to his knees and searched blindly for Lucas's zipper. He looked up, his hands trembling, wanting nothing but to see acceptance and encouragement in deep green eyes.

“Cory,” Lucas whispered, and placed a warm hand on the servant's blond head.

It was just what Cory needed. Eyes half-mast, his fingers circling the man's silky shaft, he brought his prize to his lips. It was amazing how males could be so

similar, yet so different. Lucas's organ felt real and hard in his hand, steel draped in silk, and its musky smell was making him dizzy. He could feel the expensive soap smell, but even clean, the man's organ held a specific fragrance he wanted to imprint in his memory.

Along with its taste, he thought, as he engulfed Lucas's member in his mouth, working the shaft with his tongue and his hand in the same time.

"Naughty Cory, do you want an appetizer first?" Lucas teased, as his hands were caressing Cory's head, holding him steady so he could see about his little oral fixation.

It was not polite to talk with his mouth full, so he just tried to nod. Soon enough, his wish was granted, as Lucas came, with a small grunt, in his mouth. The hands continued to keep him there, not forcibly, but caring, caressing all the time, and he relished in the sensation of having the man he had wanted for so long, the only one who counted, whose smell and taste and touch wanted to remember forever.

Lucas helped him to feet and gently grabbed him with one hand, as he used the other to stuff his spent organ inside his black pants.

"Would you like to go to the bedroom, now?" Lucas asked.

"Yes, please ... Lucas," Cory avoided the honorific at the last moment. It felt strange but good. So good that Cory could not remember anything like this ever happening in his life.

He did not expect to be so ceremoniously lifted off the floor and carried by strong arms to Lucas's bedroom. It was just going to be for one night, so he had to make it last. It was not typical for servants in Drena to ever dream of being used by one of the Masters. No, used was not the proper term. That was what Lord Xavier was doing. Lucas's hands were caring, loving, as he placed his sweet burden on the enormous bed and started to undress the young servant.

His mind became empty, a vessel destined for desire, as Lucas's lips descended on his neck, nibbling playfully along the collarbone, only to go lower, to tease the young servant's erect nipples. A small cry left his lips.

"Is it good here?" Lucas's lips captured one small bud between them again.

“Yes, please, more,” Cory said breathily, his hands moving on their own accord to run through Lucas’s raven hair.

His wish was granted, as Lucas continued to devour him slowly, biting without breaking skin, to make him arch into the touch. If Lucas wanted to eat him whole, he wouldn’t have minded.

His pants were dragged over his erection, making yelp a little in surprise, and he hurriedly opened his legs, wanting Lucas to get there as soon as possible. But the man had other plans, as his mouth descended on Cory’s cock, taking him in fast and easy. The servant moaned shamelessly, feeling the head of his dick hitting the back of Lucas’s throat. That was something no one had ever done to him. He had to tell Ayn he’d been right; getting a blowjob was, indeed, fucking awesome.

Lucas seemed skilled at it, too. Cory could not stop a short pang of jealousy as he wondered who had been on the receiving end of Lucas’s fantastic technique.

“Please, I want to come with you inside me,” he begged, and suddenly he felt cold air hitting his organ where it had been only scorching heat.

Soon enough, cold, slick fingers were playing against his hole, and Cory whimpered. It had been a while since he had been penetrated. Lord Xavier had been too busy with Ayn, and Antoine was only fucking him when they met at parties. For that, Cory was glad. He wanted to feel Lucas to the fullest.

“You’re tight,” Lucas commented, as his fingers continued to stretch him gently.

“Take me now,” Cory whispered. “I’m more than ready.”

A few tears came unbound, as something much larger than the fingers was pushed through his tight ring of muscles. Cory didn’t mind the small pain; soon, the discomfort faded away, and he circled Lucas’s midsection with his long legs, to drag him closer.

Lucas caressed his cheeks with infinite tenderness. Then he suddenly stopped.

“Are you crying? Am I hurting you?” Lucas asked, alarmed, trying to withdraw.

Cory clamped his legs over the man’s frame in desperation.

“No, you’re not. It’s just that ... I’m so happy.”

Lucas exhaled contently. Lips connected once more, as Lucas moved inside the smaller body beneath him. They moved to the same rhythm, as Cory thought he had never been so compatible with anyone. It felt as if Lucas fit there, like they were two halves of a whole, finally gluing together to form something unique and beautiful that was making Cory’s heart throb with excitement and happiness.

He came without even touching himself. Lucas knew precisely how to push and brush over his prostate over and over again until he saw stars beneath his closed eyelids. His lover’s hot seed filled him soon afterward and, unbound, words left his lips.

“I won’t mind if I die now...”

Teeth buried into his lips, making him yelp.

“Don’t you dare to talk like this while in my arms,” he heard the stern words, as soon as his so-called punishment was over.

In the meantime, in Xavier’s penthouse, Ayn was starting to feel restless. Even if Cory was not allowed to witness their trysts, it felt good to know he was around, when he and Xavier were going about their nightly business.

As the Master of the house entered his bedroom, he felt his heart growing smaller. The man’s eyes were burning. He tended to look a bit wilder lately. Ayn knew he could not postpone the inevitable forever. And, in a way, he wanted it all to happen so they could get over with it.

“Master,” he rose from the bed, to welcome Xavier. He had continued to pretend he only knew a few words. The situation seemed to be to Xavier’s satisfaction; apparently, the most powerful man in Drena needed nothing more than a silent companion.

Xavier kissed him greedily and pushed him onto the bed. Clothes were flying everywhere, and Xavier was on his knees, servicing Ayn with his mouth, as he had done it for the last weeks.

Ayn kept the man's head there with all his might, bucking into his mouth. It felt good to assert dominance in this manner, even if it was short lived. Xavier seemed to enjoy it, too.

His climax came like a wave; he could not resist for too long, as his cock was being wrapped by the skilled tongue, always sucking him dry. In the haze that followed, he noted how something hot was pouring on his balls and dripping between his butt cheeks. His eyes snapped open, but it was too late.

Above him, Xavier's eyes were burning bright. Ayn let out a cry, ashamed of it, but too surprised to be taken so suddenly, and his Master covered his mouth. His ass was burning as he was split open. Lubed with his own jizz, now how was that for irony?

He tried to push against the man, but Xavier was strong, and Ayn's senses were dulled by pain, as his virgin ass was used by the relentless cock pushing past his entrance. He bit on Xavier's lips, for lack of a better way to make him stop, but the taste of blood in their mouths seemed to drive the man even madder. He increased his rhythm, and Ayn had no choice but to allow the invasion, screaming silently in his head, trying to remember everything Cory had taught him about getting relaxed to let the penetration happen. Who the fuck could relax with a giant thing up his butt, that felt so deep inside that it was making him want to puke?

Xavier adjusted their position, by dragging Ayn closer to him. The change in angle made something between the head of Xavier's cock and something inside Ayn's ass connect, and the slave's breath hitched in his chest. What the fuck was that?

Xavier thrust into him, hitting the same spot. He moaned, something strangely akin to a short-circuit making his thoughts halt, unsure of what he was feeling.

"Do you like it, Ayn?" Xavier breathed over his face.

Man, how he wanted to punch that handsome face! But it had to be done later, as now, there was something extraordinary happening, as he felt his ball sack tightened and fluid broke free from his cock, without any other stimulation.

"You do," Xavier said haughtily and started grunting and coming inside his slave's ass, his moves shorter, harder and harsher.

Ayn lay to one side, breathing heavily. He had been stupid to close his eyes; he had let his guard down. Now, he was nothing but the man's bitch.

A hard slap on his ass made him jump. He turned to look at his Master, reproach, and anger written all over his beautiful face.

"What? It was long overdue," Xavier mocked. "I was stupid to let you go for so long. You're everything my cock needs, Ayn," he whispered and dragged his reluctant slave into an ardent kiss.

Ayn's mind was set. He needed to get the fuck out and fast. There was no way he was going to like taking that guy's cock up his ass.

"So, I gather that your encounter with my servant was up to expectations," Xavier probed Lucas for information, as soon as they were alone in his large office, overlooking the majestic Drena bay.

It was not a question, more an affirmation. Cory had been instructed to offer Lucas everything the man wanted, and Cory was an exemplary servant. Knowing his skill, Xavier doubted Lucas had been unsatisfied with the servant's performance.

"Yes," Lucas said with a small frown, after a short moment of hesitation.

"I no longer use him," Xavier said abruptly, and Lucas stared at him as if he was trying to make sense of the words. "So you can have him each night if you are so inclined. Of course, I need him for daily chores, and Ayn is far too attached to him, to replace him at this point, so make sure he gets enough sleep."

Lucas's eyes turned to slits. There was no such thing as free lunch.

"Why the sudden change of heart, Xavier? I thought you to be a miser when it came to sharing your toys."

Xavier shrugged.

"I think I finally see your point. And ... our friendship seems to have taken the wrong turn, so I must offer something in return for your ... discomfort."

“Discomfort?” Lucas smiled thinly. “Xavier, you have a way with words that never stops to amaze me. And really? What did you hope for?”

“Don’t you like my gift then?” Xavier asked, not hiding his hurt this time.

“Oh, but I do. But you’ll have to sign a small paper. If anything happens – and I mean anything – requiring Cory’s release from your service, he is going to be placed in my care immediately.”

“It will be done,” Xavier admitted. “But he’s a great servant; I have no reason to dismiss him.”

Lucas nodded.

“I know. I will see you later, at the meeting.”

He made a turn for the door then Xavier spoke again.

“Lucas.”

There was something there, vibrating and hurting that made the other turn.

“Yes?”

Lucas seemed to have no intention to make things easy for Xavier.

“Could I see you later? Outside work?”

“Yes, I guess,” Lucas shrugged. Xavier’s unexpected gift was not coming without any obligations.

“I’m taking my slave to bed,” Xavier continued, as that was something he’d been keeping inside for too long. “I believe he hates me, to some degree. But he enjoys my touch and breaking him is delicious.”

Lucas shook his head.

“Mend your ways, Xavier. The act is growing old. Is breaking this slave what you are after? I’ve told you many times before. That feeling of emptiness you feel inside won’t fill with sex, especially not the forced kind. There is no love by force. And it won’t bring anyone back,” he ended, and this time he walked away, knowing too well Xavier was not going to listen to reason.

In the meantime, Cory was walking back home feeling like on cloud number nine. His happiness faded, though, the moment he met Ayn's eyes.

"What happened?" he asked, his heart in his throat while hurrying to his friend's side.

Ayn was on his belly, his head on his folded arms, with a morose expression on his beautiful face.

"He fucked me. The sneaky bastard, he just fucked me. And it hurt like hell, and I fucking came when he did," he blurted it all out and squeezed his eyes shut to hide the storm of emotions raging inside.

"Let me see," Cory touched him gently.

"No, please," Ayn said breathily.

"Come now; I've seen you a thousand times. I need to see if you're hurt," he said gently.

Reluctantly, Ayn gave in to the gentle touch. Cory inspected him, without touching much.

"Nothing's torn," he exhaled. "I'll prepare a bath. I'll have you relaxed and better in no time."

"I'm clean," Ayn murmured, as he pulled up his pants. "Spent hours in the shower, trying to take him off me. Fucking scumbag," he said through his teeth.

Cory caressed his shoulder.

"It's not the pain that's bad," Ayn talked. "It's the fact that the jerk thinks he owns me. That I'm his bitch now."

"Ayn, it's not like that," Cory tried to stop the torrent of self-deprecating words pouring from Ayn's mouth. "He likes you. He will take good care of you. And it gets better after the first time ..."

“No shit,” Ayn retorted. “The last thing I want is to moan like a slut in heat as he stuffs his cock in me. You don’t understand, Cory. Where I come from, if you’re settled to being a bitch, that’s all you will ever be. If you sleep with a guy, you better make fucking sure you top the guy, too, or else everyone will stare at your ass and think it would be okay to ride you.”

Cory opened and closed his mouth a few times, but no sound came out. He had no idea what to say.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make this right. I’ll fucking jump him, too. See how he likes it with a cock up his ass.”

The servant shook his head, horrified.

“Don’t do it by force, Ayn. If you try, he can have you executed. He can have you in chains, torture you and no one will save you. Please, I beg you, don’t do anything rash. Look, I’ll call him and ask him if I can take you out. You’ll see the city. Please, you’re so close to being free.”

“Shit, Cory, you do have a way with words,” Ayn squeezed the pillow beneath him in his arms. “You’re right; I need to get out of here before I smash his head in.”

There was a small sigh of relief from Cory. He could not let Ayn do anything stupid.

Dion’s arms were flailing, as powerful hands slowly squeezed his throat. The knee in his groin was worse, or he could not tell.

“Now, Dion, for the last time, why is Cory no longer allowed at parties? Talk, or we’ll take this a bit further this time,” Antoine warned.

He went slack. He had to surrender. There was no choice for him. Eventually, the slave let him drop to the ground in a heap, coughing and spitting.

“Lord Lucas claimed him. No one is to touch him anymore.”

He knew he should have kept his head down while saying that. But he could not quench the desire to look up and see Antoine’s surprise at hearing the news. Even

hurting so badly, he managed a small smile. Antoine looked devastated upon learning that Cory could no longer be his.

The slave's fist connected quickly with his jaw. He slumped back to the floor, as Antoine kicked him with his feet. In reflex, he covered his face. Antoine pulled his head back by the hair. Still, his fist stopped just when he was about to connect with his face again.

“Let's not mess with your face. A cutie like you, down there ... I think you'll have your ass full of cock from your first day as a recycled servant.”

Dion's heart sank. There was no turning back then. Antoine had to vent off his frustration somehow.

“No, please,” he tried to beg.

“Not this time, Dion. I'm going to tell Master I've grown bored with you. I won't even make up anything. I'll ask him to send you away, 'cause I can't stand your face anymore.”

He doubted he had tears left to cry. But they came unbound, nonetheless, while Antoine laughed and pushed him away.

Chapter Nine

The dull sound of the large truck moving was lulling him into sleep. He had no notion of how many hours had passed since he'd been sent out from his former Master's house and shipped to be taken who knew where.

The gray clothes he wore were coarse against his skin. The boots were a bit too large, as well. It was like Dion was given a new life, along with a new uniform, that didn't suit him. He kept his head down. It was too dark to look at his companions. No one was talking, despair and pain too much for that. A thought traveled his mind, like a shooting star, that he was not even going to remember the faces of those riding with him in the old truck.

Suddenly, the truck halted, a sign that they must have arrived at their destination. A loud voice barked at them, and Dion got up along with the rest, waiting patiently in line to descend. No one could say former servants from Drena were not well trained; they knew how to keep in line, how to keep their distance and how to keep their heads down.

A steady hand gripped his elbow and pushed him forward, once he was out. He barely noticed that the air he was breathing felt foreign as if there was an entirely different world situated outside the gates of Drena.

The gentle sea breeze felt warm against his skin. He moved along, as the man guiding them barked another order. He didn't have the energy to make up the words. It could only mean one thing; that Dion, just like the others, was there to obey.

The room felt small, but Dion was glad there were only he and two other people assigned to it. From what he could gather, there were other accommodations meant for sleeping that were much larger, where dozens were forced to live. He went to sleep and let the world fade away. There was always another day tomorrow.

Ayn examined the stores as they went by. Cory was explaining a lot of stuff with the speed of lighting, and he was too amazed at the richness of the place to pay too

much attention. The servant helped him try out some new clothes and even encouraged him to pick a few he honestly liked.

“It’s ok, it’s on our Master’s tab,” Cory winked at him, and Ayn smiled back. He was speaking very little, aware that he was supposed to be an ignorant savage slave with no knowledge of the language.

The store they stopped by proved fascinating to Ayn. He let Cory speak with the store manager about some decorative knives Xavier wanted, and he began exploring the weapons on display. As the servant was vividly bargaining with the shopkeeper, he quickly grabbed the one thing that had indeed caught his eye. The servant was still turned with his back to Ayn. Maybe it was for the best if Cory didn’t know just everything.

Xavier’s heart was filled with joy as he turned back home. He had Lucas’s friendship back – sort of -, he had Ayn, and everything was working like a charm in his book.

Cory welcomed him with the same smile on his beautiful face.

“How was your day?” he asked, as the servant took his coat.

“I took Ayn shopping. He loved it,” Cory said excitedly. “I let him choose some of the outfits. I hope they will please you, Master.”

Yes, he very much wanted to see Ayn wearing beautiful clothes. Not that he didn’t prefer the slave naked, his exotic beauty more valuable and exciting than the softest fabric made in Drena’s factories. He felt a sudden, urgent need to see the slave.

“Where is he?” he demanded, a bit abruptly.

“He is in his room. Should I put the table, Master?”

“Not right now,” Xavier waved his hand and went by Cory to reach Ayn’s room, most probably making the servant wonder about his unusual behavior.

He entered the room without even bothering to knock. Ayn turned swiftly, with a small frown on his handsome face. Xavier chose to ignore how the young man had looked quite startled by his sudden appearance. He just took the slave in his arms and kissed him deeply.

“I’ve thought of you for the entire day. Every single moment,” he whispered against moist lips when he had to cut the kiss short so that they could breathe.

Unlike many other times before, the slave grabbed his head and drew him in for a kiss on his own accord. Xavier barely kept from gasping at his prized slave’s forwardness. Maybe Ayn was starting to like him, after all.

He massaged round buttocks through the thin fabric of the tight blue pants Ayn was wearing.

“I wish I could use you right now,” he mumbled as he freed his mouth only to nibble down on a graceful neck. “But Cory will be mad if we do not eat first,” he added, and reluctantly let Ayn go.

The slave took his hand and guided him out of the room. No matter how strange that seemed, Xavier didn’t care. He followed, feeling suddenly at peace, being led like that, in his own home, where no one ever dared doing that.

Ayn let out a breath, once he was back in his room. He checked under the bed. The gun was secured, strapped to one of the massive legs. It had been a close call; Xavier was starting to take too many liberties. He stopped for a second, to caress the contour of the weapon; its solid shape made him feel safe. It was also making his heart fill with anticipation, and that he had to rein in if he wanted to succeed.

Until then, he had to make nice to Xavier. He knew what was going to happen as soon as the night would come, but he did not find it in him to feel dread. It was not indifference what he felt, either.

He shook his head. He was not like that. The damn place was rubbing onto him, making him weak and self-indulgent. So what if Xavier was kissing him as no girlfriend had ever done it? It didn’t mean anything. Not his kisses, not the feeling

he got in his gut when he was thinking about how the man was going to take him once again.

When Cory called for him to shower, he was as prepared as he could ever be to face Xavier.

Xavier's long caresses were making his skin catch fire. At Cory's insistence, he had brought a few outfits to show his Master. Xavier found it more exciting to take Ayn out of them than seeing him dressed.

He was a bit too daring to do that, but besides the tight, see-through clothes Cory had insisted on getting, he also brought along one of the outfits he had chosen.

As he stopped in the middle of the room, dressed in blue jeans, combat boots, and a tight black tank top, he waited for Xavier's reaction. He put on the black leather jacket, too, and then smirked and challenged his Master with his eyes.

There was something unreadable in gray eyes, as Xavier was inspecting him without a word. He wasn't hurrying to take Ayn out of his clothes this time around, either.

"They ... fit you well," Xavier murmured, mostly to himself.

Of course they did. This was how he had used to dress as a free man. Xavier finally got up and reached Ayn. Pulling at the lapels of the black leather jacket, the Master dragged his slave in for a kiss. Hungry hands did not try to undress the beautiful body. Instead, Xavier glued himself to Ayn and breathed in the other's scent, burying his head for a moment at the hollow between neck and shoulder.

There was a moment there, a window of opportunity Ayn didn't want to miss. He let his hands travel to his Master's sides, brushing over the small of the man's back. Xavier was wearing nothing but loose black silk pajama pants. Bold hands reached lower and lower until they cupped Xavier's ass.

There was a small grunt of acknowledgment from Xavier, as the Master of the house realized what his prized slave meant by that. Xavier straightened his head, and their eyes clashed. Ayn's dark pools weren't asking for permission.

“You’re assuming too much,” Xavier suddenly seemed angered by the proud, know-it-all look in his slave’s eyes.

He pushed the jacket down briskly, forcing the slave out of it.

“Undress,” he ordered harshly. “Undress,” he repeated while grabbing the hem of the t-shirt and yanking it up.

Ayn played the reluctant, ignorant role, but eventually obeyed.

“I’ll have Cory burn these,” Xavier said through his teeth, as the heap of clothes was gathered at the slave’s feet.

Ayn’s eyes grew darker. Xavier pushed him on the bed, this time with his face down. He closed his eyes. All the need to react, to grab the man by the throat and force him down, had to be quenched. Tense hands parted his buttocks, and something cold was poured over Ayn’s tight hole. Too soon, there was the blunt head he loathed against his entrance, and Xavier pushed inside in one go, angrily.

Ayn bit his lip through. He was not going to give the fucker the satisfaction to hear him scream in pain.

Xavier’s heart throbbed painfully in his chest, as he took his slave, in short, punishing strokes. For a while, he had felt at peace, happy, in Ayn’s arms. That had never happened before; not like this.

This sort of happiness was a luxury he could not afford. For the most potent Ruler in Drena, letting another gain importance like this was unheard of. He felt scared; the balance had to be restored, and taking Ayn like this, humiliating him, was the only way.

Earlier, Ayn’s lips had tasted of freedom. He had to ask Cory to burn those clothes. Ayn as a captive was exhilarating, more than any man he had ever brought to bed; Ayn as a free man was addictive and dangerous. One taste and he could have been hooked.

Dion pushed his hair inside the hard helmet, frustrated at how red strands still spilled over. The same gray clothes and large boots seemed to be the uniform needed to work at the factory. He wondered absently whether there was a place they could shower.

There was a short ride from their sleeping quarters to the factory. The building stood tall and gray and menacing. The only sound breaking the stillness of the chilly morning was the shuffling of boots through the mud, as the workers headed to their workplace.

He was all eyes and ears during the orientation that all new workers had to go through. Manipulating the heavy machinery used for training seemed easy, and the man in charge, an older guy in his 40s, commended his ability to learn so fast. He smiled curtly. It looked like people here weren't that bad, after all.

The work seemed tedious and boring, and it put a strain on Dion's arms after a while. He was indeed grateful when the perfunctory sound of a bell announced them that it was time to take a break to have lunch.

He had yet to talk to anyone, so he searched the room for a quiet place to sit. He noticed a tall, dark man sitting in a corner. The guy looked like he liked his privacy, too. Dion wasn't going to impose on that.

As he sat at a table not far away, he started chewing slowly while watching the other as he ate. He could not say what was drawing him to that man. There was certainty in his moves, short and efficient, as he tore just the right amount of bread needed for each bite. People inside Drena walls were all exquisitely beautiful. Dion doubted he had ever seen a man like the one he was inspecting right now. He hadn't paid any attention to his co-workers, but there was strength radiating from the man as he had never seen before.

He could not see the man's eyes; they were probably darker than his skin. The guy looked strong, even if he was not bulky or too brawny. Dion's eyes traveled over the hard planes of the man's face; they were harsh, cut from stern stuff, just as the rest of his being. But he was not unpleasant to look at. Dion just stood there, his spoon still in his hand, forgetting that he should have been eating.

The man's eyes rose from his plate and clashed with Dion's warm brown ones. His expression remained unreadable, and Dion, suddenly flustered, shook his head and tried to focus back on his food.

He sensed someone taking a seat next to him and turned to see a man in his 30s watching him with intent.

"You're a pretty thing," the man spoke. "Are you spoken for?"

"W-what?" he stammered.

"Do you have a partner yet?" the man insisted, frowning slightly.

"It's my first day," Dion said in his defense.

"Ah," the man said shortly. "Mind if I eat next to you?"

"Not at all," Dion said politely.

Not one minute passed and another man approached the table. He nodded to the other and looked straight at Dion.

"We got a good looking one in our section this round," he spoke, although he wasn't talking to Dion.

"It was about damn time," the first one replied.

Dion felt apprehension growing in his gut. Antoine's words came to mind. Was he going to get raped? Maybe killed afterward? These men looked strong and harsh, not the type to mess with. He made himself little in his chair.

"It's his first day," the first one spoke again.

"Ah," said the other. "Let's let him adjust a little."

They continued to eat in silence. Dion felt a lump growing in his throat, and he could not swallow anymore. As his eyes rose, he met the guy's stare from his corner. This time, the man's lips curled in disgust.

“Your name is Dion, right?” the foreman asked while crossing his fingers over the wooden desk and looking at the redhead over his glasses.

Dion doubted he had done anything wrong, but he was ready to get punished. There were probably rules of the place he could not yet understand. Like the strange behavior of those workers who had sit next to him during lunch.

“You’re pretty,” the older man commented, with no trace of emotion in his voice, like he was saying Dion was a cow supposed to give x liters of milk.

The redhead squirmed a little. What was that supposed to mean?

“I don’t need fighting in my section, do you hear me?” the man said sternly.

“Fighting? I won’t get in any fight,” Dion eventually managed to articulate a few words in his defense.

The foreman looked at him as if he was about to ask the former servant what kind of stupid was Dion taking him for.

“Pick one fast, or else they’ll start fighting over your ass,” the man slammed some files on his desk as if he was trying to make a point.

Dion almost jumped from his chair. The foreman let out a frustrated sigh.

“They should be telling you a few things before unloading you on our hands. Former servants sent here,” he started, as if he felt strained to tell the same text over and over again, “draw immediate attention. There are two choices: either you pick a partner, or you pick all.”

“Am I going to get raped?” Dion let out, without even thinking. There had been too much strain on his mind to think clearly.

“We punish such behavior,” the foreman spoke, annoyed with the interruption. “It happens very rarely, so you should not be that concerned with that.”

“How could I not?” the redhead mumbled. Images of his first time, when Antoine had had over a dozen slaves fuck him, came to mind. It had felt like it was never going to end. No crying and begging had been enough; if anything, the slaves had seemed more turned on by his cries.

“Anyone caught raping another is punished by death,” the foreman spelled it for him as if he was hardheaded.

The man rose from his chair and took a look out the window.

“Come here,” he told Dion, and the redhead approached cautiously.

“See the one there?” the foreman pointed out a nice looking guy, without a helmet on his blonde head. He was smoking and seemingly waiting. In just a few seconds, another man appeared and went straight to him. The blond kissed him shortly then got on his knees, unbuckling the man’s pants with shrewd moves. Dion watched, without daring to make a sound, as the blond blew the guy. As the man straightened his pants, the redhead saw how he gave the blond something. The beautiful one slipped the object into his pants, and then returned to his smoking.

“We have good, hard-working guys here. Of course, no one is fond of losing his head. The blond there? He decided he wanted the attention, so anyone who wants to have him comes here during breaks.”

“What did the man give him?” Dion asked, not knowing why that aspect mattered.

“A lighter, most probably. He is fond of his smoking habit, and he collects lighters. Others give him money.”

More men appeared as the foreman spoke. The blond just dropped his pants and turned to face the wall. The guys waited in line, patiently, while each took turns at the guy’s ass. The man only turned a little, each time one finished, to get his gift or pay and slide it into his pockets.

Dion felt disgusted to watch. The foreman looked bored. He shifted from one foot to another. The older man shook his head.

“Are you terrified I’m going to jump your bones, kid? Now, go back to your chair, and think. What’s going to be? This or that?”

Dion sat gingerly on the chair.

“What if I don’t want either?” he eventually asked.

The foreman ran his hands through his receding hair.

“Then you’ll give me a lot of work. If you’re too much trouble, I may have to ask for you to be moved.”

“Moved where?”

The man shrugged.

“There are places. Since you don’t want to be touched, you may as well show the goods.”

Dion’s eyes were big as saucers.

“Will I be forced into prostitution?”

“You’re misinterpreting, again. Strip clubs, that’s what they are. You’ll work the night shift, and dance on tables. If anyone touches you, well, that’s up to the bouncers to protect you. Anyway, you won’t be my problem anymore. For some reason, though, all the guys sent there, true, the prettier ones, start selling their ass, too. I guess it’s no fun just to let guys drool over you.”

Dion could only guess what the foreman didn’t care to tell him.

“How much time do I have?” he murmured.

“The sooner you decide, the better. Now out of my office. You’ve taken enough of my time.”

Dion felt his chest growing tighter. What was he going to do? It was not like Antoine had said, but worse, in a way. He would have to give his consent to let some guy or more pawing him. It was a new type of desperation he was experiencing. Choosing one guy seemed like the right option. What if the man was going to prove abusive? What if he was going to get someone as evil as Antoine? Men were punished for raping a guy, but what happened with those so-called partnerships? And how was he supposed to know he would pick right?

The other thing was out of the question. Dion was not going to live through that again. Being sent away was even worse. What was he going to do?

He was walking a long hallway, his head down, not noticing the group of men approaching.

“Hey, cutie,” one voice called, and his head snapped up.

Soon enough, he was almost surrounded by five men. His helmet was removed gently from his head, but he felt the need to take a step back.

“Don’t be afraid,” the man cooed, but he was feeling his heart beating fast, threatening to burst out of his chest.

“Nice hair,” one man caught a strand of Dion’s red hair and smelled it.

“Stop scaring him,” another pushed the man touching Dion’s hair. “Look, baby, we want to know if you’ve made your choice yet. If not, we have money. We’d like a go at you. What do you like? We can bring it to you,” the third man tried to sound friendly.

A cold chill was running down Dion’s spine. He was supposed to have a little more time. His eyes were running like a scared deer’s from one man to another.

“Fucking beautiful,” another man commented. “Do you think he’s a mute?” he asked the others.

“I’m not mute,” he eventually managed.

“Good. So what do you say?” the first man got a bit closer, invading his personal space.

Dion heard someone approaching. Maybe he could be saved. As his eyes searched for the man coming through, he realized it was the guy he’d seen on the first day eating alone. He did not seem to care about what was happening, though, and he was about to move along when Dion broke the circle surrounding him and hung on the dark man’s arm.

“I’m already taken,” he said, taking everyone by surprise.

Dark eyes stared into his from above, and Dion pleaded without words.

“What the hell? John, you fucking jerk, why didn’t you say anything?” one guy commented. “Since when are you two sworn for?” he asked suspiciously.

The dark man, whose name Dion had just learned was John, disentangled his arm from the redhead's grip, and the former servant felt sick to his stomach. Being exposed as a liar was not going to sit well with anyone. He cast his eyes down, but suddenly felt his shoulders captured by a warm, heavy hand.

"Since yesterday. My darling here is shy," he heard the man talking in a low, full, masculine voice that made him feel at ease. "Now give him his helmet back."

"Yeah, sorry," the first guy handed the helmet to John.

"Did you fuck him yet?" another asked, followed by the others' laughter.

"None of your fucking business. But yeah, and he's great in the sack, and you're having none of it," John threw over his shoulder as he was guiding Dion away from the group while placing the helmet gently on his head.

They were far from the others when Dion spoke.

"Thank you so much. I had no idea what to do."

The man's arm was still around his shoulders.

"I think I have to go," he said, a bit embarrassed.

"And where do you think you're going?" the man asked, his voice suddenly hard and cold.

"Um, home?" Dion said.

"Then that's where we are both going, darling," the man mocked, and Dion looked suddenly frightened at him. "When you're sworn for, you go live with your partner. From what rock have you crawled here? You're coming home with me."

"But," Dion felt as if suddenly he could not breathe.

"No buts. You imposed yourself on me like an idiot; now I have to. And, don't worry," the arm slid from his shoulders, "I'm not going to beg for your ass like the assholes over there. Your lot makes me sick."

Dion stood in place, frozen. John's words hit him like a ton of bricks. But it was what he wanted, right? He didn't want to be touched.

“What are you doing, standing there like that?” the man spat, annoyed. “The princess feels affronted? Suck it, buttercup,” he continued while taking Dion’s by one sleeve and dragging him along.

He had to plan well. The memories of being taken so hard by Xavier were making his insides turn and his jaw clench so hard that he almost could not breathe. The guy was an asshole, the worst kind, and Ayn wanted out as fast as possible.

He had to put on a front, too. After the episode when Ayn had tried to make a move on his Master, Xavier had made attempts at being gentler. Cory hadn’t burned the clothes, either. But all that didn’t mean that Ayn wasn’t hurt. Any ambivalent feelings he might have had for the guy, they were now turning into pure hatred. He wasn’t going to sit down and take it like a stupid bitch.

“Cory,” he cautiously approached the servant, “I think I should take a hike.”

The servant’s bright, beautiful eyes searched his.

“You’re not yet prepared. It’s not like you can waltz out of Drena, just like that.”

“Why not?” he shrugged. “It doesn’t look like there’s much security around,” his mind traveled to how easy it had been to palm that gun from the store visited together with Cory.

“Don’t you think they’ll ask you? At the gates?” Cory looked troubled.

“I’ll think of something,” the expression in Ayn’s dark eyes was determined. “We need to plan, though. I don’t want you involved in this. We need to make it look like I escaped ... and you couldn’t stop me, or something.”

Cory seemed to ponder for a while.

“Then I’ll think you’ll have to tie me up. And hit me,” the servant said calmly, and Ayn’s eyes grew wide.

“Why the fuck should I hit you?”

“I must be absolved of any guilt. Losing you while shopping, or letting you out because you just threatened me wouldn't do. I can face execution for it,” Cory continued, and Ayn frowned.

“It would not be your fault. Is this what you're facing? If I'm leaving?”

“If you hurt me, then they cannot hold anything against me. Playing the victim, as my part of the deal, is the only way.”

“Cory, I could not hit you, what the hell ...” Ayn murmured.

The servant came close to him and embraced him tightly. Ayn caressed the blond head. Cory was just too good for the world he was living in.

“How about leaving with me?” he said all of a sudden.

Blue eyes stared at him, a small glint of hope in them. Right away, they shut down.

“I couldn't. Lucas ... he's here.”

“Yes, of course,” Ayn caressed the servant's shoulders with affection.

“I know ...” Cory hesitated for a second but quickly continued. “I know that he will get bored one day. But I've never dreamed of living a long life, so what's so bad about making the best of what you have? He's everything I've ever dreamed of and more.”

“What's with these ideas?” Ayn felt uncomfortable. “It's not like you'll die without him.”

“People down there, working the factories, they don't live long.”

“Why? Is it that hard?”

Cory shook his head, suddenly pensive.

“No, work is hard but manageable. People ... they don't reach a certain age. It's like they hit a wall and die.”

“That's fucking strange,” Ayn mumbled. “No exceptions?”

“Not many. Guys in their 40s are a rarity. And, strangely enough, they are the ones in management positions. The rest ... it’s like they are expendables.”

Ayn felt a cold chill running down his spine.

“This is a fucking strange place. Now that I come to think of it, there are no old people inside the city, either.”

“You’re right,” Cory admitted. “Yet, death does not seem to be a presence here. I should ask Lucas about it.”

“Or not,” Ayn said, more fiercely than he intended. “Don’t forget, Cory. He’s practically one of them. He may be kind to you, but can you tell what he would do if you get too curious?”

Cory shook his head. Ayn had a point, but Lucas? He could not hide anything from him, and he was quite sure Lucas would not lie to him, either. Their encounters were usually torrid ones, and they spoke little to one another. How much did he know the man?

Dion had to admit that he liked what he saw. John’s place looked tidy and clean. The man had his own small home, even if it did not stand out that much from the rest.

“This is the kitchen, the bathroom, and the bedroom,” the man presented him the layout. “The hall at the entrance serves as a living room, too.”

“You have a nice house. I didn’t know these places could have so many rooms,” Dion expressed his admiration.

“They don’t. I built the interior walls,” the man said curtly, and Dion stared at him, nothing short of amazement in his hazel eyes.

John didn’t spare him a glance.

“Help yourself to the fridge. There is plenty of food. I’m going to take a shower,” he spoke quickly, efficiently and disappeared into the bathroom.

Dion took a look in the refrigerator. There were enough ingredients for at least a generous omelet, so he decided on the quick dish. Later on, he would have to create a menu, but right now there were pressing matters like rambling stomachs to tend to. He could bet John was hungry, too.

He had the table laid out by the time the man came out of the shower. He looked a bit younger, out of his factory clothes, and dressed in some soft flannel outfit. He was still massive, making the small kitchen look even smaller, as he sat at the table.

“I didn’t ask you to cook for me,” he commented sourly, although Dion could tell he was eyeing the full plate with poorly concealed interest.

“We started on the wrong foot. This is the least I can do,” Dion spoke.

“Wrong foot, eh?” John seemed amused, but he dug into his plate without a word and Dion joined him.

They ate in silence. Dion stood and picked up the dishes.

“You don’t have to play servant here. I’m not your master,” the man spoke in a low voice.

Dion looked into the dark eyes. A rebellious strand of black hair was almost glued to the tall forehead. It made John look at bit more ... without thinking, the redhead rose his hand and pushed the strand to the side.

The man flinched from the touch.

“What kind of game do you think you’re playing?” he stood up with an angry expression on his face.

“I’m not playing anything,” Dion breathed out. It looked like he was walking on eggshells, no matter what he was doing.

“Yes, you are. You just got here, and you’re playing house.”

Dion cast his eyes down.

“I apologize. It’s everything I know.”

“Oh, really? You don’t know anything else?” the man’s voice sounded dangerous, as he approached Dion, invading his private space.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know,” John got even closer. “You Drena whores only know how to wrap men around your fingers, don’t you?”

Dion blushed and suddenly felt angered.

“I am not a whore,” he said through his teeth, as he pushed John aside.

He needed air. His arm was caught, and John pulled him back.

“Is this your act to make me beg to have you? It won’t work, princess,” he said menacingly.

“It’s no act. I would not dream of having the likes of you touch me,” Dion spat, and regretted his words right away.

John released his arm as if he had been burned.

“All right, then. Make yourself at home,” he said mockingly. “Stay out of my way, as much as possible. You can take the bedroom; I’ll have the couch.”

Dion could not stop the feeling of dread washing over him, as John slammed the door to head to the so-called living room. He had no idea how to handle the man.

“There seems to be a lot of things on your mind lately,” Lucas kissed Cory’s shoulder gently, making the young man shudder and lean into the other male.

“It’s nothing. Just a bit tired, I think,” the servant said right away.

Lucas did not believe a thing. But it was too tempting to bury himself in Cory’s body, as he let all the weariness of the day wash away and only enjoy the feeling of having the one he adored so much in his arms, pliant under his touch.

“Damn, that hurt,” Cory commented, working his jaw.

“You fucking asked for it,” Ayn said exasperatedly. “I think you’ll have a nice bruise, though,” he grinned.

“Jerk,” Cory stuck out his tongue, but let himself tied to the chair with the improvised ropes Ayn had made from some clothes.

“Do you think you can play the fool?” Ayn asked, concern visible in his eyes.

“I think I’m pretty good at it,” Cory said proudly, although an unsettling thought was nagging him, reminding him how Lucas was poking him for info he did not care to share.

“All right, then, all set,” Ayn added, admiring his handiwork. He pulled a bit at Cory’s clothes until he ripped the fabric.

Cory giggled.

“You fucking look too good like that,” Ayn commented playfully.

They laughed, but, like on cue, they both stopped and shared a long, meaningful look.

“I guess this is goodbye or something,” Ayn said embarrassed.

“Yes,” Cory admitted.

“We may not see each other again,” Ayn added.

“I hope so,” Cory grinned.

Ayn closed the distance and embraced the young servant awkwardly.

“You should go,” Cory whispered, not wanting to show how much Ayn’s departure meant to him.

It had been unfortunate enough to learn about Dion being sent to the factories outside the city gates. Now he was losing another friend.

He had no reason to go home at that hour, but Xavier thought the break was going to do him good, even if he was going to spend half an hour with Ayn and Cory.

The slave was still mad at him, for the incident from that day, so he had to tread lightly around him. He was quite sure he was going to win Ayn over again, despite that unfortunate mishap.

As he entered the house, he frowned. It was unusual for his penthouse to be so quiet. Cory should have been at the door right away.

“Cory,” he called and stopped dead in his tracks as he saw Ayn standing right in front of him, dressed like that particular day.

There was something odd about his slave. Xavier’s eyes traveled to the slave’s right hand and froze. Blood ran to his feet.

Ayn raised the weapon casually.

“TRK-106,” he commented with dark glee in his voice, startling Xavier.

In a second, he was all over the Master of the house, with the barrel of the gun resting right under the man’s chin.

“I doubt I should explain to you what it can do,” Ayn whispered.

“Who are you?” Xavier managed to talk.

“Do you have to ask, Master?” Ayn mocked. “I am Ayn, your personal, dear slave.”

“Did you kill Cory?”

Ayn chuckled.

“He’ll live. I guess. Now, onto more pressing matters. I heard you ride a fucking awesome car. I want to see that. Move.”

“What do you think you can do? The moment we are out this door ...” Xavier spoke, as Ayn turned him unceremoniously and pushed the gun onto his side.

“... we will walk right to your car, we’ll get inside, and you will drive me out of this shithole. If anyone’s asking, we’re out for a bit of a stroll.”

“You won’t get away with this,” Xavier spoke.

“Watch me. Care for a trip to the wild side, Xavier?”

For a brief moment, Ayn’s hot breath touched Xavier’s cheek. He only had to touch his right hand with the left and search for the panic button on his bracelet. But as quickly as the thought came, it flew away.

Xavier opened the door, and let Ayn guide him outside. For the first time in his life, something unpredictable was about to happen.

In the dark, helpless witness to the angry conversation in the hallways, Cory felt his insides turn. *What are you doing, Ayn?*

Chapter Ten

“From the start. Again,” the Trainer’s voice sounded even and voided of any emotion.

Cory struggled to keep his cool and began to retell the story. How he had come back to the apartment, it had been dark, he had been hit and then tied up. No, he had no idea what happened. The slave? He had left him at home when he went shopping, as he had to ready the dinner for that night. No, he had not heard anything. Yes, his Master had come home unexpectedly early.

They kept on asking him the same questions, to tire him. He was not stupid. He knew they only waited for him to make a mistake, to forget or misplace a detail in his story. It was like the Trainers had forgotten he had been trained at the Institution. Molded by it. There, no one could have any secrets. Those who had..., well, he could say fate was not kind to them.

So he continued to retell the story, careful not to miss anything. He knew that they wanted him to say something wrong so that they could find him guilty. Then, it would have been nothing but a formality to lock him up or worse, start to run an investigation to find Lord Xavier, and close the case. At least as far as Cory was concerned. The guilty one once found everyone could see about business as usual. After that, there was no way of telling what could happen. Ayn and Lord Xavier had to be far away by now.

His legs were starting to ache, but he continued. He had lost count of how many times he had said the same thing, over and over again. Words were starting to lose their meaning, and he had to focus hard on each one.

At some point, one of the Trainers got up from the chair and went to the back. There was a short break, during which the remaining two whispered something to one another. Minutes passed until eventually, the First Trainer came back with someone.

Cory’s face fell for a split second. Green eyes were measuring him up and down, as Lucas took a seat.

“Lord Lucas, should we listen again so that we can reach a verdict?” the First Trainer asked, turning towards Cory’s lover. “You know the servant better than anyone else.”

Was he going to stand there and say the same lies, with Lucas’s inquisitive eyes trying to reach deep into his soul?

“No, I’ve heard enough,” Lucas answered, but he did not look at the First Trainer, but continued to keep his eyes on Cory. “He’s telling the truth. I am afraid this is a dead end. We need to seek additional information. I’ve seen the recording from the gate cameras. It appears Lord Xavier left Drena yesterday at 17 hundred hours, accompanied by his slave.”

“We need to see the tape, too,” the First Trainer said, looking a bit offended that he had not been informed.

“We need to analyze the new data,” Lucas said, seemingly not impressed with the First Trainer’s displeasure. “Since there is nothing to gain from this,” he gestured toward Cory, “I highly recommend the investigation committee to move forward.”

“So, the final verdict?” the First Trainer turned to his papers to make an annotation.

“Servant Cory tells the truth. He is not involved in Lord Xavier’s kidnapping.”

“Kidnapping?” the First Trainer stopped for a second, his pen in the air as if a sudden, intriguing revelation had stricken him.

“Yes, I believe this is the right term. Dismiss the servant,” Lucas said.

“He will be released into your service, will he not, Lord Lucas?” another Trainer spoke, and Lucas turned towards him, vaguely annoyed.

“Yes, Lord Xavier authorized me to take care of his belongings, including servants and slaves, in case of an unfortunate event. Let’s hope,” Lucas paused for dramatic effect, “that this is only temporary, and the event in itself is nothing but a big misunderstanding. We all hope to bring Lord Xavier back home.”

The Trainers rose to leave. They looked like dark gray shadows, moving without a sound, as they left the room. Lucas rose and looked at Cory with something unreadable in his beautiful eyes.

“Am I free to go?” Cory eventually dared to ask.

He had been calm and steady all throughout the interrogation. Now, under Lucas’s intense gaze, he felt sweat oozing through all his pores. Lucas didn’t answer; he just moved slowly, stopping for a brief moment by Cory’s side.

“You’re lying,” Lucas said curtly, in a cold whisper, and Cory froze.

One full minute passed after Lucas left and until he could move again. He had fooled the Trainers, but he could not trick Lucas.

Xavier had been driving for hours. Vast nothingness stretched in front of his eyes, with no clue or landmark to show him where they were as they rode through the desert.

“Do you at least have an idea where we are going?” he asked haughtily, although he was hoping for an answer this time around.

No matter how much he had tried to speak to Ayn since they had left Drena, the only replies he had gotten were short grunts and indications to continue to drive.

“Of course I do. I’m not the stupid monkey you thought I was,” Ayn commented.

It was not the best answer to hope for, but at least it was something.

“I’ve never thought you to be a stupid monkey. Merely ... uneducated.”

Ayn snorted.

“It appears that we’re stuck with each other for now,” Xavier spoke as if this was merely a nuisance and not the kind of situation that by now, must have taken Drena by storm. “At least you could offer some conversation.”

“Conversation?” Ayn snickered, obviously amused. “Yeah, no one could say we had that much of that. You were too busy fucking my ass.”

“I thought you could not understand anything I was saying,” Xavier felt the need to explain. Although, he was ready to admit Ayn was right, in that particular regard.

“What difference would that have made?” Ayn shrugged.

“None, of course,” Xavier shrugged, pursing his lips.

“Good. At least, you’re honest.”

“Don’t mind me asking, but where are you taking me? And do you think I will disappear into thin air, without armies,” Xavier paused to make the not so well veiled threat understood, “being sent to find me, and of course, exact the punishment in your case.”

Ayn just smiled, and looked ahead, as if the road was his friend, and Xavier was a fool to even speak of them being found, let alone think it to be true.

The young man looked even more beautiful, with the rays of the fading sun playing on his face and hair through the car window. He also seemed a bit different. There was energy radiating from him. Suddenly, Xavier realized, it was something he had never witnessed in his slave. It was happiness. Ayn was happy to be free.

“Technically, you are the one driving, so your question? It’s a bit off, don’t you think?” Ayn turned a little to stare at him.

For a couple of seconds, they looked at one another. Ayn frowned.

“Keep your fucking eyes on the road.”

There was more silence. Xavier continued, looking forward, as Ayn had indicated.

“Are you wondering if I am going to sell you back to your friends in Drena?” Ayn was the first to speak.

“That’s one thought. It would be wise of you. Although ... more than a bit risky,” Xavier admitted.

“It could be done. I suppose you would fetch a nice price. Much higher than what you paid for me.”

“If you want to know, I paid quite a lot for you,” Xavier commented.

Ayn huffed.

“That’s not something I want to know.”

“All right. So, are you going to negotiate my release then?”

“I agree that’s one thought. I didn’t say I would do it.”

“What are the other options, then?” Xavier straightened one of his gloves quickly, a bit annoyed at the patch of skin showing just above the sleeve.

“Worried about your safety, Master?” Ayn mocked. “Are you afraid I would kill you and bury you here, in the desert, without all the bells and whistles of a Drena funeral?”

“There are no funerals in Drena,” Xavier said curtly.

“You’re shitting me, right?” Ayn stretched his legs, placing them on the dashboard.

“You’re like immortal and shit?”

“Of course not.”

“Anyways, what do you think of this little option?” Ayn spoke. “How would you like being the slave for a change? What would you say about that?”

“I hope you don’t expect me to say I would like that. Mistreating me would not do you any good. Seeing that you might be able to negotiate my release for a hefty sum, you should see to my protection. So that you can deliver me unharmed.”

“Fair enough,” Ayn nodded. “But you are a pretty mean bastard. Which means you should suffer a bit.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Xavier asked feeling a bit of trepidation starting to pool in his upper belly while showing none of it.

“It means that I am taking you home. My home. What will happen next, I’ll have to think about it. If I haven’t thought already,” Ayn added enigmatically.

Xavier looked at the other briefly. Ayn seemed content, in control. Something Xavier used to be, just several hours prior. Or so he thought.

Dion knocked hesitantly. Hearing no sound of acknowledgment from the other side, he knocked again. Still nothing. Eventually, he turned the knob and entered the room. John was watching TV, a sour expression on his face.

“I knocked,” Dion said matter-of-factly.

“I know, I am not deaf,” John said, a bit exasperated.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Maybe because I didn’t want you to come in here. What? Are you displeased with the accommodations? Tough luck, this isn’t Drena,” John continued without even looking at Dion.

“All right. Who pissed in your food?” Dion asked, a bit annoyed. He was usually tame, but John was surely hitting a nerve with that attitude.

“Wow, I didn’t know your type knows words like that,” John mocked. “Look, princess ...”

“My name is not ‘princess’. My name is Dion.”

“No shit. My house, my rules.”

“Like hell,” Dion retorted.

It was not like him to talk back. After the beatings he had gotten from Antoine, one would have thought he had learned his lesson well.

But he was not afraid of John. It was strange to think such a thing, but since they had gotten inside John’s home and sat together at a table, he had not felt threatened, not even for a second. John looked upset, but not angered. He looked strong, but not violent. Dion could not pinpoint the feeling he got inside when looking at the man.

“All right, enough talking,” John stood up and grabbed Dion by the arm.

He was not forceful, and he was not holding Dion too tightly. But he was determined as he pushed the redhead through the door and closed it behind him, almost slapping Dion’s ass in the process.

Dion felt the sudden need to turn and tell the guy a thing or two. But he resisted for the moment and went to the bedroom to sleep. Then it hit him, what he had wanted to tell John; that the bed in the bedroom was too large for him, and the couch in the living room could have been better for Dion's smaller frame.

Ah, well, the annoying jerk had just earned himself a bad night's sleep.

Dread was too little a word to describe what Cory felt as he set foot in Lucas's house, this time not as a guest, or a lover, but as property. He had a distinct feeling that Lucas was going to run his own interrogation and it was not going to go down too well.

He went directly to the kitchen to prepare food. He needed something to do with his hands to calm the turmoil in his head. Could he tell Lucas the truth? What was going to happen to him after that? Was Lucas going to give up on him? Just like that? Apparently, there was not much between them anyway. Except for sex. Great sex. The type that felt as if it meant more. Whatever that was supposed to mean.

He was about to dress the table when he heard the front door. He stopped dead in his tracks. Lucas appeared in the door frame and stared at him.

He could not make sense of what Lucas meant with that look. It was not inquisitive, not that much, at least, it was not hurt, although he could feel the tension in the air between them.

"You belong to me now," Lucas eventually spoke, as he moved towards the servant.

Cory nodded. He cast his eyes down. Strong, firm hands, hands he knew well now, cupped his cheeks and made him look up. His lips were captured in a fierce kiss, and Cory felt lost. Could it be that Lucas was not mad with his lie?

A hot tongue was in his mouth, making him dizzy, as large hands cupped his ass and lifted him from the kitchen floor. He could feel Lucas's firm erection through his thin pants; his own cock was rising to meet the challenge.

Suddenly, he was turned, made to bend over the table, while his pants were forced down, over his ass. He felt the air hitting the skin, and his breath hitched in his chest. Lucas was not usually so assertive in expressing his desire. He always cared about apologizing if he got carried away. It almost made Cory, every time, beg for Lucas to lose control a little.

What happened took him by surprise. The slap was short, well placed and it stung like hell. It made Cory yelp in distress.

“So, my little Cory,” Lucas spoke, and his voice was now low and dangerous. “How do you dare to lie like that?”

“I didn’t ... Ouch!” he yelled again, as his other buttock received the same treatment. “Lucas, please ...”

“No,” came the short reply. “What happened actually with Xavier and Ayn?”

“I don’t know ...”

Another slap made him lose his breath. Behind him, Lucas’s breathing was becoming a bit labored, too. At least, he had to put some work into spanking the servant.

“The truth, Cory, or you won’t be able to sit down for a while,” Lucas warned.

Cory tried to move, but a hand on his back was keeping him in place. “Please, Master,” he begged.

“Don’t play that card with me,” Lucas spat, and this time, the slap felt more vicious.

Cory was on the point of breaking. It was not because it hurt, although it did; it was because it was Lucas punishing him, and it was because he knew Lucas was right. He was lying.

“If you think this is bad, let me give you the heads up on the plans the Trainers had for you, in case I would have told them the truth,” Lucas spoke. “They would have cut off your tongue, and then sewn your lips together so you would choke on your own blood.”

Cory felt his knees buckling under him, but again, the firm hand on his ass kept him in place.

“Should I continue or will you start talking?” Lucas cooed this time.

He hesitated. He had no idea why he was waiting. Another slap came, and this time Cory just let the tears flow.

“You do realize what I am risking with this. Not a slap on the wrist. Not my career. But my life. I believe you’re smart enough to understand what accessory to crime means,” Lucas continued, as his slaps fell on Cory’s ass, making his lover’s ass redder and redder.

“Stop, please, I’ll talk,” Cory breathed out.

He had not thought about it. He was putting Lucas in danger. How could he have been so stupid? Suddenly, it looked as if it had been better if he could convince Ayn to stay and adjust to being Lord Xavier’s toy. It would not have been such a bad life after all. What was he thinking now? Ayn was a free man. He had to be free!

Lucas caressed the red butt cheeks lovingly. “Speak now, Cory,” he cooed.

There was a torrent of words as Cory began to talk. He was going to get executed, but at least he was not taking Lucas with him. At least that he could do. The hand caressing his abused ass didn’t stop and didn’t waver as he talked.

“Good,” Lucas commended him when he finished.

Cory felt the man move and walking away. He just stood there, bent over, emotionally wasted, his backside hurting like hell. He could not run if he wanted to.

Lucas came back, and he felt something cold and soothing being slowly applied on his ass.

“Are ... are you going to turn me in?” Cory spoke.

“No, what kind of monster do you think I am?” Lucas asked, as he carefully rubbed the salve on Cory’s butt.

“Are you going to tell them? Are they going to go after them? Are they going to kill Ayn?” Cory grew more and more agitated.

“No, I am not going to tell them,” Lucas said in the same even tone.

He even sounded affectionate. Cory could not understand.

“But ... why? Lord Xavier is your friend ...”

“I believe Xavier is okay where he is. And, if he isn’t, it is entirely his choice,” Lucas answered.

His ass was feeling much, much better. Cory exhaled, as he felt the hand creeping between his ass cheeks and fingers slowly teasing his hole. He bucked his ass up, wanting more, the safety of the act, the security of being embraced by Lucas again. The hand descended, touching his balls and cock, stirring the organ back to life.

“What do you think of this, Cory?” Lucas teased. “Was your punishment uncalled for? Was it too much? I must warn you that it feels better now, but tomorrow it will still hurt. Quite badly. And the day after tomorrow. Then a bit less.”

“No, I guess ... I guess I should not have lied to you,” Cory said in all honesty while wiggling his ass to get more of Lucas’s fingers inside.

“Good answer, my Cory,” Lucas pressed against his back and turned his head to the side to kiss him. “Now, would you be terribly upset with me if I fucked you?”

“Don’t ask. Just take me,” Cory whispered, and he was penetrated swiftly, with no other preparation but the little salve that had been pushed inside by Lucas’s fingers as he had been teasing him.

Whatever anger Lucas still had inside, it was going away fast. Their coupling was wild, no imposed rhythm, nothing but thrust after thrust, until Cory came all over the kitchen floor, despite feeling his lover stretching and tearing him like never before. In turn, Lucas filled him to the brim with his seed, with a low grunt.

They stood there, both still dressed up, panting.

“Why ... why do you believe Lord Xavier is fine?” Cory eventually spoke, his voice a bit hoarse from all the crying followed by moans of ecstasy as Lucas had fucked him.

“Because he didn’t activate the alarm.”

“What alarm?” Cory asked.

“Xavier wears a bracelet on his right wrist if you noticed. Inside there is a small sensor. Easy to activate through an effortless move. No one else could. From what you’re telling me, Xavier could have done it anytime. I am not going to impose on his choice. He must know better.”

“The bracelet, I mean, the alarm ... can he activate it from anywhere he is? Even if he is very, very far?”

“It has quite a large range. Unless they left the continent ... I suppose he can still activate it.”

Lucas rose and dragged Cory up. “I am so sorry about this. But I could not allow you to lie to me. Do you understand?”

Cory rested his head against Lucas’s broad chest. “I do.”

He hesitated for a second, then he asked. “Did you ... enjoy it more than usual?”

“Of course, you showed how much you trust me,” Lucas said quickly.

Cory knew there was something else, but didn’t press the matter. There was something new about his lover he was learning every day.

They reached the gates of the settlement as dawn was breaking. They had driven the entire night; Xavier felt tired, worn to the bone.

“Home, sweet home,” Ayn spoke, and Xavier looked around.

It appeared as everything was made of scrap metal. The walls looked tall and grim, nothing like the beautiful design carved into the wooden gates guarding Drena.

The gates moved with a loud screech, as Ayn got out of the car and hurried to meet someone coming out.

“Don’t you dare try running away,” he spat, as he walked away.

Xavier thought for a brief second. He could turn and leave. Drive away. But there was the small beeping alarm telling him the tank was almost empty, and the sensation in his chest he could not quench that was encouraging him to move forward, to follow Ayn and see what was going to happen next.

Ayn came back and urged him to move the car. Slowly, they entered the settlement.

“What is this place?” Xavier mumbled, mostly to himself, as small buildings, made of the same scrap metal, spread everywhere appeared in front of his eyes. A few men, women and even a few kids, were starting to get out their homes and they were staring at the newcomers.

“Welcome to Haven,” Ayn spoke. “My little corner of paradise,” he added smugly, as he let the window down and took his head out to speak to the people passing by and laugh with them. “Now, keep that smart mouth of yours shut, ok?”

Xavier stayed in the car after Ayn told him to stop. He watched as Ayn spoke to a few young men, all dressed almost in the same fashion as his former slave. They were all stealing glances in Xavier’s direction, and he could bet they were asking what was up with him.

Ayn came to the car and opened the door.

“Come out,” he gestured, and Xavier climbed out of the vehicle and into the open air.

He had no idea he could feel so much peace inside to let himself in someone else’s hands. Of course, that didn’t mean he didn’t keep his head high as he got out of the car. Ayn grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him along.

“So, that’s him?” one of the guys asked.

“He’s fucking sexy,” a younger man commented, and they all laughed.

“Hands off, he’s mine,” Ayn said, and Xavier felt the sensation in his chest growing warmer.

“He’d be good to sell back to those Drena fuckers,” an older one spoke this time, seemingly annoyed with the attention the stranger was getting.

“No,” Ayn said sternly. “I said he’s mine,” he added, as he looked at the others with something fierce in his eyes.

Xavier stared at his ex-slave. It all seemed strange, like in a dream.

“Come on, Ayn, it’s not like you swing that way,” the young one teased. “Give him to me. Just one time.”

“No way, fucker,” Ayn flipped the bird at him.

“You’re letting all this nice ass go to waste?” another asked and shamelessly slapped Xavier’s ass.

Ayn pushed him with his free hand.

“What the hell dude? I told you; hands off!”

“Wow, chill, man, you sure got freaky,” the man raised his hands in surrender.

“My house, still everything there?” Ayn questioned. “No one touched my stuff?”

“No one would be crazy enough. Although you were gone like half a year or something,” one reproached.

Ayn shrugged. “Good to know you do not forget who I am. Scrap the car.”

“But it’s a nice car,” the young one complained.

“Too nice. You don’t want anyone riding your ass for that. Scrap it. Also, here is a small souvenir,” he threw the gun he had used to threaten Xavier. “Sell it at the market in Aeria. You’ll get enough to buy yourself a stiff drink. Or charm a girl,” he joked.

“Wow, this is for me, Ayn?” the youngster’s eyes were shining.

“Yeah, kiddo,” Ayn ruffled his hair in passing, while he dragged Xavier after him.

“Why did you give him the gun?” Xavier asked.

“It’s useless. No bullets. Ammo for that kind of shit is hard to come by. But it’s flashy, and it can get the girls all wet and ready.”

“No bullets?” Xavier asked, dumbfounded.

“Yeah. I was lucky enough to steal that, though. It sure made you piss your pants,” Ayn commented gleefully, as he pushed Xavier through the door inside a house that didn’t look any worse or better than the others. “Here it is, my home,” he spoke, and Xavier looked around.

It was just a room with a bed and a small kitchenette next to it. Another door was probably leading to the bathroom. That was all. It looked barren and dismal.

“Am I supposed to say anything?” Xavier asked. “About ... this?” he waved his right hand, derisively.

His irony was not lost on Ayn.

“Feeling high and mighty all of a sudden?” Ayn pushed him down to take a seat on the bed. “I could always let the guys have a bit of fun with you, you know?” he said, a dark expression on his face.

“You told them I’m yours,” gray eyes rose to meet the dark pools of Ayn’s eyes.

“That you are,” Ayn agreed.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Xavier asked while crossing his legs and looking at Ayn with no sign of feeling intimidated.

“It means that,” Ayn closed the distance and pushed Xavier onto the bed, “I will be top dog now.”

Xavier didn’t back down and pushed back on his elbows to get up. “In your dreams.”

“Really?” Ayn challenged. “Wanna bet?”

“Bet on what? You have nothing,” Xavier threw a look around, to make his insinuation clearer.

“You’re so full of it,” Ayn huffed. “I can do what I want with you.”

“What? Kill me? You had the chance, and you didn’t,” Xavier pointed out the obvious.

“I still can. Whenever I want,” Ayn took a step back and let his eyes linger on Xavier’s body with intent.

“Then why don’t you?” Xavier looked him dead in the eyes.

“Because I don’t think fucking a corpse would be any fun,” Ayn grinned wildly, making that thing growing inside Xavier make summersaults.

Dion was sure more and more he liked John’s small home. The bathroom was sparkling clean, clinical even, given the outside conditions, and, although small, it had everything. He decided on a quick shower. There was a long day ahead, so he let the hot stream hit his body and started to wash.

He did not hear the door opening. Only when someone climbed into the small bathtub next to him, he realized he was not alone.

He was not so ceremoniously pushed a bit aside, as John started to wash next to him.

“Hot water is a luxury around here, princess,” he commented, and Dion felt a bit guilty.

He grabbed a few hands full of water to rinse whatever parts were still covered in soap and got out quickly, avoiding brushing against John but failing a few times. He took a towel to dry and wrap around his waist; then he began brushing his teeth while stealing glances at the man in the shower. John’s body was hard, muscles everywhere, but the kind obtained through hard work, not running a treadmill. He could not help look at the man’s organ as he turned.

Dion gulped unconsciously. The man was big in every department, including that. One could not tell without seeing that cock in its aroused state, but even half asleep, it looked pretty impressive. Antoine was endowed, and it had always hurt

when he had fucked Dion, but this guy looked even bigger. He continued to stare, the toothbrush still in his mouth. Was that thing growing?

“Hey, quit staring,” he heard John speaking, and he shook his head quickly. “If you wanted cock, you should have taken the guys up on their offer.”

He pretended not to hear. He finished his grooming and got out. After getting dressed, he waited for John. It was to be expected for them to go to work together. They barely had time to eat a sandwich and grab a cup of coffee, which he had already prepared.

When John came back from his shower, they ate in silence. He waited for the man to get up from his chair and head to the door then followed.

As soon as they were out the door, John grabbed him by the shoulders, taking him by surprise. Startled, he looked up. John didn't even grace him with as much as a glance.

“To the outside world, we're supposed to be all lovey-dovey,” the guy explained, the gloom never leaving his face.

Dion looked ahead. It felt good to have that large, heavy and warm hand on his shoulder. It almost made him feel wanted.

As they met others, John waved at them, and Dion politely exchanged a few words. Most guys were congratulating John for landing such a beauty to be his partner. Dion could tell his cheeks were red from embarrassment. Even if some of the comments were a bit racy, they were genuine, and he did not feel humiliated.

When they were supposed to part ways, to go about their work, John dragged him into a warm embrace and kissed him on the lips.

“Take care, darling,” he drawled out the words, making Dion feel a bit strange in the pit of the stomach.

There had been just a small brush of their lips, but it made Dion want to suddenly grab the man by the neck and show him a real kiss. A real kiss? What did Dion know about that? Antoine had taught him everything. Including that. He suddenly felt ill.

John frowned. “Well, I’m afraid you will have to put up with these little things when in public, princess,” he whispered in Dion’s ear so that no one could hear them. “Otherwise, you know I would not touch you with a stick.”

He walked away, and Dion felt deserted. He didn’t want John to think like this about him. John’s kiss had felt nice, it had felt as Dion was sure a kiss was supposed to feel, but he had just stood there, with a stricken expression on his face as the man walked away.

He had to put some things in order. For some reason, he wanted John to appreciate him, to ... what? Want him?

It was not until the afternoon when they had to have lunch when he saw John again. He took his tray and sat next to the man and started talking. He talked about what had happened at work so far, about some gossip he heard, anything, to prevent the silence from creeping between them.

“What are you? A chatterbox?” John stopped him, obviously annoyed.

“I thought ... maybe you wanted a little conversation?” Dion spoke.

“I only want to eat,” the man gestured towards his plate.

“All right,” Dion agreed and focused on eating, too.

“Hey, John,” he heard someone talking and saw a worker approaching.

John just nodded.

“Heard you got yourself another cutie,” the man commented, and Dion suddenly became all ears.

Another?

“Yeah, what do you know,” John offered an ambiguous answer.

“Andreas is a big hit down at Venusville,” the man commented. “He’s like the biggest earner and stuff.”

“No doubt,” John spoke.

Dion was looking at the man who had taken a seat across from them.

“How could you let that sweet piece of ass go, John?”

“None of your business,” came another quick reply.

“Well, at least, you got another. Just keep this one on a tighter leash,” the man joked and walked away, evidently dissatisfied with John’s lack of interest in any conversation.

“Who’s Andreas?” Dion commented.

“My ex,” John answered, and offered nothing else more.

“Ex? Aren’t partnerships supposed to be ... forever?”

“Guys change their mind. It’s not unusual. Did you hear me saying any vows? Did you? Don’t get your hopes high with me. I know I don’t. Eventually, you’ll leave, at some point.”

“Why would I?” Dion demanded, a bit exasperated and, admittedly, a bit afraid, too. “Will you kick me out?”

For a brief second, John turned to look into Dion’s beautiful hazel eyes. “No. But know that the door is open. And the sooner you go, the better. For both of us.”

“I won’t go,” Dion said, determined.

“We’ll see. In the meantime, stop getting on my nerves. Be grateful I took you in.”

“I am grateful,” Dion protested.

“Just throwing me a ‘thank you’ like you would throw a bone to a dog is not enough, princess,” John continued, his voice becoming frostier and frostier. “You stay in my house, eat my food, steal my hot water, and no one bothers you. So I’m afraid a little ‘thank you’ is too small a pay. Even for a guy like me, coming from a guy like you.”

Dion gulped, feeling nervous. All in all, John was right. Sort of. “What do you mean? How are you and me different?”

John stopped again and frowned, while their eyes clashed again. “I’ve lived here all my life. I’ll die here, too. You came here down from cloud number nine and

expected the fairytale to continue. If you want it to keep up, though, you'll have to offer something in return. It's a small price, and you have plenty."

Dion grabbed his temples, feeling them throbbing. "Plenty of what? What are you saying?"

John suddenly reached for him, grabbing a handful of red strands. What he said afterward made Dion gasp. "You're fucking beautiful. Out of my league. Like you are out of anyone's league around here. But a bunch of guys to worship your every step you take ... offering you everything you want, that may work. And you only need to be willing to take some cocks in your mouth and ass. Seeing where you're coming from, I suppose you are used to it, so what's the problem?"

The former servant felt the world spinning around them. John had just managed to compliment him and insult him in only a few phrases. He blushed, mostly because he felt anger seeping in.

"I'm not like that."

John let go of his hair. "Yes, you are. You don't know it yet."

"What happened with Andreas that made you so mean?" Dion blurted out.

"None of your business," John turned to see about his food.

"Well, it is. Because I am your partner and I need to know," the redhead said stubbornly.

John laughed. "Really? My partner? We sleep in different beds. We only touch in public. That's not much of a partnership."

"Then come sleep with me at night," Dion found himself talking.

"Darling," John suddenly got dangerously close and grabbed Dion's waist. Their lips got so close, Dion hoped for a kiss. "I am not talking about sleeping," he added, and then, just like that, he was back at what he was doing before, leaving Dion to stand there, mouth slightly parted, feeling like a fool.

The alarm blared.

“Now you’ll have to go hungry,” John gestured towards Dion’s almost untouched plate. “That will teach you to run your mouth while you’re supposed to eat.”

Dion said nothing back. He was in no mood for eating, anyway.

Several days later, he felt confident enough to walk outside, without John. There was little to no conversation between them, and Dion wanted, needed that to stop. He had thought about what John had said about him not being grateful. So he was trying his best to tidy up the house and cook, but it didn’t look like John was impressed with his efforts.

With his first paycheck in his pocket, he went shopping.

The small stores located in the central area didn’t look like much, but they had all the necessities. He counted the money in his pocket mentally. He purchased general stuff he knew they were missing or starting to deplete, and then he walked around, in search of something special. He had to say a proper ‘thank you’. John was right.

“What are looking for, sugar?” the shopkeeper asked him.

“Alcohol,” Dion said, after a short moment of hesitation. “But something ... a bit better.”

The shopkeeper nodded, all knowingly. He stole a quick glance towards the door, and then he took something from under the counter.

Dion took the small bottle. He recognized the brand.

“Drena stuff. Top shelf. 500 credits, it’s all yours, hun,” the man rubbed his hands.

500? Dion shook his head. That was half of what he got. And he hadn’t dared to ask, but most probably he was not going to get any more money until next month. Whatever, he had to. He placed the money on the table, and the man grinned. It was strange to think about money when back in Drena, he could spend it on anything he wanted – or actually, his Master wanted – without worrying about it.

After buying the rest of the groceries, he ended up without little in his pocket. He was going to have to think this through better next time.

He entered the house and started to cook. He even made dessert, and he was even feeling happy. The kitchen had always been a safe place for him. Antoine hadn't cared about coming there to torment him; a brief thought touched him.

He heard John coming in, and he blushed a little. Was he going to enjoy Dion's small gift?

John nodded at him in passing, while going to the bathroom to wash. Dion just nodded back. It was their way of greeting. Without words, since John was seemingly allergic to hearing Dion talking.

John came back from changing into his house clothes and sat at the table.

"What's the occasion?" he asked, eyeing the exquisite food on the plate.

"My first pay," Dion explained as he took a seat, as well.

"Congratulations," John said and started eating.

Dion was looking at him from time to time to gauge the man's reactions. Eventually, John raised his eyes to look at him.

"What?" he snapped.

"How do you like the food?" Dion asked, counting to three in his mind to avoid getting snappy, too.

"It's good," John said shortly, and Dion's face fell. "All right, it's great. You're a great cook," John added. "Better now?"

"Yes, thank you," Dion got back to his food, trying to hide a small smile.

The look in John's eyes when he brought the dessert, though, was better than words. The man practically devoured the éclair and smacked his lips in satisfaction. When they looked at one another again, Dion could not help feeling a bit smug.

“All right, princess, as far as cooking skills are concerned, you’re a keeper,” John winked at him and rose.

Dion took care of the dishes, while John went to his room. Although the man had insisted against Dion always taking care of the chores, the former servant had been so fierce about it, that John had finally given up.

He took the bottle from the place he kept it hidden and then took a deep breath. He knocked softly, waiting for John’s sullen ‘come in’ to enter the room.

