



Flawsome Explorations

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Description: Unexpected sparks fly when a shy, straight, nerdy sweetheart meets a flirtatious, sexy, older Frenchman. Is Zio brave enough to take a chance on Armand? Fabrizio “Zio” Revello I embrace the philosophy that nobody is perfect by studying the art of imperfection. But then I meet Armand, forcing me to completely reevaluate my world view. From his gorgeous face, teasing sense of humor, and a French accent to die for, everything about him makes me forget one very important detail: I’ve never been attracted to a man until him. I shouldn’t let him tempt me, but the glimpse of the real Armand behind his playful flirtations makes him impossible to resist. I’ve never been the adventurous type, but Armand makes me want to be brave and daring. Isn’t a lifetime of happiness with a person who understands me worth the risk? Armand Bellamy I approach Zio in search of a no-strings-attached evening of fun to kick off my business trip to Hawaii. But I get way more than I bargained for when I discover a shy, nerdy sweetheart who finds beauty in my flaws. He even accepts the hidden parts of my heart that I hide from the world. It makes me want to make him mine—not just for one night but for every night of the rest of our lives. He says he’s straight, but when have I ever let that stop me from getting what I want?

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

Armand

One of my favorite job perks was being able to travel the world while staying at Luxurian Suites Hotels. They were the ultimate luxury that money could buy, letting me live the high life while working for Arsène Devereaux, the famous fashion photographer who also was my best friend and boss. He preferred sending me ahead to new locations to scout potential places to stage photo shoots, which meant I got to see the sights under the guise of work.

It was evening by the time I arrived at the glorious Oahu Luxurian Suites Resort in Hawaii after my long flight from Sunnyside. A nightcap was the perfect way to unwind before bed, so I headed down to the hotel bar. Blue lights illuminated the dark walls, creating an underwater effect. The bar had a warm glow of amber lighting that provided a stunning contrast, backed by glass shelves that displayed only the finest liquors and wine. The floor-to-ceiling windows showcased the gorgeous ocean views, where moonlight danced on the gentle waves. Black wooden tables were scattered throughout, with couples talking by candlelight. The space walked the fine line between being high-class and pretentious, so I felt right at home.

While I was in the mood to relax, my playboy instincts did a cursory scan of the crowd to see if there was anyone to entertain me for the evening. A handsome businessman at the corner of the bar drew my attention, with his tie loosened after a long day at the office. It beckoned me to tug on it to bring him closer for a kiss. Before placing all my bets on him, something unusual caught my eye.

On the other end was a young man wearing jeans and a pink-and-purple hoodie with Japanese woodblock print clouds on it. He was the embodiment of “one of these

things is not like the other,” thanks to his casual style being at odds with all the other patrons dressed in designer clothes. It was a far cry from my tight black pants and button-down shirt with a mesh front and white-and-blue rose appliqués. It showed off a tantalizing amount of skin to give a potential partner the right idea.

As I drew closer, I saw he had chestnut-colored hair with a hint of waviness that invited me to run my fingers through it. Clean-shaven with a baby face, he seemed more like a college student rather than someone who could afford to stay at such an expensive resort. It piqued my curiosity about his story. Did he design an app that he sold off for untold millions? Maybe he was a trust-fund kid? He couldn't be a billionaire's boy toy, because they would never allow him to be alone. I hadn't met him yet, and I already didn't want to let him out of my bed.

The businessman from before inclined his head to indicate I should join him. On any other night, I would have been all too happy to have him as a playmate. But there was a je ne sais quia about the younger man staring out the window at the beach with a small smile that filled me with a hunger that demanded I act.

There were plenty of open seats, but subtlety wasn't my style. I sat on the stool next to him, unnoticed as he absentmindedly twisted his half-full glass in his left hand while appreciating the ocean view. Since he was oblivious, I took the moment to appreciate his long eyelashes, delicate features, and plump lips I hoped I'd get to kiss.

The bartender came over, a woman with stunning curves. “What can I do for you this evening, sir?”

It pulled the man from his reverie, who startled when he realized I was sitting beside him. His gray-green eyes flew wide as his jaw dropped in shock. His comical reaction made my ego purr.

I gave him my most winsome smile, loving how flustered he became. Since it was a

golden opportunity, I asked him, “Is that any good?”

He blinked at me, the nervous fluttering of his lashes telling me that my French accent had earned me a few more bonus points with him. “What?”

I pointed at his drink. “Would you recommend that?”

“This?” He glanced at the glass he was holding, clearly flustered. “Oh, um. Yeah, it’s good.”

“Trop bien.” I turned my attention to the bartender. “I’ll have one of those, s’il vous plaît.”

“One sparkling blue Hawaiian cocktail coming right up.” Her movements were elegant and efficient as she prepared it, sliding it over to me when she finished. It was a beautiful, fizzy drink served in a brandy glass, accented with a purple-and-white flower. “Enjoy.”

“Merci beaucoup. Santé.” I lifted it to the man in a toast before taking a sip. While it wasn’t something I would normally order, the taste of pineapples was refreshing. “You’re right, it’s quite good.”

He nodded in agreement, seeming too tongue-tied to speak.

That simply wouldn’t do. I set about to do what I did best: be a charming gentleman. “Bonsoir. I’m Armand Bellamy.”

“I’m Zio Revello.” He held his hand out to shake, allowing me to notice a slight tremble of nervousness.

I captured it in mine, then brought it up to my lips to place a kiss on the back of it

while looking up at him through lowered lashes. “Enchanté, Zio.”

An unintentional squeak escaped from him, which endeared him to me. His voice trembled as he said, “N-nice to meet you.”

“You have quite the unusual name.”

“That’s because it’s my nickname. My real name is Fabrizio, but Febreze kind of ruined that.” He nervously ruffled his hair. “Only my parents still call me that. Everyone else calls me Zio, unless I’m in Japan, where I go by Jio since there’s no ‘zi’ sound in Japanese.”

“Fascinating.” He intrigued me even more.

He stared at me in disbelief, almost as if he didn’t believe someone like me would ever pay attention to him. “What are you doing here? I mean, here as in Oahu, not the bar. You go to a bar to drink, obviously. Um...”

“I’m here to scout for potential photo shoot locations.”

“Are you a photographer?” He blushed at his question. “Sorry, that’s probably a stupid thing to ask.”

“Non, not stupid at all. I’m an assistant to a fashion photographer. I take care of everything behind the scenes to allow him to focus on his art.”

He sounded impressed and a little sympathetic. “That must be a tough job.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

“If Arsène was anyone else, it would be. However, working for my childhood best friend has many advantages.” I gestured around us. “Any job that lets me come here and play in paradise for a week can’t be too bad, eh?”

He relaxed as he laughed. “I’d love that kind of job.”

I seized on the natural opening. “What do you do?”

“I’m a grad student in the Japanese department at Sunnyside University.”

His answer was too good to be true. It also explained his earlier comment about being in Japan. “Then it seems our paths would cross no matter what.”

He tilted his head with a cute, puzzled expression. “What do you mean?”

“My boss fell in love with his American boyfriend, who goes to your school, so we moved from Paris to Sunnyside. We set up a second studio there, so it’s where I live most of the time now.”

“You’re joking!”

His reaction amused me. “Non, it’s the truth. One of our best models is a French studies graduate student there.”

His mouth dropped open. “Wait, do you mean Rune Tourneau?”

“Oui. Do you know him?”

He shook his head. “Not personally, but I’ve heard he goes to my school.”

“If you’re here, that must mean you’re on spring break?”

“I am, but I’m also here for school.”

I arched an eyebrow in surprise. “Oh?”

“Oahu University is hosting a Japanese studies academic conference.” He grew excited as he talked. “I’m presenting on a paper I wrote about Japanese kintsugi art. It’s a repair technique for broken ceramics where gold is used to put it back together and transform it into something more beautiful.”

I enjoyed hearing people talk about their passions, so I wanted to encourage him to keep going. “Can you show me an example?”

“You really want to see?” He seemed suspicious.

“Sincerely.”

After a moment of hesitation, he pulled up a picture on his phone and showed me a speckled blue plate. It had vibrant gold cracks highlighting where it had shattered.

“C’est magnifique! It’s even more beautiful for having once been broken.”

His cheeks flushed a pretty pink. “Thank you. I’m proud of how well that one came out.”

The information stunned me. “You made that?”

He sheepishly ruffled his hair. “Yeah, I have an online store where I sell my work on

the rare occasion someone buys something.”

“Would you share a link with me? I’d love to look at the rest of your art.”

“You don’t have to ask to be polite.”

“Non, my interest is genuine.” I held his gaze so he would believe me. “That was an exquisite piece, Zio.”

He hesitated again before pulling out his wallet to take out a business card and hand it to me. The front of the card was black with gold foil crackles to mimic his pottery with a white box featuring his name. On the rear was his contact information with a link to his online store. “Thanks. I play with it to unwind from school stress.”

“How did you get interested in it?”

“I took an art history class where the teacher mentioned it. It fascinated me when I looked it up. An art form based on the principle that there’s beauty in the imperfections appealed to me as somebody who is far from perfect.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

“Nobody’s perfect.”

He snorted with a skeptical look. “Someone who looks like you can’t say that when you’re a shining example that perfection actually exists.”

I was well aware of the fact that I was handsome, but I still loved hearing him say it. “Merci, but there is more to me than meets the eye.”

“Sorry, but from where I’m sitting, you’re flawless.”

Normally, I would make witty quips about being the ideal lover, but for some strange reason, I felt I owed him the truth. “I’m playful by nature, which leads most people to assume I can never be serious. They’re content with accepting me at face value, so no one tries to see the real me beyond that. It’s a defense mechanism designed to stop people from getting close enough to hurt me.”

His expression became sympathetic but was without pity. “Wow, I wasn’t expecting a genuine answer. I figured you’d say something like you’re so beautiful, it’s a massive inconvenience to have people throwing themselves at you all the time.”

“That would be a typical answer from me. But to someone like you who sees beauty in how the scars from the past heal, I could only tell you the truth.” I sipped my drink. “Congratulations. You’re only the second person in the world to know the real me.”

“Is the other your friend you work for?”

“Indeed.” Since my unrequited boyhood crush on Arsène had broken my heart when I

was young, I had made it a point to live free of any emotional entanglements that might ruin my pursuit of pleasure. I had come to peace with the past years ago and moved beyond my feelings for him to allow our friendship to continue. It was obvious to me now that he was never mine; he was made for Felix to love. Their relationship was a testament to how wonderful romance could be sometimes. I was happy for both of them that they had found each other.

Zio looked down in embarrassment. “Sorry, I wasn’t trying to be a jerk. It must suck to have everyone put you on an untouchable pedestal because you’re too pretty to be real.”

I reached over to tip his chin up with my crooked finger. “You’re welcome to touch me. In fact, I encourage it.”

His breathing hitched as he looked at me with wide eyes. “Are you talking literally or metaphorically?”

“Oui.” I could only hope he would take me up on my offer. He was too intriguing not to get to know better.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

Zio

All I needed to tell Armand was, “Thanks, but I’m straight.” Those four little words should have been the easiest thing in the world to say, because they had been true my whole life. If I told him the truth, he’d back off.

But if I told him the truth, he’d back off. For some reason, that stopped me cold. Why? Sure, he was more beautiful than any woman I had ever seen. He looked like a model whose gorgeous smile would sell out any magazine he posed for on the front cover. His eyes were bluer than a summer sky, with a playful twinkle that detonated a bomb of butterflies inside my stomach. But he was a guy, so why was I all twisted up over him?

What was it about him that made me wish he’d never look away from me? I certainly didn’t understand why his cologne of dark spice with a hint of leather filled me with an unbearable urge to lick his neck to see if he tasted as good as he smelled. When he lifted my chin with his finger, it sent shivers racing down my spine as heat pooled in my belly. His offer to touch him exploded supernova flares within me, burning me with an unfamiliar need that scared me as much as it intrigued me.

It should have been easy to brush him off, to dismiss him as a playboy on the prowl for someone to warm his bed that evening. But when he had answered my question about his flaws, I had gotten a glimpse of the real him behind the flirt. He had lowered his guard, allowing me to see something beautiful in his genuine vulnerability. It moved my heart and inexplicably drew me to him. That was the Armand I wanted to get to know, but to what end?

The longer I looked at him, the more confused I got. Guys had hit on me before, but other than being mildly flattered, they had never tempted me before. But the glimpse of Armand's nipples peeking out from behind the white roses on his see-through mesh shirt invited me to tease them with my tongue. Why did my fingers yearn to memorize the map of his body as I caressed him all over? And most importantly, why did those thoughts make my dick hard?

Because you're not nearly as straight as you think, the voice in the back of my mind gleefully crowed.

Okay, so what if I sometimes got off on watching the guy fucking a woman in porn? I was an academic nerd at heart, so my inquiring nature always questioned everything. Wondering what being on the receiving end of that kind of pleasure was perfectly natural. Women seemed to love sucking a huge cock in those videos, so of course I couldn't help but be curious about the experience. Sure, I had gotten off on a few confusing dreams about having sex with my roommate, Rigby. But I was comfortable enough with my masculinity to acknowledge other men as being attractive. And Armand was the most handsome man I had ever seen in my life.

Excuses, excuses, excuses.

He brushed his thumb along the outline of my jaw, sending a shudder through me when combined with his sexy French accent. "Pardon. It seems I've overwhelmed you."

When he drew his hand back, my body reacted without my permission. I captured it in mine, my fingers tracing his long, elegant ones. Confusing desire burst into flames inside me, filling me with a desperate need to have him touch me all over. "No. Yes. I mean, a little. Um. Sorry."

"There's no need for apologies. Flustered is a cute look on you." He gave me a

reassuring smile as he interlaced his fingers with mine.

My smaller hand fit in his larger one, like a perfect puzzle piece slotting into place. Why did that make me want him to wrap me up in his embrace? Where did my sense of certainty come from that being held by him would be an incredible experience? Did he inspire this reaction in every straight man? If so, god help us all.

“Why me?” The way I blurted out the question seemed to amuse him. “Out of everyone here, why did you choose me to talk to?”

“Because you’re the only one who intrigued me.” He tilted his head at a businessman sitting on the other side of the bar, who looked very dour as he watched us. “I’ve visited Luxurian Hotel bars all over the world. There are countless attractive guys like him looking for a good time everywhere I go. But I’ve never seen anyone like you, wearing a hoodie, smiling at the ocean, lost in thought.”

It was a compliment, but I still felt self-conscious. “Usually, my clothes earn me lots of disapproving looks since people assume I can’t afford to stay here. I mean, they’re not wrong. A single night in a suite here is more than my monthly stipend I get for teaching at my university.”

“What’s your secret?” He rubbed his thumb over the back of my hand, raising chills on my skin.

“My older brother is a business consultant. He spends most of the year staying at Luxurian Hotels for work, so he has millions of membership points. Since he has more than he could ever use in one lifetime by himself, anytime I travel, he uses them to book me free stays. He’s a Diamond member in their reward program, so I’m always upgraded to the best rooms. I also get complimentary drinks in the bar as part of his perks. Otherwise, there’s no way in hell I’m paying almost thirty dollars for a single cocktail, no matter how delicious it is.”

He chuckled, the rich sound of it stoking the flames of my confusing need for him. “What a nice older brother you have.”

“Luca is the best. But yeah, that’s why I don’t fit in here.”

“That is something to be proud of, not embarrassed by.” He squeezed our interlocked hands. “It makes me want to know even more about you.”

The cynic in me suspected he was only interested in getting me into his bed. However, his expression was so sincere, I felt bad assuming the worst about him. But why else would he care? “To what end?”

“That’s what I’m curious to find out.” He trailed his fingers along my palm, down to my fingertips, sending tremors through me. “What do you say we make the most of our time here?”

A weird mix of fear and excitement swirled within me. “By doing what?”

“Let’s go sightseeing together. It’s much more fun with someone else than being by yourself,non?”

The crushing disappointment I felt that he wasn’t inviting me up to his room gave me whiplash. Why would I be upset about not getting something I shouldn’t want?

Because you’re dying for him to touch you, my inner annoying asshole reminded me in an obnoxious singsong taunt.Maybe his bedroom is on the itinerary of places to visit?

I forced myself to ignore that weirdness and focus on his actual offer. That meant putting aside the fact that he was a gorgeous god of a man. He was right that it would be way more fun to go around town with somebody to talk to than walk by myself

with my headphones on to shut out the world. It would also give me something to take my mind off the stress of presenting at the upcoming academic conference. While part of me was excited, my anxiety still had my stomach tied up in knots over it.

What would we chat about, though? Could I do it without constantly tripping all over myself? Was it possible to see him as a regular person instead of a sex god waiting to tempt me into exploring my sexuality? Maybe it would get easier to hang out with him when I learned he was just another guy. I sure hoped so. Otherwise, I was fucked.

One can only hope, that annoying bastard crowed in my mind.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

Clearing my throat, I moved my hand away from his to help me think. I took a long sip of my drink as my heart raced in my chest over what I was about to do. “That could be fun.”

“I was planning to visit the Makapu’u Point Lighthouse tomorrow morning. Would you care to join me for breakfast and then go together?”

Before I could talk myself out of all the reasons why it was a terrible idea, my mouth decided for me. “That would be nice, if it isn’t too much trouble.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” he said with a pleased smile.

That traitorous asshole who lurked in my inner darkness whispered it hoped it led to sexy trouble. I swallowed more of my drink to drown it out. A complicated entanglement was the last thing I needed right now.

But he’ssofucking pretty...

* * *

My mindand dick waged a vicious war against each other over what to do about Armand. The lower half of me was adamant that pleasure was pleasure and insisted I should invite him to my room. My buzzkill brain contradicted that argument by reminding me that he wasn’t a woman, which meant he was off-limits. I shouldn’t find him so delightfully charming and gorgeous. And Iabsolutelywasn’t supposed to want his lips to cover mine as he helped me learn new things about myself. Nothing good could come from those thoughts.But coming would feel so good.

I blamed my unruly horniness on being single for too long and the two delicious sparkling blue Hawaiian drinks. It provided a solid excuse for why breathing in his masculine scent as I stood next to him in the elevator left me trembling with desire. Every muscle in my body tensed in anticipation as we neared his floor, wondering what would happen. I definitely wasn't rooting for him to rock my world with a heated kiss. It would be inappropriate to wish he would hit the emergency stop button so we could act out Rune Tourneau's infamous sex-in-an-elevator fragrance commercial. Nope, I didn't want that at all. Except I kind of do...

"I hope you enjoyed tonight as much as I did," he said in his smooth French accent that turned my insides into mush. "I'm looking forward to having fun together tomorrow."

Since I didn't trust my voice, I responded with a silent nod.

"Bonne nuit, Zio." He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss on each of my flushed cheeks. It gifted me with a concentrated hit of his leather-and-spice cologne, flooding me with an unsettling urge to be held down by him. "Fais de beaux rêves."

I had no idea what his words meant since I only knew a few words and phrases in French, but hearing him speaking his native language that close to my sensitive ears equaled an instant erection that I prayed he wouldn't notice. Or maybe I hoped he would. I was so fucked-up, I didn't know what I wanted.

Liar. You want him to make you come.

I swallowed hard as I looked up at him with wide eyes. His small smirk made my arousal twitch in the confines of my jeans. How was I supposed to spend all day with him tomorrow when he kept lighting my insides up like a Fourth of July fireworks finale and leaving me with a stiff flagpole in my pants? I gave it my most heroic effort to speak so he wouldn't think I was a complete weirdo. "Night." Well, one

word was better than no words. And at least I hadn't stuttered. That had to count for something, right?

With a final flirty smile, Armand exited the elevator on his floor. But even after he left, I could still smell the lingering trace of his cologne that continued working me up into a tizzy. Some of my ex-girlfriends had worn lovely perfumes, but nothing could compare to the way his seemed to caress me from the inside.

I had to readjust myself before I walked off the elevator. My hand shook as I swiped the key card over the reader and let myself into my room. While I was used to nice accommodations, thanks to my older brother's elite membership status, the corner suite was grand on an epic scale that stunned me. Floor-to-ceiling windows provided a panoramic view of the ocean, which stretched out like an expansive universe from my high vantage point on the twenty-sixth penthouse level. The furnishings were modern and monochromatic, with no expense spared. Instead of carpet, the floors in the bedroom were heated marble, with the king-size bed on a raised platform that had a glowing light under it. An enormous chandelier hung from the center of the tray ceiling with a warm glow of recessed lighting.

One of the walls of windows opened to a massive glass balcony with chaise lounges and chairs to enjoy the view. I stepped outside to clear my head after such a strange turn of events.

Leaning against the banister, I focused on the sound of the ocean waves lapping at the shore, finding peace in the calming noise. It was dark out, but the moonlight playing on the water was a thing of true beauty.

Just like Armand.

I dropped onto a chaise with a pained groan as I hid my face in my hands. What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I make myself stop thinking about him? I was

flattering myself if I thought he'd be interested in me. People as beautiful as him could have anyone they wanted. I was cute but notthatcute. Yet, he had chosen me instead of the handsome guy at the end of the bar. I wouldn't have picked me over him. So why did Armand? And why won't my fucking hard-on go away?

Probably because a lingering hint of his cologne remained on my hand from when he had held it earlier. I breathed deep, the tantalizing scent stoking my arousal into a five-alarm roaring blaze that demanded I do something about my situation. I tried to ignore my craving, but it was a forest fire raging out of control in a dry summer. If I was smart, I'd go take a freezing cold shower and sleep off my weird night. But I was burning up inside, and taking off my hoodie didn't help at all. There was only one thing that would make it stop.

Don't do it. You shouldn't do this. You're going to regret doing this. Don't—fuck it, too late.

Since I was on the top floor with no other buildings around to impede my view, I caved to my basest instincts. I stretched out on the chaise lounge, resting against the propped-up pillows as I made myself comfortable. My hands trembled as I reached down to free my hardness that refused to give me a moment's peace until I dealt with it.

I stroked myself with my left hand, but my plan to mindlessly jerk off was foiled by a fantasy I couldn't resist.