As always, John didn’t spare him a glance. Dion placed himself between John and the TV and quietly handed him the bottle.

John looked up, annoyed. His eyes grew wide when he saw the gift. He took it slowly and stared at it. “Brandy, huh?”

“I thought you’d like it,” Dion spoke.

“I do. Thanks,” the man looked a bit embarrassed. “You spent a fortune on this, didn’t you?”

“Don’t bother,” Dion shook his head.

There was a moment of silence, and John looked up at him while putting the bottle aside. The light in the room was growing dim.

Dion suddenly knelt next to the couch, to be on eye level with John. The man didn’t move, as Dion hesitantly placed a hand on John’s chest that was now rising and falling more rapidly.

Dion felt lost, too. He was not good at this. He wasn’t even sure he wanted it. He had seen the man naked. It was going to hurt. But at least he was not going to be humiliated. That he knew.

Antoine had taken everything from him. So, now, being the one to initiate the act, he felt awkward. He half closed his eyes and placed his lips on John’s. Sensing no resistance, he grew a bit bolder and started to kiss the man. He tasted the man’s lips, a bit sweet and salty; he swiped his tongue over them, making them part to gain access inside and tentatively he pushed.

Suddenly, strong hands were grabbing him, and he was manipulated like a doll, as John managed in record time to turn the tables and have Dion placed on the couch, almost crushing him.

Dion could feel the man's erection, pushing at the inside of his thigh.

It will hurt; don't think about it. He thought. But no matter what he tried to say in his mind didn't work. He froze and unconsciously pushed against the hard body on top of him.

John interrupted the kiss, and they looked into each other's eyes. Dion's eyes were moist. John pushed himself up.

"What a fucking cocktease," he spat as he went to a nearby drawer to pull some clothes out.

"Where are you going?" Dion rose.

"Out," John said curtly and, dressed in record time, he walked out the door, not forgetting, of course, to slam it behind him.

Dion circled his knees with his long arms and buried his head in them. He could feel John's smell everywhere in that room. It was comforting, but Dion felt pain burrowing deep inside his chest telling him it was not going to last. Not if he wasn't willing to let go of his demons.

Chapter Eleven

A single ray of light broke the unnatural darkness of the room.

“Our society is in danger,” a deep voice resonated, as the quill relentlessly scratched the paper.

“Why?” the second voice inquired.

“It’s creeping in, this flimsy ... emotion,” the first one to talk answered. The last word was spoken as if it was foreign, unused in normal conversation.

“I don’t understand. We gave them everything. They are conditioned to be content.”

“Maybe this is where we were wrong. Contentment is not enough.”

“Don’t you think they have enough thrills? We offer them innocents and whores in equal measures. The world is at their feet.”

“Not the world, just Drena,” the first man corrected the other.

“Should we stop our work on the project, then?” the other seemed intrigued.

“Just for one person? It’s just one single anomaly.”

“Two.”

“Two?”

“If we are counting Lord Lucas.”

“He’s an outsider. It could be a slip on his part. Acceptable, to some degree. Chasing what is forbidden, in his case ...”

“Of course, there is also the servant.”

“What about him?”

“I think he is the link, the connection between these anomalies.”

“I truly believe it’s merely a coincidence and nothing more.”

“We are creatures of reason and logic. There is no such thing as coincidence,” the voice was filled with contempt.

“Emotions are fickle things. We could manipulate them to serve our best interest,” the other concluded.

“The servant is the key. We shall start with him,” came the short conclusion and both men dressed in grey clothes fell silent, again nothing but the quill against the paper breaking the morbid quietness of the room.

John was out almost every evening. It was driving Dion crazy; it was filling him with something, a sensation he could not understand. Back in Drena, he had always appreciated the times when he could be alone. Here, being alone was making him fearful, filled with apprehension, although there was no reason to be so self-aware.

The house was silent, and he could not fill the silence on his own. John wasn't talking to him, either, since that night, ignoring Dion's clumsy attempts to make conversation. They sat together at the table to eat, and they went to work together, but that was all. John was doing everything in his power to avoid Dion, and the redhead had no idea what to do about it.

The only moments they were close were when John was kissing him in the morning, before parting ways to head for their workplaces. That made things worse, as Dion felt like grabbing John and kissing him for real every time. Only he could not bring himself to do it, for fear of being rejected.

He was deep in thought while working the machinery in front of him like he was an automaton himself. Someone passed by and stopped. It took him a few seconds to sense the other person's presence. He turned to see another worker from his section. He stared at the man questioningly.

“Everything's fine at home?” the man eventually asked.

“Yes,” Dion nodded, feeling a lump in his throat. No, it was anything but fine at home.

The man tsked. “I don't get John. He has a fine guy like you at home, and still ...”

Dion grabbed the man's arm brusquely. "Still what?"

"Rumor has it he's spending all his paycheck down at Venusville," the man shrugged. "It's just one thing men go for down there."

"What thing?" Dion asked, although he already knew.

"You know," the man got closer and circled Dion's waist with a strong arm.

The worker breathed in Dion's scent. "Gods, you're beautiful," he whispered.

Dion pushed against him. The man seemed annoyed and didn't back down. "Is John really that stupid to forget what he has at home? Ditch that zero and come to have some fun with me. If I were him, I'd make sure you won't be able to get up every morning," the worker continued to talk into Dion's ear.

"Let me go," this time Dion pushed against the man more energetically.

"Or maybe you're such a frozen bitch, you made him afraid his dick will fall off if he sticks it in you?" the man spat, but eventually let go of the redhead.

"Get to work!" both heard the foreman's booming voice, and Dion quickly turned to his job, his head reeling.

The worker walked away, not without cursing under his breath.

That night, when John went out, Dion waited for a couple of minutes, then he got dressed and walked out the door, too. He had to see it with his own eyes and do something about it.

Soft music filled the air as he was dancing around the house, seeing about his chores. Too few had been the moments in life when he could tell he'd been really happy. But being there, in Lucas's arms, meant everything to him, and he had a giddy sensation nestling in his chest telling him that this was it. The big L, the stuff dreams were made of. Lucas had put himself in danger to protect him. Lucas cherished him and made love to him like he was the most precious thing in the world.

He had been trained to serve for the remainder of his days back then, at the Institution. It was already ingrained in him to be obedient. But this, this was something else. It was not the respect he had had for Lord Xavier. It was not like the friendship he had shared with Ayn and Dion, for a short time. It was bigger than that, stronger, quick to make his heart beat wildly, each time he was in the man's presence. Not like the now fading sensation he once had for another man before the Trainers had put him in the Institution to be trained. That love had had no time to blossom.

Any anxious thoughts telling him that this would not last had been quenched during their latest love trysts. Now, he was living pure domestic bliss, as he was waiting each day for Lucas to come home, and spend the entire evening and night in his lover's arms.

Even if Lucas had avoided the subject ever since the day when he had punished Cory for lying, the servant knew, guessed at least, what the man wanted. With minutes passing on the clock, and the time for Lucas's arrival approaching quickly, he went to the bedroom to undress, wash and prepare. He made sure to apply plenty of lube, too, and did so with a fond smile, while looking at himself in the mirror. Waking up the powerful lust in Lucas entailed being well prepared, after all.

Smiling, he secured the cuff on his left ankle and tied it to the bedpost. He proceeded to do the same with his right one. He knew he was not going to be able to tie both his hands in the same fashion, but that could be something left for Lucas to finish.

The world outside the small window looked grey. Xavier could not help thinking of the beautiful colors decorating the streets of Drena as if each day there was something that needed celebrating. But the grey outside wasn't depressing or sad. Laughter filled the air, dogs yapping and children playing could be heard, and everything was striking him as unusual.

Drena's false happiness had been wearing him down for a while now, and being so far away from the place he used to call home, he was starting to realize that he did

not feel homesick at all. He tried to remember something, anything in particular that had made him happy there. Except for some of his most spirited discussions with Lucas, mostly contradictory, and some of the more sexual moments spent with his servant Cory, he could not remember anything else. Then Ayn had come, and his world had been upside down ever since.

He knew he was supposed to feel something about being abducted like that by the rebellious young slave. Fear, regret, anger; yet, he felt nothing of the kind. He moved his wrists against the rope cutting into his skin. Apparently, Ayn wanted to make sure he could not escape. He had worried when Ayn tied his wrists together so tightly that he might accidentally trigger the bracelet alarm. He did not want to do that, not yet at least. But, staying like this, laid out on his back was getting boring, and his muscles were beginning to cramp up. Ayn had said he would not be long; he was checking to make sure the car was being scrapped as he had instructed. Xavier found himself feeling anxious for his former slave's return, and not just because of his slight discomfort.

The door finally opened, and Ayn came in.

“So, how are you?” Ayn asked smugly, as he climbed on the bed, next to Xavier. “Do you need to piss or something?” he pulled at the rope to set Xavier free, and the former Master of Drena winced while rubbing his wrists to make the blood flow again. “The bathroom is over there.”

“Of course it's there, it is not like I am going to get lost in your vast apartment,” Xavier commented, earning an angry look from Ayn.

“While you're there, take a shower,” Ayn said shortly. “Oh, and come back naked,” he added with satisfaction while stretching, placing his hands behind his head and smiling.

Xavier could feel Ayn's steady gaze on his body. “Should I dare ask why am I supposed to do all that?”

“Come on, Xav, you know the drill. It was what I was supposed to do whenever you wanted to fuck me.”

There was something else burning deep in the dark pools measuring Xavier up and down. It was hunger, and Xavier felt elated. All the times when he had had sex with Ayn, he had wondered whether his beautiful slave was feeling anything for him at all. Now, the certainty that Ayn desired him, perhaps as much as Xavier wanted the former slave made him excited, even with the knowledge of what was coming. Ayn was undoubtedly not being coy any more about his intentions.

“If you are expecting me to just give up my body to you, you are wrong,” he said defiantly, despite the giddy sensation nestling in his chest.

“Do you want to put up a fight? You’re just making my day. I’m looking forward to it. I’m all for some naked wrestling,” Ayn had the nerve to wink at him.

It was not going to be a conquest if there was not going to be a fight, Xavier thought as he closed the door behind him. The water was lukewarm at best, but it felt refreshing to be able to wash the road dust off his hair and body. He looked at his clothes with disdain. They looked worn out and in a terrible need to be cleaned. He shrugged. He was naked, except for the bracelet. The odd thing was still silent. He squeezed his other hand over the bracelet, just checking if it was possible to take it off now that it seemed to no longer function. The metal band seemed to ignore his futile attempts. He needed to think about that more, later.

With his head held high, he stepped out of the bathroom. A whistle of appreciation welcomed him. He would have done the same if the thought hadn’t been ridiculous. But Ayn’s beautiful naked body, as the man sprawled on the bed presented himself, was worthy of praise just as much.

“What?” he said. “It’s not like it’s the first time you have seen me naked,” he crossed his arms over his chest, defying Ayn with his eyes.

“It’s all about perspective, my dear former Master,” Ayn rose and moved gracefully, circling Xavier like a predator stalking his prey. “Now I see you from the position of a free man.”

A single, impudent finger followed a small drop of water falling from Xavier’s damp hair on his chest. The hand rose to tip Xavier’s chin. Gray orbs clashed with dark ones. Ayn smiled and closed the distance for a kiss.

It felt overwhelmingly exciting to be the object of one's desire, instead of being the leading actor dictating everything. Ayn brushed their lips together slowly, and Xavier could not remember his hands moving on their own accord to rest on the other man's waist while angling his head to deepen the kiss. He waited for Ayn to push his tongue into his mouth before he probed with his own.

Ayn withdrew a little and chuckled softly. "I knew you would be good."

"I'm not," Xavier suddenly pushed the other man on the bed and climbed on top of him. "How do you feel now, Ayn? Do you have it in you to start calling for your friends to help you?" he mocked, but Ayn quickly pushed up and turned the tables, capturing Xavier's robust and sinewy body between him and the bed.

"You talk too much," he pushed Xavier's legs apart with his thighs and dragged the man's hands up to lock them in his. Then he leaned in for another kiss to silence his former Master.

This time, Ayn bit Xavier's lips a bit too hard. Not as playfully as he intended in the first place. He licked them by way of an apology. Even if Ayn was trying to deny it in his head, he had come to love Xavier's kisses. And this scene was not as much about punishment, as he had envisioned it would be.

"This specimen," the grey ghost-like figure tapped a scrawny finger against the picture portraying a good-looking man, completely naked.

"Antoine, he is called," the other commented. "Should we use a wildcard so carelessly like this?"

"The events must appear as random. Do not forget who we are dealing with here. Lord Lucas's bright mind was not, unfortunately, molded by us. Unwanted surprises may occur in how he will interpret the events."

"Are you aiming for exclusion?"

"Spare the rod, spoil the child. Lord Lucas should understand what his privileged status means."

"Is there any hope of rehabilitating him?"

“That we will have to find out. But we should not act hastily. There is no need to make the others restless. Any punishment must come about and be viewed as truly deserved.”

“Punishment is love,” the grey figure bowed curtly.

“Punishment is love,” the other answered back.

“Hey, sweetie, are you looking for work?” a man the size of a mountain blocked his path, as he was looking at the neon sign, saying Venusville.

“No,” Dion shook his head.

“Really?” the man measured him up and down. “Then what are you looking for?”

“You know,” Dion tried to sound confident. “The thing all men look for here.”

The bouncer didn’t look impressed. “You?” he snorted. “You’re the type to get on his fours and take it nicely up the ass.”

Dion didn’t flinch at the rude comment. “I have money,” he took some bills out of his pocket and shoved one of them into the man’s hand.

The bouncer’s attitude suddenly changed. He shrugged. “Then, please come inside,” he gestured for Dion to move, as he walked out of the way.

Dion had to blink a few times to adjust his vision to the many strobe lights inside. House dance music was blaring, and most patrons looked pretty wasted, while a few naked bodies were dancing on the small stage in the middle of the large room.

He started searching for his partner with his eyes. A few hands touched his ass in passing, but he ignored them. He didn’t have time or energy to waste on fighting off these advances. They didn’t mean anything.

He looked at every table and every dark corner until he finally saw the one he was looking for. John was slumped on a couch that must have seen better days, a beer on the table in front of him. He had his eyes half closed, and he didn’t care about the world around him.

Dion stared at him from afar. He approached John's table, his heart beating wildly. What was he going to say?

He stopped next to the table, but John didn't seem to notice.

"Another one," John eventually said in a gruff voice, while slamming the empty bottle against the table.

Only when he got no answer, he looked up. Dion was staring down at him, his arms crossed over his chest. John snarled.

"If it isn't my lovely partner ... What the fuck are you doing here?" he asked, as he made a small gesture to straighten himself, but gave up after the first failed try.

"I came to take you home," Dion answered, feeling a bit relieved that John was at Venusville only to get smashed and not for other reasons.

"Why?" John looked at him, with disdain written all over the hard planes of his face.

"You can drink at home if that's your choice of a good time," Dion insisted and stretched out a hand. "Come."

John laughed. The redhead felt embarrassed, his arm outstretched like that with John refusing to take it.

"Nah, I'm comfortable here," the man spoke and took his eyes from Dion to look around. "Who the fuck runs this place?" he called loudly. "I need another beer!"

"John," Dion said sternly. "People are starting to talk. Stop wasting your money like this. Come home with me."

"And do what? Watching paint dry is more entertaining than staying in the same house with you, princess."

Dion drew a long breath. That had stung.

"It's not my fault I'm such a bore," he said in his defense. "You don't even talk to me; you don't let me ..."

“Could you stop with all the drama already?” a muffled voice came from somewhere below, and Dion froze. “It’s annoying to try sucking on a limp dick.”

“Shut it,” one of John’s hands disappeared under the table.

The table moved a bit, and Dion saw a blond guy getting up from underneath. He was wearing almost nothing but glitter on his beautiful body, and a tight pair of shorts. He looked at Dion with disdain, while wiping the corners of his mouth.

“You’re fresh out of Drena, and you have no idea how to suck a cock?” he talked to the redhead. “Or no one there wanted to fuck your ugly face?” the whore added, placing a hand on his hip.

Dion straightened up. “Apparently, you’re no good either,” he served it right back.

The whore laughed, showing his beautiful white teeth. “Honey, trust me, he would have filled my mouth twice by now, if you hadn’t appeared to make his dick die on me. I’ve never had an erection go so limp so fast in my mouth until now. You’re really something,” he turned on his heels, flicking his blond hair over his shoulders.

“Hey, Andreas, where do you think you’re going?” John shouted after him. “Come back; I’m not finished with you!”

“Solve your domestic shit, John. I’m not paid to watch your drama,” the blond continued to walk away.

Dion was seething with anger. Andreas? That was Andreas? The guy appeared to be very beautiful, even in the bad light of the club, he thought, but there was no time to dwell on how inadequate he was, compared to John’s ex. He grabbed John’s right hand and dragged him up.

“You, mister, you come back home with me right now,” he said, determined.

John pulled at his trousers with his free hand. “Go back home,” he warned. “You don’t want to make me mad.”

“And leave you here to embarrass yourself? To embarrass me?”

Dion pulled at John’s hand with all his might.

“Hey, John,” they heard a voice booming behind him. “Don’t make a scene. Go home with your guy,” the bouncer warned, and John let out an exasperated sigh.

“All right,” he agreed. He pulled his hand free from Dion’s and zipped his pants. “After you, princess,” he gestured at Dion, and the redhead walked away stiffly.

As they headed for the exit, Andreas stared at them, with a mocking smile, while leaning against the bar.

“Tomorrow, same time, John?” he asked, while slowly caressing his taut abdomen.

“Don’t clear your schedule for him, honey,” Dion mocked and reached back to catch John’s arm and drag him faster towards the exit.

There were strong hands in his hair keeping him in place, as Ayn was kissing his mouth. He pushed against Ayn’s chest, and he was elated to discover how strong Ayn was. The young man had never been a tame slave; he had just waited for the right time to act. And this beautiful, strong being wanted him, Xavier, the man, not the First Ruler of Drena, the one who had everything.

Now he had nothing, but Ayn.

He was suddenly yanked by his shoulders and unceremoniously turned on his belly. A hand traveled from his nape down his spine, eliciting small shudders in its wake. A playful slap on his ass ended the short journey, and he gasped. He turned his head to throw a contemptuous look at Ayn. How dare he? He found the almond-shaped eyes gazing at him were gleaming with mischief.

“So, Xav, should I ask you? Are you still a virgin? Or you’re just a hypocrite about being always on top and all that shit? C’mon, say it. Who tapped your ass?”

“For starters, my name is Xavier, not whatever silly contraction is crossing your mind. Secondly, no one had the impudence to ...”

“Blah, blah, blah,” Ayn stopped him. “Xav suits you better. Didn’t you want to give me a name, when I had one?”

The former First Ruler of Drena froze. “How could you know such a thing?” he asked icily. “This is something I only discussed with ...”

“Cory,” Ayn laughed. “Yeap.”

“How?” Xavier felt blood thumping in his ears.

“Really, Xav, did you think I could escape without any help? Plus, he didn’t burn my clothes, right?”

An unpleasant feeling curled inside Xavier’s chest. Cory, the obedient servant, always welcoming him with a smile, never bothered by anything thrown his way, that serene smile perpetually on his face ... Cory?

“Don’t sweat it,” Ayn cooed. “Cory truly held you in high regard, you know? He is a good man, not like the likes of you. Without his advice and patience, I probably would have done something stupid and gotten killed by running at my first chance. By the way, if you hadn’t come home a bit too early, I would have left alone, and you wouldn’t have known anything. So, for your peace of mind, know he didn’t want you hurt in any way. This,” he punctuated his words by squeezing Xavier’s round ass, “is all my doing.”

“And what is ‘this’ about?” Xavier asked bitterly. “Do you hate me? Do you want to prove you’re better?”

“Prove? I don’t need any proof to know that. And things are simpler than you think. I want to fuck you.”

“Sex is power. You’re just asserting dominance with this foul act,” Xavier squirmed, only making his ass wiggle a little, which earned him a pleased grunt from Ayn.

“Whatever floats your boat,” Ayn admitted. “The truth is I have been thinking for a long time how it would be to fuck you. I’ve only wanted girls before, you know? Now I can only think about having you and you alone. So just put your ass up, and I’ll show you a good time.”

“I doubt your experience with girls,” Xavier said with disdain while breathing in, as cool fingers dipped in something slick started circling his hole, “will help you.”

“You might be right, but what Cory showed me will make it better for the both of us, certainly for you.”

Xavier sucked in a deep breath as he felt a finger breach his hole.

“Relax Xav; it’s only my finger, I am not going to shove my hand in or ram my dick in your virgin ass. Cory showed me how to make it better; you owe him your thanks if you ever see him again,” Ayn chuckled as he stuck a second finger in and twisted them causing Xavier to writhe on the bed.

They walked back home in absolute silence. Dion held the door open for John to come in and closed it shut. He waited for the man to sit on the couch and he knelt in front of him. The man looked at Dion, with an unreadable expression in his eyes.

Dion didn’t break eye contact, as he fumbled with the man’s pants.

“What are you doing?” John demanded, in a thick voice.

“Anything you go looking for down at Venusville, you have at home,” Dion explained and gently began rubbing John’s cock, freed from the confines of clothing.

To his surprise, the man’s organ grew hard in his hand right away. Without much ado, the redhead leaned and took the man’s silky cock in his mouth. It was making him feel a bit sick thinking Andreas had had his mouth on John until not longer than half an hour ago, but he pushed that thought out of his mind. He had to make John see that he had no reason to pay for sex while having Dion at home.

He had always hated when Antoine forced himself on him. But he had always done well with pleasuring the man with his mouth. It was easier to block everything and make the damn thing squirt in his mouth and have it done with. It was a bit of control he could enjoy.

As he took John deeper and deeper, he heard the man exhale. Then it suddenly struck him; he didn’t want to make John get off. He wanted more. He withdrew

very slowly, letting his tongue play on the man's shaft, eliciting short grunts from John.

The man's taste on his tongue didn't feel bad at all. There were no hands in his hair, to push him down, or make him choke in pain. John just sat there, letting himself be serviced, his only manifestations the restrained sounds he was making.

Dion rubbed the organ, milking it slowly into his mouth. He felt overcome by the sensation that he had to please that man, make him shout in ecstasy because Dion wanted nothing but to give something and receive something in return. This was because he wanted to do it. It was not forced, and it was ... nothing short of amazing. John's cock was hard, large, but silky to the touch.

He held the organ in his hand a bit. It was hot and warm, and Dion wondered for a brief moment how it would be to have that thing inside him. He shuddered at the thought, but it was not unpleasant to think of that. He angled his head to lick the man's large balls and suck them one, then the other.

"Do you want to come?" he asked softly, as he engulfed the giant head in his mouth, enjoying the sensation of having to force so much of it at one time down his throat.

"Yes, please," John murmured, and Dion adjusted his position to allow the massive cock to penetrate deeper, beyond his gag reflex.

He used his throat muscles to stimulate John's cock further, and the man started to take in deep, sharp breaths.

"Fuck," John whispered, as he started to come, and Dion kept his hips in place with his hands, while gulping down everything.

He withdrew slowly, teasing the spent organ with his tongue and cleaning it.

"Don't ever go to Venusville," he said, and John stared at him with dreamy eyes. "Do you want a drink? Have one at home. Do you want your cock sucked? I'm here to suck you dry."

Dion had no idea he could talk like that. But he had to be in charge this time and set things straight with John. Desperate times called for drastic measures.

“Do you hear me?” he insisted, and John raised one hand to caress his lips.

“Yeah, I hear you,” the man eventually spoke.

Dion straightened up and sat next to John on the couch. A large, warm arm dragged him close.

“Will you go again? There?”

“I see no reason why,” John cooed and caressed Dion’s head. “Need help with that?”

Only then Dion noticed the tent he was pitching. He was ... hard? John’s hand reached into his pants and started rubbing him gently. The man’s hand was so large, Dion’s cock felt small in comparison. No one had ever touched him like this; Dion came with a low grunt. It was nothing like the times when Antoine had forced him to come, to humiliate him further. This time was genuine; it was making his chest grow small for some reason.

“Better?” John whispered in his ear.

“Yeah, thanks,” he said back.

The pain was incredible; how did Cory stand it or Ayn for that matter? If this was what Ayn had felt the last time, he had taken it like a man with little complaint as he recalled and Xavier was determined not to let the pain or any weakness show. He gritted his teeth and let out a strangled scream.

Ayn had lubed Xav and his cock. A thought crossed Xavier’s mind. Ayn didn’t seem to make this brutal. By the way he moved, he was actually trying to make it all better for his former Master. Despite all that, Xavier could feel his entire body stiffen to the point of not letting that thing pushing at his rear inside.

“Relax, relax, breathe Xav, you only have an inch or two in you,” he whispered in his ear.

Xavier shuddered, either from the pain or Ayn’s voice, he could not judge. Ayn was taking his time to penetrate him, and Xavier was feeling his breathing getting

heavier and heavier. It was too much; the guy was too big. The more the man pushed inside him, the more he felt like he was full and could not take another inch. He was growing hard, despite the pain. He was no longer in control, a reality he had anticipated for so long.

“Please,” he called in a raspy voice, and Ayn answered with a low chuckle.

“Please, what?” he mocked.

Xavier could not bring himself to say it. Despite the pain, he didn’t want Ayn to stop.

“It will get better, you have more than half in now,” Ayn caressed his back with slow, circling moves. “You fucked me, and I hated it. But even then ...”

Xavier moved his head as he wanted to hear Ayn better. Was this a confession? A final push was all that was needed for Ayn to bury himself down to the hilt in Xavier’s ass. He slowly lifted up to an all fours position, as Ayn started kissing his nape, and shoulders.

“I think I get it now,” Ayn murmured against his ear. “It’s fucking awesome; you’re so tight.”

Xavier tried to control his breathing and relax. He could feel every vein and bump on Ayn’s cock as the man stayed motionless buried to his balls in Xavier’s ass. If Ayn thought that this was tight, Xavier thought he might explode he was so full.

A hand was holding his chest, while another searched for his cock.

“You fucker, you’re rock hard,” the former slave whispered in his ear, as he withdrew for a bit, only to slam harder into Xavier’s body.

“It’s just a biofeedback response,” Xavier answered, unsure if that was how things were.

“Yeah, right,” Ayn said under his breath, as he started to move in and out of Xavier’s ass, and rub the other’s cock in earnest. “Not so much fight left in you, once someone touches your cock, right?” he teased. “I thought you’re all bite and no bark.”

“You got it wrong; it’s all bark and no ...”

Ayn used his other hand to angle his head and shut him up with a kiss. “You’re talking too much for someone in your position.”

Xavier got lost in the sensation. The discomfort was fading, replaced by pure raw pleasure, and he moaned shamelessly. Ayn was pounding into him hard now, and it was all Xavier could do to stay on his knees. The pain had not been strong enough or did not last long enough, he thought; Ayn was right, even forced like that, he had been hard in an instant. What made things worse, or more delightful, he didn’t know for sure, was that Ayn’s roaming hand was now twisting one nipple hard. Something like a strange electric shock went straight to his cock.

Ayn’s breathing became ragged, and his sweat dripped like rain down onto Xavier’s back. Suddenly Xavier went over the edge, coming long and hard, with Ayn’s cock pulsing like living steel in his ass. His whole body stiffened and his ass involuntarily squeezed Ayn’s cock even tighter.

“Fuck, I’m coming!” Ayn yelled as he followed Xavier.

Ayn collapsed onto Xavier, who was pushed flat to the bed, both men gasping for breath. Wincing at the soreness and stickiness in his ass, Xavier tried to adjust his position, but a strong warm hand stopped his butt from wiggling.

“You look good with your ass plowed like that; I so wanted to last longer this first time,” Ayn laughed softly.

The man enveloped him in his arms and legs holding their sweaty bodies together.

“I should go wash,” Xavier mumbled.

“No way. Get used to having me inside you,” Ayn kissed him gently on one shoulder while embracing him with tenderness Xavier had never experienced in his life.

“Ayn,” he called.

“Yes?” a sleepy voice answered.

“What do you plan to do with me?”

He had to know. At this point, he had to know.

“Keep you here,” Ayn answered matter-of-factly. “Make you like it.”

“Why?” confusion and excitement crept into his brain again.

“Because I want you. You’re here, and I want to make you mine.”

“I don’t belong here. You should just let me walk away. You got what you wanted, right?”

“What I wanted?” Ayn questioned.

“You got your revenge,” Xavier pointed out.

“Did that feel like revenge to you?” Ayn’s voice grew a bit hesitant, although the young man was trying to hide it. “Gods be my witnesses I wanted so much to grudge fuck you, but I couldn’t. Unlike you, I’m honest. I have no idea why, but I like you. Now that you let me fuck you, I like you even more.”

“You liked me before, then?” Xavier let his uncertainty slip out.

“I thought I hated you, but I guess my cum in your ass proves us both wrong. I’ve never fucked someone I didn’t like. You would have been a first time for me.”

“I am a first time for you,” Xavier pointed out. “Unless ...” the thought felt uneasy, “you had another man before me.”

“That’s right. You’re my first man all right,” Ayn sounded happy as saying that. “So get used to Haven. And to me. Because just like you thought about me back in Drena, I have no plans to let you go.”

He heard the shower running, and he shook his head. He had eventually slept on the couch, on top of John, even if the larger bed in the bedroom would have been a better choice. They had been both too wasted to care for that. How could John move so gently, that he hadn’t woken Dion? The redhead jumped to his feet. He had to wash too. What was John thinking, letting him oversleep like this?

He rushed to the bathroom while shedding his clothes all over the place. When he got inside, his eyes clashed with John's. The man was holding his cock in his hand, rubbing it vigorously. Rivulets of water danced on John's hard as steel pecs, losing themselves in the coarse dark hair covering the man's chest. Dion looked his partner up and down, amazed, once more, at how big, and strong the man looked.

John's gaze burned as he looked at Dion's naked body. He was not the only one enjoying what he saw. The redhead licked his lips and went straight for his prize. He took the man's organ from the large hand and stuffed it in his mouth. The second hand traveled over his back, resting on his ass.

They had no time for refined techniques. He pumped the man's cock with his hand and mouth, sucking in with all his force. A hand, gentle but firm, kept his head in place, as John came into his mouth. Dion liked it, how he was held like that while sucking the man juice out of his partner.

Satiated, John leaned against the wall. Like before, he caressed Dion's lips as the redhead straighten up.

"Love feeding your sweet mouth," he spoke hotly, and Dion blushed.

"Out, I need to wash, too, and fast," the former servant babbled to hide his embarrassment.

"Oh, sweetheart, I'd wash you with my tongue everywhere," John smirked while getting out of the shower.

Dion drew a deep breath. The thought of John doing that to him suddenly made him lightheaded. That, and the proximity of the man's body. He was radiating heat, probably because he was stepping out of a hot shower, or perhaps not only because of that.

"That's a promise," John added, as he was drying himself with a towel. He grabbed Dion's left buttock and squeezed playfully. "I'll lick that hole like crazy. Gotta make it wet, to get inside," he whispered as he leaned onto the redhead to caress his ear with his lips, and Dion felt his stomach clench in apprehension.

Naturally, John wanted that, too. He just had to get over his fear and let the man do it.

“Why the long face?” John stopped, angling his head to take a good look at Dion.

“Nothing.”

“Jeesh,” the man snapped and took a step away from Dion. “What? Did you suck my cock to prove that you are better than Andreas? Should I go fuck him so that I can fuck your ass after that? You’re so deranged up here, princess,” he gestured at his head.

“No!” Dion cried out. “It’s just ... you’re big,” he said quickly.

“Oh,” John stopped and frowned. “Andreas used to complain about that, too,” he murmured in defeat.

“Don’t worry, we’ll see,” Dion offered, but the man shrugged and went out of the bathroom, visibly upset.

“Cory!” Lucas called for his lover. It felt unusual not to have the gorgeous blond rush to welcome him. He looked into the kitchen, then into the living room. An unsettling sensation he had no intention to listen to was curling against his thoughts. It had been a constant presence on his mind lately, and he had been trying hard to push it away. The Trainers could take Cory from him. They could do anything, and, just like an obedient servant, Lucas would have no say in it.

He opened the door to the master bedroom and smiled, seeing his beloved waiting for him like that. His worries gone, he moved slowly towards the bed and caressed a cuffed ankle.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” he asked playfully.

Cory offered no answer, but he raised his free hand to offer Lucas the last cuff. He took it slowly and caressed a sinewy arm while tying the wrist against the bedpost.

“I must admit that you are looking quite fetching right now,” he said wickedly. “Should I sit right over there,” he pointed to a chair, “and just admire the view?”

Cory frowned. “Take a picture, it will last longer,” the servant spoke, and Lucas laughed.

“Not as subservient as you pose to be, are you?” Lucas said affectionately, while slowly pulling his cock out.

He climbed the bed and straddled Cory’s chest. “Do you want to be taught a lesson, my naughty servant?” he asked, this time arousal creeping into his voice.

“Yes, please,” Cory breathed out, and the massive organ was pushed through his lips, forcing him to open wide.

Lucas grabbed a fistful of hair and started fucking Cory’s mouth. But, he was soon too close to coming, and he didn’t want that to happen. He withdrew, reveling in how beautiful his lover’s mouth looked, swallowing his cock like that.

He bent to kiss the pouty lips roughly. “Don’t worry, I just want to fuck you crazy,” he promised, and he pressed into the body he knew so well.

Cory squirmed under him, and Lucas laughed. “I bet you would want your hands free right now, don’t you Cory?”

“Yes, please,” the servant begged.

Lucas pushed a hand between them to squeeze Cory’s cock. “I am afraid your little plan of making me aroused out of my mind will backfire a little. You are to remain like this while I have my way with you.”

Lucas was hard and unyielding, as he started to fuck his lover. The pleasure was flooding his mind like a mountain spring. Yet, a slow, unwanted thought came to Lucas’s mind, as he was getting lost in his beautiful servant’s body. They wanted both this; they were trying to forget about the grey clouds gathering at the horizon.

It was something they had to talk about. Only that Dion felt a bit of dread thinking about it. Could he trust John enough to tell him about Antoine? About all the others? About what it meant for him to be used like that? He shook his head. He would manage to blow his chances with the man. John wanted Dion completely, and there was nothing wrong with that.

He took a deep breath and sat on the couch next to John. The man seemed deep in thought and turned slightly to look at him, as Dion managed a small smile and entangled his fingers with John's.

"If you ever feel like going away, please just do it," John said, in a tired voice.

Dion grabbed the man's fingers tightly. "I don't want to go away. But, I ... I guess I have some explaining to do. I like you, John."

Something akin to a bit of amusement mixed with fondness sparkled in the dark eyes. "That's good to know, because I like you, too."

Dion exhaled. "I thought you hated my guts."

A low chuckle was the answer. "Nah, I just thought you're gonna give me a bad case of blue balls, that's all. Which you did, by the way."

Dion felt all ticklish on the inside, hearing the man's honest confession. He giggled.

"Not funny," John warned.

"Hey, it was not my fault you kept on rejecting me."

"I was just protecting myself!" John laughed.

"Really? You're like double my size!" Dion kicked him in the arm.

"Let's not exaggerate. I'm not that big," the tall man commented, but the smile faded away from his face.

Dion cast his eyes down.

"Look, John ... it's ok; I can go through with it. And adjust in due time, even if there is this ... difference between us."

"Don't dance around the subject, princess," John said bitterly. "I don't need another one to tell me how I ripped him in two with my big cock. That's why I'm telling you you're free to go when you want. And don't force yourself; it's the last thing I want."

“Hey,” Dion cooed gently, using his other hand to caress John’s cheek gently. “I think Andreas was exaggerating when telling you that,” he found himself talking.

“You’re telling me the same thing,” John said morosely.

“I assume you had other lovers besides him. Before, I mean.”

“Yes, I did.”

“And did they complain?” Dion asked.

“No, actually, they kinda ... appreciated it,” John said with a small smile. “But those were guys made of sterner stuff, like me. Not like you and Andreas. That’s why I’m saying you’re out of my league. A fine guy like you has to be treated right.”

Dion felt his heart sinking at John’s self-deprecation. “Do you think I had a beautiful life before coming here?”

John shrugged. “It was all Andreas talked about. Parties, beautiful people, gifts raining from the sky and stuff like that.”

“It was nothing like that for me,” Dion spoke slowly.

“How was it, then?” John caressed Dion’s hand with his thumb, as their fingers remained intertwined.

The redhead closed his eyes for a couple of seconds; then he started talking.

“I don’t know if you know, but they keep us in training for three years. During that time, we are forced to understand that there will be ... no activity of sexual nature for us.”

“Really?” John looked at him, dumbfounded. “Sorry, I don’t want to sound rude, but you suck cock like a pro.”

“Well, they do take care that none of us has any gag reflex left, by stuffing some huge things down our throats,” Dion explained.

John shuddered. “That’s fucked up.”

“And not the only thing that’s fucked up,” Dion murmured. “I walked in Drena, once my training was over, absolutely clueless about ... sex, per se. We were severely punished for even trying to touch ourselves, while in training at the Institution.”

“So, you were ... like a total virgin?”

“Pretty much, yes. That was going to change, though, and fast.”

Dion took a short break, to collect himself. That was something he had only once told Cory and no one else. “Anyways, I was assigned to one of the Masters’ households. I was told I was going to take care of the slaves. I entered their quarters. There I met ... Antoine.”

John remained silent, aware of how difficult things were for Dion.

“He was very beautiful. But I seriously doubt I’ve ever met someone so beautiful on the outside, and so ugly on the inside. ‘Look, guys, a new bitch, fresh from the Institution, just for us’, he commented when he saw me, and I froze. I tried to ignore him. I introduced myself, as I was taught. But he just grabbed me and started to undress me. No, that’s not the right term. He just shredded my clothes apart. The others were laughing, while I had no idea how to fight him off. You have to understand; I was trained to obey my betters, for three years. He just bent me over and slapped my ass, once I was naked. I got panicked and tried to run away. But he caught me and hit my face so hard, that I thought the world was starting to spin. The others came to help him, and I was kept down. When he ...”

Dion coughed.

“It’s ok,” John made a move to stop him, but Dion shook his head.

“No, it’s fine, I have to tell you this. Well, he fucked me in front of all the others. I thought something was broken inside when he finally came. I had no more voice or tears in me. And, when I thought the ordeal was over, he ... he just told the others to have their fun with me. Fun,” he repeated. “Now that’s a word I don’t get. It was probably fun for them. When the Master of the house eventually came and saw what happened, he just told me to get up and get cleaned up. It was my ‘welcome to Drena’ party, as Antoine said.”

“Fuck me,” John murmured under his breath.

“It’s not all.”

“Shit, not all?”

“No. For the time spent in Drena, Antoine found pure bliss in torturing me almost every day. I was his toy. At least, he did not let others fuck me. Not too often. But he was creative in making everything dreadful for me. One of his favorite pastimes was to choke me while fucking me until I passed out.”

“Oh,” John started massaging his forehead. “No wonder you were so scared when coming here. You thought you’d get jumped.”

“Yes. But I liked you. Right from the start. I felt safe next to you. So, I want to try it with you. No, not just ‘try’. I want it to work.”

John got up from the couch. “I want to get out a little,” he said in a somber voice.

“Why?” Dion asked alarmed. Was John rejecting him now? After learning he had been nothing but a fuck toy for a sadistic bastard?

“I need to think and get my head straight. Don’t come after me,” John warned.

Dion remained there, completely devastated, while the door opened and closed with a small swishing sound.

Chapter Twelve

“I simply hate these social functions,” Lucas murmured while fiddling with his glass.

“We need to go out from time to time. People will talk,” Cory shrugged. “Plus, what’s the harm?”

“Besides the fact that I’d rather stay indoors and have fun with you?” Lucas angled his head and looked at his servant with a playful expression in his eyes.

Cory rolled his eyes but then burst into laughter. Lucas joined him, but a bit of worry remained hanging at the corners of his lips. Cory studied his lover’s face, with a thoughtful expression.

“You are ruminating over something,” he eventually said.

“Yes,” Lucas admitted. “It was ... too easy. They believed everything, and to my knowledge, they did not even send someone to search for Xavier.”

“And who should they send?” Cory wondered out loud. “A bunch of servants out there? Ayn told me there is nothing but the desert between here and where he’s from. I doubt even the workers would survive out there. Plus, what would their motivation be? If the Trainers were to give them vehicles, to search the desert up and down, I think most of them would die out there or simply become deserters if they happen upon one of these settlements Ayn talked to me about.”

“The continent is not as uninhabited as you think,” Lucas linked his fingers and placed his chin on top of them thoughtfully. “In Aeria, where I’m from, we have some maps ... none of them complete in my opinion. I have always wondered what lies out there ...” his eyes became dreamy.

“What stopped you from traveling?” Cory questioned, dutifully taking Lucas’s glass, left on a small table near the armchair to fill it again.

Lucas shrugged. “The other cities look up to Drena. It is said it is the most beautiful place on the entire continent.”

“It is said ...” Cory echoed his words. “Don’t you believe it?”

“I am not sure. All my life, at least from the moment I became conscious of the world surrounding me, I was curious to find out more. When I took the vocational test, the Trainers sent to Aeria to help us find our way in life told me I should focus my thirst for knowledge on scientific research. They told me the world is finite, while the human mind is not. I must say I found the concept rather ... seductive at that time. I became good at it, too; so good that I was invited here, in Drena.”

“How is it like? Your home, I mean?” Cory offered Lucas the refilled glass.

“Aeria is not as beautiful as Drena. If anything, Aerians are mostly dedicated to making machines rather than creating beautiful things.”

“Was Aeria created by the Trainers, too?” Cory asked.

He was surprised to realize how little he knew of the world he lived in. But, after all, he had been nothing but a factory worker until the age of 18 and then sent to become a servant. Studying the world had not been on the list.

“It is said,” Lucas said again, “that all the cities were created by the one before the Trainers. Drena itself seem to be deeply linked to them, though. It is their home city, and from here, they direct the trade that takes place all over the continent.”

“The one before the Trainers?” Cory spoke while sitting at Lucas’s feet and placing his head on the man’s knees. A warm hand descended on his hair, caressing it slowly.

“She is not often talked about. I think she is nothing but a legend, one to keep weaker minds hopeful of the existence of a higher being. In the golden age of rationale, we are currently living in, there is no need for such a thing. I suppose that is why her memory is fading.”

“Tell me more about Aeria. Do you have, you know ...” Cory hesitated for a bit, “women there?”

Lucas laughed softly.

“Why are you asking that? Are you afraid I left someone behind in Aeria? A woman maybe?”

“It crossed my mind,” Cory mumbled. “We rarely see women here in Drena. They only come here from Tresalt, their city. No one is allowed to stare at them, but I must admit I was curious.”

“They are flesh and blood, like us. Different in their appearance, but not by much. You should not worry; until meeting you, I wasn’t that interested in engaging in sexual congress with anyone, be it male or female. I used to see it as a necessity. In Drena, the customs demand for Masters, in particular, to be engaged in relationships of sorts, for convenience, and apparently, to keep minds sharp and focused on their tasks at hand. What I had with Xavier seemed to be enough and according to the norm.”

“Wow,” Cory grinned and rubbed his head against his Master’s knee.

“I would like to take you to Aeria with me,” Lucas said with something akin to melancholy in his voice. “There are no continuous parties there, but we could be more of ourselves.”

“Will you have to return there?” Cory felt his heart growing smaller.

“No, I must serve my purpose here in Drena. But I will ask the Trainers if I could return to my hometown and take you with me.”

“Do you think they will let us? I’ve never heard of anyone leaving Drena. Except for trade trips.”

“We’ll see when we get to that point. Although I see no reason why they would deny me such a simple request. Now, come here,” Lucas’s voice dropped to a whisper as he helped Cory get up to straddle him. He slowly captured the servant’s lips with his mouth, kissing him gently.

“One for the road?” Cory interrupted the kiss to tease one of Lucas’s ears with his teeth and lips.

“You know me, you little naughty one,” Lucas grabbed his hips and pushed him down so Cory could feel his erection.

“I guess we should take care of that,” Cory giggled in the crook of Lucas’s neck. He got up only to take his perfunctory servant clothes off.

He palmed Lucas's engorged shaft through the black silk pants. The man grunted.

"Hurry," the man demanded.

"Why?" Cory smiled naughtily, continuing his explorations without speeding up the pace.

"Because we will be late," Lucas tried to look sternly at him but failed, his eyes fogged by desire.

Eventually, the servant took pity and freed Lucas's cock from its confines. Looking straight into Lucas's eyes, he slowly pushed the weeping organ into his mouth, moaning softly while tasting it to the fullest. A small flutter of his long lashes was the only sign that he wasn't as much in control as he wanted to be.

"Oh, Cory," Lucas whispered. "You know how to drive me crazy."

Cory let the now moist organ slip from his mouth and straightened up to straddle his master again.

"Crazy?" he giggled. "How about the age of rationale, Lucas?" he dropped the honorific on purpose, knowing how much his official owner loved to hear him talk like that when alone

"I don't care about anything else when I have you in my arms," Lucas spoke as his fingers dug into Cory's hips, steadying him and helping him descend slowly into his cock.

"What would anyone think hearing you speak like that?" Cory teased while caressing Lucas's face and kissing him softly.

"They would think I should spank the naughty servant daring to question me like that," Lucas's lips widened into a grin.

Cory felt the sting, as Lucas playfully slapped one sexy buttock. He bit his bottom lip and threw his head back. In the same time, his ass was deliciously squeezing Lucas's cock, making the man buck upwards, to get inside the scorching heat deeper and deeper.

“You like this,” Lucas spoke heatedly. “You like it when I get a bit rough, don’t you?”

“I like it because you like it,” Cory said honestly while impaling himself in the man’s hard as steel member.

Lucas’s hands moved to grab fistfuls of blond hair. Cory was forced to bend to meet his lover’s hungry lips, while he tried to keep his feet on the floor, to allow Lucas to continue his torturous pounding. As always, he was the one to come first, making a mess on Lucas’s shirt. When his lover released his pent-up desire inside, he was sure he would have a hard time walking that day. Lucas was large, but it was just one of the myriads of things he loved about the man. Each time they fucked, he could feel the man, he could still feel him when he was no longer inside, and there was just a receding, dull ache he craved to feel again.

Dion did not see John at all that day. It felt strange to walk alone to work, after having the dark, gloomy man by his side each day. As he saw about his routine tasks, he suddenly felt exhausted. Was it worth fighting to prove something he was not? John’s actions spoke louder than words. He probably did not want anything to have with him, now that he knew how many men had had him back in Drena. Perhaps, John thought Dion was just like Andreas, or worse. Dion was even weaker, as he allowed a creep like Antoine to play with him like he was nothing but a useless toy.

Or maybe John felt pity? Dion didn’t want anyone’s pity. To think that he had tried to explain to the man why he wasn’t so thrilled to have sex. He shook his head, feeling sadness washing over him. What was going to be? John angry all the time, thinking of how Dion used to bend for everyone and behave like a doormat? Or John walking around on eggshells, because he was afraid Dion might break if someone as much as breathed in his presence?

For what it was worth, the man had done for Dion much more than anyone else. He had taken Dion in, offered him shelter and protection. But the redhead didn’t want to abuse anyone’s kindness, especially since John showed pretty much that he could not stomach Dion’s confession about his past life.

What did he have to offer, after all? He was nothing but a reject, someone everybody saw as the means to satisfy their primal needs and nothing else. The foreman had been right. Everything was dictated in his life by his looks; he was pretty, that was all he was. He could not impose on John anymore. He had to leave and see about his life on his own.

At lunchtime, instead of going to the cafeteria, he went straight to the foreman's office.

The man looked annoyed when he interrupted.

"I just want to let you know that I will not come again tomorrow," he said quietly, without even taking a seat.

"Why?" the man questioned. "You're a good worker, and you have a partner."

"I don't belong here," Dion shrugged, and the man just shook his head and took a file from a drawer.

He mumbled something while fiddling with the papers.

"Are you sure? You look like a decent fellow to me," the older man looked at him, a bit upset.

"It is for the best," Dion cast his eyes down.

"All right," the foreman sighed. "But I tell you this. You go straight to Venusville, or any other club. You decide you hate it, you come back. I'm not closing your file. Just this one time. If you come back, you stay here, no more wandering about. Have you talked to John about this?"

Dion shook his head.

"We don't get along that well. And I won't come back," he said stubbornly.

"Young people," the foreman seemed to speak mostly to himself. "Get out of my office. I give you three days, and you'll come running back."

Dion murmured his thanks and left. That day, he asked his supervisor to let him leave early, so he could gather the few things he had from John's house and be on his way.

Cory looked over the crowd, searching for Lucas with his eyes. It felt reassuring to seek his lover and almost always see the dark eyes staring back at him like they were linked through some invisible thread that helped them both find each other and communicate without words even in a room full of strangers.

This time, though, Lucas was standing up from the table, being guided by another Master, most probably to a private room they were using at times to discuss more delicate details of the projects they were working on.

He barely saw Lucas's strong back disappearing from his view when his arm was grabbed forcefully and a voice he knew very well whispered menacingly into his ear.

"Long time no see, Cory," the slave spoke, and the servant felt a bit of uneasiness hearing the familiar voice.

He took a deep breath and turned to face Antoine, smiling. If he was going to dodge the slave's advances, he had to be smart about it.

"Hi Antoine," he faked pleasure upon seeing the slave.

A hand moved to cup his jaw, tightening its grip a bit too much.

"I missed you," Antoine spoke again, but his eyes were cold, and Cory felt uneasiness turning into something akin to fear.

"I know, I did, too," Cory lied.

"I don't see your Master anywhere," Antoine pretended to search the room for Lucas, although Cory's senses were screaming at him that the blue-eyed slave had known exactly when to time his entrance.

"You're not supposed to be here," Cory said softly.

"I could not help it," Antoine answered. "I had to see you. Come with me, no one will notice," he dragged Cory along, and the servant followed, his heart smaller and smaller.

He was pushed through a side door, and his eyes blinked in the darkness. Antoine closed the door behind them and only then turned on the light.

Cory froze. He was in one of those rooms reserved for preparing the slaves, and there were at least a dozen of them present. As usual, they were all naked, and they were all looking at him. He could taste danger floating in the air. No one was smiling; they were staring.

Cory's eyes felt drawn to the fireplace. The atmosphere was hot, too hot; and he could see something burning there. A metal cane?

"What's this?" he tried to force a smile while turning towards Antoine.

The slave didn't answer. He just circled Cory with slow, predatory moves.

"Tell me, Cory, how much you missed me?" he eventually spoke.

Cory forced himself to remain unmoved.

"You know how much," he angled his head slightly.

"No, no, no, I don't," Antoine raised an accusatory finger. "Rumor has it you think you're better than the rest of us because Lord Lucas chose you to warm his bed."

Cory shook his head gently.

"It's nothing like that. I've always had eyes only for you," he stared Antoine in the eyes, and he could see the slave's resolve faltering.

"Antoine," he heard another slave talking, "stick to the plan."

Antoine's eyes turned to steel, and he sneered.

"Don't worry about it, guys. I know what I have to do."

He grabbed Cory by one arm and twisted it painfully.

"Antoine," Cory breathed out, "why?"

"Because no one takes me for a fool, servant," the slave whispered in his ear and pushed him down.

Others came around them and started to tear Cory's clothes from his body. He tried to shake them off, but they were too strong and too many.

He didn't want others to touch him. He knew he should go slack and let them, to minimize the damage, but he couldn't. Not after Lucas had held him in his arms and made love to him, making him feel like he mattered. He thrashed against the hands holding him down, and a kick in the ribs made him recoil from the pain.

"Stay still, you fucking whore," Antoine hissed when Cory managed to free one leg and kick blindly at one of his assailants.

He was soon completely naked, his limbs stretched painfully. There was a short moment of silence during which nothing but his labored breath could be heard.

"Guys, do you think Lord Lucas would like Cory more if we mess him up a little? Or less?"

The others laughed. His head pressed into the carpet, he could not see what Antoine was up to. When he felt the first sting against his naked back, his stomach clenched so severely that acid rushed upwards, burning his throat. He had no idea what Antoine was using to hit him with.

"Nice, Antoine," he heard another slave speaking. "You managed to break the skin. But I think he's enjoying it. Make him scream."

White hot pain shot through his brain, as another blow came. He wanted to keep it in, but, at the third, he had to scream. It was like all his nerve endings were raw, exposed.

"Can we, like, fuck him?" one of the slaves spoke.

"No time," Antoine said grimly. "Just ... fuck him up."

Cory tried to recoil when he felt the first kick, right in the ribs. And then another followed. And another. He could feel bitterness cloying his tongue, and he began retching.

Antoine crouched next to him, while he was still kept there, on the floor. He could feel the man's breath, hot on his face.

“I wish I had time to fuck you properly one last time,” Antoine whispered in his ear. “But, after this, no one will, anyway.”

He said nothing. Antoine raked his fingers through Cory’s damp hair. “He won’t keep you. Even if he wants to. Now let me give you my farewell present. Bring it!” he yelled at the others.

His arm was stretched painfully, and his eyes grew wide when he saw the reddened piece of metal contorted in some intricate design getting close to his skin. He tried to move, but the slaves were keeping him down. Antoine’s eyes were burning with madness, as he pressed the heated iron against his shoulder.

He doubted he had ever felt something as painful as that. His eyes rolled in his head, and he almost fainted.

“We should take a hike, Antoine,” one of the slaves hurried him. “Do you think he’ll tell on us?”

“And if he does, what?” Antoine snapped. “He’s nothing but a servant. He’ll be out of Drena in a heartbeat.”

“Hey, Antoine, why don’t you cut his face, too?” another encouraged him.

Antoine grabbed Cory’s chin and turned the limp head towards him.

“And leave nothing for the trash outside of Drena that will want to fuck him? No, just like Dion, he has to learn his lesson.”

The servant’s ravaged body was left there, bleeding. Antoine spared him a last glance with an unreadable expression on his face. He grimaced; a glass of wine would have to do, to wash the unpleasant taste in his mouth.

The bouncer at the door was looking sleepy as he finally decided to go in.

“John’s pretty thing,” the man smiled and looked Dion over appreciatively.

“I’m looking for work,” Dion fiddled nervously with his duffel bag.

“Seriously?” the man’s eyes grew wide.

Dion nodded.

“Well, there is plenty of work for you here, sugar,” the bouncer moved out of the way, and Dion walked in.

A rough hand caressed his ass.

“Put me on your list, honey,” the man whispered, and Dion shuddered. “The boss’s office is at the end of the hall, to the right. He’ll be more than happy to see you.”

Dion let out a breath, noticing the club to be empty at that hour. He knocked softly on the door, but no one answered. Eventually, he started to knock louder and louder, until someone yelled at him to come in.

He looked at the disheveled man behind the desk, and could barely refrain from pursing his lips in disgust. But who was he to judge?

“I would like to work here,” he offered an explanation, and the man’s expression turned from annoyance to delight.

“Take off your clothes, then,” he said with a sneer, and Dion let the bag fall to the floor, and undressed with efficient, short moves.

The man leaned back and looked appreciatively at Dion up and down.

“I think you’ll be our next sensation, sweetie,” the man nodded. “Now, how about coming over here on your knees and showing me a bit of gratitude?”

Dion stared him in the eyes. He was not going to be a victim anymore.

“I heard I am only supposed to strip, and nothing else,” he said calmly, and the man’s smile froze on his lips. “And I heard no one can force me to do something I do not want.”

The man frowned and then laughed, throwing his head back. Yet Dion knew he played his card right this time.

“Oh, cutie, you really think that, don’t you? Well, you’re gorgeous, so I won’t let you run to the competition. But I’ll give you a bit of time; you’ll adjust. Soon you will be like anyone else. Plus, nobody likes a whore who doesn’t put out. How long are you going to resist here with no friends?”

You have no idea, Dion thought and remained standing straight, looking the man square in the eyes. The other laughed again.

“I have to give it to you. You’re a bit fiery, like your hair. I bet they’ll be raining credits on your ass tonight. I’ll show you to your room. Get enough rest; you’ll need it.”

The grey ghosts remained unmoved as Lord Lucas spoke.

“Servants are replaceable,” the Head Trainer spoke. “Why is this one so important?”

“I thought Masters were respected in Drena,” Lucas spoke sharply. “My property,” he emphasized the word, “was treated as if he didn’t belong to one of the most powerful Rulers in the city. It is an insult, and I demand proper retribution.”

“Maybe Lord Arnaud should offer one of his servants in return? Maybe even the slave in question?”

Lord Arnaud moved to protest, but Lucas intervened again.

“I do not want that despicable thing. I want the rabid dog to be put to sleep!” he could no longer contain his anger in.

His voice echoed against the tall ceiling. It seemed like for one second, everyone in the room forgot how to breathe. Eventually, Lord Arnaud gathered his wits to speak.

“I know Antoine can be difficult at times. But slaves are more valuable than servants. And Lord Lucas’s demand is simply ludicrous. It’s not like the servant was killed. He was just ... damaged,” he pursed his lips in slight disgust.

“And branded,” Lucas hissed. “Trainers, you do realize this Antoine is a menace to everyone with his mad dog behavior. It would be in our society’s best interest if such elements were not kept around, to cause distress and damage.”

“Your demand is impossible to satisfy, Lord Lucas,” the Head Trainer spoke again. “If you do not wish for Lord Arnaud to replace the damaged servant, there is

nothing we can do. You should consider, nonetheless, getting another servant. The current one will take a long time to recover. We will take good care of him.”

“No, he will recover at my house. I hope you are not imposing on me to abandon what belongs to me,” Lucas’s lips almost trembled as he spoke.

“This wish is granted,” the Head Trainer rose, signaling that the meeting was over.

Dion sat on the narrow bed, his fingers linked together, staring at the ceiling, contemplating his life and what it had become. Could he survive in this harsh place that didn’t seem to agree with him? He had never been a whore by his own doing. It had always been forced; now he was choosing a line of work that was telling him he was going to be precisely that: a whore. Yet, in a twisted, unnatural way, it seemed the only possibility, since the foreman had been clear about not allowing him to tease the other guys at work, without choosing one. He had chosen one, and it had been a mistake.

No, Dion pondered. John had not been a mistake. He had not been a bad choice. But Dion could not stand looking into the man’s deep black eyes and see nothing but pity or disgust there. That was something he did not want to live with. And it had been right to choose so if he wanted what was best for John. After all, the man had the right to be free and go after another. Being trapped in a relationship, he did not want, or preferring to wander the nightclubs in search of release, was not something Dion wished to picture for John.

The door opened, and Dion stood up to see who the intruder was.

“I’ll be damned ...” Andreas put his hands on his hips while looking down at Dion.

In natural light, Andreas looked a bit different and, unfortunately for him, it wasn’t exactly a flattering look. There was a bit of bitterness hanging from the corners of his beautiful lips, and dark circles marred the large blue eyes. Dion could bet he looked older than his actual age.

The redhead chose to say nothing. He had no unpaid dues to John’s ex.

“Did John kick you out? Or did you leave?” Andreas tried to fake indifference, while climbing on his bed, placed on the opposite wall.

“None of your business,” Dion said icily.

It was against his nature to be impolite to others, but he was in no mood for idle conversation, especially about such a delicate subject.

“Oh, kitty has claws ...” Andreas commented and yawned. “Get some sleep,” he turned to one side while embracing his pillow. “They will be all over you tonight. Just don’t touch my regulars and I’ll stay out of your hair,” the blond commented.

“I won’t touch anyone,” Dion murmured.

“No shit. Boss told me you acted almighty and shit while asking him for a job. Of course, the pervert won’t turn down a piece of ass, regardless. Take this little advice from me, sugar queen; give in fast, or you won’t last long.”

The threat was left hanging in the air. It made Dion feel restless, all of a sudden. The foreman had been clear about any crimes being punished severely, but what if ...? He shuddered. He was going to be cautious. There were no fairy tales, and even in Drena, where everything looked beautiful, there was nothing but vanity and ugliness beneath. At least here no one was pretending to be something he was not.

“You’re next,” Andreas pushed by him, throwing him a sideways glance.

The applauses that had praised Andreas for his performance just earlier were dying out. Dion took a deep breath. If he was going to stick to the routine Andreas had shown him, he was going to be okay.

He heard the announcer’s voice introducing him like through a daze and stepped on the stage. For some reason, the music wasn’t starting yet, and he could hear the sound of his heels against the glossy floor too clearly.

He was wearing high leather boots that were going up to mid-thigh, and a glitzy thong he was sure it wasn’t covering much. There was indeed something they had

lied to him about it. This wasn't stripping; he was already as good as naked. He hoped at least the part about no one touching him was real.

For several moments, during which Dion stood there, all the lights on him, almost blinding him, there was silence. Then someone whistled, and suddenly catcalls could be heard everywhere. To his relief, the music started playing, and he began moving his hips slowly.

It wasn't hard at all, he mused, as he kneeled on the stage and began undulating to the music, making sure everyone was getting an eyeful. He stretched lazily, running his long fingers through his hair, then letting them roam over his naked body. He knew that the climax of his show was to take off the boots and then the thong, but he was not there yet.

The music was suddenly cut, and he blinked, confused. He stood up, unsure of what that was supposed to mean. The announcer appeared on the stage next to him again. He grabbed Dion's waist and started speaking into his mike.

"Should we give Dion a warm welcome party to Venusville?" he asked the audience.

Dion froze. He knew what a welcome party meant, at least in Drena.

The crowd roared. The commentator waited for the noise to die out, then continued.

"Then place your bets, gents. Whoever wins, gets a private show from our beautiful redhead here, and the privilege to see him completely naked before anyone else. And, of course, if you are smooth enough," the man sneered, "you may convince lovely Dion here to offer you something on top of everything for your effort."

Dion closed his eyes. He had to endure this. It was, after all, part of what he had signed for. Suddenly, he sensed something changing. There were murmurs and certain unease. When he opened his eyes, he saw John jumping on the stage and walking towards him with a terrifying look in his eyes. He was grabbed forcefully and shaken by strong hands.

"What the hell do you think you're doing here, Dion?" John said through his teeth.

“Hey, hey,” the announcer tried to push him back. “Place your bet like everyone else if you want to cop a feel, man!”

John ignored him, too focused on searching Dion’s eyes with his.

“Answer me,” he said menacingly.

Dion tried to shake him off.

“I’m doing the only thing I’m good at.”

“You’re mine,” John said ferociously. “And I am telling you! You’re not good at this. You’re good with me. Come home now,” he took Dion by the hand and tried to drag him along.

John’s act had quickly awakened the bouncer at the door from his stupor, and the giant was now trying to get through the crowd to settle the situation happening on stage.

“John,” the bouncer called. “Take a hike, man. He chose to come here to work.”

“He is my partner,” John said through his teeth, not backing down and dragging Dion closer to him, almost making him stumble. “I am not letting anyone touch him!”

There was yelling from all sides, and Dion felt fear growing inside him. John didn’t realize he was putting himself in danger! He tried to disentangle his hand from John’s, but the man’s grip was hard as steel.

“What is going on?”

Even the owner of the place had been summoned, Dion noticed.

“John here doesn’t understand his sweetheart doesn’t want him and wants to strip for cash instead,” the announcer explained.

“Get him out of here,” the boss demanded in a high pitched voice.

The bouncer moved to separate John from Dion, but the dark, tall man didn’t budge.

“If anyone touches my lover, he’ll have to go through me,” John said menacingly and pushed Dion just slightly back so he could assume a fighting stance.

The bouncer moved to hit him, but, for his height, John proved to be quite light on his feet, as he dodged the man’s heavy punch with ease. Without waiting for another opportunity, John hit the giant square in the face, making him grab his nose while screaming. Blood started pouring through his fingers, and the bouncer took the hands from his face and stared at his blood like he could not believe it. He launched as a madman at John, and this time he managed to hit the other. The element of surprise was soon gone, though, and the worker easily dodged again and executed the bouncer with a short elbow between his shoulder blades.

The entire room felt like caught on fire. Dion was shaking; he could not understand a word he was hearing. The announcer grabbed his arm and whispered in his ear.

“Get your demented boyfriend and get out of here,” he hissed and pushed Dion towards John.

Behind the announcer, the club owner tried to maintain some resemblance of control.

“Yeah, get the fuck out of here, both of you! And never come back, or I’ll take this higher! I’ll talk to your foreman, John, don’t you think I won’t! And take your fucking tramp with you!”

John turned with murder in his eyes. Dion hurried by his side and pushed him to move.

“Let’s go, please, John,” he said quickly.

The bouncer showed signs that he was going to get up from the floor, and Dion didn’t want to see another round in the boxing match between that guy and John.

Dark eyes stared into his angrily. He didn’t cower though; anything John had to say, he was going to say it, and Dion was going to listen. Right now, all that mattered was for both of them to get out of the club unscathed.

“Hey, John, why don’t you let your boyfriend show us the goods?” one man from the audience spoke loudly, and everyone laughed.

“Yeah, man, he wants to, what the hell?” another commented.

“He has no idea what he wants,” John said loud and clear, without taking his eyes off Dion.

“Yeah, be the man,” another voice encouraged him.

John grabbed Dion’s waist, and for a second, the redhead thought the man was going to kiss him right there in front of everyone. Instead, he was lifted almost effortlessly off the floor and thrown over a taut shoulder.

He could hear everyone laughing and pointing fingers at them from all directions. He tried to move and punched John’s back with all his might, yelling at him to put him down. John seemed to have lost his sense of hearing all of a sudden, as he ignored him while walking in long strides towards the door. Everyone was cheering and rooting for John, from what he could gather from all the yelling.

At some point, he gave up on trying to get John to release him from his hold. The man seemed both deaf and immune to his punching and shouting and was continuing his walk towards his house, without making as much as a sound.

Only when they were inside, Dion was unceremoniously dropped on the sofa. He felt overly conscious about his state of undress. The reproach in John’s eyes was evident. Embarrassed, he reached for the blanket to cover himself. A steady hand stopped him.

“No,” John almost growled.

Dion gulped. Was John going to hit him?

“Stay like this. Show me. I earned your fucking private show,” John spoke slowly.

The redhead could swear the air in the room was vibrating with the man’s pain.

“You already saw me. You know how I look,” Dion spoke while grabbing his knees with his palms. The leather felt cheap beneath his fingers.

John shook his head slowly.

“You said this is the only thing you’re good at. Show me,” he demanded again. “Show me how you were planning to reward the guy who was going to place the highest bet on your ass tonight.”

“I was only going to undress, that was all,” Dion said in his defense.

“Really?” John sneered. “And after that? A blow job? Letting him have you? How? On your fours, you on top spread wide ... Tell me, enlighten me,” he pressed.

He was not moving. He was standing there, towering over Dion, with that expression of deep hurt on his face that was making the redhead want nothing but to take John in his arms and tell him to stop saying those horrible things.

He shook his head and buried his face in his hands.

“I wasn’t going to ...”

“Yes, you were,” John spoke again bitterly. “But I’m not letting you. I’m not letting you become Andreas. I don’t care if you hate me for taking you away from there. You’ll stay here, and I will take care of you, whether you like it or not. I don’t know what fucked up games you guys like playing up there, in Drena. Here, things are simple. You are mine. From the moment you grabbed my arm and told the guys at work you chose me, you were mine. And nothing is going to change that.”

Dion was staring at John wide-eyed. That was one hell of a confession. He stood up slowly and ran his fingers through his hair. He smiled and looked John in the eyes.

“What are you doing?” John demanded.

“I am showing you,” Dion said simply.

John averted his eyes.

“Don’t take everything literally. I don’t want you to behave like a slut and show me what you would have done for money. I don’t have that kind of money, anyway.”

Dion came closer and grabbed John's shirt, slowly opening it button by button. He reached inside and touched the man's hairy chest, caressing it slowly. The man didn't move away. His breath just became raspier.

"I am not showing you that. I am showing you what I would like to do with you and no one else."

He leaned onto John's hard body and used his both hands to struggle with the belt. He took the man's erect cock from his pants and started stroking it.

"Would you like to fuck me John?" he slowly raised his eyes to look into John's black ones. "I want you to fuck me."

He barely held in a gasp, as impatient fingers pulled at the small thong and made the string snap. He was pushed on the floor, his legs parted, with the man on top of him. John buried his head in the crook of Dion's neck, groaning. Dion wet two fingers in his mouth and used them to lubricate himself. John's cock was hovering near his entrance, and he could hear the man now whimpering softly.

"It's ok now," he encouraged him, and John pushed inside, making him cry out in surprise.

John stopped, but Dion used his legs to wrap them around the man's midsection and keep him there.

"No, John. I want you to fuck me," he said bravely, and this time the man moved, although a bit uneasy, burying himself little by little in Dion's body.

The redhead grabbed his partner's head in his hands and kissed him. John's mouth was hot on his, and their tongues started the dance they knew from past encounters only to now discover something new that both of them had craved for so long.

John felt huge inside him, to the point Dion was afraid he would break, but the way the man moved was compensating for the discomfort. There was something there, deep inside him, that resonated with John's slow thrusts as it had never happened before with anyone else. He freed his mouth so he could moan freely.

"How is it, baby? Is it good?" John said almost pleading, and Dion realized the man was barely keeping himself from fucking him into the carpet.

“Fuck me harder,” he urged his lover and John’s satisfied groan as he sped the rhythm confirmed his suspicion.

He felt his pleasure growing, the small bud inside his ass sending short bursts of pleasure through his spine, into his brain. It felt so great to come. Only this man could make him feel this way. John praised him clumsily and poured himself fully into Dion’s body.

As he withdrew, Dion felt a bit empty and deserted. He wanted to hold John close some more. The man moved, and Dion’s anxiety grew. Maybe that was all that John wanted from him.

But the man grabbed him by his back and legs and lifted him in his arms.

“What are you doing?” Dion mumbled.

“I am taking you to bed, love,” John whispered and kissed his damp forehead. “I hope you don’t intend to have us sleep in the floor.”

Dion nestled his head in John’s shoulder. Never in his life, had he felt so protected.

Chapter Thirteen

A soft humming sound was caressing his sense of hearing. He tried to open his eyes, but the eyelids felt heavy as lead. Just as the tongue inside his mouth; some unarticulated sounds came out, and he could barely register they were only half words he was trying to speak.

A warm hand came to rest on his forehead.

“Easy, you’re safe here,” he heard Lucas’s voice, low as a whisper.

Something sweet and moist was pushed past his lips, and he allowed the intrusion. It felt good, cool against his heavy tongue. Soon enough, he let his slumber take him once more.

Lucas stood up and sighed. Recovery was going to take a while. With proper care, the marks on Cory’s back were going to heal. The scars on his heart were a different matter. And there was also the problem with the brand. The Head Trainer was not happy about it. He had clearly stated that allowing a servant, damaged in such a manner, to continue to tend to a Ruler’s needs in Drena, was undesirable.

He had examined the burned flesh, barely containing the hatred he felt within. He had to focus on Cory’s recovery at the moment and on convincing the Head Trainer to leave the young man in his service. But the future, which he had always thought of as being set in stone, each day resembling the other, with no big surprises, no high hopes, now seemed muddy and a cause of unease.

There was a storm of emotions he was trying to cope with. Antoine had escaped punishment without as little as a slap on the wrist. The Head Trainer’s was trying to convince him to get a new servant. The raw intensity of the deep hatred he was nurturing inside was too much. He had to do something about it. But as much as he wanted to picture Antoine being tortured to death, each time Cory moved in his sleep, he had to forget his own heart and the pain inside it and tend to the man he loved immediately.

Now he had been summoned again. He had a distinct sensation he was not going to enjoy meeting the Head Trainer.

“We fail to understand why you are so adamant about keeping a defective item in your household,” the Head Trainer spoke slowly as if Lucas was a difficult child sitting at a school desk.

“I thought I was free to choose my servants,” Lucas answered sharply to the unspoken request.

“We would not normally deny such simple demands from our Rulers,” the grey hood bowed slightly, as in apology. “But there is also the issue of the brand burned on the servant’s shoulder. It is still a mystery to us how the symbol emerged at such an inopportune time.”

“I do not understand,” Lucas murmured, for some reason feeling the temperature in the room dropping. “I have never seen the symbol, and I do not see its importance.”

“Something from old times,” the Head Trainer gestured like he wanted to protect himself from some pesky insects. “It is the so-called mark of a whore, and we find it simply distasteful. Keeping this servant inside the city walls will remind everyone of a time when such barbaric acts were condoned. We believe punishment is love, and that it should be administered accordingly. Trying to shame someone is simply not done in a society like ours, and intimate acts are seen as natural for Masters and those who serve them to render the term ‘whore’ simply obsolete.”

Lucas frowned. The Head Trainer seemed to dance around the subject.

“He would be entirely covered by clothes in polite society. He is not a slave, so he would not be required to undress in public, either. The branded mark would not be visible.”

“Yes, I understand. The only one exposed to its ugliness would be you, Lord Lucas,” lifeless pools of darkness measured Lucas up and down like they were trying to uncover some secret the man did not want to share.

“And I do not mind,” Lucas added quickly.

“It is not a matter whether you mind or not. We love all our children equally. Please do not see it as we want to deprive you of a preferred toy.”

It took Lucas all the self-restraint he was capable of to avoid saying something he was certainly going to regret later. The Head Trainer continued.

“We want to offer you perfection ...”

“Perfection is boring,” Lucas blurted out.

“Please do not be difficult,” the grey form moved, and the old chair creaked under the weight. “We will give you time to adjust. We understand that you developed quite an attachment to this servant, so we will not take him away from you. At least not until you see the errors of your ways and decide to be in accord with us.”

“What do you plan to do with him?”

“The same thing we do with all the servants who complete their service. He will be sent to work the factories. Or the mines. Seeing his condition, he is probably going to be better working underground.”

Lucas’s heart skipped a few beats.

“I would like to leave Drena. Could I take my servant with me? There are no such rules in Aeria,” he spoke, trying hard not to storm out of the room, grab Cory and leave right away.

“Leave Drena?” the Head Trainer’s voice seemed disappointed. “At this time, we are afraid it is not possible. We have no one as brilliant as you to fill your position. As for your request, we hate to disappoint you, but as a person born here, Cory the servant needs to remain close to home. Working the mines outside the city, or staying here, these are the only two possibilities to consider. And you know well which one we find desirable.”

A whorl of dark thoughts gripped Lucas’s mind.

“Head Trainer,” he spoke loud and clear, “I must say that I am disappointed with how this was handled. First, my property is damaged, and no retribution is exacted, and second, my simple wishes are condemned in your eyes. On top of everything,

there is no investigation going on, searching for an explanation of how the symbol you are talking about fell into the hands of my servant's attackers."

"An investigation?" the Head Trainer seemed intrigued.

"Yes. At least I have the right to demand answers. If you have no intention to do so, I will ask the slave myself. Where did he get the iron branding cane from?"

The Head Trainer seemed to ponder. "In this respect, you are correct, Lord Lucas. We will see to finding answers. After all, it was an unfortunate event, and if Lord Arnaud had not been so attached to his slave, some punishment would have been in order."

Lucas knew when a meeting with the Head Trainer was over. He stood up, bowed rigidly and left. The uneasiness inside him was only growing stronger. He was being pushed against his will. It was just a matter of time until they would take Cory away from him. Even if he was to beg, he knew the Head Trainer was not going to revise his position in that regard. For the first time in his life, Lucas was starting to question everything he believed in.

Good relationships with merchants were not only required of Rulers, but they were also useful. Carefully rolling the paper and placing it inside a beautifully ornate stylus, Lucas waited for the merchant to appear. He was not particularly fond of Vacchiari, but, in time, he had learned the merchant was a man to be trusted. Within reason. There was a little cipher locking the stylus so that the merchant could not stumble upon the content of the message by accident or otherwise.

He handed the middle-aged man the stylus and a small card. "Please see that Professor Edgar in Aeria receives this. It is imperative that you give him this gift directly," Lucas looked Vacchiari in the eyes. "No one else must know."

The merchant nodded and palmed the stylus and the card on which some boring greeting like words were printed. Vacchiari had been in the trade for a long time to know when a good deal could be struck from keeping secrets. That was what Lucas could read in the man's shifty eyes.

A few days later, one Professor Edgar in Aeria, Lucas's old friend, and confidante was studying the card and the stylus with a frown on his face. He scratched his head and sniffed the stylus then played with it, rolling it between his bony fingers.

“A good game of hide-and-seek like back in the days, Lucas?” he spoke out loud. That was a habit that could have been seen as peculiar, talking to himself. But there was no one there to judge him.

It had always been entertaining to play those games with Lucas. His leaving for Drena had not meant the end of their friendship, though. The stylus popped open as the scientist carefully switched the cap, rightfully guessing the code he and Lucas had used so many times. Edgar unrolled the small paper on his desk, way too overcrowded with documents of all shapes and sizes, filled with his little, tormented scribbles. He stared at the symbol while tapping his fingers against the wood.

“And what exactly is this supposed to mean?”

Lucas's message was clear. ‘Edgar, please tell me what this symbol is all about.’

“Yes, Lucas, and that is easier said than done,” Edgar straightened his back, making a few vertebrae pop. He was anxious for a new challenge. Working all day and all night on improving the new gate system had left him feeling a bit unsatisfied lately. Now he had something to play with.

“It is a wonderful morning,” Lucas spoke while helping Cory to get up and wake slowly to sit in a rocking chair in front of the window.

Cory didn't need words to let him know what his lover felt. His handsome face had become a little gaunt, and there was a deep frown on Lucas's forehead that Cory knew too well had not been there before.

“How are you, Lucas?” he spoke hoarsely. He was still getting adjusted to talking again. It felt a bit unnatural.

“This is something I should ask you,” Lucas said with tenderness while caressing Cory’s hand as if it was made of some fragile material, bound to break at the slightest wrong move.

“That would be redundant,” Cory said wistfully. “You’ve cared for me all this time, haven’t you?”

Lucas’s strong fingers curled with tenderness against Cory’s smaller hand.

“What happened? You know, to ... them?” he asked with difficulty.

Lucas shook his head. Containing the rage and anger he felt within was taking its toll on his sanity as it was. Cory understood without words.

“Don’t worry. It is as expected. When will they send me away?” he asked while staring out the window.

“They won’t,” Lucas’s voice sounded hollow. “I won’t let them!”

Cory moved his hand to grab Lucas’s fingers tightly. “I knew it was not going to last. For what it’s worth, it was a beautiful dream, Lucas. I will always have this, for the days to come.”

“Don’t talk like this!” Lucas almost shouted. “I’ll do everything! They say I can still keep you!”

“Lucas,” Cory spoke tenderly. “It is not like how we were taught. We break the rules. We pay for it. We knew it very well, both you and I.”

“What are you talking about? No one tells a Master, a Ruler even, what to do,” Lucas’s voice vibrated with emotion. “There are no rules.”

“But there are. Servants are nothing but a commodity to be moved around. My time here is done.”

Lucas let go of his hand.

“Is this what you want, Cory? What you really want?”

“A servant’s wish is not important.”

“There is no one else but you and I here. Tell me what you want, and I will change the world,” Lucas spoke passionately while pacing the room behind Cory.

Cory’s heart grew smaller in his chest.

“A good servant never questions his betters. A good servant never speaks out of turn. A good servant never falls in love with his Master,” the words grew thin, weak in his mouth.

Lucas came to kneel next to his chair. Green eyes searched his.

“What are you speaking of, Cory? Tell me right now.”

A thin hand caressed Lucas’s face, relearning each feature in its wake. “Is it that hard to understand? I love you, Lucas, and for this, I will have to leave. You cannot jeopardize your position for someone like me.”

“Someone like you?” Lucas’s hands closed over his. “There will never be someone like you. No one has ever made me feel as alive as you do. For a while, I thought I was simply infatuated, but not anymore. They had to hurt you to make me realize ...”

Thin fingers pressed against Lucas’s lips to silence him.

“Don’t worry; I’ll be fine. They dragged me here, to the inner city, and now they are sending me back. And you will be fine, too. If I stay here, you will only feel pain and unhappiness. At least, outside of Drena, enemies come straight at you if they have something against you. They do not lurk in the shadows. At least, that was what I knew.”

“I will protect you,” Lucas begged Cory with his eyes.

“And they will all laugh at you. They will wear you down, day after day. And will I be safe? By now, I suppose what happened is all over Drena. I doubt I would make any new friends.”

He forced a small smile.

“Not that I had many, to begin with. But that is not what I’m worried most.”

“Then what is it?” Lucas’s eyes were filled with worry and regret. “I should not have left that day, leave you alone ...”

“Lucas, it is not the slaves who are the most dangerous,” Cory spoke softly. If it was one thing Lucas didn’t know about was how he had laid so many hours on his suffering bed, thinking.

“Antoine,” Lucas hissed.

“Not even him,” Cory grimaced and closed his eyes tightly. “He did not do it because he hated me. Or, better said, not only because of that. They said something ... something strange. I remember well how he wavered when I tried to reach him. It was one split second, but it was like, if it were on his own accord, he would have just pushed me around at best. Not ...” he drew a deep breath, “not all this. They told him to ‘stick to the plan’. It was all staged. It was not just a random episode of violence. It was prepared. Do you see Antoine being capable of acting on more than mere impulse? You must not forget I have known him for a while.”

His other hand traveled to his shoulder as if he was trying to feel the brand with his fingers through his shirt.

“And this,” he added softly. “For Antoine and the rest, it would have been enough to beat me up. Why this?”

“It is something I am trying to find out,” Lucas spoke.

“What do the Trainers say?” Cory questioned. “They hold the truth.”

“Not this time, it seems.”

“How ... how does it look like? I feel like my shoulder is getting better.”

“You are going to heal.”

“I know. I could not see it very well. I would like to see it,” he said, staring into Lucas’s eyes.

He was helped to his feet and moved slowly in front of a mirror. He drew a deep breath as Lucas gently unbuttoned his shirt and took the sleeve on his right arm off. He looked into the mirror.

“It looks like a flower of sorts. Why did they do it?”

“Apparently,” Lucas helped him get the sleeve on again, “it is supposed to be shameful.”

“What is the point? I do not know what it means.”

“The Trainers say it is the main reason why I should consider sending you away. They say it is ... distasteful. A reminder of times past.”

“Times past? I thought the world was always like this. I do not understand.”

“Me neither. But I don’t care. If there is something that someone is trying to keep from me, I will do my best to find out. Now, please, you must return to bed. You are yet to recover fully.”

Cory turned and let his forehead rest on his Master’s shoulder. “Can I ask for a favor?” he spoke softly.

“Of course you can,” Lucas caressed his head with infinite tenderness.

“Please stay with me at night.”

The look in Lucas’s eyes was the only answer he needed.

“Mister Whiskers,” Edgar pointed his pencil towards his cat that was watching him from his vantage point on top of the cabinet, “I think we have something interesting to transmit to Lord Lucas in Drena. What do you say? Do you like a good story?”

To demonstrate his total disinterest in his owner’s intellectual tribulations, the tomcat closed his eyes and stretched lazily.

Edgar pushed his thin-rimmed glasses back on his nose. He carefully rolled the small map together with the text he had written for Lucas. A strange ticklish sensation was making him excited and nervous at the same time; it was not like him to do something against the rules. But as he and Lucas often said, knowledge was always worth breaking the rules.

Lucas waited patiently for the door to close after Vacchiari. He unlocked the stylus and took out the two papers.

“La Fleur de Lys,” Lucas murmured, looking thoughtfully over the text written in Edgar’s chaotic handwriting.

He took a seat. As he was reading, a play of emotions animated his face. Surprise, disbelief, worry, and finally, determination lit his face. The Trainers were not going to send Cory to the mines outside of Drena. He was going to do that.

He looked at the old map and traced the barely visible lines. He then returned to the symbol and pressed the tip of his fingers against the three petals.

“For those who work, those who fight, and those who pray,” he repeated the words written by Edgar right under the symbol.

An appreciative whistle made Xavier turned with an affronted look in his beautiful grey eyes. He probably missed a few things from Drena. Such as his privacy when taking a shower. He could not say he minded, although the playful slap across his buttocks that followed made him grind his teeth a little.

“You could knock,” he murmured and turned back to see about washing his body while trying to ignore Ayn’s radiating heat.

“And miss having you in a hissy fit again?” Ayn grabbed his waist and pressed his naked body against Xavier’s. “I love it when you’re angry. It makes the sex so much better,” he drawled the words into the other’s ear while biting it.

“You are so full of yourself,” Xavier rolled his eyes, a bit miffed at how his cock stirred to life, as Ayn’s rough hand brushed over it, with seemingly no intention to grab it and give it a good rub.

“I learned from the best,” Ayn whispered seductively in his ear, letting his hands roam over Xavier’s perfect torso until they found purchase on erect nipples that grew instantly harder when pinched.

“You are developing quite an obsession,” Xavier’s breathing grew ragged, as Ayn began twisting his nipples between his fingers, sending jolts of electricity straight to his cock.

“Admit it. You’re into this big time,” Ayn teased while placing a trace of small kisses on the man’s right shoulder.

“No,” Xavier denied a bit too quickly.

“Xav, baby, you’re absolutely fucking lying,” Ayn rubbed his growing erection against Xavier’s flawless buttocks.

Xavier pushed back to encourage the intrusion. It was, after all, what he truly wanted. No matter how much he hated to admit, and he would have been caught dead rather than do that, Ayn had proved to be a skillful considerate lover. The fact that the man had learned everything from wooing girls was not sitting well with him, but he had to swallow it. At least, he had been the first man in Ayn’s life, and that had to count for something.

“Xa-vi-er,” he spelled stubbornly, as Ayn used his fingers, coated with something slick and wet to open him and then push inside slowly. “And don’t call me ‘baby’. It’s cheesy.”

Ayn grunted with satisfaction, as he buried himself deep inside Xavier’s compliant body.

“How should I call you, then? My darling? My love?” Ayn punctured each one of his words with slow, torturous thrusts.

Love? The word sent a small jolt of pleasure up his spine. Yet, the taste in his mouth was bitter. It was not the word bothering him, but the fact that Ayn was saying it so casually.

“No,” he said again. “Xavier would suffice.”

“That won’t do,” Ayn said simply. “You’re Xav to me because no one else has ever called you that. And no one else should dare unless they want to piss me off.”

Naming was taking into possession, Xavier thought as one of Ayn’s hands descended on his neglected cock and started jerking it, while its owner continued

his pounding. It made him feel so incredibly aroused to be manipulated, taken like that as if Ayn didn't give a damn who Xavier was or who he pretended to be.

Their moans mingled, bouncing against the walls of the small bathroom. All the riches in the world meant nothing, Xavier thought, as he was fucked by Ayn so totally, so thoroughly, that he could not even start to think what it meant.

He came first, spewing his load on the wall in front of him, and he felt Ayn stilling himself and shouting his release. It always felt like a victory for Ayn and as some sweet surrender on his part.

What mattered most was that every time, Ayn was making him turn to kiss him some more even if both were spent and satiated. Xavier felt like this was counting for Ayn, and he was more than happy to oblige, during their moments of bliss.

"You're an amazing kisser," Ayn praised, as they eventually broke the contact so they could breathe. "Even back in that city of assholes, I still loved your kisses."

Ayn caressed Xavier's cheek, his eyes glued to the man's lips. "And a great cocksucker, too," he added, as he bent and stole another kiss.

"Just great?" Xavier pushed him back a little, casting his eyes down.

"No, the best," Ayn smiled and embraced Xavier, pressing their bodies close together. "My very best in all the ways."

The slave moved around slowly, circling his victim. The other man sat on his knees, his eyes closed, waiting for the final act of humiliation. Antoine got closer and, as everyone cheered, he pumped his cock and grunted his release, painting the man's face with his jizz. Victories seemed hollow lately. But he was playing his part, just like every time; it was the surest way to keep to Arnaud's good graces. Sooner or later, he was going to be discarded, no longer the most beautiful and desirable, so being on top of everyone proved that he was still good enough to keep. Many slaves around him didn't know this simple truth. There were whispers, rumors, and gossip, but Antoine cared for none of them. Keeping his head on his shoulders was what mattered most.

He rubbed his cock a few more times against the other's lips, then turned on his heels and left the arena. Arnaud gave him a nod; the Master was pleased. So Antoine had to be, as well.

He went straight to the slaves' quarters, feeling in terrible need of a shower. He was too lost in his thoughts, so he barely avoided bumping into someone who seemed to have appeared in front of him out of nowhere.

With a frown, he looked up. He blinked, barely hiding his surprise.

"Lord Lucas," he said thinly. Cory's Master. Out of all people, he had to bump into this one, now, when he was alone, and the hallways seemed suddenly very empty.

"I will tell you just this one time," the man spoke rarely, and Antoine could taste the threat wrapped in every word. "You made a powerful enemy. Don't think this is the end. For what you did, you are going to pay."

He opened his mouth, wanting to say something, to laugh the menace off, but Lord Lucas moved past him, without sparing him a glance. What the hell was that supposed to mean?

He pushed the doors to the slaves' quarters.

"Towel," he barked to one of the servants, and the guy hurried to help him.

"Great performance, Antoine," one of the other slaves spoke to him, and he just nodded.

"Lord Lucas was here," another spoke. "He started asking questions. You know ... about that day."

Antoine shrugged, although he could feel unease starting to gnaw at him.

"And?"

"And nothing. We said nothing," the slave said defensively. "But he says that we will be punished. You said no one would do that."

"Lord Lucas is just pissed about not having any power over us," Antoine straightened his back, while a servant was gently wiping the sweat off his back.

“He’s an outsider, so the Trainers don’t give a shit about him. He won’t do anything.”

“But ...” the other slave tried to speak.

“Zip it now, I’m tired,” Antoine headed for the showers. He was in no mood to hear them complaining about that episode.

Not that he wasn’t thinking about it. There were very few things he wanted in his life without getting them. Cory slipping through his fingers had made him mad behind all reason. He could not explain the attraction. But he could still remember eyes blue like cornflowers staring at him with hate and disgust. They still haunted him at night.

It was of no consequence. It had been an order from above. The kind no one dared question. He had a distinct impression or feeling it was related to Cory’s and Lucas’s connection being seen as undesirable by the higher powers. He could not agree more. No one belonged just to one person. It was an unspoken rule Lucas, and Cory broke. They were paying for it.

Later that day, he was summoned for a regular medical checkup. His Master seemed a bit displeased with being deprived of his favorite slave, especially after such a great victory. Arnaud loved being dominated in bed, but that was something he was not supposed to share. Although it had always boosted his pride to let others know a few details now and then, about how he had his Master wrapped around his fingers.

The grey form moved around him, touching him everywhere. For some reason, medical checkups were very unpleasant for Antoine. Probably because the Trainers’ hands were always cold. The physical examination was giving him the shivers. A small needle prickled his arm.

“Have you talked to Lord Lucas lately?” he heard the Head Trainer speaking.

He had no idea when the leader of the Trainers had entered the room.

“Today. He threatened me,” he said simply. He had been trained to keep no secrets from the Trainers.

“What did he say?”

“That I was going to pay.”

“Did he ask you anything in particular?” the Head Trainer moved around.

“No. He just wanted to show off his anger.”

“He will start asking you questions.”

“I know my part. I won't say anything,” Antoine felt a chill creeping down his spine.

“We know,” the Head Trainer spoke.

Antoine tried to move, feeling uneasiness washing over him. He could not move his arms and legs.

“What is going on?” he started breathing hard.

“We know you will not talk because we will make sure of it,” the Head Trainer's voice was growing colder.

His jaw was growing slack, and he felt his examiner pushing something metallic through his lips. At his point, all he could do was blink. Some unarticulated sounds came out, but he could no longer speak.

A sudden sharp pain made his mind go blank. He wasn't sure whether he was screaming or he just imagined it. His mouth filled with blood, and he tried to fight the urge to swallow and swallow so that he could breathe.

He lay there, completely rigid, conscious of the life draining away from his body, as he was suffocating in his blood. Anger was nothing; it served nothing, and regret and blue eyes staring at him were the last memory fading from his mind. His eyes remained open, void of all emotions. A cold hand closed his eyelids.

“And the others?” the Head Trainer questioned.

“A public execution would be distasteful. But we need to make our position known. Punishment is love,” the grey hood bent slightly.

“Punishment is love,” the Head Trainer replied and left the room. His brothers were going to take care of everything. Lucas was going to receive the satisfaction of knowing his servant’s assailants punished, but without knowing anything that might hurt him. It was probably needed for him to get rid of that broken toy he still cared for in his household.

Lord Arnaud’s plea was tearful. Lucas would have been a liar saying that he didn’t feel moved at all.

“I want everyone involved in this dead,” Arnaud spoke with tears in his eyes, while the Trainers were seated in their chairs. “Why did they do it? Why?”

“Apparently, they were afraid Antoine would tell on them, although we solved the issue with Lord Lucas’s servant in a peaceful manner,” the Head Trainer spoke. “Your loss is regrettable, Lord Arnaud.”

“And why is he here?” Arnaud pointed an accusatory finger towards Lucas. “So he could rejoice over my beloved slave’s death?”

“I assure you, Arnaud,” Lucas spoke softly, “that I feel no such thing. I wanted him punished, not maimed and killed.”

“You said you wanted him dead!” Arnaud turned towards Lucas, with madness and hurt in his eyes.

“I was mad with grief, like you are now,” Lucas shook his head gently.

“You must take into consideration, Lord Arnaud,” the Head Trainer spoke again, “that all the Masters whose slaves were involved in this incident will feel the same pain as you. Your request will be granted. We have no interest in allowing this unfortunate event to cause any more distress. The ones involved in this incident will be punished by death. Lord Lucas, it is regrettable that we could not question the slave properly about the provenience of the branding cane. The rest seem to know nothing. By dawn, they will all be obliterated from Drena’s life, and we will all be able to return to ours. Lord Arnaud, a new generation of slaves, is expected. You will be allowed to pick first.”

“No one will ever replace my Antoine!” Arnaud buried his head in his hands and stormed out of the room.

Lucas had never liked Arnaud, but he could understand his pain. He wanted to add something, though.

“Can I see the slaves who killed Antoine? Maybe they are not saying something.”

“This is unnecessary, Lord Lucas. We will take care of everything. And, although this is not the manner we like to use for solving things here, in Drena, we believe that eliminating them will solve the situation for good. To some degree, we think that you should be pleased with this, as well.”

Lucas seemed to ponder for a second. Dark eyes stared at him, waiting. He bowed politely.

“Thank you, Fathers,” he said, and the Head Trainer nodded.

“How are you feeling today?” Lucas embraced Cory from behind, kissing one of his ears gently.

“Much better,” the servant leaned on the hard body pressing against him. “What happened?”

“Something rather strange ...” Lucas mused and took Cory with him, to place him in his lap. “Antoine was killed.”

There was a small gasp from Cory. If the servant thought anything about it, Lucas was not going to press it.

“By whom?”

“By the other slaves involved in ...” Lucas’s words trailed off.

Cory touched his lover’s lips. “I don’t want to see you hurt anymore,” he spoke softly.

Lucas’s green eyes were shining. “I want to protect you,” he squeezed Cory a bit harder in his arms.

“I know. But it was my fault, too, for being too trustful. Drena is beautiful, but its roots are dark,” he spoke thoughtfully.

“What do you mean, Cory?” Lucas questioned, caressing the servant’s back.

“Outside of Drena, everyone disappears once they hit a certain age. They are still whole, men in their prime, but it is like they are not needed anymore. Have you ever seen anyone growing old, like in the books, Lucas?”

“In Aeria, yes, some,” Lucas nodded. “Here ... no. I haven’t seen anyone in Drena over 40 years of age, except for a few merchants. Beside the Trainers. But they are eternal.”

“Why did the slaves kill Antoine now?” Cory asked, letting his head rest on Lucas’s shoulder.

“So you find it strange, too?”

“Yes. No one would dare lay a finger on him in all Drena. Why now?”

“I have no answers, unfortunately. But I am hoping to get some. The Trainers are silent about everything. But ... I need you protected. I need you out of here.”

Cory straightened up. “And where should I go? The Trainers won’t allow me to leave Drena. The only other place to go is outside the city gates.”

“I have a plan. I plan on sending you to Aeria.”

“Your hometown? Would they let us go there together?” Cory got excited and smiled at Lucas, making green eyes lit up again with happiness.

“I ...” Lucas drew a deep breath. It was a leap of faith, a gamble he was taking, but Arnaud’s desperation had kindled his, as well. Nothing could guarantee Cory would not suffer the same fate as Antoine, at some point. The Trainers did not take well to embarrassing incidents or people. “I don’t trust them anymore. Not as I used to.”

“Them?”

“The Trainers. They may be our Fathers, and they may want the best for the world, but there is so much they keep from us. I need you to be strong for what will follow.”

Cory rose and sat in front of Lucas. “I am ready. And ... I need to tell you something, too.”

Lucas gestured for him to continue.

“The Trainers ... they punished us all the time. I didn’t want to be taken from where I lived and be made into a servant. At a move of their fingers, people’s lives take a turn or another. I ... I am sorry to say this, but I have always felt like I hated them.”

Cory waited for Lucas’s reaction, his heart small in his chest. That was something they had never talked about.

“They are our Fathers,” Lucas murmured.

“Punishment is love, that’s their motto,” Cory spoke passionately. “But what is what I feel when I am in your arms, Lucas? If they are right, this is not love. It’s a word I have never heard about.”

“Your truth is above else,” Lucas spoke with tenderness. “It is because of you I am questioning myself and my faith in them now. That is why I don’t want to leave things to chance. There is an unknown world out there, and I don’t know whether it is good or bad, but what I know is that here, in Drena, right under our Fathers’ close supervision, the person I hold dearest was hurt. And they did nothing about it, letting fate decide for those who attacked you to play its part. This is against everything I was taught.”

“The rest ...” Cory’s question floated in the air.

“They were put to death. If there was something they could tell, it’s gone forever. But I want answers, and I want to live with you, without fear. For this, I need you to be strong. I cannot keep you safe here. The Trainers may think that they are doing the right thing, but I no longer understand their ways anymore. I must show you something,” he stood up from his chair, and Cory followed.

Apprehension was buried deep in his gut, as his hands searched for the small papers in his drawer, kept under lock and key.

“This is ... the symbol,” Cory’s hand traveled on its own accord to the right shoulder.

“Yes. The Trainers said it was something shameful. They said it was considered the mark of a whore. But it is not what it means,” he shook his head energetically.

Cory’s eyes lit with curiosity. “What does it mean?”

“This is what my friend from Aeria, the one I will be sending you to, tells me.”

Cory bent slightly to read the words. “I don’t understand,” he murmured. “What does the mark of a whore has to do with ... this?”

“Exactly,” Lucas took the other paper and placed it above. “This is a small map of the mines outside of Drena. If you observe, there is an exit ... here,” Lucas pointed out.

“And this?” Cory pointed at a small red square.

“I don’t know. Edgar does not know it, either. But do you know what we are looking at?” Lucas caressed Cory’s hand affectionately. “This is your way to freedom. I will tell the Trainers I want to send you away.”

Cory’s eyes became sad. “And leave you here?”

“For now,” Lucas answered. “I am going to miss you, but I will make sure you are fine, and things will not be like this forever. Are you willing to give it a try? I know it’s dangerous, but keeping you here seems dangerous anyway.”

“I am more than willing,” Cory squeezed Lucas’s hand in answer. “I want to go to Aeria. But I want you to come with me.”

Lucas shook his head. “They won’t let me leave. I must wait. In the meantime, I will know you are well, through Edgar. He will take care of you, for me. I trust him with my life. He can be a bit strange at times. His head is up in the clouds most of the time, but, when it matters, I know I can count on him. As we have corresponded, I know he continues his research. I have a strange feeling, like never

in my life, that we are about to find out something ... something that is bigger than us. Even bigger than Drena. I cannot say what this feeling is. I do not usually believe in fairytales. But this time,” Lucas’s eyes shone as he looked at Cory, “this time, I want to believe that there is a time and space when and where I can be with you. With you, as an equal, not as master and servant.”

Lucas caressed Cory’s cheek briefly, afraid that he would touch too much.

“Lucas,” Cory breathed out and moved to embrace his lover. “Do you want to ...?”

His question remained suspended in the air. Lucas pushed him away gently, and their eyes met.

“No, not yet.”

“I am fully recovered,” Cory protested, barely refraining the chill coursing down his spine, as memories of strangers’ hands keeping him down came to mind.

“I’m not,” Lucas’s low whisper was the answer. “I hold myself responsible for what happened. We will be together again, someday. That day will be everything I will think of; I will do everything in my power to reach that day, to be with you. Until then, this is the only thing I allow myself,” he added and gently kissed Cory’s lips, embracing him tightly. “My desires are no longer important. Your life is.”

“We are more than happy with your decision, Lord Lucas,” the Head Trainer bowed politely. “Please allow an old man a curiosity. Why now?”

“I thought I could bear the sight of him around. But he is, as you say, defective and beyond repair. I guess I was deluding myself into thinking that I could make him whole.”

“His appearance was not affected to such a high degree, although the mark ...” the Head Trainer spoke.

Lucas interrupted him. “I am not talking about his appearance. I found myself simply incapable of touching something that was touched by others in such a foul manner. I suppose I overestimated my ability to cope with such a ... personal challenge.”

“Don’t beat yourself over it. You are educated to deserve only what is best. It is ingrained in your intellect, and it is your conditioning responding as it is supposed to do. You will be offered many other servants and slaves to choose from.”

“With all due respect, Head Trainer,” Lucas cast his eyes down, “I would rather focus on my work for a while. Such distractions are seemingly taking a toll on my ability to deliver the best results, as one of the Rulers in Drena.”

The Head Trainer seemed to ponder for a while. “As you wish, Lord Lucas. You please us. You have always pleased us. We will let time take care of washing the marks left by the recent incidents. Drena is at peace, again.”

“Will he be sent to the mines?” he tried to sound as casual as possible. His training was of good use during such moments.

“Yes, it is for the best. He will continue to serve, even if in another form.”

“Thank you, Father,” Lucas bowed and left the room, letting the Head Trainer behind, failing to see dark pools watching his retreating back, with a faint sign of unease in them.

“Lord Lucas, you seem to be in need of my services quite often lately,” Vacchiari smiled, fighting his urge to rub his fat hands, adorned with jewelry on every finger, in satisfaction.

“I have a rather difficult request this time. Do you think you are up to it?” Lucas sat at the wooden table and linked his fingers together.

“I won’t be able to answer your question, my lord, until you tell me what is that you want of me. As you well now, I am your humble servant.”

Instead of answering, Lucas took a small leather bag from his pocket and placed on the table. He encouraged Vacchiari with his eyes. The merchant hesitated just the right amount of time to avoid showing off as greedy. The beautiful stone made his eyes bulge out of their sockets.

“Is this? ... This is ... priceless!” he barely muttered.

“Everything has a price,” Lucas said simply. “My task for you is not an easy one.”

“Just say what it is,” Vacchiari said abruptly. This was no longer about getting richer than any other merchant on the continent. It was about getting the reputation he deserved.

“I need you to do ... a bit of smuggling,” Lucas eventually said, his eyes glued to the merchant.

Vacchiari snorted. “Smuggling? I can smuggle anything in and out of Drena,” he said with pride.

“We are talking about a bigger cargo, this time,” Lucas measured his words. If the merchant was going to step back, he was going to need more time, a time he didn’t have.

“How big?” Vacchiari bent over the table, curiosity sparkling in his eyes.

“As big as a person in flesh and blood.”

Vacchiari opened and closed his mouth a few times. “That’s dangerous,” he eventually spoke.

“I know,” Lucas caressed the stone on the table, making a small move as if he was going to push it back into its leather bag.

Vacchiari’s greasy paw closed over Lucas’s as if he was trying to stop the Ruler from taking back what was rightfully his.

“Where am I supposed to deliver this ... delicate cargo?” he asked, and his eyes looked as big as saucers as he was trying to maintain eye contact with Lucas.

“Aeria.”

“It’s done,” Vacchiari nodded energetically, and Lucas’s hand withdrew, letting the merchant’s paw snatch the precious stone from the table.

“I will give you all the instructions. No one is to know,” Lucas added.

“No need to tell me that. As always, a pleasure doing business with you, Lord Lucas,” the merchant laid back and started listening carefully to Lucas’s instructions on the task.

On his way out of Drena, heading for the mines, Cory was conscious of only one thing: the sigil and the small map hidden in his boot, designed to show him a new way. A way to freedom.

Chapter Fourteen

The last thing he wanted was to draw the others' attention. He was glad he had been given a larger helmet, so his forehead and half his eyes were shadowed from view. He pulled the collar of the coarse miner's uniform he was wearing a bit higher, to hide his face. His worries, however, had proved in vain so far. The hard work in the mines left little time for workers to chat up others, or even look around.

He knew from Lucas that someone was going to wait outside for him every Tuesday. He had used the time so far to explore the galleries, each time going a bit further. Trying to read the small map by the low light of his torch had proved tedious. And it was a different thing to make up a sense of how long the galleries were supposed to be, and where the map was starting.

There were no free days for miners, unlike there were for others. A small detail Cory noticed was that everyone seemed a bit older than the rest of the men toiling over their pieces of machinery in the factories located outside of Drena. They seemed to be made of harder stuff, too, and they had to be to make sure that they could survive working inside the mines. The night shift was supposed to be the worst, but Cory found quickly that night and day didn't have any meaning down there, in the pits. Keeping track of time was getting more and more difficult.

"Hey, you," he heard someone calling behind him. "It's dangerous to go that way. Come back."

He turned and moved back. No point in pursuing his explorations for now. The man who called for him turned and left before he could reach him. He turned again to look at the gallery left behind and then he noticed a small fading light at the end of the corridor. He hesitated for a moment. At any point, he could get lost if he was to roam the convoluted labyrinth continuously. But curiosity got the best of him. Taking a last look to see if anyone else was still around, he increased his pace while heading for the small light.

It was strange. It didn't look like there was a clear source of the light, and now it was fading more and more. He hurried, trying to catch it, feeling somewhere deep

inside his gut that it was important to track the light now sweeping along the walls, leaving nothing but the deepest darkness behind.

He took one corner, then another. An eerie silence was falling, surrounding him with its embrace. It felt colder, too. And, suddenly, it was all darkness. It felt as if the temperature was falling fast and he felt panic assaulting him in the pit of his stomach. He wanted to run, but his feet were like lead; his breathing became ragged, his lungs striving for air. He could feel small crystals of ice forming on his eyelids. Soon, it became harder even to blink.

He fell to his knees, his hands searching for something, anything he could hold on to. Was he going to die there? He thought of Lucas, of his warm embrace, and collapsed.

He groaned, moving in his sleep. His eyes opened slowly, with difficulty, and he had to close them quickly. There was too much light. As he was waking up, he realized one thing. He was no longer cold. He opened his eyes again, often blinking to adjust. The source of the light was right in front of his eyes; there, inside the wall, there was a square room encased in the solid ground. He rose to his feet and moved closer. The room itself was not the source of the incandescent light; inside the room, floating in the air, there was someone.

Frightened, Cory took a step back. His eyes were now starting to adapt, and the light no longer seemed so harsh.

He looked again. There was no doubt; the individual inside the strange casing was a woman. He had seen too few of them to know exactly how they looked like, but he could tell.

Stunned, he took in the image in front of him. The woman seemed soundly asleep, her eyes closed, with a serene expression on her face. She had long, golden hair, running to her bare feet, and she was very beautiful. The white garment she was wearing looked ethereal as if it was made of waves and thin air. One of her hands was closed over her womb, as she was trying to protect it. The other was placed over her chest. Between her thin fingers, she held a delicate lily flower.

Cory felt a sudden sting. He grabbed his right shoulder, squeezing it, trying to ignore the pain. His brand seemed as painful now, as it did when the iron had connected with his flesh. Soon enough, the pain subsided. The light grew dim, again. Cory hurried to touch the glass, but the casing was turning into the same gallery wall surrounding him from all sides. A final glimpse of the woman inside the strange room and it was over. Cory could swear he could see the hint of a small smile on the woman's lips.

He searched with his hands for a crack in the earthy wall, but to no avail. The woman had disappeared.

He turned to face the corridor stretching in front of him. Suddenly, he knew where he was going. Steadily, he started walking. A strange, warm sensation was filling his chest. Everything was going to be all right.

It was breaking dawn when he reached the surface. He breathed in the clean, crisp air and almost felt like laughing. The white walls of Drena were standing tall in the distance. For a short moment, he imagined Lucas still there, and it felt unjust to be happy leaving his lover behind. Yet it felt so strange, so new and so unusual to realize that for his 22 years of life, he had never set foot outside of Drena, the Institution or the area that served only to supply the city with goods and labor force. It was like walking out of prison.

He watched around for any sign of a human being. It looked like he was alone. The sun was barely climbing over the horizon line. In front of him, the desert stretched, mysterious and hostile. By contrast, Drena was a geometrical wonder.

After what felt like hours, he finally saw the small black truck moving slowly in his direction. If that was not the person sent by Lucas, it could be the end for him. He steeled himself, waiting.

Finally, the truck stopped, and a man who looked to be at least twice Cory's age came out. He moved with difficulty, most probably because of his generous belly, but he went straight towards Cory. The servant watched him, and then he carefully took the L shaped sigil out of his boot. Without a word, he showed it to the man.

“Come,” the man gestured for him to follow.

The man fiddled with the doors at the back. He pointed out a long, dark box.

“In there,” he spoke, and Cory hesitated for a fraction of a second.

The man seemed to sense his unease. “You don’t expect me to parade you riding next to me, do you?”

The servant no longer needed another encouragement. The man helped him get inside the box, and then unceremoniously started to drop what looked like piles of old books over him.

“Hey,” he said annoyed. “Are you trying to suffocate me?”

“No, just saving your sorry ass,” the man grunted as he threw another pile of books over him. “You have a hole to breathe, in that corner,” he pointed out. “Special book delivery is nothing conspicuous compared to taking a miner out of Drena, don’t you think?”

Cory remained silent. So the man thought he was a miner. As if he was reading thoughts, the man spoke again.

“Except that you’re not a miner, are you? The most beautiful slaves of Drena don’t seem to come close to you in importance,” he talked as if he was trying to make sense of things for himself, more than for Cory. “Somehow you’re special,” he stopped to look at Cory’s face, covered for the most part in soot and dirt.

The servant felt his heart growing small. Was the man going to turn him in? If he was a wise man, that was the logical thing to do. But the man shrugged and continued with his endeavor of covering Cory in books.

“Not my business. My business is to take you to Aeria and deliver you to your destination. This is what I got paid for. And Vacchiari is a man you can trust.”

He turned his head to one side and shielded his face, so his nose could be close to the hole in the box. When the man called Vacchiari closed the lid, he knew he was going to leave for real this time.

“What do you have here, pops?” he heard some young men’s voices outside.

“Nothing, nothing, it’s nothing but books in the back,” he heard Vacchiari complaining.

“So, business got slow,” Cory heard a thumping sound, sign that someone was climbing in the back.

“You took everything from me last time, you dirty weasels,” Vacchiari spoke.

“Watch that mouth. You don’t want me to take that gold tooth from you.”

“What gold tooth?”

“Don’t play games with me, old man.”

Vacchiari seemed to have realized it was better to shut his mouth. The lid was open and then closed again. Cory didn’t even have time to panic.

“All right, it seems like you have nothing. Just say thanks we won’t take you for ransom.”

“Who would pay for me?” Vacchiari’s voice whined.

“Exactly. Although ...” the man seemed to ponder.

Cory strained to hear. The doors were closed again, and the man seemed to have stopped just outside to talk some more to Vacchiari.

“Ayn still holds a grudge. He would love to beat the shit out of you.”

“Who’s Ayn?” Vacchiari questioned, visibly annoyed with the prospect of having an enemy he knew nothing about.

Ayn, Cory thought. Maybe that was just a coincidence and nothing more.

“Just someone you took like an animal and sold in the white city,” the man continued.

Cory could barely rein in the wish to jump out of his box and go to that man and ask him about Ayn. There could only be one Ayn.

“I don’t remember,” Vacchiari faked a sudden memory loss.

“Don’t worry, he does,” the man laughed.

Cory’s mind was in turmoil. He had to respect Lucas’s wish, though. And who was to say if this man who claimed to know Ayn was friend or foe? The fact that Vacchiari had been the one to sell Ayn to Xavier was not very settling, either. The man was nothing but a merchant, so his loyalties were dictated by nothing else but cold hard cash.

They moved again, and Cory thought he might have just missed his only chance to meet Ayn again.

The box was lifted by strong hands and carried outside the truck. Cory hoped he was now at his destination. His limbs had gone all numb, and he could use a bathroom. It was strange how he could think of such mundane things while he was basically on the run for his life. He had no doubts the Trainers could not be pleased with his escape.

Eventually, all movement stopped, and he heard someone moving around, lifting the lid. Books were taken from the pile on top of his body.

“How to Behave in Polite Society, The 10 Most Common Rules of Baccarat, ...” he heard someone reading random titles.

Was the guy for real? He was going to read the cover of each book, totally ignoring what lay under the pile? Or better said, who? Was he even where he was supposed to be? Without thinking further, he moved energetically, making books and broken pages fly around. He breathed deeply and looked at a man with a book in his hand.

His so-called host was looking at him amused through what seemed like circles made of glass. Cory observed his face. The strange contraption on his nose was making him look older, but he could not be more than 27 or 28 years of age. He was skinny, wearing a tweed suit that had seen better days, and his lips were twisting in amusement.

“Who are you?” Cory eventually managed.

“That is a question I should ask you, young man,” the host spoke pompously.

For some reason, Cory felt like laughing. Usually, he should have been mad or scared seeing that the man showed no signs of knowing who he was.

“I’m just joking,” the man waved and hurried to help Cory out of the box. “I’m Edgar, Lucas’s friend. Welcome to Aeria, Cory.”

After a shower, a good meal and dressed in clean clothes, Cory felt as good as new. It felt so strange to be far away from home, and yet feel so comfortable. In Edgar’s house, there seemed to be nothing but books everywhere, but basic living features like chairs and tables were still present.

He went to the window and looked outside. He withdrew right away.

“What’s wrong?” Edgar looked up from his reading.

“I’m not supposed to be seen, right?”

“Relax,” Edgar waved. “We’re all a bunch of mad scientists around. No one will notice you.”

“Really? No one?” Cory asked, visibly surprised.

“Well, you are aesthetically pleasing, and that may have some of my lady friends talking. I will tell them you are someone I know from Bluesilver.”

“What’s Bluesilver?” Cory asked.

“A city-state up north. Don’t worry. After the novelty wears off, no one is going to pay you any attention. I hope you don’t feel affronted, do you?” Edgar asked, quirking an eyebrow.

Cory shrugged. “I am totally fine with that. But wouldn’t it be strange for me to appear like this, out of nowhere?”

“I won’t parade you everywhere. But I won’t hide you, either. That would be too conspicuous. Hiding things in plain view is the best strategy.”

“How come?” Cory sat on a chair and pressed his palms against his knees.

“I used to play all kinds of games with Lucas. It is just a rule we came up with for hide and seek.”

“Lucas played hide and seek?” Cory wished he could know Lucas from that age when such games were normal.

“A special kind of hide and seek. It was more like treasure hunting, I think,” Edgar pondered. “All right, maybe a bit of disguising wouldn’t hurt ... Let’s see. Maybe make you wear a hat. Or glasses. Or both.”

“What are glasses?” Cory asked, feeling that his question might seem a bit dumb.

Edgar didn’t seem surprised with Cory’s question. He took the contraption off his nose and showed it to Cory. “These are.”

Cory took them and studied them. He tried to put them on, as he had seen Edgar doing, and he scrunched his nose.

“My eyes,” he complained as he took the glasses off. “Why do you force yourself to hurt your eyes?” he questioned.

Edgar laughed this time. “They help me see better. I heard from Lucas that everyone in Drena is perfect. So I assume no one needs glasses there. In my case, I would not be able to go from my bedroom to the bathroom without them. I’m as blind as a bat,” he joked, scratching one of his ears.

“Unfortunately, I won’t be able to wear them. I think I will end up smashing my head around.”

“I won’t give you mine. I’ll give you some fake ones. They will be nothing but ordinary glass. They won’t hurt your eyes.”

“Edgar, you know so many things,” Cory expressed his admiration.

Edgar coughed, a bit embarrassed. “That’s nothing. You didn’t have the chance to see anyone with glasses in Drena. The Trainers promise us all the other cities will be that way one day. Perfect.”

Cory shook, feeling a chill traveling down his spine. “I doubt Drena is perfect,” he murmured, and unconsciously grabbed his right shoulder.

Edgar smiled at him. “I doubt it, too. Plus, where would people like my friends and me be in that perfect world?”

There was a small exchange between them; they could understand each other. Cory felt his chest growing warmer.

“It’s ok if I look out the window?”

“Go ahead. Ah, I have an idea. What color do you want your hair dyed? Do you want to change eye color, too? That’s a bit more difficult but still doable. If we make a few changes, you will no longer be able to recognize yourself in the mirror.”

“I’m counting on that,” Cory spoke with a smile, and he went to the window.

The cobblestone street looked pretty animated at that hour. Men in high hats, walking in groups of two or three, were conversing vividly. Sometimes, women dressed in what looked like terribly convoluted outfits, with all kinds of ruffles and frills, were joining them. Cory could hear them laughing.

“The people here seem happy.”

“Aren’t people in Drena happy, as well? I heard from Lucas that it’s a permanent party down there. Everyone is beautiful, and there is nothing people could wish for.”

“By people do you mean the Masters?” Cory asked, a genuine expression on his face.

Edgar coughed, a bit embarrassed. “I suppose ... I didn’t mean it to sound like ...”

Cory came to his aid. “That’s no problem. I think this is how everyone looks at things anyway.”

“Not everyone,” Edgar seemed to ponder while pushing his glasses back, a small habit Cory was starting to notice when the man thought whether he should speak or not. “Lucas sent you here. He didn’t tell me much ... but I gathered that you were ... his lover?”

Edgar's cheeks seemed to color a little. Cory thought the small change in his demeanor was making him look younger.

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "I hope so, I mean. What I want to say is ..." he stopped for a brief second to find the right words, "it was more than sex. It still is."

Edgar shook his head a little like some nasty insects were bugging him. Cory read the situation right away.

"Are you ... embarrassed with this subject, Edgar?"

"What subject?" the man murmured, this time taking his glasses off to fiddle with them.

"You know ... sex."

"Coitus," Edgar spoke. "This is how it is called here. It is a scientific term," he explained as Cory quirked an eyebrow questioningly.

"That sounds terrible," the former servant spoke. "So this is how people here refer to when ... you know ..."

Somehow, Edgar's embarrassment was transferring to him. He wished they weren't having that conversation.

"Oh, no, we do not indulge in such acts here. It is strictly forbidden. And unnecessary," Edgar almost shouted while raising his hands in defense.

Cory's eyes grew wide. "But Lucas ..."

"He left for Drena when he was young. We used to question ourselves about it ... he told me on more than one occasion that he found the approach in Drena on the matter more natural, but at the same time more bothersome for some reason he didn't care to elaborate. I didn't press the matter, either," Edgar put his glasses back on.

"And ... what do people do ..."

"We have a special machine built to sublimate our inappropriate thoughts into more brain power," Edgar answered promptly. "Too bad the machine seems to fry our brains, but that is not something you heard from me," he continued.

Cory didn't hide his shock. "You get killed for feeling sexual desire towards someone?"

"Well, ... eventually. But it's not a problem. Frankly, after the age of 35, one can barely come up with something new in mathematics or physics, so their utility ends anyway. I suppose it's not a bad way to go, wrapped in a stimulus of ideas swarming in your brain."

Something in Edgar's voice sounded off; Cory was no fool to believe the lie the man was telling himself.

Cory looked towards the window, thinking of the men and women conversing in the street.

"Men and women, too?"

"Yes, every one. We have an obvious role that we need to comply with. Of course, if you manage to keep yourself away of any desire, you get to live longer."

"Have you been using this sublimation machine a lot of times?" Cory inquired.

"A few times," Edgar averted his eyes.

A strange sensation was creeping in, Cory could tell. "Is my presence here a problem?" he blurted out. Back in Drena, there had been quite a few men to express their sexual interest in him.

Edgar looked at him surprised. "Oh, no, Cory, no, please, do not misunderstand! Besides being Lucas's lover, I am also not at all attracted by men. But," he sighed, "there is a lady ... She's called Lena. Her equations are so ... perfect," he whispered. "I have to steer clear of her. Each time we met, we have such a wonderful time, completing each other's research ... but, each time after that, I have to go use the machine, and it's embarrassing and ..."

Edgar shook his head gently. "She doesn't understand why I do not seek her companionship. I would not dream of telling her that."

Cory mumbled. "So sorry to hear that. But, if you are all here scientists, why don't you perfect the machine? Or find another way?"

“The machine was sent here by the Trainers. We are not allowed to fiddle with it. And there are certain things even a mad scientist doesn’t touch.”

The threat was there, floating in the air, left unspoken. Aeria was no shelter, after all, Cory thought.

“But enough about such depressing things,” Edgar linked his fingers and looked at Cory. “Do you know how to read and write?”

“Yes,” Cory answered, without feeling insulted in any way.

“Good. We have a lot of research to do, besides my usual work. I cannot slack off, or everyone will notice. I am afraid a lot will fall on your shoulders,” Edgar smiled and lifted a massive tome from the table, handing it to Cory.

“What are we looking for?” the former servant asked, without hiding his excitement.

“Our beginnings,” Edgar said plainly, and Cory nodded.

To learn where they had to go, they had to learn where they came from. He thought about telling Edgar about the woman he saw in the depths of Drena’s mines, but the man seemed so engrossed in his work that he decided to postpone that conversation for a later date.

Xavier rolled from one side to another, almost crashing into Ayn’s hard chest. He wished he could pretend he was still asleep, but Ayn’s right hand immediately started to travel on his flank, going down and moving on the back to grab his ass. He groaned.

“Really? There is nothing else on your mind?” he said through his teeth.

“And why wouldn’t it be?” Ayn’s black eyes snapped open, to stare at him. “Should I remind you this was the only thing you wanted to do with me when we were in your shitty city?”

“Shitty city? Oh, we must be living in paradise then!” Xavier had the nerve to look affronted.

“Sorry, Mr. Pompous Ass, not everyone is born with a silver spoon in his mouth like you,” Ayn retorted, and squeezed the man’s ass tighter.

“I was not!” Xavier protested. “I’ll have you know that I worked my ass off to become who I was in Drena. And you took everything ...”

Ayn stopped Xavier’s torrent of words with a kiss. Grey eyes stared at him in anger, making him laugh.

“C’mon, Xav, you hated it there. You almost always had a sour expression on your face, like you had only lemons for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

“I did not!” Xavier wanted to protest, anything to contradict the uncouth man he was currently sharing a bed with.

“Oh, yeah?” Ayn left Xavier’s ass alone to stretch and yawn. “I felt you would be good at taking me and enjoying it. You could not just submit and let yourself go... If you were so free there, how come you didn’t wiggle your tail more to show me how much you wanted me to mount you?”

Annoyed with Ayn’s choice of words, Xavier bolted from the bed.

“Where are you going?” Ayn looked after him, visibly curious.

“I’m taking a shower,” Xavier threw back over his shoulder.

“Again? Too bad. I wanted to take you outside,” the man spoke casually.

Xavier made a one-eighty in a split of a second. “Really? Aren’t you afraid I’m going to run?” he cocked his head to one side and stared at Ayn in disbelief.

The other man shrugged. “Frankly, I think you are well adjusted. And where would you run?”

“My clothes are dirty,” Xavier crossed his arms over his chest.

“Do I fucking look like a laundry machine? And those rags?” Ayn snorted. “I burned them.”

“You what?” Xavier’s eyes grew wide. “I hope you don’t intend to parade me naked all over the place. I will not have it!”

“Chillax, dude,” Ayn laughed. “I got you some normal clothes. Here, only those who bury the dead wear all black. I am not keeping you around looking like the harbinger of death. Now, don’t you want to get into your new clothes?”

Ayn didn’t wait for an answer and moved to rummage through the only closet present in the room. He eventually threw a pair of jeans, a white shirt, and a leather jacket, together with a pair of combat boots, on the bed. He gestured to Xavier.

“Come, dress up. Don’t make me do it for you. My job is only to undress you,” he joked, earning a venomous look from Xavier.

The former First Ruler of Drena moved and took the clothes from the bed. It was better than nothing. After wearing nothing but silk all his life, the new garments felt coarse against his skin. But they were not bad. After inspecting himself as much as he could, he raised his eyes to see Ayn watching him with renewed interest.

“Well?” he hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his jeans.

“Well, I think I’ll have to chase a bunch of girls and guys away with a stick because you look absolutely fuckable,” Ayn said with admiration.

Xavier could not admit the remark made him feel good. Instead, he pursed his lips in annoyance.

“Are we going out or not?”

“Not so fast,” Ayn closed the distance between them. “First, suck my dick.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. Ayn smirked and grabbed Xavier’s cock through his jeans. “I’ll suck yours, too,” he promised and stuck his tongue out, provoking the other.

That was not something Xavier could overlook. He suddenly closed his mouth over Ayn, sucking the other’s tongue in, showing that he was not afraid to take on the challenge. It was a short battle of wills, with no definite victor.

He was the one to interrupt the kiss. Ayn’s lips glistened, and the thought of having the guy’s mouth wrapped around his cock, sucking him dry, drove him to speak.

“Get on your knees then,” he looked at the guy, his eyes at half-mast.

There was a short moment of hesitation in the man, and Xavier steeled himself for a fight. But Ayn slowly descended, his eyes glued to Xavier's.

His cock freed from the constraints of his jeans, Xavier threw his head back, breaking eye contact. There was heat, and there was moisture, as the other's greedy mouth engulfed his organ. Just a small hint of teeth grazing over the sensitive skin made him hiss.

"Watch it," he warned.

A tongue wrapping around his member silenced him. It looked like Ayn had learned a thing or two during the times when Xavier had sucked him dry. He didn't find it suitable to let the man know he was coming. Instead, he grabbed at raven strands, and pushed his cock deeper, relishing in hearing the other's labored breath, as he struggled to take all of him.

He could feel his toes curling inside his boots, as pleasure washed over him, as Ayn swallowed. He didn't have time to enjoy the aftermath for too long, though. He was unceremoniously pushed on the bed; hurriedly, Ayn straddled him and took his engorged cock out of his pants.

"Open," Ayn commanded in a strained voice. Xavier could see a few droplets of white fluid still hanging on the man's lips. The view was more than satisfactory. He didn't have to be told twice. He let the meaty organ pass through his lips. The entrance was a bit forceful, but he could take it. It was a pleasant sensation to feel Ayn's cock hitting the back of his throat. He moved enough to adjust the position so that the guy's organ could slide back and forth with ease. Ayn was fucking his mouth, whispering dirty words.

Their eyes met briefly when Ayn looked down.

"Fucking wonderful cocksucker, you're the best," the man praised him and let his essence flow inside his lover's mouth.

He tasted Ayn fully. It felt so profoundly familiar that he could not recall anything else. It was like Ayn was pouring himself inside him, permeating his very being until there was a connection being built between them that neither of them could escape.

Ayn withdrew and plopped himself next to Xavier. They were both sweaty and breathing heavily. Ayn turned and grabbed his neck, forcing him into a kiss.

“I love your taste,” Ayn murmured. “I love your mouth.”

Xavier thought briefly, as their tastes mixed, that if he were to enumerate the things he loved about Ayn, it would take him days and nights to finish. He loved everything about Ayn.

Dion looked up the sky. It was going to rain. He had had to leave earlier from work, due to a temporary outage, but he was glad. He had enough time to cook something for him and John. If they had come back from work together, Dion would have doubted having time to prepare anything. John seemed to have only one thing on his mind, and it was always a miracle that they managed to open the door to their small home and get inside. After that, it was all about John getting inside Dion, and nothing else mattered.

He fiddled for his keys.

“Hi,” he heard a voice, a bit unsteady.

He raised his eyes to see Andreas huddled on the steps, right in front of the entrance. The clothes he wore looked thin, totally unfit for the kind of rain that was going to pour soon from the darkening sky.

The guy looked thin, too.

“Hi,” Dion answered. “Are you looking for John?” he asked hesitantly.

He had no reason to fear Andreas. Something more akin to pity nestled in his chest.

“No, actually ... I was looking for you,” Andreas spoke softly. “I wanted to ask you something.”

“All right,” Dion nodded. “Come inside; I’ll make some tea.”

Andreas looked around, balancing his weight on one leg, then the other. “I shouldn’t. It’s just a small question.”

Dion waved. “Nonsense. It’s going to rain soon. Come inside, and you can warm up a bit.”

He didn’t wait for Andreas’s response this time. He opened the door and let the other follow.

He started making tea while encouraging Andreas to take a seat in the small, clean kitchen.

“How did you make John care so much about you?” Andreas asked as Dion placed a hot cup of tea in front of him.

Dion shrugged. “I don’t know. I liked him, right from the start. I thought he hated me,” he chuckled softly. “I think because of you,” he looked at Andreas questioningly.

The other made himself little in his chair. “Yes, I guess,” he sighed. “Have you ever, you know, lost something, and didn’t realize you wanted it until it wasn’t yours anymore?”

Dion rested his chin in his right palm. “You made the wrong choice, is this what you want to say?”

Andreas nodded slowly. He made a move to rise.

“Wait, don’t go,” Dion stopped him. “Tell it to me straight. Do you still like John?”

The guy averted his eyes.

“It’s all right to be honest,” Dion continued.

“You won’t get mad?” Andreas asked.

Dion shrugged. “Well, he went to see you plenty of times, while I was waiting for him here.”

“And I was used to seeing him all the time. It was like our ... thing was continuing in a fucked up way. But you came, and this changed. And it wasn’t until recently that I understood that I really lost him.”

Silence followed as the two ex-servants looked at each other, in understanding.

“I have to go. Thank you for the tea,” Andreas rose. “Good luck, Dion. You have a good man. Take good care of him.”

Dion wanted to stop Andreas again, but this time, the man hurried to the door, ignoring him.

“That smells terrific,” John spoke happily, as he entered the kitchen and grabbed Dion’s waist, making him turn and kissing him deeply. “I heard your unit was in an outage, so I knew you must be home, cooking.”

“It’s one of my favorite pastimes; you know that,” Dion chirped and kissed John shortly. “Take a seat; it’s almost ready.”

Dion waited until after dinner to tell his lover about the visit from earlier. As John measured him up and down with burning eyes, he knew he had one small window of opportunity before the man was going to jump him, and there was not going to be any conversation possible.

“Andreas came by today.”

John frowned. “What did he want?”

“He just wanted to know how I managed to make you like me,” Dion said plainly, gauging John’s every reaction.

The man shifted in his place. “You did it by not being a dirty little whore, like him,” John muttered.

John’s anger was palpable. But there was something else there, and Dion wanted to know all about it.

“You never told me about what happened between you two,” he said gently while taking a seat across from John.

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Come on, John. Don’t let this get between us. Did you like him?”

“Not as much as I like you,” John answered, looking straight at Dion.

“That’s good to know,” Dion smiled. “But don’t worry. This conversation is not some trap. Even when you went to ... relieve yourself, you still picked him. Why?”

John looked sideways and shook his head in annoyance. “I don’t know. He was there. Nothing but convenience.”

“Truly?” Dion pressed.

John’s jaw tensed. “Yeah! What do you want me to say?”

“I want nothing but the truth, John, that’s all. He still likes you.”

There was a small sign of surprise in John’s black eyes, but it died right away.

“He’s lying.”

“I don’t think so. I think he regrets it, the way things went between you and him,” Dion spoke.

“That’s his fucking business. Look, Dion, he’s just playing, all right? He just lost a paying customer!”

“Admit it, John. You never let go, either. Not for good. You went to see him,” Dion explained.

That was not the right thing to say. John stood up from his chair and started pacing the room.

“Are you fucking jealous, Dion? You’re the one here, aren’t you? Are you not satisfied? I cannot wipe away the past, all right?”

Dion watched him, pondering. “I’m not jealous,” he said plainly.

John snorted. “Then what do you want?”

“I want you to admit you still like Andreas, too.”

Dion’s hazel eyes were glued to John’s every move.

“I cannot believe this,” John stopped and crossed his strong arms over his chest, staring Dion down. “Tell me, Dion, what’s the right answer to this? Either way, I’m fucked, right? I say ‘yes’, and you’ll bolt out through that door. I say ‘no’, and you’ll call me a liar.”

“You’re wrong,” Dion said, shaking his head slowly.

“Am I?” John leaned in slightly. “Look, Dion, he’s there, you’re here. There’s no other thing to say.”

“I don’t want you to have any regrets,” Dion continued.

“What regrets?” John threw his arms to the sides in an exasperated gesture.

“Are you telling me you do not care that he’s there, doing what he is doing?”

John huffed. “It’s not my fucking fault, is it?”

“I am not asking you this. But you are asking yourself, aren’t you?” Dion didn’t look intimidated.

“Yeah, all right, I am! I am wondering why I didn’t keep him, ok? Why didn’t I insist that he didn’t leave? I have no idea! Satisfied now?”

Dion sighed. “As you can see, nothing you say surprises me.”

“Oh, so you don’t care!” John accused. “Fuck it! There wasn’t going to be any sex for me tonight anyway, right?”

Dion’s eyes grew wide. “Why on earth ...” he tried to express his indignation over John’s accusation, but the large man stormed the room, slamming the door to the bedroom behind him.

The redhead scratched his head. Things weren’t so complicated. John might have thought so, but they weren’t.

They didn’t speak much on their way to work the next day. Since the outage was ongoing, and they were reassigned to other departments, Dion had the chance to leave early again. This time, he knew what he was going to do.

John entered his home, moving slowly this time. He had made too much of a scene the other day to continue to stay angry at Dion. When he looked up, he froze.

“Hi, John,” Andreas waved at him.

He looked at the blond then at Dion than back at Andreas.

He closed the door behind him, to gain more time. Eventually, he had to face his two lovers.

“All right, can someone please explain what is going on?” he asked. He looked insistently at Dion. The redhead sustained his gaze, utterly imperturbable.

“What is going on, John,” Dion spoke, “is that you need to be shown a few things. I will tell you just this. That what will happen here will not have to change anything between us. That you and you alone can decide what you want, and whatever you choose, Andreas and I will understand and support your decision. All right?”

John frowned. Dion was trying to give him a severe headache.

“What?” was the only thing he managed to say.

Dion smiled and took Andreas’s hand. He slowly moved and cupped the other’s cheek with his other hand, bringing him closer to kiss him gently on the lips.

John gasped and blinked. In front of him, the only two guys who had ever managed to rock his world were kissing slowly. Dion was now slowly removing Andreas’s shirt, and Andreas was also trying to get the redhead out of his clothes.

Soon enough, they were both naked, and it made John feel the familiar strain inside his pants. Dion and Andreas were caressing each other’s bare backs and butts, and watching felt like too much. Or too little.

Dion broke the kiss and challenged John. “Are you going to stay there all day or are you going to join us?”

He almost tore off the buttons of his shirt, as he started to undress. If someone had told him he was going to have his biggest fantasy happening in front of his eyes, he would have sent that someone straight to the mental house. He grabbed the two

thin waists forcefully and made Dion and Andreas almost crash against his hairy chest.

“Are you trying to make me lose my mind, Dion?” he murmured, as he bit the redhead’s lips. “You know there’s no coming back from it,” he warned.

“I’m betting on it. Kiss Andreas now,” Dion encouraged him. “We’re dying to suck your cock.”

That earned him a murderous look from John, but the man complied and brought Andreas closer to kiss him roughly. The other mewled into the kiss, surprised by John’s determination.

“It’s not going to be roses and soft kisses this time, Andreas,” he warned, and Andreas just nodded. “You two, you have no idea what you have gotten yourselves in,” he looked into Andreas’s blue eyes, then into Dion’s warm brown ones.

Dion giggled. “Scary,” he commented breathily and winked at Andreas.

Both got on their knees, and Dion grabbed John’s huge cock, giving it a tentative lick. He guided Andreas to take John’s cock in his mouth, while he started to lavish the guy’s heavy ball sac with kisses. Andreas wanted to be generous, too, as he withdrew a little and helped Dion taste the guy’s cock, too. Their soft lips wrapped over the long shaft, pushing it through their kisses, playing with it.

“You two are going to be the death of me,” John murmured. “I want an ass to fuck, and I want it now.”

Dion rose and dragged Andreas with him.

“Let’s go to the bedroom then,” he spoke, and John hurried after them.

Andreas was placed on his fours by Dion who quickly proceeded at licking the guy’s ass. Small soft grunts escaped Andreas’s lips, while John was watching them with dark eyes.

“Are you sure about this, Andreas?” he moved to kneel between the long legs, as Dion wrapped his thin fingers around his shaft to help him maintain his erection.

He didn’t need any help with that, but Dion’s intentions were more than laudable.

“Yes, John, fuck me,” Andreas pushed his ass back.

John looked at Dion. “Are you ok with this?” he asked. “One word from you is enough.”

“Yes, I am,” Dion admitted. “Let’s see now if you have enough stamina for the both of us,” he joked and winked at John. He leaned over Andreas’s prone body to quickly prepare the guy. John was not going to be patient.

A hard slap over his ass made him yelp. “Hold Andreas’s ass. He won’t be able to walk after this, so remember you two asked for it,” John added and plunged deep in the sexy hole presented to him.

Andreas gasped loudly but pushed back to meet the assault. John slammed hard inside him, grunting. “You always said I was too big,” he managed to say while pumping deep.

“You are, but it feels so good to have my ass destroyed like this by you,” Andreas moaned and threw his head back. “Dion, please,” he begged, and the redhead moved to position himself in front of Andreas.

John was beginning to feel that he was going into veritable sensory overload, as he saw Dion pushing his delicate cock through Andreas’s rosy lips. He could not see much from where he stood, but the expression of pure bliss on the redhead’s face was telling him Andreas was doing a pretty good job with him.

“Thank you,” he dragged Dion in for a kiss, over Andreas’s arching back, as he released himself deep in the pliant body he was riding.

Dion kissed him back passionately. Making his lover happy was the one thing that could make him happy beyond his words, too.

Chapter Fifteen

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay?” Dion spoke, watching Andreas as the blond stood there, one hand on the doorknob.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Andreas nodded. “For what is worth, though, Dion, thank you. You’re really a swell guy. Who knows? Maybe back in Drena, we could have been friends.”

“We’re friends now,” Dion offered and was rewarded with a small smile.

“Friends ... Yes, I’m ok with being friends. Take care of John for me, will you?”

“You know I will,” Dion embraced him briefly.

After Andreas left, he headed back to the bedroom. Slowly, careful not to wake up his partner, he slid under the covers. As John moved in his sleep, a bear-like arm landed on top of him. Dion moved a little, trying to adjust to the weight, but the arm grabbed him and pulled him tighter towards the sleeping man. Apparently, there was no escape.

He shook John, gently at first, then more energetically. Eventually, the man woke up.

“Is it morning already?” John mumbled.

“No, not yet, but you’re heavy,” Dion complained, but he was smiling.

John blinked and looked around. “Is he gone?” he asked, and Dion didn’t have to guess who John was speaking about.

“Yes.”

“Good,” John replied, without hiding a sigh of contentment.

“Hey!” Dion punched his arm.

“What?” the man looked at him confused.

“I thought you wanted him!”

“For a fuck, yeah, but not as a fixture,” John spoke so genuinely, that Dion burst into laughter.

Now John was awake. With a small growl, he rose and grabbed Dion by the shoulders, pushing him into the mattress.

“Now, I should really have a talk with you, young man,” he threatened, and Dion stuck his tongue at him.

“You’re not that old,” the redhead retorted.

“Older than you, that’s all you need to know. Stop changing the subject. Now, enlighten me. Why did you call Andreas over?”

“It’s too late to have regrets,” Dion glared.

“I don’t. So did you tell him to leave or did he leave on his own?”

“He left because he wanted to. I tried to stop him, but ...”

“Why stop him? Do you need extra help in the kitchen?” John quirked an eyebrow questioningly.

“No,” Dion shifted, a bit uncomfortable under John’s intense gaze. “Because I thought he and you ...”

“There is no he and I, Dion. There’s only you and I. Understood?”

Something in John’s voice would brook no contra-argument. Dion nodded. John continued to keep him there, with a thoughtful expression on his harsh face.

“Dion,” John started. “It was a nice surprise, but let’s leave it at that. Did I want to fuck Andreas? Yes, I did. But he went away, and I have no intention to have him back. The place is taken, and you should know that I would not trade you for the world. Also, I am definitely against any drama in my home. I had enough of it. Now, I want you to tell me, clear and straight to my face, if you feel like I’m not enough for you.”

Dion’s eyes grew wide. “W-what?” he stammered. “I thought it was the other way! I thought I wouldn’t be enough for you!”

John chuckled softly. “Really?” he grabbed a few strands of hair and wrapped them around his fingers. “You’re fucking gorgeous. And you always let me have my way with you. Every day, every time I need you. I should get worried that I might break you.”

“You cannot break me,” Dion protested feebly, fascinated with the intense look in John’s dark eyes.

“Yes, it looks like resilience is among your many qualities ...” John cooed while planting small kisses over Dion’s face.

“What qualities?” the redhead questioned. He might have looked pathetic for asking to be complimented, but he was hungry for it.

“Well, besides the fact that you are an absolute stunner, and that gets me in trouble at least a few times daily ...”

“How is that getting you into trouble?” Dion murmured, feeling a small giddy sensation growing in his chest.

“Mainly because guys at work keep pestering me with questions, like how good are you in bed, and if I’d be willing to share ... Yeah, in your dreams, fuckers!” John became a little agitated, and Dion hurried to caress the man’s cheeks, covered by short stubble, and calm him down.

“Anyways, you are everything the doctor ordered from top to bottom,” John let one hand wander over Dion’s lithe form, caressing a naked hip and sliding beneath to grab the redhead’s buttocks. “And what a nice bottom you have,” he joked. “But it’s more to you than just looks.”

“Is it?” Dion whimpered softly. He wanted to hear more, but he was this close to begging John to take him. He seriously doubted the man could handle a conversation while ramming Dion’s bum hard and fast, as he liked it.

“You’re kind. You’re generous. You’re a great cook, and you know how to listen. You’re smart, and you always come up with ideas that would never cross my mind. You are good with people. But not even all these can explain.”

“Can explain what?” Dion muttered as John’s mouth hovered closely to his.

“Why each time you look at me with those large warm eyes of yours, my heart starts beating faster. This has never happened to me before.”

“Not even with Andreas?”

“Not even with him. I wanted to fuck him. Yes, I did. But, from the first time I saw you looking at me, that day, in the cafeteria ...”

“You remember!” Dion said excitedly.

“Of course I do. Stop interrupting,” John warned, and Dion bit his lip. The man’s calloused fingers brushed over his mouth. “That first time told me that I was in deep trouble. That if you were ever to get close to me, I’d fight a losing battle.”

“Why? Why a losing battle?”

“I got a taste of bad medicine when I met Andreas. I thought I learned my lesson. I was seriously trying to tell myself you were just temptation in flesh and blood. That you were going to mess with my head and leave, too. I was pretty sure I wanted to stay away. But then you chose me, and there was no escape for me. Yet, the fool I was ... I still tried to fight my attraction for you. You seemed so eager to please, and that got on my nerves because I was running out of arguments. The only way I could protect myself was to see you as little as possible.”

“Protect yourself?” Dion giggled. “You’re double my size.”

“And still you bring me to my knees. How do you explain that?” John challenged him while pushing the covers aside and planting himself between Dion’s long legs.

“I do not do such things,” Dion denied sheepishly.

“You’re still blushing,” John kissed his cheeks slowly while sneaking one hand between them, so he could guide his cock towards the secret entrance he was so enthralled with. “Why?”

“I’m not sure I deserve such praise,” Dion murmured, feeling unsure and hesitant.

“You do. You deserve everything and more,” John started to push inside, as Dion adjusted his position to allow the intrusion. “You deserve, Dion, because you made me fall in love with you.”

For the briefest of seconds, Dion could swear his heart stopped beating. As John's tongue probed his mouth, while his cock sheathed itself in Dion's body, the redhead breathed deeply. In the man's arms, he was whole again. He was whole as he had never been in his entire life. He could not remember a time in his life when he had felt so happy, not even as a kid. He threw his long arms to embrace the mountain of heat pouring over him, inside him, filling him. He had John, and John loved him. Everything terrible he had ever felt in his life disappeared; there was nothing else but the absolute sensation of happiness that was unfurling in his chest.