Armand pinned me against the elevator wall, tilting my head to lick up the curve of my neck. He murmured something in French by my ear before tugging on my lobe. My hands reached out to steady myself by holding onto his broad shoulders.

He rewarded me with the barest brush of his lips against mine. The dam of my reservations burst inside me, driving me to lean forward and demand more. I could

feel his smirk as he teased me with me soft kisses.

Pulling myself out of the fantasy, I questioned my sanity. Straight guys didn't imagine making out with a man. They definitely weren't supposed to touch themselves while they did it. But the bead of precum leaking from my tip was damning evidence of how spun up I was over Armand. It was wrong on so many levels, but my asshole subconscious taunted me with visions of more.

I slid one hand through Armand's hair to the nape of his neck, then tugged him closer as I opened for him. He accepted the invitation, his tongue giving me what I was after. I moaned into the kiss as I drowned in him. Hungry for more, I rutted against his thigh that he had worked between my legs.

He rewarded me by reaching between us to unbutton my pants. It allowed him to slip his hand down to stroke my erection. His other one slid under my hoodie to caress my bare stomach. I gasped when he tweaked my nipple before I stole another desperate kiss.

Unable to resist, I trailed my tongue up his neck.

Too far gone to stop myself, I made my fantasy more realistic by licking my right palm to taste the trace of him that lingered on my skin. Even diluted, it was something dark and divine that sent lava coursing through my veins. I burned for more, so I ran my tongue along the length of my hand again. My head spun as my desire spiraled out of control. I was barely aware of what I was doing as I slid two fingers into my mouth. The beguiling hint of the world's most potent aphrodisiac sent me soaring high. Sucking on them as I imagined him giving me a passionate kiss pushed me over the edge.

I came hard with a muffled moan, leaving me dazed as I trembled from the aftershocks. My orgasm had been incredible, but fire ants still crawled under my skin

with insatiable lust. When I sucked on my fingers in search of more of him, I withdrew them from my mouth in horror.

What the fuck did I just do?

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

Armand

The outdoor restaurant at the Luxurian Suites Resort had a long bar with a mosaic made of golden stones that sparkled in the sunlight. They illuminated everything with blue and red lights, which overlapped into beautiful purples. It was early, but there was a smattering of couples spread out across the terrace. There wasn't a better way to start a day.

As I took a seat at a table next to the railing, the refreshing breeze that ruffled my hair invigorated me. It was the perfect weather for an easy morning hike. I had opted to stay casual in black chinos and a short-sleeve white shirt with flowers on it.

The restaurant had a magical view of the sparkling blue ocean and the clear sky. I was eager to explore the island of Oahu. Since Zio would be joining me, I was even more excited by the prospect.

Asking him to accompany me had been out of character for me. Despite Arsène's assumptions, I never mixed business and pleasure while on the clock. After hours was a different story, though. But when I sensed I had pushed a little too hard in my seduction, something inside had urged me to find any excuse to spend time with Zio. Even if it didn't lead to getting him into my bed, befriending him as a travel companion had its own appeal. Other than Arsène, I didn't have anyone who saw me for who I really was. But for some strange reason, I instinctively felt like I could trust Zio with my hidden truths.

The art, modeling, and fashion industries were built on the principles of flawlessness. I worked in a world where everything was what it seemed on the surface. Nobody

dove deep into the messy undertow of reality. But Zio was someone who by nature of being an academic wished to get to the bottom of things with an endlessly inquisitive spirit. He wasn't interested in fake perfection; he found beauty in disasters. It was a mindset that was so radically different from my norm that it drew me to him.

I couldn't remember when I had last met a man that I wanted to talk to for the pleasure of enjoying his mind, rather than only indulging in the carnal delights of his body. Since a brilliant mind was one of the most attractive features in a person, I deliberately didn't seek it out to keep my heart safe. However, even if nothing happened with Zio, being around him didn't seem like a waste. It was a delightfully novel experience.

As soon as he entered the patio area, he caught my eye. He was adorable in his sneakers, jeans, and white T-shirt that had a soda can decorated with a peach and Japanese writing. He looked every bit the college student he was. It was a striking contrast to all the other guests who were ready to go sun on a yacht in their designer clothes.

Without the bulky hoodie hiding his body, I got my first glimpse of his lithe and slender build. The overall effect made him seem smaller than he was, despite him being six feet tall. He was far from an imposing figure, but there was something about his boyish smile and baby face that meant I couldn't take my eyes off him.

Before I went too deep down that distracting rabbit hole, I waved at him to draw his attention. He returned my wave as he came over to join me at the table.

“Bonjour, Zio. You look quite radiant this morning.”

The delicate flush of his cheeks was endearing. “It's impossible to have a bad night's rest at a Luxurian Hotel. I get the best sleep of my life whenever I'm staying at one. Although, that's not saying much when everything is better than my crappy twin bed

in the dorm.”

“For someone your height, that must be an awful way to spend the night.”

“It’s worse for my roommate, Rigby. He’s six six, so he’s longer than the mattress. It helps me keep perspective when I want to complain.” He ran his hand through his hair, making it stand up in spikes before he flattened it back down. “But it’s not worth ruining such a beautiful day thinking about the awful bed I have to return to.”

I had to bite my tongue to stop myself from inviting him into mine. Having him be comfortable around me was far more important than an easy pickup line.

Our server came over to take our orders and bring water before leaving us alone once more.

Zio took a deep breath as he closed his eyes to savor the cool breeze on his skin. When he opened them, he gazed out over the dazzling ocean. “This really is paradise. I’m glad I’m taking a few days before and after the conference to enjoy myself.”

“What’s your schedule?”

“Today and tomorrow I’m free, then I’m at the conference on Thursday and Friday. I have Saturday and Sunday to sightsee before I fly back to Sunnyside on Monday morning. What about you?”

“I’m leaving the same day as you, so I’m flexible with my time while I’m here. Is your academic conference open to the public?”

“Yeah, why?”

His oblivious reaction was precious. “I was hoping I could attend.”

He stared at me with shock in his beautiful gray-green eyes. “What? No, you don’t have to do that. Unless you’re a Japanese major, there’s no reason to waste time sitting inside a stuffy auditorium while you’re in heaven’s paradise on Earth.”

“Au contraire. I’ve spent a great deal of time in Japan, but I don’t know much about it. Attending would be a wonderful opportunity to expand my cultural horizons.”

He blinked at me in confusion. “But...”

“I’d like to hear your presentation, unless that would make you uncomfortable.”

“Why would you want to sit through it?” He gestured around us. “You have an entire island of fascinating things to go see and do. Why in the world would you waste your time with my talk?”

“Because learning about something you’re passionate about wouldn’t be a waste of my time.” It thrilled me when his expression became one of awe. “Please believe me when I say I was being sincere with my interest yesterday. Your particular art form intrigues me. I wish to hear you speak more about it, whether it’s at the academic conference or over dinner.”

“But it’s so nerdy!”

I chuckled at his adorable protest. “You say that as if it’s a bad thing.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

“It’s ceramics. Do you know anyone else who geeks out about broken bowls?”

“Non, which makes you the foremost expert on the subject I’m curious to know more about.” When he remained unconvinced, I couldn’t resist flexing a little. “The tale of how artisans repaired Shogun Ashikaga’s favorite broken cup by turning it into a jewel with gold in the fifteenth century made me curious to know more.”

I had to cover my mouth to hide my grin at his astonished gasp. “You researched it?”

“Isn’t that what someone does when they wish to learn more about something?”

He gawked at me like I was a mythical unicorn he couldn’t believe was sitting in front of him. “But—but it’s kintsugi! Normal people don’t care about that!”

I gave him my most charming smile. “Yet again, you are only the second person to discover the hidden me. I’d expect nothing less from someone who studies the beauty of broken things.”

“Are you even real?” I laughed hard at the question, causing him to huff in a cute way. “I’m being serious! Maybe my plane lost oxygen and I’m hallucinating all this. No, I must have fallen and hit my head and am dreaming all of this in a coma. That’s the only thing that could explain why this is happening. You’re too good to be true. Nobody as handsome and charming as you should care about kintsugi.”

I held my hand out to him. “Do you wish to confirm that I’m real?”

Zio surprised me by bringing my hand up to cup his flushed cheek. He nuzzled

against my palm, filling me with the desire to lean across the table and kiss him. “Maybe you are real. Not even my dreams are this amazing.” He inhaled with a soft whimper that stirred my lust. “God, why do you smell so good?”

Many a person had fallen under the allure of my warm, woody spices and leather cologne. If Zio was another one of them, that suited me fine. The note of desire in his voice sparked hope within me that perhaps I still had a chance with him after all.

I was more determined than before to make the most of my time with him, no matter what. If it ended with him in my bed, that was all the better. Whether it was as a friend or a lover, I needed more of him.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

Zio

I felt like an addict as I indulged in Armand's scent, craving more as it stirred my lust. It left me ready to beg for things a straight guy should never want from another man. The more I attempted to suppress it, the more painful my aching hollowness became. All I knew for certain was that only Armand could help it go away. It scared me but also piqued my curiosity.

"Here's your coffee."

I startled as the server set our cups on the table with a smile, releasing Armand. It snapped me out of the weird reverie I had slipped into as my cheeks flushed with profound embarrassment. "Sorry for spacing out. It must be the jet lag."

His amusement did nothing to quell the weirdness inside me. "Must be."

"I'm not fully a person until I've had at least two cups of coffee." That was a lie, but I needed it to be true. What the hell was I doing, nuzzling against him as I breathed him in? Worse, why was I half-hard and aching for more of him? My hand shook as I prepared my drink with creamer and sugar while berating myself for acting so weird. Get your shit together!

"I prefer late nights to early mornings." His smirk hinting at innuendo detonated a bomb within me. I wasn't equipped to handle what he was implying or the sexiness of how his lips parted when he took a sip of his coffee. The way his tongue darted out to lick them afterward made me verklempt. "They're much more fun, non?"

“Not really. It usually means I’ve procrastinated too long on a paper the day before its due.” That was the story of my entire academic life.

“Ah, that’s no good. Perhaps we can find a better reason for you to enjoy some late-night adventures on this trip.” His sexy smirk electrified me as if it put jumper cables on my heart and jump-started it.

It was another golden opportunity to tell him I was straight and not interested. But I couldn’t force myself to say the words, especially since my subconscious was being a fucking dick about it. If you weren’t interested, you wouldn’t have gotten off on the taste of him last night while jerking off to a fantasy of him.

It was true, but that didn’t mean I had to like it.

Yeah, uh-huh. You hated it soooo much that you got off on the memory this morning. Sure, that makes total sense.

It was too early in the morning to be antagonized by my inner bastard. Leave me alone, and fuck you very much.

As payback, my subconscious flashed an image of me under Armand, moaning as he fucked me. I could see a crystal-clear vision of me with my legs wrapped around his waist, my back arching off the bed as sexual ecstasy flooded all my senses. The suddenness of the sexy visual caused me to startle. I slammed my knee against the table when I jumped, causing the silverware to rattle. The sharp pain was almost enough to distract me from the fact that my semi was on the verge of turning into a full-on erection. Knock it off, asshole!

I swore I could hear my inner jerk snickering as it slinked back to dwell in darkness.

Thank god my weirdness seemed to entertain Armand. “Are you doing okay over

there?”

“I’m definitely going to need more coffee.”

Armand’s chuckle sent shivers racing down my spine and made the situation in my pants more dire.

Please let me get through the rest of today without humiliating myself. Is that too much to ask?

* * *

As a career academic, I wasn’t athletic. However, the paved Makapu’u Lighthouse Trail was an easy hike. It was a beautiful day that wasn’t too warm, and the views of nature as we walked were stunning. Armand paused to take pictures for his boss throughout our stroll, which gave me plenty of opportunities to do the same. I had snapped a few covert snapshots of him, acting like a sneaky Bigfoot hunter photographing an impossible creature out in the wild. He looked infuriatingly perfect in every picture. It wasn’t fair that someone could be that pretty, charming, nice, and funny.

You left “and fucking sexy as hell” off that list, the voice in the back of my head taunted me.

Mentally flipping it the middle finger, I ignored the unruly part of my brain that loved to torture me.

When we reached a scenic overlook, the view of the clear blue water with an endless sky of fluffy clouds was breathtaking. Leaning against the railing, I marveled at the beauty of nature. “Wow. It’s so pretty, it’s hard to believe that any of this is real.”

Armand rested his forearms on the rail as he stood next to me. “That seems to be an ongoing issue for you. You said the same thing about me this morning,non?”

“In my defense, you’re kind of unbelievable.” With him standing so close, I caught a tantalizing whiff of his cologne. What was it about his scent that had a confounding ability to make me question my sexuality?

His laughter raised chills on my skin despite the sunny weather. “Ah, you’re not the first person to say such a thing to me.”

It was so weird how he managed to both set me at ease and kept me off-balance with such comments. “What’s it like?”

“What do you mean?”

“Being you and so—” I gestured at him and all his perfection. “That.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

I appreciated the railing support because his grin gave me the vapors. “It makes it very easy to get what I want.” With the hunger in his eyes, I could almost hear his unspoken “And I want you.”

The thought made me light-headed. I had to remind myself that I shouldn’t be interested. “That must be nice.”

“It is, but—” Armand cut himself off with an indecisive noise as he tried to figure out how to express himself. “You helped me realize that perhaps I was mistaken in assuming I had everything I wanted.”

His words triggered confused panic within me. Oh god, is he talking about me? What the fuck am I going to do if he says I’m what he wants? No, stop being so ridiculous. Nobody as gorgeous as him desires me for real.

I pushed my fears to the side. “How did I do that?”

He kept his gaze trained on the vista in front of us. “Everything in my world is built on the superficial. The models and art—it’s all about the aesthetic surface. There’s nothing under all that. You reminded me about the depths I’ve ignored for too long.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“C'est très bon.” He studied me with his eyes that were bluer than the sky and water around us. “You view the world so much differently than anyone I know. It lets you see something in me that I forgot was there. You fascinate me.”

I had to be hearing things, right? “M-me?”

“Oui.” He reached out and cradled my cheek in the palm of his hand. His touch combined with his genuine sense of awe melted me in a way no woman had ever done. The smell of him mixing with the ocean air overwhelmed me. “You’re remarkable, Zio.”

If I had fallen off a cliff on our hike, I hoped nobody woke me up from my coma dream. “I’m not sure being weird and neurotic counts.”

“Everything about you is, especially your strange and quirky parts.” He smiled at me as his thumb brushed against my cheek. The gentleness of it caused me to tremble. No one had ever looked at or treated me that way. I soaked it up like a day of warm sunshine after a long winter. “It makes me want to discover all your secrets.”

If he kept looking at me while touching me, the first secret he would uncover was that I apparently wasn’t nearly as straight as I thought. As stunned as I was, my subconscious took over my mouth to say, “Only if I get to learn yours, too.”

His eyes lit up in delight at my response, sending a shudder through me. “That’s a most agreeable arrangement.”

When he moved his hand from my face, I mourned the loss of contact and lack of a kiss. The voice in my head crowed at me with glee. Do you think that’s a heterosexual reaction? Because it’s definitely not.

I fumed at myself. Maybe I wouldn’t be so confused if you weren’t making things way harder than they have to be, asshole.

Its knowing snicker infuriated me. The only thing that’s harder than it needs to be is your dick whenever you fantasize about him.

Armand interrupted my internal argument by wrapping his arm around my waist to pull me closer. “Let’s take a selfie.”

My body reacted by holding on to him in a one-armed embrace, but being in a picture with someone as beautiful as him was laughable. “That’s not a good idea. My pictures are awful whenever I have to pose.”

“Then don’t pose.” He cut off my response by tickling my side. It was so unexpected that I yelped and started cracking up because I was ticklish.

“Mercy! Mercy! Stop!” To his credit, even though I was laughing as I told him to quit, he stopped. It was such an absurd thing for a grown man to do that it broke me out of my weird mental headspace I had been stuck in. “Oh, I see how it is. You play dirty.”

His wicked smirk once again did things to my heart that made me question how much longer I was going to be allowed to call myself straight. It filled me with needs that I couldn’t afford to have when I was close to him. “Sometimes. There’s a method to my madness, though.”

He held up his phone and showed me the selfie he snapped of us when I was too busy laughing to notice. We both had broad grins as we looked at each other, looking like lifelong friends sharing a funny joke. I had never seen a picture of myself so free and happy. It was the first time I liked a photo that I was in, which was unexpected when I assumed I’d look homely standing beside someone so handsome.

When he swiped to the next one, my breathing hitched when I saw how I looked at him as he smirked at me. The naked desire in my expression stunned me, confronting me with irrefutable evidence that the lust he kept stirring up within me wasn’t just in my head. It showed all over my face that I wanted him. Badly.

Uh-oh.

* * *

Sitting on the outdoor deck of a restaurant with an amazing view of the beach, I was grateful for the shade of the umbrella on such a sunny day. It was impossible to be stressed-out when surrounded by such beauty. Not even the pain in the ass who lived to torture me in my mind could mess things up today. The delicious raspberry mango margarita I enjoyed while waiting for lunch helped me forget about my inner bastard, who was attempting to ruin my fun.

The wind ruffled Armand's hair, making my heart tremble like a leaf in a storm. Nobody should be that attractive. I stiffened when he shifted his gaze to meet mine. "It's so beautiful, non?"

"Stunning," I agreed, although I wasn't just talking about our surroundings. Everything about Armand was too much for me to handle. Reminding myself to get a grip, I did my best to act normal. "Thank you for letting me come with you today."

"I'm glad you did. It's been far more fun than I would have had on my own."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

I had to smother my instinct to scoff at his claim. “Thanks for putting up with me being so awkward.”

“I’ve enjoyed your company.” He sipped his cocktail. “So, tell me more about yourself.”

I twisted my glass in my hands. “There’s not much to tell. My life is just studying, more studying, teaching, and procrastinating on papers.”

“What do you hope to do after you earn your degree?”

“Teach Japanese art history at a university. There isn’t a lot of real-world use for my degrees outside of that.” I shrugged as I felt the burn of my parents’ disapproval. “It’s stupid, but I’m committed to it at this point. I’m in way too deep to do anything other than finish my program.”

He frowned with concern. “Why would you say it’s stupid? Studying what you love and are passionate about is the best thing in the world.”

A humorless laugh escaped me before I could suppress it. “Not according to my parents.”

“They disapprove?”

Talk about understatement. “They wanted me to get an MBA like my older brother, since it’s a practical degree in a field they understand. In their opinion, getting a PhD in Japanese studies to live as an underpaid adjunct is a monumental waste of time and

money. They've written me off as a disappointment who will never amount to anything in their eyes."

His sympathy made me wish I could curl up in his arms and soak it up. "That's horrible, Zio."

"Not even Luca could change their minds, and he's their favorite golden child who can do no wrong." That would have hurt more if he wasn't the best brother in the world. "I told him not to waste his breath. I've always been an unwanted complication for my folks, so even if I followed in their footsteps, they still wouldn't be satisfied. I decided it was more important to make myself happy than please two people who only see the faults within me."

Armand reached out and took my hand in his to squeeze in solidarity. "It's a tragedy they cannot recognize you for the amazing person you are. They should be so proud of having a son as incredible as you."

"They're not, but thank you for saying that." His support got me a little choked up, so I refocused my attention. "It's not all bad, though. I'm lucky to have Luca as an older brother. Despite the twelve-year age difference between us, he's always loved me and been on my side."

"I'm happy you have him in your corner." He brushed his thumb over my hand, sending sparks of fire through me.

"He encouraged me to ignore our parents and study art history since it was my passion. I wouldn't have come this far without his support. He paid for me to go to Japan for a few years to learn Japanese, which would infuriate our folks if they found out. They think I went on a scholarship, but Luca funded everything. I'll never be able to repay him for what he's done for me."

“You can repay him by being happy.”

His words brought a smile to my face. “That’s the only thing Luca’s ever asked for in return.”

“You’re very fortunate to have an older brother as loving as him.”

His comment raised more questions. “What about your family?”

“I’m an only child. Ma mère is a famous opera singer who travels throughout Europe. The less said of mon père, the better.” He drew his hand back to drink his margarita, making me wonder if I had touched a nerve.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

He waved away my concerns. “It’s fine. Mon père abandoned us when I was six, but I was fortunate that Arsène’s family took me in. They are the greatest maman and papa I could have asked for.”

His explanation confused me. “You weren’t raised by your mom?”

“Ma mère spent most of her time traveling on tour. She had lovers in every city she preferred to stay with, so there was no one else to take me in but them.”

“What about your grandparents, or an aunt or uncle?”

“They cut her off for marrying mon père, so I never met any of them.”

His situation made mine not seem so awful. “I’m so sorry.”

“There is nothing to apologize about. Arsène’s parents are wonderful people, who

raised me in a home full of love. It was a far better life than I ever would have had otherwise. With Arsène and his youngerfrère,Isidore, they're all the family I need."

"Found family is better than blood family, sometimes." I never expected to have that in common with him. "I'm glad they were there for you when you needed them most."

"That's why my home has always been where Arsène is."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

His words turned my stomach as something deep inside me hissed with jealousy. “That almost sounds romantic.”

“Non,non,non, not at all. Arsène was born to adore his Felix. There never has been or will be anyone else for him.” Armand held my gaze as he reassured me. “I’m so happy they found romance with each other. The affection I hold for Arsène is one of *afrère*, not a lover. When I say my home has always been him, it’s because he’s family of my heart. It has nothing to do with romance.”

Why did that cause me to heave a tremendous sigh of relief? What difference did it make to me that he wasn’t in love with a man I had never met before? How did his words instill me with a sense of hope that there might be room for me in his heart? And dear god,why did I want that?

“Oh, that’s good to know,” my mouth said without my permission.

His knowing smile filled me to the brim with nervous butterflies flapping their wings in quadruple time. “Is it?”

“Uh, maybe?”

“You have nothing to fear from Arsène. He would be relieved if I settled down with someone like you.” There was no mistaking the desire in his blue eyes as he gave me a not-so-subtle glance-over. “Not to mention quite shocked.”