He kissed John back with all his might. "I love you, John," he spoke, when they had to stop and fight for air. "You are the one for me."

The man didn't need any more incentive. As he voiced his release inside Dion's body, met by the redhead's natural spasms of his orgasm, they both knew the world outside their small home didn't matter. The honesty of their emotions flooded them, making them feel clean, reborn anew, in a better place, built only by them.

Ayn surely was a cocky one, Xavier observed his partner from the corner of his eye. With an arm thrown over Xavier's shoulders, Ayn was animatedly talking to everyone they happened to meet. Xavier could hardly shake off the sensation that the guy was parading him all over the place, looking forward to causing the others' envy. The others had no intention to disappoint Ayn, either, and they were loudly voicing their opinions.

"You finally let your man out of the cave, Ayn?" one questioned, while his eyes raked over Xavier's body like he was trying to scan him or something.

"Yeah, aren't you afraid he's going to get stolen, now?" another butted in, eyeing Xavier in a manner that left little to the imagination in regards to the man's intentions.

"You're free to try," Ayn waved his free hand, but he instantly pulled Xavier closer with the other. "But, I hope you are already making plans on how to dance a dickless jig," he threatened, and the guys laughed.

Xavier could not tell whether they were bantering or wanted to make a pass at him. These men here were like no others he had met before. And he had thought himself to be a good judge of character. Ayn's place had different rules.

The men were not the worst, though. When a tall, slim brunette jumped in Ayn's arms, making the man lose his grip on Xavier for a short while, the former First Ruler of Drena felt like he wanted to go back to his "cave".

"Ayn, I heard you were back! Why didn't you come by?" she pouted.

Xavier rolled his eyes. The brunette was talking to Ayn, but she was looking at him shamelessly. Xavier couldn't make much of the way she looked at him. He had met very few women, and even then, he had not conversed much with them. For him, they were strange creatures, of which, he would not have admitted, he was a bit afraid.

To his displeasure, Ayn's hands came to rest on the woman's tiny waist. "As you see, Myra, I am a bit busy," the man gestured towards Xavier.

The woman took the gesture as an indication she could inspect Xavier closer. Even worse, touch him. She rested her hands on Xavier's shoulders and looked him in the eyes. She didn't seem an inch impressed with all the disdain gathered in eyes the color of the storm.

"I've heard you've taken a male lover, so I was intrigued," she smiled sweetly, while she was practically devouring Xavier with her eyes.

Xavier knew it would have been impolite to shake off the woman's touch. He was wondering, though, if there was any common sense rule against wanting to strangle her on the spot. The familiarity with which she was talking to his Ayn was putting his anger on a short fuse.

"But, seeing how fine he is ..." she bit her bottom lip, and laughed. "... I cannot hold it against you. You got yourself a looker. Even so, this should not make you a stranger. Bring him along and stop by my place. The girls will go crazy over him," she emphasized the last words.

"I am afraid we will have to decline your invitation," Xavier spoke sharply.

Her dark eyes grew wide and then she burst into laughter. “Wow, Ayn, he’s a tough cookie, isn’t he?” she barely managed.

The good part was that she had eventually let go of his shoulders.

Ayn retook his place, by Xavier’s side. “Sorry, Myra, you heard what my love here said. Maybe some other time. Plus, instruct the girls to keep their hands to themselves.”

“Or what?” Myra flicked her long mane over her shoulder. “I heard you’re ready to fight all the guys in Haven if there was one crazy enough to lay a finger on your sweetheart. But what are you going to do against a bunch of horny girls?”

Ayn seemed to ponder for a bit. “Against them? Nothing. But I’ll have to put Xav under key again. And then he will be miserable and hate all of you.”

“Oh,” Myra smirked. “Hitting below the belt, aren’t you? All right, they will behave. After all, unlike the guys, we’re satisfied with just having the pleasure to see him. Just come by some time.”

Turning to Xavier, she caressed his cheek quickly. “Xav, is that your name, cutie?”

Before Xavier could say anything, Ayn answered. “For you, it’s Xavier. I am the only one allowed to call him Xav.”

The brunette giggled. “Ayn, you’re really in love, aren’t you?”

Xavier stole a furtive glance in Ayn’s direction. He held his breath, waiting for his partner’s answer. Ayn did nothing but laugh. Unlike Xavier, Myra thought she heard a ‘yes’, according to her reaction.

“Oh, wait until the girls hear this! It was time for mighty Ayn to be brought to his knees! I’ll drink in honor of your love tonight!”

She winked at Xavier. “Later, Xav!”

“Xa-vi-er,” Ayn shouted after her, as she ran away laughing.

“Can you please enlighten me what is she to you?” Xavier said in a far more accusing tone than he had intended in the first place.

Ayn cocked his head to one side and stared at him. “Why do you care?” he challenged, and Xavier could swear he could hear his teeth grinding.

“She was very familiar, and she took some liberties in touching me,” Xavier continued.

Ayn shrugged. “So? Myra touches everyone. Be thankful she didn’t grab you in her arms and smooch you to death.”

The guy started laughing seeing the horrified expression painted on Xavier’s face. “Oh, that’s right. You don’t have women in that weird city of yours. They’re a lot of fun,” he winked, and Xavier chose to ignore him.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what kind of fun?” Ayn moved closer and touched Xavier’s waist.

“I am not at all interested in your dealings with girls,” Xavier glared in turn but didn’t shake off the touch.

Ayn took that as an invitation to invade his partner’s space even more. Soon enough, their lips were locked together, and they were kissing right there, in the middle of the street.

A lewd whistle interrupted them. Both stared in anger at the intruder.

“Ayn, what the hell, man? Didn’t you have enough time to tell your girlfriend goodbye?” a man of uncertain age inquired. His words seemed angry, but his eyes were laughing.

Xavier measured him from head to toes. His clothes were covered in dust, and the man must have seen better days himself. He was rugged, with long, entangled hair that could quickly become a home for birds. Xavier could not say he would have been surprised to see a flock of feathered creatures flying away from the guy’s twisted strands.

Even so, he was not entirely unappealing. His eyes were light in color, somewhere between green and blue, and made a sharp contrast against his tanned skin. The fine wrinkles around the man’s eyes said the guy was enjoying his laughs, as well

as long journeys across the desert. He was a piece of work, and Xavier could not feel any antipathy towards him.

“Marcus, my man,” Ayn let go of his lover to embrace the intruder in a manly hug. “I thought you were still out there,” he gestured off in a vague direction.

“Came back, found out you got yourself a man,” the man named Marcus looked at Xavier over Ayn’s shoulder. “Where did you get him? Dress him up all you like; it’s like he’s screaming that he’s not from around here.”

“I am, as you can see, present,” Xavier punctuated his words with a studied sigh, “so there is no need to talk about me in the third person. Any question you might have can be addressed directly.”

Marcus laughed wholeheartedly. “If that’s the case, who’s on top? Did you get to bugger Ayn here really good? He always looks like he needs a good shag.”

Xavier’s jaw went slack. He was about to say something when Ayn intervened. “Of course I’m on top, what the hell do you think I am,” he pushed Marcus playfully. “And before you start asking any other stupid questions, yes, he’s all mine, and I’m not going to share. Live with it.”

“I wasn’t going to ask that!” Marcus grinned, a clear sign that Ayn’s suspicions were right. “Anyways, Ayn, I’d love to chat you up, guys, but we need to get going. If you’re game, I’m leaving now.”

Ayn stole a quick glance in Xavier’s direction. “I’m game, as always. Xav, you’re coming, too.”

“Xavier,” Xavier said his name, with a sour expression on his face.

“Xavier? Where are you from?”

“He’s from Drena,” Ayn supplied the information before Xavier could open his mouth. “And he’s coming.”

If Marcus was surprised, he didn’t show it. Instead, he snorted. “Yeah, right. Leave Mr. Gorgeous Ass from Drena here. He’d only slow us down.”

“He won’t. He needs to come,” Ayn insisted.

Marcus sighed. "All right, but he's on you. If anything happens, I'll leave your sorry asses behind like there's no tomorrow. Don't count on me."

"As you'd ever leave someone behind," Ayn said knowingly. "Should I remind you how you dragged me across half the desert, with a bullet in my thigh? Why didn't you feed me to the coyotes?"

"I doubted they would have liked your flesh. Plus, you have tough skin. The poor coyotes would have broken their teeth in you," the man grinned and Xavier felt a bout of sympathy washing over him.

"And coyotes are your long forgotten kin," Ayn said ironically, but he was grinning, too.

"Who knows? I've fucked some strange creatures in my life," Marcus joked. "One of the damned women I've brought to bed could have been half coyote, for all I care. I only know I've been drunk plenty of times to not remember such details as too hairy legs or too many legs."

Even Xavier felt compelled to laugh. This Marcus guy sounded like a good friend of Ayn, and Xavier felt like he could trust him.

"So, is he getting a gun?" Marcus questioned. "Sorry," he turned towards Xavier, "is Your Majesty getting a gun?" he faked a bow, balancing his large frame in a comical curtsy.

"Not yet. He needs to prove himself, just like anyone else," Ayn spoke and threw Xavier a strange look.

"If I am to come along, I should at least be informed of what is expected of me," Xavier said with a glare directed at Ayn.

"What is expected?" Marcus scratched his head. "Basically, we go in, we hit, we take everything we can, and we run."

Xavier looked at the man, obviously confused. "Where?"

"The first city we find that is not ours and has nice fat warehouses waiting to be plundered."

“Oh,” was the only short reply Xavier could manage.

“Are you ready?” Marcus slapped his hands together.

“I was born ready,” Ayn boasted. “Xav?”

“Am I going to be involved in some criminal activities?” he questioned, trying to stall for time.

Ayn chuckled. “Well, if you consider shopping without paying, criminal activities, then this is exactly what we are going to do. You can always stay at home if you want. Or I could leave you with Myra. She’ll drive you crazy, but you’ll be safe with the girls.”

The prospect was not a very attractive one for Xavier. He dismissed Ayn’s proposal with a flick of his wrist. “I think I prefer the criminal activities. I am afraid of spending even just a couple of minutes in that woman’s company will drive me to do something regretful.”

Marcus was howling with laughter. “Did Myra scare him really good?”

“He’s exaggerating. He hasn’t seen many girls in his life.”

“Oh, yeah, those Drena bastards don’t have chicks,” Marcus spoke. “Then he may want to learn what real fun looks like,” the man offered and gestured for the other two to follow him.

“And what is this supposed to be?” Xavier crossed his arms over his chest and looked at Marcus’s self-proclaimed means of transportation without hiding his disdain.

“This is our car,” Marcus said simply.

“Do you call this a car?” Xavier gestured towards the old van that looked one second away from giving in and turning into dust.

“Never judge a car until you’ve seen what’s under the hood,” Marcus grinned and made a dramatic pause before lifting the rusty hood.

Xavier's eyes grew wide. "Is that a TS80DETT?" he barely managed.

"A man who knows a bit about engines," Marcus stared at Xavier with admiration. "Yeap, it's even an improved version."

"Improved? How?" Xavier leaned over to take a closer look at the shiny engine hiding inside the rusted carcass.

"You'll see," Marcus clicked his tongue in satisfaction for managing to impress the haughty man playing house with Ayn.

Ayn intervened. "Got the guns. Now, let's go. I'll sit in the back with Xav."

"All right, but if I catch you make out while I'm on boring driving duty ..."
Marcus threatened.

Ayn shrugged. "Then don't fucking look in the mirror."

A hearty laugh was the only response.

Soon, they embarked in the strange vehicle. Xavier looked out the back window at the cloud of dust raised in their path. His life was going to change forever. Xavier, the man who used to rule Drena, was going to be involved in a criminal act. He could give Ayn and Marcus away and return to his former life if the city they were headed to was known to him. Chances were it was. But did he want to do that?

From the corner of his eye, he studied Ayn. Despite the playful banter, the man looked serious, while he was checking two heavy pistols. Of course, neither were for him. Ayn had said that he had to prove himself. He was wondering what exactly that was supposed to mean.

Ayn stood up and rummaged through a rusty box. He threw a grey garment at Xavier.

"We're supposed to look like delivery boys. Put it on."

Without a word, Xavier obeyed. Ayn was doing the same thing. After they were both dressed, their face half hidden under grey caps, Ayn took one of the pistols and handed it to Marcus, in front.

“We’ll go inside, tell them what we need. Be prepared with the car. And put the shade on; don’t let the fuckers see you.”

“Roger that, chief,” Marcus said playfully and pushed a button. The front window got darker.

“Where did you obtain this kind of technology?” Xavier questioned, impressed for the second time with Marcus’s vehicle.

“Here, there,” came the driver’s reply.

That was a clear sign that he was not supposed to question them any further. That Xavier managed to realize on his own. Maybe he was going to question Ayn later.

The car made a swift turn and Ayn gestured for Xavier to get out.

Xavier took in his surroundings.

“Is this Teran?” he asked.

Ayn threw him a sidelong glance. “You know your way around, it seems.”

“I’ve visited here several times.”

“Well, now you’re visiting again,” Ayn slapped his shoulder and guided him towards one of the lateral metallic doors. “The difference is you’re not taking the front door.”

Xavier looked at the tall, dark walls of the city. Teran was known for producing basic materials, but they were also specialized in making fine liquor and various foods, plus weapons.

Ayn knocked on the door loudly. Eventually, a man in his 30s opened the door and watched the two with dull eyes.

“Yes?” he eventually asked.

Ayn spoke. “We are here for a special delivery. Big party down in Drena.”

Xavier threw him a venomous look.

The man at the door didn’t budge. “I didn’t get any notice.”

“Well, it’s last minute stuff. They took us directly from our beds, and we rode the entire night to get here.”

“What do you need?”

Calmly, Ayn started enumerating the most expensive stuff Teran was producing. Xavier could not believe the guy’s courage. Some of those things were rarities even at the most lavish parties in Drena. Ayn was doing nothing by half.

The man eventually moved out of the way. “I don’t have help around since I didn’t know any special order was on the way. Who do you say sent you?”

“The First Ruler of Drena, Lord Xavier,” Ayn said bluntly, and Xavier froze.

What was Ayn thinking? Word of his disappearance from Drena must have been sent out already.

The man showed no sign that he knew anything, and Xavier slowly let out the air he was keeping inside his lungs.

They were guided along long metallic shelves. While Ayn was instructing him what to carry to the door, Xavier obeyed without a sound.

It looked like everything was going to work out. Xavier had to admit that he was relieved they were not going to use force.

“Wait,” the man from the storage room spoke, when they were about to start loading their wares inside Marcus’s vehicle. “What the fuck is this?”

Xavier felt his blood turning to ice in his veins. As he turned, an ominous feeling washed over him. His senses went on high alert in an instant. It was like he was watching the scene unfolding in front of his eyes in slow motion. He watched the man as his right hand went to his waist and he acted on instinct. He punched the man from the left, short but firm, and the man’s head made a loud, crashing sound. Its owner fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Xavier was breathing heavily, towering over his victim. The man was sprawled on the floor, in a weird, comical position, his hand still touching his holster.

Loud laughter made him turn with murder in his eyes. Ayn was staring at him, his eyes moist from so much laughing, his entire body shaking.

“What the fuck, man? Why did you hit him?”

“What?! He was going to ...” Xavier gestured towards the unconscious form on the floor.

“He was going to call his superior. I could have easily talked my way out of it,” Ayn said with satisfaction, but there was something strange in his eyes while his bout of laughter was dying out and he was looking at Xavier.

“What drew his attention?” Xavier questioned.

“Marcus’s van is always making a fine impression,” Ayn grinned. “Come now, let’s load these and fast. Soon enough, someone will come to investigate and will find this poor shmuck barely recovering from being hit by the First Ruler of Drena.”

Xavier pursed his lips. His blood was still boiling, and he didn’t mind hitting another shmuck.

Soon enough, they had everything loaded in Marcus’s van, and they were putting considerable distance between them and Teran.

“What happened back there?” Marcus questioned them.

“Xavier punched the guard,” Ayn said with a satisfied grin.

Marcus turned to stare back at Xavier. “For real? You’re shitting me, right? Why?”

“He thought the idiot was going to shoot or something.”

Marcus laughed. “Good one, Your Majesty.”

“How can you two be so careless?” Xavier ignored the ironic honorific Marcus was addressing him with. “Why don’t you paint your van? And why don’t you give me all the details in advance?” he turned towards Ayn.

“My van is gorgeous just the way it is,” Marcus boasted and continued to stare at Xavier, challenging him.

“You get back to your place and keep your eyes on the road,” Xavier commanded.

Something in his tone offered no room for resistance or further comments, so, with a shrug, Marcus obeyed.

Xavier focused his attention on Ayn, now that he had Marcus back to his position. Although the man was still smiling, Xavier was not at all amused.

“Can you please enlighten me why you used my name?” he inquired.

“Don’t you want to know if your people are looking for you? As you can see, Drena likes keeping her shit together. Either the idiot you hit didn’t know anything, or the guys back in Drena don’t give a rat’s ass that you went missing.”

There was some logic in what Ayn was saying, but Xavier was still mad. “It’s the first and last time I intervene because I think someone is putting your life in danger,” he no longer kept it in.

“Nah,” Ayn stretched and yawned lazily. “You love me too much. Nice knowing you care,” he looked at Xavier, his eyes at half-mast.

“I certainly do not,” Xavier looked away with a huff.

“Isn’t love beautiful?” Marcus could not help commenting. He faked a sigh.

“This conversation doesn’t concern you,” Xavier rebuked him sharply, and the driver laughed.

“You got your work cut out for you, Ayn, with this one,” Marcus added. “Soon enough, he’ll boss you around, and you’ll obey like a puppy on a leash.”

Ayn continued to stare, the same mysterious smile twisting his beautiful lips. “I told you, Marcus, I’m the boss, not him.”

Xavier closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He was in no mood to be the butt of the joke for Ayn and his friend.

They were welcomed back like heroes. Xavier helped the other two men share the goods among the people of all ages that were gathering around them.

A kid with eyes big as saucers touched his arm. “Mister, can I have a candy?”

Xavier watched the small boy and tried, for a split moment, to remember how it was like when he was a child. He had nothing but the best. The best clothes, the best food, the best education. The kid before him was scrawny and could use some new clothes, and, although the people in Haven looked like they managed to carry on with their existence without complaining, it was obvious there was plenty of room for improvement.

He rummaged through one of the boxes and chose a huge lollipop. He handed it to the kid, and the boy’s eyes grew even larger. “Thanks a lot!” the child snatched the candy from his hand and ran away.

Xavier stared after the child for a while. Something scratched his hearing, and his attention was drawn to a scene that was not at all to his liking.

Myra was loudly expressing her gratitude, embracing Ayn and making sounds that could easily compete with a rusty door.

“Ayn, you’re the best! The girls will love these!” she was happily commenting.

“Nothing but the best for my girls,” Ayn kissed the woman’s cheek casually and handed her one crate Xavier suspected was full of liquor.

He could not take it anymore. He turned on his heels and headed for the place he had to call home for now.

Half an hour passed until Xavier heard the front door opening, signaling that Ayn was back, too. He jumped from the bed. He was going to have a talk with the annoying brat.

“Why did you leave?” Ayn questioned while taking off his jacket and throwing it on the bed.

“And do what instead? Watch you rubbing against everyone like a dog in heat?”

Ayn stopped and looked at him, visibly surprised. “Are you jealous?” he grinned and threw Xavier a sidelong glance. “C’mon, Myra’s just a friend.”

It took Xavier less than a second to reach Ayn, grab him and throw him on the bed with his face down.

“What the ...?” Ayn tried to get up from the bed, but he was pushed back, his words muffled, as Xavier kept his head down.

His pants were roughly pulled back over his buttocks, as an impatient hand reached between them and fingers probed him.

Xavier could hear the blood pounding in his ears. He wanted nothing but to teach the brat a good, hard lesson. It didn't matter that he was pretty much Ayn's prisoner. He could not take it anymore.

He clumsily pushed his jeans down to free his engorged member. He spat and made himself slick quickly. “Who's on top now, Ayn?” he challenged through his teeth as he pushed inside, uncaring.

He had to bite back a low moan, feeling the familiar heat engulfing him like so many times before. He stopped for a second, to enjoy the sensation. Ayn made no sound, but he moved, and Xavier didn't want to miss his chance to put things in order.

He slammed against Ayn's gorgeous ass fast. The sound of flesh against flesh ignited his desire further. He let go of Ayn's head so he could grab the man's hips and fuck him as hard as he wanted.

This was not going to be about Ayn's pleasure, but about his revenge. But the man was wiggling his butt beneath him, encouraging him, and his short, punishing thrusts soon became slower, gentler, as Xavier was falling back to the way he so much enjoyed when making love to his former slave.

His low moans resembled those of an animal. He could not believe that was him; he could not think he could lose control so badly. He was a prisoner, indeed; but no chains or locks were keeping him there. The arched back moving slowly to meet his thrusts, the beautiful raven hair, begging to be touched, and the almost aristocratic profile he could see from his vantage point as Ayn moved his head to the side so he could breathe, all were his doom.

He surrendered. There was no going back for him. As he voiced his pleasure as a cry of victory, he heard Ayn like through a haze.

“It looks like you’re on top now, Xav.”

The words were spoken softly, like a declaration of love. Xavier collapsed next to his lover, and covered his face with his hands, while still trying to regain his breath.

“I thought you had settled for being a bottom,” Ayn commented, while touching Xavier’s elbow, and pressing his lips against the man’s ear. “It was kind of disappointing, really.”

Xavier uncovered his face to look at Ayn. Almond shaped eyes were staring at him. There was honesty in them and a lot of affection. Xavier felt his heart growing larger.

“Why? You missed having me ...?” he trailed off.

“Fuck me?” Ayn chuckled softly. “Yeah, I guess I did. I think I’ve provoked you on purpose since we got here, just to have you react.”

“I thought you hated it,” Xavier mumbled.

“I did, at first. But, like your kisses... To be clear, I will continue to fuck you, too. You’re great at taking me,” the man winked at him, and Xavier smiled. “Let’s take a shower. I want to be inside you just as badly as you wanted me.”

It was so easy for Ayn to express his wants and needs. Xavier wanted that, too; he wanted to be free.

“By the way,” Ayn commented as he helped Xavier up. “It was courageous what you did for me in Teran. It was not such a big danger, but you proved yourself.”

“As a member of your tribe or something?” Xavier questioned, as he followed Ayn to the small bathroom.

“No. As my partner,” Ayn helped Xavier inside the shower and kissed him roughly on the lips. “Don’t worry about the guys. They’re just teasing.”

“I’m not worried about the guys,” Xavier said with a pout, letting himself be turned by Ayn, and having his ass lavished with attention by strong hands.

“Myra?” Ayn questioned, as he knelt to rim the hole he so much enjoyed fucking.

“Yes,” Xavier admitted meekly.

“We used to fuck,” Ayn admitted simply.

Xavier had a mind to push Ayn away, but the man’s strong hands kept him in place.

“Don’t be stupid. It’s all in the past. Now, we’re just friends. And, even when we fucked, her and me? We were nothing like this.”

“Like this, how?” Xavier almost begged as Ayn returned to rimming him deeply.

The man stopped again. “I don’t know exactly. Crazy, wonderful, like I’d never stick my cock in anyone else for the rest of my life.”

Xavier threw his head back in ecstasy, as Ayn’s meaty organ soon replaced the deft tongue. It always felt like a bit of a stretch to have the man inside, but it was making him see stars behind closed eyelids. Ayn’s hands moved to tease his nipples, just the way both liked it.

They both took pleasure in the act this time. One of Ayn’s hands covered Xavier’s erect cock and started pumping it in the same rhythm. Xavier turned his head, so their lips could connect, and Ayn met him halfway.

“Be my partner, always?” Ayn begged, as his breath accelerated.

“Yes, always,” Xavier moaned his reply.

It did not happen all the time for them to come at once, but now it was one of those magical moments when time just stood still, and their lovemaking was the only thing that counted.

For the first time in his life, Xavier felt truly loved. It was not the Trainers’ cold caring or his many trysts’ fleeting affection; this was real.

“For the last time, where did you get this item? Who gave it to you?” the Head Trainer’s cold voice inquired.

It was not like Vacchiari to be courageous. It was never a good time for a merchant to be that.

“Why should I tell you? You’re going to kill me anyway.”

“Yes, you will be dead. The only question is when and how long is it going to take,” the Head Trainer sat down on the high wooden chair and took in the bloodied form hanging like a doll from the wall.

One of the grey forms looming around in the room moved with a torch in his hand.

“Some things can make men go crazy with fear,” the Head Trainer commented in the same cool, even voice.

“Death is death,” Vacchiari said simply, but he was trying to keep track with his eyes of the Trainer approaching with the torch burning brightly.

“What could be your most important weakness? Fear?” the Head Trainer continued. “Could it be fire? Fear of drowning? Devoured by beasts? So many possibilities. It is a good thing we have so much time on our hands.”

“How much time?” Vacchiari faked bravado.

“Endless,” the Head Trainer answered and gestured for his brother to proceed.

Loud screams and smell of burned skin filled the room.

“Now, Vacchiari, who gave you the stone? We know it was one of the Rulers because no one else has such precious things, but who? We don’t want to cause any disturbance, questioning our most beloved sons. So, please, spare yourself the pain, and just say it.”

“Fuck you,” Vacchiari spat. For some unfathomable reason, he was suddenly no longer afraid. Death was to be feared when it was uncertainty. Once it became unavoidable, fear became useless.

The torture continued. The Head Master came and went, and asked the same question over and over again.

Eventually, he sat down with a piece of paper in front of him.

“You were not supposed to be alive in the first place,” the Head Master commented. “You were saved by miners who found you almost buried alive. We suppose you were one of the rejects. The ones who could not be used. We were right. So, your biggest fear must be ...”

Vacchiari’s heavy breathing was the only sound filling the room.

“Take him outside. Dig a hole and throw him there. He’s of no use to us anyway.”

A long howling sound was the effect of the Head Trainer’s words.

“What? Are you afraid of being buried alive?”

“Don’t, don’t, don’t,” Vacchiari begged as his head lolled back and forth. He could no longer think straight. Who cared about him anyway?

“We can take pity and ease your pain right away. There is nothing beyond death. No suffering, my son,” the Head Trainer spoke softly. “Who was it?” he demanded.

“Don’t bury me alive!” Vacchiari shouted. “It was Lord Lucas!”

The Head Trainer sat back in his chair. “Thank you.”

He gestured towards his brothers. “Finish here.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Lord Lucas,” the Head Trainer nodded, acknowledging the Ruler taking a seat in front of him.

“Head Trainer,” Lucas responded in kind.

The grey hood moved imperceptibly to the side. The long table was made of lacquered solid wood. Bony fingers trailed the shiny surface like they were searching for something. Lucas waited patiently.

“Do you have any idea why I summoned you here?” the Head Trainer finally spoke again.

“I am afraid I cannot go as far as to project assumptions about your intentions, Head Trainer,” Lucas answered politely, although he could feel the tips of his fingers turning frosty.

“A perfect answer,” the Head Trainer looked straight into Lucas’s dark eyes.

Lucas had always had troubles sustaining the direct gaze coming from any of the Trainers. The Head Trainer had a particular way to make one feel uncomfortable. The large grey eyes looked as if they had a life of their own. The gaunt face was ashen, cut in stone, and the receding gum line only made the sharp white teeth look as if they belonged to an animal. Lucas had always felt something akin to disgust when watching one of the Trainers so closely.

“Have you ever been unhappy?” the Head Trainer linked his fingers and continued to stare at Lucas.

“Unhappy? I ... don’t think I understand the question,” Lucas frowned slightly.

“Unhappy, as in experiencing negative emotions, like loss, sadness, melancholy ...” the old man trailed off, and Lucas felt as if the air in the room was gradually getting colder.

“My education taught me these are nothing but trivial emotions. I might have experienced them fleetingly, but I’ve always known how to rise above them.”

The Head Trainer nodded approvingly. “My brothers and I have always had regrets for not bringing you up here in Drena from an early age. As a child, you were promising, intellectually wise. We could not envision the ugly duck turning into a beautiful swan later in life. You are every inch Drena worthy in both terms of physical beauty and intellect.”

“You are flattering me,” Lucas spoke, feeling an unpleasant taste pooling on his tongue.

“We have offered you everything. We have always treated you like you belong here. We have always had trust in you.”

“And for that, I want to thank you, yet again.”

“Lucas,” the Head Trainer’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Why are you hurting us, your Fathers?”

Lucas had the presence of mind to look surprised. “Hurting you? I would never ...”

The Head Trainer slid his hand in one of the large pockets of his grey robe. The large gemstone fell on the wooden table with a small thump. Lucas stopped cold. The Head Trainer continued on an even tone.

“I must admit I would not have expected an ordinary merchant to be so resilient to torture. It was quite a feat to make him break.”

Lucas’s stomach churned and twisted.

“There is no point in denying now. Lucas, my child,” the Head Trainer spoke softly, “I would like to hear everything.”

“Am I going to be put to death?” Lucas eventually articulated.

“Over a little thing like this? And lose your beautiful mind? Correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t it on impulse that you gave the merchant this precious stone? Your battle with emotions ... is it getting too hard? We know that you suffered greatly after losing your servant. Cory, his name was?”

“I thought that was solved. I gave him up.”

“You did. Your decision was more than laudable. He died in the depths of the mines.”

Lucas said nothing, his eyes still drawn to the gemstone that right now equaled his doom.

“How is that making you feel?” the Head Trainer scanned over Lucas.

The Ruler shrugged. “He was no longer my property.”

“That is not what I asked you.”

“I don’t feel anything.”

“One fraction of a second.”

“What?” Lucas inquired, finally raising his eyes.

“You answered too fast. I am your Father, Lucas. Tell me everything. Don’t lie.”

“A loss is a loss. I will not deny that I used to have feelings for him. But that was in the past.”

“All right. That will be put to the test. But, I want to know one more thing. What was the gemstone for?”

Lucas searched his mind for an answer. “Didn’t the merchant tell you?”

“I would prefer hearing it from you, not that lowlife who now rests in the ground.”

It was a trap. It had to be. Lucas took a gamble anyway. “I wanted to go to Aeria. On a short visit. I miss my home.”

The Head Trainer remained unmoved. “Emotions again ...” he said somewhat regretfully. “You can go back to your home, Lucas. Your home, here in Drena.”

“What will happen to me?” Lucas questioned.

“You will undergo a re-education program. These emotions are affecting your mind. We need you to be functioning perfectly for what we have in mind for you.”

“Can I know what?”

“That information will become available when the moment is right. And, Lucas, do not plan to run away from home again. Drena is your home. It will always be until your last day.”

The Head Trainer’s words sounded ominous. Lucas felt dread washing over him. They were going to make him wait, feed on his suspicions and fears until they would cull him, ripe for the taking.

“Strange,” Edgar commented.

“What is?” Cory inquired, peeking his head from behind a massive stack of old books. He was not used to reading so much.

“I was expecting a message from Lucas. The usual messenger hasn’t arrived.”

Cory felt a short pang of pain knifing his chest. “Do you think something’s wrong?”

Edgar shrugged. “The desert can be tricky at times. Maybe he is just taking longer to get to Aeria. Now, we must prepare to attend a party.”

“A party?” Cory asked confused. “I thought you guys never partied.”

“Well, we’re supposed to take a break once in a while. But I doubt a party in Aeria can ever rival the lavish happenings that are a fixture in Drena. Now, excuse me, I need to get ready. I left your attire on the back of that chair.”

When Edgar came back from the other room, Cory smiled, a bit amused.

“May I say that you look quite dashing, Edgar?” he giggled.

His host had chosen a black velvet suit with a matching hat. The shirt was white, but the tie was black silk. The attire made the bookworm suddenly look like a beautiful butterfly.

“You think?” Edgar blushed slightly.

“Oh,” Cory said all knowingly. His blue suit was not as elegant as Edgar’s, but it looked good on him. “At this party ... will a certain lady be present?”

“A certain lady?” Edgar blushed more this time.

“C’mon, Edgar,” Cory teased. In the short time he had spent with the man, he had come to like him. Edgar was witty, easygoing and even funny, although sometimes that happened without any intention to joke. “Lena will be at this party, right? Will you introduce me to her?”

“And lose her to you?” Edgar faked outrage and then started laughing. “I must say, Cory. You should be prepared. The ladies will be all over you. You are very aesthetically pleasing. Now, I must warn you. Their requests may be ... quite strange. Nothing dangerous, and you do not have to worry, as you well know, about any sexual advances. But their scientific interests can sometimes be peculiar, especially in regards to attractive men, like you.”

“Now you’re making me nervous.”

“Don’t worry. But do try to keep a low profile.”

“Maybe pretend I’m mentally challenged, so everyone leaves me alone?”

“Nonsense. That will make you their lab rat in an instant. They will want to know what’s wrong with your brain,” Edgar warned. “Just be yourself. So far, you proved to be a very manageable guest, so I think you know very well how to behave in polite society. Actually, I’m afraid I might embarrass you; I have two lefts of ... well, everything,” he concluded and gestured for Cory to follow him outside.

Everything looked austere. The men and women at the table wore beautiful clothes, but they were covered from head to toes. Especially the women were practically swimming in frills and lace, with their small heads peeking over large and convoluted collars. Large hats were covering their heads, so, although he was a bit curious to see them from up close, he quickly realized that there was not so much to see.

“Hello, Edgar,” a small woman sat next to them and nodded briefly. “I see you brought a friend,” she inspected Cory with her sharp, intelligent eyes, the color of amethyst.

“Hello, Lena. This is a friend of mine from Bluesilver. Hector, this is a good friend of mine, Lena.”

Cory, now going by the name of Hector, inclined his head. The woman continued to stare at him.

“Can I feel your skull?” she suddenly asked.

His jaw went slack. What kind of a strange request was that? He turned to Edgar, only to see the man smiling devilishly at him. He straightened up.

“Of course, please be my guest.”

Lena didn't wait for another invitation and rose from the table, to come to Cory's back. She removed his hat and placed it on the table. He felt her small hands feeling his head like they were searching for something.

“Magnificent,” she commented. “Edgar, are you sure your friend is from Bluesilver? It is so unlikely for commoners to exhibit such perfect anatomy, down to the smallest details.”

“Lena is an expert in phrenology,” Edgar explained.

“Oh, Edgar, you're exaggerating,” the woman laughed softly, and her hands stopped their strange explorations for a bit. “And it's just a side hobby, nothing else. The Trainers do not think phrenology is real science. I'm afraid I still need to deal with boring math on a regular basis.”

“What is phrenology?” Cory eventually asked.

“I can tell certain things about you, just by studying your skull,” Lena explained.

“She can even predict the future,” Edgar intervened again.

“Really?” Cory felt excited about such a possibility.

“That's nonsense, dear Edgar,” Lena's voice turned a bit deeper. “I am just playing with concepts and ideas, nothing more.”

“Please, tell me my future,” Cory demanded.

“All right, but please be aware that this has more to do with personality traits and the most likely things that will happen in your life, based on these traits. There is nothing set in stone, and what I am about to tell you will sound pretty vague.”

“I don’t care, I’m curious,” he insisted. “I mean, if you’re not busy,” he remembered his manners. He found Aeria a strange place, but the people here were undoubtedly fascinating.

“Well,” Lena’s fingers descended over his ears and started trailing invisible lines, stopping in places, as if the woman wanted to read something deeper in there. “You are a very balanced person, Hector. Yet, it looks like you are very passionate, too. What science are you specializing in? Since you’re here in Aeria, I suppose you want to specialize in a certain discipline.”

Cory pondered for a second. “History,” he breathed out.

“History?” Lena seemed surprised. “That’s nothing but dead science. Who cares about the dead anyway? Once someone is no longer functional, he or she must retreat right away. There is no progress to be obtained from there.”

“Oh,” Cory spoke, not knowing what to say.

“Never mind, if that’s your cup of tea, that’s ok,” Lena concluded for him. “Now, take what I will say with a grain of salt. It looks like you are destined for great things. Who knows? Maybe history will become an important science again. That, or you’ll change your specialization,” she joked.

Cory was all ears. He liked this game. “What else? Don’t worry. I think it’s very entertaining.”

Lena’s small hands descended on his nape, feeling the base of his skull. “Strange,” she whispered.

“What?” Cory and Edgar asked almost at the same time.

“It’s nonsense. It cannot be,” she eventually spoke.

“Please, Lena, don’t leave us in the dark. It’s not like we believe this fortune telling thing, anyway,” Edgar insisted instead of Cory.

She hesitated a few more seconds. “What I feel at the base of your skull is mentioned in a few old books. But I’ve never seen such a thing, and I’ve never believed it anyway.”

“What is it?” Cory now felt a bit uncomfortable.

“It looks like ... you have two life lines.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, a loose explanation would be that you have to die once, to live a second life. Have you gone through any near death experiences?”

Cory’s mind flew back to the moment back in the mines outside of Drena. “No, I cannot say that I have,” he murmured.

Lena’s hands disappeared. “I’m sorry. I should know death is not exactly a great conversation subject at a party. If that makes you feel better, the two life lines can also mean something else. It’s a more common explanation.”

“What?” Cory’s curiosity was piqued.

“That there is another living inside you. You know, like when you experience strong feelings for someone else. Or ... another for you.”

Cory could tell without looking that right now, Lena was staring at Edgar and the man was staring back. He thought of Lucas, and his heart grew small.

“Well, enough of this hocus-pocus,” Lena was the first to break the awkward silence. “I heard the chef outdid himself today. Let’s enjoy other things besides the usual food for the mind we regularly indulge in.”

Like on cue, servants pushing trays of food entered the room. Cory remained thoughtful. Lena’s words had hit a bit too close to home.

“Are you still thinking about what Lena said?” Edgar asked him, once they were back home.

“She’s quite an exceptional person,” Cory said.

“I know,” Edgar’s voice was filled with regret.

“Edgar ... would it be that bad to get close to her? I mean, you know, to become romantically involved?” Cory was trying hard to pick the right words.

“I could never do that to her. If anyone does such a thing, they are not the only ones punished. The subject of their misplaced affection is punished, as well.”

“What does this punishment consist of? Who will know, anyway?”

Edgar frowned. “The Trainers have eyes everywhere. I mean, not exactly eyes, but affection levels can be detected.”

“Detected? How?” Cory wondered, confused.

“It’s difficult, and it’s hard to explain. If two people come together, they will be exposed rather sooner or later. The punishment ... well, the sublimation machine can be used as an execution device.”

Edgar had a pitiful expression when he spoke. “I would not want anything happening to Lena because of me. I would not stand it,” he shook his head energetically.

“But Lucas said ...” Cory spoke softly, “that he wanted to take me here. How would have our lives turned out to be?”

“He said that?” Edgar was surprised. “That’s strange. Maybe he knew something I don’t?”

That question was more addressed inwardly than to Cory.

“About what Lena said ...” Cory changed the subject, his heart heavy. “I did have a near-death experience.”

“You did?” Edgar showed his surprise.

“While I was escaping. I felt freezing, and I had no direction. But, then ... you’ll laugh if I tell you.”

“No, please, I promise I won’t,” Edgar grabbed a chair and took a seat.

“I thought I was dying but then I had this ... hallucination. I saw a woman in a casing inside the wall. She was floating in mid-air.”

Edgar didn't laugh. “How did she look like?”

“Blonde, long hair, really beautiful ... I think. I don't know many women. I felt myself growing warm again.”

“Anything else?” Edgar pressed.

“The mark on my shoulder,” Cory touched his arm gently. “It flared for a brief second. Oh, she had a lily flower in her hand.”

“Like the mark,” Edgar continued thoughtfully, pursing his lips.

“Then she disappeared, and I knew the way to get out.”

Edgar rose and took one of the old tomes from the table. “You know, these were books we were supposed to burn a long time ago,” he said casually.

“You personally?”

“Oh, no, we, the people of Aeria. An old man gave them to me, told me to keep them. I thought he was a bit crazy. But he was a happy guy. He didn't have to use the sublimation machine. Not even once. He found his work passionate enough to not care about anything else. Lucky man,” Edgar smiled. “He died at 102.”

“102?” Cory was flabbergasted.

“Yeap, he saw like five generations of us, or even more. Most thought he was a bit deranged up here,” Edgar tapped his right temple, “but they left him alone. Not even the Trainers cared about him. They told us to look at him and see what old age could do to us. He was a cautionary tale. Don't grow too old or something like that. They even made a show of it, undressing him and showing us his sagging skin.”

“Poor man,” Cory whispered.

“Oh, he didn't care. Actually, if I think about it, he was very content with his own being. When the Trainers came, he got ready to be presented to the crowds. He joked about it, too. I miss him.”

“When did he pass away?” Cory inquired.

“We are not exactly sure. We didn’t see him for days and went to his home. It was empty. Who knows where he found his end? We didn’t find his corpse.”

“So how do you know he’s dead?”

Edgar stopped his flipping through the pages and stared at Cory. “He could barely walk. Where could he have he gone?”

“And just disappear?” Cory insisted.

“You do have a point,” Edgar murmured. “We just supposed he was found by the cleaning crew someplace and taken to the crematory. We didn’t give it too much thought. But I still have these books from him.”

“What was the old man’s name?”

“Hector,” Edgar said a bit amused. “I named you after him. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I hope I get to live till 102,” Cory joked.

Edgar laughed while continuing his search. “Aha!” he exclaimed and gestured for Cory to come closer. “Is this her?” he pointed out at the old page on which fine lines, barely visible, showed a woman with a lily flower in one hand and the other placed over her womb.

Cory took a step back. “That’s her!”

Edgar seemed surprised. “Are you sure? You barely looked!”

“I am, I am sure,” Cory felt all his pores breaking into a sweat. “It is her!”

“All right, don’t be afraid.”

“Who is she?” Cory came closer. Something more powerful than fear was drawing him to the old picture.

“According to what it says here ...” Edgar brought the tome closer to his eyes, “she is the one who was before the Trainers.”

“Lucas mentioned her,” Cory murmured. “How did he know?”

“Well, he was good friends with Hector. Maybe the crazy old man told him something,” Edgar expressed his suspicions.

“But he had to ask you about the lily flower,” Cory voiced his thoughts.

“Hector was a tad crazy, as I told you. He always said something like he gave us little truths, and that it was up to us to put them together. Yes, if I remember correctly, he did speak kind of strangely. Not only to me. To everyone. Then suddenly, he fell silent, like he could not speak anymore. His eyes were kind of frightening. They were so grey and so deep. Like the Trainers’ eyes.”

“The Trainers are eternal,” Cory spoke, as he suddenly remembered one of the lessons taught, as a young boy. That phrase had been like a mantra they had to say every day.

“What did you say?” Edgar turned to him.

“The Trainers ... they are eternal. They do not die, do they?”

“Yes, that’s a known fact. From their love and care, everyone is born. They have the power of life and death.”

“How are we all born exactly?” Cory questioned. “I know the basics, how the women from Tresalt go to Drena to give birth, but, otherwise ...”

“Oh, it’s quite a secret process. The Trainers take care of everything. Pregnancy, as is, is a biological process, but the initiation of the process is entirely in the Trainers’ hands. They know exactly what genes to combine to fuel the world with workers, scientists, rulers like Lucas ...”

“... and servants like me,” Cory spoke softly. “I wish I knew the woman who carried me in her womb.”

“Why?” Edgar was a bit intrigued.

Cory shrugged. He could not pinpoint what he was feeling. Regret? It was more than that. “I am part of her, I think, as I stand here in flesh and blood. It’s like she’s

living through me, but I don't know who she is, and she doesn't know who I am. I think, no, I feel ... it's kind of sad."

Edgar seemed to ponder for a bit. "You're quite an interesting individual, Cory. And not only because of your magnificent skull," he added jokingly. "I've never thought about the woman who gave birth to me. There had to be someone right? And she was not just a vessel ..." the scientist felt his breath stopping, all of a sudden. He caught the back of the chair to regain his stability.

Cory hurried to his side. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Edgar furrowed his brow. "I must have overeaten tonight or something."

Cory shook his head. He felt as he was responsible for the unpleasant switch in conversation. "So, if Lena studies phrenology as a side hobby, what do you do for fun?"

The host's face lit up. "Oh, you'll think it's silly," he waved his hand, but he watched Cory like he was waiting to be asked about it.

"Try me," the former servant smiled at his new found friend.

"You won't laugh, right?" Edgar warned as he gestured for Cory to follow him to the back.

"No worries, I find all this science stuff fascinating."

They descended on the ground level and exited in a small backyard. Stone walls surrounded it, and only the light of a few lamps made the inside yard visible. In the middle of it, there was something tall and large, covered with a huge piece of cloth.

"It's more like a practical ... thing," Edgar said excitedly, as he grabbed one corner of the cloth. "Ready?" he smiled at his guest, and Cory nodded.

"Wow."

That was the only thing the ex-servant could say, as a strange apparatus appeared in front of his eyes. He had never seen such a thing before. He touched the long, slightly twisted blades and started to move around. A cabin with two places lay on

top of the apparatus, and just underneath, a huge engine – something he had learned from Edgar, took almost the entire space. Above the cabin, there were some other blades, and as he examined the machinery, he noticed other similar devices, of various sizes to the side.

“Do you like it?” Edgar rubbed his hands with unhidden satisfaction.

“What is it?” Cory didn’t hide his admiration and surprise, either.

“It’s a flying machine,” Edgar said pompously. “Well, err... I mean, this is what I want it to be.”

“Does it fly? You mean, up there, in the sky?” It was Cory’s turn to show excitement.

“Technically ... yes. But I’ve never tried it for more than a few minutes. It makes a lot of noise, and I don’t want to draw unnecessary attention.”

“Why did you make it?” Cory inquired.

“I don’t know ... I found the plans, and I started tinkering, and here it is. That, and I have a dream that one day, I will jump in it and fly over the desert, just like that,” Edgar said with something akin to embarrassment in his voice.

“And why don’t you do it?” Cory asked.

Edgar laughed. “And go where? I don’t have a plan, although I’d love an adventure.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be an adventure if you knew your destination, would it?” Cory smiled.

“Good point yet again, Cory,” Edgar nodded. “I’ve never left Aeria, except on short trips to Bluesilver, from where we get our prime materials. I have no factual knowledge of the outside world, besides what I know from the books in my library.”

Edgar covered his flying machine, and they walked back inside.

“Edgar, the woman, the one who was before the Trainers, how did she die?” Cory asked.

“No one says she died, because the Trainers say she is just a legend, and therefore, she never lived.”

“That is what they say.”

“Correct,” Edgar said a bit amused. “Are you sure you haven’t dreamed of becoming a scientist? You do have a way of doubting things, Cory.”

The former servant laughed. “Before coming here, I didn’t know what a scientist was. I would like to read more about the woman if that’s all right with you.”

“Please be my guest. Since you’ve already met her, that might lead us to something.”

“You don’t think I just had a hallucination?” Cory inquired.

“A hallucination showing you the exact representation of something, in this case, someone, you’ve never known before? There must be a scientific explanation for such a coincidence. Since you show no sign of suffering from a mental condition, I have no reason to doubt your words,” Edgar concluded.

The messenger remained standing. Edgar fiddled through the contents of the box he had just received from Drena.

“Are you sure this is all?”

The thin man pursed his lips. “Are you accusing me of stealing?”

“No, I think you might have forgotten something.”

“Like what?”

Edgar hesitated. He didn’t like this new merchant, and he was a cautious individual, as a personal rule.

“Never mind, it was nothing important.”

The merchant left, but Edgar remained thoughtful. When Cory came into the main room, he was still standing there, the small box in his hands.

“Is there something wrong?” Cory asked, seeing the man’s change in composure.

“It was not the usual merchant who got me the new shipment from Drena. There was no personal message from Lucas, either.”

A cold chill ran down Cory’s spine.

“Something is wrong,” he murmured.

“Yes, something must be wrong,” Edgar added. “Cory, I don’t want to frighten you, but I don’t think you are still as safe as I thought you were. The merchant didn’t see you, but he was looking around like he was searching for something.”

Edgar went to the window and saw the merchant, walking empty-handed, to knock on a different door. The person opening the door conversed for a while with him, then the man turned and proceeded to knock on a different door.

“What did you find so far, Cory?”

“About the woman with the lily flower? Just a bit. It’s a big book, you know,” he complained. “There is a city, west from Aeria, as the map indicates, in the heart of the desert. She may be from there, or so the book says.”

“West from here?” Edgar wondered. “Only Tresalt is west from here. The city where the women used for procreation by the Trainers live.”

“Do you think she is still there?” Cory wondered.

“That would be impossible since you saw her in the depths of the Drena mines.”

“She could be,” Cory said a bit stubbornly.

“How so?” Edgar inquired, visibly puzzled.

“It’s hard to explain, and the book is difficult to read. It’s like she can be in many places at the same time.”

“Ubiquitous,” Edgar commented.

“What’s that?” Cory’s eyebrows rose in question.

“Omnipresent, someone who is everywhere at the same time.”

“Oh,” Cory spoke. “Well, she is definitely not here, and not even in Drena, except the mines, and she wasn’t except for that time.”

“That’s a good argument,” Edgar praised him. “But your question is if she is still in Tresalt, right?”

“Yes, pretty much.”

“That would be hard to find out. Tresalt is closed to visitors, and only suppliers get there, and leave everything at the gates because no one should see or talk to the women.”

“That’s strange. Although, in Drena, it is a well-known rule never openly to stare at a woman. They always had those black, long clothes that were covering them from heads to toes. I barely saw one or two, I mean, their faces. They were in a store and wanted to buy something, and they lifted the garments from their faces just a bit so they could talk freely. Their guardians told them to cover right away when they saw me standing there.”

“Well, there is no other city west from here, so there is no other lead right now. I would tell you to keep on reading, but I’m afraid we should plan to hide you somehow.”

Edgar was curious about what the merchant could be talking about with so many people from Aeria. So he left Cory alone for a bit and went on a short visit to his neighbors.

“The merchant? He wanted to know if something strange happened lately, or if someone new is around,” the first neighbor, a known mathematician, offered an answer. “I didn’t have anything to tell him. Well, I did try to entice him with my new method on solving third-degree equations, but he suddenly had to be someplace else. Would you like to hear about it, Edgar?”

“Maybe some other time, my friend,” Edgar hurriedly bid his neighbor farewell. Cory was lucky the people in Aeria were such airheads.

As he went from door to door, he heard about all kinds of new stuff his friends were working on, but, apparently, nobody considered talking about Cory with the merchant. One last piece of information, though, sent shivers down his spine.

“He said the Trainers are bound to visit soon. I didn’t know they were scheduled for verification,” the last person Edgar questioned said.

It could not be a coincidence. Edgar didn’t believe in coincidences. Cory was in trouble, and so was he.

“Cory, we have no more time. I know you still need to learn about the woman with the lily, but the Trainers are expected over the next days, and they have no reason to do so. I think we need to take a gamble and get you out of here.”

“And go where?” Cory demanded although he had to admit he had felt equally troubled after Edgar had gotten no message from Lucas with the delivery.

“I have no idea, but ...” Edgar hurried to one of the enormous drawers that made most of his furniture and extracted an envelope from there. The paper was yellowish, and the corners were turned, and Edgar looked at it, scratching his head.

“What is that?” Cory questioned.

“Well, maybe it sounds a bit crazy, but ... since I am no master of escape plans, I think we should try this first,” he showed the envelope to the former servant.

On it, a few words had been scribbled, most probably by a nervous hand that had no patience to finish each letter.

“Open in case of trouble,” Cory read, not without squinting. “What’s this?”

“Old Hector gave it to me. He said something strange, like to use this if I ever needed to escape the Trainers. Of course, I laughed it off, telling him why I should need that, but he looked deadly serious and added something like that a day would come and I would be much thankful for his help.”

Cory shrugged. "Let's open it then," he concluded, and at Edgar's gesture of encouragement, he tore the envelope. Just a few other words were scribbled inside. "Travel West. Meet Tora."

He stared at Edgar.

"That's it?" the scientist took the paper from his hand and looked at it. "The old man and his pranks ..." he shook his head.

"Well, the book also speaks of going west," Cory gestured to the big book from the table. "I should probably read more. Although it looks like there's not much time."

"I won't work today. I'll call in sick, and stay here to read along with you," Edgar offered.

Both took seats at the table and started reading. Cory rose his eyes a few times, surprised to see how fast Edgar flipped through the pages written in small, tortured letters.

"How come you read so fast?" he asked.

"Oh, some of these pages I've read before. Unfortunately, this method of fast reading doesn't allow the memory to retain much, except for short periods of time. And my mind is enhanced because I've used the sublimation machine so many times," he blushed and squirmed in his place.

"You read fast because of the machine?" Cory pondered.

"Yes, it augments your brain so that you can process information faster. The downside is, of course, that it makes your head explode at some point."

"Can I use it?" Cory asked, a determined look on his face.

"The machine?" Edgar stared at him, confused. "Cory, I don't know, it can be dangerous ... you are not from Aeria, and there is no way of telling ..."

"Do you think I'm too stupid to use it?" Cory demanded on a tone that bore no contradiction.

"No! No, no, Cory, please, it's not like that! Lucas entrusted you to me; I don't want to do something that could lead to your injury, or worse."

“You are still alive, as is everyone who has used it, so far, and you have used it multiple times. I only need it once, to help me before the Trainers come here.”

Edgar pursed his lips in displeasure. He eventually sighed. “All right, Cory. Let’s get you there once the night falls. Maybe you should rest now, so you have the entire night to read the books.”

Cory nodded in agreement. As he rose, Edgar looked at the page he was on.

“I don’t remember seeing this here,” he pointed at a picture on the page.

“It looks like your flying machine,” Cory said.

“How could it be here? I only found a sketch, and it was definitely not in this book. This, however, looks like ...” Edgar picked the book and dragged it towards him to see it better. “I cannot believe it ... it’s like it’s the spitting image of my machine.”

“Really?” Cory leaned over the table and placed his hand on the page. When his hand connected with the paper, the apparatus started moving slowly. Frightened, both he and Edgar took a step back.

“What on earth ...” Edgar murmured.

“Have you ever seen anything like that?” Cory asked, slightly aware of how his hands were shaking, trying to find the table so he could hold on it.

“Never,” Edgar shook his head very slowly, while his eyes remained glued to the paper. “Do it again,” he urged Cory.

“Me?”

“Yes, it doesn’t react when I touch it. Touch it now, Cory,” Edgar regained his steadiness, the scientist in him winning over his initial surprise.

Reining in his emotion, Cory touched the paper again. The apparatus moved, and this time, they looked at the moving picture in front of them. Lines representing desert dunes moved below the device, and slowly, the silhouette of a city appeared in the distance. The picture stilled and remained like that.

“Touch it again,” Edgar frowned.

Cory obeyed, but this time nothing happened.

“That is so strange,” the scientist mumbled.

“I need to read these books,” Cory sat again at the table. “I feel like I have to do it. Edgar, is it possible to use the machine now?”

“Well, it’s almost lunchtime. Even scientists are taking a break to let food break down into fuel for their brains. There’s almost no one in the streets. We could try then.”

The building looked damp and gloomy. Cory could barely suppress an unpleasant sensation as he touched the old stones in passing.

“Does the machine need to be in a place like this?” he asked, mostly rhetorically.

“Well, I guess the Trainers don’t want it to be a pleasant experience for either of us. They probably count on our disgust to come here, to suppress our emotions on our own, before ending up here. There it is, the good old lady, killer of all things nice,” Edgar gestured to what looked like an iron throne, fixed with large bolts into the floor.

Despite feeling his heart growing small, Cory stepped up and sat on the ominous chair. Edgar helped him fix what looked like an iron helmet over his head.

“Are you ready?” Edgar asked cautiously.

“Go ahead. There’s no going back now,” Cory said to himself.

As Edgar pressed a switch just under Cory’s hand, a feeling of dread and hopelessness invaded the blond’s brain.

Memories of Lucas flooded him, then drew away, like waves on a shore. Lucas’s smile, his dark eyes, his warmth started diluting, bright colors washing away in a colorless pool, and Cory saw himself standing on the edge of this endless pool, staring down.

“No,” he whispered, “I’m sorry, Lucas.”

Edgar took the helmet off his head gingerly.

It was cold, so cold. Cory just grabbed at his arms, trying hopelessly to cover the imaginary hole opened in his chest. He howled like an animal. Not even when he had gotten beaten and branded, had he felt so utterly hopeless. Even during those dark hours, he had still had Lucas's memory, and that had been his light. Now, there was nothing but darkness all around.

Slowly, he started getting back to his senses. Edgar was shaking him gently.

"I'm sorry, Cory, I should have told you ... how it feels. I guess I've grown so emotionally numb that I didn't realize what it could mean to someone who has never used it."

"Is it ... always like this?" Cory eventually gathered his wits.

Edgar just nodded. "Let's hope it's for a good cause. We should get back home to our reading."

They both remained silent on their way home. Cory sat without a word at the table, and his eyes started dancing over the pages, sniping important information, with incredible speed. From his side, Edgar sneaked glances. Cory could feel the man's eyes.

"Edgar, please, don't worry, I'm fine," he tried to help his friend get over the recent experience.

"It's not that. It's that ... you're fast; you're really fast."

Cory raised his eyes from the pages. "Faster than you?"

"Definitely. Faster than anyone I know. What have you found out so far?"

"The writing is very difficult to follow. There are mostly myths, but it looks like the world is bigger than we think. There are islands far from the continent, and there are all kinds of animals and birds living there. The people left them for the main continent. The book says they wanted to grab more than they could chew.

The continent is mostly covered in desert, but the woman with the lily helped them.”

“Is her name mentioned?” Edgar asked. “No matter how much I tried to find this information, I never managed to find it. It felt like going in circles all the time.”

“No name. She is just The One, and nothing else is said. Variants of something like an adjective are presented, but that could not be a name. It’s more like a function, rather than a name. She is said to be matr, mitera, mut, and, as far as I can understand, it’s like she gave birth to the first people, the ones who wanted to go to the continent.”

Edgar was looking at him in unhidden fascination. “I’ve gone through these books, and never found this info. Or I’ve always forgotten it somehow. Did any pictures move?”

“No, not yet.”

A sudden gust of wind made the window frame hit the wall with a smash, taking both by surprise.

“There was no sign of rain,” Edgar rose quickly to close the window.

Cory returned to his book. What he saw moving on the page made his heart stop.

“Edgar,” he whispered, “they’re here.”

Edgar remained still, frozen in front of the window.

“Yes, they are. And they are coming here.”

He turned like an automaton towards Cory. “To the flying machine, now,” he said in an even tone.

Cory fell silent and obeyed. He helped Edgar fuel the machinery, and he took a seat next to the scientist. Loud noises could be heard like someone was trying to break through a door.

He looked up. The machine had enough cover to protect them from the heavy raindrops that started to fall. The sky was grey and menacing. Edgar’s machine

began rising while making an even louder noise than the ones coming to get them and the storm in the making.

Cory knew they were there, below them. He didn't have to look to know. But what he knew, as Edgar and he started flying west was that the Trainers, standing there, in Edgar's backyard, their grey eyes following them, came to Aeria on a single simple mission. How he knew, he had no idea; but he knew right now, with sudden clarity, that he hated them, with all his heart.

Dion watched John as he sat down at the table, a morose look on his face.

“What is it, John? Hard day at work?”

It was so seldom for John to complain about work. He had always left such problems there, never willing to take them home.

The big man fiddled with his fork.

“I'm going to change workplaces,” John eventually said.

“All right,” Dion sat next to him. “Why is this bothering you?”

John buried his head in his palms briefly. “I'll be working the mines. I am at that age, I know, but I hoped they would just let me be a little more.”

“Is that really hard work?” Dion questioned. “I'll work hard, too. I'll do everything around so that you can rest,” he offered.

John caressed his lover's fiery strands and smiled. But Dion felt the man's smile never reaching his eyes.

“What are you talking about, baby? You're already doing everything,” he kissed Dion's forehead briefly.

“Why are you so upset?”

John stopped for a second like he was trying to find his words. “I'll see you less, that's all.”

No, that's not all, Dion could swear. But he had to be patient to let John talk about it, in due time. He forced a smile, too, as he kissed John on the lips.

The man grabbed him suddenly, and there were plates and food flying everywhere. Dion clutched at John's shoulders, as his lover started kissing him desperately. Their coupling was fast, rough, but Dion was not scared. He felt his big man needed him that way, at that very moment. As John lay there, his dampened forehead resting in the crook of Dion's neck, he caressed the man's short hair.

"Everything will be fine," he spoke softly, although he knew somehow his words sounded hollow.

Lucas stood there, in the middle of the room, looking around. His own house felt strange, hostile. He chuckled bitterly. It had to be. It was a prison. Every step he had tried to take outside the home, he had been under close supervision for days now.

He sat at the small table in his living room. He leaned and stared at the seams in the old wood. A little thing he had brought to Drena from Aeria. It was far from being perfect, and many times, Lucas had looked at it, to find comfort in its imperfections. Now, his mind focused on a single seam and started following it. His thoughts were carefully gathered and concentrated, poured into the same river, following the seam.

There was no luxurious feeling, no victory. But there were ways to use prisons, and walls could be built to keep the world outside, not only to keep one imprisoned.

Chapter Seventeen

The apparatus coughed and steered to the left. Cory could see the sweat pouring off Edgar's forehead.

"We're going to crash, aren't we?" he shouted the question, feeling in his gut the danger they were in.

"This is all I can do," Edgar shouted back, trying to cover the sound of the howling wind. "Hold on tight!"

Cory felt in every muscle in his body how their machine impacted with the ground. The dunes seemed to have been their savior, though, and, as he moved to get up, he was glad to discover that every bone in his body felt intact. The wind was whipping up the sand, getting it in his eyes, his mouth, and any other place that was not adequately covered by clothes.

He hurried to find Edgar. The man looked a bit shaken, but he was okay.

"We're alive!" Edgar raised his arms gleefully.

"That we are," Cory exhaled.

The Aerial had dirt on his face, but he was smiling.

"It's quite a heck of an adventure so far, isn't it, Cory?" Edgar kept yelling while striving to walk straight through the sand engulfing his feet.

"It sure is, my friend, it sure is," Cory grabbed his arm to help him out.

Sitting on top of a tall dune, they looked around.

"Well, where to now?" Cory mostly spoke to himself.

"I suppose we should keep going west," Edgar said energetically after stealing a quick glance at his compass, and started descending, with Cory following close.

It was a good thing they felt so alive, Cory thought. The road ahead of them was still long.

The Trainer in charge looked through the books on the table and the floor.

“There is nothing in here,” he flipped through the pages. “Nothing but empty pages.”

Another Trainer stared over his shoulder. “I told the Head Trainer we should have never let that idiot Hector here in Aeria, to poison young minds.”

“You know very well the Head Trainer had no choice,” the first one spoke. “He ... We had to let time run its course. Hector is dead now.”

The second Trainer puffed in annoyance. “It took him long enough to die.”

“He could not be ... eliminated.”

“What are we going to do now? It looks like they practically disappeared.”

“The desert will take care of them. They could not get too far in that contraption.”

“Should we organize a search?”

The Trainer in charge hesitated for a moment.

“It looks like wasted time at this point. But do the usual. Even if they escape to one of the free cities, they cannot do anything. They are powerless. They are all powerless.”

“Yes, brother. We are the only one true power,” the other agreed. “But ... they chose to travel west.”

“There is only Tresalt west. They’ll die at the gates. And that if they even get there.”

“Are you sure of that, brother?”

“They’re men. No man has ever entered Tresalt.”

Cory licked his parched lips for the umpteenth time. It looked like there was nothing but the desert around them. Edgar had fallen silent, walking next to him.

They had been walking through the desert for hours, and neither of them dared to say the obvious. They were lost. Edgar stopped and knelt on the sand.

“Cory, let’s take a small break, please,” he asked.

“Edgar, we should just keep going,” Cory insisted, taking his friend’s hand and helping him get up again.

“We are too far from any livable place, aren’t we?”

Cory nodded.

“Let’s just walk,” the former servant insisted. “We’ll get somewhere, somehow.”

Edgar sighed and got up again.

“Well, the good part is that the Trainers won’t kill us,” he said philosophically.

Cory took his hand, and they started walking again. He could feel Edgar growing wearier and wearier. His hope was not going to die. Not just yet.

They continued to walk like that. Cory could feel his legs growing numb, but he wasn’t going to let Edgar’s hand slip from his, and he wasn’t going to say that they were lost.

“Cory, look!” Edgar suddenly shouted, pointing at something on the horizon. “It’s something there!”

Cory could feel laughter bubbling in his chest.

“I bet it’s Tresalt! Let’s go!”

It was Edgar’s turn to drag Cory after him.

“You are responding very well to retraining, Lucas,” the Head Trainer showed his teeth in a cold smile.

The brunet nodded briefly. “Thank you.”

The green eyes looked calm, serene. The Head Trainer's fingers were tapping against the armrests.

"I am more than impressed. I was expecting ... at least a bit of resistance."

"I am here to serve," Lucas spoke.

"I have important plans laid out for you. We intend to make you First Ruler, in Xavier's stead. My brothers and I are all in an agreement on the matter."

Lucas bowed politely.

"In this role, we want you to handle an important mission."

Grey orbs searched Lucas's eyes.

"As you well know, there are a few scattered cities across the continent that are still not under our control. The people there live under the illusion that they are free when all they do is live like animals. We need to put order into things."

"What do you have in mind, Father?"

"Some evil can be made right. But some is so twisted, that you need to cut it right from the roots. We have worked hard to streamline the production of the population in all our cities. A simple, efficient wipeout would be in order."

"Do we have the resources to do that? I doubt it," Lucas offered his input.

"Not just yet, but we are getting there. We still need to hear from Aeria. They are continuously working on our most important project."

"I am afraid I do not know too much about it. I suppose I wasn't involved in it."

"We decided long ago to let the scientists work separately on different parts of the project, without letting anyone in charge. However, since their research is so advanced, it is time that we start developing the final stage."

Lucas's expression was imperturbable.

"When we will start the wipeout process, Tresalt will be included, too."

"Tresalt?" Lucas expressed his surprise. "But that is where all the women live."

“When our project is finished, we will not need them anymore. Their inferior nature will no longer influence or play a role in our creation.”

“Is that possible? I do not have extensive knowledge of their biology, but women cannot be replaced in the reproductive process.”

“That is exactly what we are aiming for. To replace them once and forever.”

Lucas continued to remain impassive.

“Are you sure everything is all right?” the Head Trainer demanded.

“Why shouldn’t it be?” Lucas chased away some lint from his lapel.

The Head Trainer continued to look at him, but Lucas didn’t flinch. His demeanor was nothing but flawless. He rose and bowed politely, as the grey ghost gestured for him that he was free to go.

“It’s odd,” the Head Trainer spoke out loud.

“What is, brother?” another Trainer emerged from the dark.

“Lord Lucas ... I was expecting something else.”

“His response to retraining is impeccable. As expected from a son educated by us.”

“It is expected, of course. But Lucas is not ordinary.”

“None of our brightest sons is ordinary.”

“I am not talking about his intellect. I am talking about his emotions. What do the tests say? You were in charge of the program, I think.”

“Yes, brother. His fundamentals were changed, as indicated. We noticed no emotional distress throughout the process. His mind absorbed everything, like a sponge. Now that you mention it, I thought it to be a bit strange, too. Only in retraining performed on younger minds, I’ve seen such response.”

“Do you have a theory about this?”

The Trainer hesitated for a second. “Could it be he destroyed the surface of his cortex on purpose? I highly doubt it. He doesn’t have the means. It looks like his

emotions are no longer there at all. Another explanation would be he suffered so much at some point, that the failsafe implanted in his brain decided to wipe everything related to an emotional response, to protect itself.”

“That could be, indeed,” the Head Trainer agreed. “I know Lord Lucas has a brilliant mind, but, as you say, he doesn’t have the means to perform such a complex task. Either way, he is now completely ours. There is nothing between us and our final goal.”

The other Trainer bowed reverently.

“Soon,” the Head Trainer spoke slowly, “there will be no one else.”

Xavier thoughtfully examined the bracelet around his wrist.

“When you were asleep, I wanted to take it off. It looks like solid platinum or something. It would have fetched a nice price on the market,” Ayn sat next to his lover. “The problem is I could not remove it.”

“Couldn’t you have just asked nicely?” Xavier glared.

“All right, I am asking you nicely. Give me that, and I’ll turn it into money. Like magic, you know,” Ayn snickered and stole a quick kiss from Xavier.

“I cannot take it off, either,” Xavier said, licking his lips and pretending to be unaffected by the small signs of affection Ayn was displaying so casually.

“No shit,” the guy showed his surprise. “Should we use a tool or anything? That is if you are not particularly attached to it.”

“I’m not. Not anymore,” Xavier pondered while looking at the bracelet and letting his eyes slide over the faint glow. “If we take it off, you can’t sell it,” he said determinedly.

“I can’t?” Ayn smiled as he knew better.

“You won’t because it’s not a regular bracelet.”

Ayn straightened up. “What is it then?”

“It has cutting edge technology incorporated in it. There is an alarm system, and also a tracking device.”

Ayn tensed. “Do you mean those in Drena know where you are? Right now?”

“The device seems to be dormant. I doubt its signal range was designed to work this far from Drena. Nonetheless, if we sell it, we could be found.”

“You mean you could be found,” Ayn said slowly.

“Yes, I could be found.”

“And ... don't you want to be found?”

Xavier turned to stare at his lover. Ayn was tense, although he tried to assume a relaxed stance. Without a moment of hesitation, Xavier let his right hand slide across a muscular thigh, dressed in tight denim. Ayn exhaled as Xavier's deft fingers reached his crotch and grabbed his manhood through the fabric.

“Only those who are lost can be found. I am not lost. I finally found myself.”

Ayn's lips parted. Xavier pushed him on the bed and glued their bodies together.

“Dry humping is no fun,” Ayn pretended to pout.

Xavier bit him softly on the lips. “It won't be dry for long, I promise.”

His hands traveled at the hem of Ayn's t-shirt, pushing it up, revealing taut abs, raising and falling under his skilled caress.

Ayn's hands mirrored his as he was made to shed the white t-shirt donning his upper body.

“I like it so much when I can feel you like this, so close to me, skin on skin,” Xavier murmured, between small, tentative kisses that were only meant to fuel their desire further.

Ayn grinned wildly. “Do you love me or something?”

“I've been known to do worse things than this,” Xavier chuckled and, without further delay, he pushed himself up so he could help his partner out of his jeans.

He looked at the dark organ, twitching, and weeping, resting on Ayn's lower belly. He bent to lick the precum off the head.

"Fuck, Xav," Ayn grabbed at his hair. "Have I ever told you how much I love your blowjobs?"

"Countless times."

"Then I'll tell you once again. You're the best cocksucker who's ever lived."

"I suppose I should take it as a compliment."

"Hey, keeping that position may be tricky. Less talking, more sucking."

Xavier didn't have to be told twice. In one fell swoop, he engulfed Ayn's hard cock into his mouth and started depthroating. Ayn's hands were holding him in place, guiding him to take it deeper and deeper.

Suddenly, Ayn pulled at his hair, forcing him to stop.

"What?" he asked annoyed.

"I want to come inside you, but not in your mouth."

"You're quite demanding, aren't you?"

"Please," Ayn flashed his gorgeous smile, making Xavier roll his eyes.

"Oh, no, you said the magic word," Xavier teased, but he let his lover get on top and undress him completely.

He was made to stay with his ass on the edge of the bed, and rest his legs on Ayn's shoulders. As always, the young man was taking his time to make him ready. He could not deny that Ayn's deft tongue and mouth playing with his nut sack and his hole were making him see stars behind his eyelids.

"I love eating you out," he heard Ayn talking. "You're opening up for me as you've never done for anyone. Tell me, Xav, please."

"What do you want me to tell you?" Xavier whispered.

"How I'm the best for you like you're the best for me."

“You are, Ayn. You are my one and only.”

It looked like Xavier had his fair share of magic words as that was enough to make Ayn straighten up and place himself between the other’s legs, ready for penetration.

“I love you, cocksucker,” Ayn said affectionately and kissed Xav deeply as he pushed inside.