I ruffled my hair as I debated the wisdom of asking the question burning up inside me. “Why?”

“Because you’re a good man I could build a life with, rather than a random stranger who entertains me for a night and is gone by the morning.” His gaze was so intense, I almost couldn’t breathe. “I’ve always lived in the now, but you inspire me to think about the future. It’s quite unexpected.”

If my heart raced any faster, I would be in danger of passing out. But I had to know. “What kind of future?”

“I’m not sure, but I look forward to finding out.” He raised his glass in a toast to me. “Something tells me it will be a fun adventure.”

The asshole who lived in my mind tortured me with another vivid visual. This time, it was one of me on my back in bed with Armand settled between my legs while giving me a blow job. It was rendered in exquisite detail as I arched up under his oral attention, my fingers laced through his dark hair while I cried out his name.

That would be a wonderful adventure, wouldn’t it?

No matter how much I wanted to disagree with the jerk in charge of my mental movie theatre, I couldn’t. The thought of Armand’s lush lips wrapped around my cock made me painfully hard. No amount of telling myself it was wrong would make it go away. I was in serious trouble.

Only if you resist what you’re feeling, my voice of dissent taunted.

That was my real problem: I wasn’t sure if I could keep my curiosity at bay about indulging in explicit pleasures with Armand.

Great, now we’re getting somewhere.

Armand

Zio's ability to draw the truth out of me was fascinating. I never spoke about mon père; he was dead to me. Not only had he abandoned us, but the few memories I had of him were terrible. Arsène and his family were the only ones who knew about that period in my life, because they'd saved me from it. There was no need to get that personal with someone who would be gone in the morning.

But Zio was different. After he confided about his sad parental situation, I trusted my secrets were safe with somebody who understood. It allowed me to show him the ugliness I had worked hard to keep hidden. I had never let anyone other than Arsène see that side of me, so it was strange how easily it came to me with Zio.

It made me crave him even more. However, he seemed to be fighting a war within himself. Every time he got close to giving in to the magnetic attraction between us, he'd get scared off by how much he wanted me. Something deeper was going on, and I intended to figure out what was holding him back. I was more determined than before to have him. "You seem more relaxed around me now."

"Two of these definitely helped," he said with a cute giggle, pointing at his almost empty margarita. "Sorry if I made it weird earlier."

"No apologies are necessary."

"You're very confusing." His brows furrowed as he studied me.
"Like, really confusing."

I tilted my head as I regarded him. “In what way?”

“You’re impossible, but you’re real. You act as if you want me, but there’s no way in hell that’s true.” He scoffed as if it were the most ridiculous notion he had ever heard before.

The confirmation that he was at least aware I wanted him helped me judge where I stood with him. “Why not?”

“People like you don’t want guys like me.” After hearing about how his parents rejected him, his disbelief was more understandable. I was about to speak when he continued. “And guys like me aren’t supposed to want people like you.”

“Why not?”

He bit his lower lip as he hesitated. “Because you make me want things I shouldn’t, which is so damn confusing.”

“Such as?”

He gave me a pointed look. “You. I’m not supposed to want you. But you keep making me want you, and it’s fucking with my head, not gonna lie.”

“What if I want you to want me?” My question made him flush bright red. “What if I desired that very much?”

He touched the back of his fingers against his cheeks to check if they were as flushed as they felt. “It’s against the rules.”

“What rules?”

“The ones that say I play for the other team,” he mumbled without looking at me. “But you cause me to question the ethics of switching teams, which is scary. It’s not worth it for one game, but...”

Hearing he was straight explained a lot about his scared reactions to being attracted to me. “But you still want to?”

Hiding his face in his hands, he groaned. “But what if it’s not just for one game? What if I end up wanting to sign on for a permanent transfer?”

“Wouldn’t that be a good thing?”

“Only if you were playing for keeps. But that’s not what this is about.” He sighed heavily, avoiding my eyes. “I’m not even sure that’s what I’m hoping for. I’m so confused, I’m using sports metaphors, for fuck’s sake. I don’t know anything about sports.”

“Zio, look at me.” I waited until he obeyed before I continued speaking. “I’m not interested in playing a game with your heart.”

He fidgeted under my gaze. “I’d disappoint you by being an awkward virgin with a man.”

“There would be nothing disappointing about that,” I reassured him. “I’d take every good care of you.”

My words sent a visible shiver through him that made my ego purr. “I’m not saying no. But I need a little more time to sort my thoughts out about this before I can say yes.”

His comment gave me hope I still had a chance with him. “Take all the time you

need. I have no intention of pressuring you into something you're not comfortable doing."

"Which is a huge tick in the column of why I should give in to you." His wry grin was adorable. "For what it's worth, the voice in the back of my mind is very vocal about letting you introduce me to a whole new world of pleasure. You don't make it easy to tell it no."

"Whatever it's promising you, reality will be better than you can fathom."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

I could see the chills on his skin my words inspired. “That’s an awfully big promise.”

“Non, it is a guarantee.” I chuckled at the involuntary squeak that escaped from him. “It wouldn’t be a one-and-done with you. Regardless of your decision, I wish to spend the rest of the trip together.”

He blinked at me in shock. “Really?”

“Oui. I mean it most sincerely.”

“Are you saying if I told you nothing would happen between us, you would still hang out with me?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” I did my best to reassure him. “This isn’t some elaborate ploy to get you into my bed, Zio. Being around you has been the most fun I’ve had in a long time. Going to your talk isn’t dependent upon us having an amorous adventure. Even if it’s only as a friend, I’ll still attend and support you.”

My reply overwhelmed him. “Um, wow. I don’t know why you feel that way, but that means a lot. Thank you.”

“You’re so genuinely yourself, which is a refreshing delight to me.”

He snorted in disbelief. “How can you find any delight in me being so neurotic?”

“Because you aren’t trying to be perfect,” I explained. “You’re authentically yourself, flaws and all. I admire that about you.”

His jaw dropped in shock, making it a challenge not to laugh at his comical reaction. “I’m sorry, are you seriously sitting there and saying that you admire me for being weird?”

I couldn’t hold in my chuckle. “In a way, I suppose I am. You’re on full display, whereas part of me is always hidden. It makes me wish I was more like you.”

He held his temples in his hands as he stared at me. “You want to be more like me? Why would anyone want to be as fucked-up as me, let alone someone as amazing as you?”

“Because I’m not brave enough to be my real self without fear like you.” Saying the words out loud lifted a weight off my chest I hadn’t realized had been there. “I’ve learned to live my life by being as desirable as possible to avoid rejection. The stunted child within me believes if I never get serious with someone, then I’ll never be hurt by them abandoning me like my parents did. I always told myself that being alone is better than being in pain. But now, I’m not so sure.”

His sympathy and understanding were a healing balm to my soul. “What changed?”

“I met you.” When he could only blink at me with a stunned expression, I continued. “Something deep within me is begging me to let you in to see all those parts of myself I’ve spent my entire life ignoring. Because other than Arsène, you’re the only other person I’ve ever felt would accept me.”

“Please be weird with me.” His cheeks flushed when I started laughing at how precious his reaction was. “Sorry, that came out wrong. I meant I want you to be comfortable enough to be yourself around me. And I’m not just saying that because I’m dying to know what you consider ‘weird’ about you.”

His words gave me a taste of freedom, which was more delicious than any dessert.

“Does being an unrepentant hedonist who denies myself the things that give me the most pleasure count?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure that would qualify. Can I ask why you do that?”

“To avoid succumbing to the temptation of love. Losing my heart to an intelligent cutie was too high of a risk for me to indulge. But I’m done being afraid of that.” I gave him a look that would leave no question in his mind that I was referring to him.

He appeared to get the message based on how he flushed to the tips of his ears. “You can decide to stop being afraid? That must be nice.”

“Only because the idea doesn’t frighten me as much as it excites me. I still have an irrational fear of heights, though.”

He scoffed in protest. “It’s not irrational! That’s a healthy paranoia designed to keep us safe from harm.”

I grinned as he revealed more of himself to me. “Since it seems you share that phobia, I guess I don’t have to feel bad about not having zip-lining down a valley of trees on our itinerary.”

It was adorable how he blanched. “Oh, please leave that off the list of things we have to do. No cliff diving, scuba diving, or off-roading adventures, thanks.”

“Well, there went all my afternoon plans.”

He looked horrified until he realized I was teasing him. “Hey! Don’t give me a heart attack. I thought you were serious for a second. I’d like to leave this island alive and not in a body bag, thanks.”

“Pardon. What do you say about heading back to the hotel to take a stroll along the beach, then refresh ourselves before having dinner together? It’ll give us a chance to get to know each other better.”

His smile was brilliant and beautiful, making my soul beg me to make him mine. “I’d like that.”

* * *

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

We returned to the hotel and changed into sandals that were more appropriate for a walk on the beach. It was tempting to take his hand, but we weren't quite there yet. Instead, I enjoyed his company and the beautiful breeze as the ocean waves crashed against the shore.

"Is it rude if I ask why your English is so good?"

"Not at all. Arsène's parents do business in America with their winery, so they're both fluent and made sure that we were, too. It also helped that Arsène and I attended university in New York, and a lot of our clientele are American."

He nodded in understanding. "What's it like working with so many famous people like Rune Tourneau?"

"More of them are nightmares than a joy to work with." I sighed at the thought of some of our more difficult clients. "But Rune is great. He's engaged to Callum, one of Felix's best friends. If you had asked me to make a perfect partner for Rune, I couldn't have created someone better for him than his beloved."

"Wait, how is that not all over the headlines?"

"Rune has always guarded his privacy, plus he has an amazing publicist. He doesn't want to expose Callum to the media, so they're doing everything they can to keep things quiet. Callum's friends are also fiercely protective."

Zio got lost in thought as we continued walking along the shore. I eventually prompted him, "What are you thinking about?"

“That I always assumed Rune was straight because of his elevator commercial,” he muttered with a faint blush. “It’s making me wonder if I know anything about sexuality anymore.”

I was sympathetic to his situation. “In your defense, a commercial where he has sex with a woman would make most people assume that was his preference. It was très sexy.”

“Yeah, that’s the stuff that fantasies are made of. Wow, if he’s that good at acting, he should try movies.”

The idea made me laugh. “Non, Rune barely has the patience for being a model these days. Arsène is the only photographer he’ll work with at this point. His passion is learning. It would not surprise me at all if he renounced modeling to become a professor after he earns his PhD.”

“Do you really think he would do that? I mean, he has a glamorous international fashion career and must make gazillions of dollars doing it.”

“True, but it does not fuel his passions. Not the way history does. Making all the money in the world means nothing if you’re not happy. Now that he’s with Callum, he’s discovered more important things in life.”

“Wow, that’s really something. I guess love can change everything if you let it.”

A question escaped me without thought. “Has it changed you?”

“The lack of it has.” His humorless laugh said so much. “Other than my brother, no one has unconditionally loved me. Not even my parents or any of my ex-girlfriends.”

His comment piqued my curiosity. “Have you had many of those?”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but there’s only been three of them. I’m not exactly a playboy.”

I couldn’t stop myself from reaching over to rub his shoulder in comfort. “That’s not such a bad thing, eh?”

“If you say so.” He was silent for a moment before he built up the courage to ask, “How many boyfriends have you had?”

“None.”

He scoffed at my claim. “I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s true. I have enjoyed countless men for an evening, but I’ve never dated anyone seriously. That’s how I kept my heart safe.”

He stopped walking as he looked at me in confusion. “But you’re so amazing! Who wouldn’t want to be your boyfriend?”

“It wasn’t my priority.” I reached out to cup his cheek in my hand, loving the heated flush of it. “But things change.”

It was cute how flustered he became. “I can’t believe I have more experience being a boyfriend than you do.”

“Perhaps you will teach me everything you know about it someday.”

His eyes flew wide before he burst into giggles, which only endeared him to me further. He was so sweet; it was only a matter of time before I lost my heart to him.

Zio

After my walk on the beach with Armand, we returned to our separate rooms. We had a little time to ourselves before we met up again for dinner. It gave me a chance to contact my roommate and best friend, Rigby Pasquali.

His friendly face set me at ease when he accepted my video call. He was handsome, with wavy sandy-blond hair, purple-rimmed glasses, and a kind smile. I had been so scared about living with a stranger as a graduate student, but it had worked out better than my best dreams. “Hey, Zio! How’s paradise?”

I lifted my laptop up to show him the view out the window over my shoulder of the beautiful beach. “Heavenly.”

“Wow, talk about the best spring break ever.”

Setting my computer back on the desk, I made myself comfortable in the office chair. “It is, but something weird happened I was hoping I could talk to you about.”

He grew concerned. “Oh no, is everything okay?”

“It’s not a bad thing. I’m just super confused, and I know you’re one of the only people who can help me.”

“You know I’d do anything for you. What’s going on?”

The only way I could get help with my problem was to be honest about it. “I met

someone at the hotel bar last night.”

“Oh!”

Considering I had been single as long as Rigby had known me, his startled reaction wasn't surprising. “They're beautiful, charming, funny, and so perfect, I don't understand how they're real. We only met yesterday, but they make me feel so many things that nobody else ever has.”

“That's awesome!” He toned down his enthusiasm when he noticed my hesitant expression. “What's the problem?”

“I—it's—” Making myself say it was difficult, even though Rigby wouldn't judge me for it. “He's a man.”

Rigby's eyebrows flew up in shock, since he knew I was straight. “Oh.”

“Although he's a guy, he lights me up inside. He's gorgeous, but for some inexplicable reason, he thinks I'm cute and interesting.”

“You are cute and interesting,” Rigby insisted. “That's the least surprising thing you've said so far.”

I fidgeted as I tried to explain myself. “He's so playful and flirty, which has been a lot of fun when I'm not too in my head about enjoying it. And not to get too TMI, but he smells so fucking good that it makes my dick hard, which has definitely never happened before. I don't understand what's happening to me.”

“It sounds like you're trying to talk yourself out of being attracted to him.”

“What if he kisses me and I want more? What am I supposed to do when he wants to

have sex?”

Rigby was logical, as always. “Do you want to kiss or have sex with him?”

“Maybe? I have no idea.” I ruffled my hair with a frustrated sigh. “Half of me is convinced it could never happen because he’s too perfect to be with me. The other part of me—well...”

“You can tell me, Zio. I won’t judge you about any of this,” Rigby said in a gentle voice. “I’m bi, so trust me, I’ve been at the crossroads of confusion about this issue.”

“How did you figure it out?”

His wry grin spoke volumes. “When I realized that fantasizing about men and women both ended in an orgasm.”

“Last night was the first time...” I trailed off with a pained groan of embarrassment. When he didn’t say anything, I forced myself to continue. “I didn’t mean to, but I couldn’t avoid imagining him while I...”

Mercifully, he got the idea without me finishing my sentence. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

It was true, but I struggled to accept it. “But what I did wasso weird.”

He chuckled but not unkindly. “It’s really not.”

“No, you don’t get it. I could still smell him on me from when he held my hand at the bar. When I fantasized about him, I got off on tasting his cologne on my skin.” I groaned as I hid my face in shame. “Oh god, it sounds worse when I say it out loud. What the fuck is wrong with me?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

“Damn, it must be a hell of a cologne.” His gentle laughter soothed away my worries. “Seriously, out of all the kinky things you could have done while getting off, that’s so low on the list, it doesn’t even rank. It’s not worth beating yourself up about.”

I dared to glance up at him, relieved to see he wasn’t disgusted. “Does this mean I’m not straight now? Am I bisexual if I’m only interested in him but no other guys? How does that work?”

“It’s all a fluid spectrum. In my case, I’m happy in my relationship with my boyfriend, but that doesn’t mean I’m no longer bisexual because I’m with a guy. I’m still bi, despite being more attracted to men than women. For me, the most important attraction factor is the person, not their parts. Whether my partner is Jude or Judy, I fell for who he was. Him being male was secondary. Maybe that’s what’s happening with you.”

“If you see him, you’ll understand why I’m so fucked-up.” I texted him a few of the pictures I had taken on our morning hike and at lunch. “How is anyone supposed to look at him and not want him?”

His eyes widened when he pulled up the photos on his phone. “Damn, you weren’t kidding. He’s gorgeous. Does he model?”

“No, but he works for a famous photographer behind the camera.”

Rigby shook his head. “He’s definitely on the wrong side of the camera.”

“Right? I thought the same thing.” I sent the two selfies Armand had shared with me

earlier. “Check these out.”

His eyebrows went up again as he flipped through them. “You know what this looks like, right?”

All too well. “Like I’m having the time of my life and I want him to fuck me?”

“Where’s the lie?”

I exhaled a heavy sigh. “But I don’t know anything about being with a man!”

“He does, though.” Rigby’s point sent an unexpected spark of excitement through me. “The best thing you can do is go with what feels good. Don’t psych yourself out wondering if you’re doing things the right way. Focus on the feelings and not the mechanics or your anxiety.”

“But I’ll be awful.” The fear gnawed at me. “Armand is probably a sex god, and I don’t know how to give a blow job or—”

Rigby gently interjected. “He’s not going to expect you to be an instant master.”

“But what if I’m so awful, he doesn’t want to be with me again?” My fearful question slipped out of me, making my cheeks flush with embarrassment.

Rigby’s gaze softened with fondness. “Well, that answers your doubts about whether you want him, doesn’t it?”

It was past the point of denial. I ached for things I didn’t know how to express, which scared me a little. “What if I hate anal sex?”

“There is plenty of other stuff you two can do instead. Sex isn’t just about being

penetrated, after all.”

“What if—”

When I cut myself off, Rigby prompted me. “You can say it.”

“What if I fall for him?” That terrified me more than anything. Armand was incredible, and I had never had sex without my feelings getting involved. It was bound to be a disastrous combination.

“I guess that depends on where he lives.”

“He’s from Paris, but he spends most of the year in Sunnyside working for a photographer.”

Rigby grinned at the news. “He has a French accent on top of being that handsome? Damn, you didn’t stand a chance.”

“I know, right?” Accents were a major weakness for me.

“If he lives in Sunnyside, what do you have to lose? If you fall in love, you could still be with him after your trip is over without it having to be long-distance. That’s a good thing.”

The sense of hope his point gave me was a big warning sign I was already in too deep. “I can’t think that far ahead. I mean, he claimed I wouldn’t be a one-and-done for him. But maybe it’s all in my head and he doesn’t want me. He’s flirty and French. What if that’s all there is to it?”

He shook his head. “Based on those pictures you sent, I’m confident you’re not the only one feeling something between the two of you.”

“It terrifies me that I hope you’re right.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

His smile reassured me. “Then that means you’re not nearly as confused as you think you are.”

“It’s scary how much I want him. When he told me he still wanted to see me throughout the trip, no matter what, part of me was ready to jump into his lap.”

“My advice would be next time, don’t hold back. If you want to kiss him, then do it.” He made it sound so easy.

Throwing up my hands, I asked what had been bugging me since breakfast. “How do I not fall for someone who looked upkintsugiafter I told him about it? Not because he wanted to get in my pants, but because he was interested enough to learn about it?”

“The better question to ask yourself is whywouldn’tyou want to fall for somebody who researched something important to you so they could connect with you?”

That stopped me in my tracks. “Damn, that’s a great point.”

Rigby tapped his chin as he mulled over something. “Let me put it to you this way. Someone who looks like him can have anyone he wants, yeah?”

“Obviously.” I snorted at how ridiculous his question was. “There was a businessman on the other end of the bar who was practically drooling at the prospect of being with Armand.”

“But Armand sat next to you instead of him. What does that tell you?”

“That the lighting in the bar was awful?”

We both laughed at that before Rigby regained his composure. “I’m being serious, Zio. He could have had the other guy with a simple ‘bonsoir’ and flirty smile.”

I snorted at that. “He wouldn’t have needed to do that much. That guy wanted him. Badly.”

“There’s a reason Armand sat beside you and not next to the sure-thing. It had nothing to do with the lighting. If he had been after an easy lay, he would have abandoned you for him at the first sign of resistance. But he didn’t, which means something.”

“He can have anybody, so why me?” Despite what Armand had confessed to me earlier, my anxiety had me too tied up in knots to accept that he might genuinely be interested in me.

“That’s what I’m trying to say. He doesn’t need to impress someone by putting in any effort. His entire existence is impressive all by itself. He only has to be himself to seduce whoever he wants. But for you, he researched kintsugito talk to you. Trust me, a guy as gorgeous as him doesn’t have to do that to score.”

My jaw dropped in shock. “Wait, that’s true! That makes what he did even more unbelievable.”

“No, him doing that makes it more believable that he’s interested in you as a person. This isn’t about getting into your pants. He clearly cares for real.”

It was difficult to accept his logic. “But he doesn’t even know me.”

“No, but he clearly wants to get to know you.”

I worried my lower lip with my teeth as I tried to process Rigby's words. "Do you think so?"

"I do. Another question to ask yourself is, if he was just an average-looking guy, has he done anything else to make you suspect his interest in you isn't genuine?"

His point caused me to reflect on all our interactions. It was startling to realize that Rigby was right. Ignoring the fact that Armand was too pretty to be real, he had shared parts of himself that few people saw. It was unfair to be cynical and suspicious of his warmth, humor, and kindness when he had been his authentic self with me all along. When I told him I was straight, he had been respectful about not pressuring me. "I don't want to be an asshole who puts him on an untouchable pedestal like everyone else. He's been so honest with me, and I hate that I'm too afraid to trust him because my anxiety is a nightmare."

"Forget about the gorgeous person anyone with a libido would desire. Spend an evening with the heart of Armand who researched kinks for you. You'll have all the answers you need if you do that."

"I can't tell you how much I needed to hear that." While I didn't have everything figured out yet, I was a lot calmer. "Thanks for talking me off the ledge."

"I'm always here for you." I drew comfort from that fact. "If you need to talk about anything else, I'm around."

There was a flurry of sound before Rigby's boyfriend came on camera with a wave. "Hey, Zio! How are things in paradise?"

"Wonderful," I said with renewed hope. "Something tells me it's about to get better."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed it does." He lifted both hands to show he was doing it,

making me laugh. Jude was always fun to hang out with. “I’m loving all the photos you’ve been posting online. Vicariously experiencing Hawaii through your pictures is the closest I’ll get to being there for a while.”

As much as I wanted to keep talking with them both, a glance at the clock told me it was almost time to meet Armand. My stomach did an impressive somersault routine that would have gotten a perfect score at the Olympics. “It’s great to see you as always, Jude. Thanks for the advice, Rigby. I’ll let you know how tonight goes later.”

“Have fun! Just remember to stay focused on enjoying yourself more than worrying about the how or the why of it all.” He was the best roommate and friend I could have asked for.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

After exchanging a few more words, I ended the call. He had given me a lot to think about, but I was grateful he had opened my eyes to what was in front of me all along. I was determined to have dinner with the real Armand and not the hot guy at the bar I couldn't fathom why he was interested in me. My butterflies kicked into overdrive, which was another huge clue that I was more than ready to see where the evening would take me.

* * *

Standing outside the elevator on the main floor, I reminded myself to breathe as I waited for Armand to appear. I hoped my black pants, white undershirt, and emerald-green cardigan were appropriate for dinner. Normally, I didn't care about fashion, but it was tough not to dress up when he always looked like he had stepped off a runway. But since I hadn't been optimistic enough to envision going on multiple dates, my love of keeping it casual limited my choices for clothing.

When the elevator doors opened, everything became slo-mo as he walked toward me. His black blazer had red and white piping details, with the cut of it flattering his form. He was too beautiful, making my heart hammer like it was trying to bang a stubborn nail into submission. With a warm smile, he greeted me with air-kisses on my cheeks. "Bonsoir, Zio. You look très beau tonight."

That close, his scent clouded my senses and made it difficult to speak. It took an effort to remember to reply, "T-thanks. You, too."

He guided me by the small of my back to the outdoor restaurant at the hotel. The area was lit up with twinkling lights all over that sparkled like stars shining in the night

sky as the ocean waves kissed the shore. The real world felt so far away, which was fine with me. A dream life with Armand was a much better alternative to reality.

After placing our order, it was time to be brave. “I owe you an apology for being a terrible friend.” When he seemed puzzled, I pushed myself to tell him the truth. “You’ve been so kind to me, but my inner cynic keeps telling me to distrust you because you’re too perfect.”

“I understand.”

That wasn’t the reaction I had been hoping for. “It’s not okay. You’ve shared your real self with me, which is amazing. I’m sorry I’ve been too scared to trust you. That’s such a shitty way to repay your kindness. Because you’ve been nicer to me than anyone ever has before, other than Rigby and his boyfriend, Jude.”

His soft smile was a comforting hug. “May I ask a personal question?”

“Sure.”

“You’ve dated a girl who was so pretty, you couldn’t fathom why she liked you, haven’t you? And she broke your heart.”

How did he always understand me? “Almost. Lacey was one of the most popular girls in high school. I couldn’t understand why someone as cute as her would talk to a guy as quiet and geeky as me. She made me think she had a crush on me, and I started to fall for her. But it was just a twisted game she and her friends played to laugh at guys for assuming we had a chance with them. She never cared about me at all.”

The sorrow in his eyes helped heal the old hurt. “I’m so sorry, Zio. What she did was cruel. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Thanks. But I shouldn’t have judged you based on my past experiences. It’s not fair to you.”

He held my gaze. “I would never do that to you.”

“And I believe you.” I took a deep breath to steady my nerves. “That’s why I’m going to try hard not to trip over my hang-ups and anxiety issue. I want to be friends with the real you, who researched kintsugi and understands having shitty parents. Because the glimpses I’ve gotten of that Armand have been incredible.”

His radiant smile was so stunning, my heart almost stopped. “I’d enjoy that.”

“I’ll probably screw up a lot because you’re so pretty it makes me stupid sometimes. But please don’t hold that against me.”

He chuckled, helping calm my nervousness. “Then we’re the same, since you’re so cute, it ‘makes me stupid sometimes,’ as you say.”

His compliment brought a blush to my cheeks. “Thanks.”

“I’m the one who should say, ‘Merci beaucoup,’ for seeing through to that part of me I had lost sight of. Without knowing it, you rescued me.”

I stared at him in amazement. “Really?”

“Oui. I mean it most sincerely. I’m grateful to you.”

Hugging his words close to my heart, they both comforted and gave me confidence.

* * *

After finishing dinner, we lingered at the restaurant and enjoyed the beautiful weather out on the patio deck. Now that I had lowered my guard, I was more open when talking to Armand. It made for a most enjoyable evening.

I fidgeted with my glass as I brought up what had been bothering me throughout our meal. “Why haven’t you asked about the other thing?”

“I’m not sure I understand your question.”

It took me some time to work up the courage to clarify. “You haven’t questioned me about if I’ve decided about taking our friendship a step further.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

“Ah, that.” He took a moment to find the best way to express himself. “I meant it when I said I wouldn’t pressure you. All you have to do is say the word.”

I studied him with an apprehensive look. “Is that what you want?”

“I want you to be comfortable with whatever decision you make. You’re not obligated by my desires.”

“You really desire me?” I worried my lower lip with my teeth, trying to ignore the bubble of hope floating up within me. I’m not supposed to want that, remember?

“Oui, but your friendship is its own gift, one that I am most grateful for. Anything beyond that is up to you.”

Even though I told myself not to, I confessed, anyway. “I’m scared.”

“Zio, I mean it. Nothing has to happen.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to confess the truth. “I’m scared by how much I desire you. I’m afraid I’ll want more of you if I give in to the thing inside me that’s begging for a chance with you. My anxiety is convinced I’ll be so bad that you’ll never want me again. More than that, I’m terrified I’ll do something stupid like fall in love with you.”

“Why would loving me be stupid?”

His reaction stunned me into being speechless. That wasn’t the part he should have

gotten hung up on. “Because I’m not allowed to.”

“Says who?”

“I’m just some guy in a bar you met. I was supposed to be an easy, random hookup. You don’t love that person.” The words left a bitter tang in my mouth that I tried to wash out with a sip of my drink.

“But that’s not who you are,” he insisted. “I told you before. You intrigued me, so I went over to talk to you.”

“Hoping I would end up in your bed for a meaningless fuck before you moved on.”

He shook his head. “If that’s what I was after, I would have gone after the businessman. I stayed to chat with you because you interested me. Even if I had spent the night with the other man, I never would have invited him to spend the day with me. I did that because you’re you.”

It was almost impossible not to laugh. “That’s what Rigby said when I talked to him this afternoon.”

“Your friend is right.”

Hearing that confirmation comforted me. “He also told me if I wished to kiss you that I should.”

Armand’s lips curved up into a wicked smile that sent shivers through me. “He sounds wise. Did he say anything else?”

I hesitated before answering. “He pointed out if I fell in love with you, we both live in Sunnyside, so we could be together.”

“If you won’t believe me, then you should listen to him. He understands me quite well for someone who has never met me.”

His words gave me the courage to make my decision.

* * *

Armand insisted on walking me up to my room after we finished talking at the restaurant. It made our evening feel like an actual date, filling me with the warm glow of a million fireflies flitting around inside me.

When we reached my door, I turned to face him. “Thank you for today. I had way more fun than I would have had on my own.”

“Same. I enjoyed your company. I’m very much looking forward to our day together tomorrow.”

The voice in the back of my mind was pitching a royal hissy fit at my inaction. Kiss him! Fucking kiss him! You don’t want to spend the rest of tonight and tomorrow torturing yourself by wondering what it would have been like.

It was a valid point, but I couldn’t make myself act. Asking to be kissed was also too weird. But Armand was enough of a gentleman to be true to his word by not making a move unless I explicitly said something. Damn it!

He did a terrible job of suppressing his amusement. “It seems you’re fighting a tough war within yourself, eh?”

I couldn’t hold back my reaction. “In my defense, it’s a hell of a battle between being scared and wanting you to kiss me.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

He reached out to trace the outline of my jawline, igniting my lust into a raging hellfire that burned for him. “Which side won?”

His blue eyes were a dark ocean I wanted to lose myself in forever. My gaze dropped to his full lips, which I couldn’t stop imagining covering mine. One kiss would tell me if I liked it enough to want a second or was grossed out by kissing him. It was impossible to decide without being informed, which tipped me over the threshold I had struggled to cross. “The one that wants you to kiss me good night.”

I had expected him to look triumphant over getting permission to do what he had been aiming for since we met at the bar. His genuine delight was unexpected.

Holding my breath, I trembled as he placed a gentle kiss on each of my cheeks. He tipped my chin up before brushing his lips against mine. Tilting his head, he gave me a lingering kiss as he let me get used to him. The third was a little more passionate. I held on to him to avoid getting swept away as the dam holding back my feelings burst open inside me.

I tugged him closer with a whimper as I sagged against the door for support. He braced a hand over my shoulder as he pressed against me, caging me in place. Our fourth one was so perfect, I forgot why I had been scared. My hands instinctively moved to his neck as his tongue teased me. I laced my fingers through his soft hair as I opened for him, melting under him with a moan. It was so much better than I had hoped. I was drunk with lust as I surrendered myself to him. It fueled my arousal as I grew harder every second his lips were on mine.

When he stopped, I had to admit that the experience proved that not only was I not

disgusted by being kissed by him, but I was also hard as hell from it. Everything in me was begging for more, drowning out my fears. All my feelings were a jumbled mess as I continued holding him to steady myself as desire battered me like a fierce hurricane.

“Bonne nuit, Zio.” He leaned down to give me two sweet good-night kisses. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

All I could do was nod in agreement, still speechless from the arousing encounter. Only after he walked away was I capable of fumbling with my wallet to get out my key card to enter my room.

I stripped as fast as I could before I fell onto the bed and started jerking off as I replayed the kiss in my mind in exquisite detail. It meant I was already teetering on the edge from the intense experience. I brought my free hand up to my nose to catch a whiff of his incredible cologne from where I had touched his neck as I held on tight. A single lick was all it took for me to come. It fucked me up I hadn’t even needed to fantasize to get off because that was how good he tasted on my skin.

Breathing heavily as I stared up at the tray ceiling, I tried to reorient myself after my intense climax. I had irrefutable evidence that despite my straightness, Armand had made me come again. Was I ready to cross that point of no return? If the cum on my stomach was any sign, I was more than prepared to take that leap.

Tomorrow should be interesting...

Armand

After we reached the summit of the Lanikai Pillbox Hike, the dark of night was warming up to a gray dawn. I had heard the view of the sunrise was spectacular from there, so I was excited to bring Zio with me. Although he had been quiet so far, having his company made waking up early a less onerous task to see nature at its finest.

I used an oversized hotel towel as a makeshift blanket for us to sit on as we waited for the sun to crest the horizon.

Since the dawn air was crisp, he once again had on his Japanese woodblock-print, pink-and-purple clouds hoodie he wore when we first met. He blinked owlshly as he stared out over the ocean below. “Why is getting up and going to bed at this hour so different?”

I chuckled at his adorable grumbling. “If you wished for me to keep you up all night, you should have said something yesterday.”

His cheeks flushed a becoming shade of pink, even as he grinned at me. “If I had, we probably would have missed the sunrise.”

“Ah, this is quite true.” I crossed my legs under me as I made myself comfortable. “You would have been too exhausted to get out of bed.”

“That sounds like another one of your big promises that you swear are guarantees.”

His reaction amused me. “See? You already know me so well.”

We sat in silence for a few moments before he worked up the courage to speak again. “Can I ask you something?”

I turned to give him my full attention. “Of course.”

He caught me by surprise when he leaned over and kissed me. It was a gentle, lingering kiss of sweetness. His shyness when he drew back only endeared him to me further.

I couldn’t resist teasing him a little. “Did that answer your question?”

He bit his lower lip as he fought not to smile. “Yeah.”

Encouraged by the display, I tempted him in the hopes of getting one more taste of him. “Do you have any follow-up questions?”

“Maybe a few.”

“Ask away to your heart’s content,” I invited him, hoping he took me up on the offer.

To my delight, he gave me a second kiss. He entangled his fingers in my hair as it grew more heated, making me burn for more. A soft moan escaped from him as he teased me with a hint of tongue. I wanted to guide him onto his back and lay claim to him, but it wasn’t time for that yet. Instead, I enjoyed indulging his curiosity as he took the lead.

We were both breathless when he stopped. He stared at me with wide eyes, trembling as he tried to process the experience. When he spoke, there was a sense of awe in his voice. “I never want to stop doing that.”

I reached out to trace his jawline. “You’re welcome to kiss me as much as you like, anytime you wish.”

He ruffled his hair with a cute huff. “Why is that so tempting when I’ve never felt that way about a guy before?”

“That’s because you hadn’t met me yet,” I said with my most charming smile.

“My brain can’t comprehend how it’s possible for me to be attracted to you after only liking women. But when we’re kissing, the rest of me doesn’t care about that. All it desires is more of you.”

“Perhaps that is the side you should listen to, eh?” I wrapped my arm around his shoulders and drew him closer to curl up next to me.

He nuzzled against my neck, breathing in with a moan. “It’s not going to give me much of a choice in the matter. Even if I don’t understand why, everything in me believes I need more of you.”

“Then it’s fortunate I have the same conviction about needing more of you.” I rested my head against his as the first rays of sunlight peeked through. “You can take all of me if that’s what will make you happy.”

He murmured in agreement but said nothing as the sun began its colorful ascent into the sky. Pinks and purples illuminated the clouds like on Zio’s hoodie, providing a stunning contrast to the yellow light and blue ocean. I had seen a lot of sunrises in my lifetime, but never one as magnificent as what was happening in front of my eyes. It was a moment of such magnitude, I didn’t want to ruin it with a camera that could never capture the grandeur. Savoring the experience for my memories was enough for me.

“Wow,” Zio breathed in awe as the colors of the sky grew more vibrant. “This is incredible!”

“Oui.” I didn’t say it, but it was better because he was nestled at my side as the sunrise exploded the world into a technicolor spectacle of light.

We remained in a companionable silence after that as the vermillion brightened into a vivid shade of blue. The colors were extra brilliant when contrasted with the white clouds drifting through the sky. Combined with the ocean, it was a landscape that made one feel grateful to be alive and witness to such splendor.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

Zio was the first to speak. “What are our plans for today?”

“I was thinking we could stay here a little longer, then head back to the hotel for breakfast. We could go for another walk on the beach before you take some time to rehearse your presentation. After you finish, we can get dinner together.”

He moved so he could look at me. “How did you know I wanted to practice?”

It took an effort not to grin at his surprise. “You seem to be the type of person who would find comfort in being well rehearsed.”

“I’m terrified of public speaking.” He looked down in embarrassment. “Like, have panic attacks over talking to an audience.”

“Then how do you teach?”

“Um, I’m petrified for the first two weeks, and then I get okay with it once I’m friendly with the students,” he replied with a laugh. “It’s hell on my anxiety, which sucks, because Iloveteaching. I’m good at it, and it’s what I want to do for the rest of my life. But standing in front of strangers who need answers from me is more than I can take.”

It was important for me to reassure him. “Ah, but it won’t be a crowd of complete strangers. You’ll have me in the audience.”

“I can’t tell if that makes it more or less scary.” He fidgeted with his hands. “I don’t want to disappoint you.”

Tilting his chin up to hold his gaze, I did my best to comfort him. “You could never do that. Consider me your student who is eager to learn more. Perhaps then it won’t be as frightening, eh?”

“I’ll try.” His long eyelashes fluttered against his cheeks as he looked at me. “You don’t mind if I work on my speech?”

“Non, I think it will help you to do that instead of spending our time together worrying about how much you need to do later.” I brushed his cheek with my thumb in a gentle caress. “That way, you can look forward to dinner with me as a pleasant reprieve. Your dessert will be well-earned.”

That brought a smile to his face. “I can never resist a good dessert.”

His sweet tooth made him even cuter. “When your practice becomes too stressful, focus on that.” I laughed when his stomach rumbled with hunger. “Perhaps now is a good time for breakfast.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s nothing to apologize about.” I gave him two lingering kisses, since I had noticed his preference for things in even numbers. Standing up, I held my hand out to him to help him. “Come, let’s eat.”

He accepted my assistance, surprising me when he used our interlocked hands to pull me in for a hug. I embraced him, loving having his body pressed against mine. On such a beautiful day, everything felt right with the world when he was in my arms.

Zio

When I hit a wall with rehearsing my presentation, I decided the best thing I could do was take a break and call my brother. Rigby had helped reassure me about my interest in Armand, but Luca was who I turned to when I needed guidance.

Luca answered with a friendly smile and a small wave. He was everything I wasn't: handsome, confident, and successful. With his gray eyes, sharp features, well-trimmed scruff, and fashionable sense of style, he had men and women falling all over themselves to be with him. He preferred hookups to serious relationships since he never stayed in a place long enough to fall in love. I envied his ability to enjoy casual partners, which had never been an option for me, thanks to my anxiety. While we were close, he rarely talked about his bisexuality or his love life. Whether that was because he didn't have one or he didn't consider it was worth discussing was up for debate. It never seemed important until now.

"Hey, Luca. I hope it's okay that I'm calling."

"I'm never too busy for you." Even though I was always a mess compared to how composed he was, he never made me feel bad about asking for some of his time. "I was hoping you'd reach out to tell me how your trip was going."

"It's been amazing! I can't thank you enough for this incredible suite." I moved my laptop in a slow circle to show off the surrounding area and gorgeous ocean view.

He gave an impressed whistle. "Damn, even by Luxurian standards, that's impressive. I'll have to find an excuse to get out there someday."

I put my computer back to focus on talking to him. “Hopefully, it’ll be sooner rather than later. It’s been too long since you’ve taken a vacation. You know I worry about you working so hard. It’s not good for you.”

“That’s rich coming from the grad student who works nonstop,” he teased. “Wintervale is so beautiful; working there will be the same as taking a vacation.”

My brother was a consultant who often traveled for work. He was about to start a new project there. He’d be helping a boutique-style Luxurian Suites Hotel expand to a second ski resort location.

“If you’re relaxing at your apartment, why are you wearing a suit?”

“Because I had a quick conference call. I’m professional on top, but I’ve got pajama pants on since I’m in vacation mode.” He brought his knee up into view to show me his teal flannel pajama bottoms.

I chuckled at my brother’s idea of chilling. “Well, I guess that’s better than nothing.”

He waved it away. “I’d much rather hear about your trip. From the pictures, it seems you’re enjoying yourself.”

I bit my lower lip as I hesitated to accept the opening he gave me. “Yeah, it’s been amazing. A lot has happened, even though it’s only been a few days. I was hoping I could talk to you about something, actually.”

“About your new friend?”

I had been very careful to keep details about Armand off social media, so there was no way my brother could know about him. Luca was friendly with Rigby, but I couldn’t imagine my best friend betraying my confidence. I played dumb instead.

“Huh?”

“You’ve obviously met someone while you’re there.”

“What do you mean I’ve ‘obviously’ met somebody?”

He stroked the scruff on his chin as he explained himself. “You’ve shared several pictures of yourself, but they aren’t selfies. You’re too anxious to ask a random tourist to use your phone to snap a photo of you. Plus, you won’t prop it up on a fence with the auto timer in case it falls over with a gust of wind or someone steals it. Somebody else clearly took the pictures you posted, which means you’re sightseeing with somebody and not alone.”

My jaw dropped at his insightful analysis, but it shouldn’t have surprised me. He was the king of being observant; no detail was too tiny to escape his notice.

“You haven’t been to the conference yet, and I doubt anyone else attending it is staying at the Luxurian Suites Resort. The Oahu Ocean View Hotel is closer to the university and cheap enough that normal grad students can afford to stay there. That means you met this person on your flight or at the resort.” His piercing gray gaze saw straight through me, despite the screens and ocean between us. “You’ve either become friends with this person, or you’re having a vacation fling with them. Am I wrong?”

I shook my head, reeling from his accuracy.

“If it was just a friend, you wouldn’t need to talk to me about it, and you would have been more open about their presence in your posts. That means your issue is a romantic entanglement because you’ve never been the type to have meaningless flings.”

I sagged back in the office chair with a heavy sigh, running my hand through my hair with a huff. “Damn, it’s been a while since you’ve Sherlocked me.” That was what I called it when he pieced together minor observations to form the bigger picture with his keen insights. “You missed your calling as a detective. There’s no crime you couldn’t solve with that mind of yours.”

He grinned at my reaction. “I can never resist a good puzzle.”

I had to laugh at that. “Yeah, I know.”

His expression turned sympathetic. “Did you catch a case of the feels for someone who’s only supposed to be fun?”

“God, I sure as hell hope not.” The thought caused me to groan. “No, it’s more confusing than that.”

He was silent as he tried to figure out my issue. “Has she introduced you to some new kink you didn’t know you liked?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

I didn't think getting off on the taste of somebody qualified, but it was something I wasn't ready to get into with my brother yet. "Kinda. He has me interested in being with a man for the first time." My heart hammered in my chest as I waited for my brother's reaction.

"Damn, that was my next guess."

"Seriously?" That had not been the response I had expected.

"It's the only other thing I could think of that would make you insecure enough to ask me about." He shrugged as if it was a logical explanation, which I suppose it was. "Tell me what's going on."

"We met at the hotel my first night here. From the very beginning, I experienced a weird magnetic pull to Armand that I couldn't explain. And the more time we spend together, the harder it is to ignore my curiosity."

Luca chuckled at how very me that statement was. "You've never been able to resist finding out more about things that intrigue you."

It was the story of my life. "Everything about him makes me want more. It's scary."

"Why?"

"Because he's a guy," I replied with a shrug. "The logical part of my brain is still hung up on that. How did I go from never being into guys to wanting to be kissed by him?"

As my brother always did, he tried to walk me through understanding my issue by asking questions. “Are you morally opposed to being with a man?”

“Of course not,” I scoffed. “You know I believe love is love.”

“Does it gross you out when Jude and Rigby are together around you?”

The idea was laughable. “Their relationship makes me envious. They complete each other and are so loving that I wish I had a partner like that.” I left out the part about how seeing them kissing filled me with confusing thoughts that I always pushed to the depths of my soul to ignore.