“I love you, too, fool,” Xavier replied as soon as he was allowed to breathe.

“It doesn’t look like there is a door or anything,” Cory touched the tall wall in front of them. “We have no idea where that door is, so we will just have to search around it until we find it,” he concluded.

Edgar looked at the tall wall, squinting.

“Or we could yell. Hey!” he called loudly.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Edgar, but that doesn’t sound like such a good idea. What are the chances we will be heard?”

“You cannot know until you try it. Come on, shout with me,” Edgar encouraged him.

Cory shrugged and started to shout together with Edgar. The wall before them remained silent.

“I think it’s useless,” Cory said discouraged.

“Let’s just keep walking and yelling until someone notices us,” Edgar suggested.

They began dragging their feet. Cory knew they were both at their wit’s end, but didn’t have the heart to say it out loud.

The night was cold, and it was approaching fast. When Edgar asked him to stop a little so they could catch their breath, Cory no longer opposed.

They stood side by side, their backs against the wall.

“It was still a nice adventure,” he heard Edgar speaking like through a haze.

“For what is worth, I’m sorry I’ve dragged you into this, Edgar,” Cory expressed his apologies.

“No worries, my friend. It had to happen sooner or later, and if I had died in Aeria, lonely and without ever being allowed to experience anything, what kind of life would that have been?”

“You’re a good man, Edgar. I am proud to be called your friend.”

“Same here, Cory, same here.”

“What do you think will happen to us?”

“The temperature will fall fast. If we survive the night, we might die slowly of hunger. Or cold. Or both. Not a nice way to go, I guess.”

Cory just nodded. As his eyelids closed, he sent his thoughts to Lucas. His memory was fading, and he was trying to hold on to it with all his might. Instead, another, bright and calm, engulfed him. The light inside was soothing and familiar.

“Mother, if you are there,” he found himself talking, “please guide us.”

A deafening sound made them jump to their feet.

“What was that?” he wondered.

“I have no idea,” Edgar supplied the exact answer he was expecting.

In the faint light of the moon, he saw some contraption descending quickly down the wall.

“Should we run?” the Aerian asked.

“I don’t think I have the energy for that. Let’s wait and see what happens.”

The object landed next to them with a thump. It looked like a metal box, empty on the inside. There was no one in it, but it had a rope attached to it that now stretched across the wall. Cory pondered. Edgar was again, a bit quicker and jumped over the ledge to get inside.

“Come on, Cory, I suppose this is just the way of the people here saying ‘welcome’. I think it can hold us both.”

“Always the optimist,” Cory laughed, but jumped into the box, next to Edgar.

They waited for a while, holding their hands together. The case finally started to move upwards, much slower than when it descended. Cory felt as if it took forever for them to reach the top of the wall.

“All right, now what?” he tried to see something through the dark.

Suddenly, the box started moving again. Cory was pretty sure he was shouting louder than Edgar, as the contraption began gliding on something that looked like rails with incredible speed. When the box finally stopped, they were projected against a wall, and they fell to the ground.

Cory could feel his head hurting like hell.

“Why on earth did you bring them up?” he heard a woman’s voice, not far from them.

“Since when do we let people die?” another voice, much younger, responded.

“Not people, they are men,” the first voice said disdainfully.

“Still people, in my opinion,” the younger female grumbled.

Cory kept his eyes closed, pretending to be unconscious. He hoped Edgar was doing the same, in case he was not already out due to the impact.

“They’re cute,” he heard the young one giggling.

“Diane, you’re crazy. We need to bring someone older than us here.”

A noncommittal grunt was the only response from the woman called Diane. They didn’t seem dangerous, Cory thought and risked opening his eyes.

Suddenly, something cold and sharp was pressed against his throat, and he gulped.

“We mean no harm,” he spoke softly.

“Don’t you dare look at us,” the older female hissed. “Diane, cover your face, idiot.”

“You’re no fun,” the younger one complained, but Cory could judge by the swooshing sound of clothing that she was obeying.

“Now, state your business,” the first woman demanded while pressing the blade against his throat again.

“It’s kind of hard to do that while you’re almost chopping my head off,” he said daringly.

Diane laughed. “He has a point, Adrienne. Just let the poor guy breathe.”

The blade was removed from his neck, and he rose on his haunches. The room they were in was poorly lit, and the two women looked like two indistinguishable black silhouettes, covered in clothes from head to toes.

“My friend and I are lost,” Cory started talking. Next to him, Edgar moved, sign that he was, too, conscious. “Is this Tresalt? The city of women?”

“Yes, it is,” Adrienne answered sharply. “If you have half a brain, you go back where you came from, right now.”

“That’s not an option for us.”

“We cannot keep you here.”

“Yes, we can,” Diane intervened, and Cory’s eyes grew wide when the older woman practically slapped the younger one upside the head. “Ouch, that hurt.”

“Keep your mouth shut. We don’t know who these two are.”

“We’re here to see Tora,” Edgar spoke this time around, as Cory was too absorbed to observe the dynamics between those two.

The women stopped their quarreling and remained unmoved.

“There is no one by this name here,” Adrienne eventually spoke, and Cory could sense fear in her voice.

“Yes, there is,” he contradicted her. “Old Hector sent us.”

“Old Hector? The good ol’ sack of bones?” Diane spoke out of turn again, earning another slap from Adrienne.

“You two should just leave,” Adrienne spoke again, ignoring Diane’s protests.

“We have nowhere to go,” Cory insisted. “We are running from the Trainers.”

“And they didn’t catch you. Ha, you want me to buy this bullshit?” Adrienne stood her ground. “We will just let you back outside, and you will see about your business.”

“No, Adrienne, they will die out there,” Diane spoke more determinedly this time. “We will take them inside.”

“Like hell, we will.”

“Who was put in charge of the gates? Was it you or me?” Diane spoke defiantly.

Adrienne masked her displeasure with a small grunt.

“Come one, men,” Adrienne didn’t hide her disgust as she said the last word, “get up and follow us. No tricks or you’ll see how sharp my blade is.”

Cory helped Edgar up, and both started walking in silence behind Adrienne. Diane was escorting them from the back.

“Don’t worry about her,” Diane whispered. “She’s all milk and honey once you get to know her.”

“What are you doing, Diane? Chatting up the prisoners?”

“Prisoners?” Edgar expressed his surprise. “I thought we were guests.”

“That’s debatable,” Adrienne said philosophically. “Until we’re sure you’re here with no bad intentions, you are prisoners.”

They walked through an empty hallway, dark and humid. After that, a long flight of stairs, spiraling down, guided them to the lower levels.

The entrance to the inner city seemed like a labyrinth, Cory thought. He was pretty sure he would not be able to go back on the same path and reach the exterior, without getting lost.

Finally, they stopped in front of a large wooden door. Adrienne knocked softly like she was afraid she was going to disturb the ones inside.

Cory could not hear anyone answering, but it looked like there had been some signal that only Adrienne understood because the door opened without a sound.

As they passed over the threshold, Cory felt his breath catching in his chest. The room inside was tall and narrow, and at the back, a colossal statue representing the woman he had seen in the mines and Edgar's books was dominating over the entire place. There were lines of wooden benches on which other women dressed all in black from head to toes stood hunched over what looked like small books.

Everyone turned to look at them. Like on cue, whispers rose from the crowd. Cory felt a bit uncomfortable, but strangely enough, he wasn't afraid. The room was warm and lit by what looked like dozens of tall candles.

"What did you bring us here today, Adrienne?" he heard an old woman speak, as she walked down the aisle, slowly, painfully, barely dragging her feet.

He could not tell how old she was since she was also covered in black garments, like the rest. But her voice sounded frail, and the way she moved was enough indication that she was very old, indeed.

"Two prisoners," Adrienne spoke. "They say the Trainers hunt them."

"And why did you let them in?" the old woman inquired.

"I let them," Diane made her presence known. "Adrienne had no choice since you put me in charge of the gates."

The old woman chuckled softly. "Diane, you're so impulsive, aren't you? So, what made these two men worthy of entering Tresalt?"

"They were all alone down there, yelling and hoping for someone to let them in. I could not let the desert have them."

The old woman got closer, and she was helped by Adrienne to straighten up a little. Cory remained silent, waiting.

"What are you two doing here?" the old lady finally asked.

“We’re looking for Tora. Hector told us we would find her here.”

“And? What is Tora supposed to do with you?”

“I guess she could help us get away from the Trainers.”

“The Trainers are powerful. What can a simple woman do against them?” the old woman continued her inquiry.

Cory hesitated for a moment. Then he remembered something from the books. “All men come from a woman’s womb. A mother’s love is the most powerful, not the Trainers.”

“Very well. It looks like you learned your lesson, young man. You speak the words, but you don’t believe them.”

“How could I?” Cory spoke softly. “I’ve been raised by the Trainers. I do not understand a mother’s love. I don’t know what that is.”

A scrawny hand rose to touch his cheek. “You have your mother’s eyes,” she whispered, then she caressed his hair gently. “And her hair.”

Adrienne made a small sound of surprise. Diane was quick to talk again.

“What are you saying, Tora? Is he ...?”

“Shut up, idiot,” Adrienne grumbled, and this time, she covered Diane’s mouth with one hand and kept her in place.

All the women in the room stood up. Cory felt all tingling for some strange reason. So the old woman was Tora, the one they were looking for.

“There could be just a coincidence, of course,” Tora added.

Everyone seemed to be waiting, the air strung with anticipation.

“Remove your shirt, young man,” the old woman commanded.

“Why?” he asked, feeling suspicious at the request.

Adrienne didn’t wait to be told what to do. She grabbed him and started undressing him. He felt a bit like a doll in the tall woman’s hands. Adrienne seemed strong.

He was turned towards Tora with his right shoulder. Old fingers touched the mark.

“Yes, it is him,” she concluded, and the place filled with excited exclamations from all the women in the room. “Welcome to Tresalt, Cory.”

“How do you know my name?” he murmured.

“You are her son,” Tora spoke gently. “I have been waiting for you all my life.”

“Her son? Whose?” he felt he needed to ask.

“Beautiful as her, but not as sharp?” Tora joked, to ease his nervousness. “She’s right in front of you.”

Looking at the statue, Cory gulped. He should have seen it from the first time he had seen the woman in the mines. He was nothing short of her spitting image.

Dion was still waiting in the kitchen when John came back late at night. The redhead hurried to welcome his partner. The big man looked tired, his face ashen.

“Hey,” he called softly and offered to take his coat.

“Hey,” John answered back.

“Do you want to eat something?” Dion gestured for the kitchen.

“I don’t think I can. They feed us three large meals down there. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“No problem,” Dion said with a small regret.

John headed for the shower, while Dion slid under the covers. The man seemed distant. It had to be because he felt so tired, Dion thought.

When John came to bed, Dion made a small move to touch him.

“I’m sorry, Dion. I need to sleep.”

“It’s all right,” the redhead spoke.

He stared in the dark, as John drifted off to sleep. He could not be an egoist, with John having to work such long hours now. But he could not deny feeling deserted, after having John's love for so long. Never before had it happened for the big man to be too tired for making love with Dion.

He tried to make the man's profile through the darkness of the room. He touched him, and a feeling of dread engulfed him. John's body was hard as a rock, unmoving like there was no life in it. Worry and fear crept in, squeezing Dion's heart painfully.

"John," he called, hesitantly at first. "John," he raised his voice, becoming more and more panicked at the lack of reaction from his lover.

John's eyes suddenly snapped open. They looked translucent, unworldly in the faint moonlight filtered through the curtain.

"Go back to sleep, Dion," he ordered, and the strange eyes closed shut again.

Dion felt a cold chill seeping through the room. His eyes searched for the source of the unwelcome draft, but the door and the windows were carefully shut. Curling into a fetal position, his back away from John, he tried to warm himself. Heavy sleep hung on his eyelids, and he drifted off, in a whirlpool of sensations, all pulling at his senses from all directions.

He was in a swamp, no light in sight; he could feel the humid air, packed with foul smells rising from the moist ground clamping at his feet. Loss, his mind echoed, and he felt like crying. He didn't want to lose. Loss, the strange voice in his mind echoed again, and Dion moved his feet forward, not knowing what to do but that.

Suddenly, there was warmth again, as strong hands were holding him, cradling him. His right hand swiped a sweaty forehead, and he realized he was awake.

"Are you all right, love?" he heard his partner's voice. "You were thrashing in your sleep."

John sounded worried, but more importantly, he seemed like himself. Dion turned to face him, and calloused fingers carefully wiped the tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Was it a bad dream? It’s fine now,” John held him tightly, kissing him gently.

“John,” Dion whispered meekly. “What’s wrong?”

“With me? I wasn’t the one having a nightmare just now,” the man cooed softly.

“Earlier, you were ...”

“I was what?” John seemed confused.

“Cold.”

“Towards you? You were sleeping when I got in. And I’ll never be cold towards you, sweetheart, you know that.”

“What? John, don’t you remember? I waited for you in the kitchen. We talked.”

“I ... are you sure? Because I am quite certain I came home and went straight to bed. You were sleeping so soundly; I didn’t want to bother you.”

Dion felt fear, dark and twisted, and it was like a physical sensation grabbing him by the neck.

“I don’t understand,” he began shivering. “You were so cold. Not towards me. Your skin was cold. Your body was like ... all stiff.”

“Hush, love,” John cradled him in his strong arms. “It was nothing but a nightmare.”

He was starting to feel better, the warmth radiating from the man’s much more massive body engulfing him.

“I miss you so much,” he let out his pain.

“I’m here, baby,” John cooed and slowly began pushing down Dion’s flimsy nightgown.

Lips he knew so well traveled along his collarbone, slowly nipping at the damp skin. Dion shivered, but this time not from cold. John placed him slowly on the bed, making room for himself between slender legs that came to wrap around his waist.

His lover was infinitely gentle in his caresses, and in his taking. Dion thrashed and squirmed with each long stroke, with each long thrust. It was like John wanted to make it last, to make it linger. Somehow, he felt it was not in anyone's power to do that. Postponing the inevitable was nothing but pure luxury, and Dion just chose the moment, the exhilarating feeling of having his man deeply impaled into his body, driving him insane with his slow lovemaking.

In the morning, John was gone again and the leftovers from the previous night were untouched. Dion remained alone in the bed, enjoying the fading scent of his lover from the sheets, while his mind began working.

It was not difficult to get in touch with Andreas, right after finishing his shift. The blond had just woken up, but he was not in a bad mood. He even smiled when Dion promised him coffee.

“So, to what special occasion do I owe the honor?” Andreas asked while blowing away the steam rising from his cup.

“Andreas, you have been here for a while,” Dion started. “I guess you know much more than me. Plus, you most probably hear people talk all the time.”

Andreas nodded slowly.

“It's just that ... do you know anything about the people working down there, inside the mines?”

“Why are you asking?” Andreas demanded to know, frowning. His eyes began wandering about, taking in the small barracks. “Fuck!” he spat, as soon as he realized. “Is John there already? But he's not that old!”

“That is what he told me, too,” Dion said, shaking his head. “The thing is ... can I trust you, Andreas?”

“I'm a fellow ex-servant and your boyfriend's ex. But ... I suppose that is not answering your question. Well, shoot, and let's see if I can help you with anything, Red.”

Red? Dion could not remember ever being given a nickname that was not an insult. He felt a bit warm and ticklish inside.

“John comes home late. He never eats. At night, he is cold.”

“I heard the mines are doing that to people. They are just too tired to get it up. I know, they’re never my clients,” Andreas said, as he grabbed the coffee cup tighter, looking to warm up his hands.

“Tiredness is one thing. Andreas, John is cold like in a block of ice. He doesn’t move. He lays there ... like a corpse,” Dion says with a small shiver.

Andreas stared into his cup, seemingly fighting with himself.

“There are ... rumors,” he eventually whispered. “People say there is something evil, down there. That it’s not just hard work that makes miners ... quickly perish.”

Dion bit his bottom lip hard. This was not the right moment to start crying.

“Like what? What is this evil?”

“Rumor has it that the more people mine, the less human they become. It seems like they are gradually losing their souls. And it’s like they move in this continuous line. The ones who are first are digging deeper and deeper, and suddenly, they disappear. Their strength is said to double, if not triple. At some point, they want nothing but to dig. The others do not follow them when they are in this frenzy. And suddenly, from where they dig, no sound comes anymore. Soon enough, others fall prey to this madness. It is said they die, but no one has ever seen a body coming out from there.”

Dion buried his face into his palms.

“So no one ever came out from there?”

Andreas shook his head slowly, pity softening his features.

“I don’t want to sound cynical, but I think it’s time you say your goodbyes and start searching for another man.”

“No,” Dion shook his head. “There is got to be something I can do.”

“Oh, honey,” Andreas looked at him, his eyes filled with compassion. “What can we do? Whoever controls all these is more powerful than all the people living here combined. They run a well-oiled machine here and ...”

“Machines can break,” Dion said stubbornly.

“What?” Andreas looked at Dion, shifting in his chair.

“I may be nothing but a recycled servant, but I know that machines are not made to last forever. Back in Drena, we had to replace appliances all the time.”

“Dion, dear, whatever happens in that pretty head of yours, no. Just no,” the blond repeated. “And it was just a figure of speech.”

“A brilliant figure of speech,” Dion smiled at his guest. “Nothing can run this smoothly without hiccups. I work in a factory now, I know more about how things work. And also, there was someone I met when I was still in Drena. Someone who was different than anyone else, although he had gone through the same training as we all had. He was solid proof that no system is flawless.”

Andreas was looking at him wide-eyed, speechless.

“What?” Dion blushed.

“I had no idea you were so smart, Red,” Andreas whispered in awe. “And who is this mysterious someone? Was he your lover? Who was he?”

“Just a servant, like you and I.”

“Cool!” Andreas’s eyes lit up. “But wait, what’s that got to do with anything? I mean, the mines are down here, your friend is up there in Drena...”

“Hear me out on this. I’ll let you in all the gossip from the old days another time, and I’ll tell you more about my friend. But, for now, I need to ask you: is there a way to get inside the mines? I mean, if you are not admitted there.”

Andreas pursed his lips while pondering.

“No one gets close to that disgusting place, on their own accord, I can tell you that. So it may not be that hard. But I suppose that there are people at the gates, monitoring the personnel. They have to be distracted somehow.”

Dion fell silent.

“I know it!” Andreas exclaimed, clasping his hands. “If you want to get inside, Red, and have some wingman to distract the guards ... well, you’re staring at him.”

“You?! But Andreas, this could be dangerous! I mean ...”

“Shut up, honey. You lure me here with coffee, talking about all kinds of crazy stuff and you expect me to sit on the sidelines, without helping? No way!” Andreas flicked his beautiful hair over one shoulder.

“But you have no obligation to help me!” Dion almost shouted.

“Eh, no obligation indeed. But I do want to be of some use, you know. All my life I thought all that glitters is gold. And now, between you and me, sweetie, I ... feel kind of like I’ve done nothing but wasted my life. Just let me be myself for once, not someone everyone expects me to be. I choose this,” Andreas said with pride, squaring his shoulders and looking Dion in the eyes. “Plus, I think I can get you past the guards like this,” he snapped his long elegant fingers.

“Thank you, Andreas,” Dion jumped from his chair and threw his arms around Andreas who embraced him in return. “How are you going to do it?” he asked, as he sat back in his chair.

Andreas slowly pushed a finger into his mouth, wetting it and letting it free with a playful pop. His eyes became sultry, and Dion knew precisely why Andreas was such a big success down at Venusville, despite no longer being the newest or the youngest.

“There are not many who can resist my blowjobs,” the blond added with a smirk.

“Oh, Andreas,” Dion whispered.

“Come on, Red, we all know blow jobs are the easiest. It’s harder to take it up the ass constantly, especially from different dicks. But blow jobs? You go down on a guy, and you can think of anything else, while polishing that rod, like you would the silverware. Don’t tell me you’ve never done it like this,” Andreas winked at him.

Dion chose to blush instead.

“What? Hadn’t you sucked a lot of dick before coming here? Wow, nice going, Red!” Andreas stared at him in disbelief.

Dion shook his head.

“I did ... suck a lot of dick. Only that I haven’t thought of doing what you just said. Although I must admit, it was a lot easier than ... the other thing.”

“So what does John like best now?” Andreas whispered while leaning over the table. “With me, he was more about blow jobs. I was always skittish when it came to my back door.”

“Well ...” Dion blushed a deeper shade of red, “he ... likes fucking me more.”

“Oh, really?” Andreas giggled. “And yet, you don’t have a limp or anything. You should show me some of your ... stretching exercises.”

“Cut it out, Andreas,” Dion covered his face.

“Come on; we did it together, how can you still blush? That threesome was damn hot, you know?” Andreas laughed at him. “Now, on to more serious things, like when I am going to blow some mine guards.”

“Oh, as soon as possible,” Dion said quickly, glad to escape Andreas’s nonchalant poking into his sexual life. “Let’s run some recon first and see what we are up against.”

“Ok. Ah, I just remembered something,” Andreas replied with a thoughtful look on his face. “Rumors about the mines also mentioned something about the food there being ... disgusting or something. Not that it matters, I suppose,” Andreas shrugged.

Dion stared at his new friend, pondering.

“I cannot remember last time John ever had a meal at home. Not even in the morning. If the food is so disgusting, how come he prefers it to my cooking?”

“Maybe you suck as a cook,” Andreas laughed, earning an affronted stare from Dion.

“No way. I make a killer ... everything, from the first to the last course. And he used to complain I was going to make him fat. There is something here. I don’t know what it is. But damn, I will find out.”

“Let me know when you are prepared.”

“Is tomorrow too soon?” Dion asked hopefully.

“Sure thing, it’s not like there is anything to keep me,” Andreas shrugged. “Let’s go after you’re done with your shift. There are a few good hours during which you can roam the mines once inside. But, before that, we will have to do something about your pretty face.”

“Like what?” Dion demanded to know.

“Like making sure that no one takes a look at you and knows you don’t belong there. Ex-servants end up there anyway,” Andreas began thinking, “but not as young as you. Not that I know a lot of such things. Find some soot or something, so we can make you ugly. Once inside, you will be on your own, and I won’t be able to help you, so we need to prepare.”

“All right, Andreas. Thanks a lot,” Dion stood up and held Andreas tight, as the blond was already on his feet, ready to leave.

Andreas embraced him back.

“Hey, anything for a friend,” the blond patted the red strands.

“I’m glad we’re friends,” Dion spoke, and Andreas just laughed, a bit embarrassed.

It was the middle of the night when Xavier woke up with an unfamiliar jolt. Next to him, Ayn was sleeping soundly, his chest rising and falling with each steady breath. He looked at his lover’s profile, barely visible in the moonlight filtered through the metallic shades masking the world out there. Haven was silent at night when there were no people organizing night rides or the occasional party.

Xavier got up from the bed slowly, making sure not to disturb Ayn. Outside, the fading sounds of wind swirling over the desert were making the silence deeper,

unworldly. He sighed and then he raised his hand and watched the bracelet. It was pulsing, ever so slightly, that even he, with his keen senses, could barely feel it.

His other hand enclosed over the bracelet, in a futile effort to break through the solid metal, to turn the object into dust, dust that he could scatter over the dunes and forget about it forever. But instead, the bracelet continued to pulse, sending an unpleasant jolt through his arm, mocking him.

He took a look at the sleeping man on the bed. The need to touch was so high it hurt him physically. One step towards the bed was soon followed by several towards the door. His hand on the knob, he hesitated.

“Hey, what are you doing, Xav?” Ayn called sleepily from the bed.

Xavier’s lips twitch, unfamiliar with cursing, but wishing he knew some proper words to express it.

“I need a bit of fresh air. I’ll be back shortly,” he promised, hoping his schooled voice could hide the emotions swirling inside him.

“Ok,” Ayn just rolled on his stomach and fell asleep right away.

Minutes later, Haven was quickly disappearing behind him. A strange sound, something between a small cry and a whimper left his lips as he sat behind the wheel of Marcus’s van. He had no idea what that was and that he could do that. Or where he was heading.

Chapter Eighteen

There was an alien feeling, nesting in his chest, as his eyes remained glued to the enormous statue in the candle-lit room. Unconsciously, he raised his hands to his face, mapping it, as he was discovering it for the first time. Everyone around him was silent, watching him, even Edgar.

“How could this even be?” he mumbled. “I thought she wasn’t real.”

Tora smiled.

“She is.”

“Wait ... is she still alive?” Cory asked, barely managing to let out the words.

“She is eternal,” Tora answered.

“Can I see her?” the blond servant demanded, a mix of anxiety and confusion in his blue eyes.

“You are looking at her, and you are wondering if you can see her?” Tora squinted her watery eyes, as she stared at him.

“That’s ... just a statue. An inanimate object,” he added, remembering a few things from what he learned during his short stay in Aeria.

“Is this what you think? Is it the first time you see her?” Tora questioned him.

The silence was replaced with discontent murmurs.

“I ... I think I’ve seen her before ... but that cannot be,” Cory added.

“Non-believer!” Adrienne hissed, and soon her sharp blade was against his neck.

Tora raised one hand, and Adrienne dropped her hand. Her old face was like carved in stone, all traces of warmth gone. The murmurs in the room were turning into protests.

Cory could taste danger. To his surprise, Edgar came to the rescue.

“You people seem to be judging Cory. But you forget that the Trainers raised him. He doesn’t know this woman you speak of so highly. Until we arrived here, we thought her to be nothing but a myth.”

Adrienne turned towards the scientist with anger written all over her face. There was shouting from all sides, and Edgar took a step back.

“Silence!” Tora ordered, and the women fell quiet again. “It is true that they come from a place without pity. They need to be educated.”

“Love cannot be taught!” someone from the crowd yelled.

Tora turned towards the pews.

“Is that what she taught us? She trusts him, or she would not have put him into this world. She trusts us, or she would not have guided him to us. Since when are we lacking faith?”

There were murmurs again, but this time in agreement.

“Come, children,” Tora gestured for Cory and Edgar to follow her. “There are many things you need to learn.”

Ayn felt the place on the bed next to him with one hand, only to find it empty and cold. He blinked a few times. Where could that lover of his be this early in the morning? Just when he hoped they could linger in bed for some action before sunrise. He stumbled in the semi-dark until he found his clothes and went outside. Now he vaguely remembered that Xav had said something about going out for a bit of fresh air. But that must have happened hours ago.

An unpleasant thought came to him, unbidden, but he chased it away. Now it was not the right moment to feel doubtful. They had, like, exchanged vows, or something. Said ‘I love you’ and all that. And it hadn’t been a joke. It was stupid to think Xav just decided to take a hike.

Haven was still silent at this hour, but the first rays of the sun were starting to rise above the dunes in the distance. Everything around came into focus in sharp colors,

bright orange, and metallic blue. Ayn stared around, searching for his lover with his eyes.

He heard footsteps behind him and turned quickly. But his hopes were dashed right away, as he saw who was coming. Marcus looked pretty pissed.

“What’s with you, up and about, at this hour? Is your honey losing his appeal already?” Marcus spoke first, but he was looking around, too, like he was also looking for something.

“Cut the crap, Marcus,” Ayn shrugged. “Who pissed in your morning coffee?”

“Some fucker who took my van,” Marcus replied, the frown on his face deepened. “When I find the moron who dared to pull this kind of prank on me, I’ll bust his balls, rip them from his body, and shove them up his ass.”

Ayn frowned.

“Your van is gone?”

“Yeah, what do I keep saying? Give His Majesty a break. Ever since you’ve buried yourself balls deep into that tight ass, you started to sound like a moron, Ayn. Thinking too much with your dick?” Marcus joked, but only half-heartedly.

“Xav is gone, too,” Ayn replied, ignoring his friend’s banter.

“Don’t tell me,” Marcus huffed. “You told him it’s okay to take my van out for some pleasure ride. Damn, Ayn, how about you be more generous with your toys, not mine? I get nothing out of this. So he’s out there, burning my fuel, and I won’t even get to tap that ass.”

Ayn threw his friend a nasty look. Marcus put his hands up, in defeat.

“Don’t mind me. I’m just joking. His Majesty is not my type at all. You can have him. But what the hell is he doing riding around in my van at this hour? Did he have an errand to run or something?”

“I have no idea, and I don’t know if he’s riding your van or not,” Ayn spoke. “Just that it can’t be that kind of freakish coincidence for him to disappear at the same time as your van.”

“What did you do?” Marcus joked again. “To make him run away, I mean. Hell, I’m not even mad anymore. There’s so little going on around here. I need to find all the juicy gossip behind this. C’mon, Ayn, what did you do to make him so mad that he took a hike? Or did you scare him with your big cock?”

“Shut up, asshole,” Ayn mumbled. “He loves my big cock. And he’s not that easy to scare.”

“Well, whatever happened, the point is that he has my van, and letting your lovebirds’ quarrel aside, I need it today.”

“We need to find him first,” Ayn said with determination. “So, do we take the buggy now?”

“What other choice do we have? At least, he cannot go too far. The van needed refueling. Let’s chase the tracks. The winds haven’t been too heavy.”

Ayn nodded. What could have made Xav run away? He could pretend all he wanted that he was sure of himself, or else Marcus was going to laugh his ass off, but the truth was he worried. Something was amiss, and he needed to know what. Have Xav explain it to him. It could not be that bad. It just couldn’t.

“Come on, lover boy,” Marcus’s voice startled him. “Let’s get that partner of yours back safe and sound. And my van.”

“Maybe he’s just around here somewhere,” Ayn said, but even he could tell his voice lacked conviction. They would have heard the van if it was close. “But I’m helping you get your van back either way.”

“Then move your ass, and let’s have some extra fuel staked in the back of the buggy. We’ll need it to bring Melissa back home safe, too.”

“Why on earth would you give that ugly thing a woman’s name?” Ayn mumbled, to get his mind off what could have gone wrong between him and Xav. Just when things were so great between them.

“Because it is a woman’s name,” Marcus winked at him.

“And what could a woman have in common with that ugly thing you call a van?”

“Everything. This Melissa chick was just as ugly. But she could take a riding, just like my van.”

“You’re one sick bastard, man,” Ayn shook his head.

“Hey, there’s no better thing than the love of an ugly woman. That kind of woman will take everything from you. She won’t fuss, because she knows how she looks. And she’ll fucking love you. But what do you know, pretty boy? Only cute chicks dig you. And cute men, too, lately.”

Ayn laughed. It was damn good to have someone like Marcus on his side of the fence. He could count on the guy. In bad times and in good times.

“Well, now I need to find my cute man and bring him back.”

“Ah, so you’re not letting him go?” Marcus elbowed him playfully.

“Are you kidding me? That kind of man? He won’t get away from me if he goes all around the world. I told him he’s mine.”

“Oh,” Marcus snickered. “Don’t tell me you want me to be the flower girl at your wedding. I’d rather be the one in charge of the booze.”

“I won’t trust you with that. You’ll drink everything and leave everyone else thirsty, you prick.”

“Just look at you,” Marcus slapped his back hard, but friendly. “Not denying, huh? You have it that bad for His Majesty, then?”

“Are you blind or something? Did you look at my guy?”

“Not too much, I don’t want my ass kicked for staring,” Marcus replied.

Ayn was filling two canisters while listening to Marcus’s bad jokes.

“Good answer,” he said and stood up. “So are we like ready to go?”

“Yeah, I already saw the tracks,” Marcus climbed behind the wheel, and Ayn took the seat next to him right away. “Don’t worry, buddy. Your beloved will be back with us in no time. But it’s up to you to make him stay, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. Now step on it, already.”

“Sure thing, man, sure thing.”

The van began to cough. Xavier frowned as he wiped the fuel gauge with one sleeve. Ah, damn, how could he have been in such a rush that he forgot the damn contraption still needed fuel to work? Another look at the glinting band around his wrist was the only answer he needed. Or knew.

The sensor was still searching. That meant that the Trainers back in Drena had finally decided that Xavier needed some help getting back home. What a strange thing to call the white city his home. That was not it. The soft tendrils of longing were not stretching between him and that place but between him and a small cottage made from corrugated metal, where inside was almost nothing save for a bed and a man he knew so well now.

He hoped Ayn was not going to hate him. But leaving was the only way to show he cared. Had he been soft, pleading, waiting for Ayn to tell him to stay, regardless of the relentless sensors trying to locate the first ruler of Drena, that would have meant only one thing. That he was just an egotistical bastard, who could care less that Ayn's home was going to be blasted to smithereens so that he could prolong his stay in his lover's arms.

This way was the only way. The desert stretching in front of him. He knew what waited for him out there. The sun was mocking him, so cruel and merciless up in the sky. It would have been better if a sandstorm started. He would have had a way to ...

He wiped his face in an annoyed gesture. That damn thing was going to pulse and pulse as long as he was alive. Maybe even beyond. When the sensor locked on, when that moment came, he had to be as far away as possible from Ayn's home. If the Trainers were to find his body lost somewhere in the vast desert, they would have no way to guess the traces in the sand, growing thinner and thinner by the hour.

He doubted he was far enough despite driving for several hours. Miles and miles were now between him and Haven, a place where, if he was to be completely

honest to himself, he had been happy. The only time in his entire life when he had been truly happy.

Drena was such a distant memory right now. The glitter, the gold, the power. All held nothing but emptiness. Only the people were important. Lucas, his best friend, by whom he had done so wrong. Cory, his servant, caring enough to let Ayn go, despite knowing all too well that his life was going to be forfeited for it. Could he remember anyone else? Not really.

The Trainers were all the same. They wanted Xavier to be the best. And he had been, and for the most of his life, he had thought that was what he wanted and needed. Until a savage slave had been on offer, and Xavier had taken him home, put him in a cage and ... fallen in love with him.

For all that was worth, he was grateful. Just imagining his life as an empty line of lavish parties and obligations let him know he had chosen well, the moment he had decided to let Ayn take him away. He was carrying something with him now, for that reason only. It was what Ayn had given him, no strings attached.

And now he had to do the right thing, and leave Ayn behind because he could never forgive himself if he brought harm to the man he loved.

The van coughed again and a foreboding mechanical sigh followed. Well, he was going to walk from this point forward. For more than one hour, the van had just struggled, and he had driven at only a fraction of the speed the car should have managed. More of that and walking would have been faster.

He jumped out of the vehicle and slammed shut the door. The unfortunate thing had served him to the best of its abilities. No point in letting the door hang open and allowing wild animals to find a place to nest inside. As was no point in dwelling over the thought that the same animals would soon find Xavier as a good alternative to their usual meals.

No way out but through, he thought, and he started marching forward. Soon enough, he was going to leave the van behind, and he was going to walk and walk, until the thing was going to turn into a small point at the horizon, just like Haven did, hours ago. Only that, this time, Xavier was not going to turn and look back.

A sound in the distance startled him. He turned slowly. What could that be? The noise was mechanical, so that was no animal. Riders? Xavier looked around. There was no place to hide. The only thing he feared was to be taken back to Haven. There were not many vehicles in that town if what he had noticed was correct. So the chances were slim to have someone from there happening precisely in this area. To his knowledge, only Marcus and a few others were in charge of raids. The only scheduled raid was on Marcus's men, and the guy had no vehicle as of earlier that morning.

So there could be others. Ruthless people who probably were going to kill him for the fun of it. He had no qualms with that, specifically, but he still needed to be as far from Haven as he could. If some idiots living in the heart of the desert were going to be found by the powers that be and blown to pieces once the bracelet was going to lock down Xavier's location that was not his problem.

He began moving faster. The problem with this awful desert was that the dunes always looked closer than they were. Maybe he could make a run for one of them, but the more he hurried in one direction, the further the dunes seemed to move away from him.

The sound, on the other hand, was getting closer and closer. Xavier did not have the heart to look back now and face his soon to be assailants. He was not that courageous. He needed to be brave later on when he was going to have to fool them into taking him further and further away, but, for now, he could allow himself a moment of weakness. That if they didn't shoot him or skewer him first, no questions asked.

Something else besides the sound of the vehicle approaching was taken by the wind, tickling his ear. He stopped and turned. And his heart sank. Screaming his name and riding in another strange contraption, of which Xavier did not know of, next to that damn man called Marcus, Ayn was leaning out the window.

There was no point to run now. They were approaching faster, and running was going to waste the energy he needed to put his lover in place and explain to him, as soon as he could, what was going on. Ayn and Marcus had to run away from him like he was the plague, but they did not know it yet.

So he waited, crossing his arms over his chest. Ayn jumped from the car, the second Marcus cut the engine and ran towards him.

And tackled Xavier, making him stumble and fall on his ass, in the most ungraceful manner possible. Ayn straddled him fast, grabbing his flailing arms and pushing them up.

“What the fuck are you thinking, Xav?” Ayn yelled at him.

He could see the pain in those deep black eyes. So he chose to close his.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Ayn shook his entrapped arms, to make a point. “Look at me and tell me why the fuck you ran away like a coward in the middle of the fucking night!”

“Give the man a breather,” Marcus intervened and grabbed Ayn by one shoulder, only to be shaken away in anger. “How is he going to talk if you’re yelling at him like this?” the man continued.

Ayn breathed hard a few times, and then he pushed himself up with a huff. He didn’t offer Xavier a hand, but Marcus hurried to do that instead. All right, he could take an offered hand at this point. He got to his feet and murmured a short thanks to Marcus, who just nodded and moved away. The guy was probably curious about what was going on, too, but he was decent enough to stay a little apart, yet still within earshot.

“So?” Ayn made an exasperated gesture with one arm. “Care to enlighten me, Xav? What the fuck did I do? Couldn’t you just say you didn’t like it or something? You had to run away?”

“You did nothing wrong,” Xavier spoke.

That earned him a somewhat doubtful look from Ayn. Marcus was pretending he needed to clean his fingernails with the tip of his knife.

“It’s this,” Xavier raised his hand and showed them the pulsing light on the bracelet.

This time, Marcus seemed to forget about his weird hygiene habits. He was staring at Xavier’s bracelet, just as dumbfounded as Ayn.

“The fuck is that?” Marcus asked roughly.

Ayn looked away guiltily.

“What the fuck is that, Your Majesty?” Marcus trained his attention on Xavier, after throwing a furtive look in Ayn’s direction.

“This is a special device that, once this little grey light turns green, will pinpoint my location with 97.8% accuracy,” he offered promptly.

“Fuck me sideways,” Marcus murmured. “And what the fuck are you doing? Just take it off already! Who’s going to find you? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Ayn continued to remain silent. Marcus turned towards his friend.

“You knew about this? Does your so-called lover have an army on his tail right now, coming to take him home? It’s not my place to say, Ayn, but right now, stop thinking with your fucking dick. That’s our death warrant, right there,” he pointed at Xavier’s hand.

Ayn looked down and shook his head.

“I should just leave both of you, fucktards, here in the fucking desert,” Marcus continued, “to let the coyotes eat your corpses.”

“Be my guest,” Ayn said aggressively. “I’m not letting Xav go. Go the fuck back already.”

Xavier felt the need to intervene.

“Marcus, I meant no harm to you or your home. And I don’t mean it now either. All I want is to get as far away from Haven as I can so that I’m not found in your vicinity at all.”

“Without asking me if I’m okay with it?” Ayn began shouting again, his anger refueled by Xavier’s words.

“You are not okay with it,” Xavier said matter-of-factly.

“His Majesty is right,” Marcus spoke.

“Shut the fuck up, Marcus,” Ayn spat. “Of course I’m not okay with it. You’re my fucking partner, or have you forgotten already? Really, Xav, you’re a piece of work.”

Xavier’s mind was working in overdrive. He needed Ayn and Marcus as far away from him as they could be. And all this chatting was not helping. So he decided to lie.

“Actually, Ayn, I have begun to get bored lately,” he spoke, hoping his voice was not trembling and giving him away.

“No shit,” Ayn glared. “You didn’t seem bored yesterday night when I fucked your brains out three times in a row. You were calling my name like I was your God or something.”

Xavier closed his eyes for a second. It was not fair to be remembered why it mattered so damn much to drive this impossible and beautiful man away from him.

“Well, people change,” he shrugged, but, even to his ears, he didn’t seem too convincing.

“Not overnight,” Ayn cut him short.

“Lovebirds, the clock is ticking,” Marcus spoke. “Don’t be fucking blind, Ayn. The man wants to save your ass. And the rest of us, although he probably thinks we’re worse than muck on his shoes.”

“I do not think that,” Xavier said, hoping that his affronted voice sounded genuine enough. It was the truth, but he knew that making people like Marcus believe he was honest was a long shot.

“And you, stop lying,” Marcus pointed the finger at him. “Breaking your man’s heart more than you already did won’t make things better.”

Xavier opened his mouth to say something, but he frowned and decided against protesting.

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt or worse.”

“So just take the damn bracelet off and let’s bury it somewhere,” Marcus offered the solution that seemed so obvious and right in front of their eyes at the moment.

“Impossible. I cannot take it off. The only thing I can do is this. Leaving and getting as far away from you as I can.”

“No fucking way,” Ayn said through his teeth. “Do you have some cutters, Marcus?”

“The van is full of them; I was just going to trade them.”

“Let’s just try getting the damn thing off Xav.”

Marcus nodded and headed for the van. That left Xavier and Ayn alone, with an awkward silence stretching between them.

“You’re wasting your time,” Xavier spoke first.

“We’ll see about that,” Ayn said darkly. “Honestly, I thought you kept to that bracelet because you were homesick or something.”

“I’m not homesick. I wish the bracelet didn’t exist. And that I didn’t have to leave,” Xavier began to explain.

Ayn shifted from one foot to another.

“You mean it?”

“Yes, I mean it,” Xavier confirmed.

“And what you said earlier? A lie? Like Marcus said?”

“Yes,” Xavier confirmed again.

Ayn just nodded, more to himself.

“Ayn,” Xavier spoke softly. “I need to leave. I didn’t tell you because I was certain I would not be able to leave after talking to you about it. I will put all of you in danger.”

“No, you won’t,” Ayn said stubbornly.

“You cannot know that,” Xavier sighed.

Ayn closed in the distance between them and grabbed Xavier by the lapels of his jacket. His eyes were burning again.

“How many times do I have to fuck you and tell you that I fucking love you to get it through your thick skull that you’re mine?” Ayn asked angrily.

Xavier wanted to close his eyes and run away, but it was not possible. He had nothing to say to that. If he were to talk, he was going to admit that all was true and he was just a coward who wanted to run back to Haven with Ayn, and hide under the blankets and ignore the entire world and its perils.

Marcus saved him by dropping to the ground a few power tools. Xavier eyed them warily.

“Well, let’s get to work,” Marcus spoke, with a small frown.

The man might have looked like a brute, but he knew to read the situation right. Now was not a good time for sentimentalisms.

“This is our library,” Tora pointed some chairs next to a table so that Edgar and Cory could sit.

“So many old books,” Edgar ignored the old woman’s offer to rest and began caressing the manuscripts laid on another, larger, table.

“A man of letters,” Tora said with a small smile. “I do not yet know who you are, but since you’re accompanying her son, you must be a good man.”

Cory could not believe Edgar was blushing. Maybe he had not been praised too often in his life.

“I am a scientist,” Edgar coughed to hide his embarrassment. “I am afraid that letters, while seductive as they are, are a luxury I cannot afford.”

“By custom and attire, a scientist, of course,” Tora confirmed. “But these eyes,” she smiled again and touched Edgar’s cheek with her rickety hand, “they are filled

with a hunger for knowledge. Knowledge only the letters can now feed. Please, child, peruse these old works to your heart's content."

"Aren't we here to talk about her?" Cory intervened, hoping he didn't sound too rude.

There was hunger in him, too, yet not for knowledge, or not only. He could feel almost a physical pull to those old papers, to read them at once, and learn who The One was.

"Impatient?" Tora turned his attention on him. "Yes, she was, too."

"The main attribute of godliness shouldn't be perfection?" Edgar expressed his curiosity right away.

"Alas, is this what you know?" the old woman asked.

"Just something I gathered from the old books Hector left in my home, for me to read. To expand my horizons, he said."

"Ah, Hector. Where would we all be without him?" Tora sounded reverent and nostalgic at the same time. "But you are here to learn about her. To answer your question, young scientist from Aeria, she is perfection and flaw, in one. Just like her children," her watery eyes trained on Cory, once more. "The beginning is here," she gestured to the shelves, loaded up the ceiling.

"It looks like a lot of reading," Cory headed for one of the shelves and just pulled one book at random.

"Your enthusiasm is much appreciated. I will let you to it. In a few hours time, we will have dinner. Don't forget," the woman said. "Until a proper meal, enjoy these modest refreshments," the woman pointed at a tray with a water pitcher and a few neatly arranged sandwiches on it.

The rustling of papers soon replaced the swooshing noise of her clothes on the polished floor.

"Do you think we're still running high on whatever the sublimation machine did to us?" Cory questioned. "I mean, are the effects permanent or something?"

“Tora said that there are still a few hours until dinner so that we can focus on research for now. Although I must say that I would not say ‘no’ to some food in my stomach as of right now. All this adventure seems to do wonders for one’s appetite,” Edgar joked and reached for the food on the tray.

“I want to learn and fast. I need to know who she is. This ... what I feel, seems ... overwhelming. I can’t even think about food until I discover what she should mean to me,” Cory mumbled.

Edgar’s face fell a little, only to brighten up seconds later.

“Well, then let’s just get started, my friend. Busy minds are happy minds.”

“I’m certain that it should be busy hands are happy hands,” Cory said with a small chuckle.

“Whatever works for you, my friend,” Edgar took his place at the table. “Whatever works.”

Lucas was hunched over the old table in his study, picking the same crack in the wood that had become his best friend as of late.

“Lord Lucas,” the new servant he had been forced to employ, brought his train of thought to a halt.

Lucas ground his teeth, just a fraction, feeling the tiny flexion of muscle ticking in his jaw. He wore a perfect perfunctory smile, as he raised his eyes to look at the servant.

“One of our master Trainers is here to see you,” the servant spoke.

If the young man suspected any change in his master’s behavior, he did a great job not to show it. His symmetric features remained serene while waiting for Lucas to speak.

A Trainer? In his own home? Trainers were not known to make house calls. But it was not like he could dismiss the unwanted visitor.

“Please, see him in,” Lucas spoke, schooling his face into a neutral demeanor.

The grey shape moved inside the room, a few seconds later. It was like the temperature had just dropped several degrees. It reminded Lucas of the morgue in Aeria. Unlike in Drena, where death was considered an unpleasant business, and hidden from view, in Aeria, he had seen dead people. The Trainers brought death with them, he thought idly, and the sudden realization almost made him twist his face into a grimace. How come he had not thought of this before?

“Father,” he spoke, hoping that his willingness to please was not a tad too much.

He stood up to pay the proper respect to his visitor. The Trainer seemed pleased. It was strange how none of them had names. This one could be any of his brothers. Lucas could not be able to tell. Except for the Head Trainer, who seemed more sinister than the rest, no one could be individualized in any way. This was not a random event, a whim expressed by one of the Trainers. The steady hand keeping its grip upon the world was reaching for him, in his own home. Lucas had every reason to fear, but he chose to remain calm. It was getting easier and easier to let go of his emotions. They were nothing but fireflies roaming at his peripheral vision at this point.

“I am here to see your progress,” the Trainer spoke.

“What do you mean?” Lucas inquired.

“You have gone through a complicated retraining process. You are our charge. You are in our care. With our most important plan soon to be in motion, we need to make sure that our First Ruler is dedicated to the cause, body, and soul.”

Lucas squared his shoulders and chose to remain silent. It was unnerving to stare into those large grey orbs and rein in a natural response of disgust, settled deep inside his guts.

“Give me your hand, son,” the Trainer extended one hand.

Lucas could not allow himself to hesitate and offered his hand, as well. The rough, papery hand of the Trainer grabbed his. Fingers curled and twisted like an old tree branch began mapping the inside of his palm, creeping upwards, until they circled Lucas’s wrist.

The temptation to pull his hand free was almost too intense.

“We know what you did. Your temporary moment of weakness,” the Trainer spoke. “The servant.”

“What of him? He’s dead.”

“You don’t believe it. I feel it in your blood,” the Trainer squeezed Lucas’s wrist.

Lucas curled his hand into a fist, trying to force the old bones to let him go. But for a man as old as him, the Trainer seemed to have no issue with keeping his hold on Lucas’s wrist.

“I am a changed man. Fleeting emotions do not affect me anymore.”

“What if I told you, Cory, the servant, hadn’t died in the mines?” the Trainer tried to throw him off balance.

And almost succeeded. Lucas swayed but quickly regained his control.

“Not so fast, child. I did not say he survived.”

Lucas could feel the ill omen radiating from the hooded figure. No, he was not going to believe their lies.

“See, Lucas,” the grey shape uttered with something akin to affection in his voice, “we know all about your elaborate plan to send your dear servant to your friends in Aeria.”

Lucas frowned, for a brief moment.

“Ah,” the Trainer spoke, “forgive me. A small slight on my part. I did not mean to say friends, but a friend. Edgar, isn’t that the name? Quite a promising mind. In his prime, but with too many visits paid to the sublimation machine, to survive long past his most productive years. Is my description accurate enough?”

Lucas was fighting himself now.

“Don’t fight it, Lucas,” the Trainer raised his other hand to caress Lucas’s forehead. “Let it all out. The injustice of it. One cannot place his faith in fate. So cruel. You already know what happened, without me saying anything. Edgar and Cory are both dead. Do you feel guilty? You shouldn’t, child.”

Lucas could feel his heart beating, was hearing its pounding in his ears.

“Do you want to hear about how they went?” the Trainer continued.

“I would rather not,” Lucas barely muttered. “It would be bad taste on my part to ask for such a thing, and a waste of time on your part, Father. You must be busy.”

“But I must oblige. Not your plea, as you refuse to say it, but my fundamental need to come to your aid. You see, your friend Edgar built, without our knowledge, an interesting contraption in his backyard. He took Cory with him and soared into the sky.”

Lucas stared at the Trainer in disbelief.

“So they didn’t die?” he forced his voice to sound neutral.

“They were swallowed by the desert. They were traveling west. And west of Aeria, there is nothing but ...”

“Tresalt,” Lucas spoke.

“No man has ever entered Tresalt. Maybe the desert got to them. Maybe they died of thirst first, went mad with it. They must be nothing but bones now.”

Lucas tried to recoil from the Trainer’s touch, but he felt paralyzed. He blinked a few times, trying to chase away the nasty sensation of having something stuck into his eyes.

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked, his willingness to fight growing thinner by the second.

“Punishment is love, son. A truth that must be reinforced on any given occasion.”

“I paid my dues,” Lucas said sharply. “There is no need to hear of such things. They are of no consequence for me.”

“Are you that certain?” the Trainer scanned Lucas’s face with his dead eyes.

“My mind and body are at your service, Father,” Lucas spoke.

“What is your current servant’s name?” the Trainer changed the subject all of a sudden.

“My servant’s name?” Lucas frowned. “I have no idea, and it does not matter.”

“So how do you call him?”

“I don’t call him. He does not need such a thing. He already knows his way around this house better than I do.”

“Servant, come here,” the Trainer spoke.

To Lucas’s surprise, his new servant emerged from the shadows and stood one foot away from them, waiting for orders.

“Take good care of your master. We need the First Ruler ... To be fit to rule. Do you think you can handle this noble task?”

The servant bowed.

“Yes, Master Trainer.”

Lucas looked at the exchange in front of him, feeling that there was something amiss. Trainers never visited anyone. They could summon him at any given moment. They could have the world. But they could never have his heart.

“I must leave you now, child,” the Trainer turned his attention on him again. “Don’t let the news about Cory and Edgar affect you.”

“Why?” Lucas asked the bitterness in his mouth too much to handle.

“We need you,” the Trainer smiled, showing sharp, yellow teeth. “When you are needed, there is responsibility weighing on your shoulders.”

Lucas shrugged.

“As I said, I am here. At your service,” he said every word like it was forced out of his mouth with pliers.

The Trainer’s smile grew wider and more sinister.

“Servant, I place your Master in your care,” the Trainer addressed the servant again, but without tearing his watery eyes away from Lucas.

“Yes, Master Trainer,” the servant took another bow.

Lucas stared blankly in front of him, for long minutes after the Trainer was gone. He barely noticed the young servant placing a cup of steaming tea in front of him. Only when he felt the servant's hand on his cheek, armed with a tissue, he came to his senses.

“What are you doing?” he grabbed the servant's wrist with one hand.

“I am taking care of you, Master,” the servant spoke in the same even tone, without blinking.

“Did I ask you for such a thing? Don't touch me, let me be!” Lucas lashed out.

“My purpose is to serve. Master Trainer was clear.”

“Get out of my face!” he pushed the servant away.

The young man moved, but no emotion showed on his serene face. He just bowed and withdrew. Lucas was breathing heavily by the time his servant was gone from the room. Burying his face into his palms, he let the darkness growing inside take him.

“Fuck,” Ayn expressed his frustration after the blade slid on the metal for the umpteenth time.

Marcus wiped the sweat on his forehead with the back of his head. The man's face was all a frown.

“As you can see,” Xavier said with a sigh. “I do not wish to say I told you so, but, well, you cannot deny the facts. The bracelet is indestructible.”

“Yeah, well, you don't have to be a jerk about it,” Ayn kicked one small rock in frustration, projecting it a few feet away.

The sun was getting unbearable. Xavier could feel his shirt gluing to his back. Marcus ground his teeth and picked up another power tool from the pile growing bigger and bigger next to him. Xavier caught the man's arm.

“This is enough,” he said quietly.

“Are you sure, Your Majesty?” Marcus’s voice was grim.

“I have already accepted my faith.”

“Like hell!” Ayn spat. “I haven’t, okay? Fucking asshole!”

Marcus pushed Ayn away, as the young man was trying to reach for Xavier again.

“So, what will it be, Your Majesty?” Marcus asked while barring Ayn with one arm from moving forward.

“Well, I suggest you two return to Haven. I will ... just walk, as far away from here as it is possible. I have already lost too much time with your futile attempts with the bracelet.”

Xavier could hear Ayn’s ragged breathing. The young man looked like he was about to do something stupid.

“So, that’s it? No other way?” Marcus asked.

Xavier shook his head.

“Is that thing still going to work once you take it off?” Marcus questioned again.

“There is no way of saying, it has never been off my wrist.”

“But if we do take it out, and bury it, or throw it somewhere away from here, it would be all right, wouldn’t it?” Marcus continued.

“What if is a dangerous pattern of thinking. It is the opposite of reality,” Xavier said in a calm voice.

He was stalling. He should have been on his way by now. But he was here, still trying not to look at Ayn, still trying to let go, but to no avail.

“We cannot take the bracelet off,” Marcus said matter-of-factly. “But it’s not like it’s glued to you or anything.”

Xavier frowned. Ayn’s heavy breathing was now suspended like the man was not breathing at all.

“You’re going to die out there, right?” Marcus gestured towards the desert stretching in front of them.

“Without a doubt,” Xavier confirmed, his mind kicking into gear.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Marcus?” Ayn broke himself free from his friend’s hold.

Xavier looked straight at Marcus, and the man smiled at the flicker of recognition that must have lit the eyes of the former First Ruler of Drena.

“His Majesty knows what I’m talking about,” Marcus grinned. “Right, Your Majesty?”

“Confirmed,” Xavier nodded.

Ayn’s eyes were wild as they moved between the two other men.

“No, no, no, no fucking way! You can’t be fucking serious!” he yelled.

“So you prefer to send him to die out there, in the desert?” Marcus looked at Ayn.

“I won’t kill him myself, you fucking scumbag!” Ayn growled.

“Watch that fucking mouth, Ayn,” Marcus growled back. “I’m offering you two lovebirds here a chance. And it ain’t that slim. I know what I’m doing. Stop being an idiot and grab the torch from the van. It’s under the seat. Bring that bottle of booze, too. We’re going to need it.”

Ayn walked away, almost stumbling on his own feet. Xavier was calm as he looked at Marcus.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” Xavier questioned, as soon as Ayn was out of earshot.

“Yeah. You don’t get caught in the crossfire as many times as I have, without having to go through stuff like this,” Marcus spoke.

“All right, then. I count on your expertise.”

“I must give you points for being so cool about it, Your Majesty. Should I be on your end, I’d shit my pants,” Marcus said with a small smile.

“It’s a good thing for your personal hygiene, then, that you’re not on my end,” Xavier replied with a small smile.

“You care about the punk, don’t you?” Marcus looked in the distance, at Ayn slowly making his way back.

“As I only care about myself. Or more. I am not certain.”

“Well, you better be certain, Your Majesty, because it’s for his sake that we’re going to cut you a little. It will only be the thumb and what’s around it, but it will still hurt like hell.”

“No need to remind me. But I haven’t thought of this solution, so I must thank you.”

“Well, your gratitude is well received. It will make up for all the names you’re going to call me later when I have done the job.”

“It’s all deserved. You are an ... interesting man, Marcus,” Xavier said.

Marcus made a small curtsy.

“Here,” Ayn interrupted them, by throwing the torch on the ground.

“Well, no moment like the present. Feed your loved one some booze. It’s better if he’s not entirely conscious while I do this.”

Ayn had a somber look on his face as he handed Xavier the bottle.

“I think it’s better to keep it to disinfect the wound,” Xavier refused it. “I will need it later.”

Marcus shrugged.

“Don’t let this one go, Ayn,” he patted his friend on the back. “He has balls of steel. Now keep him down, because he’s going to thrash a lot. And keep the booze close. He’ll need it.”

Xavier lay flat on his back, allowing Ayn to straddle him and keep his arms immobilized. He could feel Marcus moving about, and he almost jolted when the man grabbed his wrist.

“Easy there, your Majesty. I’m going to be as fast as I can. Then we’ll seal the opening quickly with the torch, and you’ll be as good as new.”

“Minus one thumb,” Xavier mumbled.

“The things we do for love,” Marcus sighed.

“Stop joking, asshole,” Ayn spat.

“He’s just trying to lighten up the mood,” Xavier explained before Marcus could say anything.

“Thanks, Your Majesty,” Marcus replied.

Xavier was about to say the perfunctory ‘you’re welcome’, when a sharp pain shot up his arm, straight to the end of his spine, at the confluence with his skull. He felt his eyes rolling in his head, and through a haze, he felt Ayn struggling to open his mouth and pull his tongue out.

It all lasted seconds. The pain suddenly disappeared, and he blinked.

“What the fuck is this?” Marcus’s voice was sharp and loud.

Ayn moved to look, and Xavier pushed him away.

On the ground, his severed thumb was making a small whirring sound. He looked closer. There was blood, but somewhere else, too. Xavier raised his arm and looked at the metal loose ends hanging from the open wound in his hand.

“What the fuck are you, motherfucker?” Marcus suddenly pulled out a gun and pointed it at Xavier.

Chapter Nineteen

He wasn't in shock. There was pain radiating from the point where the metal ends were hanging, and he could hear his heartbeat resonating in his ears.

"Marcus, what the fuck, man?" Ayn was the first to react.

Ayn pushed Marcus away, and grabbed the man's hand, forcing him to lower the weapon. As expected, Marcus pushed back, trying to hold Xavier at gunpoint.

"He's a fucking freak, Ayn! Let me put a hole through that metal head!"

"No fucking way!"

"Stop it!" Xavier intervened.

The two other men turned to look at him, Ayn's hands still on Marcus's wrist, fighting him, the other fighting him back.

"I'm still bleeding," he pointed out, raising his hand.

Ayn let go of Marcus and grabbed the torch from the ground. He didn't look at Xavier at all while directing the blaze over the open wound. Xavier grunted and thrashed despite his effort to remain cool. He was breathing heavily, and the smell of burnt flesh was making him sick to the stomach.

"He bleeds like a man," Ayn pointed at Xavier, as he stood up, and looked at Marcus.

"Then what is that shit? Could you tell us what the fuck you are?" Marcus had no qualms about turning to look at Xavier.

At least, the man no longer seemed that murderous, lowering his gun and just watching Xavier with a deep frown on his face.

"It may come as a surprise to you, but I do not know the answer to this question. These modifications have occurred without my knowledge," Xavier spoke with difficulty.

"How can you tell you're not going to kill us all? I'm sure you can break our necks, like this," Marcus made a hand gesture to emphasize his words.

“I doubt it,” Xavier replied. “Ayn can overpower me, and I doubt he is stronger than you.”

Marcus shook his head, his frown deepening.

“I don’t believe you. Your word is horseshit.”

“It’s true,” Ayn mumbled. “I can take Xav if need be.”

“I am not going to turn against you. Do you have anything in those skulls that might resemble brains?” Xav shook away Ayn’s hand still resting on his wrist. “But please, do not let me keep you. The both of you. I will take the bracelet with me and be out of your hair right away.”

He stood up. There was a small, rhythmic throb in his hand. It was going to get infected, most probably. They had forgotten to pour some whiskey on it. But it didn’t matter, anyway. His lifespan didn’t look any longer now from before.

“The fuck you will!” Marcus said through his teeth. “We’ll take that thing and throw it somewhere away from here. And you? We’ll just fucking kill you.”

Xavier sighed.

“Should I want you dead, I would say ‘fine by me’. But, regardless of what you might think of all this, I still think it would be for the best that you two won’t stay anywhere near me. Unless you want a death warrant and a bounty on your heads.”

“No one is killing anyone,” Ayn intervened sharply.

“Like fuck not!” Marcus protested. “Ayn, listen to me, moron. This is not your sweetheart,” he pointed the finger at Xavier. “He’s some fucking machine, and he will fucking kill us in our sleep.”

“So why hasn’t he?” Ayn batted his friend’s hand away from his face. “He could have done it countless times by now.”

“Beats me! How should I know what freaks as this one think? I bet he has a plan!”

“The only plan I have is to start walking,” Xavier spoke.

True to his word, he stood up and picked the bracelet from the ground with the only hand he had whole now. The greyish light was still there, but it was getting fainter and fainter by the second. That was a good sign. Probably there had been a magnetic impulse between the metallic structure enveloping his bones and the device. With it gone, there was a chance for the device to lose its power.

He started walking away, his decision taken. But strong arms reached him from behind, pulling him into a strong hug.

“I said that you’re not going,” Ayn spoke, his voice pained and soft.

“Ayn,” Xavier warned. “Go back to Haven. Forget everything.”

“No way,” Ayn said stubbornly.

“Marcus,” Xavier called. “Please take Ayn away. As you can see, I cannot break myself free from him, especially now with this bloody pain in my arm.”

“No, you’re coming with us,” Marcus replied. “I know the perfect place to throw that wristband away. And we could throw you there, too. No one will find you.”

“Stop speaking shit, Marcus!” Ayn shouted, but he didn’t let go of Xavier.

“Ayn, you stop with the bullshit! This guy’s bad news. Don’t worry; I’ll let you kill him.”

“Like hell I will!” Ayn shouted again.

Xavier set his jaw.

“You are doing nothing but endangering yourselves. Go back now. Marcus, be at least the one reasonable. Take Ayn and go.”

“No, I need to see you dead, motherfucker,” Marcus spat. “I don’t trust you.”

“And you have no reason to. Fine, let’s go to this perfect resting place for me,” Xavier decided to comply. “Ayn, let’s go.”

“No way! No one is killing no one! Do you hear me, Marcus? Or do you want to kill me, too?” Ayn finally let go of Xavier to turn and face Marcus.

“Don’t make me. Are you insane? Dude’s some kind of robot! Do you think he cares about you?” Marcus gestured wildly, his gun still in his hand.

“He does, or else he wouldn’t have left in the first place, moron. And he’s not a fucking robot!”

“Then why the fuck is he made of metal?” Marcus yelled.

“I am not made of metal,” Xavier protested.

The throbbing in his arm was intensifying, and the pain was making his stomach clench. He dropped to his knees.

“Xav, what the fuck?” Ayn asked, alarmed.

The world went black.

He woke up to the monotonous sound of the vehicle engine. For seconds, he didn’t open his eyes. This way, he could listen to the conversation taking place between Ayn and Marcus.

“Do you vouch for him, then?” Marcus’s voice was apprehensive and tired.

“Of course I do. How long have we known each other, Marcus?” Ayn was aggressive, but Xavier could read impatience and fear in his man’s voice, as well.

“I must be fucking mad,” Marcus murmured. “If it were just me at stake, I’d say, ‘yeah, why the hell not, let’s see how I fare going against a robot’, but you know, Ayn, that it’s not just me. Think of all the people back home. If some shit goes down, they’ll pay the price.”

“I know Xav,” Ayn said stubbornly. “He left that shitty city of his with me, and not because I forced him. He could sound that fucking alarm and have me executed, like that,” he snapped his fingers.

“You do think that thing loves you or something,” Marcus sighed.

“He isn’t a thing. He’s flesh and blood. I know he is. He is the guy I love,” Ayn said with determination.

“All right, I am a complete idiot for trusting you with this.”

“Come on, man, why would he have let you cut his thumb if he knew he was going to expose himself? He doesn’t know why he’s like this.”

“Yeah, and we don’t know what he’s capable of. What if he has one of those machines in his brain that’ll tell him to kill everyone?”

Ayn grunted in response. Xavier decided that it was time for him to intervene.

“I highly doubt it.”

Marcus didn’t turn to look at him, busy tending the wheel. But Ayn did. Xavier wasn’t sure he could face all the questions in those dark eyes. But he could reply to a few from Marcus.

“What makes you say that, Your Majesty?”

Good, the man was back to calling him annoying nicknames. That was a good sign.

“There would have been no need for the bracelet, should I have had a neural implant,” he replied promptly.

“I don’t think I understood all the words you said,” Marcus shot back.

“These modifications I have, they may not be extensive. There was still a need for an external device. And by the way the signal seems to fade, it needed to be close to me. Take a look at the bracelet, Ayn.”

“It looks dead,” Ayn grabbed the thing from the dashboard and showed it to Xavier.

“See? The proof is in front of your eyes. But still, Ayn, I believe that Marcus has a point. It is best if you don’t let me live.”

He could not believe his ears, but his decision could not be shaken. Not by Ayn’s dark eyes filled with hurt. Not by the hands that were now reaching for him.

“Your Majesty,” Marcus sighed, “your boyfriend here, unfortunately, is deep under my skin. So Gods forgive me if I’m making a huge mistake here, but after we throw this thing away, you’re coming back with us to Haven.”

“Marcus,” Xavier tried to reason with the man. “Hear me out.”

“No, I’m done with talking. And I already cut you once. I spilled your blood. That’s enough for me. Should be.”

“Now I am the one who fails to understand your logic.”

“Don’t bother,” Marcus raised one hand and waved. “Your partner thinks you’re human. You say you have no idea you were modified. And you two seem so in love that it’s stupid. Who am I to go against that? But, make sure you understand this one right. The moment I notice you putting us in danger, I’ll fucking kill you, no matter what your boyfriend says.”

“Fair enough,” Xavier replied.

He got to one side and grunted.

“This thing fucking hurts like hell,” he mumbled. “Do you still have that booze?”

“Look at His Majesty. He even knows dirty words. Hit the man with some medicine, Ayn. And stop staring at me like you found God or something.”

“I owe you everything, Marcus,” Ayn patted Marcus on the back.

Xavier was thankful when Ayn cradled him in his arms and helped him drink some of Marcus’s liquor.

“This stuff tastes like gasoline,” he grimaced but took another mouthful.

The burn in his blood was doing him good.

“Who says it isn’t?” Marcus joked.

“We need something more than this for the infection,” Ayn spoke. “I don’t like how this hand looks.”

Marcus threw a look behind.

“Shit.”

“Yes,” Ayn confirmed.

“You should draw some blood from the area,” Xavier offered.

“Yeah, that will help,” Marcus confirmed. “It’s bad blood there.”

“More cutting?” Ayn asked.

Xavier captured Ayn’s hand with his free one.

“It will prevent the infection from spreading, trust me on this. I will show you where to cut.”

“Okay,” Ayn nodded.

“Are you going to make a mess in my luxurious vehicle?” Marcus joked.

“Fuck you, man,” Ayn said back, but there was no more bite in his bark this time.

Somehow, the two men had reached an understanding. Xavier could not say it was a good or a bad thing. But one part of him, the egotistical one, the one that yearned for Ayn’s love, was tipping the balance hard.

“So, what are we going to do now?” Edgar tried to get his attention.

Cory could barely draw his eyes away from the book he had brought with him to dinner. He could feel the women’s eyes on him from all sides, but he was trying to ignore them. It was normal for them not to trust them. They were men, after all. He had to say that it was unnerving for him too, to be surrounded by so many females, and it was only so much he could do not to stare. In Aeria, the women had been so wrapped up in their strange clothes and were talking just about scientific topics that he hadn’t felt that uneasy. But here, many of the women, especially the young ones, had lost their hoods to show off their flowing hair and fresh faces. So he was trying hard to focus on reading. The fact that Edgar was pestering him wasn’t exactly helping.

“I suppose we should just read some more,” he whispered, aware of the way some of the others were trying to pretend not to be interested. “And I thought you were hungry.”

“The food here appears to be quite filling. I don’t think I am capable of taking another bite. Frankly, I think we should talk to Tora again.”

“Why are you so impatient?” Cory finally decided to look at Edgar.

The man looked a bit pale, and he was adjusting his collar over and over again. What could make Edgar so uncomfortable? He risked a look around and understood right away. Some of the women were giggling and pointing at them. While Cory had done a fine job ignoring them, poor Edgar hadn’t been that strong.

“You have women in Aeria,” Cory tried to point out, leaning over the table.

At least, they had been allowed a small private table, so, if they managed to speak quietly, no one could understand them.

“Yes, we do, but never before have I ...” Edgar began but stopped mid-sentence.

“Go on,” Cory tried to encourage his friend to speak.

“Well,” the other exhaled, “never again have I been the subject of so much interest from the fairer sex.”

“Ah,” Cory managed. “What about Lena?”

“You’re not helping,” Edgar glared.

“Why should you be so bothered? And they’re staring at us, not particularly at you,” Cory tried to reason with the Aerian scientist.

For a man who was supposed to be extremely rational, Edgar seemed to be quite an emotional mess at the moment.

“Again, Cory, this is not helpful. What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to act? What if I do something that is objectionable?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know,” Edgar complained. “Let’s just go.”

“All right,” Cory understood his friend’s predicament and closed his book.

Maybe it was not such a bad idea to talk to Tora after all.

The old woman was sitting behind a wooden desk that looked like it was sharing her age, and there was a musty smell, of ancient books, all around, more overpowering than it had been at Edgar's house, in Aeria.

Tora was accompanied by that young woman, Diane was her name if he remembered correctly. They were both perusing some papers and were engaged in hushed conversation. Diane's young face was scrunched up in thought, and she was carefully listening to what Tora was telling her.

"We're sorry to bother you," Cory began.

"Not at all," Tora waved and gestured for them to sit on a long wooden bench that seemed to be siblings to the old desk. "Diane and I were just talking about the next step of your journey."

"The next step of our journey?" Cory repeated, unsure he understood Tora's words right.

"Oh, thank you, thank you," Edgar mumbled next to him, and Cory elbowed him quickly.

"Too bad you have to leave so soon," Diane spoke and giggled, her attention trained on Edgar more than on Cory.

It was clear as day that the young woman found great pleasure in tormenting the poor man. Cory just squeezed Edgar's hand in sympathy.

Tora began speaking again.

"You needed the rest, and if it were solely after me, I would keep you here with me a lot longer."

"And we would have been so happy to have you," Diane spoke, earning a stern look from Tora. "With all due respect, mother, but look at how cute they are. You can't expect us not to talk. And make plans."

"Plans? What about?" Cory asked.

Diane's mischievous eyes set on him this time.

“For making babies, of course.”

“Babies?” Edgar exclaimed. “Well, I do understand why Cory, but what could I possibly offer concerning genetic material? And do you have one of the Trainers’ reproduction facilities here?”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Diane snorted. “First of all, you’re a scientist from Aeria. And you’re cute. Secondly, we prefer the old fashion way of reproduction,” she burst into laughter right away.

Edgar remained nonplused, while Cory averted his eyes, blushing. Poor Edgar didn't have it in him to protest anymore.

“Stop teasing the young men, Diane,” Tora finally intervened. “They have a nobler mission. Diane will take you to one of the settlements inhabited by free men. There you can start laying your groundwork.”

“But what work that might be?” Cory inquired.

“Recruiting manpower,” Tora explained.

“For what? We’re nothing but a former servant, and a scientist, both on the run. I don’t see how we will manage to convince these men ...”