See? Not so straight after all, are you? That threesome dream you had about them being with you should have been a—

I shoved that annoying asshole who lived in my head back into its box. To make sure it stayed there, I put a boulder on top of the lid. The last thing I needed was to think about that while I was talking to my brother.

“Does gay sex make you uncomfortable?”

I squirmed in my chair before I forced myself to answer my brother’s question. “Only in the sense that I worry about penetration hurting.”

He laughed at my response. “I meant more in the ‘thinking about two guys hooking up grosses me out’ sense, but I guess that answers that. In that case, how does it make you feel imagining being the dominant partner?”

I snorted at the absurd idea. “Hey, I may not know much about gay sex, but everything about Armand screams he’s a top.”

“What if he’s verse?” At my confused expression, Luca clarified. “What if he’s as comfortable being on the bottom as on top?”

“I can’t imagine a world where he would let someone as inexperienced as me near his ass.”

“Being with women means you’re more experienced being the penetrating partner than the one on the receiving end,” he pointed out.

“Okay, that’s true.” I pulled out my phone and texted my brother some pictures of Armand so he’d understand. “Look at him. That man is not a bottom.”

My brother’s eyebrows arched up in surprise at the photos when he looked at them. “Well, if there was ever a guy worth switching teams for, it’d be him. Wow.”

“He’s French, funny, and charming, but there’s a very real side of him under the playful playboy that draws me to him.” Just thinking about him made me hot all over. “A single kiss from him was better than all the times I’ve kissed a woman combined. It fills me with a desire that’s so intense, it frightens me.”

“Don’t be afraid of it. Embrace it.” He set his phone aside. “As long as you’re safe, what’s the harm in experimenting?”

“Falling in love with him for real?” The thought turned my stomach into knots. “Everything about him is so dazzling, and that’s before sex has factored into it.”

“Does he live far away?”

I shook my head. “No, he lives in Sunnyside.”

“Then what’s wrong with falling in love?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

Even though I had resolved to give Armand a fair shake, part of me couldn't wrap my mind around the concept of him loving me. Instead of getting into that, I voiced the fear I hadn't spoken to anyone about. "The only thing Mom and Dad have never been disappointed in me about is me being straight. If I have a boyfriend, they'll..."

"They won't disown you over it," he reassured me. "If my experiences with them have taught me anything, all that will happen is they'll never talk about it. And honestly? I prefer it that way. The less involved they are in my love life, the better off I am."

"It's stupid to worry about them disapproving of me for it when my entire existence is a disappointment to them. But the part of me that craves their approval is afraid to give up the only thing about myself they've ever liked. I shouldn't care about what they think of me, but I do."

"Don't stop yourself from being happy when they're impossible to satisfy." Luca hesitated before he showed a little tough love. "They're going to disapprove of any woman or man you bring home just as much as they are with you being single. Is it worth sacrificing your happiness for two people who will never approve of anyone you love?"

I sighed. "You're right. I can't keep living my life hoping maybe they'll wake up and be different."

"If it makes you feel better, I approve of Armand. He's gorgeous, and as long as he treats you well, then I'm happy for you, Zio. You deserve to have a partner you can have fun with, regardless of their gender or how long you're together."

I held his words close to my heart. “It means everything that you’re on my side, no matter what.”

“And I always will be. You’re my brother, and I love you.”

I got choked up at the show of affection. “I love you, too. Thank you for talking to me about this. It’s not as scary when you and Rigby approve of Armand.”

“Whether it’s only during your trip or turns into something more long-term, it sounds like it’s a chance worth taking. If you need anything, all you have to do is ask.”

“Thanks, Luca. You’re the best brother I could have asked for.”

“I feel the same.” He checked the time on his watch. “You should get lunch, though. Knowing you, you forgot to eat because you were too busy preparing for your presentation.”

He really knew me better than anyone else. “Thank you for the reminder, because I haven’t eaten yet. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Sounds good. We’ll talk soon.”

After exchanging a few more words, I ended the call with an optimistic outlook. I was even more excited to meet Armand later and see where the night would lead us.

* * *

Once I finished lunch, I dove back into practicing my presentation until I was sick of hearing myself talk. I was so hyperfocused on my work, I didn’t immediately register the sound of knocking. Getting up to answer it, I checked in the peephole and saw it was Armand on the other side. I opened the door. “Hey! What are you doing up

here?”

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. He was the picture of dark desires, dressed all in black. His button-down shirt had squares of various sizes with alternating solid and opaque mesh. It showed off a generous amount of his chest. The sight of so much skin on display flustered me. “Confirming my suspicion that you were working too hard.”

“What are you talking—wait! What time is it?” My heart dropped out at the thought that I was late for our dinner. I glanced out the window and belatedly realized it was dark out, which meant I had really lost track of things.

“Time for a break, eh?” His charming grin made the tension in the pit of my stomach unclench.

Realizing I hadn’t let him enter yet, I moved and gestured for him to come inside. “I’m so sorry, Armand. I got caught up in rehearsing and—”

He stopped my protest with a gentle kiss on the forehead and one on the lips that liquified me into a puddle. “I’m not upset; I understand. Trust me, I understand how easy it is to disappear into your work. Half my job used to be pulling Arsène away from work long enough to feed him.”

“Why used to be?”

“His Felix has much more effective techniques of tempting him.” Armand chuckled when I blushed at the implications. He led me by the small of my back into the living room to sit on the comfy white sofa. “Instead of going out, why don’t we stay in and order room service?”

It was impossible not to rejoice. “You’d be okay with that?”

“Absolument. I wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t.”

“I’d appreciate that, thanks.” While I was relieved he wasn’t mad, I nevertheless felt bad. “I’m really sorry for being so late you had to come find me. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful of your time, or—”

He shushed my fears. “Think nothing of it. I came up here because I wanted to see you, not to make you apologize for something that’s not a big deal. I go with the flow of things, so a last-minute change of plans doesn’t bother me at all. No more apologizing, okay?”

“Thank you.” I hesitated before I leaned in to give him a tentative kiss as a peace offering. But as it always did, it made me burn for more. I kissed him with more passion as it ignited a fire within me as his tongue teased me. Without being aware of it, I ended up straddled over his lap as we kept kissing like our lives depended on it. The only thing that stopped me was when I gasped as he reached under my T-shirt to touch me.

He moved his hands to rest on my black-and-pink plaid pajama pants that I was too turned on to be embarrassed about. “Pardon, I—”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

“More,” I pleaded without meaning to. As he caressed my bare skin, it ignited my desire into a raging inferno. It left me rock-hard and ready to beg for more. I had never been so aroused by simple kissing and touching, but my body came to life under his fingertips.

He issued a playful warning. “If we continue kissing like that, dinner will have to wait.”

“That’s fine. I’m not hungry because I had a late lunch.”

“Then that makes two of us.”

With my desire in full control of my actions, I tugged off my shirt with more confidence than I knew I possessed. “Please keep touching me.”

“Here or in the bedroom?” When I didn’t respond, he moved his hands away to make it easier for me to think. “You seem to have a question.”

“I do, but there isn’t a way to ask without it being awkward.”

“That’s fine,” he reassured me. “You have my word that I’ll tell you the truth.”

I ignored my body screeching at me for stopping the best make-out session I had ever had the privilege to enjoy. “You’re a top, aren’t you?”

Thankfully, he didn’t laugh at me. “I’m a hedonist at heart. I love pleasure in any form it takes, whether it is giving or taking it. As long as it feels great for me and my

partner, I don't care about the position."

"Really?" It almost seemed too good to be true.

"Oui, and I'm happy to accommodate any specific desires you have."

I swallowed hard at the implication. "Do you mean kinks?"

His smile was wicked and filled with promise. "I'm very indulgent about exploring what brings you the greatest pleasure. There's no reason to be embarrassed about anything you enjoy. Shame has no place in the bedroom."

"But what if I don't know?" It was a failure to admit that to someone as experienced as him. "I've never experimented, and I'm not into weird stuff. It sounds terrible, but I'm pretty basic."

"That's not a bad thing. Some people don't have a taste for the unusual." His specific choice of words brought a blush to my cheeks about my secret obsession, which didn't go unnoticed. "Ah, it seems there might be something after all, eh?"

I squirmed on his lap, my arousal tenting my pants. "It's not a kink. It's just weird." I ignored the asshole in my brain who was quick to remind me that getting off on a strange thing was one definition of kink.

"You can tell me." He brushed his thumb against my lower back in comfort, which sent another supernova flare of lust through me. "Pleasure comes in all forms. I don't judge."

"But how do I explain what I don't understand?" He remained silent as I tried to express my confusion. "Whatever the hell is in your cologne, it gets me all twisted up inside. It makes me—"

His voice was gentle and encouraging. “Tell me.”

“It makes me want a taste,” I whispered.

“There, you see? That’s not embarrassing at all.” His words reassured me. “Perhaps it would be best if we moved to the bed, eh? You can explore me to your heart’s content to satisfy your curiosities.”

It was almost too tempting, but I hesitated. “To what end?”

“Hopefully, until you come,” he replied with a laugh that sent a shudder through me at the promise of getting relief. But it also filled me with nervousness, which he picked up on. “I know this is an unfamiliar experience for you, Zio. You should explore my body to grow comfortable with this. To be crude, this isn’t about me fucking you, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Seriously?”

“You have the conference to focus on for the next two days. The last thing I want to do is distract you from that by making you sore.” His show of consideration moved me. “If you wish to explore what it’s like to be penetrated after your event is over, I’m happy to show you what pleasures there are in that. If that’s something you’re never comfortable with, then that’s fine with me, too. I’ll never complain about receiving pleasure.”

Even without me saying anything, he had known the thing I was most worried about. For that reason, I gave him two soft kisses before I got off his lap and held my hand out to him.

He accepted it with a smile, interlocking our fingers and raising my hand to kiss it before I led him into my bedroom. When we entered, he glanced around at the

grandeur of the enormous space. “Wow, I didn’t realize there was such a difference between being a Platinum and Diamond member of Luxurian’s membership program. I’m impressed.” He refocused his attention on me. “Do you want to undress me yourself, or should I do it?”

Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward and undid his first button with trembling fingers. Each one I unfastened revealed more of his beautiful body, flooding me with a warring sense of heat and insecurity about how perfect he was.

He shrugged his shirt onto the floor and guided my hands to his chest. “Nothing else matters other than feeling good.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

Doing my best to listen to him, I let them slide down his pecs and over his nipples that pebbled under my touch. I kept moving downward over his toned physique until I reached his waistband. In my nervousness, I struggled with unfastening them, so he stopped me in order to remove his boots, socks, and pants.

It left him in a pair of black briefs with an impressive bulge. The sight filled me with conflicting desires and fears, but I couldn't resist reaching out and cupping his arousal in my hand. It scrambled my brain, but my hands reached out to lower his underwear to bare all of him before my eyes.

I took it as a good sign that his erection didn't fill me with disgust. Instead, it piqued my curiosity since I had never seen another man's dick or an uncircumcised one up close before.

Armand surprised me by getting into bed and stretching out on his back as he made himself comfortable on top of the comforter. He gestured for me to join him, which seemed to flip the switch on my autopilot to comply with his wishes.

I stripped out of my pajama bottoms and tried not to self-consciously cover myself. "Um, where should I sit?"

"Here." He guided me to straddle over him, making me blush when our cocks brushed against each other. "Do whatever feels good."

I started with kissing him, something that was becoming familiar and beloved. As I lost myself in his lips and tongue, my desire roared into a five-alarm fire. It burned my reservations into ash as I gave myself over to the moment and acted on instinct.

Taking a pause to collect myself, I inspected Armand. It was a relief he didn't have rippling abs and bulging muscles, but he was still fit compared to my softness. Before I could get self-conscious about it, I noticed a long, diagonal scar near his hip that had silvered with age. It compelled me to touch it, tracing the length that had a hint of roughness. I had been too distracted earlier to notice it when removing his shirt. "What happened?"

"I had my appendix removed fifteen—non, seventeen years ago. Has it been that long? Mon dieu."

The time frame shocked me; I had been nine when he had surgery. "Wait, how old are you?" I blushed when he burst into laughter. "Shit, that came out super rude, I'm sorry."

"Not so old I can't keep up with you," he replied, chuckling at my reaction. "I'm thirty-eight."

I blinked at him in disbelief, because he looked closer to my twenty-six years than he did to forty. "You really don't look it."

He grinned at me. "Should I have a walker and a head full of white hair?"

His teasing helped me relax. "No, but you should at least have a few gray hairs."

"They're there if you look close enough."

"I'm going to check later, because I don't believe you at all." He laughed, setting me at ease. "I guess I figured you were maybe twenty-eight. I'm twenty-six and apparently a horrible judge of age."

"Aww, you're abébé," he cooed, making me laugh and blush at the same time. "And

such a cute bébé at that.”

I snickered before returning my attention to his scar. It was like seeing kintsugi on his skin, where the fact that he had been hurt and pieced together again made him more beautiful to me. The old wound was a testament that he was real and had survived bad things, that he was a man and not an untouchable god. I moved so I could kiss up the slender mark, getting turned on as I did so.

It emboldened me to explore his body, kissing and caressing him as I worked up to his nipples. As I teased them into tightened peaks, his hardness pressed against my belly. It gave me a confidence boost to have proof that my gentle explorations aroused him.

I trailed kisses along his collarbone, breathing in his woodsy cologne spiced with a hint of leather. It filled my veins with molten lava and made me drunk with desire in a way I had never experienced before.

When he tilted his head to expose his neck in silent invitation, I caved to my urges. I placed a lingering kiss at the base, then dared to lick along the curve of it. It felt like taking a hit of lust in its purest and most potent form, giving me an incredible high. I moaned as his unique scent exploded on my taste buds, rocking my arousal against his as my desire spiraled out of control. It was even better than I had imagined. Like an addict, I couldn't stop with just one taste. I alternated between licks and kisses as I worshipped him with my lips and tongue while stroking the other side with my fingertips.

The experience became even more intense when he reciprocated by caressing my back and sides with teasing touches. Everything was a blur of white heat that pushed me higher than I had ever been before. One more lick was all I needed to send me over the edge as I came with a moan that I muffled against his neck.

It stunned me I had such a powerful orgasm with neither of us touching my dick. When I tried to apologize for doing something so strange, Armand cut me off with a hungry kiss. It swept me away until I couldn't tell which way was up.

After we paused, I propped myself up on trembling arms. "Seriously, please tell me what the fuck kind of cologne do you wear."

To my relief, he gave me an actual answer and not a coy response. "Tom Ford Ombré Leather. It's a combination of leather, patchouli, amber, and some other earthy notes, combined with my natural body chemistry."

I wasn't sure how any of that equaled such an intense orgasm, but it amazed me all the same. "At this point, I'm convinced you're a walking aphrodisiac. I've never felt that kind of blind lust, let alone because of a damncologne."

He chuckled as he stroked my lower back. "I'm glad such a simple thing gives you so much pleasure."

His words reminded me of his hardness, which made me feel like a terrible partner for being so selfish. "Uh, should I...?"

He continued stroking me in a soothing manner, which kept most of my anxiety at bay. "Should you what?"

It took me a few attempts to figure out how to phrase my question. "Um, take care of you?"

"You're free to touch if that's what you're asking. I want you to explore as far as you're comfortable."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

Moving off him to sit at his side, I blushed at the sight of my cum splattered on his skin. It was an intimacy that made something deep inside me purr with a sense of satisfaction I didn't understand. That gratification pushed me to give him the same release, so I reached out with trembling fingers to trail them along his rigid length that twitched under my touch.

“You don't have to be shy,” he encouraged me.

Taking the hint, I wrapped my hand around his cock to stroke it. I watched with fascination as his foreskin rolled up and over the head, then down again. Repeating the action, I studied it with curiosity since it was so different from my cut one. I kept waiting for a sense of disgust or discomfort to impinge on my flush of sexual gratification, but it never came. Even though touching another man sexually was a first to me, it felt right. I worked him with more confident pumps when I realized I wasn't hurting him.

To my great surprise, jerking him off stoked the embers of my lust once more. Acting on impulse, I repositioned myself so I could resume exploring his torso with my lips and other hand, although I skirted around the cum on his stomach. I derived more pleasure from the experience than I would have expected. It took some adjusting to get used to doing both, but I got the hang of it. Armand's soft sighs as he arched under me told me I couldn't be doing too bad of a job. They inspired me to add a little more flair to my movements.

When I ran my tongue along the length of his scar, he groaned. “I'm so close, Zio.”

I sat back to allow myself to focus on helping him finish. True to his word, a few tugs

were all he needed to climax with a moan. I hadn't expected it to be such an arousing experience, but all the combined stimulation had my dick standing at full attention once more.

My curious nature demanded that I taste some of his cum off my hand with a tentative flick of my tongue. I wasn't sure if I was at a point where I could handle drinking down his entire release yet, but the salty tang wasn't as off-putting as I expected.

I yelped when Armand reversed our positions to pin me down on the bed. Before I could ask what he was doing, he kissed me with a demanding need that left me aching for another climax. I was breathless when he stopped.

"Will you let me use my mouth to pleasure you, Zio?"

I was so desperate for relief that I couldn't be embarrassed by how needy I sounded when I replied, "Please!"

That was all the permission Armand required to turn my entire world upside down. His lips and hands were everywhere as he worked me up into a frenzied need. By the time he had progressed to a blow job, I was fighting not to cry out from the intense pleasure.

His was nothing like the ones I had received from my ex-girlfriends. Theirs had been half-hearted and perfunctory, but Armand sucked my dick as if he couldn't get enough of it. He alternated between teasing me with his lips and tongue before letting me slide in deep. Right when I was on the verge, he pulled off me and switched to stroking me as he bobbed his head along my length. I babbled nonsense as he pushed me to my very limits, entangling my fingers in his dark hair as I squirmed under him with increasingly vocal cries. The longer it went on, I was almost sobbing from how badly I needed to come, my body tensing up as I teetered closer to the brink.

When he took me to the back of his throat and moaned around me, I lost control. I climaxed a second time with a shout as he swallowed my release, then licked me clean. The intense orgasm left me dazed as I whimpered from the incredible pleasure that overloaded all my circuits.

Armand reached over to the nightstand and used tissues to wipe the cum off his stomach from earlier. He then curled up beside me and draped his arm over me. It was a reassuring weight that grounded me as I floated in a mindless nirvana of sexual ecstasy. Even my analytical brain couldn't analyze what had happened. All I could do was bask in the incredible afterglow. My OCD about even numbers meant having two orgasms in a row was the ultimate high I hadn't thought was achievable.

I wasn't sure how long I drifted in a mindless bliss, but Armand brought me back when he asked, "When do you need to be up tomorrow?"

"Huh?"

He stroked my shoulder with his thumb. "I don't want you to oversleep and miss your conference. I'll ask the concierge to give you a wake-up call in the morning."

As blissed-out as I was, the show of consideration touched me deep in my heart. It was a small gesture that told me so much about him. I tried to pull myself together and focus. "You're really good at taking care of people, aren't you?"

"Oui, so let me take care of you right now. Give me a time, and you can sleep without a single worry in the world."

"Will you stay with me?" The thought of him leaving to return to his room left me cold.

He smiled down at me. "I'd love to."

“Can you do the wake-up call for seven o’clock?” I preferred sleeping in as late as possible, more than I needed the hour to be an even number.

Nodding, he moved to make the contact to the front desk for me, then got up and went into the bathroom. To my surprise, he brought a warm washcloth over to clean me up, so I didn’t have to get out of bed. Once he finished, he pulled the covers out from under me to tuck me in, which did things to my heart. Satisfied I was good, he left again. I heard him flip the dead bolt before he shut off all the lights and returned to get in bed with me.

It was hard to fight off sleep, but I had to know the answer. “Why did you lock the front door?”

“Because you always double-check to make sure you have all your belongings twice whenever we’re out. I didn’t want you to stay awake worrying about it not being secured.”

“Wow, I can’t believe I’ve been Sherlocked twice in the same day,” I muttered with a sleepy chuckle, losing my battle to pleasant exhaustion.

“I’m not sure what that means, but I’m going to assume it’s good.” Armand gave me two tender kisses before he positioned us to curl up behind me.

Safe in his arms and adrift in the afterglow, sleep claimed me too soon. I lost my chance to tell him that everything about the evening had been the best of my life. We’d have to laugh later about how we forgot about dinner. It wasn’t surprising when what we had done had been more fulfilling than any meal could have been.

Armand

I wokeup when the phone rang with Zio's courtesy call from the concierge. It took three rings before he stirred and flung his arm out to make the noise stop. He knocked the receiver off the cradle, making me chuckle. It seemed I was forever doomed to be surrounded by men who could not get themselves out of bed without help. Good thing I found it an adorable trait.

"Zio, it's time to wake up."

He curled into a ball with a sleepy mumble that sounded like an attempt at asking for five more minutes. It didn't come as a surprise considering he was pretty out of it at breakfast. Him not being a morning person made his waking up yesterday for the sunrise more meaningful to me. I could only imagine how many alarms he had to set to wake up in time.

Deciding to take pity on him, I slipped out of bed and walked around to hang up the beeping phone. Getting dressed, I grabbed his key off the coffee table to get him breakfast. After not having dinner last night, there was no way I was going to send him off to his conference without a meal. If I brought it to him, he could sleep in longer if he didn't have to go down to the restaurant to eat.

Whereas I enjoyed a hot breakfast, Zio had shown a preference for their pastries. My Parisian soul despaired at the pathetic excuse for croissants he liked, but I grabbed two of those and blueberry muffins. I picked up four packets of butter since I noticed he always ate and drank things in even numbers. The server was kind enough to get me a bag for the pastries, a knife, a drink carrier, and two cups of coffee to go. I was

generous with the cream and sugar because he preferred his coffee to be a pale shade of taupe. Since he also liked sparkling water, I grabbed him two bottles. That way he could take one to the conference and have the other in his room fridge for when he returned.

Satisfied I had everything he needed to start his day off on the right foot, I returned to his suite. I set his food and coffee on the desk next to his laptop. If he was anything like Arsène, he would multitask by eating and checking his email while doing last-minute adjustments on his presentation.

After putting the sparkling water in the fridge, I went over to peek in his closet. His clothes were neatly hung, making it easy to pick an outfit for him. I pulled out a pair of pants and a thin gray sweater with black trim to go over a white button-down shirt. Taking them into the bathroom, I folded them on the marble counter before setting about the impossible task of waking up Zio.

I started by saying his name, then shook his shoulder to rouse him. Other than a sleepy grumble, he didn't react. That meant I had to resort to more underhanded means. I threw off the comforter and sheets, leaving him bare. He curled into the fetal position with a whine as his hand flailed in a desperate grab for the blankets to pull them back over him.

"Non, it's time to get up, Zio." When that didn't work, I figured appealing to his anxiety would be the best method. "You're going to be late."

As I suspected, hearing the word "late" caused him to jolt awake as he stared at me with wide eyes in a panic. "Shit! How late am I?"

"You still have time to eat." I held my hand out to him to pull him out of bed. He accepted my help, so I rewarded him with two soft kisses before ushering him toward the bathroom.

It impressed me how quickly he got ready and emerged fully dressed. He looked adorable, although he had a puzzled expression on his face. “How did you know this was what I planned to wear?”

“Since you wore your green sweater cardigan on our first dinner together, I assumed that was the outfit you wished to impress people with. You mentioned your presentation is tomorrow, so I thought you’d save it for that. Hoodies would be too casual for the event, which left this for today. You’re très beau in it, too.”

His pleased blush was adorable. “Um, thank you. But we should head to the restaurant for breakfast if I have any chance of eating.”

“I already took care of it, so there’s no need to go downstairs.” I led him over to his desk where the bag and drinks were next to his computer. “This way, you can eat and do any last-minute presentation adjustments or check your email. I also prepared coffee for now and the other to take with you.”

Zio blinked at me in shock before he sat down in the office chair. “Um, thanks. That was really considerate of you.” He took everything out of the bag, his expression brightening when he realized I had made sure he had all of his favorite things. “This is perfect, wow!”

Taking a seat on the couch, I enjoyed his wonder over such a simple thing. “Your coffee already has cream and sugar in it, too.”

“You don’t miss any details, do you?”

“I don’t, which is what makes me so good at my job.” I had always prided myself on anticipating people’s needs before they had to ask for things. “There are also two bottles of sparkling water waiting in the fridge for you, too.”

He sliced his blueberry muffin in half and began buttering it. “Thanks! But why two?”

“Because I noticed you eat and drink everything in even numbers. When you order only one thing like a hamburger for lunch, you cut it in two.”

“I don’t know whether to be horrified or impressed you figured that out about me.” He ate the bottom of his muffin in two bites, as he always did. “Is it obvious that I do that? Or are you like my brother where you get all Sherlock Holmes about picking up little details?”

“Ah, that’s what you meant by ‘Sherlocked’ last night.” His term had confused me, so I appreciated him shedding light on it. “To answer your question, I’m more attuned to people’s needs than the average person. I don’t think your preference for even numbers is something most people would notice, nor is it strange.”

“It’s a manifestation of my OCD. I’m lucky that mine isn’t debilitating, but it’s still annoying.” He ate the top half of his muffin while giving me an assessing look over. “Have you always been like this?”

“As a child, I enjoyed being useful. Few things please people more than having their every need catered to, and I love making everyone happy. My hedonism isn’t just about sexual pleasure.”

“Is it—” He interrupted himself and took a long sip of his coffee.

I refused to let him dodge the issue. “Is it what?”

“Never mind. It’s not my place.” He focused on pulling his croissant into smaller bites to put butter on. As dry as it looked, it needed any help it could get.

His reaction intrigued me. “You can ask. I’m an open book.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:19 am

He kept his attention on eating, making me think he might not finish his thought. However, he had built up the courage by the time he finished his pastry. “You said you were this way as a kid. Is it because you felt you needed to be useful to Arsène and his family so they would let you keep living with them?”

“It seems I’m not the only observant one.” I leaned back against the cushions in surprise. “Maman and Papatook great pains to reassure me that I always had a place with them, no matter what. I tried to repay their kindness of giving me a home, which extended to taking care of Arsène.”

“Have you ever wanted to do anything else?”

I shook my head. “Not really. Working for my best friend is the best job ever. Few people let me be unapologetically myself. Making his life easier so he can focus on his art brings me deep joy. Plus, there are benefits I’ve enjoyed in the past with entertaining his models and traveling the world. I have no regrets about following him to America, especially when it led me to you.”

My latter comment brought a sweet blush to his cheeks. “How can you be so smooth this early? My brain is barely on.”

“And yet, you’ve figured out another secret of mine,” I teased him. “Not even Arsène knows that one.”

“Really?”

“Oui. It would hurt him if he thought my childhood debt to his family played any role

in why I've stayed by his side this long." That was one of the few things I had ever hidden from him. "It's not my only or main reason for being with him. But I'd be lying if I didn't say there was a small part of me that wants to look after him, Isidore, and their parents. That's the least I can do to repay them for taking such good care of me when I was at my most vulnerable."

"And to make sure they don't abandon you, too."

It hit me hard that he understood that deep-seated fear that no amount of rationalizing could convince me would never happen. "It's not a daily anxiety, but I won't deny that it lingers in the dark shadows of my heart's oldest scars."

I didn't expect him to get up and come over to straddle himself over my lap to give me a hug. My arms encircled around him to hold him close, drawing comfort from his gesture and his reassuring weight against my body.

Zio stunned me once more. "You're just like my brother. He only likes casual hookups because someone who doesn't matter can't hurt you if you never let them into your heart. It's so lonely."

I squeezed him tighter in my hold. "Not since I met you."

Once again, he caught me off guard when he drew back to give me a kiss that was full of emotions that translated how he felt without words. It was a soothing balm to my soul that I only recently realized had been aching from being empty for too long. Like the gold in his pottery, Zio's sunshine filled all my broken cracks and made me not just whole but better than ever before.

* * *

I celebrated getting Zio off to his conference with time to spare with a leisurely

breakfast on the outside patio. While he wasn't with me, my mind was full of thoughts about him. I tried to understand how he had slipped through my defenses to find the real me I hid from everyone else but Arsène.

Zio not only saw me but understood the parts of me I took great care to never show anyone. My soul reached out to him, turning toward him like a sunflower seeking out the sunlight after a long storm. I of course wished to indulge in the carnal pleasures of our bodies uniting as one. But I also ached to hold him in my arms and just be near him. It was why I had stayed up late the previous night, savoring the peace that holding him gave me. When I barely knew him, it amazed me that for the first time in my life, someone who wasn't Arsène gave me the same sense of home, security, and comfort that I secretly craved. It made me never want to let Zio go. When he wasn't mine to keep, that left me with an uncomfortable sadness I refused to dwell on and let ruin a beautiful day.

Instead of going out to explore on my own, I returned to my room to contact the only person I could talk to about my confusion. Arsène answered my video call, looking handsome in his maroon cardigan with a high collar over a white T-shirt. Both he and his younger brother, Isidore, had chiseled features that gave them an aristocratic air that I loved teasing them about any chance I could. He was scruffier than normal, but it made him more attractive.

“Bonjour, mon ami. I'm impressed you're awake at this hour,” I teased. “I'm jealous of how easily Felix can get you up in the morning.”

Arsène rolled his hazel eyes, but he still chuckled. “It is not just in the morning, I assure you.”

Dragging him into the gutter with me was always a delight. “With a lover as tempting as him, it must be morning, noon, and night, non?”

Too classy to confirm, he deflected with humor and his trademark lack of contractions. I loved teasing him about how old-fashioned his speech patterns made him sound. “When you are entertaining many lovers in Hawaii, it is amazing you have time to spare a thought about mine.”

“How like you to get straight to the heart of the matter.” It was both a blessing and a curse of having an insightful best friend who knew every intimate part of me. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but there haven’t been any lovers this trip.”

“Are you unwell, or did you suddenly develop standards?”

I laughed hard at his question. “Are those my only two choices?”

He lost some of his playfulness as he became concerned. “What happened?”

“I may have met my Felix.”

His eyes grew wide at my statement. It wasn’t one I made lightly. Arsène had the same sexually adventurous spirit as I did, which meant he used to keep things casual and fun as he enjoyed himself with countless beautiful men. But when he fell in love with his boyfriend, he became devoted only to him. “When did this happen?”

“My first night here.” I smiled as I remembered Zio sitting by himself as he watched the ocean. “I met a man who saw straight through to the real me. I’ve yet to enjoy the pleasure of being inside him, but being with him already feels like home.”

Arsène was the only person who understood how profound that emotion was for me. “Who is he?”

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

“His name is Zio Revello. He’s a graduate student at Sunnyside University in the Japanese department.”

It was hard not to laugh at Arsène’s stunned expression. “I must confess, that was not the answer I was expecting.”

“He’s here for an academic conference, but he came a few days early to explore the island. We’ve been sightseeing together as we get to know each other better. It’s the happiest I’ve been in a very long time.”

“It seems there is a ‘but’ coming.”

“That’s because there is. He’s always identified as straight, so he’s struggled with his attraction to me.”

Arsène tilted his head as he regarded me. “Is that the only issue?”

“I don’t just want him for a night of fun. I’m not interested in him being a plaything I enjoy during my time here and then never see again.” Pausing, I took a moment to steady myself before saying out loud the words I never thought I’d say. “My heart wishes to hold him tight and never let him go, Arsène. Everything in me wants to keep him when he’s not mine.”

“Then make him yours.”

I scowled at his response. “To have him enjoy the sexual pleasures of being with me is one thing. It’s something else entirely for him to accept having his first boyfriend.”

He was quiet for a moment as he studied me. “Does he understand that you are serious?”

“I’m not sure if he can overcome his perception of me as the playful guy at the bar who was in search of a fun evening.” The idea didn’t sit well with me.

Arsène frowned at my comment. “But you said he saw the real you?”

“He does, but his anxiety keeps trying to talk him out of believing in me.” I sighed with frustration. “I have no experience with convincing a man that I’m interested in his heart and not just his body.”

“If I may make a suggestion, I would encourage you to be honest with yourself and him,” Arsène said. “It is tempting to hide behind your normal mask of playfulness, but if you want an actual relationship with him, you must tell him how you feel. Do not joke about it, but speak to him from the depths of your heart with sincerity.”

I knew he was right, but it was hard for me to be so open after a lifetime of hiding my heart. “But what if that’s not enough? What if hearing I have genuine feelings after only a few days scares him away?”

“You said you have not had all of him yet, did you not?”

I nodded. “Being attracted to a man is an unfamiliar experience for him, so I don’t want to rush him into something he’s not comfortable with.”

Arsène tapped his chin as he mulled over a point. “If you were a woman, do you think it would be different?”

His question made me pause. “Zio doesn’t seem to be the type to have meaningless flings, regardless of gender. He’s already expressed fears about falling for me, which

leads me to believe he can't be with a partner without that."

"Then he really is like my Felix." Arsène chuckled at memories of the beginning of his relationship with his beloved. "He insisted we could be casual, but we had many conversations where he complained I was making it too difficult not to fall in love with me. It should have been a warning sign to me to stay away, but nothing in the world could have kept me from being drawn to his bright flame."

"With his fiery spirit, you never had a chance of resisting him." I had known that from my very first encounter with Felix.

His knowing smile said so much. "I know that now. But I still tried to resist it in the beginning because I had no use for love in my life."

That was a fact I knew all too well. When we were young, Arsène was who I had wished to cherish. However, I had given that up when I realized he had no interest in being tied down by a romantic relationship. My feelings for him had morphed into a brotherly affection. Afterward, I had been convinced I would never love anyone else. But that part of my heart that had lain dormant for so long had stirred to life because of Zio. "How did you come to accept that you wanted to love him?"

"My confession accidentally poured out of my soul as I spoke to him about my confusion. I had not realized until that moment I felt that way, but I knew every word was true. Any fear I had of regretting being so open with him was washed away by the joy of having him return my feelings."

"But I've never loved anyone."

Arsène's expression clearly stated I was wrong. "Non, you have never let yourself be in love with someone. There is a difference, mon ami. You have lived your entire life in fear of love because your parents withheld it from you. But you also have a lifetime

of knowing how wonderful it can be because of our family. I refuse to accept that you are incapable of loving a partner with all of yourself once you choose to.”

His words touched a chord deep within me, but I had one fear I couldn’t quite shake. “But what if he doesn’t want me?” Besides my parents’ rejection of me, my entire love life had involved men who had no use for me after having a good time.

“If he did not, your heart would not be ready to let him in,” Arsène pointed out. “You would have had your fun with him for a night and been gone in the morning without a second thought.”

“But what do I do if he’s too afraid to be with me?”

The sympathetic expression in Arsène’s eyes consoled me. “You talk to him about his fears and demonstrate why he should entrust his heart to you.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

“I’m already scared to lose him, and he’s not mine, yet.”

“The best thing you can do is to be yourself,” Arsène counseled. “Not the flirty playboy you show to the world, but the real you that you try so hard to hide.”

From the background, I heard Felix’s voice call out, “Are you home?”

“In my office!”

Felix appeared, looking as precious as ever in ripped jeans and an old, faded band T-shirt. His brown hair stood up in tiny spikes from where he had ruffled it earlier, making him seem younger than his twenty-three years. With his joyful exuberance, he was a bright light in Arsène’s life that had changed my best friend for the better. While Felix had been very distrustful of me from our first encounter, we had grown closer over the time he had been with Arsène. Like Isidore, I had adopted Felix as a baby brother to take care of while also teasing him any chance I got.

He lit up with a bright smile when he saw me wave on camera. “Hey, Armand! How’s Hawaii?”

“Worthy of Arsène’s talents for a beautiful photo shoot.”

Felix made himself comfortable on his boyfriend’s lap before he looked at me with concern. “Is everything okay?”

“Why would you ask that?”

“Because you never give me a straight answer, let alone talk only about work. You normally would say, ‘Full of gorgeous men who are eager to have threesomes with me.’ When your first retort isn’t bragging about banging some dudes, I’m legit worried about you.”

I had to chuckle that even Felix had me so figured out. “You’re as clever as always.”

“Did something happen?”

Arsène rested his chin on Felix’s shoulder. “It seems our Armand has finally fallen in love.”

“Wait, for real? And not just an ‘I’ll love you all night long,’ kind of thing?” Felix’s green eyes went wide when I chuckled at his adorable reaction. “Like, stop teasing about threesomes level of being in love with someone?”

“I feel selfish enough that I don’t wish to share him with another.” It was a shocking realization when I always enjoyed a good *plan à trois*.

Felix leaned back against Arsène with a stunned expression. “Holy shit, who is he? I can’t fathom a man who would make you want to be with only him.”

I couldn’t blame him for being shocked considering my reputation. “He’s an adorable graduate student.”

Felix’s jaw dropped. “You’re joking, right? He’s not some celebrity or a famous billionaire but a grad student?”

“What can I say? The heart wants what it wants, even if it is as unbelievable to me as it is to you.”

Felix made noises of disbelief before he turned to glance at Arsène behind him. “Is he being serious? Or is he pulling my leg?”

Arsène laughed as he hugged his boyfriend tighter. “He is being sincere. I think it is wonderful.”

“What’s wonderful?” Isidore asked before coming on-screen. He may not have been my blood relation, but I loved him fiercely as my own baby brother. Like Arsène, he was devastatingly handsome, with dark hair, lush lips, and a wicked sense of humor. He was dressed stylishly in a teal blazer and white T-shirt with skinny pants.

His boyfriend, Wren, was right behind him. He was a lively spitfire, which made him so much fun to tease. As he always did, he had on a shirt with a skull that had hearts for eyes with jeans. His quirky personality filled Isidore’s life with light and laughter, which was all I could have ever hoped he’d find in a partner. “It can’t be wonderful if it involves Armand.”

I couldn’t resist joking with him. “Ah, if it isn’t mon petit chat.”

“You’re lucky you’re an ocean away from me right now! You know I hate it when you call me that.”

“But of course. That’s why I do it,” I said with a laugh. “And how is mon beauIsidore?”

“Curious about why you haven’t been posting pictures of handsome men on social media.” Just like Arsène, he was quick to pick up on minor details. “Normally, you would have shared proof of all the beautiful hookups you’ve entertained on your trip, but you haven’t uploaded a single one.”

“He has found his Felix,” Arsène told him.

“And he’s a grad student, which I’m still trying to wrap my head around,” Felix added.

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Are you implying I prefer men who aren’t smart?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

“I’m not saying that, but usually your primary criteria for a guy is he has to be good-looking, sexually adventurous, and open to threesomes. Someone you can have an intellectual discussion with doesn’t seem to factor into your consideration when you’re more concerned about how skilled he is at sucking your dick. After all, it makes it a little difficult to have a conversation with him when his mouth is full of you.”

I laughed hard at Felix’s trademark bluntness, but Isidore stopped me with his keen observation. “Armand has always been attracted to intelligent men. That’s why he stays away from them. It saves him from the danger of falling for his conquests.”

His point was a reminder that Arsène wasn’t the only one who knew me so well sometimes. “Zio’s not a conquest. He’s everything I didn’t know I wanted.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting him!” Felix looked downright gleeful at the prospect. “He has to be hot, right?”

To satisfy their curiosity, I texted them a few of the pictures of Zio I had snapped while he was unaware and the ones of us together. Arsène must have pulled them up on his computer screen because they all reacted at the same time.

“What the fuck? He’s cute! Since when do you docute?” Wren asked in outrage.

“Wow, I would have lost that bet on who’s your type. I figured he would have been a buff model, not an adorable cutie,” Felix commented with surprise. “Damn, no wonder you were interested in me when we first met.”

I snickered at his reaction. He certainly wasn't wrong. There were quite a few similarities between them that didn't escape me.

Isidore nodded to himself. "It makes sense that you'd fall for someone who is the complete antithesis of the men who normally warm your bed."

"Most importantly, you are happy with him, *mon ami*," Arsène said with warmth. "You look at him with so much love already. All you need to do is tell him with words so he understands. Do not make him guess when you are so clearly enamored with him."

"I hope it goes as well as you think it will." The idea of confessing my feelings to Zio filled my stomach with a nervous flutter I hadn't experienced before.

"There isn't a man who could resist falling for you if you truly loved them," Isidore added.

Wren scoffed. "I certainly wouldn't fall for him!"

Isidore pulled his boyfriend closer by the waist and gave him a sweet kiss. "That's because you're in love with me."

Wren cuddled against him with a happy noise. It meant everything to me that Isidore had that kind of partner. "Yeah, I am."

"All jokes aside, it's awesome that you've finally found someone to be serious about," Felix said. "You're so great at taking care of people, so having a boyfriend to cherish will be good for you."

"Merci, Felix."

“Maybe now you’ll quit teasing me,” Wren muttered, making all of us laugh.

“I’ll never do that when it is so entertaining getting you riled up.”

He crossed his arms over his chest with a pout. “You’re such an ass.”

“I miss you, too, mon petit chat, but I’ll be back to play with you soon enough. Hopefully, with a new beau in my life.”

“If you need anything else, all you have to do is ask,” Arsène said.

“Merci beaucoup, mon ami.” I really had lucked out with the best friend in the entire world. “That means everything to me.”

I ended the call after exchanging goodbyes with everyone. While I was still nervous about being honest with Zio about my feelings, I had a renewed sense of hope that maybe things would work out for us.

Zio

At the end of the first day of the conference presentations, I attended the group dinner for all the participants. Even though I had enjoyed spending my trip with Armand and my natural shyness made it hard to socialize with strangers, it invigorated me to interact with other Japanese studies graduate students. It was rare for me to feel like I belonged somewhere, but everyone there was on the same wavelength as me.

I was riding high on excitement by the time I returned to have dessert with Armand in the hotel bar. The sight of him waiting outside for me rocketed my heart into my throat. He was stunning in a pair of pinstripe pants and a formfitting white button-down shirt with a deep V-neck cut that showed off his smooth chest. Now that I knew what was under his clothes, what he was wearing was sexier than before.

He greeted me with a warm smile as he wrapped an arm around me to pull me into an embrace. “Bonsoir, Zio. Welcome back.” He pressed a kiss against each of my cheeks.

Feeling unusually bold, I tugged him down to kiss my lips. It made my good night even better, which was why I said, “I missed you.”

His surprise at my statement gave way to a fond look. I swooned so hard, I was grateful he was holding on to me. “As I missed you. But I’m very excited to hear all about your fun at the conference today.” He blessed me with another lingering kiss on the lips. It took a minute for my brain to realize he probably did it to soothe my need for things to be in even numbers. How had I gotten so lucky?

Once we sat down and placed our orders, I couldn't hold back my gushing any longer. "It was amazing! There were so many incredible presentations. One woman talked about an anime show about anthropomorphic train stations. She explained they were representative embodiments of place and memory within a society. Isn't that wild?"

"Are you saying it's an animated Japanese TV show about train stations who are people?"

"Yeah! Although it's ashojoserries, she elevated something that most scholars would dismiss as silly. She had a fascinating analysis on how the show's promotion crossed boundaries from the imaginary into the real. It was so meta, and—"

When I cut myself off, he prompted me. "And what?"

My excited rambling embarrassed me; I hadn't meant to get so carried away. "Sorry, that's way more detail than you wanted."

"Au contraire. I've been looking forward to this all day."

A tiny seed of hope blossomed in my heart at his words. "Really?"

"Sincerely," he assured me. "What's ashojoserries?"

The part of me that was aware most people didn't care about the stuff I liked warned me to rein in my enthusiasm. But when he asked a specific question, I had to answer. "It's a genre aimed at girls, but the readership is far wider than the targeted market. I haven't read much of it, but her presentation made me want to check it out."

"It sounds charming, not to mention unique."

“She went all out with it and did shot-by-shot comparisons between stills from the anime with photos of the actual train stations. Then she showed the advertising campaign on the physical trains themselves, letting you be part of the TV show. It wassocool! But it also made me feel like I needed to step up my slides game. I added a few things while I was listening to presentations that weren’t as interesting.”