“You will,” Tora cut him short and stood up with difficulty.

Diane hurried to help her. Tora rummaged for something in the folds of her black dress, and her gnarly hand came back with something that looked like a pendant. From up close, he noticed that the silver wires were making up the same symbol he had burned into his flesh.

“Those who pray, those who work, and those who fight,” Edgar spoke.

Tora nodded.

“It is up to you to unite them all.”

“So, I’m going to go searching for ... those who fight?” Cory asked, taking the pendant and wrapping its long chain around his hand.

“Yes. You know those who work. They are your friends back home, and you were once one of them. You have just met those who pray, here, so the only ones that remain for you to know are those who fight,” the old woman explained.

“How will I know ...” Cory hesitated. “How will I know how to make them join us?”

“You show them the pendant. We all do our part. You need to do yours. You were born for it.”

He wasn't so convinced. Everything seemed new.

“We need to fight them,” he spoke with determination, going against the feeling of anxiety nestling in his chest.

“Yes, we need to fight them. There, in the desert, The One is not forgotten. Your pendant will keep you safe and will bring you what you need to move forward.”

“Are you in danger?” Cory asked. “It feels like we are leaving you behind.”

“Don't worry about us, Cory,” Tora caressed his cheek and her glassy eyes filled with warmth. “We know what danger is. We live with it every day. They might think that they made us kneel, but as we knelt, we prayed. Our faith is not a whim, something they believe they let us have so that we obey. Our faith is the true power of this world. Help us unite those who believe.”

“Yes,” Cory said softly.

“Can I still have the scientist?” Diane interrupted.

Cory might have thought the young woman rude, but, by the way she hurried to take Tora to sit down again, he understood that they were overstaying their welcome.

“Well, when are we bound to leave?” he inquired.

“First thing in the morning,” Tora said.

“But what about the books? I've barely scratched the surface about ...” Cory protested, but his voice was low.

“One day, you will have the time to sit and read,” Tora said softly. “But now the time is ripe for action, not for old words on paper.”

“Will I ...” Cory stopped for a second. Was it the right thing to ask? “Will I ever see her again?”

“Don't you understand, child? She is you, and you are her.”

With those mysterious words, Tora gestured for Diane to see them to the door. Any answers he wanted to learn, he had to find them on his own.

Xavier looked down the empty well and then watched Marcus throw the bracelet into the darkness.

“Tempted to join that thing?” Marcus pressed one heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Not in particular,” he replied.

Marcus laughed.

“His Majesty knows a joke or two, it seems,” the man talked to Ayn, who was sitting a few steps away, in a crouched position, pretending to be taken with examining the way the grains of sand were flowing through his fingers, as he picked fist after fist full of them.

“Are we done? Can we get home?” Ayn asked, without raising his eyes.

The young man was troubled. Xavier could tell. He wished he could chase those troubles away, and it felt like such a thing was not in his power at all.

“Sure, let's hit the road,” Marcus agreed.

For the long, exhausting hours back to Heaven, everyone remained silent. Xavier could feel the pain in his hand, raw and intense. He was not a robot, and that meant that he could still die from an infection. Haven was not the best place to get medical attention. By the frown on Ayn's face, the guy knew it, too. Marcus was probably trying to deal with his thoughts, as well.

“How is it?” Ayn asked softly, placing a hand on his arm.

Xavier laid on his back, trying hard not to moan in pain. There was no point in scaring Ayn more, at this point.

“I'm as fine as I can be, seeing what I went through,” he tried to joke.

“That hand hurts like fuck, right?”

“It does. I'm afraid that we need to take more of it out.”

“You need medicine,” Ayn said flatly.

“Yes,” he confirmed.

“We cannot treat you here.”

“That's true. But don't worry. People are already suspicious, seeing my hand wrapped like this. I noticed their looks,” Xavier added, watching Ayn turn his head away. “Don't give them any more reason to suspect something is not right.”

“I won't watch you die,” Ayn said stubbornly.

“Then don't watch,” he replied. “You should have just killed me there, and threw me in that well. You're putting your life in danger for nothing.”

“It's not for nothing, asshole,” Ayn shouted.

When Ayn had been just a slave, his slave, suffering through everything that had entailed, he had never cried, if Xavier could still remember correctly. But right now, there was so much pain in the man's voice that Xavier found it unbearable.

“Consider this, Ayn. We had a good time together,” Xavier said.

Ayn made a small pained sound.

“We had,” Xavier insisted. “So I'm asking you this. Wipe your tears, look ahead, and survive. It's not much I'm asking.”

“You're such a bastard,” Ayn sniffled, his cheeks wet with tears. “You're asking me everything. I won't do it without you.”

“Stop speaking like this,” Xavier hoped his lover could see the truth.

“You stop speaking like this,” the young man shot back. “You don't have the right. As soon as Marcus is up, I'll go with him to find some medicine. Something that works.”

“Your head is clouded. I fear you might not be careful enough.”

“Oh, I'll be careful enough. I'll blast the fucking head of anyone who gets in my way,” Ayn spoke through his teeth.

“Hey, come here,” he stretched his good hand towards his lover.

Ayn linked his fingers with his, but he didn't move.

“I want you here,” he insisted.

Ayn finally came closer.

“Here,” he put his hand over his chest. “Come here and rest.”

Running his fingers slowly through Ayn's hair, Xavier drifted off to sleep. He knew he was going to wake up soon, due to the pain, but Ayn needed to rest, and the man's proximity was making him feel better and at peace, too.

Diane seemed a different person, in her new getup consisting of a jacket, pants, and boots the color of the desert and made from some rough material. She wore a helmet, too, as well as a large piece of eyewear that was covering half her face.

They had been given the same sort of clothes, although finding something to fit them well had been a bit of a challenge, seeing that everyone around was female. It was a good thing, after all, that he and Edgar were not exactly well-built, or that would have become a problem.

“I wish you guys could have stayed longer,” Diane chirped away happily. “We didn't even have enough time to show you where we raise the children.”

“Do you have children here? And the Trainers don't know about it?” Cory expressed his wonder.

“We know how to hide them. They're predictable in their routines, plus, it helps that they're so disgusted with us that they don't care for many visits.”

“But they did come to Aeria unannounced,” Edgar pointed out.

“When they came for you, right? Well, we're prepared for all sorts of situations,” Diane winked at the scientists, making Edgar look away in distress. “You're so shy for a guy who's into science. I thought there are no mysteries left for you to uncover,” she teased.

“I'm afraid there are plenty of mysteries I have not yet the pleasure to uncover, and the female of the species is one of them,” Edgar replied promptly, although he kept his eyes averted.

Diane guffawed.

“You're so much fun. I like you!” she exclaimed.

“He has a special someone,” Cory intervened, seeing his friend in trouble, as Diane seated behind the wheel of what looked like a truck, and patted the place next to her while staring intently at Edgar.

“Oh, you do?” Diane asked Edgar. “Boy or girl?”

“Well, Lena is a female,” Edgar tried to explain. “But our conversations used to be purely in the realm of the reasonable and the explainable.”

Diane's eyes traveled from Edgar to Cory.

“This Lena girl must hate Edgar right now,” she shook her head. “He surely didn't take one step to uncover her mysteries,” she added with an eye roll and ignited the engine.

“You're not fair,” Cory tried to side with his friend, but he could feel his lips twitching at Diane's shenanigans. “They have this machine in Aeria that robs you of your happiness if you ever feel something for someone.”

“Yeah, I heard,” Diane made a disgusted face. “Well, when you guys beat the Trainers, we will destroy that stupid machine, and Edgar will be able to do other things with Lena, besides interesting conversations.”

“I beg your pardon,” Edgar said with a small huff. “There can be no way I can ... debase Lena with ...” the man had a lot of trouble finding his own words.

“Is she pretty?” Diane asked, interrupting his mumbling.

“Lena? I ...”

“She is,” Cory offered. “Edgar is madly in love with her.”

“That clearly he is,” Diane grinned. “He can barely speak her name.”

“You two,” Edgar shook his head, but he began smiling, too. “You are having fun at my expense, right?”

“We definitely are,” Diane confirmed.

The machine started rolling.

“How do you know where we're going?” Cory wanted to know.

Diane pointed at the strange displays on the board.

“We have this baby to show us the way.”

“But where is it that you're taking us? Tora didn't say,” Cory fished for more information.

The pendant was heavy in his pocket.

“We'll drive to the nearest settlement where free men live. I can introduce you to a few people, but from there on out, it's up to you. I cannot be away for too long. The old lady needs me.”

“She does,” Cory murmured.

“Sometimes I feel like she has just postponed any rest, just so she could see you,” Diane spoke.

“I'm not sure why she thinks I'm so important.”

“Well, you're her son, I mean HER son,” Diane said with a bit of emphasis. “And not in a sense like we all are her children, but you're really hers. The One somehow managed to sneak you into this world, and there's just one reason for that.”

“How do you know so much? I mean, it must be old history.”

“It is,” Diane confirmed. “Sometimes I wish I had as much faith as Tora. But, I must admit, although I read the old words, and I sing them, and I pray them late at night, I ... don't feel the same way. It might all be just, you know, make-believe.”

“Does Tora know this is what you think?” Edgar questioned.

“No. It would break her heart. She has been a priestess all her life. Since she was a little girl. Her mother was one, too, and so was her grandmother. But she had no kids of her own. And she often joked saying that it was only one child she was expecting, and would all her life. It looks like her wait is over,” Diane looked over at Cory. “Don't disappoint her, okay?”

Cory nodded.

“I wish I could say that with more determination,” he spoke. “But I'm not a believer. I wish I were. I mean, it feels like there's hardly anything else I want more right now.”

“It will come to you,” Diane shrugged. “Tora says so. And even if I'm not that big a believer myself, and I cannot give you advice, I have to tell you something. This faith thing? It grows on you. It's like you're never alone at night. So it has to be real.”

“If you say so,” Cory looked down. “I wish Tora had let us take those books with us.”

“It's guns you'll need, not books,” Diane replied.

“I don't want to sound like the devil's advocate here,” Edgar spoke, “but, as Cory already said, we're not exactly warrior material.”

“It's not you who'll have to carry those weapons,” Diane explained. “I tell you this, though. You don't have to be a fighter to have the will to fight. And, seeing what

we're going up against, we'll need everyone. But, of course, it never hurts to have some real fighters on our side.”

“Will we find them in these settlements?” Cory questioned.

“The people living out there,” Diane gestured for the desert stretching in front of them, “they're survivors. Yes, they steal, and they cheat, and they brawl, but they're of the mold you need for what's ahead. And, while they might not be the most ardent believers, they have plenty of hate in their hearts. You'll have to play on that.”

Ayn woke up with the first rays of the sun. He looked at Xav for a few long minutes, taking in the man's breath. Xav was a strong motherfucker, but it was not like he could cheat that fucking thing, or go against it. Not without medicine, and that was something they didn't have there.

He moved slowly, to avoid waking up his lover. It was maybe a good thing that Xav could sleep. Ayn didn't like the pallor on the man's face, nor the way his arm twitched from time to time on the wounded side.

He had slept enough. Now it was time for action. Marcus had to help, but first, he needed to leave Xav in good hands.

Xavier could feel something cold and pleasant touching his forehead. With some difficulty, he managed to open his eyes.

“Hey, hey, look who's awake,” Myra appeared in his field of vision, smiling. “So, what happened?” she gestured towards his hand.

“What are you doing here?” Xav struggled to get up, taking the cold cloth from his forehead and throwing it away. “Who let you in? Where is Ayn?”

Myra huffed and went to collect the wet cloth from the corner where Xavier had thrown it. She mumbled something, but he could not precisely make what she was saying. Probably some unflattering words directed at him.

“Ayn has work to do,” Myra explained, as she threw the cloth into a trashcan and proceeded to collect another from a bag she had left on a chair. “You should be a good boy, rest and make yourself well,” she wagged the finger at him.

Xavier huffed in indignation.

“I cannot tolerate you. Please, be gone,” he spoke.

“Yeah, you wish,” Myra snorted. “Now tell me, Xav, is it women, in general, you don't tolerate, or do you have something against me in particular?”

He stared at her, hoping that his righteous annoyance was going to make the damn woman shut up. There was no such luck, it seemed. Myra's grin was only widening, getting on his nerves.

“You're so damn lucky he loves you,” Myra continued. “Or else ...” she left her threat hanging in the air.

“No, please, indulge me,” he pushed her hand away, as she tried to touch him again, and push him on the bed. “Tell me what I should expect from the likes of you.”

“I'll be damned,” Myra guffawed. “You're stupidly jealous! Of me!”

“You're misunderstanding,” he clenched his teeth, as Myra held his shoulder down, and fiddled with the cloth, dipping it in a small bucket, filled with water, placed on the nightstand.

“No shit,” she replied with satisfaction. “Well, seeing that you're sick, I won't take pleasure in tormenting you, although I feel so damn tempted. Ayn and I might go way back, but we're not an item, don't worry. Now, seriously, just lay nicely already, or I can't play nurse.”

“I doubt you can be of any help,” Xavier protested, but fighting the woman was too hard. For the moment, he was going to let her win. Plus, his throbbing temples felt a little better with the cold cloth on his forehead.

“Well, it looks like you're in deep shit,” Myra nodded, her eyes clouding for a second. “But don't worry,” she said brightly. “Ayn will find what's needed and get

it for you. All you have to do is to lie here, like a good boy, and let me take good care of you until you're better. How does that sound?"

"It looks like I don't have a word to say," Xavier turned his eyes away.

"Hmm, seeing how obnoxious you can be when you talk, maybe that's for the better," she replied.

Somehow that irked him.

"Then I won't stay silent. Maybe my obnoxiousness will convince you to leave me alone."

"Sure, and then let Ayn have my head. No, thanks. I think I have a really pretty head."

He stared at her, and she laughed.

"Xav, you're so much fun. Ayn should let others talk to you. You might be haughty and a bit annoying, but you're too handsome to frown all the time. C'mon, let me tell about this place."

"I'd rather not listen to your annoying voice," Xavier mumbled.

"Well, you have no choice. Now, I brought some food, but I don't know if you can keep it down."

She was watching him now with serious eyes. He could have used a bit of nourishment, so he made a gesture for Myra to bring the food.

It was weird to be helped out like that. He could not remember ever feeling ill, and he had always had servants to take care of him, so this was all new. But, from so up close, Myra didn't seem as dangerous as he thought her to be. There were fine lines around her bright eyes, and something in them was telling him Myra had seen plenty, despite still being a young woman.

The soup was filling his stomach, spreading a sensation of warmth, pleasant, and making him feel like he wanted to go back to sleep. And Myra began talking, in a soothing voice, her words falling, one after another, like beads on a string. She was talking about Haven, and he tried to focus, but soon enough, sleep took him.

Dion carefully pushed a few rebel strands under the helmet, and he watched with unease as Andreas was swinging his hips and flirting with the guards. The entrance to the mines was making him shiver; it gaped like a mouth, ready to swallow everything and everyone. The men walking through seemed all made of the same mold. They were tired, moving like in a trance, their faces as grey as the clothes they were.

He could not see John among them, but his man had left early in the morning. The guards seemed impressed with Andreas's charms, but not enough, and their eyes were still traveling towards the men pouring in, scouting them. They were younger than the miners, and maybe that position was giving them an advantage because they didn't seem to care that they were watching over people like them. There was a certain sense of superiority in how they held their hands resting on their weapons.

Dion could not remember ever seeing that kind of weapon in Drena. There, the higher-ups often indulged in collecting beautiful pieces, and some even liked the sport, so almost everything could be found, even some serious firepower. Antoine had once threatened him with one of the weapons in their master's arsenal, only to reveal later that there was no ammunition. While servants could acquire weapons for their masters, ammo was an entirely different thing, and even the Rulers had to justify ever firing a gun.

But he was pretty sure that the dark weapons carried casually by the guards were loaded. The men would not have looked so empowered if they hadn't been.

The crowd of miners going in was thinning. It was time for him to hurry, or else he was not going to make it. He looked over at Andreas, and it was like the guy could sense his distress, because he suddenly grabbed one of the guards and kissed him on his lips, making the others hoot.

Dion sprinted towards the gates and didn't throw one look toward Andreas. He was afraid for his new friend, but there, in the darkness, John was in danger.

“Hey, you,” he heard someone calling from behind, and he just sped up.

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder, and he turned slightly, feeling his knees on the point of giving in.

“You forgot this,” the miner who had stopped him spoke.

The man pushed a small pendant into his hand. Dion looked at the object and felt his fingers getting numb. The miner began walking, without looking at him again. He let the pendant drop to the ground, and brushed it with his foot, covering it with soot and dirt. The blood was returning to his fingers.

He hurried into the darkness.

Chapter Twenty

Ayn marched toward the man in charge of the local market with a purposeful stride.

“Hey, man,” he greeted the merchant, and the old man humphed instead of a reply. “I need some of the good stuff. Medicine, antiseptic, antibiotics, anything you have.”

It was the third settlement he was visiting, and he had to ignore the way his throat was getting tighter, just as his chest with each denial that the people had things like that in stock. Refusal would not have been a problem, seeing that he had good means of convincing people to give him what he wanted, but no one seemed to have what he needed.

“We’re keeping those,” the merchant made a small gesture like Ayn was dropped from the sky. “For the cause, as it seems,” the man added with a toothy grin. “They say we’ll get paid well. The fortunes in Drena are all for us,” the man said, raising his hands toward the sky, as if, at any moment, the said fortunes were starting to pour from above.

“Cause? What cause? Don’t piss me off, old man. I don’t have time for riddles. Any medicine you have, shell it all out, or I’ll do it. And trust me, if you’re thinking yourself pretty, you won’t be when I’m done with you.”

The man started laughing, a sound that soon lost itself in an ugly cough. Ayn could feel his muscles flexing on their own accord. He pulled out his knife and brought it swiftly to the man’s throat. The old sack of bones wasn’t laughing anymore, and he was watching Ayn warily.

“I swear,” he gulped. “They come, they take everything. It’s for the cause, they say. What do I know?”

“What cause are you talking about?” Ayn squeezed the man harder, making him yelp in distress.

“The cause, The One,” the man fretted a bit more. “They say we’re going to war. But what do they know? They stand no chance against the Trainers in the White City. They will be culled like harvest. They won’t even know what hit them.

They're stupid! And they took all my merchandise ... All, all, all, they left nothing! So go ask these warriors about your damn medicine and let me be!"

"Where are these guys?" Ayn shook the merchant one more time.

"Go to Nadaia's tent. You'll find them there, planning to take over the world," the man spat in disgust. "They convinced the youngsters, others stupid like you, but they won't convince me. The desert has nothing to give!"

Ayn pushed the man away and began walking again. Whoever these so-called warriors were, he was going to give them a piece of his mind and his shiv, if they dared not to give him what he needed to save his lover.

There were, indeed, a lot of people gathered in front of the local ruler's tent. The men living in the desert were as organized as they could be and remained free people. The ruler's role was to tell people how to schedule their raids, and to keep in touch with other settlements. So the fact that there was so much ruckus at that moment was strange indeed. Who were those warriors and what could they want?

Cory was sure that Tora was mistaken somehow. But that could not stop him from trying. Getting on his feet, he held the pendant the old woman had given him in one hand and raised it above his head so that everyone could see it.

"Good people, do you know what this is?" he called out.

There were whispers, and people started exchanging curious looks among themselves.

"You are part of it," he continued. "The people who are hard at work lose their lives digging under Drena, in factories all across the coast. Those who keep our Mother's memory alive are held as cattle and forced into the most abject shape of slavery. But they are not dead! They are waiting!"

"Waiting for what?" one young man in the front row asked.

"For you to free them," Cory answered.

“What business do we have with these people?” another asked. “The workers you’re talking about, they have it easy. Three meals a day and all that. And who are those you say they keep The One alive? The women in Tresalt? They’re nothing but sheep, with nothing left for them except to pray,” the man spoke with disdain.

“I won’t mind visiting that place next time when I’m on the raid,” someone from the back shouted. “No sweeter women anywhere else,” he laughed, and others join.

“Is this all you think of your brothers and sisters?” Cory could feel his anger rising.

“They’re not our brothers and sisters!” the men protested.

“Everything we are, everything we have, is here! Our brothers and sisters are right here, in the desert! Everyone else is the enemy! Yeah, sure, the women in Tresalt have it rough, but they don’t have to worry about what they’ll eat tomorrow. And others? Do you talk about the workers? They’re nothing but the spawn selected and bred by the Trainers! With help from people like the one you have next to you!” an older man spoke.

Cory did not have any doubt who they were talking about. Edgar was probably much more uncomfortable right now than when they had been in Tresalt, under the scrutiny of young women.

“No one chose to be made by the Trainers!” he spoke loudly. “My friend here, Edgar, can teach you how to make weapons. I know Drena and its weaknesses. You say that you don’t care about the women in Tresalt. But what about the children that are raised there?”

“I don’t have any child there,” the older man spat.

“But I do,” a local took a step forward. “And I want to know what this man with the pendant has to say.”

A few others joined the man who had spoken last. They were looking at Cory expecting something. No, if he was to look closely, they were watching him like their hopes were hanging by what he was going to say next.

“You are the warriors, my friends,” Cory spoke. “You will be the hand that will slash through the unjust ruling of the Trainers. You are the ones who will bring the dawn of a new world!”

There were murmurs again. He and Edgar had worked on this speech for hours, wondering if they were going to reach these men’s and women’s hearts. And he knew one thing. That from the first second he had begun talking, he started to believe, too.

“I’m with this guy,” a short woman who could not be one day over 25 years of age hurried to the front. “For so long my mother and my father and my grandmother and my grandfather, and their parents, too, have waited for a sign. Do you think having food on the table is everything that matters?” she continued, pushing a mop of black hair away from her forehead. “You want the lives of those miners and those women? To eat and sleep and forced to live like animals? Here we are free. And maybe that seems little. But can’t you see the truth? We are the ones who’ll take down the injustice. Or else our freedom is nothing but a dream. I wasn’t born to live like I’m asleep. For how long do you think the Trainers will let us live? My mother used to say: it will come a day, my child, when we’ll be asked if we are ready, ready to fight for The One, and on our answer, the future of all this world will rest. So, I’m asking you, my brothers and sisters: are you ready?”

Cory was staring, his eyes wide. That was the power of faith, there, in front of his eyes. Other men and women stepped forward, joining the speakers. He could feel his heart beating in his chest. And, for once in his short life, it was with pride.

It hadn’t been easy, but now they could round up everyone capable of fighting and organizing them. The ruler of the settlement had let them inside her home, and together with Edgar, he was trying to strategize the next move.

“Who the fuck are these guys?” he heard someone yelling outside.

Maybe his ears were playing tricks on him, and he had spent way too much time in the desert sun, but he felt like he knew that voice. Could it be? Edgar stared at him, wide-eyed. He could tell that the scientist was not used to this rough way of living. Neither was he, if he was to think about it, but getting used to people who spoke

their minds was too little an inconvenience to consider. Edgar was trying to put on a brave face, nonetheless. Cory made a small gesture towards his friend and stepped outside.

“I need that fucking medicine, and I need it now,” the same voice commanded.

Cory squinted and blinked a few times. Was it possible? Were his eyes seeing what he thought they were seeing?

“You seem like a healthy lad to me,” the old woman in charge of the settlement spoke to the stranger. “What do you need that medicine for?”

“Ayn!” Cory yelled, and the newcomer turned on his heels, and remained there, stunned.

“Cory? For real?” Ayn smiled and hurried to him.

He was pretty sure he could not breathe, that was how tightly Ayn was hugging him. But he was hugging back, with all his force, too.

“What are you doing here? Where’s Lucas? Did you two guys run away from Drena?” Ayn began showering him with questions.

“No, unfortunately,” Cory mumbled. “I am the only one who got away. Lucas took care to send me away after ... ah, we have so many things to say to each other. How are you doing? And where is ...”

He did not feel brave enough to ask. Ayn’s face fell.

“He’s home, I mean, my home. But ... he’s in a bad situation,” Ayn breathed out.

“Bad situation? What happened?” Cory asked, his heart tight.

“It’s a story at least as long as yours,” Ayn joked, but his eyes darkened. “I need some medicine for him. He’s gravely ill. And now I hear of some warriors setting to fight against the Trainers and taking all the good stuff off the market.”

Cory caught Ayn’s arm and squeezed in sympathy.

“Well, good thing you know these warriors then,” he joked.

“You?” Ayn’s eyes grew wide. “Damn! A lot of things surely have happened since we last saw each other. Are you as handy with a gun as you are with a spatula?” the former slave joked, earning a punch in the shoulder from Cory.

“None of a kind, and frankly, I don’t know how much of a warrior I am. But come, I want you to meet someone.”

Ayn followed Cory, shaking his head and not believing his eyes. Cory seemed taller somehow, his soft features hardened, probably from too much time spent in the sun. His clothes were different, also, and he blended in with the other people of the desert, despite his golden hair.

“Ayn, this is my friend, Edgar. He is a scientist from Aeria, and the one putting up with all my lack of skill in handling all this war stuff you’ve probably heard people talking about.”

Ayn’s eyes fell on a man who seemed thin under the rough clothes he was wearing. If he had thought of Cory to blend well with the environment, this guy was anything but. His intelligent eyes were taking in everything with a sort of wonder that Ayn would have compared to a child’s if it were not for the inquisitive look in them.

He also seemed more delicate and of a weak constitution. A scientist? Not exactly the type to make it out in the desert. But again, who would have thought Xav was going to do so well in the desert after living in the lap of luxury in Drena?

“Guys, I’d love to hear your war stories,” he smiled, as he shook hands with Edgar. “But I have a serious situation back at home. Xav ... he’s ...”

He could not bring himself to say it. His smile died on his lips, and he noticed how Cory and Edgar exchanged quick glances between them.

“What seems to be the problem?” Edgar spoke in a friendly voice.

“He ... got his thumb cut out, and now he’s fighting an infection,” he said quickly.

He had no idea how he was going to explain the metal ends wrapped around Xav’s bones, and who knew to what extent the metal was in his body.

“I am not exactly a medic, but I have knowledge of the human body that makes me believe that I can be of assistance,” Edgar spoke. “Plus, I think we can spare a little medicine from what we got so far. It is, after all, for a good cause,” the scientist turned toward Cory as if he wanted to ask for the former servant’s approval.

“You know how to make Xav well?” Ayn grabbed Edgar’s arm and shook the poor man, something that seemed to give the guy a bit of a scare. “Sorry,” he let go of the man.

“No problem. I suppose I need to get myself acquainted with the human touch a bit more,” Edgar shook his head like he needed to face a severe problem.

“We need to move anyway,” Cory said. “How far is your home, Ayn?”

“We’ll have to drive all night since it’s already late, but we’ll get there,” Ayn said with conviction. “Are you guys coming? How many of you are there?”

“Besides Edgar and I? None.”

“That’s one hell of an army,” Ayn joked.

Everything seemed a puzzle, but there was no time to talk about anything else except for saving Xav. But what if this scientist could not save the man he loved? He worried so much. What if he needed to reveal everything so that Edgar could know what to do? After a short moment of deliberation with himself, he spoke again.

“There’s just one thing you need to know. About Xav.”

“Yes?” Edgar encouraged him.

“It’s strange,” Ayn added. “He ...”

He was probably not breathing at all, as he began explaining to Cory and Edgar about the bracelet and then what happened after Xav had tried to leave him. He could not get over that thing quickly, but there was no time to think about that. With his heart as small as a berry, he waited for the verdict. Cory and Edgar were staring at him, visibly surprised, and a bit scared.

Edgar was the first to break the silence.

“Some mechanical implant seems to have been inserted. That makes me believe that the medical problem should be addressed at the same time as the mechanical one.”

The way the man spoke was making him feel more at ease. Cory was still silent and was staring at him wide-eyed.

“Have you guys ever heard of anything like this?” Ayn opened his mouth. “I mean ... He is Xav, after all, right?”

“I doubt that this type of intervention could have altered the human nature of the person we are talking about,” Edgar replied. “But forgive me if I feel a bit at a loss here. Who is this Xav person? Don’t tell me ...” he turned towards Cory, and the former servant nodded slowly. “Oh. I see. Maybe that is why the First Ruler must be selected with extreme care. I doubt just any ordinary human being could be subjected to this sort of modification.”

“We didn’t have the time to tell each other the entire stories of our lives, either,” Cory offered with a sympathetic smile. “And I didn’t even properly introduce Ayn to you, Edgar. He used to be a slave in the household I served, while I was Lord Xavier’s servant. He ... sort of ... took Lord Xavier away with him. And forgive me if I don’t understand much myself.”

“Eh, you know, one thing led to another,” Ayn smiled. “We’re like this now,” he explained, linking his hands together.

Cory burst into laughter.

“What did you do, Ayn?”

“You know me. He was too good to waste, right?” Ayn allowed himself a small joke. “We’re ... well, he’s my man now.”

“Well, at least it’s good to know he’s not a prisoner. I doubt he would have taken that well,” Cory smiled. “Frankly, I don’t know how you managed. I’m trembling a little, only with the thought that I’m going to see him again.”

“I heard that Lord Xavier tends to have an overbearing presence,” Edgar expressed his thoughts out loud.

Ayn shook his head and chuckled with mirth.

“You guys should drop the Lord stuff. He’s one of us now. He’s mine,” he said with pride, earning looks of wonder from both the other men.

“Well, then we are counting on you, Ayn,” Edgar spoke again. “I would not know how to behave in the presence of the First Ruler of Drena. I’m afraid that being cooped up in Aeria for almost all my living years didn’t exactly make me good company for such select people.”

Ayn patted Edgar on the back, making the young scientist cough as if taken by surprise.

“I like this guy,” he roared and laughed, earning an enthusiastic nod from Cory. “Let’s go, warriors,” he joked.

His heart could finally slow down a bit. Never in his life had he been a believer, but it was like someone from above had led him to Cory and Edgar. This was even better than medicine. He was bringing back home with him a healer if what the scientist was saying about his knowledge of the human body and mechanics, was correct.

Cory was hesitant, as Ayn jumped from his van and gestured for him and Edgar to quickly follow. He hadn’t seen his former Master in what seemed like years, even if only a few months had passed. Such a change had taken places, not only with all of them but on the inside, too. But was Lord Xavier a changed man, as Ayn had said? He wanted to believe that was the case.

Edgar, next to him, seemed a little bit more preoccupied with something else. The scientist was mumbling something to himself, deep in thought.

“It looks like we’re here, ready to meet my former master,” Cory forced the words out, trying to sound much more enthusiastic and confident than he was.

“The medical problem might not be without complications,” Edgar spoke, totally oblivious to Cory’s distress. “It puzzles me. I cannot wait to see that.”

Of course, now the responsibility rested on Edgar's shoulders and his knowledge. Cory scolded himself for being so silly sometimes. He was merely a support character at this point, and the least he could do was to avoid burdening Edgar with his issues.

Ayn hurried them.

"Come, come, time's a wasting," the former slave called for them, and Cory hurried to follow him.

Edgar continued his mumbling, but followed, as well.

Contemplating his inevitable demise was proving to become a tad annoying, Xavier thought. Even that damn woman's presence would have helped to stave off the black thoughts, but Myra needed a few hours of sleep, too, and he had been the one to insist that she needed to go home and rest since there was no room for her to sleep in Ayn's home.

His former self would not have cared less if Myra was going to have a stiff back by trying to sleep in the only chair in the room. But that was not him anymore. Lord Xavier, the First Ruler of Drena, was only a memory of a distant past now.

The thought of having to die eventually was not as much troubling for him, as was the thought of how much Ayn was going to suffer. And that thought was particularly challenging to take in. What could he do to prepare Ayn for what was to follow? The throbbing in his arm was getting worse. Myra had changed his bandages, dressed the wound as much as she could, ignoring the hardened pieces of metal sticking from his shattered bones.

So the woman knew. Yet she had said nothing and continued to treat him like he was no different from her. Maybe she was not such a bad choice for Ayn, after all. Her soft touch could comfort the young man after he was gone.

But no matter how selfless he was trying to be, in his mind, he could not deny that the image of Ayn in Myra's arms was leaving him jealous and exhausted. There was nothing rational in his reaction. He didn't want Ayn to grow bitter and lonely,

did he? He could not stand the mere thought of the man he loved being embraced by another.

He needed to make amends. With Ayn, and with himself. And that meant that when Myra was going to come again, he was going to make her promise, on the faith she had for that deity she had spoken about in her stories that she was going to take care of Ayn. And help him forget.

It was barely dawn, but he could not sleep anymore. There was also a lot of noise outside. What could be? Was that Ayn's voice?

His heart made a small leap in his chest. He was going to see Ayn again. That made him grateful and emotional. But who to thank for the comfort of living enough to see his lover one more time? Myra was a wise woman. Faith was something to hold on to, in the darkest of hours.

"Here he is," he heard Ayn speaking to someone.

His eyes fell on the two guests that made way into the humble house, invited profusely by Ayn. He blinked in the weak light of the morning, filtered through the windows. That could not be, could it?

"Master," one of the newcomers bowed slowly.

"Cory?" he asked, his voice hesitant.

"Lord Xavier," the other spoke.

His eyes traveled to the other man, someone he didn't know.

"I'm Edgar, from Aeria. Please excuse my lack of manners. Lucas often mentioned you in our correspondence."

A scientist? He vaguely remembered something from Lucas's stories from Aeria. Edgar was a name he found familiar, even if he didn't know the man.

"C'mon, guys, I told you to drop all the lord and master stuff," Ayn broke the solemn moment. "Edgar, can you make Xav well?"

"May I?" Edgar approached.

Cory was still in the same position, bent from the waist, his eyes cast down. The truth was he didn't know what to say, or what to feel. Everything seemed unreal.

"Edgar is a healer," Ayn said with pride. "We got some medicine, too."

"Ayn is exaggerating my area of expertise," Edgar said shyly. "But I think I can do something if you allow me to examine your wound, Lord Xavier."

"Please, just Xavier," he eventually spoke, trying to push himself into a sitting position. "Cory ... there's no need to bow. Not to me, at least."

He offered the wounded hand to Edgar, who quickly pushed the glasses up his nose and proceeded to unwrap the bandages. Cory seemed to have heard him because he straightened up and hurried by Edgar's side. Xavier had a thousand questions, but everything had to wait. How could Cory have escaped from Drena? And what was Edgar doing away from Aeria?

"Everything you need, Edgar, just tell me, and I'll help," Cory spoke.

"Always a good servant, right, Cory?" Xavier made a poor attempt at a joke. "How's Lucas?" he asked the first and most ardent question on his mind.

Cory shook his head and looked down.

"I wouldn't know. He sent me off to Aeria, and we don't know anything else."

"It would be difficult to know anything," Edgar explained as if he could feel his companion's distress. "We ran away from the Trainers."

"Ran away?" he asked, no longer able to reign in his surprise. "From the Trainers?"

"It is quite a long and convoluted story, Lord Xavier," Edgar replied. "We would be happy to oblige you as soon as we manage to solve this health issue that seems to bother you."

The diplomatic speaking mannerism Edgar seemed an expert in would have been amusing, if it hadn't been for the constant pain in his arm. But how were Cory and Edgar going to react, seeing his wound?

“Ayn explained the nature of the problem,” Edgar said. “I can assure you that I will do everything in my power to help you, Lord Xavier.”

“You should, indeed, drop the Lord part, as Ayn said,” Xavier said with a small smile he could barely manage. “Here I am no different from anyone else. And, as you can surely notice, I am in quite a bit of pain.”

“A bit, indeed,” Edgar smiled. “I must commend you for how well you are taking it, Lo ... Xavier.”

“So, what is your opinion?” he asked.

He could feel Ayn pacing the room while Edgar and Cory were crowding him, his former servant busy taking away the used bandages and Edgar preoccupied with looking at his wound.

“It may sound like a bit of a wild guess, but I suppose that the main problem we should address is the conflict between the mechanical part, on one side, and, flesh and blood, on the other side.”

“I am quite certain I am not a complete automaton,” Xavier spoke.

“And you would be correct. If you were, there could not be any need for such a complicated design. I will need to feel your arm if that is all right with you.”

“Sure. I lived through being taken care of by a woman bent on sending me off to sleep with stories that must be centuries old. I suppose I can live with you examining me,” he joked.

“I am afraid it would feel unpleasant, seeing that you are in pain. Could we have some sort of ... painkiller?”

“We brought some,” Cory hurried and took something from a small duffel bag he had left by the door. “Is there any water, Ayn?”

“Sure thing,” Ayn pointed the water container in the corner that any home in Haven seemed to have. “Just let me bring it,” the man hurried. “If I’m just staying here, next to you, guys, doing nothing, I might just go a bit insane.”

Xavier followed his lover with his eyes. There was comfort in watching Ayn's purposeful stride across the small room. He was pulled back by Edgar's steady hands feeling his arm, pressing and prodding, like they were looking for something.

"I would appreciate if you could let me know what is it that you're searching for," Xavier addressed Edgar.

The scientist was frowning, apparently focused on something. He could not hold against the man the fact that he was ignoring Xavier's demand.

"As far as I can tell," Edgar spoke after a while, a time during which everyone in the room seemed to be holding their breath, "the wiring stops before the elbow."

"Should we cut it all?" Xavier spoke, earning a gasp of disbelief from Cory, and a few pained cuss words from Ayn. "It could be a solution to eliminate the entire problem," he added.

"Let the doctor speak, Xav," Ayn said through his teeth. "Edgar?"

"Xavier is not off the mark," Edgar spoke, making Ayn curse again and hit the nearby wall with his fist. "But, if my years spent studying in Aeria could ever be put to good use, that is a good time. A good time, indeed," the man added with a bit of strange satisfaction. "I would just need some tools."

Xavier's attention squared on Edgar.

"Please do explain."

"I cannot make your hand as good as new," Edgar spoke, continuing to examine Xavier's hand with serious eyes. "That would be way outside the range of my knowledge. But I can opt for the alternative if that is fine by you."

"What alternative?" Xavier asked.

"I can compensate the part that is missing with a mechanical piece," Edgar said promptly.

Xavier had to admit that he was impressed.

"Is that truly possible?"

“It is worth a try. Balancing that against having your forearm amputated gives it extra points, don’t you think?” Edgar added, with a small forced smile.

Xavier could appreciate good humor in a man. Edgar was, however, trying to draw his attention away from the grimmer of the two possibilities. But that, in itself, was to be appreciated. He could vaguely remember something he had once read about the ability to be compassionate and yet still have a clear head, as being an essential part of being a medic. Edgar seemed to fill in that part rather accurately.

Not that he could recall compassion, in how the Trainers had often handled him, as a child. They spoke of love, but Xavier was sure he had not known such a thing until he had met Ayn. And it was not about the physical part of things, although the simple thought of Ayn’s strong hands wrapped around him was making him tremble slightly, and not from cold. It was like somewhere, deep inside his chest, he felt warm.

His eyes met Ayn’s, dark and worried. He attempted a small smile.

“Edgar here seems to know what he’s doing,” Xavier said.

Ayn seemed to relax if only a fraction.

“Just tell me what you need, man,” Ayn addressed Edgar, his eyes still on Xavier. “If I have to turn the entire desert and the coast cities upside down, I’ll bring it to you.”

“Oh, nothing that extravagant,” Edgar waved.

But those words had not been meant for the scientist. Xavier smiled. It was Ayn’s way to show what he felt inside. It was Ayn’s bold declaration of love, and Xavier wanted so much to get up from his sick bed and walk over to his lover, only to keep him in his arms.

Dion was delving deep into the darkness. For long moments, he felt like he was turning blind, but slowly, his eyes began to adapt, while lights from torches in the distance started to lick the walls.

With new found confidence, deeply rooted in his desperation, he walked forward. He almost stumbled upon someone, his eyes fixed on the lights ahead.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

The man he had almost crashed into said nothing, and just moved away. Dion could feel icy chills running down his spine. He turned to look after the man when he felt the sudden unbearable heat coming from below.

His feet struggled to keep him upward. He balanced over the edge of what looked like a chasm opening under his feet. His breath caught in his chest, and he almost screamed.

Fire, burning bright, in hues of orange and yellow, made the shadows of the people ambling around the massive cauldron at their feet, seem gigantic, projected on the tall walls. And the miners were humming, like they were all in a trance, raising their tools, chipping at the walls, and sending the results of their labor into the fire pit.

What was the point of all this? From the corner of one eye, he noticed sudden movement. He jerked toward the source of that movement, only to witness a man falling to his death into the fire pit.

Without a scream. Without a sound. Without his mates noticing his dive. Dion could feel his feet shaking. One man almost pushed him closer to the edge as he moved by, humming and obsessed with swinging his pickaxe.

He needed to find John. So he just grabbed the man nearby and looked into his glassy eyes, on which the fire pit played its demonic dance.

“John, have you seen John?”

For a fraction of a second, the man seemed to make an effort to look back at Dion. But he just raised his pickaxe and returned to his job. Dion looked around him in desperation.

There was no other way. He hurried toward the next man, grabbing him and forcing him to look up. Not John. The heat was unbearable like his breathing was turning to soot in his mouth.

Was he going to check every miner in there? There were hundreds of men, if not more. But there was no point to dally. He needed to find his man, and he needed to do it soon.

He looked around. Even among these hardened men, John had to stand out, due to his stature. Dion was the only one moving about, against the tide of human bodies, bent awkwardly over their work.

He had to find him. There was no way he was going to fail. If there were things in the world worth fighting for, this was one of them. The most important. How he felt about John and how John felt about him.

A man moved, navigating a nearby corner and threw a wheelbarrow full with rocks into the pit. Dion followed him, as the miner returned with the empty tool. After the fiery glow of the pit, his eyes were blind in the darkness, again.

“John! John!” he called out loud, running after the miner.

He hit solid mass and almost fell back on his ass. He could barely outline a human being standing tall and unmoved in front of him. There was no time to dally. He pushed himself up to his feet and caught the miner’s arm, forcing the man to turn towards him.

Or, at least, he tried to, as the miner remained there, like a statue. Was this man his John? Dion threw all caution to the wind. He could sense other people moving around them, busy with their constant digging. But he got in front of the man and put his hands on the guy’s face.

He knew that face. Tears were prickling his eyes. He had found him. Throwing himself into the man’s arms, he began sobbing. Fear was fast at work deep within his soul, and the only person who had ever loved him, as a lover, not only as a friend, was there, looking like a dead man.

He could feel the man stiff into his arms, not rejecting him, but not responding either. With frantic moves, he began searching the man’s pockets. It had to be there; it had to be. But he was only coming up empty.

Blindly, he searched the man's chest, sliding his fingers through the shirt opening. His fingertips could make out the shape of a metal object, but, when he tried to grab it, it felt like it was set within the flesh.

No, no, no, that couldn't be! His fingers began digging, trying to find an edge, a corner, something he could grab on, too, and when they found it, they pulled with all the strength Dion was capable of.

The man groaned as Dion tore the pendant out of his body. Dion was trembling, feeling moisture around his fingers.

"What the hell," the man mumbled, touching his chest.

"John," Dion called, his voice hoarse from his shouting from earlier.

"Dion?!"

"Oh, John," Dion dropped the pendant to the ground and hurried to embrace his man.

"Hey," the man called softly, confusion clear in his voice. "What are you doing here? Weren't you supposed to be out there, into the sun?"

"No," Dion sniffled and buried his head in the crook of the man's shoulder. "I don't want to be there, alone."

"You could be in danger," John whispered. "Ah, my chest hurts," the man complained.

"No, it is you who's in danger," Dion said and pushed himself a bit away so he could feel John's chest.

Yes, there was blood, but the wound seemed superficial.

"What is it, baby?" John's voice was hesitant.

"There's no time to explain. Not here. We need to get out," Dion took John's hand to make the taller man follow him.

"Wait. How do you want us to do that?" John spoke, slurring the words a little bit as if he was drunk. "The entrance is guarded, and there's only one way in and out."

Dion stopped. John was right.

“Can’t you tell me what’s going on?” John whispered. “I feel a bit dizzy. Do I imagine you here, with me?”

“No, you do not imagine it,” Dion replied. “But there’s evil here, something that keeps everyone like this,” he made a small gesture around them.

John seemed to take a moment to try observing their surroundings. Maybe his eyes were more accustomed to the dark.

“Hey,” he called for one man, but the miner slid past them. “What’s going on?” he spoke, turning toward Dion again.

“I don’t know, but it’s like ... they’re under this strange spell and ... I’m the reason your chest hurts. I needed to take that thing out of your body.”

“Thing? What thing?”

“I don’t know what it is,” Dion babbled. “But the moment I got in, someone pushed one into my hand, and it felt like I was starting to grow numb, so I just threw it away. But you, you had that thing set in your chest, like your flesh was going to swallow it, so I needed to pull it out, you see?”

John caught him in his arms. Now the man was tense, and Dion could tell he was quickly processing all that information.

“I remember what you’re talking about,” John’s voice was now rigid and void of emotion. “It is the token they give us, the moment we pass through. You said it was set in my chest?”

“Yes,” Dion whispered.

“All the others move about us like they cannot see us,” John spoke. “What is going on here?” he mumbled, mostly to himself now.

“I don’t know, but we need to get out,” Dion insisted.

But John stopped him.

“We need to wake them up. Wake everybody up.”

“But,” Dion tried to protest, but John just squeezed him into his big arms.

“If there’s an evil spell, you just found out how to break it, baby,” John said lovingly. “And they won’t be able to stop us, not if we’re that many.”

What John said was making sense. Yet, he could still not avoid the feeling of unease settling in the pit of his stomach. Could they free all the people?

“Our son,” the Head Trainer spoke in his deep cavernous voice while examining Lucas with cold dead eyes. “We have an important task for you. The most that any son of ours could hope to be given.”

“I am here to serve,” Lucas bowed slightly, his eyes remaining on the Trainers gathered around the long wooden table.

“You will need to go through an important transformation.”

Lucas reigned in the trembling in his body.

“I have been retrained,” he spoke.

“Yes, and the process was a success. But, as you are, no matter how strong and intelligent you are, we are afraid you cannot be as much as Xavier. Not without our help.”

“Could you not find Lord Xavier? I thought that the bracelet was going to point out ...”

“For the moment, Lord Xavier appears to remain lost,” the Head Trainer interrupted him. “We will find him when the moment is right, and we need your help for that.”

Lucas remained standing, without blinking, ignoring the hard thumping in his chest.

“We do have one in Aeria, as you well know. But we created one here, for you and you alone,” the Head Trainer spoke again.

His mind was brought at a halt. Could it be? Never before had he been subjected to the malicious attack of that machine, not when he had been Aeria, and not after. But Edgar had often told him, in their correspondence, what an awful trick that machine was. And he feared its consequences.

“Is there no other way?” he opened his mouth, words coming out with difficulty.

He knew what it meant. He knew how his mind was going to be destroyed, and more than that, his heart. So, after all, he wasn't going to have not even one thing left, the only one that matters.

“There is no point in wasting time,” the Head Trainer replied. “It is for your own good, Lord Lucas.”

The honorific sounded hollow in that creature's mouth, as were his words of love. They weren't humans, the Trainers. But while for the duration of his life before Cory, he had no trouble thinking this, and thought of the Trainers as superior beings, now he could see them all the more clearly for what they were.

Monsters. The kind not bent to disappear come morning, when nightmares could no longer survive in the light of day. They were superior, indeed, but only in their malice. Evil was deep within their souls, provided that they had any.

The Head Trainer gestured for him to follow, and he did, his legs filled with lead. One of the others pulled a heavy curtain, the color of old wine. And there, Lucas saw it, the machine that killed all dreams, as Edgar had used to say.

This was an execution. He was going to get up from that machine, but he, Lucas, the man Cory loved, was going to be dead. And instead of him, a shell of a being, turned into a tool, was going to emerge.

His servant from home was present there, his perfectly symmetrical face, as serene as always. Lucas could feel something was odd, in the way the servant stood, one hand resting on the machine.

“The procedure can be painful. We wanted you to have someone familiar close by.”

How was this servant familiar to him? Lucas could swear the servant was like a shadow, moving inside his home like he was calculating each step to be the most efficient.

He closed his eyes for one second. Enough to say his goodbyes forever. To Cory, the man he loved, to Xavier, the friend he had found in Drena, and to Edgar, the one who had tried to save his Cory when Lucas had asked.

The Head Trainer placed one hand on his shoulder, forcing him to walk and sit in the metal contraption.

“Everything will be okay, Lord Lucas,” he heard his servant speaking.

The young servant took Lucas’s hand in his. Before descending into darkness, Lucas’s last thought was that the servant’s hand felt nothing like a human’s.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Is this bothering you?” Xavier asked, moving his arm slowly, and looking at the mechanical thumb Edgar had created from nuts and bolts and scrap metal and who knew what else readily supplied by Marcus who seemed pretty much taken with the scientist from Aeria.

Despite being quite passionate about mechanics, at a layman’s level, for sure, Xavier had little idea about how Edgar had managed to bypass the conflict between his flesh and metal. For an entire week, the man had come and gone from Ayn’s home, each time bringing something else and tinkering for hours to get his little project going.

Xavier could forgive the man’s excitement with the so-called project that was basically a human hand, turned partially into metal. He no longer felt pain, and his arm was usable, as much as it could be used under the circumstances.

Ayn embraced him from behind.

“The only thing that’s bothering me is that you’re talking too much,” the man said lovingly, as he pushed away the sweaty strands of hair from Xavier’s neck and planted a slow kiss.

He could not deny it. Everywhere Ayn touched, it felt like fire. How had he lived before finding this man he loved so much? A man who was brave and uncouth and born in the heart of the desert, so far away from Xavier’s world that he could have just as well been from a different planet. The sound of Ayn’s heart, the vibration of his deep breathing, they were all around him, resounding into him, and he knew once again, why he wasn’t lost but found again.

“Can I fuck you?” Ayn whispered into his ear.

Xavier chuckled. Count on the man to skip politeness. But it was this directness that fascinated and made Xavier yield to Ayn.

“Do you feel the need to ask?” he said back, and Ayn’s laugh tickled his ear.

“I suppose I could just bend you over and give it to you hard. I surely know this is how you like it,” Ayn said with satisfaction.

“Oh, you do?” Xavier tried to sound consternated, but he didn’t seem to do such a good job.

His voice was trembling already. He knew his body was taut, stretched with desire, for the man who was pushing his legs apart slowly, apparently having a mind to take his lover through his clothes.

They were standing up, Xavier overlooking the window, trying to gather his wits about him. At least, that had been the case until Ayn had come from behind, tip-toeing, but determined to make his intentions known.

Not that he minded. He could use a small break from the storm of thoughts clouding his mind. Cory was on a crusade, and he knew enough to realize that starting a war with the Trainers meant certain death, not only for the former servant and what he thought he believed in but for everyone swept into the tide.

But change was coming, and Xavier knew enough politics to realize what that meant. He could not fight it, even if that meant that any future he could have hoped to have with Ayn, lost from the Trainers, in the heart of the desert, but found in love, was forfeit.

His lips drew a small moan, as Ayn’s hands sneaked under his shirt, groping his chest. Ayn’s hands were rough but loving, and Xavier loved that roughness.

“Do you want anyone who happens to pass by to see your face while I give you all my love?” Ayn chuckled in his ear.

“Why not? It appears that the entire settlement is well aware of your stories of sexual prowess,” Xavier teased. “What’s one more notch on your belt?”

“Not fair,” Ayn seemed to pout. “Has Myra filled your head with stuff like that?”

“Ah, no, she just sent me to sleep with bedtime stories, nothing of the kind. But it’s not like I am deaf,” Xavier replied.

“Well, it’s not after you, anyway. C’mon, hop on the bed, it’s not like I want anyone to see you while you come impaled on my dick,” Ayn said, more determined this time, and he began dragging Xavier towards the bed.

“They might still hear me moaning, though,” Xavier joked.

“Then I should shut you up so that no one hears you,” Ayn kissed him. “Wait, did you just admit that I’m making you moan?”

“I was just stating the obvious,” Xavier still made an effort to play it cool.

“Xav, stop talking. I need you on your knees, sucking my dick,” Ayn growled, but Xavier could hear the amusement in the man’s voice.

“Really? No pity for a man who’s no longer whole?” he joked, raising his arm.

“You’ll never be anything but whole to me,” Ayn said simply. “You’re mine, and nothing else matters.”

Xavier needed no other explanations. He let himself slip to his knees, ready to worship his lover’s manhood, which Ayn hurried to free from his jeans. Xavier felt growing hunger as his tongue lapped at the sturdy length presented in front of his eyes.

“By all gods, you know how to drive a guy crazy,” Ayn murmured. “Just hurry up,” he begged.

“My pleasure,” Xavier smirked against Ayn’s hard cock and swallowed the member fast, making sure to drive it home with efficiency.

Ayn cursed, and grabbed his lover’s head, forcing his way inside even deeper, and starting to move his hips.

“Let’s fuck,” Ayn withdrew, much to Xavier’s dismay.

“I thought you were bound to penetrate my throat,” he spoke.

“As much as I like to shoot a fresh load in your mouth, I’d rather have your other hole.”

“Sometimes I think you believe yourself in charge,” Xavier joked, but he didn’t mind being manhandled, as Ayn brought him up from the floor and pushed him on the bed, clearly intent on having him obey, without too much fuss.

Ayn’s eyes were burning in the semidarkness of the room.

“You know what Cory wants. It means war. Real war,” he voiced his worries, despite his better judgment.

“We’ll talk about that later,” Ayn said shortly.

Xavier gasped when his lover went down on him fast, pulling his cock out and engulfing it in moist heat. He was even less prepared for what happened next, as Ayn undressed him, and then hurried to undress himself as well.

The man moved a bit, away from Xavier’s field of view and returned only to straddle Xavier’s hips, with an intent look in his eyes.

“I thought you wanted to fuck me,” Xavier spoke.

Ayn’s short look made the words die away on his lips. He knew what this was. Ayn didn’t want him to believe that he was less in his eyes. And Xavier also knew that it was taking Ayn’s all his willpower to fight his pride to do this on his own.

Which made him all the more grateful when Ayn slid onto Xavier’s hard member, obviously well prepared for the invasion and surrender of his own body.

Xavier loved everything about his former slave, right now, as Ayn began moving up and down, holding his manhood a bit away with one hand, as if he was trying to concentrate on giving pleasure, not receiving it.

“Come here,” he spoke tenderly, and he used the arm that was still whole to cause Ayn to fall forward onto his chest.

This way, he could use his hips and contribute to their pleasure, by moving them up and down. Their breath mingled, becoming one.

“You couldn’t let me die, could you?” Xavier asked tenderly.

“Not in a million years,” Ayn confirmed, the solemnity of his words, a stark contrast against the ragged moans escaping his mouth. “Fill me up, Xav, and don’t you ever dare doubt me.”

Xavier laughed. It was easy to forget about the storm ahead, as he drove himself deep into his lover’s body, giving him what he wanted. What they both wanted.

Edgar was standing bent over the car engine, while Marcus was gesticulating widely, explaining something. Ayn felt the need to grin. He had to admit that it was funny how much impact the well behaved scientist could have on a man like Marcus. His friend had not hesitated to express his admiration in the words he had known best, which had made poor Edgar blush to the tip of his ears.

“This man,” Marcus bellowed, as he saw Ayn and Xav approaching, and pointed toward Edgar, “has a fucking sexy mind!”

Yeah, that was precisely what made Edgar look like he wanted to start running back to Aeria, or worse, right into the arms of the Trainers.

“Stop teasing the guy, Marcus,” Ayn spoke. “Cory says he has a sweetheart back at home.”

Marcus blinked a few times; then a sly smile lit up his bearded face.

“That girl can have his body all she wants; it’s his brain I want!”

Ayn laughed wholeheartedly, although he could tell Edgar was about to explain to Marcus something obvious like he could not have the two parts of him separated. But what came out of the scientist’s mouth took them all by surprise.

“I doubt Lena would be interested in my body,” Edgar protested, earning around round of laughter from the locals.

Xav smiled, too, but Ayn could tell his lover had many questions and cared little for playful banter. And he knew why. There was no time for such carefree things.

“Well, if that girl doesn’t want you, there’s always an empty spot for you here,” Marcus opened his giant arms, a gesture that could just as well drive the fear of all that was holy into Edgar.

But the scientist was fast to catch innuendo now, and he even seemed more used to it.

“I’m afraid that it would be quite a crowd there,” Edgar said lightly.

Marcus was laughing so hard that Ayn thought for a moment that his friend was this close to blowing a fuse for real.

“What did I tell you? The sexiest mind alive,” Marcus spoke. “What brings you and His Majesty here? Don’t you have more healing to do?” he wiggled his thick eyebrows, only to be encountered by an annoyed huff from Xav.

“We wish,” Ayn snorted. “Now it’s time to bring us up to speed. Where is Cory?”

“He is with Myra and the other women. They all want to touch him and make sure that he’s real,” Marcus replied.

“He is learning about the old faith, as well,” Edgar supplied, in turn. “Everything is still very new to us, and learning about it all would take us some time.”

“We don’t have time,” Xav intervened.

Ayn knew what the pursed lips and steel like gaze meant. Oh, he knew his lover well enough now. And it meant that the whole bunch of them needed to shut the hell up and listen to the man. Marcus seemed to sense the change in atmosphere, and Edgar was quick to understand, as well. Everyone fell silent.

“What we need is organization, planning, and someone on the inside,” Xav spoke.

Marcus shifted from one foot to another and then scratched his head.

“What we need is a fuck load of guns,” the man spoke.

“That, too,” Xav admitted, taking Ayn by surprise.

He was expecting a least a reprimand from Xav for Marcus’s language. But instead, his lover was showing, once more, that he understood the situation and understood it well.

“We need to know how many men, vehicles, weapons, and other supplies we can count on,” Xav continued.

“They’re all scattered across the desert,” Marcus made a vague gesture with one hand. “Do you think you can organize these sons of bitches?”

“They need motivation,” Xav said with a small frown. “That is where all this talk about The One comes into play.”

“You don’t believe, do you?” Edgar intervened.

Xav shook his head curtly.

“Then maybe you are not the right person to be in charge, with all due respect, Lord Xavier,” Edgar replied in turn.

Marcus was staring at the two men talking, his eyes growing wide, and filling now with something Ayn knew was respect. He was surprised at the scientist’s big mouth, as well. Not that he could not see where Edgar was coming from. And the guy was right.

“I do not wish to be in charge,” Xav replied, without one hint of disdain or disapproval in his voice. “I am merely offering my assistance.”

Both Ayn and Marcus turned to look at Edgar, expecting the scientist’s reply.

“Yet, you are the right person for the job,” Edgar offered right away, and it was clear, to everyone present, that he wasn’t trying to suck up to the former First Ruler of Drena. He was stating a fact.

“Then we seem to be in a conundrum. I do not have the faith you speak of,” Xav said calmly.

“Do you believe that I am a person in his right mind, Lord Xavier?” Edgar asked.

“Please drop the ‘lord’ part as I find it jarring. Also, it does not sweeten by any means the truths you believe would sound harsh in my ears. Yes, I think your mental faculties are perfect,” Xav said.

Edgar leaned in a short bow.

“I would reject the possibility of a higher being, just like you, if it wasn’t for all the evidence I witnessed. Cory barely received formal education in his young years, and we all know what the training of a servant entails. He’s reading 20 times faster than me and has an understanding of things that no one else has. Also, he made the pictures in the old book Hector gave me move under my very eyes, predicting the future. I can assure you, I was not imbibed at the moment, and everything happened just as Cory made to appear in front of our eyes.”

Xav seemed to ponder, and Ayn watched him curiously. He had to admit that he could not tell what his lover was thinking right now. And it was true that he had

never paid much attention to Myra's ramblings about a goddess and whatnot. That seemed to be stuff only women cared about. And he had not wondered until now whether he believed in those things or not. What Edgar was saying sounded pretty messed up, but those were things that had just happened, so they weren't legends mothers were telling children to send them off to sleep.

"While I could come with arguments in favor of other possibilities other than Cory being the emissary of this higher being you are speaking of into this world, I will not do it," Xav eventually spoke.

"May I inquire why?" Edgar insisted.

"Because while I may not believe in a goddess who lived one thousand years ago, or who knows when ..."

"She is eternal," Edgar interrupted him.

"I still believe in something," Xav continued, seemingly not at all pissed with Edgar's interruption. "And sometimes that is all that is needed."

"What do you believe in?" Ayn hurried to ask.

Xav smirked, and Ayn didn't need any other explanation.

"I guess I know what you believe in," he grinned back. "How about we start that organizing stuff? We have our work cut out for us, that's for sure."

Edgar nodded gravely, and Marcus clapped his hands in glee.

"I would suggest you all refrain from acting too happy just yet," Xav suggested.

"Come on, Xav," Ayn patted the man's back. "Don't be a party pooper. We can hardly wait to kick some Trainer ass."

"You talk like you don't know them. Which is true, because you don't," Xav spoke. "They will not be easy to bring down, that I can tell you. And I don't know if weapons or manpower are enough. The toughest thing of all would be to have a man on the inside."

"How about Lucas?" Edgar spoke.

“He may sound like the obvious choice. But we don’t know anything about what may have happened to him, and we don’t have any means to get in contact with him.”

“Cory knows a way back inside, through the mines. The maps were drawn long ago, but he has it in his blood.”

“The mines are not Drena.”

“I believe in him,” Edgar said shortly. “If there is someone who can get inside the city, that would be him.”

“I doubt that risking our symbol would serve the cause,” Xav crossed his arms.

“Symbol?” Edgar wondered out loud.

“I know who the people say he is. And I know for sure that he never was an ordinary person. And for the sake of our entire operation, I hope that is the case. But I would rather hold that back as plan B. First, we need to send scouts ahead. And Cory is not the only one who knows a thing or two about getting inside Drena.”

Edgar bowed in respect. Ayn had to say he felt touched. His lover was turning against his old world, and he seemed to have no trouble with that. That could only mean that Xav was his, heart and soul.

“You look just like her,” the young woman spoke right into his ear.

Cory smiled.

“I’ve heard that a lot lately. Your name is Myra?” he asked the tall girl.

She nodded with a small smile.

“So how does it feel?” she asked, clearly curious about him.

Other young women and girls stood up, as they entered the place where the female population liked to gather. Cory could tell he was surprised. If in Tresalt, he had

seen women praying, studying, and get their hands busy with needlework, the women of Haven were busy doing something else.

Cleaning weapons, counting bullets, organizing medicine. He felt like he was entering a different kind of temple.

“What?” he asked, turning toward her.

“To be the living proof,” she smiled.

“Ah, that,” he smiled back. “I will do my best to live up to everyone’s expectations.”

“You know you have to do more than just try,” Myra placed one hand on his shoulder.

“It is that, or I will die trying,” he said matter-of-factly.

Myra squeezed his shoulder in sympathy.

“Is it true? That’s him?” one girl hurried to them.

Myra seemed to be pretty proud to be the one to introduce Cory to the crowd.

“Yeah, in flesh and blood.”

There was noise growing all around him, and soon hands were trying to touch him from every corner.

“Hey, watch it, girls, he’s taken,” Myra fended off the attacks for him.

“You don’t know that,” another young woman protested. “Don’t tell me you hurried to claim him.”

“I wish,” Myra snorted. “He’s sworn to some pretty man up in Drena.”

“Don’t tell me that he’s sworn to one of the Trainers,” another girl joked, and everybody started laughing.

Cory could see why Ayn loved his birthplace. Here, everyone was brave, daring to laugh in the face of danger. Because he knew that was the only thing he had to offer.

And in exchange for what?

Somehow he knew. He knew that it was not in vain what he was doing. There was evil rising at the horizon, threatening to engulf the entire continent. He only sensed it in his blood, not knowing what it was. But the certainty of impending doom had risen with him for several mornings now, and under the blanket of night, it was still there, living with him, almost residing inside him.

“Again,” the Head Trainer ordered. “He is yet to reach the potential.”

“With all due respect, brother, he seems already out of it,” one of the grey shadows moved, stepping forward.

“He is yet to reach the potential,” the Head Trainer repeated. “Brother,” he added.

There was frustration growing in a dark room. Lord Lucas stood in the metal chair of the machine, his human shape slumping to one side.

“Should we search for someone more suitable?” another asked. “We might have to recycle Lord Lucas. As he is, he is probably incapable of performing even basic tasks, let alone our most important mission.”

“The search would take too long. Should I remind you, brothers, that it is most unfortunate that Lord Xavier remains outside our grasp? We cannot know what evil is underway. By now, we should have been contacted. And for all the deaf ears and blind eyes we have outside our areas of influence, this is the solution that we have at hand. Lord Lucas will come to his senses, and he will use his augmented mind to perform the full wipe of the continent. Unfortunately, we need the human element, or the machine won’t work. Any word from Aeria?”

“Except for the incident involving the scientist named Edgar, everyone there is working according to schedule. Within a fortnight, they will have all the parts ready.”

“Excellent.”

The Head Trainer was about to speak again when someone burst into the room. It was abnormal for a Ruler to interrupt their sessions, let alone a mere servant. But

the man coming through the door, gasping for air, had a look in his eyes that made the Head Trainer believe that there was something to gain from letting him speak.

“Down, at the mines,” the servant managed with difficulty, “something is happening!”

“Speak correctly so that we can understand you, child,” the Head Trainer demanded.

“It’s a revolt. The miners want to get out.”

“Take this order to your Master. Let him have the guards seal the entrance to the mines.”

The servant stopped for a second, hesitating, but then he began running back the same way.

“Will the ones trapped inside be enough?” a Trainer asked.

“They are fodder anyway, be it one way or another. Nothing can stop us now.”

“Head Trainer, don’t we wish to know what is happening at the mines?” another asked.

“It is of no consequence. It is, for sure, just another anomaly. All the more reason for us to proceed as quickly as it is possible. Restart the program for Lord Lucas. We do not have time to dally.”

Waking the men now seemed to have been the easy part. Dion was staying close to John, while words of revolt, anger, and fear were flying around.

“Let’s get back, back to the surface!” someone shouted.

The people were pushing against each other, almost trampling the weaker ones, on their way back to the surface. John was holding Dion tightly, seemingly afraid he might lose him.

“Let’s not hurry to be among the first,” John spoke into his ear.

“Why?” Dion asked, his lungs already burning with the smell of smoke.

“There are guards at the gate. What’s your bet on what they will do the first thing they see us trying to rush outside?”

Dion fell quiet.

“Shouldn’t we warn the others, then?”

“They might not want to listen to us,” John replied.

“We are responsible. We woke them up,” Dion insisted.

John nodded curtly.

“People!” he began shouting.

After yelling the same word a few times, those close to them began to fall silent and turned to look at John.

“If we rush through the gate, the guards will just fire at us!” he shouted, as loudly as he could.

“And what do you propose? That we sit here and die? Have you seen that cauldron of fire? We will fall inside it or die because of the smoke!”

Without the token seated deep within their flesh, the miners no longer seemed immune to the harsh conditions inside. Some coughed so severely that Dion feared they were already very sick. And the temperature was going up, or so it seemed, with the friction of the bodies struggling to pour toward the gate.

“Isn’t there another way outside the mines?” Dion asked, but only John could hear him, his voice was so quiet.

“We should look for another way out!” John shouted.

“If there’s another way out, I bet they have it guarded!” one man said out loud, and others seemed to agree with him, by the affirmative grunts coming from all directions.

“In front of you lies certain death!” John spoke again. “We don’t know the same about what lies behind us! There are refuge areas where we can breathe, and we can start to explore the corridors. There can be unexplored areas!”

Some seemed to hesitate now, but other just raised their fists, and drove forward, maddened with the hard to breathe atmosphere.

“Thank you for trying,” Dion slid one hand into John’s. “It looks like we need to explore the mines for a way out on our own.

They just took a few steps, and Dion turned. True enough, a lot of men were following them. And he could not tell how many had chosen to try forcing the gates, but there were plenty with him, and John and that was all that mattered.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to him. He pulled at John’s hand to draw his attention.

“We have plenty of digging tools, right?”

“Yeah, those are plenty for sure,” John replied.

“Then even if there’s no other way, how about we dig one out?”

John placed a quick kiss on the top of his head.

“You’re a smart one. It must be why I love you,” John joked.

“I’m sure,” Dion laughed.

Their conversation was cut short by sounds coming from behind, angry shouts, followed by what could only be considered the noise caused by fired guns. Dion felt cold sweat down his back.

“Let’s hurry, people!” John began walking fast. “They won’t come here after us, but let’s not try our luck!”

They were running towards the dark, the light of their torches timid against the high walls. Dion was only too scared to think what awaited for them there. And, for a second, he wondered which death was to be preferred: a quick one, at the hand of the guards, or the slow torturous one caused by thirst and hunger?

Xavier watched closely as Cory was laying the map provided by Edgar on the large table.

“Do you say you can count on all these settlements?” he asked his former servant.

He could tell Cory was not at ease around him.

“They were the ones we visited so far,” Cory replied.

“Everything seems to look good, on paper,” Xavier spoke.

“Care to tell us what you don’t want to tell us, Xavier?” Edgar intervened, obviously aware of the stilted conversation between the two men at the table.

“I do not pretend that I have lived enough in the desert to know what these people think and how they would most likely act. But what you need is an iron hand.”

“Faith should lead us,” Cory said, his eyes set grimly on the map.

Cory knew what was wrong, and he didn’t need Xavier, his former master, to tell him. They were nothing but a handful of misfits with heads full of dreams. While the emotions were there, and Xavier also thought that they were running a bit amok, that was not enough.

And, yes, Cory knew it.

“Why shouldn’t we use both?” Edgar spoke again.

Xavier examined the scientist, and the man sustained his gaze, without flinching. He could see something of Lucas in the young man from Aeria. Scientists were not people to be easily swayed by station or worldly order. For Edgar, the map laid in front of them was a problem looking for a solution. And he had no qualms with compromises, as long as the outcome was going to be in their favor.

Xavier had to say that he agreed with Edgar.

“We should,” he said curtly. “Cory, as much as I would like to say that your faith is enough, what we need here is pragmatism. First, we need to gather everyone here, in Haven. This place is reasonably distanced from all the other settlements. This will mean that we need enough water, food, and weapons for everyone. We need to time our schedule so that we don’t end up with more problems on our hands than we can deal with. As you can see, these people are not exactly the disciplined sort.”

“We are not yet sure that we have enough weapons for everyone,” Edgar spoke.

“That is one of the problems that we need to solve. Ayn, Marcus?” he turned toward the other two men present.

“We need to organize some raiding parties,” Ayn confirmed. “Let’s just say that up there, in Terran, they have more weapons than they need.”

Marcus flexed his fists and laughed.

“They might need a little convincing, but that’s what we’re good at.”

“We should not antagonize the people living in the cities,” Edgar said.

Marcus placed one paw on the scientist’s shoulder.

“Man, you know what they say: you win some, you lose some. You cannot have it all.”

“I insist,” Edgar slightly turned to face the giant next to him, “that these raids end up without bloodshed. After all, we should count on these people as our allies, later on.”

“Especially since they might all be in danger as us all,” Cory suddenly interjected, taking everyone by surprise.

“Danger, what danger?” Xavier asked.

“I don’t know,” Cory looked away. “I just know that it is coming.”

“How about you focus a little, pretty boy,” Marcus took a step toward Cory as if his impressive stature could scare the truth out of the smaller male.

Xavier knew that such a thing wasn’t going to work. But the certainty with which Cory had spoken about a specific danger was making him feel chills down his spine, just as well.

“The Trainers have often spoken about a project ... they didn’t name it, but it seemed important,” Xavier began speaking. “They also used to say that, when the time was going to be right, I would be the most important tool. Do you know anything about such a thing? Something you might have read in those old books, in Tresalt?”

Cory frowned, deep in thought. Edgar was the one to attempt an answer instead.

“I believe that all of us in Aeria had to work on something that was supposed to be part of a bigger project. It was not our main project, and we still had other things to do on a regular basis, but it was considered vital. Yes, I think that was the word used by one of the Trainers when they came around to supervise this project.”

“But do you know what it is?” Xavier insisted.

“I am afraid that I cannot answer that. We were supposed to work on our assigned parts in complete secrecy.”

“Supposed?” Xavier quirked an eyebrow.

“Well, we did, from time to time, stumbled upon issues that we could not solve individually. Despite the Trainers’ clear indictment, we did collaborate from time to time.”