My reaction seemed to amuse him. “Tomorrow will be fun.”

I bit my lower lip as I looked at him. “You’re really going to come?”

“Oui, and I’m eager to learn more about yourkintsugi. Tell me about some of the other talks you enjoyed.”

“A guy from Wintervale University named Vigo van Rooyen presented on the Dutch translator Henry Heusken, who went to Japan at the end of the Edo period and right before the Meiji era.” After being around so many Japanese studies specialists, I almost forgot to give him a frame of reference. “This was between 1855 and 1861, right before Meiji started in 1868. I got so into that one, I bought a book on him halfway through his presentation.”

Our server came over with our desserts. We had ordered Hawaiian guava cake, which was a beautiful shade of pink with a white cream frosting on top and a guava gel glaze. I cut mine in half before I took my first bite. A moan escaped me from the unexpected flavor of strawberry mingled with vanilla that combined to perfection. “Oh, that isgood.”

Armand sampled his dessert, making me shift in my seat as he somehow turned pulling the fork out of his mouth into a sexually charged act. “Oui, c’est très délicieux.” After another taste, he asked, “What’s so intriguing about a Dutch translator?”

That he willingly returned to my original topic made my soul sing. “Heusken was one of the rare foreigners the Japanese accepted into their fold. They let him do things that the diplomats were too high-brow to enjoy, like communal baths and kabuki. Heusken was sympathetic to them for having their country invaded and even had a child with a Japanese woman. He still had some really backward viewpoints because it was the late 1850s, but for the time, he would have been incredibly progressive and open-minded.”

“Then he spoke English, Dutch, and Japanese?”

“Yes, plus French, and a little Latin and Greek as well.”

Armand tilted his head in acknowledgement of the translator’s skills. “That’s quite impressive. No wonder he was so skilled at his work.”

“He earned the respect of everyone, but that caused his downfall. You wouldn’t think of a translator having the power to affect so much change, but the Meiji era almost didn’t happen because of him.” It fascinated me that one person had such a huge impact during that tumultuous time, yet few knew about him.

Armand ate more of his cake before asking, “Did he mistranslate something?”

“No, there were rogue samurai who wanted the foreigners out of their country, so the diplomats had armed guards. Heusken was notorious for refusing to have escorts, because he was so confident that his reputation amongst the Japanese would protect him.”

Armand frowned. “That seems unwise,non?”

“Oh, it was,” I agreed with a nod. “This sect of samurai decided they wanted to send a message not just to the foreign diplomats, but to the Japanese politicians working with them. They murdered a Japanese man who worked as a translator, but the guy was apparently such a huge asshole, nobody cared.”

He winced. “How unfortunate.”

“When killing a Japanese politician changed nothing, they assassinated Heusken. It terrified all the foreign ambassadors. They realized if the samurai executed the person everyone liked, it wouldn’t be long before they started murdering the people they hated. That was them.”

“Mon dieu!”

I enjoyed more of my cake before continuing the story. “Because of that, the international ambassadors ran to Yokohama in fear, ready to call off all negotiations and pull out of the country. But the man he worked for refused to be chased out of town and let Heuksen die in vain. Because Harris resisted their scare tactics, the other diplomats returned to finish their jobs of negotiating treaties. But everything almost fell apart because of the death of a single translator. I’m excited to read more about him.”

“Maybe I should stay for the entire event tomorrow,” he told me with a smile. “If it’s any indication of the other talks, I’ll enjoy hearing about so many intriguing subjects.”

I was giddy at the thought that he might spend the whole day with me. It was so hard not to rejoice after the incredible night we had had and the amazing start to the morning he had given me. His consideration overwhelmed me, although it embarrassed me he had figured out one of my OCD habits about even numbers. But he hadn't made a big deal about it or teased me; he had simply accommodated it not just with understanding but acceptance. It was that part of him that held my heart in his hand and put me in very real danger of forming deep feelings for him.

“There sounds like there'll be some fun ones. Tonight at dinner, I talked to Vigo and his friend, Alain Toussaint, who also goes to Winterville University. Alain is presenting tomorrow on depictions of the French Revolution in Japanese popular culture, so I'm curious to find out more about that.”

Armand quirked a single eyebrow upward, which was sexy as hell. “Is it such a popular subject?”

“According to Alain, there are a ton of anime, manga, and musicals about the French Revolution. He's doing his dissertation on the topic, so I'm curious about his presentation tomorrow.”

“Is he French?”

I shook my head. “No, but his father is. His mother is Japanese.”

“It sounds fascinating. I'd like to sit in on it if you would be okay with that.”

Thinking about Armand attending the conference with me and listening to other speakers sent an exhilarating thrill through me. “I'd love that.” Not wanting to be selfish, I shifted the focus of our discussion. “What did you do today?”

“I had a pleasant conversation with Arsène, Felix, Isidore, and Wren after breakfast.

After enjoying lunch on the patio, I visited Waimea Bay Beach Park. Like everything here, it was a beautiful area. It's going to be tough for Arsène to figure out where will be best to shoot when all the locations are somagnifique."

"I'm glad you had a nice chat with them."

"It was most helpful, although it involved a fair amount of teasing, which is to be expected," he said with a chuckle.

"Why expected?"

He grinned at me, which caused my heart to do a very good impersonation of hummingbird wings on fast forward. "It's how we show that we care. They've never been able to tease me about wanting to be with somebody before, so they took great delight in it, before expressing how happy they were for me."

I couldn't figure out which part of his comment surprised me more. "Wait, you told them about me?" I hadn't expected him to tell anyone about me, let alone his family and close friends.

"Oui, I called Arsène to discuss you. The others came in later during the call."

I struggled to wrap my head around him calling his friend about me. What reason would he have to do that? "Why?"

"Because he was the only person who would understand my situation."

"Situation?" The word filled me with dread. I tried not to jump to the wrong conclusions, but it was really hard to stay on my lily pad and not leap to the worst-case scenario.

The smile he gave me was reassuring. “Arsène and I both entertained ourselves with men who never mattered, because we weren’t interested in anything more.”

I nodded to show I was listening, but I couldn’t form words.

“But when Arsène met Felix, everything changed in a matter of days. He went from never spending more than a single night with someone to wanting to spend the rest of his life with a younger man he barely knew.”

Time slowed to a grinding halt as I held my breath. Was Armand saying what I thought he was? Or was I getting my hopes up for nothing? Did I want him to tell me he felt that same way about me? Yes, dear god, please!

“There was no better person to talk to about you than him.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

I swallowed hard. “W-w-what are you saying?”

“What I want from you is something I never imagined I would desire from any man.”

“Which is?” I whispered, putting my fork down so he wouldn’t see how badly my hands trembled in fear.

“Your love.” His words made every thought in my head screech to a stop, but he kept talking. “I’m not interested in a single enjoyable evening. I want you to need me. More than that, I desire to adore you with all that I am, to cherish and take care of you. But I worry that it’s too much too soon. I don’t want to scare you off, when all I wish to do is hold you close and never leave your side.”

It was the single most romantic thing anyone had ever said to me. I didn’t know whether to swoon, burst into tears, or throw myself in his arms and babble with incoherent joy. There was so much to process, I wasn’t sure where to start. I couldn’t comprehend that someone as incredible as him feared I wouldn’t return his feelings. The dick who lived in the back of my skull was quick to point out that Armand had a long list of reasons to be scared. First and foremost would be me assuming I was straight until I met him.

For once in my life, I acted without caring what anyone thought of my actions. I got up and sat on his lap to throw my arms around him, burying my nose against his neck when he embraced me in return. “I’m sorry, I have too many feelings and not enough words. I need a minute.”

“That’s fine. I’m satisfied that you ran to me and not away from me.”

“I—you’re—it’s, I don’t know.” It frustrated me I couldn’t articulate my emotions. All I could do was talk it out and hope I said the right thing in the end. “I’ve wondered all day if I’d experience that gut-wrenching regret of ‘What did I do last night?’ I always agonize over my mistakes. It would be very on brand for me to spend the entire day beating myself up for what we did. Normally, I’d be dying of shame and wondering how I could ever face you again. That didn’t happen, though.”

“That’s good,non?”

I pulled back to make eye contact with him but stayed in his lap. “It’s amiracle. You have to understand, my inner voice is a wrecking ball of anxiety which is always tearing me down and viciously mocking and antagonizing me. But it didn’t do that this time.”

“What happened instead?”

Now that I was talking, the words wouldn’t stop spilling out of me. “Whenever I thought about you today, I’d have a warm, fuzzy glow as I remembered how you took care of me this morning and locked the door last night. I had a ton of fun at the conference, but I couldn’t wait to see you again. And when I wondered about what would happen when we went upstairs, well...” My deep blush finished my sentence for me.

His pleased expression set off a confetti cannon inside my stomach. “That’s wonderful.”

I needed him to understand the scale of the impossible thing he had done. “If I hadn’t met you, I would have been dying at the conference today.”

“What makes you say that?”

“My inner asshole would have been telling me I would humiliate myself in front of everyone because my presentation wouldn't be as good as theirs.” I drew a steadying breath. “But I'm excited about tomorrow, because you'll be there in the audience. I can't wait to talk to you about it later and return here to celebrate together.”

He smiled at me. “And what a celebration it will be.”

Instead of fear, his words filled me with indescribable joy. “Somehow, you've overridden my default angst about failing. I don't understand how the hell you've done that in a few days when my therapists have spent years trying to teach me how to do that.”

We both laughed at that before I continued. “You've turned everything I thought I knew about myself upside down. You and your power over me should be terrifying. With things changing so fast, I should feel out of control and in danger of crashing. But I don't want to run away from you, because I got a glimpse this morning of how wonderful it would be to be loved by you. The only thing I'm afraid of is not having more mornings and nights like that.”

“There would be no greater joy than being blessed with that kind of life together.”

“That's why I'm going to be brave and selfish for the first time.” My heart hammered wildly as I stood on the edge of the cliff where I was about to change everything forever. With a deep breath, I took the leap of faith. “After we finish our cake, I'll show you upstairs what I feel for you, because I'm doing a shitty job trying to explain it with words. I want you if you'll have me. Not just here, but even when we get home to Sunnyside. I'm ready to see where this adventure takes us.”

Seeing Armand's overjoyed expression was worth the embarrassment of speaking so openly. The passionate kiss he gave me confirmed I had made the right decision in choosing happiness with him.

Armand

I thought I knew what true joy was until I heard Zio wanted me. To know that he desired to be with me was better than the icing on the delicious Hawaiian guava cake we enjoyed before returning upstairs to his suite.

I lost myself in kissing him as we littered the floor with our clothes. Once bare, I stretched out in bed. There was no hesitation this time as Zio settled over me. I had to chuckle when he skipped my neck in favor of exploring my torso with his lips and fingertips. Luxuriating under his gentle worship, I loved being the center of his attention. He was bolder than before as he teased me with playful flicks of his tongue as he lavished me with caresses all over while working his way south.

It didn't surprise me when he fixated on my appendectomy scar. Given his attraction to broken pottery put back together, I understood his fascination with it. All my previous lovers had avoided the area, almost as if they had an irrational fear of injuring me again or were repulsed by it. But he kissed it with reverence, serving as further evidence that he was attracted to all the parts of me that no one else had ever wanted. It made my love for him take deeper root in my heart until it learned to beat only for him.

I tensed as he moved into a position that allowed him to trail his fingers along my erection that was aching for relief. He kept his touch light and teasing, driving me wild.

"I'm not quite ready to tackle this," Zio said as he worked my length at a leisurely pace. "I want to be, but I'm not there yet."

In my haze of pleasure, it took a moment to process his words. “You never have to do anything.”

“I think I’ll be fine once I do some research, provided I don’t die of embarrassment first.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve seen plenty of women give men blow jobs in porn, but I don’t know how to do it,” he admitted with flushed cheeks. “It was incredible when you did it last night. I doubt I’ll ever be that talented, but I’m hoping with enough practice, I won’t suck at it.”

He was so cute; I couldn’t resist teasing him. “But sucking is the point.”

I loved how he burst into laughter. “Wow, I walked into that one. Oops.”

“You’re always welcome to try anything on me,” I encouraged him. “I’ll also help you look into things if you’d like.”

“Something tells me if you helped me research, we’d get sidetracked by lust.” He chuckled before he shifted his attention down to my sac. I spread my legs further as he explored. “Wait, what’s that?”

I grinned when he ran his fingers over the black silicone bar that was flush with my body. “Optimistic preparation.”

“Meaning?”

“If you wish to take me tonight, that will allow us to skip some steps,” I explained.

His breathing hitched. “Is that what you want?”

It was hard not to chuckle at his disbelief. “I’d prefer having you inside me than that.”

“Fucking hell,” he whispered as he continued tracing the length of the bar. “Are you serious?”

“Very.”

“Um, that sounds great—amazing, actually—but I don’t have a condom, so...”

His innocence was precious. “I have some in my pants pocket.”

“How? Those were so tight, they were practically spray-painted on.” We both laughed at his comment.

“You’re also welcome to not use them.” My words caused him to inhale sharply. “I can show you my last negative test if it would set your mind at ease about being safe.”

An interesting noise escaped from him at the thought of being in me without barriers.

When he didn’t say anything further, I explained my logic to him. “I’ve never been with a partner without using protection before. I’d like this experience to be a first for both of us, but only if you’re comfortable with it.”

“Okay, hold on. Give me a second to process this.” Closing his eyes, he took a few calming breaths to steady himself. “Wow, you make it really hard to think sometimes.”

“Pardon.”

“Are you saying you want me to be in you without a condom so I can come inside you? Because that’s what I’m hearing.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

To give myself some relief, I stroked myself a few times. “Nothing would please me more.”

“I mean, I know you can’t get pregnant, but isn’t it gross if I shoot my load inside you?” He flushed at his crude words, which was adorable.

The question confused me. “How could you intimately claiming me as yours be gross?”

It startled me when he moved over me to give me a fierce kiss. I reached up and pulled him closer as I surrendered to him.

“Tell me what to do,” he said when he paused for air.

“Slowly pull the bar to remove the plug. Grab a lube packet from my pants, then use it to slick yourself. Push into me, then take me as hard and fast or soft and gentle as you’d like.”

“I’m going to be lucky if I don’t explode the second I’m inside you.” He got up to grab what we needed to continue.

I moved my legs further apart as he settled between them and pulled out the butt plug. Seeing his curious amazement as he withdrew it was its own pleasure.

“Didn’t it hurt to have this in for this long?”

“Not at all.” I sighed in relief as it popped free.

He glanced between me and it. “How? Just looking at this is making my ass ache.”

“The only thing I’m feeling right now is eager for you to enter me,” I said, reaching between my legs to tease my hole.

“Why is that so hot?” he whispered under his breath as he fumbled with the small foil packet. It took a few tries before he tore it open. He slicked his cock, then moved into position.

I lifted my hips to indicate he should proceed. As he slid into me, I savored the slow spread as my body welcomed him into mine. His intimate warmth gave me a sense of completeness once he was buried to the hilt.

He braced himself on trembling arms on the bed as he got used to being inside me. “Holy shit, you’re so tight!” I couldn’t resist clenching my muscles around him, earning me a swear as his hips thrust in response. “Sorry!”

“Don’t be. Do it again. I promise I can handle anything you’re about to do. I’m not a fragile doll that will break if you go too hard or fast.”

He readjusted his position so he could take hold of my hips. Starting with tentative thrusts, he worked his way up to a more satisfying rhythm once he realized he wasn’t hurting me.

I draped one of my legs behind him to give myself a little leverage to move as I enjoyed him inside me with nothing between us. “Oui, just like that, Zio. Trop bien!”

“So good!” He gasped as he used more force with each pump of his hips, making it a more enjoyable experience for me. “Armand!”

Hearing him calling out my name made my body sing as we rocked together as one. I

wrapped my other leg around him and hooked my ankles under him to move into a better position. When he hit the spot within me that caused my toes to curl, I cried out with pleasure. “Oh, right there!”

Luckily for me, Zio was good at following instructions. He used targeted thrusts to send me flying high as I writhed under him. It pushed me to take myself in hand and start working my prick.

His nails dug into my hips as he reacted to the sight of me masturbating, which spiked my arousal higher. It created an endless loop of pleasure between us as we got off on the other one enjoying themselves. His rapturous expression as he drove into me with blind need was everything I needed as I rushed toward my climax faster than normal. “Give me more, Zio! More!”

He released his tight grip on my hips in favor of leaning forward to brace himself on the bed once again. He hit deeper as he thrust with more strength and speed than before. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I held on while crying out in lust.

“So fucking good!Armand!”

Everything became about the intense passion between us. It was incredible to be intimate with someone I adored. My body grew taut as I neared the precipice of sexual nirvana, teetering right on the brink.

Zio pressed closer to kiss my neck, then licked along the curve to taste our exertion mixed with my cologne. He came almost instantly as he moaned my name against my skin.

His cum marking me as his took me over the edge. I called out to him as I climaxed, my body shaking from the intense release as my tension ebbed away and left the afterglow in its wake.

It got better when Zio gave me a tender kiss. It endeared him to me further as I hugged him tight, unexpectedly overwhelmed by the experience. I held him after he pulled out and collapsed on top of me, cradling him against me and in no hurry to let him go. If I had my way, he would be mine forever, and I would be his to love always.

We remained in a companionable silence while we floated in the glow of such an incredible release. As a hedonist, I had experienced all kinds of pleasure, but nothing compared to what we had just done. It wasn't about the carnal satisfaction that having sex normally gave me. For the first time, I didn't feel good; I felt whole. He had filled all the cracks in my soul with his warmth, fixing something I hadn't known was broken. If I had any doubts before about needing Zio in my life, there wasn't any question after our joining that he was the missing key to my happiness.

Lost in my feelings, I almost missed his awed "Wow."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

I hugged him tighter. “Mmm.”

He was boneless on top of me. “I didn’t know it was possible to feel this good.”

“Same.”

He remained quiet for a few moments before he said, “It’s never been like that before. And it’s not because you’re a man or we didn’t use a condom.”

“Oh?”

“You turned off my brain, which I thought was impossible.”

I chuckled at the strange phrase. “What do you mean?”

“When I have sex, my paranoia constantly questions everything I’m doing and all of her reactions.”

With his anxiety issues, that wasn’t a surprise. “Why her reactions?”

“If she doesn’t sound like she’s enjoying herself, then it must be because I’m doing a terrible job. If she acts like she’s getting off, then I’m wondering if she’s faking it to not hurt my feelings. My stupid brain won’t let me believe it’s because I’m good.”

I pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Let me assure you I wasn’t faking anything in my reactions.”

“See, that’s what’s weird. I never thought you were. The part of me that always criticizes what I do and tells me my partner doesn’t want to be with me was completely offline. My thoughts centered on how amazing the experience was. I couldn’t get enough of you. My anxiety should have been lying to me about how you were faking it to build up my confidence, but it didn’t. How is that possible?”

“Perhaps it’s because I bared my heart to you,” I suggested. “Not even your anxiety can doubt something so genuine.”

“Oh, it definitely can and has.” He sighed before continuing. “But somehow, I trust you more than I believe the lies. I didn’t question your sincerity about what you told me downstairs, because everything in me wants it to be true.”

I rolled us over so I could look down at him. Caressing his cheek, I held his gaze. “It is true. I’ve meant every word I’ve said to you with all of my heart. Since the beginning, I’ve been open with you, because I can’t be anything else with you when you deserve honesty. You’ve noticed truths inside me that not even Arsène has seen. Having such deep feelings for you already might not make sense, but I don’t care. I just need you in my life.”

He reached up to cup my face in his palm. “There’s one other thing that explains everything, irrational as it may be.”

I nuzzled against his hand. “What’s that?”

His smile was dazzling. “This morning proved that you accept all of me, which is something none of my previous partners have ever done. They’ve always made fun of my OCD habits or gotten mad at me about it. I’m still kind of embarrassed that you figured it out, but you didn’t shame me for it, which is huge.”

“There’s nothing shameful about it.”

“Tell that to my parents and all my ex-girlfriends.” He rolled his eyes at the memories. “Anyway, the point is, you showed my anxiety you’re the only partner I can trust to let in close enough to love without fear. And that’s why it can’t question you, because for the first time, I’m safe. It’s like something in my primordial soul has been reaching out to you from the very beginning. But it took a while to get my brain and fears to a place where I could accept that.”

His words filled me with sunshine. “Then that must be why you feel like home to me. From the first moment I saw you, I was drawn to you. Perhaps it was indeed my soul recognizing yours as my long-lost mate.”

“I’m so grateful you found me.” He guided me down for a sweet kiss that bloomed my love for him into the most beautiful flower in the world. “And I’m extra glad I didn’t let my anxiety ruin the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“That makes both of us.”

The happiness radiating from him was stunning. “Hold that thought. I’ll be right back, okay?” He gave me two quick kisses before getting out of bed to go to the bathroom.

I stretched out with a happy sigh as satisfaction echoed through every cell in my body. At long last, I had found the person who made everything worth it. Never again would I have empty hookups with meaningless people who didn’t matter.

While he was gone, I phoned the concierge to schedule another wake-up call tomorrow morning at seven. Thinking about him being grumbly and wanting to sleep in after such a pleasant evening brought a smile to my face. Hearing his confession was worth keeping him up too late when he had to wake up early.

“I hope this is okay.” At the sound of his voice, I turned my head to glance over at

him. He held up a white washcloth with a questioning expression as he returned.

My heart stuttered in my chest at what he was offering me. I swallowed the lump in my throat to answer him. “More than okay. It’s very appreciated.”

Sitting down beside me, Zio wiped me clean with the warm cloth. He was so gentle as he attended to me, I couldn’t speak through my overwhelming emotions. I had spent my entire life taking care of everyone else, so to have someone attend to me for a change moved me beyond words. The rarity of it made it even more precious as the experience caused me to fall deeper in love.