“Look who’s the undisciplined bunch now,” Marcus laughed and slammed his paw against Edgar’s shoulder, making the man sway a little.

“That certainly was a dangerous thing to do,” Xavier said calmly.

“We know not to tell on each other, especially when our shortcomings concern our integrity as scientists,” Edgar explained.

“Ah, you wipe each other’s butts,” Ayn laughed.

“Yes, I suppose that is a way of describing what we did,” Edgar said thoughtfully, but with a small smile.

“That could work to our advantage. We need unity, above all, but the fact that we are just swimming in the dark, at this point, is certainly not helping.”

“I propose just to whoop the Trainers’ asses, and free everyone,” Ayn said with conviction.

“We have no idea if that would be enough. The Trainers are different. I doubt they’re made from flesh and blood, like us.”

“And they chose this appearance because it was as close as they could get to look human,” Cory spoke, making everyone’s eyes turn toward him once more.

“That is something I didn’t know,” Xavier said.

“Me either,” Edgar sounded surprised.

“Ayn, did we know?” Marcus joked, this time hooking one arm over his friend’s shoulders.

“Nah, man, I must have missed that lesson,” Ayn bantered back.

“Cory, please tell us what you know,” Xavier demanded, after taking a short look at Ayn.

Ayn smiled widely, and Xavier had to refrain one smile of his own, too. Good morale was necessary, and that was why he wasn’t annoyed with his lover’s and his friend’s shenanigans.

“It was one of the things I read back in Tresalt. When The One created the world, she also created the Trainers. They weren’t called this way in the beginning.”

“How they were called?” Edgar asked, voicing the curiosity eating up everyone present.

“They were called ... servants,” Cory said hesitantly.

“Servants?” Edgar expressed, once more, everyone’s surprise at that little revelation.

“Yes, they were servants of the new world, their role being to maintain order and ensure its prosperity and development,” Cory explained. “I’m sorry that I don’t recall exactly the exact words ... there is the old language the books use. But I’m certain they were called servants.”

“So, what happened?” Xavier was the one to ask this time. “When did everything change? How did they become the powerful beings they are now?”

“The stories become cryptic at one point,” Cory continued. “The One decided to retire from her work of building the world, once she considered it complete. But she left the world in these servants’ care.”

“They did a shit of a job,” Marcus murmured, earning a playful shove from Ayn and a stern look from Xavier.

“For that, they were granted power, immense power, and, in time, it appears this power has crept into their souls,” Cory spoke. “They turned against the old faith, and brought one new, to worship them, not The One.”

“Does it say all these in those old books?” Edgar expressed his bewilderment.

Cory seemed to ponder.

“It’s hard for me to tell. I feel like, in some way, this is my interpretation.”

“For he will be the one to understand my words, and feel my love,” someone intervened, making everyone turn toward the door.

Myra came in and nonchalantly took a seat at the table.

“What?” she shrugged. “My feet are killing me. I’ve been up all day.”

“We don’t have a problem with you sitting,” Xavier said sharply. “What’s with the words you just said?”

“Ah, that?” the woman smirked. “That’s what we know and you, warmongers, don’t. Cory, I think you understand the old books differently because you were the only one meant to do so. Seriously, do you think those old scumbags would have let anyone still read those books? I bet they would have built a funeral pyre with them. It’s clear that they thought them to be harmless.”

“How do you know all these, woman?” Xavier asked.

“Xav, dear, I told you not to frown so much. Wrinkles don’t make you pretty,” Myra joked. “But let me tell you this. We know only because what I have just said is passed to us from mothers to daughters. It’s not written anywhere, it’s here,” she pointed at her temple, “and here,” she placed one hand over her chest.

“Unlikely to have the means to fight against this type of knowledge,” Edgar said.

Xavier had to agree, once more, with the scientist.

“All the more reason to use both the power of faith and that of weapons,” he said, mostly to himself.

“Oh, no, Xav,” Myra gasped. “You think I said something right?”

By all means, he should have been annoyed with the woman’s playful attitude. But she was just like Ayn and Marcus. Full of happy banter and the right choice for keeping everyone’s morale up.

“Yes, you did,” he replied and looked her in the eyes while smiling.

Myra’s eyes grew wide and then she burst into laughter.

“No wonder Ayn is crazy about you. You’re handsome when you smile. Ayn, keep this one close. I’m not saying, but you might have to fight to keep him if he continues to be nice like this.”

“Let me see anyone try,” Ayn flexed his fingers, as he could barely wait to fight someone over his lover.

“Well, I suppose you don’t mind another head at the war table,” Myra placed both hands on the wooden surface like she wanted to make sure she had a guaranteed place there.

“Not at all,” Cory said. “You seem to be able to complete the holes in our understanding of the situation.”

Xavier nodded. There was something strange he was feeling right now. Like he could not recall ever feeling so close to so many people at the same time. That had to be the power of friendship.

Lucas could feel his eyelids heavy like lead, but he fought to open his eyes, nonetheless. There was something cool pressing against his lips, and he stuck his tongue out, feeling thirsty.

“How are you feeling, Lord Lucas?” a voice from far away swam to me, through the haze muffling his hearing.

He straightened up and looked around. Grey shadows moved everywhere his eyes could see.

“Is the transformation complete?” someone asked.

The servant from his household appeared in his field of vision, examining him.

“His eyes turned grey. Yes, the transformation is complete.”

He felt a surge in his blood, upon hearing the words. He was powerful, all of a sudden, and he could feel like he could barely contain that power.

“Lord Lucas, welcome among us,” the Head Trainer approached.

His hands were cold, as the Head Trainer took them into his. But it wasn't bothering him. Nothing was bothering him now. Something new was opening in front of him, and it was up to him to walk through that door.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Should I ask what’s wrong?” Edgar’s voice broke the thread of his gloomy thoughts. “Besides the obvious,” the scientist added, with a tinge of humor.

“The obvious?” Cory turned toward his friend, with a small smile.

Maybe it was not too bad to get distracted for a bit.

“We’re planning to start a war we have no idea we can win, we have coyotes and who knows what other desert critters to worry about, and, on top of it all, Marcus just offered to become a mentor for me in matters of the flesh,” Edgar explained.

Cory half-giggled. Ah, how much he wished he could be carefree and genuinely laugh. But he had never been truly free, not until he had climbed into Edgar’s strange contraption and flown over the desert to meet his destiny. Not counting those brief moments of pure happiness he had lived in the arms of a man with beautiful green eyes and strong arms and a heart as big as a mountain. A man he had left behind. A man he could not know whether he was still ...

He fought his train of thoughts.

“Can you believe it, Edgar? Sometimes I don’t think I can recall his face. Was this the machine’s doing and only that? Sometimes I fear my memory is failing me. And my heart, too.”

Edgar placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing in sympathy.

“Maybe I can be of help,” Edgar offered. “As someone who used that terrible machine more often than anyone on the entire continent, probably,” the young scientist added with a small, self-deprecating smile, “I believe that I can offer some assistance.”

“That would be great,” Cory sighed.

In the wee hours of the morning, this was what he hated most. The silence. It felt oppressive, not conducive to peaceful meditation, but a gate to dark thoughts. And the worst part was that he felt selfish, for caring more for the memory of his lover than for the fate of the world now resting upon his shoulders. He could not tell

which task was more cumbersome. Edgar's lack of sleep and interest in holding a conversation came at the right time.

"The point of the machine is to rob you of your feelings," Edgar spoke matter-of-factly. "Yet, I have the sensation that the machine is far from being perfect. It's like a sharp tool shaving off what lies at the surface. Do I make any sense?"

"Not exactly, but do go on," Cory joked.

"Our feelings, what makes us who we are, our memories, do not exist solely on the surface of our cortex. They have their roots deep in our consciousness, and, when the machine performs its culling job, it is nothing but a tool that cuts the branches, yet cannot fell the trees."

"I think now you're starting to make more sense, Edgar," Cory replied, and this time, he was no longer joking. "Are you trying to tell me that I still have him? That I didn't forget him?"

"The simple fact that you're losing sleep over thinking about him should be enough proof," the young scientist replied.

"I feel like his face ... I cannot see his face in my mind," Cory let out a heavy sigh.

"But you don't need that to remember him still," Edgar spoke. "The only thing that truly matters is that you're holding him in your heart and your mind. The rest are details."

"But what if I see him and I cannot recognize him anymore? Am I the same person as before? Is he the same?"

"Change is inevitable. Nothing stays the same forever. Yet, some things are enduring, and that is what makes us most human," Edgar explained.

"What is this thing you're talking about?" Cory asked, his voice full of hope.

"If I were a romantic, I'd call it 'love'. But I'm afraid the notion is as strange to me as anything dealing with emotions. So let's call it just what makes us persevere. As individuals. As a species."

"What do you mean?"

“Feelings express something that goes deeper than what we can comprehend. We love, let’s use that word because we don’t want to be alone. And it is a natural instinct, or else people would have never gotten together and built settlements, like this one, nor would they have gotten friends to share their lives with, nor would they ... felt deep affection toward someone else.”

“That sounds like a romantic explanation to me,” Cory joked. “It’s funny, though, don’t you think. We learned the word ‘romantic’ only recently. From the old books.”

“That’s true,” Edgar admitted, his gaze a bit unfocused for a second.

“Do you ever think about Lena, Edgar? Like I do about Lucas?”

“All the time, my friend, all the time. See? I’m the living proof that the machine could not erase the one I love from my mind.”

“And you say you’re not a romantic,” Cory joked. “What you just said sounds exactly like that.”

“Then I suppose all that is needed is just a little practice,” Edgar joked back.

“I worry about him. I feel guilty. We’re here, yes, in the heart of the desert, exposed to who knows how many dangers, yet, there is no other more dangerous situation than what Lucas’s fate must be right now.”

“He should be safe,” Edgar said half-heartedly. “At best, the Trainers will just put him through their re-education program. They never waste a talented mind, or so they say.”

“After we fled, he must have been caught. He must have been punished,” Cory said, his pain making the sounds come out strangled, unnatural.

“There was nothing more for us to do. If the Trainers had caught us, Lucas’s life would not have been different from what it must be right now. He made his choice, and, since I’m the one with the cool head in this, please, forgive me, Cory, I would say that it is the least terrible outcome.”

“What are you saying? That we didn’t make things worse for Lucas by running away?” Cory asked.

“No, we didn’t. Without us in their clutches, the Trainers have no bargaining chip. Which means that they cannot truly force Lucas to do their bidding.”

“I would like to believe that is true,” Cory spoke, his eyes drifting away, through the window, taking in the first rays of the desert sun over Haven.

“It’s one of the things I recently learned. To believe,” Edgar said. “And even I, a man of facts, have to admit that on a psychological level, it works. It gives me the motivation to move forward. And, Cory, don’t ever think of yourself as an egoist. I am as selfish as I can be. Because I hope and I believe that, when everything is said and done, I will be able to return to Aeria, my home, to my books, my workshop, and, of course, to Lena. And that I will finally have the courage to take her hand and tell her what I truly feel.”

Cory turned to look his friend in the eyes. He placed both hands on the man’s shoulders.

“Thank you, Edgar. In this time of need, you prove to be a true friend. Now I feel like I can face the world again.”

“Glad to be of help. Is it a wrong time to mention that we need to saddle up for Teran? If we want to be able to grab those guns, as Marcus says, we need to put the hours in ... well, driving, and grabbing.”

“Isn’t it dangerous? Maybe it would be for the better for you to stay here. There are plenty of things you can do while waiting for our return.”

“Nonsense, my friend,” Edgar brushed Cory’s caution off. “One, I would disappoint Lucas if I were to let you out of my sight. Second, I also need to keep an eye on this operation so that it goes as peacefully as possible.”

“And third,” Cory added with a small laugh, “you don’t want to miss all the action, right?”

Edgar smiled in turn.

“Of course. Some of Marcus’s behavior must have rubbed on me. I almost feel the need to grab a gun and shoot,” the scientist replied in good humor.

“As much as we would like to joke about it, we might just need all the hands we can get for firing weapons, too,” Cory spoke, some of the gloominess from earlier slowly creeping in again.

“I would have no problems with that,” Edgar hurried to assure him. “And somehow I feel Lena would be impressed to hear about me firing a real weapon. Hmm, this just might be something that Marcus planted in my head. I do not recall having such ambitions before.”

“Then let’s get ready for Teran so that you can put these ambitions into practice later. You should at least show some marksmanship once you get to fire a gun in front of Lena. We wouldn’t want her to be unimpressed, right?” Cory joked.

“Definitely,” Edgar agreed.

Cory looked over the settlement again. But, this time, his heart was a little less heavy. He would have to face whatever the future had in store. What made it easier was the fact that he was not going to do it alone.

In Drena, in his iron chair, Lucas could feel his strength coming back to him. It was like power was coursing through his veins, raw and wild. It needed something, a channel, where it could pour itself.

“Head Trainer, I am ready,” he confirmed, placing his hands on the iron arms.

“I would recommend waiting for a little more time,” one of the Trainers spoke. “Lord Lucas has just awakened.”

“There is no point,” the Head Trainer waved. “We are pleased with our favorite son’s enthusiasm.”

“Have you forgotten about Lord Xavier?” the same Trainer from before spoke.

“No, we have not forgotten. Should he come back to us, we will welcome him into our loving arms,” the Head Trainer replied, and this time, his grey eyes searched for the speaker to identify him in the midst of grey hoods.

“I believe Lord Lucas is still too dehydrated after the effort,” Lucas’s servant suddenly spoke. “I recommend a hearty meal, water and a bit of rest. With your blessing, of course,” the servant took a bow.

“Why are you, servant, still here?” the Head Trainer turned his attention to the young man speaking out of turn.

“To watch over Lord Lucas’s wellbeing,” came the prompt reply.

“You are free to go, child. Lord Lucas is with us now. He has no longer need for your services.”

“He still needs nourishment and ...”

“Begone, servant!” the Head Trainer’s harsh voice slashed through the air. “We will see if you can still be used later.”

“I beg forgiveness, Head Trainer,” the servant bowed again and began walking away.

Lucas registered the young man moving from his side. The hand the servant had held throughout the ceremony of initiation felt cold. Colder than the rest. He gave it no longer thought. He was to receive his first mission.

“Let the trial test begin,” the Head Trainer commanded, as soon as the heavy door closed after the servant.

“Aren’t we traveling a bit too light?” Xavier asked, seeing Marcus pulling his van in front of Ayn’s home. “We do go there to collect an important amount of weaponry.”

“Collect,” Marcus repeated after him and burst into laughter. “I like the way your man thinks, Ayn. He makes our entire operation, I don’t know, sound like a stop and delivery sort of thing.”

“Should I explain to you the difference between collecting and delivering?” Xavier glared now.

Marcus laughed even harder.

“Ayn, I believe you fucked a sense of humor into this guy,” the man began slapping his thighs, his fit of laughter unstoppable.

Xavier had to admit that he was working hard on keeping a frown and the corners of his lips tugged down. Marcus was incorrigible, that was a sure fact. That didn't mean, however, that the question didn't still stand.

“Are we using just this one van?” he insisted.

“Brother,” Marcus placed one heavy hand on his shoulder, “take a little look over there.”

Xavier followed the direction pointed by Marcus.

“I see. That is more like it,” he commented.

It looked like the entire settlement intended to be part of this operation. There were vehicles of all shapes and sizes gathered further toward the gates to the settlement, and while people were still barely waking up, it looked like there were plenty of drivers to man all the vehicles.

“Ayn, how can I impress your man?” Marcus complained.

Ayn, who had so far preferred to watch the exchange between his friend and his lover from the sidelines, grinned.

“Sorry, man, you don't have it in you. Only I can impress Xav.”

Xavier noticed with satisfaction how Ayn moved lazily to come next to him. He said nothing as the man threw one arm over his shoulders.

“Should I pull out my dick to see whose is longer?” Marcus asked, his eyes shiny with mischief.

“It's not all about length,” Ayn puffed out his chest. “It's how you use it.”

“Stop it, man, your sweetheart's blushing already,” Marcus joked.

“I am certainly not blushing,” Xavier protested. “And I can vouch to Ayn's prowess in bedroom affairs if that seems to be the issue.”

It was hard for Xavier to keep a straight face as Marcus stared at him, trying to figure out if that was a joke, or Xavier was serious about all that. Eventually, scratching his head, the man declared himself defeated.

“You got yourself a fine man, Ayn. He almost shut me up, what can I say?”

“You can simply rally up the troops,” Xavier chose to reply in Ayn’s stead. “We need those weapons.”

“Yes, sir,” Marcus mocked, feigning a salute, but he followed through and began shouting at the man and women getting busy around the vehicles.

“So, are we ready?” Xavier asked, turning toward Ayn.

Ayn’s gaze was intense, and Xavier sustained it with his own.

“For all that is worth, Xav, it’s been fun, right?” Ayn said, pulling him close.

“Let’s see how this plays out,” Xavier patted his lover on the back. “We have a long road ahead of us. Filled with dangers, yes. But I have you by my side.”

“And I have you,” Ayn replied. “And you know what? You still behave like a Ruler.”

“That is not easy to forget,” Xavier said with a sigh.

“No, it’s okay. Because I think you’re one of the reasons why I think we’re going to win this.”

“One of the reasons?” Xavier laughed.

“For me, the best reason of all,” Ayn embraced him tightly.

“Are you going to put on a show, so that others can enjoy it, or you’re just going to stand there all day making lovey-dovey eyes at each other?” Marcus interrupted them.

“Chill,” Ayn shot back, but without an edge to it. “We’re ready to roll.”

“Who else is riding with us?” Marcus demanded to know.

“Just the usual. Cory and Edgar,” Ayn replied.

“Good. Then let’s go get them,” Marcus nodded. “I want Edgar to see his work on my baby’s engine put to the test.”

“Are you in love or something, Marcus?” Ayn teased. “Edgar this, Edgar that, all day long. If I didn’t know you any better, I’d say you’re smitten.”

Marcus didn’t seem bothered in the slightest with his friend’s allusions.

“Yeah, I’m smitten. The guy’s a frigging genius. That chick of his, she’s a lucky woman.”

“I hear she’s a genius, too,” Ayn continued.

“Then I’ll have them both,” Marcus shrugged. “You know I can handle,” he opened his arms wide as if he could barely wait for Edgar and Lena to jump into them that very moment.

Ayn laughed.

“Just don’t let the guy hear you say that about his beloved. Genius or not, he might get pissed.”

“Ah, no reason to,” Marcus laughed. “I’ll have the both of them upgrade all the vehicles we have. I’ll pay them in hard liquor, and I’ll rent them my cot so they can finally get to know each other. For real.”

“Really, Marcus, I think you should not propose such a thing to Edgar. He is a gentleman, unlike you,” Xavier pointed out, but he was laughing, too.

“Well, then I’ll repay him by teaching him how to be less of a gentleman, or that girl is going to leave him for some big bad boy, like me,” Marcus joked.

“Let’s just focus on getting back from this trip alive,” Xavier said. “So ready?”

Marcus nodded.

“On your call, Your Majesty.”

It was odd how at ease they seemed to be able to breathe now, Dion thought. Although it felt like they were going deeper into the pits, the air was not as heavy

as he had expected, and the tall walls also made their trip into the unknown easier to handle, at least, as far as the fear threatening to nestle in their minds went.

“We should find a refuge room, and then scout the corridors. It’s all a maze,” John spoke.

Dion looked behind, at the men following them. He was surprised with the discipline the miners showed. None was complaining. Except for the people who had wanted to try escaping through the regular entrance, no one was speaking of this being a mistake.

And every word John said, was taken and transmitted by the people walking right behind so that everyone down to the last would know what decisions were discussed. It seemed that the miners had tacitly decided to appoint John as their leader, and they could do without all the chaos that would have derived from having too many heads shouting too many contradictory ideas.

Dion was entirely out of his element, and he was wondering, inwardly, at John’s determination and what seemed to be great knowledge of dealing with his co-workers. He had always seen John as a loner, someone who cared more about keeping to himself than getting involved. And this new face of the man was only making him love him more.

He took John’s arm and glued himself to it. There was no danger from the others, he did not sense anything of the kind, but he needed to feel his man close.

Word from the men marching behind flew back to them. It seemed that one of the miners knew of an old refuge, back from the times when the mines had not become so complicated. It wasn’t something that the man knew based on his own experience, but from memories passed by people who had lived before.

Dion wondered briefly how come the Trainers had allowed such a thing to be known by the miners. Maybe they had thought that once trapped in Drena’s underbelly, they were condemned to die there, anyway. So what they knew didn’t matter anyway.

“Are you cold?” John asked him, pulling him close.

He shook his head. They were moving forward, but he still feared of what lay ahead. They needed nerves of steel and hope on their side.

“I won’t let anything happen to you, not as long as I breathe,” John whispered into his ear. “You came for me.”

“I came for you,” Dion said, too.

“You could have stayed, continue living up there,” John pointed out. “Someone pretty like you ...”

“Someone pretty like me would have missed you very much,” Dion said softly.

John pulled him closer if that was even possible.

“No way I’ll let you alone,” Dion added. “You know I picked you, right?”

“How can I forget?” John chuckled. “All fiery hair and determined eyes and such a pretty, pretty face. I thought to myself: John, you got your work cut out for you.”

“Well, I had no idea you would be such a crybaby,” Dion joked. “Come on, I’m compensating. I’m cooking, I’m cleaning ...”

“And you’re giving amazing blowjobs,” John whispered very softly, to avoid his words being caught by the others.

Dion giggled. It was a good thing that they could still joke. And it was good that John was back to himself. Hearing him speaking like he usually spoke was a really good thing. Even if he could not know what awaited them, deep in the darkness of the mines, he knew he would be okay, because the man he loved was next to him.

“The refuge must be somewhere near,” word came from the miners.

The corridor was growing larger, and soon it opened into a large room.

“Let’s set our base, and organize scouts to explore the area in search of an exit.”

“Or places where we can dig our way out!” one miner shouted.

“That too,” John agreed. “We need a way to the surface. After that, we will see. We need to be prepared for anything. Let’s ration all the food we have. If there’s an underwater stream, we should find it.”

John was thinking of everything, and, in the faint light of the torches, Dion could see the other miners looking at him and nodding in agreement. These men weren't scared. He should not be either, he thought.

He stepped aside, as the miners began organizing themselves, deciding on who to go first on the scouting missions. Waiting was going to be agonizing, but hope was going to keep them alive more than anything else.

John came to sit by his side, their backs against the smooth wall.

"We should also organize the people remaining," someone talked. "Who sleeps, who stays to guard. There is no way to tell what could come for us."

Other sounds of agreement welcomed that proposal. Dion could say that the fact that they seemed to understand each other so well helped. The Trainers could not have envisioned this. They could not have realized that people were going to find each other, even in the darkness of minds they were keeping everyone. That was giving him hope.

"Are you tired?" John asked him, hooking one arm over his shoulders.

"No, not exactly, but I think it would be good to sleep a little."

"Okay, rest your head against my shoulder. I'll wake you up if something happens."

"Aren't you going to sleep, too?" Dion asked.

"Not right now. I want to watch over you a little. It feels like it's been so long since I felt you next to me. Really felt you."

"You were under the spell of that thing," Dion said gently.

"And it robbed me of my time with you," John said back, and placed a small kiss on Dion's forehead.

"John, what if ..." Dion stopped himself.

"No, no what-ifs," John said with determination. "I will do everything I can to hold you near. And I believe there is a way out. Just like I believe that it was not just by accident that I met you."

Dion cuddled against his man and sighed.

“I had never been happy before I met you,” he said softly.

“Me neither,” John said back, his voice filled with tenderness. “Let’s make a vow.”

“Yes?” Dion encouraged him, seeing that the man stopped talking as if he was trying to gather the courage to speak.

“When we get out of here, let’s go someplace else. Away from Drena. People are living out there, in the desert, so I hear. It must be true. Traders won’t just lie all the same. Let’s go to one of those places. I guess it will be tough, but I’m a hard worker, and so are you. I want to live all my life with you. As long as it might be.”

Dion buried his head into John’s chest, to hide his face. He was afraid he was smiling so widely that people who happened to look their way might start to think he was going insane. John’s large hand rested atop his head, caressing his hair slowly.

“Don’t you want that?” John asked.

“I do,” Dion’s voice came out muffled. “I sure as hell do. And I don’t care how hard we’ll have to work. A life with you is worth it. It’s worth everything I have. Everything I am.”

“That’s good to hear, princess,” John said with affection.

“Hey, my name is not 'princess',” Dion protested, but only in jest.

“It’s not? Because I could swear by how much my life changed for the better since I took you in, that I must be living like royalty,” John joked. “Like one of those Rulers up in Drena.”

“You’re just saying,” Dion giggled.

“Well, let’s see. I’m getting serviced by an amazing pleasure expert,” John began, and his words instantly earned him a playful punch from Dion. “I’m eating the best foods in the universe. All I have to do when I come back from work is to chill and do whatever I like ... but well, it’s true that was before. Now, it’s going to be even better.”

“Better?” Dion’s head shot up.

“Yes. Because where we go, I know we’ll be together all the time, not just for some borrowed time.”

Dion fell silent and rubbed his forehead against John’s collarbone.

“Promise?” he asked softly.

“Promise,” John said back.

“Should we consider it an honor that we’re riding so far in front?” Xavier inquired, as he looked through the back windows of the van at the other vehicles behind.

What did make him a little worried was that Marcus was leaving the others in a cloud of dust.

“Yeah, it’s an honor, Your Majesty,” Marcus replied. “And I just want to show Edgar what this baby can do now because he worked on the engine.”

“I believe that the demonstration was more than satisfying,” Edgar replied, from the seat next to Marcus.

The man cared for no one else to ride in that seat. Xavier could not find it in him to find an affront in that. He preferred riding in the back with Ayn anyway. The man was holding him by the shoulders and was happily chatting with Cory.

“So you two,” Xavier turned his attention to his lover and his former servant. “You conspired under my roof.”

Cory had the decency to look away guiltily. But Ayn laughed, like the uncouth devil he was, and even dared to tip Xavier’s chin to make him turn.

“If we hadn’t plotted against you, you wouldn’t have gotten it so good,” Ayn joked.

Xavier could sense Cory making himself little in his place. No matter the importance lying on his shoulders, Cory was the same. For his sake, and not only,

he hoped Lucas was safe. He knew enough about the Trainers' re-education system to also know that it could be reversed, at least to some degree.

"You know fully well that I chose that path," Xavier stared his lover in the eyes, but he felt like laughing, too. "I could have called an army upon you."

"And risk losing all of me?" Ayn mocked.

"Of course, that consideration stopped me from even trying to do that," Xavier replied and grinned.

Now he could feel Cory relaxing gradually on the bench across from him.

"For what is worth, Cory," he finally turned toward his former servant, "I do not blame you for anything. Even though you disobeyed me, I know you did it because of the kindness of your heart."

"And also because no one resists me," Ayn joked again.

Xavier glared at his lover, but by the smug smile on Ayn's lips, he could tell the man was far from being impressed.

"I knew Ayn wanted his freedom," Cory said simply, clearly not completely oblivious to the subtleties of the exchange between the two lovers. "I hoped you would forgive me, Xavier."

It was clear as day that the former servant found it difficult to say his ex-Master's name without the honorific.

"And forgiven you are. Even more than that. Ayn kidnapping me was the best thing that had ever happened to me until that moment," Xavier said.

Ayn leaned a bit to stare at him.

"Are you frigging serious? You were like the Master of the world or something. All day wearing silk and having sexy boys like Cory wash your back," Ayn joked.

"It was not what I wanted or needed," Xavier pointed out.

"Ah, but I know what you want and need," Ayn grinned.

“You should have a bit of decorum in front of other people,” Xavier chided his lover.

“Pff,” Ayn shrugged. “It’s not like Cory didn’t see my naked ass ever.”

“Please don’t remind me. You know you’re not allowed to fool around,” Xavier glared, hoping that this time Ayn knew he was only half-joking.

“Chill, Xav, you know no one compares to you. And I bet Cory hated all that servant shit you were forcing him to do.”

“Guys, I think I’m going to try sitting in the front with Marcus and Edgar if you two plan on going at it like this,” Cory intervened, his voice filled with amusement.

“No need,” Ayn waved. “You chill, too. I promised Xav I’ll behave on this trip and even keep my hands to myself.”

“Really? When did you promise that?” Xavier asked, surprised.

“It must have been while you were sleeping or something,” Ayn shrugged.

The vehicle seemed to be catching even more speed, making the metal carcass tremble. They were pushed around their seats like bags of potatoes.

“Marcus!” Xavier boomed.

“What? Don’t you like it, Your Majesty?” Marcus roared.

“I would like it even more if we were to arrive at our destination in one piece,” Xavier poured all his previous Ruler training and the irony he could muster in that statement.

“Point taken,” Marcus agreed, and the vehicle was finally brought back to cruising speed. “Edgar, my man,” he added, slapping the scientist on the back, “you did a fine job with this one. You make me wonder what other tricks you have up your sleeve.”

“Seeing that I’m about to decorate the dashboard with the light breakfast I had this morning, I would say that I should keep those tricks up my sleeve and avoid sharing them,” Edgar replied, only half-amused.

“Oh, no, and ruin the upholstery?” Marcus joked. “It’s genuine, you know.”

“I suppose it is,” Edgar acquiesced. “Let me guess. Genuine ... crap?” the scientist seemed to have chosen the word after careful deliberation.

Marcus howled with laughter.

“I fucking love this man,” he shouted over the roaring of the upgraded engine.

“And I sincerely admire your easiness to use cuss words,” Edgar replied politely.

“I could teach you more,” Marcus promised.

“Are you teaching Edgar dirty words now, Marcus?” Ayn intervened. “You might break our little scientist. Next thing we know, he starts drinking booze and sleeping around.”

“I can assure you that I find the beverage called as such difficult to keep down. As for sleeping around, I’m afraid I’m more than satisfied with the current arrangements,” Edgar replied promptly, contributing to the happy banter flying back and forth. “For now, I will just settle for the deliberate use of the word mentioned before, and nothing more.”

It seemed so natural to pretend to be happy and carefree, Xavier noticed while looking around at the faces of his comrades. But he knew what that meant. The words, the attitude. No one knew what lay ahead. And, as he stole a look toward Cory, he wasn’t the only one who knew exactly how they stood. Cory seemed troubled, and it was right to be so.

The city was approaching, a silhouette at the horizon, drawing a blue-grey shape against the still sunlit sky. It was not going to be long for the twilight to settle. And, according to Ayn, that was the best time to begin their operation.

Cory could sense an ominous feeling invading his chest, to the point that he could feel that he was skipping one breath or two. Something was unsettling about the city rising in the distance. He could not tell what it was.

He got up from his place and got behind Edgar's seat in front so that he could take a clearer look through the windshield. The others fell silent, too, a contrast to their happy chatter from before. It was like they felt something wasn't quite right.

"All right," Ayn was the first to speak. "We'll just need to go first inside and bash some heads in."

"Please, don't kill anyone," Edgar said sternly.

"Don't worry, my man," Ayn replied. "I'm an expert at making people take little naps, that's all. They might get a huge headache, after this, though. Xav and I go first."

"Isn't it a bit too risky?" Cory asked, looking back at Ayn and Xavier.

"Xav throws a mean punch," Ayn grinned. "Sorry, Cory, but I don't see you doing that."

Cory pondered over Ayn's words and looked at Xavier. The look on his former Master's face bore no argument. There was little of the Drena Ruler apparent on that face; Xavier had changed, emerged as a different man, and his face was now tanned by the desert sun, and his steely grey eyes had another quality to them, something wild and determined, unlike what Cory could remember from before.

"We go in, we solve the issue of guards lying around, doing nothing, and then we open the gates wide for everybody. In and out, no one will suspect a thing. Of course, we might need to use some of that firepower to suppress the guys that will come after us, in case they sound the alarm too early."

"You know a lot about Teran, Ayn," Cory noticed.

"My favorite place to shop. These guys have everything."

"Be careful," Cory said.

"It's okay, mom," Ayn laughed.

"I'm coming with you," Cory said right away, and his voice sounded determined, even to his ears.

“Let the boy play with you,” Marcus urged Ayn. “He may be scrawny, but we all were like this.”

“Not you, Marcus,” Ayn shot back with a large grin. “You were always big. Your mom had to work six days and six nights to get you out of her belly.”

“No shit,” Marcus laughed. “So you were one of the midwives, holding my mom’s hand? No wonder you can’t shoot for shit.”

“We’re getting close,” Xavier interrupted them. “I hope you were clear, Marcus when you told the others to wait for us to clear the entrance and give them the signal.”

“Sure thing, Your Majesty,” Marcus nodded.

Marcus slowed down, letting them at a fair distance from the entrance. Cory could not suppress the heavy pressure he felt descending upon him like a veil made of lead, as they continued to get closer.

Their steps into the sand were making strange sounds. Like they were the only sounds. Cory looked around. There was not a bird in the sky, not a single growl from desert animals. Nothing moved.

He had a strong sense of foreboding, as he threaded behind Ayn and Xavier.

“Something’s not right,” he spoke.

The two men in front turned to look at him.

“What do you mean, Cory?” Xavier’s inquisitive eyes searched for Cory.

“There is just too much silence,” he explained.

“So everybody’s off to dinner,” Ayn shrugged. “Plus, it’s not like you could hear anything through those heavy doors, anyway.”

“No, I don’t mean just the city. There’s just nothing,” Cory insisted.

Xavier remained silent, but he turned slowly to face Teran, not more than a short distance away.

“Cory is right,” the former Ruler spoke.

“Shit,” Ayn mumbled. “What the hell is this supposed to mean?”

“We have to find out,” Xavier began marching toward the entrance, with steady steps.

“Really? We do?” Ayn said, but there was no humor in his voice now, just apprehension.

Cory hurried after them.

For minutes, they remained silent, but now, all three of them were throwing cautious looks around.

They stopped in front of the large gates. Ayn hurried to brush off the security panel that appeared to be covered in fine dust.

“They should do a bit of cleaning once in a while,” Ayn joked. “Now let’s see if I can wire us in.”

Cory stepped closer, looking at the security panel, too.

“Isn’t this odd?” he spoke out loud.

“What?” Ayn replied while he began punching in numbers while holding a small device in his hand.

Cory had learned from Edgar that it was some magnetic device that could override the components in the security panel. The scientist had worked on improving that, too.

“This dust,” he touched the edge of the panel, gathering some powder on the tip of his fingers.

“Cory, not the time for playing the house maiden. I need to work on getting us in,” Ayn replied, his attention focused on the device in his hand and the security panel.

“I don’t think there’s any need,” Xavier drew their attention. “The gate appears to be open.”

“Now that’s fucking strange,” Ayn murmured, raising his eyes from his work. “They never leave this open. That much I know.”

Xavier didn't reply. Instead, he grabbed the heavy handle and pulled toward him. Cory and Ayn hurried to join him, the latter reaching for his gun.

"I don't think there's any need for that, either," Xavier shook his head and pushed the large gate open wide.

Cory knew, instinctively, what he was going to see, but he looked anyway. On the large corridor opening in front of them, lay clothes covered in the same dust of a whitish color from the security panel. They looked like guard uniforms, as far as he could tell. As if on cue, the wind began wailing.

"What the fuck is this?" Ayn murmured, giving a voice to everything all the three of them were thinking.

"It looks like the test was a resounding success, Head Trainer," one of the grey hoods spoke.

"As expected. No sign of life from Teran?"

"None whatsoever. What should we do about Lord Lucas? He appears to be unconscious," another Trainer asked.

"He will come to his senses," the Head Trainer replied.

"But is he capable of carrying on our work?"

"He will be. Enough to bring our plan to fruition."

"He might become damaged beyond repair."

"That is not a matter of concern. When his role is finished, we will no longer need him anymore," the Head Trainer spoke.

The grey hoods moved out of the room, in silence. The Head Trainer sat at the long table, taking in the human slouched in the iron chair. The weariness was going to fade, he decided, watching his hands and willing their trembling away. Not long until he could claim true rest. The plan was going to succeed, and his existence's work was going to be complete.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Cory knew what fear felt like. He remembered the way the hot iron had branded his flesh, the searing pain. As he could still recall being asked the same questions by the Trainers about Xavier's disappearance, over and over again.

But this, this was a new kind of fear, sister to despair, deep and wide, threatening to swallow him whole, down to the last fiber of his being.

He leaned against the metal wall of the long corridor, breathing hard, and taking in the image of the lifeless clothes on the ground, the unusual aspect of their positions as if they had just been scattered around by an enormous impatient hand.

Xavier seemed to be the one with the cool head. The former Ruler crouched and raked his fingers through the whitish dust, bringing them to his nose to smell the strange substance. By now, all the three of them knew what that was. The people of Teran, the guards, turned to fine dust. Cory dreaded to think that everyone inside the city had shared the same fate. But deep down, he knew, that was the truth.

"I can only surmise that this is the result of a weapon of mass destruction in action," Xavier said out loud.

"What kind of weapon would that be?" Ayn mumbled.

Unlike Xavier who was inspecting their surroundings with cold eyes, Ayn was almost just as shaken as Cory was. And that had to stand for something, seeing the rough life the man had led up till that point. Ayn must have faced death before. But now he was scared, too.

"The kind of weapon that the scientists in Aeria are working on as we speak," Xavier straightened up.

"But if the weapon is not yet built, how come ..." Ayn questioned, his words fading away, as he was taking in his surroundings with frightened eyes.

"Oh, that was not the weapon that is yet to be constructed. It was just a small-scale prototype," Xavier replied. "And this was a trial run," he added, as he scanned the long corridor with a frown etched deeply on his forehead.

"A trial run? How do you know?" Ayn mumbled.

“Because we’re alive,” Xavier said, turning to look at Ayn, and then at Cory.

“But that means,” Cory spoke with difficulty, “that once the weapon is ready ... Everyone will be dead?”

Xavier nodded gravely.

“How the fuck can we deal with this kind of thing?” Ayn almost shouted, kicking a small dune of dust at his feet furiously, making tiny speckles fly around.

“Any weapons we could wield would be ineffective,” Xavier confirmed what all of them knew already.

“Then what are we doing here?” Ayn asked, his voice rising gradually. “What are we going to tell the rest? That there’s no point? Did we get all up for nothing? We will die on our feet, like these poor shmucks? Without a chance to fight?”

Xavier took hold of Ayn, as the man was struggling, swinging his arms, and moving around like he was drunk.

“Listen to me, Ayn,” Xavier’s voice was just as loud, but calm. “Everyone knows the risks. And at least we know what’s coming our way.”

Xavier’s voice and firm grasp seemed to get through Ayn. The man was now breathing hard, but at least he was calming down.

“How are you?” Xavier turned toward Cory.

The former servant waved, trying to look away.

“Now it’s not the time to lose our heads,” Xavier began speaking, without letting go of Ayn’s arm. “It’s time for us to think how we are going to go against this.”

“There’s no weapon to go against this thing,” Ayn pointed out, but he wasn’t shouting anymore. “There’s no point for us to be here.”

“We should still get the weapons we’ve come here for,” Xavier spoke. “They might not help us against the weapon the Trainers want to build, but they will help us carve a way to get to them.”

“The Trainers are immortal,” Cory recited from his place, his voice drained of emotion.

“That may be,” Xavier nodded curtly. “But that doesn’t mean that they cannot be stopped. We only need to find a way.”

“What are we going to tell the others?” Cory asked.

“We won’t destroy their morale by letting them know of this,” Xavier replied.

“But how are we going to haul all the weapons without them knowing?” Ayn was the one to ask now.

“As long as we don’t let them see, they won’t suspect anything. Quick, let’s get organized. Let’s start bringing weapons to the door. It is the surest way to streamline the process, without letting anyone sneak a peek inside.”

“What the hell?”

They turned to look at Marcus who let himself in, followed closely by Edgar.

“What the fuck happened here?” Marcus murmured.

Not even the big burly man was in the mood to joke anymore. Edgar, just like Xavier, crouched to examine the nature of the fine dust covering everything.

“Is this how the entire place looks like?” Edgar inquired, his voice not trembling one bit.

Cory admired the scientist. Maybe Ayn and Marcus had faced violence before, terrible things, but they were still mute in the face of what the Trainers could do.

“We have no reason to believe that it would be any different. Marcus, Edgar, we need to keep this to ourselves,” Xavier spoke.

“But what the fuck happened?” Marcus insisted. “Is everybody ... dead?”

“It appears that a device was used to destroy every living being in the area,” Edgar explained. “That is why we could not see any birds in the sky. Or hear any of the desert creatures that should be out at this hour.”

“A device?” Marcus boomed. “How the fuck do you fight a device like this?”

“The full-scale weapon is most probably being built in Aeria as we speak,” Xavier spoke.

“Aeria? Why? Why are they building such a thing?” Marcus demanded to know. “And I’m asking again, people, what kind of weapon can we use against this ... device?”

“We will not use a weapon,” Edgar said with conviction. “We will use a strategy.”

“A strategy?” Marcus turned, and the others turned to look at the scientist, too.

“Yes. It will involve getting into Aeria and, of course, sabotage,” Edgar replied.

“And how are we going to get inside? Without letting the Trainers know we’re on to something?” Ayn was the one to speak now.

Edgar pushed his glasses up his nose and watched the others through the now scratched and dusty lenses.

“We have a little ace up our sleeve. I was the one to design and work on the gate system.”

There was nothing left of the happy banter that had accompanied them on the road to Teran. Marcus was staring ahead, his hairy hands gripping the wheel tightly. Next to him, Edgar was scribbling down something on a small notebook he had found in one of the lockers in Teran, along with other writing supplies.

Cory didn’t have to look to know that Ayn and Xavier were both deep in thought, too.

“How can we know for sure that what we think about this is correct?” he began speaking, just for the sake of breaking the heavy silence.

“There are no weapons on the entire continent for something of this scale. The Trainers are the most powerful beings,” Xavier replied.

“We don’t even know if they are ‘beings’ to begin with,” Cory said, burying his face into his palms.

“That is true,” Xavier confirmed.

“What happens if we cannot destroy them?” Cory continued.

“Let’s focus on the present. Right now, we need to derail their plans of turning everything that breathes on the continent into fine dust,” Xavier said.

“How come they want to do this now? The fucking scumbags,” Ayn mumbled, rubbing his fists with a hard expression on his face.

“It is not a question of want,” Xavier placed one hand on his lover’s back, in assurance. “It is a question of means. And that tells us something.”

“That they couldn’t do it by themselves,” Cory continued Xavier’s train of thought.

Ayn looked up and stared at Cory.

“So they’re not all powerful?” Ayn asked.

Cory shrugged.

“That could be, I think.”

“Yes, I also believe that to be the truth,” Xavier confirmed. “All my life, ever since I was barely getting into the education system they prepare for Rulers, I heard about the project. Nothing of its nature, or what it could entail, but its importance was obvious. For us, too, as a consequence. This,” he raised his damaged hand, “might just have been part of it. What the purpose was, that I cannot tell.”

“Could it be that other Rulers suffered the same modification as you?” Cory asked.

“Again, this is a question I have no answer for,” Xavier said. “But I am afraid that, in my stead, Lucas could be used to fill in the role I was prepared to play. For what is worth, I’m sorry, Cory. But I do think you deserve to learn the truth. Or, at least, to be prepared for it.”

“It is all I’m thinking of,” Cory said with small, self-defeating laugh. “And what I’m afraid of most.”

Ayn made a small non-committal sound.

“All I want to know is whether you’re truly and thoroughly fucked or not,” Ayn said.

“That is not something we can know the answer for right now,” Xavier replied.

“So, all in, until the end?” Ayn turned toward his lover.

“All in,” Xavier nodded.

Cory remained silent. At least the two had one another. And what he was terrified of was that even if, through some miracle, they saved the entire existence on the continent, he would still not save the man he loved.

But he kept quiet. He watched fondly as Xavier pulled Ayn close into a hug. Throughout his short existence, he had made friends, and he had known love. Somehow, in the final hour, that had to be enough.

“How do you think Cory is holding up?” Ayn questioned his lover.

Xav had seemed unable to sleep, and, without a word, Ayn had woken up and followed him. Xav didn’t seem surprised to hear him talk.

“He’s fighting a lonely struggle,” Xav said simply. “We’re here, together, and we might have a chance, but who knows what they could have done to Lucas. I do not dare to think about it.”

“Do you think that you know, they got him on their side or something?” Ayn asked the question that had stayed on the tip of his tongue for the entire journey back from Teran. For Cory’s sake, he had kept silent.

“They might,” Xav said. “And, if that happened, we might have a tough call to make.”

“We can’t have his head!” Ayn protested.

Xav turned to look at him, in the faint light of the stars. Ayn could barely make the other’s profile, let alone stare into his eyes. But he knew his lover enough to understand that the look he must be throwing was not a kind one.

“Of course not. But we might have to keep everyone from having his head,” Xav said slowly, speaking every word like he needed to make sure Ayn understood its meaning.

He nodded curtly.

“Anything he might end up being guilty of, it was done against his will.”

“Could you turn him, you know, the way he was?”

“There’s no way to tell, at this point. But no matter what he is now, and what he does, he will always be my friend.”

“I’m with you,” Ayn placed both hands on his lover’s shoulders, squeezing them. “Anyone who dares to get close to your friend, he’s going to have to go through me first.”

“I appreciate your loyalty,” Xav took one step closer. “Let’s hope that we won’t need to use it to fend off the others. As long as Lucas breathes, I believe that he is still himself beneath the surface.”

Ayn pulled his man into a hug now. He liked it best when Xav was leaning in, like right now, letting himself go a little. He pushed his hands into the longish strands. Xav needed a haircut. Probably most of them required one. Later.

“You know,” he said, as he pulled Xav’s head back a little, and angled it to that perfect point so that they could kiss, “we’ve never really done it out in the open, like this.”

“Are we doing it, then?” Xav asked with a small chuckle.

“We sure are,” he answered. “It’s like our last night alive, or something.”

“Are you trying to kill the mood here?” Xav laughed.

“Nah, just stating a possible fact. We should fuck to last us forever.”

“We sure should,” Xavier confirmed.

They could joke, even now. They could hug, and they could kiss. And Ayn was undoubtedly not the kind of man to let an opportunity pass him by. For good or for

worse, Xav, the man who had been trained all his life to be the First Ruler of Drena, was in his arms, was the lover of a man dragged from the depths of the desert, and now he cared not for going back to that white city that knew no love.

And if that wasn't the biggest middle finger he could show to those scumbags in Drena, he had no idea what else could.

"I thought you were bent on jumping me," Xavier brought him back to reality. "What were you thinking about just now?"

"That maybe I got screwed over that day when that asshole caught me and dragged me to Drena, but I am sure screwing those scumbags over now, by screwing your brains out," Ayn said with a small laugh.

"There's a lot of screwing going on in your mouth, and none where it matters," Xav pushed his hands under Ayn's t-shirt, raking his blunt nails over the skin.

"Bend over, and you'll see screwing," Ayn teased.

"What? No foreplay?" Xav's laugh was low and heady, sending eddies of pleasure straight into his groin.

He let himself down at the man's feet.

"You won't last through my foreplay," he warned, as he fiddled with the man's zipper to pull his cock out.

He had no trouble taking Xav deep. The man was used to Ayn's rough technique, but he still squirmed and huffed and moaned when his lover began bobbing his head to and fro. Ayn knew he could be efficient if he wanted to. After all, he had learned from the best. That, and they also needed something to use as lube.

"Ayn, please, not so ..." Xav moaned, but Ayn didn't let go, despite feeling Xav's fingers locking into his hair and trying to stop him.

The man was bucking his hips now and trembling. Ayn drew with expert moves all of Xav's essence, holding it into his mouth. Xav was still shuddering as Ayn got back to his feet.

He spat into his palm and nudged his lover to turn. No words were needed, and Ayn could feel his cock throbbing into his jeans, as Xav made a one-eighty, and pushed down his pants.

Good thing he was an expert at pulling his one-eyed monster out of his jeans with just one hand. He was busy using Xav's jizz to lubricate the man's hole.

"Damn, it's a wonder how you can still have a damn tight hole with all the love I'm giving you," he whispered, as he worked the improvised lube in and out Xav's ass.

"Complaining?" Xav teased, but it was clear, by the way, he was speaking that he felt proud to hear that.

"Not in a million years," Ayn chuckled as he positioned himself behind his lover.

Xav was a real fighter; that was what Ayn loved most about him. But he knew how to give in, too, and Ayn loved that, also. With a muffled curse, he buried himself deep into Xav's tight ass, his fingers digging into the man's hips.

"Fuck, who could've known you'd be such a perfect bottom?" Ayn murmured.

"I should remind you that your ass is treated quite regularly with the same type of affection from my part," Xav replied with a small laugh.

"Ah, damn, Xav, you always talk too much," Ayn replied.

Quickly, he pulled the man up to him. Being almost the same height, it was easy for them to do it like this, on their feet. The most rewarding part was that he could use his hands, too. One to grab Xav's growing erection, and the other, to tease the man's nipples, under the tight t-shirt.

"I'm so lucky to have you," he said quietly.

Xav turned his head to kiss him.

"Same here. Now fuck me as you promised. You know, until others have the same fantasy of doing it out in the open, and the place gets rather crowded."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Ayn brushed his lips against his.

He knew well how to take his lover for a ride. That was something he might have learned along the way, but it was clear he was now better even than his master. Xav's moans were growing in intensity, and it was liberating for both of them to voice their pleasure like this, where no one could hear them.

"Fuck, I'll always love you, Xav," he whispered, as he began climbing the path of no return.

"I'll always love you, too, Ayn," Xav moaned back, as he started coming.

Only one man, one man in the entire universe, could make him feel like this. Ayn held his lover close, as he poured all of him inside Xav. Knowing that the man felt the same made it all worth it. Even going to war, a war they might not win.

Sleep was not his friend, and it wasn't going to be for as long as this was going to last, Cory thought, as he laid on the improvised cot, in one of the humble dwellings the people of Haven had put at his disposal. Not far away from him, Edgar's rhythmic breathing should have lulled him back to sleep, too, but his head was still too full with the dream he had just had.

For all that was worth, it could have been a good dream. The best kind. His body deep in slumber, he had awakened as if he was still in Drena, in Lucas's household. He should have been happy for still being able to remember one of those blessed days.

The dream had been vivid, too. It had felt as if Cory had just gotten out of bed, busy already with putting things in their places, straightening the sheets, opening the windows, and starting the day as the servant of the household.

The only difference to that position was, of course, that Cory had just gotten out of his master's bed, not his own, and his body was still aching. It was a pleasant ache, turning his bones to butter, and the blood in his veins to pure fire, as he remembered the night before.

Lucas was always a demanding lover, Cory from the dream thought fondly. It was a good thing that he could sleep in as much as he wanted. As the master of the household, Lucas was not at all demanding, a contrast to his draconic wishes as

his servant's lover. Cory had spent the night prior with his hands tied to the wooden headboard, while Lucas had been busy driving him to the heights of ecstasy and keeping him on edge for what might have been hours.

"Have mercy, Master!" he had cried out, only half-joking.

For all his demands not to be considered a real master by his lover, Lucas surely loved to be called as such when bed matters were concerned.

"Ask me nicely, Cory, and I just might," Lucas had teased. "You know I do this for a good reason. If you were to come once, you'd go to sleep and leave me unsatisfied."

"You know it's not like that," Cory had glared, slipping out of his submissive role.

"Oh, are you mouthing off to me?" Lucas had chuckled, and changed the angle of his thrusts, making Cory cry out in ecstasy once more.

"I wouldn't dare," Cory had moaned softly, his eyes moist from too much edging and arousal.

Lucas from the dream had looked down at him fondly and finally settled into a rhythm that allowed them both to reach completion. Cory knew the sheets were soaked through by now, and that he should have gotten up and changed them. But Lucas had just pulled him into a tight hug, moving only enough to let Cory's wrists free. They had slept till morning tangled in an embrace.

Oh, it was so late! Cory thought as he moved around the house to see about his chores. How come he had slept in so much? It was only normal for Lucas not to wake him up when leaving for his workday, but it was ... too late.

He stared at the large clock on the wall. There was something odd about it. It was an ancient piece of furniture Lucas had brought with him from Aeria. Its precision was, as Lucas had said jokingly, legendary.

Suddenly fascinated by the object, Cory moved near. For a while, he could not tell what was not quite all right with it. And then, he realized. The clock was working backward.

He stepped away from it, stumbling over a chair, and almost falling on his back. Then the door to the room opened, and Lucas walked in, seemingly preoccupied. He went straight to his nightstand, rummaging through the drawers as if he was looking for something in particular.

“How come you’re home?” Cory asked. “What time is it? The clock ...”

Lucas didn’t seem to hear him. He was still busy looking around, now his attention turned to the large closet. Crouched over an old box, another souvenir from Aeria, he was now looking through some papers, yellowed by the passing of time.

“Lucas,” Cory called tentatively.

Again, the man seemed too absorbed with his search. His hands were moving frantically, scattering the papers around.

“If you could tell me what you’re looking for ...”

“He cannot find what he’s looking for,” suddenly, a voice spoke.

Cory turned to see someone seated at the further corner of the room. His heart clenched when the apparition stood up and began walking toward him. He knew who that was.

“What he’s looking for,” the grey hooded shape towered over Cory, “was taken from him, and it will never be given back.”

“You’re lying!” Cory shouted.

By all means, he should have been shaken with his audacity. No one dared to raise his voice at the Head Trainer.

“I know who you are,” the grey hood spoke. “I know all about your little games, out there in the desert, with other misfits like you. You will never win.”

“Lucas, what did you do to Lucas?” Cory steeled his resolve.

The Head Trainer straightened up, pushing his hood back, letting Cory see the inhuman shape of his face, the deep-set dead eyes, the broad forehead on which pale skin stretched too thin, almost giving way to the bone beneath.

“Look,” the Head Trainer pointed at Lucas, and Cory turned.

Lucas stood up and now began looking around until his eyes fell on Cory.

“No,” Cory whispered, as grey lifeless orbs set on him.

He had awakened drenched in cold sweat. So he was warned. Lucas was not the same man anymore. Was that what the dream was trying to tell him? But dreams could only be born from a person’s subconscious, so maybe that was just what he feared most. It could not be that the Head Trainer was entering his dreams. He had never heard of such a thing before. So it was his choice to believe that the dream was nothing but his fear trying to get the best of him.

“Don’t worry, Lucas,” he spoke into the dark. “I’m coming for you.”

“What is it with him now?” one of the Trainers asked, pointing at Lucas, thrashing in his sleep, still seated on his iron chair.

“We practically carved out an important part of his memories,” the Head Trainer explained. “His mind is still struggling to adapt to the loss. It is a natural process.”

“It is a sign of instability,” the Trainer spoke again. “And we’re relying our existence’s grandest work on an unstable mind?”

“Brother, do not doubt our decision. Are you against it, for some reason?”

The Head Trainer strained to watch into his brother’s eyes. But the grey hood stayed low, covering the Trainer’s face.

“Only if it endangers what we have fought for all our existence,” the Trainer replied.

“Do not doubt,” the Head Trainer repeated his words from earlier. “What we needed from Lord Lucas, we took. Now nothing can stop up. The shipment from Aeria is due over the next five days. The test was concluded. Soon, we will be free.”

Other Trainers in the room murmured, repeating the words.

Why the doubt now? The Head Trainer pondered. He rarely dreamed. But dreams meant nothing. They were but a reminiscence of things that had never happened and never would. Nothing was unsettling about them. The part of him, just as of his brothers, the only that was keeping them tied to this wretched world, had to be to blame.

It didn't matter what he thought he felt during the dream. That luminous presence, a danger to him and his brothers. She was no longer here. Not a trace of her, for so much time. The fact that he could still remember her was of no consequence.

Otherwise, the dream made no sense. He could not remember to have ever been interested in visiting Lord Lucas's quarters. Some Trainers paid house visits, but not the Head Trainer. It had something to do with his station if he was to think correctly.

He dismissed the dream. Fretting over connotations of what a dream could mean was the sort of thing usual to the mindless gossip between servants or slaves. It meant nothing.

"Dion, wake up," John nudged him gently. "I'm going with the next team to cover some ground. Scout around."

"I'm coming with you," Dion said with determination, as he sat up, and dusted his pants.

It was more of a force of habit than anything else. There was no point to try keeping his clothes clean now that they were here, where dust and grime should have been good friends to him by now.

"Good," John said shortly. "Then we two could be one team. It would be more efficient this way."

His man's voice was a tad strained. Dion tried to make John's face in the faint light of the torches. They were rationing everything, and there was just one torch actually, now. It almost gave no light at all, but the men found a little comfort in its flickering flame, so, for all that was worth, it performed a vital role.

“All right, let’s go,” he said and slid his hand into John’s larger one.

He was a bit surprised when John pulled him a bit too quickly after him. What could be wrong? He wondered.

They had a small torch with them, which John had modified by wrapping a long strip of cloth seeped into tar to last longer, while giving little light, and quite smelly fumes. Dion didn’t complain.

“What should we be looking for?” Dion asked. “I must remind you that my experience with being a miner is close to naught,” he added.

They were walking for some time and barely took a corner when John pushed him with his back against the wall. The torch fell at their feet, dying without a single sigh.

“Hey, the torch ...” Dion tried to point out the obvious when firm, impatient lips caught his mouth.

John’s hands were on his hips, lifting him off the ground, soon on his ass, making him wrap his legs around his man. Dion didn’t need any other explanations to know what was going on there. John’s hard erection was grinding against his crotch and was making his manhood twitch with sudden desire.

“Don’t worry, I have matches,” John whispered during the single second he allowed Dion to breathe before catching his lips in another passionate kiss.

John’s moves were hurried as the man pushed down Dion’s shirt from his shoulders, followed next by the pants, making the clothes fall into a heap at their feet.

“Aren’t you afraid someone might come?” Dion whispered, feeling vulnerable all naked like that.

“Do you think others aren’t doing what we’re doing?” John chuckled. “I want you, princess. Who knows when I get another chance to have you?”

All rational thought and fear of getting caught drained away from his mind, as John began kissing his neck, making him throw his head back. John’s lips were rough, and a bit chapped from not drinking enough water, but, nonetheless, they felt like a

balm on Dion's skin. John was busy raining kisses over his naked chest, going lower until the same rough lips wrapped around Dion's cock, now entirely awakened by the experience.

He could not remember ever coming so fast. Or maybe he could not remember much anymore.

"Turn, baby," John said, his voice filled with urgency and strained with desire. "I must have you or I might not ever come out of here alive."

He needed no other incentive. Dion turned with his back at his lover, resting his head against the cold wall. So strange, he thought, the wall wasn't smooth here, and it smelled of earth, and was soft, like the fields worked by farmers in early spring.

John's tongue wormed its way deep inside Dion's ass, and he forgot everything in a split second. He was bound to get hard again if his man was going to go at it like this. His fingers began digging into the soft soil the wall seemed made of, while John made love to his back entrance, pushing his tongue inside over and over again, in his quest of making the tight ring of muscle give up to the intrusion.

"Hurry," he murmured, wanting John so badly that nothing else mattered.

He almost howled in pleasure mixed with pain, as John quickly obeyed, and began pushing at his back. The man was using all the restraint he could be capable of. But even John, the gentle giant who had saved him from being miserable and lonely for his entire life, could not hold back anymore.

So Dion arched his back, standing on his toes so that he could impale himself into the man's mighty sword. He wanted this, the same way he wanted water or food. Oh, no, it was more than that. It was a need, but a craving, too, and, for someone who had been denied having another man's affection all his life, Dion was sure no one would care if he took, and took, and took.

"Baby," John cooed, but his voice was now strained, low and turned into a moan.

"Fuck me, John," Dion demanded, pouring all the tenderness, love, and want for his man into his words.

There was no way he could keep quiet. Even if he bit his lips through, the desperate sounds he was making were now bouncing off the walls. They were doubled by John's hitched breathing, his low, masculine growl. One time, Dion had seen a strange movie showing animals in heat. He was sure he and his lover were no different, but that didn't make him feel less.

It made him feel free.

"Harder, faster, deeper," he chanted, and behind him, John was obeying his demands with every thrust.

Dion's fingers drew long deep trails into the wall, as John started coming inside him, dragging him along. Now they were both a heap on the floor, probably dirty and undoubtedly sweaty, but happy and unafraid.

"How come it gets better every time?" John was the first one to speak.

Dion giggled.

"I don't know. I thought the novelty would wear off, eventually."

John pulled him gently by the hair at the back of his head, to kiss him again.

"Wear off? I don't think so. You're like an addiction to me. The more I taste you, the more I want you."

"Such a glutton," Dion teased. "Good thing this wall is so cold. I was frankly afraid we might make the air catch fire," he joked.

John turned slightly and pressed his hand against the wall.

"Light up the torch," he told Dion, rummaging through his clothes for the matches.

Without a word, Dion obeyed, his hands now accustomed to finding things in the dark. He stood up and guided the torch toward the wall. Next to him, John was pressing his fingers into the wall.

"I have a feeling I know exactly where we should start digging," John murmured.

"We should tell the others," he added, in a determined voice.

"Is this a way out?" Dion asked, touching the wall again.

“Could be. It’s the best thing we’ve come across so far. Let’s hurry.”

They barely took two steps, when John began laughing.

“First, let’s just put some clothes on. I might not be a surprise for my mates, but I’m sure they would love a bit too much to see me flaunting my beloved in the buff.”

They were still snickering as they were dragging their clothes on.

“Do you know how to reach Aeria?” Cory asked Marcus, as the others were moving about, loading the van with all that was necessary for their trip.

“I’ve only been once,” Marcus said curtly. “Nothing worth stealing there. Even if the scientists there may come up with all kinds of crazy devices, if we don’t know how to use them, there’s no point in grabbing them.”

“So do you think you can take us there?”

Marcus pointed at Edgar, who was busy checking his compass.

“Trust my intuition and your friend’s genius, and we’ll get there. But we need to time our arrival. I suppose we don’t want a welcome committee.”

“Do you think someone might know what we’re planning?”

He had no idea why he was asking Marcus, of all people, these things. Maybe he didn’t want to make the others worry about him. But Marcus was the kind of guy made from sterner stuff than most, so he was the most likely to offer him an answer that wasn’t going to consider his feelings.

“If the fuckers in Drena know, then we’re fucked,” Marcus said matter-of-factly. “Who knows what kind of freakish weapons they might have. But the thing is no one has bothered us so far. That could mean that they don’t know shit. And we need that surprise element. We need it badly. Especially since we have no idea what we’re going against.”

“That’s good to know,” Cory murmured.

“Hey,” Marcus said firmly, “don’t go around like your dog died or something. People look up to you, as scrawny and pretty as you are. They think you’re something. Someone. So c’mon, chin up and get ready to face the music. Some of us might get on with this thing because of boredom or something, but there are true believers everywhere. You don’t want them to change their mind, right?”

Cory squared his shoulders and looked Marcus in the eyes, even though he needed to strain his neck a little for that.

“Are you a believer, Marcus?” he smiled, feeling a little better with the man’s rough encouragement.

“I might just be, pretty boy,” Marcus grinned, too. “Because frankly, I don’t recall ever feeling this motivated to go bash some heads in. Truth be told, those freaks must be pure evil. Never saw one myself, but I heard stories. If they won’t make much shadow on the earth, I won’t cry for them.”

“That’s great to know,” Cory patted the man’s arm. “And, Marcus, I’ll make sure not to let you down.”

Marcus was right. People followed him because of what they believed. And bad dreams could not stand in his way and his determination to do what was right.

Marcus had been right after all. They had to drive in turns, with Ayn, and even Xavier, behind the wheel for hours. But now they were close, and Edgar had suggested that they would make their entrance into Aeria, just a couple of hours before dawn.

The plan was crazy, but Cory believed in the scientist. The others seemed to share his belief.

“Let’s let the van here, hidden from view,” Edgar recommended. “It is a bit of hike to the gates, but there’s no surveillance at the gates. I don’t believe anyone suspects what we’re planning to do.”

“That might be just wishful thinking,” Xavier pointed out. “But it is our chance to throw a span in the works, so there’s no point to dally. Let’s get inside, and we’ll see if we get to live and fight another day.”

“Your man has a point,” Marcus spoke, nudging his friend, Ayn, in the ribs. “Just for the record, all of you,” he pointed at the others, “are the finest men I wish to die side by side.”

“Let’s not talk like we’re doomed to fail,” Cory was the one to speak now. “If there is one thing I understand, after reading the old books, and putting two and two together, is that the Trainers are a proud kind. They might not suspect at all what we’re trying to do. And that only because they think they are superior, and no one could challenge them. They raise the Rulers of Drena as their brightest minds, but even that seems to be a pet project, at best. For sure, they don’t suspect a party like ours getting ready to end their reign.”

“Yeah,” Marcus laughed, “we’re just a band of misfits from the desert, after all.”

The words, while spoken casually, had an ominous meaning to them. They reminded Cory of his dream. He pushed the dread threatening to raise its ugly head down to where it came from. Now the time was ripe for being a believer, not someone keen on hesitating.

He was aware of the sounds their feet were making on the gravel that seemed to be ever present around Aeria. But it wasn’t disconcerting, and it didn’t make his heart beat faster, or his ears prickle with apprehension.

Edgar explained to them in a low voice that they were going to use the so-called failsafe ladder that was supposed to be used only when the gate system was inoperable for some reason. The rest of them followed closely, as the scientist led the way.

It was a little hard to believe that their entrance was not going to cause a ruckus in the dormant city, but it looked like everyone was still asleep when they set foot on the other side. A row of shadows, they hurried along the walls, until they reached Edgar’s residence.

“They didn’t even bother to close the doors,” Edgar huffed in righteous indignation.

The room Cory knew was a total mess. It was clear that the Trainers had tried to make sense of what Edgar and Cory had been up to.

“What you are going to do is bold and crazy,” Xavier commented, addressing Edgar this time.

“Yes, I know,” the scientist nodded, as he started searching through his closet.

“Well, just know that we got your back for a hasty retreat,” Xavier pointed out at the concealed gun he was carrying.

Edgar seemed a bit distressed at that reminder.

“Let’s hope that it doesn’t get to that. The people living here are peaceful. They are not armed.”

“Let’s hope that they don’t give up any trouble, then,” Xavier replied in kind.

They were all silent, and only the sounds made by Edgar as he continued to rummage through his clothes filled the room. When the scientist finally spoke, everyone turned to look at him.

“It’s not long until morning. It would be strange for me to make an apparition on the morning call, but I’ll make my move before that.”

“Are you sure no one will notice you?” Cory asked.

“I told you, Cory. Everyone here is the type with their heads up in the clouds. And I will make my intervention short and efficient.”

“Are you really trusting your girlfriend that much?” Marcus asked as he leaned against a bookshelf heavy with old tomes, making it heave.

“Ahem, she is not my girlfriend,” Edgar blushed. “But, yes, I trust Lena. She’s our best bet right now.”

“I think you’re batshit crazy,” Marcus chuckled. “You think no one will sound the alarm, the moment they see you.”

“They won’t see me. They won’t look. As long as I’m dressed like them, and I wear my hat low like this,” the scientist pulled his high hat so that it almost covered his eyes completely, “they won’t suspect a thing. On most days I lived here, if someone had asked me if I saw Mr. X or Ms. Y, I could not have told them for the love of all that is.”

“Just be careful, okay?” Cory said, touching Edgar’s elbow lightly.

“You can count on me, Cory,” Edgar nodded. “I used to think my work was everything. But you showed me that there is much more to the world than that. I feel like for the first time in my life I have a purpose. And I am willing to do what it takes to fulfill that purpose.”

Cory pulled Edgar into a hug.

“Good luck, Edgar,” Cory said. “See you in a bit, then?”

Edgar nodded gravely.

“You can count on me. I’m sorry my house is such a mess,” he gestured around. “I hope you guys won’t be bored while I’m away. If everything works fine, by lunchtime, I will be back and by nightfall, we can put our plan into action.”

Cory knew it was not only his wish to believe. He honestly thought Edgar’s words spoke the truth and the fact that they had a purpose. He was going to face this new day without dark thoughts. And strange dreams involving the one he now could call his archenemy were slowly slipping from his mind. The Head Trainer was going to have the surprise of his existence the moment he was going to discover that his war machine was damaged beyond repair.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Nobody was saying a thing. Waiting was the pits, Cory thought, as he eyed the door for the umpteenth time with troubled eyes. Were they prepared for what was going to come through that door, should Edgar get caught? He could not tell, and he didn't need to check on his partners in justifiable crime, to know that they were thinking the same thing, maybe not worrying as much, but dealing with their thoughts in their own ways.

Xavier sat on a chair, his eyes set on the door, too, without even pretending that he was busy doing something else. Marcus was inspecting the pair of sub-machine guns concealed by his large leather jacket time and time again. It was clear as day that Ayn was tempted to do the same thing with his weaponry, but he was trying to pretend that he was nonchalant and not one bit affected by the long wait.

Could Edgar pull off such a stunt? For anyone, except the scientist, it seemed unlikely. But the man knew this city, its inhabitants, and he hadn't seemed one bit frightened by adverse outcomes as he had dressed in the usual Aerial attire and taken his temporary farewell.

He stood up and went to the window. Maybe it served to know in advance whether there was trouble coming their way or, the desired opposite, hope.

"I think they're coming," he said hurriedly, the moment he spotted Edgar's tall silhouette, accompanied by someone all dressed up in frilly garments.

Everyone stood up like they were ready to welcome someone very important. Which was, if he was thinking clearly, the truth. This next piece of the puzzle had to work. Lena had to be able to help them somehow. And willing, at the same time.

The door opened with a small screech, most probably due to lack of proper oiling, seeing that the master of the house had been away for some time now.

Edgar dutifully held the door for the woman, and Lena entered the room.

Everyone kept their breath, as the woman searched their faces with inquisitive eyes until she noticed Xavier. She opened her mouth, then closed it quickly, and made a curtsy.

“Lord Xavier,” she said, her eyes demurely cast down.

“There is no need for this, young lady,” Xavier spoke in a perfect Drena accent.

Cory stole a quick glance toward his former Master. It was evident that Xavier knew that his position could be used to impress their would-be ally, but, at the same time, he wanted to clear the air of all the possible complications his former station could incur.

“Did Edgar tell you everything?” Xavier continued, as Lena straightened up and now seemed tempted to keep her quiet observation of the men filling the room.

“An astonishing tale, yes, he did,” she admitted.

“Do I gather that you don’t believe him?” Xavier inquired.

Lena threw Edgar a little glance, filled with meaning.

“Edgar is the sanest person I know. I do believe him.”

“And I believe Lena is the perfect person to help us,” Edgar offered courteously in exchange for the strange compliment.

“I think this is their way of saying they like each other,” Marcus whispered to Ayn, making his friend snicker.

It wasn’t like the others couldn’t hear them. Cory hid a smile of his own, while Xavier half-turned to throw them a brief look. Lena blushed and looked away, while Edgar seemed to encounter sudden trouble with his collar.

“This is no time for chit-chat and meaningless banter,” Xavier chided Marcus and Ayn. “Young lady, what we are going to ask of you is dangerous, might not work, and could compromise you forever.”

“Great pep talk,” Marcus commented, but another look from Xavier made him turn temporarily mute.

“I understand the risks,” Lena replied. “But by what Edgar is telling me about what happened in Teran, it is not like I have a choice. As much as I would like to be philosophical enough about embracing my demise, I want to be able to continue my existence just as much as any other living creature. So, I am not doing this for

you only; I am just as much doing it for myself. And the ones I care about,” she added quickly, looking furtively at Edgar.

“I like her perspective on the situation,” Ayn was the one up to no good this time, trying to imitate Xavier’s high-class accent.

Xavier didn’t waste a breath to chide his lover for the small interruption.

“Well, it is great to know that you are on our side. But can you take us to where the components that you must send to Drena are?”

“I am afraid that there is only one shipment left. The others were scheduled for different days up till today. But I can take you to where the components are. Unfortunately, I cannot say whether something vital might be among them. I cannot guarantee the success of this sabotage operation.”

“For a machine as large as the one that the Trainers need to use, a lot of pieces can be vital. We might be in luck.”

“Let us all wait for nightfall,” Lena recommended. “Aerians are not famous for roaming the streets after dark. And, except for what are usually scheduled visits, we work unmonitored.”

“We will stay alert, nonetheless. When the Trainers suspected Cory of coming here, they did come unannounced,” Edgar spoke.

“Cory is Hector, right?” Lena smiled and looked directly at the former servant. “You could not have been from Bluesilver. People so beautiful could only be raised in Drena.”

“Now that makes me feel like I want to take offense,” Marcus parodied Xavier’s accent, making the others snicker. “Do you want to say, young lady, that my buddy Ayn here, and I, are some monkeys you wouldn’t look upon?”

Lena examined the burly man with unhidden curiosity. But not for one second did she seem surprised or intimidated by the mountain that was Marcus.

“Depending on standards of attractiveness that pertain to one culture or another, you two could be considered within the small percentage of people gifted with

looks that might be appreciated by the rest of the population,” she answered promptly.

Marcus stared at the short woman through his eyelashes, as he weighed her.

“What do you think, Ayn?”

“I think she just said that we’re handsome sons of bitches,” Ayn replied, in good humor.

“Hey, say what you want about your mom, but leave mine out of it,” Marcus shot back, and that earned him an instant playful punch in the shoulder from Ayn.

Lena observed the exchange between them with keen eyes.

“Your friends are fascinating, Edgar,” she turned toward the scientist.

Cory could tell Edgar was not exactly comfortable with all the exchange between Marcus and Ayn, by the coloring of the heights of his cheeks. But he was a brave man, nonetheless, despite being so blatantly teased.

“Yes, I suppose they are,” he answered promptly.

“We’re teaching Edgar how to shoot a gun,” Ayn boasted.

“Shoot a gun?” Lena expressed her astonishment. “Aren’t you afraid that you might get hurt, Edgar?” she inquired.

“Not as much as I feared that we were going to set the entire laboratory on fire when we experimented together with acetone and sulfuric acid,” Edgar replied.

“Look at these kids,” Marcus said joyously. “Having fun with dangerous stuff. I suppose that stuff was dangerous, right?”

“Especially in combination,” Edgar admitted.

“And I was worrying about Edgar. It looks like he already managed to impress the little lady,” Marcus remarked in a loud voice.

“We will have enough time to have fun at the expense of one another,” Xavier stopped their happy banter once more. “Later. After we deal with the matters of a weapon of mass destruction that might wipe all life on the entire continent.”

That seemed to sober up everyone at the speed of light.

“Edgar will know where to take you,” Lena said. “I will wait for you and let you in.”

With that, she bid her farewell, leaving a speechless Edgar to stare after her, while holding the door for a little while.

“That one,” Marcus wagged the finger at the scientist. “There’s fire in her eyes. I’m telling you. You should hurry and get her already.”

“Nonsense,” Edgar protested. “She is as well behaved as I am.”

“We’re already teaching you bad words. I bet she’d be an even faster learner than you are,” Marcus joked.

“I suppose,” Edgar said with a small, reverent sigh.

“What are we going to do until nightfall?” Ayn wondered out loud.

“I will search the premises for some canned food that is not yet expired, and I would like to invite anyone who’s up for the challenge, to a game of chess,” Edgar answered.

“What’s that?” Ayn questioned.

“I’ll explain all the rules,” Edgar waved, but he did have a small, secretive smile on his face, as he spoke.

“Look at him. Planning to beat us to a pulp, at that game of his,” Marcus laughed.

“Me? No way,” Edgar’s smile broadened. “But I should warn you that I’m not always easy on novices. Maybe I should go easy on you.”

“Bring it on, Mr. Scientist,” Marcus challenged him. “That game can’t be that hard.”

Cory watched his friends engaging, once more, in laughter and chit-chat. It was like danger wasn’t looming at the horizon. He admired them. But while Marcus, Ayn, and Edgar were happily setting up the table for their game, he could not help

notice Xavier and the deep frown on his face. There was someone who was just as worried as he was.

The building where the components were stored was not guarded, even after nightfall. Cory couldn't help but wonder whether the citizens of Aeria were indeed so confident in one another not to engage in criminal activity, especially given what had happened with Edgar.

“What did Lena tell you about how the others reacted to your disappearance?” he whispered, although the streets seemed deserted and the entire city seemed still, except for the flickering of the street lights that, for some reason, while electric, had been designed to imitate the golden tremble of dying embers.

“I made the news for a few days, by the looks of it,” Edgar replied, in the same hushed voice. “But, eventually, after the Trainers simply decreed that I simply turned mad, most probably due to the too frequent use of the killer of feelings, everyone took it like it was.”

“Lena, too?” Cory murmured.

“No,” Edgar answered with a small sigh. “Not for one moment, she believed that. She, ahem, kissed me when I pulled her aside this morning.”

“Oh,” Cory giggled. “Marcus and Ayn might just be right; I'm afraid to say.”

“Of course, that made me quite the scattered brain,” Edgar exhaled. “Otherwise, I cannot explain how I could lose three games of chess in a row against Marcus, Ayn, and Xavier. I used to be the master of that game.”

They reached the dark door, and Edgar knocked very softly, following a pattern on which he must have decided with Lena. The woman was dressed in black, Cory noticed when she opened the door. She glanced around and signaled them to follow. No matter how quiet the streets were, Lena still cared about taking precautions. That was just another sign that they weren't out of the woods just yet.

“These are the components,” Lena gestured toward what looked like an organized pile of pylons made of metal, wires, and other mundane items.

“Nothing that looks that ominous,” Xavier commented, and Cory agreed, quietly, with him. “How can we know if we can truly sabotage the entire mechanism, just by damaging this lot?” he added, gesturing toward the stored components.

“We cannot,” Edgar replied gravely. “But we can, not so randomly, cause unapparent damage to these elements, and hope for the best.”

“That is not exactly a thorough plan,” Xavier remarked, while Lena was guiding Ayn and Marcus toward a workbench on which power tools lay around.

“No, it is just part of the plan that still involves trying to take Drena by storm,” Edgar admitted. “Ever since Lena told us that there is just one shipment left, that was on my mind.”

“It’s a reasonable plan,” Xavier admitted. “We should attempt to stop the Trainers from using their death machine in more ways than one. We’re increasing our chances of success. Good thinking, Edgar.”

“Thank you,” the scientist replied politely.

That was their last exchange in the large room. The moment they began working on the components, the only conversation was reduced to small orders and suggestions, mostly from Lena and Edgar, to the others.

“I believe you are about to live that grand destiny I thought I was seeing while reading your skull,” Lena put a gentle hand on Cory’s arm.

“And I believe you are right,” Cory confirmed.

Lena squeezed his arm in sympathy.

“There was something else,” she said. “At that moment, I had no idea what could mean. But you will have to make a choice.”

Cory nodded.

“Whatever that would be, I hope I’ll make the right one.”

Lena smiled.

“I am certain you will.”

Everyone was putting their hopes in him. But he no longer felt daunted by the task ahead. It was like the stream of his thoughts was pushing through a narrow path for a determined destination. And, despite not knowing what the end of the road held in store for him, he knew it was the only choice. The right one.

“Smooth sailing, uh-hoo,” Marcus shouted, as their van was leaving Aeria behind.

“Too smooth, if you’re asking me,” Xavier murmured, as he set his hands on his knees and looked behind, through the rear windows at the city disappearing in the distance.

“I’ll take what I’m given, man,” Marcus shrugged. “And with all due respect, Your Majesty, this time, I’m not asking you anything. This one’s a win, and we frigging needed a win.”

“You know what I’m talking about,” Xavier continued to talk, but this time he looked straight at Cory.

He shifted in his place. How come Xavier’s eyes made him feel so unsettled, even after all this time? There was something strange about their color. He could not remember seeing anyone else with eyes of such a steely quality and hue. Especially when Xavier had been passionate or angry, his eyes had reminded Cory of a sky in turmoil. They didn’t have the same lifeless, dull grey color of the Trainers’ eyes, but they were still ... somehow the same.

He shook his head.

“Yes, I do,” he eventually replied. “No one stopped us. Or at least tried to. Maybe the last shipment was of no importance whatsoever?”

“It doesn’t matter. We’ll go through that front door, and stop them before they can even say hello,” Ayn joked. “They won’t have time to put together their stupid machinery, while we march toward Drena to get them.”

“The shipment still moves slow enough,” Edgar agreed. “We have the advantage of speed. Everyone is ready for combat, back in Haven. Even without us there, they got organized. I’m sure of it. Myra’s in charge.”

Ayn snickered.

“I bet she had everyone make their beds while we’ve been away. They must be scared of her right now.”

“Your friend proved to be reliable,” Xavier said, turning toward his lover. “I think she taught them more than just to make their beds. What we need is an army waiting for us, so that we can lead the way to Drena.”

“Everyone will be ready,” Ayn said.

“There are guards down at the mines and the factories,” Xavier spoke. “They need to be neutralized first. Drena is not heavily guarded, otherwise. Of course, the Trainers cannot suspect a mutiny is rolling down their way. Everyone there is under their thumb. The best part of this is that no one there is a fighter. The Rulers are trained to handle state affairs, trade relationships, and such. The slaves have their utility that doesn’t involve the use of weapons, at least not the kind that we should fear. And the servants are not trained to oppose an army of well-armed individuals.”

“Are you trying to tell me that it’s going to be a breeze? Will we just waltz into Drena?” Ayn joked.

“No,” Xavier shook his head. “What I’m trying to say is that the ones who will be able to oppose us are not the human beings living there. And that means that we have the element of unpredictability to worry about. We cannot know what we’re going to face.”

“We were all taught that the Trainers are the most powerful. There’s no greater power than theirs,” Cory spoke.

Xavier nodded shortly.

“But except for training us all to fit a mold, I cannot say that I have ever been made aware of what their power means. They are great at brainwashing, that is for sure. But somehow it feels that our obedience is to blame,” Xavier said, as his eyes traveled back to the rear windows, only to stare at nothing, as Aeria was not even a dot in the distance now.

“Your obedience, maybe,” Ayn shrugged. “But no one forced me into a mold. Or Marcus. Or Myra. Or anyone else back home. And you two are just the proof that the Trainers know jack shit. You’re no Ruler,” he pulled Xavier close to kiss his cheek. “I suppose the Trainers didn’t teach you to moan so nicely when I take you.”

Xavier wanted to open his mouth to protest, but Ayn continued, pointing the finger at Cory this time around.

“And you, what kind of servant are you? Going to and fro through the desert, getting everyone hot and bothered about some revolution and stuff? And you,” he punched Edgar’s seat playfully, to draw the man’s attention, “are not the kind of scientist I thought any guy from Aeria should be like.”

“Really?” Edgar turned and smiled. “How am I, then?”

“Too much in the mood to jump into flying contraptions – by the way, I would have given a nut to see that crazy stuff in action.”

“You would not have given anything,” Xavier’s voice was icy, despite the playful banter being thrown around.

“See what I mean?” Ayn kissed Xavier’s cheek again. “The First Ruler of Drena only cares about my nuts.”

Everybody laughed. Even Xavier. Even Cory. They needed this type of morale to see the end of this thing. Otherwise, they would have gone through everything for nothing.

“So, we’ll just start digging?” Dion asked, pulling John’s sleeve to draw his man’s attention.

“Basically, yeah, but we need one thing to make sure that the earth won’t come rolling down on us,” John explained.

“What’s that?” Dion asked, but he was interrupted by a noise coming from behind.

The huge cylinder the miners were pushing was impressive enough to make the rest of them scatter to the sides.

“Lucky thing we found this close to the refuge,” John spoke. “We drill and open the way in front, and this will take care of the earth crushing our bones problem.”

“Okay,” Dion murmured.

John surely knew what he was talking about. Together with the rest, he lined up to jump into the strange contraption.

“Is it like a huge drill or something?” he whispered to John.

“The drill part of it no longer works,” John replied. “That’s why the fellows had to remove that component. We’ll drill. This thing at least moves. It would have been something for the drill still to work, but we’re lucky nonetheless. Now, let’s make ourselves useful.”

Dion had had many friends among the servants. Yet, he could not recall ever having this sort of bond with the other people he had known in Drena. Humming a musical tune, the miners began working like well-oiled machinery. They were making a conveyor belt of human bodies to dislodge chunks of earth from the wall and move it, using old-fashioned wheelbarrows to the other end of the cylinder like contraption, where they were throwing them away.

“This seemed pretty dangerous,” Dion murmured, as he grabbed the handles of a wheelbarrow to help.

“It’s this, or we just die of thirst and hunger,” John said matter-of-factly.

“We’re not going to die,” Dion said with conviction and moved only so that he could steal a quick kiss from John.

Forward was the only way. Humming in the same rhythm with the rest, he began pushing the wheelbarrow.

“What the hell could that be?” John asked out loud, although his question wasn’t aimed at anyone in particular.

“It looks like a large room,” Dion jumped out of the drill and began to inspect their surroundings. “Hey, look, that’s a ladder!” he pointed out at the far end of the enormous room.

Without waiting for a confirmation from his mates, he hurried with the torch in hand to the metal ladder. Grabbing it with one hand, he shook it.

“We don’t know where that leads!” one miner shouted in warning.

“Not exactly,” Dion shouted back. “But we know that it goes up, and that’s where we need to get, right?”

Murmurs of agreement could be heard from the exhausted men. Dion put his put on the first step.

“Not so fast, princess,” John chuckled behind him. “Allow me the pleasure to get first.”

“No way,” Dion said stubbornly. “We’re going to get out of here. I feel it in my bones.”

“Even so, we cannot know where this ladder takes us. I wouldn’t forgive myself if something happened to you because I let you go first.”

“Come on, lovebirds,” a miner pushed them both aside. “I’ll go first.”

Dion and John both nodded at the man. The miner was as agile as a monkey, as he began climbing. It was strange to stare into the darkness above, as it was difficult to see how far the ladder went.

Everyone held their breath, and only the sound made by the miner’s heavy boots on the metal steps broke the silence for what seemed to last forever. Suddenly, there was a screeching sound that tore through the darkness.

Above them, small and faint, there was a circle that seemed paler, infused with light, compared to the darkness inside the mines.

“All good,” the miner’s voice followed by its echo bounced off the walls. “It’s like a building or something. It looks like no one’s here.”

There was a bit of a ruckus, and they had to get organized so that everyone could climb the ladder but without running the risk of making it collapse under their weight. John and Dion allowed the others to climb before them and remained last.

“Now you can go first,” Dion joked.

“And make me miss the pleasure of staring at your ass all the way to the top?”

With a small laugh, Dion started climbing. It certainly helped much with his balance that John placed a heavy hand on his ass and made him move upward. He almost felt like laughing. They weren't going to die in the mines, after all.

The long way up did take some time, but, eventually, they were all out of the darkness. Dion had to blink several times, and his eyesight was still impaired. The soft light filtered through the tall windows garnishing the large hallway they were in on both sides had the effect of bright halos directed straight at their eyes.

Eventually, he began to make sense of everything around him.

“I know this place,” he said with a small gasp.

“What is it then?” one man asked, grabbing him by one arm.

John pushed the guy aside and pulled Dion to him.

“It looks like no one's around,” another commented. “Not in this wing, at least.”

“That's odd,” Dion murmured and made himself little against John's larger frame. “This is ... not supposed to be like this.”

“What do you mean?” John asked him this time, engulfing him with one large arm, to make sure Dion felt protected.

“This is the Institution,” Dion said in one breath.

It was clear that the others knew little, if anything, of what he was talking about. He knew more than he could ever want, in return. The place did seem deserted, but it was like Dion could still hear his cries, echoes of a time past, but one that had not been too long ago. Not enough to let the deep scars on his soul heal till they could become nothing but fading marks.

He shook his head. This place wasn't going to get the best of him. He wasn't going to allow some ghosts to scare him. They might have tried to make him fit a mold, but the simple fact that he was now there, standing tall, next to a man he loved and they wanted to send to his sure death, was enough proof that all the Trainers' torture and mind-numbing experiments amounted to nothing.

"We should be careful," he spoke, raising his voice so that the others could hear him. "It is unusual that the place seems so empty. It is usually ... pretty animated," he added, pushing away the memories.

Animated was the wrong choice of words, but he didn't have the time, nor the inclination to explain to people who had just escaped certain demise, and had been condemned, anyway, what atrocities usually took place in that building.

They began walking, but nothing save for the sound of their steps on the polished floors could be heard. All the benign shuffling and murmurs were theirs. The Institution looked like nothing else but the empty shell of what it used to be.

Every chamber was empty. The beds had been neatly made, and there were no signs of human activity anywhere. Not in the cafeteria, not in the rooms used for disciplining those who were trained to serve.

"Where is everybody?" he spoke, mostly to himself.

The Trainers' complex machinery that was Drena needed human blood to function. That meant that new people were always in training. Yet, there was no one like that in sight. Actually, there was no one at all.

"It is the eve of our most important celebration," the Head Trainer stood up and took in the crowd.

It was not desirable to speed things up like this, but with the mutinies down at the mines, the strikes at the factories that had exploded the moment the creatures there had imagined, based on nothing but hear-say, that some misfits had managed to escape through the convoluted underground corridors, he could do nothing else.

The miners were probably dead by now. Or, if not, they were bound to die of thirst and hunger. Death by thirst was something to contemplate. It had usually been a compelling method of torturing the most willful elements trained at the Institution. Hunger pangs were something, but thirst ...

The Head Trainer took in the population gathered at the foot of the erected platform, organized in honor of the announcement. Yet he was not anticipating with glee what was to come. He felt nothing, and that, in itself, had to feel like empowerment.

He had heard the merchants gossiping. Something about a desert army on the loose. Good. The closer everyone was to the machine, the better. There was, unfortunately, no more time, to test its potency. What had to be done was going to happen.

He raised both hands as if he was ready to bless the masses. His speech was not going to be long. Soon, he was going to step down and let his brothers continue.

“Our most significant work is complete. I have my brothers’ agreement that it entails a riveting change for Drena and the entire continent.”

Rulers, servants, slaves. Some wore beautiful clothes, laying on lavish beds carried by strong slaves. Others were served delicious fruits from trays held by beautiful servants with their eyes cast down.

Even the people from outside Drena had been invited to partake. Men with harsh eyes, and callous hands. Guards holding their weapons, fingers on triggers, always vigilant, ready for an uprising.

How useless, the Head Trainer pondered. Soon enough, all were going to be the same. And above them, he was going to rise as the only one.

The One.

Was there a tinge of irony? No, if anything, the Head Trainer could not have been accused of such a trifle whim of twisting words. No, that was going to be the simple, pure reality.

The event, as was thought to be orchestrated, was not taking place there, on the high platform. They were going to withdraw to the inner sanctum, at the right moment. There, where Lord Lucas was going to play the final act, filling in the role he had been given to the best of his abilities.

Such a weak one, the Head Trainer wanted to shake his head. Lord Xavier would have been such a perfect choice. Maybe even the only one with a chance.

His mind had a bad habit of getting a tad distracted lately. Maybe he was, indeed, tired, with keeping the whole world on his shoulders. He was going to rest soon. That was something to look forward to.

“What the hell?” Ayn stood up from his car seat and watched warily at the unmanned gates. “Really? We got armed and all that, and we don’t even have to fight?”

Xavier stood behind him.

“Stay alert. This is strange. There should have been guards at the gates.”

Their noisy procession fell as silent as it could, as they made their way through.

“There’s no one?” Ayn wondered out loud.

Cory jumped out of the van and began pushing open doors to what looked like bunkhouses, or small shops.

“Do you think they already used that machinery? That weapon?” Marcus asked, from his place.

“It seems unlikely,” Edgar replied. “Nothing points out at the people who lived here being ... dead. It just looks like they all got up and left, nothing else.”

“But why?” Marcus asked again.

“Well, that’s the big question, indeed,” Edgar said instead of an actual reply.

“So what do we do?” Ayn asked.

“Just as planned,” Xavier spoke. “We storm Drena. No one is dead yet. And that means that we still have a chance.”

Cory observed his friends with troubled eyes. No, they weren't too late. That couldn't be.

“Well, I'd say we go outside, and see what the hell is going on,” John proposed, and everyone else seemed to agree with him.

The court looked just as deserted. Dion verified a few other places where proof of life should have been found. But there was nothing. Outside the Institution, Drena stood white and proud, promising, just like in the past, not salvation, but something ominous and dark, despite its pristine walls.

“Should we try to get into the city? Find some answers?” Dion asked.

“Or we could just run the hell out of here,” a miner proposed.

“We have no food, no water. Do you say that we should just run into the desert, like this?” Dion asked again.

He was met with a few murmurs of discontent.

“There's nothing here to take,” he continued, his voice a bit firmer now. “And if we get back to the outer city, we'll just run into the guards. Armed guards,” he reminded everyone. “Drena has plenty of everything,” he added. “But not that many guns. Or people to wield them.”

That seemed to tip the balance in his favor. Their cortege was nothing but a bunch of tired, harrowed men. But none was afraid to walk into the white city and demand what was rightfully theirs. Whatever risk that might entail.

“Don't use lethal force unless it's needed,” Cory spoke, standing tall on the roof of Marcus's van. “Most of the people inside won't be armed.”

“Neutralize the guards only,” Xavier added, from his right. “No bloodshed,” he added. “Unless it’s needed,” the last words were spoken mostly for Cory’s ears and no one else’s.

“Are we ready?” Cory raised his right hand, holding the symbol given by Tora.

A collective energetic shout was the response. With determined eyes, Cory turned to face the tall white walls. The inner city seemed silent, yet Cory could sense that he was still to meet a formidable enemy behind those gates.

“What do you think it’s going on in there?” John whispered into his lover’s ear.

“I have no idea,” Dion murmured, as he stared down, at the gathering, from his vantage point. “But it doesn’t matter. If they’re all here, that means that we have plenty of time to plunder the kitchens and pantries.”

“Good thinking,” John replied.

They were as silent as they could be as they descended the high walls. Dion stole nervous glances from the people down below. One Trainer was saying something in a thunderous voice, standing on a tall platform above. And everyone was listening, in pure rapture, it seemed, as not one noise could be heard from the crowd.

Something of what was going on there was giving him the chills. But there was no time to dally. They needed to act fast.

“So first we need to knock down these gates?” Ayn looked up, at the impressive doors sealing in the inner city, hidden in its cocoon. “Well, we should get to work. We might not be able to surprise them, after all.”

“They will be plenty surprised,” Xavier replied as he marched forward, and signaled for the people with their improvised battery ram to move.

The army split in half to allow the war machine to pass through. Yet, they weren't even close when the gates suddenly opened before them, and a group of men dressed in nothing but dirty rags began walking through them.

"What the fuck?" Ayn expressed, out loud, his astonishment at the strange apparition.

Upon seeing them, the group of men stopped, most probably in shock. On one side, a few cocked their weapons. The others froze in place.

"Stop!" Cory shouted.

He didn't need any confirmation that the men in front of them were no enemies. They couldn't be. He rushed in front.

"Who are you, people?" he asked.

"Cory?" someone from the group of men spoke.

He squinted at the one walking forward.

"Dion!" he exclaimed and began running.

His face completely covered in soot, dressed in clothes that must have seen much better days, his servant friend was rushing to him. They embraced and stood like that for what must have been a long time, as people from both parties began to cheer and whistle.

"All friends here," Cory let go of Dion and waved at the others.

His words were carried from mouth to mouth to the people in the back. Dion's mates were still walking cautiously toward them, unsure of whether they were welcome by the strange army.

"I knew we'd meet again," Dion said and grinned.

Cory replied in kind.

"But what's all this?" Dion asked.

“It’s a bit hard to explain. We need to get inside Drena. So, thanks for opening the door for us, so to speak,” Cory spoke. “We need to stop the Trainers. They’re about to do something bad.”

“Bad?” Dion snorted.

“I mean really bad,” Cory caught his friend’s arm and looked him in the eyes. “Will you guys come with us?”

“Sure thing,” Dion nodded curtly.

“I see a lot has happened to you, too, since we last saw each other,” Cory looked over Dion’s shoulder.

“I’m John,” a tall man offered, shaking Cory’s hand, and putting one protective arm around Dion’s waist.

“Are you guys done with the smooching, or are we going to have some tea?” Ayn joked. “Hey, guys, give some of your spares to our allies,” he gestured to the people behind them.

Dion’s mates hurried to join them.

“Could you at least tell me what we’re doing?” Dion asked Cory.

“We’re practically destroying the Trainers’ reign,” Cory replied.

“And we need to save our asses,” Ayn added.

Dion’s eyes grew wide as he carefully examined Cory’s friends.

“Lord Xavier,” he gasped.

“Not a lord anymore,” the former Ruler replied. “I’m with the good guys now,” Xavier attempted a joke.

Dion was clearly beyond himself with surprise. Cory took his arm.

“Do you trust me?”

“Sure thing I do. But, Cory, I can hardly wait for you to tell me everything.”

“Later,” Cory embraced him curtly.

Thousands of heads turned to watch the large door being pulled wide open by a few of their strongest men.

“As they say,” Cory murmured. “It’s now or never.”

“It’s frigging chaos!” Ayn yelled from one side, and Cory pulled the man by his leather jacket.

“We need to leave the guys to take care of this, and we need to move,” Cory said. “Dion said the Trainers were saying something from a high platform. Look, there,” he pointed up, and Ayn followed his hand. “No one’s there now.”

“We have to get inside the building, then,” Ayn said with determined. “Let me rally the inner circle,” he added, and Cory nodded at him.

Around him, people were fighting. So far, the people he had brought with him were keeping their promise not to use lethal force against those unarmed. But there was resistance, and a few guards had been already neutralized, which meant weapons had been shot. Many were fleeing in disarray, and the attackers were trying to push them toward the gates.

He closed his eyes and tried to calm the rapid beating of his heart. Where was Lucas? What were the Trainers doing? Could it be that they had their machine ready?

“What’s with all the noise?” the Head Trainer asked, irritated. “I thought we recommended them to spend the next hours in reverent silence.”

“There seems to be a coordinated attack, Head Trainer,” someone answered.

“Why is this servant here?” he asked, as his eyes fell on the one who had replied his question.

“He’s Lord Lucas servant,” one of the Trainers offered the answer in the servant’s stead. “We believe it would help our favorite son to have someone familiar with him now, during the most trying hour of his life.”

“We?” the Head Trainer hissed but reigned in the emotion threatening to overthrow his balance. “What is this news about an attack?”

“Outsiders, Head Trainer,” the servant spoke again, keeping his head bowed, his eyes concealed.

Outsiders? The memory of the dream he had had a few days prior touched him fleetingly.

“It doesn’t matter,” he waved. “But I will have to withdraw for the rest of the day. I am tired.”

At his words, a few murmurs rose in the sea of grey hoods.

“Do you not wish to be a witness of our accomplishment?” one of the hoods asked.

“As much as this would fill my heart with glee, I am afraid I cannot. It pleases me that we reached this important milestone. Now, if you will all excuse me, brothers,” he added, as he rose from his place.

He didn’t look back as he walked toward the door. Soon, soon, he would be free. Of everyone and everything. No one and nothing could stand in his way.

“We’re in full formation?” Xavier asked as he looked over their group.

“We are,” Cory confirmed, as he pushed open the doors that seemed to lead to a long hallway.

“Do we know where we are going?” Edgar asked. “Or should we split to cover more ground?”

“No need,” Cory said curtly. “I know precisely where we’re going.”

He could not explain how he knew that. It would have been difficult to say anything that could make sense about it. But he knew, and with that knowledge, a sense of urgency was growing inside him.

“I’m not too late,” he murmured to himself.

“What, Cory?” Xavier asked him, as they marched forward.

“Nothing, I was just trying to encourage myself,” he replied.

There was a door in front of them, singular in appearance, unlike anything they had seen before. Made of solid metal, with elaborate decorations covering it from the ceiling to the floor. He pushed through it, without giving it much thought.

“Stop!” he shouted, and a mass of grey hoods turned with swishy sounds of garments.

His eyes searched frantically. He needed to get to him. He needed to. Pushing aside anyone who tried to stand in his way, he was carving himself a path. By the sounds surrounding him, he could tell that his friends were more convincing than him, helping him complete his quest.

“What do you think you are doing, coming in here, in this foul manner?” one Trainer stood on a dais, blocking his view.

“Get out of my way!” he shouted and jumped on the low platform, pushing the Trainer away from his path.

He stopped in front of the iron chair, heaving. Lucas was there, slouched in the contraption, his eyes cast down. Cory moved closer, taking in the manacles holding the man tied to the chair.

“There is nothing you can do,” one Trainer shouted at him in his cavernous voice. “Lord Lucas is completing our existence’s work as we speak. Soon, you will be nothing but dust!”

“Shut the fuck up, creep!” Cory heard Ayn’s voice from behind, followed by a low thud, a clear sign that the man had taken care of the speaker.

He grabbed Lucas's head into his hands and forced the man to look up. A pang of real hurt shot through his chest, as his eyes met nothing but limpid grey pools.

"I know who you are," he said gently, as he hurried to support Lucas's head with one arm, and used the other hand to push away a few damp strands from the man's face. "I know your face."

Around him, he could hear the sounds of fighting. But there was nothing he cared about at that very moment. Everything else was fading, and there was nothing there but him and the man he was holding in his arms.

"I'll free you," he spoke, and he let go of his lover only to begin struggling with the ties around the man's wrists.

"Cory?" a hoarse voice called for him. "Is that truly you?"

He stared into the grey eyes and smiled. He could feel his tears falling down his cheeks, but he could still smile.

"Yes, it's me. I promised you I'd come. In my dreams, I told you I would come."

He threw the manacles on the floor and hurried to embrace Lucas again.

"What happened? I had dreams of destruction, of people dying ..." Lucas tried to speak, raising one hand to touch his forehead.

"Don't worry about it," Cory pulled him close into an embrace.

"Cory, no," Lucas whispered and tried to get away from his lover's touch. "I ... I ... did something horrible ..."

"No," Cory pushed Lucas's fending hands away to take hold of his man once more. "That wasn't you, you hear me? That wasn't you!"

He pushed his forehead against Lucas's, closing his eyes tightly, willing himself not to cry so much, not to appear weak. He needed to be strong, now more than ever.

There was something akin to a chortling sound coming from behind that made him feel cold chills running down his back. Still holding Lucas, he turned slowly.

No one was laughing. The sound he was hearing was coming from the Trainers. The grey hoods were on the floor, squirming, seemingly fighting for air.

“What the hell is going on?” he almost shouted.

“We might have worked that machine pretty good,” Ayn laughed, turning to face him. “It looks like they’re the ones kicking the bucket, not us!”

That could be, Cory thought, but unlike Ayn, he was experiencing no righteous sense of retribution. The scene on the floor, the tangle of gnarled limbs rising, fighting, like they were trying to escape moving sands, was making him feel nothing but horror, deep into the marrow of his bones.

“This isn’t right!” he chocked, and when he turned to look at Ayn, he watched as his friend suddenly fell to the ground, as if his legs had been cut off by an invisible adversary.

“Ayn!” Cory heard Xavier yelling.

The former Ruler of Drena was just in time to ease Ayn’s fall. The mass of grey hoods was turning quiet, and Cory’s eyes swept the room. Where were the others? Where was Edgar ...? Or Marcus? Or Dion?

“Ayn, Ayn, talk to me!” Xavier’s voice was filled with anguish and urgency, as he was shaking the man in his arms. “Ayn!”

Xavier’s last horrified shout made his hair stand on end. He turned to look at the one he was holding. A howl escaped his chest.

“No! Lucas, no!”

Lucas’s head lolled to one side. Cory tried to squeeze into his hands the man’s arms, but it was like they were meeting no resistance, and soon he was grabbing at nothing but the sleeves of the coat Lucas had been wearing.

He was shaking so hard as he turned back to look at the room, that he could not see clearly. His eyes were swimming in tears, and he could not control himself.

Fine dust was swirling through the air. But it wasn’t silence, like in Teran. No. Another one’s anguished cries were bouncing off the walls.

“Xavier!” he called out, taking one shaky step towards the man rocking violently on the floor, cradling nothing but a dusty leather jacket into his arm.

“Cory, they ... They killed my Ayn!” Xavier cried out. “They killed everyone!” he screamed, looking around with lost eyes. “How could we be so wrong? How could we be so late?”

“You’re not late,” someone else talked, making both of them turn toward the door.

“Who are you?” Cory blinked, as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

Holding the door, a young man dressed in impeccable servant attire, took a small bow.

“Hector thought of this possibility. I am your failsafe. Please, follow me.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

They were following the stranger, without a word. By Xavier's labored breath, Cory could tell the former Ruler of Drena was still in shock. As he was himself. The pained sobs he couldn't control matched Xavier's hitched breathing.

"Who are you?" he forced himself to speak.

The stranger walking quickly in front of them didn't turn but did reply.

"I believe the right definition would be an automaton. Hector was my creator."

"Hector, the one who lived to be 102 years old?" he asked, the memory of what Edgar had told him about the old man while in Aeria came to him.

"A bit longer than that," the servant replied.

"Is he dead now?" Cory grabbed one of his arms with the other to stop the shaking that was almost making his teeth clatter.

"Yes. He died a few minutes ago, in the room where you were," the automaton supplied dutifully.

"Why are we alive?" Xavier asked this time, and by the trembling of his voice, he was fighting his emotions as much as Cory. "No, why am I alive? I understand why Cory ..."

"There is someone who can offer all the answers I cannot provide," Hector's creation replied in the same serene voice.

Cory stole a nervous glance in Xavier's direction, and his eyes were met by troubled ones.

"I don't care," he said, looking straight at his former Master, now friend. "Why you're alive, I mean. Because at least I'm not alone."

Xavier cast his eyes down. If there was something the man could guess right now, if there was some warning he feared, that was his to bear. That was what the lack of a reply was telling Cory right now.

“Hurry,” the automaton gestured for them to follow, as they seemed to begin their descent toward an inferior level.

Were they going underground? The temperature was starting to drop, although they were still inside the building.

Cory didn’t need to be told they were at the final point of their destination. In what looked like an ancient throne room, with tall columns sustaining the ceiling, at one end, on a tall iron chair, an imitation of the one he had seen Lucas on earlier, stood the Head Trainer.

Limbs of purple and violet light trembled, grown from the Head Trainer’s location, licking the walls and throwing frightening shadows on the walls.

“Stop what you’re doing! Stop it right now!” Cory hurried toward the grey hood sitting on the iron chair.

“Stop? The deed is done,” the Head Trainer replied, showing his yellowed teeth in a snarl.

Cory slowed his steps.

“Undone it,” he spoke.

His voice was strung with hurt.

“Even if I could, I wouldn’t,” the Head Trainer replied, his voice hollow, void of emotion. “What you are asking is impossible.”

“It cannot be!” Cory took another step.

“Who are you?” the Head Trainer leaned forward as if he was trying to make Cory’s face in the semi-darkness. The evil limbs of light could not offer much illumination.

“I am Cory, the servant,” Cory replied. “You killed my friends! You killed Lucas! And I love him!”

“Ah, you are the mistake,” the Head Trainer stood back. “Is she thinking I am impressed by her spawn? The least she could do was to send someone who could

offer a bit of a challenge. But I suppose it was everything she could create out of her puny wrath.”

“I was created out of love, not hatred,” Cory replied, somehow the words coming easily to him, as he was slowly approaching.

“If you don’t want to die in terrible pain, I suggest that you stop where you are,” the Head Trainer pointed a long gnarled finger at him. “There is still some energy left in the machine.”

“I want answers!” Cory boomed, growing frustrated with how his feet didn’t seem to listen to him anymore, stopping him in place. Fear was getting the better of him, for now.

“The only answer you deserve is this: you’re too late. If it is any consolation, even if you hadn’t been, you couldn’t have done anything to stop me.”

“Undo everything, as Cory said!” Xavier spoke from behind.

The Head Trainer cocked his head to look at the other newcomer.

“Ah, my son. It was such a terrible overstep from your part to desert us as you did.”

“Stop calling me your son. I know you’re nothing but evil. You never cared for any of us. How can you be such a hypocrite?” Xavier shouted.

“Never cared, you say? But look at you. Alive. Unharmd,” the Head Trainer pointed out. “Come next to me, my son. This world waits for us.”

“What world? Are you that insane that you don’t see what you did?” Xavier became more agitated, and Cory caught his arm to prevent him from getting too close.

The purple and violet lights seemed to glow more menacingly the more they got closer. There was no way of telling what could happen to them, should they walk forward.

“I freed the world. For us. For you,” the Head Trainer stretched his arms, as he was expecting Xavier to come rushing to him.

“For me? As far as I know, you left me for dead,” Xavier spat. “Not that I ever wanted for you to come looking for me. Where I went after I left Drena, I was the happiest I had ever been.”

That seemed to give the Head Trainer pause, but only for a brief second.

“None of this matters anymore. Come to join me, my son,” he called for Xavier again.

“Join you? Not in a million years! And stop calling me your son. Enough with this charade!”

“Xavier,” the Head Trainer shook his head. “What shouldn’t I call you my son? Of everyone I raised under my watchful eye, you are the most deserving. Flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood.”

Xavier staggered and took a step back. Cory was just as shocked, but he moved to grab the other’s hand.

“No, you’re lying,” Xavier whispered, his eyes fixed on the grey hood seated on the iron chair.

“Am I? Then how do you explain that you’re alive, unlike the others?”

“Cory’s alive, too,” Xavier babbled, grabbing at straws.

“He’s the anomaly. Nothing but a mistake. But you, my son, you were planned, and should you have been less of a slave to the human flesh I had to use to make your mold, you would have been witness to my master plan in motion. It no longer matters. I will tell you all about it. Come, child,” the Head Trainer spoke again.

His words were not gentle. They weren’t harsh, either. They fell with the cadence of a mechanism, one after the other.

“He doesn’t want to come to you,” Cory linked his fingers with Xavier’s in a fierce grip. “You took from him everything he loved. From all of us!”

“Xavier, my son, use one of those lethal weapons you brought with you and terminate the anomaly. He is just trying to get between us,” the Head Trainer looked only at Xavier as if he could not stand to pay Cory any mind.

“One of these, you mean?” Xavier used his free hand to pull a shotgun from his jacket.

Cory tried to hold the man behind, but Xavier began marching toward the iron chair, shooting once. The sound reverberated through the room, and the empty shell hit the polished floor. Using his good hand, Xavier reloaded and aimed at the Head Trainer again.

“Xavier!” Cory hurried after him, afraid of the menacing limbs of light that seemed to sense that their master was in danger and they were now flickering close to their point of origin.

Xavier moved like an unstoppable force, emptying his gun over and over again into the grey hood before him.

The Head Trainer began laughing.

“Have you forgotten my teachings already?” he asked. “My son, I am all powerful.”

Xavier pushed Cory out of his way and jumped on the platform on which the chair was located. Using his now useless shotgun, he began hitting the Head Trainer in the face over and over again, growling like a wounded animal.

Cory hurried and pulled him back, pushing him on the floor, hoping to keep him there, stop him from getting hurt. Before them, the Head Trainer was laughing. He didn't look wounded in the least.

“You're not human,” Xavier mumbled. “You're not ... anything. You have no soul,” he said, as he crouched to the floor, overwhelmed by his own pain.

“Oh, but I am everything, my child. And despite the lack of respect you're showing me right now, I am still ready to welcome you into my arms. Remove the anomaly, and come to me.”

“No,” Xavier refused, crawling back as if he was trying to get as far away from the Head Trainer as he could.

“Ah, do you want me to do all the work?” the Head Trainer scolded him. “Fine.”

His attention turned to Cory.

“You see, servant,” the last word was spat in disgust, unlike the unemotional discourse of the Head Trainer so far. “We do have a bit of a dilemma here. I am tied to the chair, and I am bound to stay here so that I can control the world.”

Control the world? Cory took a close look at the Head Trainer. And then he noticed. The twisted fingers were digging deep into the arms of the chair. For all the lack of emotions the Head Trainer had exhibited so far, he seemed to find it strenuous to keep up with the appearances. From time to time, he was moving one arm, to point at them while he spoke, but he was quick to put his hands back as if he feared something was going to slip out of his control.

“You need Xavier, to keep all that power in check, right?” Cory spoke.

The hood turned toward him.

“Clever for a servant. But, of course, she tried to invest you with at least a semblance of strength. Cleverness would not serve you here and now, nonetheless. To continue what I was saying, we have a dilemma. Or better said, the dilemma is yours. You could attempt to destroy me, with the little power you have in you.”

Power? Cory wondered and looked down at his hands. A small flicker of warm, bright light was twirling in his right palm.

“But, if you do that, I will transfer all my power to Xavier. Given that you have already consumed yours, you will be defenseless. And I will destroy you, guiding Xavier’s hand.”

“Xavier won’t listen to you. You’re lying,” Cory spoke, as he took one step toward the Head Trainer.

“Wait, not so fast,” the Head Trainer smiled, showing his horrifying teeth again. “You could choose to destroy Xavier, using the little power she gave you.”

“I have no intention to do that,” Cory shook his head.

The power in his right hand was growing. He could feel it.

“Are you certain? Even if it would bring your friend back? The man you say you love?” the Head Trainer continued. “The entire world? Think about it. All in exchange for one soul. For one human being. It’s not like the choice is difficult, right?”

“You’re talking nonsense,” Cory said. “I would never raise my hand against a friend. I would never kill a human being in cold blood like you would. And how could Xavier’s death reverse the destruction you created? You told me it was impossible.”

The Head Trainer seemed to enjoy their exchange.

“I lied. Kill Xavier, and restore the world as it was. It is a simple choice. I don’t understand how you’re not taking the chance I’m giving you already.”

“No,” Cory shook his head. “Your so-called chance is not tempting me at all. It goes against everything I believe in.”

“Ah, hence the dilemma,” the Head Trainer smiled with what seemed like satisfaction.

“I’ll take your chance!” Xavier cried out from behind.

Cory turned. Xavier was holding a small revolver at his temple. He was trembling, and tears were falling down his cheeks, but his eyes were like a sky in turmoil, as they were looking at the grey hood on the dais.

“Xavier, no!” he shouted and lunged toward his friend.

“Xavier!” the Head Trainer almost stood up.

The deafening sound of the revolver gone off made everyone stop for a second. Cory kneeled next to his friend and pulled Xavier’s head into his lap.

“No, no, not you too!” he sobbed, cradling the man in his arms.

“The human propensity for drama is beyond the pale,” the Head Trainer commented. “Xavier must have thought this would stop me. But of course, we are just as much at odds as before.”

“He’s your son!” Cory cried and pulled Xavier up as much as he could as if he was hoping the Head Trainer was going to be impressed with seeing his flesh and blood lifeless.

“As much as I wished for this not to be the outcome, there is nothing I can do,” the Head Trainer spoke. “Of course, it is in your power to bring him back.”

“How?” Cory asked, using one hand to wipe away his tears.

“Aren’t you afraid I’m lying to you now? Use that pathetic power you have. But, seriously, wouldn’t you use it for someone else? Lucas, perhaps? Or is your so-called affection as frail as your entire existence?”

“Lucas is already gone. And everybody else is,” Cory said.

The Head Trainer was lying. That he knew. But nothing could tempt him now out of doing the right thing. He looked at the trembling flicker of light in his hand and placed his palm gently over Xavier’s temple, whispering a prayer.

He could feel something moving under his palm. He was amazed to watch the bullet coming out, the bloodied skin closing.

And then, the strangest thing happened, and Cory remembered the dream. He wasn’t healing Xavier. He wasn’t bringing him back from the dead. The bullet was moving, as if on its own, back into the weapon, and now he was standing next to Xavier, as the man was holding the gun to his temple, shouting like before.

He stopped for a second, and everything else stopped, too. He watched the Head Trainer, immobilized on the iron chair. Then he watched Xavier, the pure hatred etched onto his face, as the man was looking at the one claiming to be his father.

He needed to find a way. His eyes traveled at the back of the room, where Hector’s automaton was waiting, looking every bit as serene as before. Now he knew what to do. He wrenched the weapon out of Xavier’s hand.

The sound of the bullet flying, followed by the noise that only a ricochet could cause, restored the flow of time.

“Help me keep Xavier from hurting himself!” he called at the automaton.

The servant moved with maximum efficiency and caught Xavier's arms, pulling him aside.

"What the hell? Let me go! Let me! Cory! Have the machine let me be! Cory, you can't do this!" Xavier tried to fight the automaton's hold but to no avail. "You can't! Let the others live! How can you choose me over them? Don't you remember how I hurt you?"

"Silence him, please," Cory asked the automaton again. "Just for a little while. I'm sorry, Xavier, you'll understand later. Please forgive me."

Xavier's eyes were filled with sorrow and rage, as the automaton efficiently produced a leather strap to place over his prisoner's mouth. Only muffled cries could be heard now.

Cory turned his attention to the Head Trainer. Now sure of himself, sure of his faith, he moved toward the grey hood.

"What are you doing? Stay where you are!" the Head Trainer demanded, impatiently.

For the first time, Cory could tell there was fear what he could read in the Head Trainer's eyes.

"Don't you understand what I'm telling you? Are you that dimwitted?" the Head Trainer almost screamed, as Cory stopped next to him. "I'm telling you that killing my son would bring everyone back!"

Cory shook his head.

"No, it won't," he said. "It is just a ploy to make me betray my true self. My faith."

"Your faith," the Head Trainer spat the word. "She's nothing but a tale! I am the One!"

"No," Cory shook his head again. "You're empty, can't you see?"

"I am the most powerful! I destroyed the world because I could!" the Head Trainer babbled, whitish foam at the mouth. "What better proof than this do you need?"

“It’s easy to destroy,” Cory said gently, as he placed one hand over the Head Trainer’s. “To build, to create, that is the true power.”

“You can’t do anything against me,” the Head Trainer felt more and more agitated. “You’re nothing but a servant!”

“Yes, that is what I am,” Cory nodded in agreement. “What do you fear? My power is gone,” he added, as he opened his other palm, to show that there was no flicker of light left there.

The Head Trainer’s eyes filled with malicious glee.

“You lost it! You lost it!” he rejoiced, shaking in his chair with hysterical laughter.

“No, I didn’t lose it,” Cory smiled.

The Head Trainer froze in his place.

“I used it,” Cory explained. “To save Xavier.”

“What?!” the Head Trainer exclaimed. “What do you mean?”

“I had to. It was the only way to revert the mortal wound he had inflicted upon himself.”

Under Cory’s hand, the Head Trainer was starting to shake again.

“No, it is impossible! You’re lying!” the Head Trainer shouted. “What are you doing to me? Let go of my hand!”

“I’m trying to help you,” Cory said gently. “Isn’t the emptiness inside you too great? I can deliver you from that.”

“No, no, no,” the Head Trainer growled, trying to move his hand from Cory’s.

“She’s waiting for you. Don’t you want to be forgiven?”

“No, I don’t want to be forgiven!” the Head Trainer shouted.

Black spittle sputtered, and a sickening gurgle could be heard coming out of the Head Trainer’s throat.

“You’re killing me, how can you kill me when you’re so insignificant?” the Head Trainer gasped and coughed.

“I am not killing you. I’m offering you a way out,” Cory said gently.

“If I’m dead, you’ll never be able to bring your friends back from the dead,” the Head Trainer barked, his voice filled with hatred.

“That is not in your power,” Cory continued. “You did destroy the world, but that still didn’t make you feel whole, did it?”

“You’re nothing! I am all powerful!”

The Head Trainer leaned forward and crumpled into a pile at Cory’s feet. Cory knelt next to him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Get away from me,” the Head Trainer pulled himself away from the human’s touch.

There was a thin smoke rising from the grey hood. Cory looked as the shape inside began shrinking, while horrid sounds announced the Head Trainer’s demise and he was forced to take a step back as a foul smell rose, too. Suddenly, the garments fell flat to the ground, with nothing to sustain them.

Cory moved to sit on the empty chair. If he were to be asked, he could not tell exactly how he knew what to do. But, when he placed his hands on the arms of the chair and grabbed them firmly, he let all his emotions flow through him. The love he felt for Lucas, the friendship he had for Dion, Ayn, and Xavier, the affection he had for everyone he had met along the road.

The limbs of light tried to reach him, but as they tangled around him, the dark colors turned to a warm, calm golden yellow. The temperature in the room began to rise.

Cory noticed vaguely as the automaton released Xavier from his hold.

“Cory,” Xavier whispered and fell to his knees.

To Cory's surprise, the automaton did the same thing. His eyelids were growing heavy, and he could feel as if he could not keep his head up anymore. Around him, there was nothing but warmth and light.

He could hear whispers around him, but his eyelids seemed to be heavy with sleep still.

"Hey, you're not going to pretend you're still sleepy," he heard a familiar voice calling for him. "I know you're not an early riser, but still, it's been almost a week. And I can see you smiling."

What a nice dream, he thought. There was no point to open his eyes, now was it?

"Hmm, do I have to rely on my tried and tested methods to make you wake up? And here I thought you needed to take it easy," the familiar voice continued.

He could feel the bed dipping under the weight of another person. Ah, the dream was getting better. He giggled, as he felt teeth nibbling at his ear.

"Ah, I knew you were awake," the voice chided him.

Well, if it was a dream, he could pretend to open his eyes. Especially since he could barely wait to see Lucas again. A pair of mischievous green eyes bore into his from above.

"I love your eyes," he spoke and pulled one arm free from the blanket covering him to grab his lover by the back of his neck. "So beautiful."

Lucas laughed and leaned over to kiss him. It didn't take them long for their kiss to turn passionate. Soon enough, they were devouring each other.

"Really, guys," someone intervened. "The entire world is waiting, and you just want to get freaky."

What the hell was Ayn doing in his dream? He was going to have a word with that up to no good desert dweller, Cory frowned.

As Lucas moved away with a broad smile, he had to blink a few times. Not only Ayn was intruding into his dream, but also Xavier, Marcus, Edgar, Lena, Myra, Diane, Dion, John ... The entire room was full of people.

"I'm not dreaming?" he wondered out loud, and everyone began laughing, although he could hear some sighs of relief through the chuckles and giggles.

"No, you're not," Lucas offered him the answer.

"Wait, what happened? To everyone? And the Head Trainer?"

"Turned into fine dust, as he deserved it," Xavier was the one to answer now.

"I'd say he deserved more than that, like a fine kicking in the balls," Ayn began.

"We don't know if he had balls," Marcus intervened.

"The Trainers weren't exactly human, so maybe a reproduction system was not needed," Edgar said promptly.

"Stop it, that's not even a matter to discuss," Diane spoke next. "Really, do you believe these guys, Myra?" she addressed to the taller woman next to her.

"I think I do. That's all they like talking about," Myra grinned.

"The Trainers?" Diane asked, a bit shocked.

"No, balls," Myra laughed and caused everyone else to laugh, too.

"Seriously, I'm not dreaming?" Cory could feel the skin on his face a little prickly, as he was probably smiling so widely right now that there wasn't room on his face for that.

"No, you're not," Lucas pulled him close. "You did it, Cory. You made the world right."

"And you're here," Cory said tenderly. "I feared I wouldn't get to see you."

"Just as I did," Lucas said back. "We will have plenty of time to catch up, my love. Now, I'm afraid I will have to share you with the rest of the world for a little while. But, after that, the One forgive me, but I will not let you out of my quarters for at least a week."

“The man’s got stamina,” Marcus whistled.

“Now, people, before turning this room into the scene for an orgy, because I know what you are all thinking,” Myra wagged the finger at everybody, “let’s have the hero of the day all dressed up and ready for the ceremony. I think the people outside are starting to get tired with so much partying and celebrating. Plus, soon enough, we will have to start the reconstruction. There’s only this much the reserves here will last.”

“Ah, the voice of reason,” Lena said courteously. “But I suppose that Cory would still find it more comfortable if he were to get washed and changed into day clothes without all of us staring at him. We all know that he is fine, so we should let him be for the time being.”

Before leaving the room, everyone came to embrace him and kiss him, Marcus insisting on kissing him twice, on both cheeks, for good luck, and only when the room turned quiet again, he could feel the reality sinking in.

He was smiling as he was watching Lucas taking out clothes from a huge closet.

“We’re not at your place,” he remarked. “Where are we?”

“There was an unused wing in the main building,” Lucas explained. “In all the chaos, some destruction did happen. My quarters fell victim to it, I’m afraid.”

Cory tip-toed out of bed, and embraced Lucas from behind.

“Sorry, I need to touch you. I need to know that you’re real,” Cory spoke, holding his lover close.

“I know,” Lucas said gently and turned to hold Cory in turn. “I spend all these days and nights watching you, just because I could not believe you came back to me. Or maybe because I missed you so much and I didn’t want to miss the moment you were going to wake up.”

“You must be tired,” Cory pushed himself on his toes to reach Lucas and kiss his lips. “Everyone waited for me? Like this?”

“They came every day. They were afraid we might lose you. But not me. I knew that you would wake up.”

“Lucas,” Cory said softly. “Your eyes ... how come they’re green again? Sorry, it’s a stupid question, it doesn’t matter ...”

Lucas pressed his fingers against Cory’s lips.

“Apparently, except for planting some ideas in my head, and operating light changes to the pigment of my eyes, the Head Trainer did not do much to keep me part of his charade. He was cruel enough to make me witness what he did to the people in Teran, though. The moment his power faded from this world, I came back to my old self. I must say that was a relief. I sincerely thought ...”

“Don’t worry anymore,” Cory caught Lucas’s hand and kissed the fingers. “It’s all gone now.”

“I know,” Lucas smiled. “You took care of it. Of everything. I knew you were special the moment I fell for you, but I could not have envisioned that I was falling in love with the world’s savior,” he joked. “Are you ready to face the world outside? I will help you wash and get dressed. You must feel weak after not eating for so long. We did try to administer some nourishment ...”

“There’s only one thing I want,” Cory interrupted his lover.

Lucas licked his lips as Cory sneaked his hands underneath his lover’s linen shirt.

“Are you sure? You don’t have to tell me twice,” Lucas replied.

“I’m sure. I think everyone can forgive me if I’m half an hour late.”

“Half an hour? You might want to reconsider that,” Lucas joked.

“Well, for now, to stave my thirst and hunger for you, it should be enough,” Cory joked back. “After the celebrations, I expect to be fed regularly with your love.”

Lucas chuckled and pulled Cory up into his arms.

“Don’t worry. They won’t notice we’re late.”

Lucas made him walk backward, and Cory began to giggle when the man forced him on the bed, and on his back.

“Ah, I missed this oh so much,” Lucas murmured, as he pushed Cory’s nightgown up and engulfed one nipple into his mouth.

Cory gasped. Now he could no longer afford to be amused. Arousal, raw and powerful, was coursing through his body, melting his bones. He was experiencing pleasure, in its purest form, and like a thirsty man after days in the desert, he wanted it all.

“Lucas,” he whispered, as he arched his back under the man’s skilled ministrations.

“There were moments when I thought you gone for good,” Lucas whispered. “Forgive me if I’m going to be a bit too ravenous.”

Cory grabbed a handful of dark hair strands, to force the man he loved to look up.

“Are you kidding me? All I want right now is to eat you whole,” he said tenderly.

“I’m afraid I’m the one to do the devouring,” Lucas joked and leaned in to kiss Cory’s lips.

Their tongues were in a battle, but one with two winners and no losers. Cory was pretty sure they must have sounded obscene right now, so it was a good thing that there was no one listening. They met each other in the middle, kissing each other, with tongues and lips and everything, only to pull away for a second or two, so they could breathe.

“I could do this all day,” Lucas grinned.

“Yeah, but aren’t we neglecting other things?” Cory replied with a grin of his own.

Lucas let one hand wander on Cory’s chest.

“I suppose I should free you from this silly garment,” he chuckled. “It just keeps getting in the way.”

“By all means,” Cory helped Lucas undress him and free him from the nightgown.

They were equally hurried as they forced Lucas out of his clothes, as well.

“Your skin is tanned in places,” Lucas spoke, as he drew a small trail with his fingers on Cory’s jawline. “Yet, your nipples are as rosy I remember,” he added

and pushed Cory on his back so that he could focus again on the objects of his interest.

Cory giggled and gasped, and then he began moaning. There was no possible way for him to postpone this now. His need was growing urgent. Lucas was sensing his trembling and excitement, and letting go of Cory's nipples, was now slowly going lower, until his lips were wrapped around his lover's cock, up and ready to be lavished with attention.

Cory's cries of pleasure could only go this high. Lucas's mouth was nothing but moist heat, and everything they must have forgotten, their bodies were now relearning. Cory was bucking his hips off the bed, wanting to reach deeper inside Lucas, while his lover was holding him in place, digging his fingers into his hips, but increasing his pace.

Cory moaned loudly as he began coming into Lucas's mouth. He was breathing hard, as Lucas was gently licking his cock clean.

"Ready for me now?" Lucas asked, and without waiting for a reply, he kissed Cory on the lips, letting him experience his own taste.

"Where are you going?" Cory mumbled when he saw Lucas pushing himself up and disappearing from his field of view.

"My love, as much as I wish to make this only about you, I am in terrible need myself," Lucas laughed.

Cory giggled when he looked at Lucas and saw the man showing him the vial in his hand.

"Allow me," he reached out, but Lucas dodged him and kneeled in front of the bed, but only after dragging Cory by the legs toward the edge.

He gasped again, as skilled fingers reached his back door, and began to probe gently.

"Are you sure the others won't mind we take this long?" he joked. "I need you, Lucas. Just come up here and fuck me," he urged his man.

Lucas faked affront, by pursing his lips, and it was clear as day that he was grinning, as he was positioning between Cory's legs, pushing them up.

"Oh, damn, Cory, you're the sweetest, most beautiful, most gorgeous ..." the string of compliments got lost in series of small moans, as Lucas pushed himself in.

Cory could feel tear pooling in his eyes, but it wasn't from pain, but from the pure happiness he was experiencing right now.

"It's funny how I can still remember how big you are, and it's still a surprise," he joked, as he grabbed his ass cheeks to make more room for Lucas.

"A pleasant surprise, I hope," Lucas joked. "I must say that the surprise is all mine. You're so tight that I'm afraid I might break you. Or break myself," he added with a small laugh.

"Don't you dare to pull out," Cory giggled. "You know you're mine."

"All yours, my love," Lucas said gently.

Which was a bit of a contrast to the man's sudden motion that practically made Cory's body sink into the bed. Cory laughed and wrapped his legs around Lucas's body.

"I will be a bit rough," Lucas apologized.

Cory didn't care to offer a reply. Instead, he dug his fingers into Lucas's back, forcing him to move. At least, Lucas was finally convinced to let go of some of his politeness. They were moving frantically, in unison, without the need for limits.

"I missed coming inside you," Lucas whispered, as he pushed himself all the way in, then withdrew, and pushed back again.

Cory could feel his pleasure growing once more, too, a bit more satiated this time, and not so urgent, but still heavy like a flood.

"I love you, Lucas," he moaned, as he let go for the second time.

"I love you, too, Cory," his lover matched his words and his actions, steeling himself in place, and letting his essence fill Cory's body.

For minutes, they stood embraced, just breathing heavily.

“I feel so deliciously tired right now,” Cory chuckled. “Do we really have to attend this party?”

“Let’s go later. I think the only thing I can do now is sleep,” Lucas replied.

Cory held Lucas’s head gently on his shoulder and caressed the man’s hair. He was tired, too, but unlike the last months of his life, it was the good kind of tiredness. Lucas’s soft breathing lulled him into sleep what must have been only moments later.

“Ayn, what on earth are you doing?” Xavier marched toward his lover.

For the last hour, he had been looking for his man, to no avail.

Ayn stood up, but Marcus remained crouched next to the door.

“What are you doing here? Are Lucas and Cory out of the room yet?”

“I don’t think they’re ready,” Ayn replied, with a broad smile.

“Now what are they thinking?” Xavier could feel his need for etiquette kicking in now.

He was about to knock on the door when Marcus stopped him.

“Seriously, man, just let the lovebirds rest,” Marcus said with all the seriousness he could muster. “They just finished doing the uh, ah, and oh, just one minute ago, or so.”

“And you, bawdy men, stood here to listen to them?” Xavier stared at the duo in what he hoped to look enough of righteous indignation to count.

“No, but we happened to be around. We wanted to check on them, too,” Ayn said as he sauntered toward his lover and pulled him into a hug. “Frankly, we’ve only listened to them for like two minutes, and I’m already horny as hell.”

“You’re always horny,” Xavier rolled his eyes.

“Are you complaining now?” Ayn pretended to pout. “Now let’s go to our place because Lucas and Cory just whet my appetite.”

“Ah, great, you traitors,” Marcus complained. “You’re all fooling around, while I’m forced to live a life of restrictions and restraint.”

“Marcus,” Xavier said sternly, “I think I’ve never seen in my life someone to go through as many bed partners as you these days. Both men and women. I wonder why kind of person could make you settle down.”

Marcus shrugged and grinned.

“That person has not been born yet,” he laughed.

“Now, let’s move from here. We’re going to wake up Lucas and Cory, and something tells me that they won’t appreciate it,” Xavier hurried the other two.

Ayn threw one arm over his shoulders.

“So, have you thought where are we going from here?” the man questioned him.

“Back to Haven, I’d say,” Xavier replied.

“But, you know, you have like all Drena at your disposal, now,” Ayn pointed out.

Marcus was already out of sight, probably bent on his next conquest for the evening. Xavier stopped and pulled Ayn into a hug, then kissed him loudly on the lips.

“Drena was never home for me. Haven is,” he said simply, earning the biggest, most blinding smile from his lover.

“That’s great to hear. So what is going to happen to Drena?”

“It wasn’t a happy place. We’ll strip it of everything, and then we’ll have the people head over to other cities and settlements. Teran waits to be populated once more.”

“Some people might not be easy to convince,” Ayn pointed out.

“Those who used to be Rulers and Masters, you mean?” Xavier said.

Ayn nodded.

“They will learn. There’s a shock, and I understand it. No one is keeping them for remaining here, but no one else would. I’ve talked to every one of them, and I’ve convinced some. You have to understand, for them, the Trainers’ rule is everything they’ve ever known.”

“Aren’t you worried they might turn against us?”

“They don’t have the power to do so. The freed servants and slaves can barely wait to walk out of here. So, unless they learn how to take care of themselves, I’d say that with some growing pains, they will make the right decision, too.”

“It’s good to hear that you have it all figured out. But, seriously, isn’t it tempting? To rule again, I mean?”

“No, not in the least. The Trainers are the best proof that power corrupts. And we have a lot of work to do in Haven and the other settlements. We should no longer be considered outsiders, scavengers, and looters. For the contribution to the cause, we will receive, in return, the aid we need to build a better life for the people in the desert, too.”

“We, huh?” Ayn grinned. “So you’re one of ours now?”

“Not by birth, mind you,” Xavier said with mirth. “But by being, well, kidnapped,” he joked.

“So I made you ours,” Ayn said with satisfaction.

“Hopefully, just yours,” Xavier commented dryly but began laughing right away.

“Well, then let’s celebrate a little more. Because, knowing you for the slave driver you are, you will put us all to work to make Haven as fancy as Drena.”

Xavier kissed Ayn briefly.

“No, nothing like that. But it will be a place where people will be happy. It’s already home. Let’s make it better.”

“Bet your sweet ass we will,” Ayn laughed.

People everywhere were getting ready to leave. Cory let go of Lucas's hand and hurried to meet the servant he saw standing in a corner, with a grey robe folded on his linked arms.

"I've never got the chance to say thank you," Cory spoke.

The automaton blinked, very human-like, and offered a smile.

"There is no need. I was created to serve."

"Was that Hector's?" Cory pointed at the robe in the servant's arms.

"Yes. It was his final wish that whatever remained of him should be carried to Tresalt. He said he wanted to rest in peace under his goddess's watchful eye."

"Can you tell me why the Trainers didn't survive?" Cory asked the question that had been on his mind for a while now.

"Hector put me in charge of sabotaging the machine to the best of my abilities. Of course, I failed to render it useless, as I was not allowed in the room where the Head Trainer's machine was. All I managed was to sabotage the one arranged for Lucas. However, something must have gone wrong. It is my understanding that some of the components were tampered with, while they were still in Aeria. That must have happened."

Cory nodded.

"It's good to know that our efforts counted," he spoke.

The automaton remained silent, probably suspecting that an answer to that was not needed.

"Who will you travel with?"

"Diane offered a place in her vehicle," the servant replied.

"What will happen to you?" Cory asked again.

“Tora must find a use for me. If not, Edgar and Lena said that I should join them in Aeria. They even joked. They said that place would feel like home to me. But my first obligations are taking me to Tresalt first.”

“I’ve meant to ask,” Cory said after a moment of hesitation. “About Xavier and the circumstances of how ... he was made.”

“Is he conflicted over what the Head Trainer said?” the automaton asked.

Cory nodded. He knew the proud man Xavier was. So far, the former Ruler of Drena had been thrown himself, heart and soul, into organizing their leave, but Cory sensed that something was bothering him. He was also the only one who knew why.

“Hector shared with me that he was present when Xavier was born and the days after. Yes, there was a tentative of tampering with his biological code. But it was unsuccessful.”

“But why do you think the Head Trainer told him that awful lie?” Cory asked.

“Most certainly, in an effort to manipulate Xavier,” the automaton replied. “Hector told me that a certain reactive substance was injected into Xavier’s blood, to make him immune to the destruction that was going to happen once the project was ready. It had a rather unexpected consequence in changing the color of his eyes, but not much else. Also, it made the connection to the tracking device in the bracelet possible.”

“How I wish we knew all these earlier,” Cory sighed.

“Everyone engaged in the course of the events played a dangerous game,” the automaton spoke. “I should beg my leave. Diane seems ready to depart.”

“Wait, just one more thing,” Cory said.

The automaton nodded.

“How come Hector was against the Trainers? Wasn’t he one of them?”

“He didn’t share their views. He has always been against their hunger for power. They could not eliminate him, as he was just as immortal as they were, but they could push him aside, which they tried.”

“So was he 102 or ...” Cory smiled.

“My master never disclosed to me his real age. But he was certainly older than 102 years old.”

“Thank you,” Cory squeezed the servant’s arm. “I hope we’ll see you in Aeria. That is where Lucas and I are headed.”

“If that is asked of me,” the servant bowed.

Cory went back by Lucas’s side.

“Are we ready?”

“I believe so,” Lucas smiled.

“Wait,” Cory said, this time spotting Xavier.

“Ah, do you love long goodbyes?” Lucas teased.

“I promise, this is the last thing I have to do,” Cory placed a quick kiss on his lover’s cheek and hurried after Xavier.

What could Cory had so urgent to tell Xavier? Ayn wondered as he followed with his eyes the two men withdrawing on the open terrace. He watched through the glass doors, reading the body language of those involved in what seemed like a pretty tense conversation.

He sighed in relief when he noticed the tension draining away from Xavier’s shoulders as the man hurried to embrace Cory. Now maybe it was a good time to intervene, though. They had to leave.

“C’mon, guys, are you done with saying bye-bye? It’s not like we’re separated forever. We’ll come to visit,” Ayn opened the glass doors.

Xavier looked happy as he looked at him. Now Cory must have given the guy some excellent news because after that shitty experiment the Trainers had played on them, he had sensed something happening to Xavier. And it was not about his usual haughty self or whims. It had seemed serious at the time.

Nothing of that was there anymore.

“Yeah, guys, don’t be strangers,” Cory opened his arms and embraced Ayn, too.

“We won’t. We still need to organize our regular raids. I promise we will include Aeria in the itinerary. Hopefully, you guys will have something worth stealing. Or at least, good booze,” Ayn joked.

Cory laughed and shook his head.

“There will be no looting,” Xavier wagged the finger at him.

“Look who thinks he’s boss,” Ayn challenged the other with his eyes.

“I do not think. I am,” Xavier said flatly, but he wasn’t fooling anyone.

“Ah, there you were,” they heard Lucas talking from behind.

“This time, we really need to go,” Xavier said, after embracing his longtime friend shortly.

“So, always friends?” Cory asked, taking both Ayn and Xavier by the shoulders, and looking at Lucas.

“Always,” the others replied at the same time.

Cory turned his head and stared at the white city disappearing in a cloud of dust. It still loomed like an ominous proof of the past, but it was completely dead now.

“Hey,” Lucas called for him softly. “What are you thinking of?”

“Nothing in particular,” Cory shook his head. “It’s all gone now. Hard to believe, but it is.”

“Yes,” Lucas confirmed. “Let’s not look back. Nothing but good things is ahead of us now.”

“When you say it like that, it makes it true,” Cory joked, but he adjusted his position so that he could only look ahead.

Lucas pulled him close, without another word. There was life ahead of them, as Lucas said. A free and happy life, Cory thought, and the remnants of the horrifying experience they had all gone through began slipping from his mind, drifting away like leaves from a bough.

Epilogue

There were history books now that taught the people of the new world how it all was and had been. Some argued. They talked about this or that in stuffy rooms, smelling of mold. But their work, as painstaking as it was, was necessary.

A new world was born.

And the new world needed to learn from the errors of the old one so that they could never repeat them.

“What do you think?” Lucas crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for an answer while eyeing his lover carefully.

“I ...” Cory cleared his throat a few times.

The large painting adorning the entire back wall of the Academy’s auditorium had rendered him speechless.

“I think it is a bit dramatic,” he eventually managed. “Don’t tell me Xavier provided the details. He is not by far the type of person to exaggerate.”

“Don’t you like it?” Lucas’s lips twitched.

“It’s not a matter of whether I like it or not,” Cory exhaled, and walked over to Lucas, to link one arm with his lover’s. “I thought we were all about finally being honest about past events. I doubt this painting reflects something as honest as that. So, please, tell me, who had the crazy idea for this representation?”

Lucas’s eyes were now shining with a bit of mischief, and the man laughed.

“I believe you should blame all of us, Cory,” the man replied. “After you resurrected everyone, we all rushed to the room where you were. Seeing you slumped in the chair gave us all quite the fright. Xavier was mumbling incoherently, but please don’t tell him I said that. It should be a secret.”

“And?” Cory looked up at his lover, but now his lips were twitching. And he didn’t have any idea why. Lucas’s laugh was infectious, most probably.

“And everyone decided to bring their contribution when the artist was brought over to create the painting. The poor man must have never heard so many contradicting opinions in his life.”

“Let me guess,” Cory laughed, too. “The idea that the iron chair was engulfed in flames belonged to Ayn, right?”

“Correct, my dear Cory,” Lucas nodded. “He also had this strange idea that you were also supposed to shoot some beams of light from your eyes. Xavier told him ‘no sex for a month’, and I believe that is a direct quote. They quarreled for a while, but, eventually, Xavier’s common sense won. Ayn is still a bit miffed about it all. Although the flames stayed.”

“I’m glad at least I’m not shooting light out of my eyes,” Cory giggled. “And I don’t remember the chair to have so many technical details ... and all the mechanisms beneath? This must be Edgar.”

“Well, yes, but at least he only embellished, if we can say so, the appearance of the final representation. He examined at large the mechanisms holding the chair in place. I believe he repeated the words ‘how fascinated’ at least a dozen times.”

“We could have just relied on Hector’s automaton for an accurate recount of the events,” Cory laughed.

“And take the others the pleasure to imagine the biggest moment they ever lived? They were pretty disappointed everything was over when they got there. Especially Ayn. He was truly pissed he hadn’t had the opportunity to fight the Trainers for real. But, in the end, they were all happy to be alive, so they didn’t bother that much.”

“I hope, at least, that the written word is more accurate,” Cory added and looked at Lucas. “I doubt I would visit this room too often. It would be too embarrassing.”

Lucas gathered him into his strong arms and kissed his lips.

“What you did was amazing, Cory. No point in being embarrassed. And let everyone show how much they appreciate what you did for them.”

“Well, if you put it like this ...” Cory hid his face in Lucas’s chest and inhaled the man’s familiar scent.

“Also, since you chose to be a historian, after all, it is up to you, as well, to present things in the correct light and uncover the truth. The only thing I demand is that you don’t forget you have a home. I would hate to tear you away from all your books, but, as humans, we’re supposed to eat. And, of course, do other things,” Lucas chuckled, making Cory shiver slightly.

“Yes, you’re right,” he replied. “Should we head back home? It’s almost dinner time. Since you mentioned food.”

“We should, indeed.”

For a few more seconds, they stood there, gazing at the painting. There was one thing that was accurate. The grey hood folded on the floor.

The evil had been vanquished. And there was an entire world to build and look forward to with passion and excitement.

THE END