“Is that better, or—wait, why do you look like you’re going to cry? Did I do something wrong? Or—”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

I reached out to pull him into a crushing hug. “If I said, ‘Merci beaucoup,’ to you every minute for the rest of my life, it still wouldn’t be enough gratitude for what you’ve done.”

He propped himself up to glance down at me. “Why?”

“Because I’m a giver in a world of takers.” I brushed the hair away from his eyes. “Other than Arsène and his family, you’re the only person who has ever given anything back to me. I can’t adequately express in any language how much that means to me.”

“In that case, I’ll have to take extra good care of you to make up for everyone else being awful.” He tugged the comforter and blankets out from under me, then pulled them over us once he returned to bed from shutting off the lights. “I appreciate you looking after me, but I don’t want you to think I’m using you.”

I opened my arms to him, letting him curl up on my chest as I hugged him closer. “It would be my honor, not a chore.”

“Let’s see if you feel that way in the morning—oh, shit, I forgot to ask for a wake-up call.”

I tightened my hold on him to stop him from getting up. “I arranged it for seven while you were in the bathroom.”

“Of course you did.” His laughter sounded so light and free that it brightened my life even in the darkest night. I savored his tender kisses before he put his head on my

shoulder. “Thank you.”

“De rien.”

He was a puddle in my arms, which spoke volumes to me about how secure he felt with me. His breathing evened out, but I lingered in the waking world a little longer as I memorized the perfection of holding him. I assumed he had fallen asleep, but he stunned me when he mumbled, “Love you.”

It meant even more to me it had escaped him when he was half-asleep with his guard down. The genuine sentiment was spoken from the depths of his soul without thought. His insecurities might need more time to grow accustomed to the idea of being with me. However, knowing I lived in his heart was all I needed to keep me going. As I kissed his forehead, the words I had been waiting to say flowed freely. “Je t’aime.”

Snuggled against me, Zio succumbed to sleep. He probably wouldn’t remember saying that in the morning, but I would never forget.

Zio

Thanks to Armand's help with getting me out of bed on time, we arrived early on the second day of the Japanese studies conference. It was surreal walking hand in hand with him, especially when he looked stunning in a black button-down shirt. It had vertical rainbow ombre stripes that made him seem taller somehow. Formfitting, it showed off his beautiful body and his tiny hips with his tight pants. I should have felt inferior in my sweater cardigan standing next to all his perfection, but I drew strength from the way our hands interlocked as we walked. There was an entire island of fun things to do, but he had chosen to spend his day with me. I accepted it as irrefutable proof that he loved me, which filled me with confidence.

As we neared the auditorium, I spotted Vigo and Alain talking to each other in the hallway. Both of them were grad students at Winterville University and close friends. It almost seemed they might be more than just friends, but maybe I was projecting onto them, thanks to my involvement with Armand.

Vigo was classically handsome, with thick, dark hair, sapphire-blue eyes, and sharp features. He had on a well-cut black blazer over a dark gray shirt and slacks.

Alain wore a much flashier jacket. It was tangerine orange at the top with a gradient fade into white, decorated with pink and blue paint speckles. His black hair was curly and framed his face, with a hint of scruffiness that gave him a roguish appearance. He had beautiful gray-hazel eyes that were striking when paired with his predominantly Japanese features.

They waved at me as we came closer, so I walked over to them to say hello. Vigo was

the first to greet us. “Hey, how’s it going?”

“It’s too early for my tastes.” My answer caused Armand to chuckle. “I’m happy to be here, though.”

Alain not so subtly checked out Armand, making something inside me stir with a rare hint of possessiveness. “I don’t remember seeing you here yesterday.”

“This is my boyfriend, Armand Bellamy.” It stunned me at how easily the words rolled off my tongue, but I quickly recovered. “He came to support me today, but he’s going to stay for some of the other presentations, too. Armand, this is Vigo van Rooyen. He’s the one who presented about the Dutch translator I told you about yesterday. This is his friend Alain Toussaint, who’s presenting today on the French Revolution in Japanese popular culture.”

Armand shook hands with Vigo first. “A pleasure. I’m sorry I missed your presentation on Heusken. It sounded fascinating.” That he cared enough to remember the name of the Dutch translator made me swoon. How did I get so lucky?

“Thanks. It’s nice to meet you.”

Armand shook Alain’s hand next. “I’m curious to hear more about why the Japanese are fascinated with the French Revolution. It seems strange to me.”

“I haven’t solved the mystery of why yet, but I’m working on it for my dissertation,” Alain said with a laugh. “If you have any thoughts afterward, I’d love to pick your brain.”

“I’m not sure how much help I can be, but you’re welcome to do so.”

Seeing how easily Armand interacted with them amazed me. It made me feel brave

enough to ask, “Maybe we could talk more during the lunch break?”

“I think that’s a great idea, although Roo will probably be a prima donna again today and insist we sneak out to go to a real restaurant.” Alain calling his best friend “Roo” was another reason I wondered if there was something between them. It seemed too cute of a nickname for him to use unless they were actually a couple.

Vigo tilted his nose in the air with a disdainful sniff. “Sorry, but I did not fly all the way from Wintervale to enjoy the saddest cold-cut subs I’ve ever seen on stale bread. When there’s a great Hawaiian poke place around the corner from here, why would I settle for meh when I could have something delicious?”

Alain draped his arm over his friend’s shoulder as he laughed. “Trust me, I know better than to get between you and something yummy. Do you guys want to come with us?”

I looked up at Armand and received a subtle nod of permission. “Yeah, that would be great! Thanks for the invite.”

“We’ll have fun,” Vigo promised. “We should head into the auditorium, though. The opening keynote speech will start soon.”

As we walked toward the entrance doors, someone called out to Alain. Vigo told us to go ahead, so Armand and I went inside to sit. He draped his arm around the back of my chair to rest his hand on my shoulder. It filled me with more of the warm fuzzy feelings I was getting addicted to. I didn’t mean to gush, but I couldn’t help myself. “That was amazing! I can’t believe I did that.”

“Invited them to lunch?”

“That, but I also called you my boyfriend.” The word made my heart flutter like a

metric ton of confetti falling from the sky at a parade. “I didn’t even stutter! I thought I would have to practice telling people I had a boyfriend. But saying it was the most natural thing in the world.”

He brushed his thumb against my shoulder as he smiled at me. “It made me happy to hear you claim me without fear.”

While I had never liked overt public displays of affection, I gave him two quick kisses in appreciation. “I don’t know how you fill me with such confidence. I’ll never be able to thank you enough for helping me live life without being afraid all the time anymore.”

“It’s because I’ll always be on your side, cheering you on.” The look of love he gave me was enchanting. “When you know you’re not alone, it’s easier to stand tall and walk proudly.”

Whatever the reason was, I’d never stop being grateful to Armand for picking me to adore.

* * *

Talking to a group of strangers was one of the worst hells I suffered in academia. With teaching, I was always a nervous wreck standing in front of the class until I got comfortable and friendly with my students. The first two weeks of every term ended with me collapsing at home to take a nap to recover from the stress it put on my body. Once I connected with them, it got better. Otherwise, I’d never be able to pursue my dream of teaching.

I never would have gone to an academic conference to present if my advisor hadn’t forced me to submit my proposal for inclusion. The day I found out they had accepted me to take part, I had an epic meltdown that my poor roommate Rigby had helped me

survive. He had been so generous with helping me work on my speech and slides for weeks while his boyfriend, Jude, cheered me on from the sidelines. Luca had talked me out of not going so many times, which was another reason he had reserved a room for me with his hotel points; he knew my guilt would force me to go.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

Whenever I gave a presentation, I teetered on the verge of a panic attack the entire time, then had one after I finished. My body shook with nerves while my stomach churned with queasiness, making me clammy all over. Countless presentations had ended with me curled up in a ball on the floor of a bathroom in tears after throwing up my soul into a toilet. I'd have to take four showers afterward to feel clean again.

But this time was different. When it was my turn to go up to speak, an eerie calm pervaded me. With Armand there as my anchor, his steadfast belief in me kept me steady as a rock. All the other participants faded away until he was the only one in the auditorium as I approached the podium. Seeing him smiling at me from the audience set me at ease. His confidence in me steeled my backbone and gave me faith in myself I never had before. The pressure to perform and my conviction that I was about to fuck up disappeared, leaving in its place a desire to share my research with him. It was another opportunity to let him further into my world and be a part of the thing that mattered most to me.

I wanted him to understand my field, because it was the key to understanding me. I needed to find beauty in the broken things pieced back together again, because I had been shattered and rebuilt more times than I could count. On my own, I had been an inferior artisan who had tried to patch myself with transparent glue, hoping nobody would notice the cracks within me. But Armand had filled in my splintered fractures with the most beautiful gold known to man. And where the original pieces of myself had been decimated beyond patching, he added fragments of himself to fit my holes and complete me. For the first time, I was someone worth showing to the world.

As the words flowed out of me with ease, I had a weird, almost out-of-body experience as I watched myself with wonder. Never in my life had I been so self-

assured in front of a group before, let alone a crowd of nearly one hundred people. I was powerful and in control, comfortable in being the foremost authority about kintsugi in the room. It gave me the confidence to go off script and add a few extra details. When I finished and the audience applauded, I didn't fall apart. I experienced overwhelming pride at having given the best presentation of my entire academic career.

The only thing I had been dreading more than presenting was fielding the Q&A session afterward. I could control my part of the talk, but the open-ended nature of the audience questioning my knowledge had kept me awake at night before I flew to Hawaii. Because I was always in a state of panic, I was ready to fall apart at any second. The idea of someone asking me something I didn't know the answer to was a terrifying prospect.

But Armand raised his hand first, letting me stay focused on him. I gestured for him to ask me his question. "You mentioned kintsugi adds beauty and value to pieces to elevate them into works of art. How does it do that?"

That was a question that would normally have made me come unglued and beat myself up for being inadequate by not being clearer. But it was Armand asking me, so I didn't interpret his question as a passive-aggressive attempt at showing the weaknesses in my presentation. Instead, I saw it as him trying to learn more about me, which filled me with indescribable joy.

"Kintsugi elevates a piece of ceramics into something more valuable because the gold emphasizes the history of the object. Both wabi-sabi and Zen philosophy embrace the precarity of existence as being beautiful because it's imperfect and ephemeral."

Seeing Armand nodding in understanding gave me the courage to continue answering his question. "No one escapes life unscathed, because being broken is part of life's journey. By using gold, lacquer, and other precious materials, it honors the history of

an object while marking it as something worthy of becoming a treasure. The patched-together pieces become greater than the sum of the whole through the elegant repair. It reminds the observer not just of the fact that we can be broken, but it's proof we can also survive. It's evidence of how we're capable of healing and coming out better than we were before because of what we endured."

His brilliant smile added more gold to the cracks in my soul. I barely remembered answering the next two questions before I returned to my seat. Instead of my normal exhaustion, I was invigorated by the experience. I was riding high and didn't care what anyone thought of me. It gave me the strength to lean over and give Armand a passionate kiss as a thank-you for being the king of gold to my sugary repairs that had turned me into a treasure.

* * *

It was a powerful magic to experience an amazing day without wondering what was going to ruin it. Not only had I nailed my presentation, but Armand and I had a fun lunch with Vigo and Alain. We laughed and joked as if we had been close friends for years instead of a day and a half. With my boyfriend at my side, his confidence in me imbued me with a self-belief I had never experienced before. It let me have fun without my normal anxiety holding me back by hiding in a corner while praying no one talked to me.

I felt free in every sense of the word. Free to be who I really was, to have fun without a single care, and to love Armand with all that I was. It meant I could enjoy my research without self-doubting myself and make friends without worrying about them secretly hating me. For once, I saw life as being limitless with possibilities. I didn't just feel like I could do anything; I believed I could do anything.

By the time we returned to my room at the hotel, I was ready to take on the world. As we undressed in between kisses, desire unfurled within me as I burned for more of

Armand. It drove me to get on the bed first. I didn't experience fear when he pinned me down with his larger form. Instead, I was hungry for more.

When he gave us a chance to catch our breath, he smiled down at me with a look of such love that it made heat pool in my belly. He caressed my cheek with a tender touch. "I witnessed the most beautiful flower in the world come into full bloom today."

I covered his hand with mine, pressing a kiss against his palm before nuzzling against it. "If I did, it's because you helped me grow."

"Seeing you filled with so much joie de vivre today has been amazing," he said with fondness. "I'm in awe of you."

"It's weird how I feel like a different person and my real self all at the same time."

He gave me a sweet kiss that melted me into a puddle. "That's because this is the real you that you've been too afraid to be. This is your kintsugi self on full display. It's très beau."

"You're a miracle worker." I moved my hand to lace my fingers through his hair. "I want you to take me. Make me yours, Armand."

"Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure in my life." Everything in me knew I was making the right decision. "My heart is already yours. I want my body to be yours, too."

He kissed me hard, making me moan against his lips as his tongue teased me into a frenzy. His cock rested against my belly, which turned me on in a way I never would have imagined. It fueled the craving inside me rather than stoke my fears.

He moved on to kiss and caress me all over. My enlightened state kept my anxiety at bay, allowing me to enjoy his attention to the fullest without my inner asshole ruining everything. My body undulated as I soaked up his affection like the first beautiful spring day after a long, harsh winter. I lost myself in his talents, so it came as a surprise when he ran the pads of his fingers over my entrance.

“Promise me something,” Armand requested.

“Anything.” I would do whatever he wanted to have him keep pleasuring me.

“If you want to stop at any point, promise you’ll tell me without worrying about hurting my feelings. Even though you said yes now, you can change your mind. You have my word that I’ll stop if it’s too much to handle.”

It amazed me how well he knew me already. “I promise I’ll ask you to stop if it’s too painful.”

“I’m going to do everything I can to make it not hurt, but if it does, tell me. Please don’t suffer through this because you don’t want to disappoint me.”

Him caring more about my well-being than his pleasure made it easy to give myself to him. “I will.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

He waited until I made direct eye contact with him before saying, “Even if I’m three seconds from coming, you can stop me. One word is all it takes to make me pull out, no matter what.”

“I never knew consent was sexy,” I teased him. “Leave it to you to make that a turn-on.”

That drew a chuckle from him. “It’s too important not to be crystal clear about. If you’re not enjoying yourself, then I’m not, either.”

I nodded my understanding, although my heart skipped a beat when he flipped the cap open on the bottle of lube. We had stopped by his room earlier to grab it and some other essentials before coming up to mine. Dispensing some before closing the lid, he set it aside. He didn’t plunge right in but circled my hole to get me used to the sensation. At the first hint of penetration, it amazed me that my body pushed down to draw him deeper. I might not have known what I was doing, but it seemed some part of me somehow knew what I needed.

When he eased a finger into me, neither of us expected me to giggle. He kept moving his digit in and out of me as he teased, “I know you said you were ticklish, but here?”

“Not to be unsexy, but it reminded me of a doctor doing a digital rectal exam. It made me picture you as Dr. Feel Good and—” I couldn’t finish my sentence before I broke into another fit of laughter.

Thankfully, my reaction seemed to entertain him. “If you wish to be my patient, I’m more than happy to role-play as your doctor.”

“What am I supposed to do? ‘Oh, Dr. Feel Good, can you please help me? Sex with women leaves me unsatisfied. Can you use your magical dick to heal me? Won’t you bend me over a table and fuck me hard to make me feel better?’” I started laughing again at the absurd mental image, which almost distracted me from noticing he added a second finger. There was a slight stretch, but it wasn’t uncomfortable enough to make me quit cracking up at my thought.

He laughed along with me before he quieted his amusement. “Is it true?”

“You having a magical dick that can heal me wouldn’t be the least bit surprising at this point. Everything about you is beyond belief incredible. Why wouldn’t that be?”

“Merci, but I meant being unsatisfied with having sex with women.” He kept moving his fingers with deliberate strokes as I grew accustomed to the strangeness of something inside me.

I shrugged. “Normally, my anxiety makes it hard to enjoy anything. As I said before, I usually was so wrapped up in doubting my abilities and her enjoyment that sex stressed me out more than it gave me relief.”

“You didn’t find any pleasure in it?”

“I thought I did until you showed me what real pleasure is.” It blew my mind at what a difference there was between being with Armand and my ex-girlfriends. “I’ve never enjoyed anything this much until you.”

My answer pleased him. “In that case, I believe you deserve a reward.”

Before I could ask him what he meant, he shifted positions and took my erection into his mouth to tease it while working me open. The combined sensation made me gasp in shock as an explosion of sexual ecstasy detonated within me, rocking my world.

Everything became a blur of intense arousal as he gave me an incredible blow job while fucking me with his fingers. I barely noticed when he added another one, because of the pressure building up inside me. It was almost too much when he hummed around my length and let me slide deeper into his throat.

The sight of him nestled between my legs was so intensely sexy. I threaded my fingers through his dark hair as I tried to stay still. Without warning, he brushed against something that made me climax with a shout as I saw stars. Watching him wipe the corner of his mouth with his thumb and licking his lips to catch the last drop of me overloaded me. I whimpered as he continued stroking me deep inside.

“How was that?”

I answered with a protracted, needy keen, not quite up to forming words yet. Thankfully, he knew how to translate it.

“Can you handle more?”

I wasn't sure, but I said, “Yes,” anyway.

Still blissed-out from my orgasm, I stayed relaxed as he slicked his cock before positioning himself to penetrate me. The slow stretch was strange, but when he slid past the tight ring of muscles, I exhaled the breath I had been holding. When he was all the way in, I couldn't hold in the bubble of laughter that burst free. “Sorry, sorry! I swear I'm taking this seriously!”

He remained still as he let me get used to the fullness. “There's no need for it to be serious when this is about feeling good. I can't wait to hear what has tickled you this time.”

“It's like your dick is doing a weird disappearing magic trick. Now you see it; now

you don't! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to laugh. But I just thought about pulling a rabbit vibrator out of the hat, because 'going at it like rabbits' is a thing, and—" I stopped talking when I lost control of my laughter, causing him to join me. "Oh, thank god, you're laughing, too."

"How could I not? You're too cute for words."

"I'm pretty sure this counts as wrecking the moment," I said with a sheepish grin.

"Non, it's what makes it extra special and so unique to you. It also means you're relaxed and feeling good, which is what I want."

I shifted my hips as I got more comfortable. "I'm full and stretched, but not in a painful way. Just different."

"It will be much better once I move. Are you ready?"

"As ready as I can be when I don't know what's coming next." Exhaling a shaky breath to relieve some of the stress in my body, I tried not to tense again when he started with small movements. But when the pain didn't come, I relaxed into the gentleness. It wasn't anything spectacular, but I was too relieved it didn't hurt to be disappointed about that. All my thoughts came to a screeching stop when he canted my hips higher and used more force to push into me. My focus sharpened when I got my first glimmer of hope that I might be in for more mind-blowing ecstasy. "Oh!"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

His smirk was so sexy it sent shivers racing up my spine. “Now that I have your attention again, are you ready for more?”

“Yes!”

He shifted his weight forward a bit as he adjusted his grip on me. I gasped as he alternated between short and shallow thrusts, then pushed in deeper. As his hips rocked and rolled against me to the rhythm of an unheard song, my body moved in sync with his as I surrendered to him. I writhed under his amazing talent, ascending to a new echelon of sexual nirvana as he hit something inside me that made me cry out his name. It felt so good that I didn’t resist when he guided my legs up and over his shoulders to let him plunge into me with more speed.

I forgot how to breathe, how to think, how to do anything other than feel incredible. Nothing else in the world mattered other than the endless loop of pleasure echoing between us. Every pump of his hips sent me higher than I thought possible as I held on for the ride. I loved the way he ran his hands along my thighs before cupping my ass to use it to guide my movements.

He encouraged me to move my legs around his waist again, freeing him to lean forward and making me shout as the shift in angles detonated fireworks within me. I reached out to loop my arms over his neck, burying my fingers in his hair as I held on and gasped his name while I clung to him.

When he murmured something in French, it sent shudders through me as it pushed me to my very limits. I kissed him with desperate need, needing him more than my next breath.

Pressure built up at dizzying speeds. I was in real danger of my heart giving out from the overwhelming experience. Everything happened at once as he reached between us and took hold of my renewed erection. He climaxed inside me as he pumped my cock twice, causing me to explode all over his fist as his name got caught in my throat.

The world went fuzzy as every fiber of my being vibrated with sexual satisfaction. It left me speechless and incapable of thought as I continued clinging to him. Even after he pulled out to settle beside me, I couldn't do anything other than try to remember how to breathe as I rested my head on his shoulder. He rubbed my bicep as he held me, setting off more bombs of desire inside me. I was boneless on him, content to ride out the afterglow in his arms.

It took a while before I shifted positions. I hadn't believed him earlier when he claimed to have grays, but that close, I spied a few of them hiding amongst his dark hair. They made him even more handsome to my eyes. I reached out to toy with a few silver strands.

His voice had a rumble of laughter in it. "You're checking for gray hair, aren't you?"

"Sorry, I couldn't resist."

Thankfully, he sounded amused and not mad. "Should I dye my hair to hide them so you don't feel like you're dating a grand-père?"

"No, because I like them."

"Ah, so you'll be counting down the days until I turn into a silver fox, eh?"

The implication of our relationship lasting that long filled me with a burst of sunshine. "I never thought that would appeal to me."

“But it does?”

“Only with you.” I snuggled against him with a contented sigh. “You make everything look good, including gray hair.”

He squeezed me tighter, making my soul sing. “You’re so adorable, I should start calling you *mon petit chou*.”

The idea of him giving me a pet name made me unexpectedly squeal in delight. “What’s that mean?”

“‘My little cream puff,’ which is appropriate since you’re cute, sweet, and I want to eat you right up.”

How could I say no to something so adorable? “I’d be okay with that.”

“In that case, *je t’aime, mon petit chou*.” He shifted us to press two kisses on my forehead.

“I love you, too.” I couldn’t believe how easy it was to confess that when I had fumbled doing it with my past ex-girlfriends. “I have to work on a pet name, though. I’ve never given one before, so the first thing that popped into my head is inappropriate.”

He chuckled at the thought. “If it’s the right kind of inappropriate, I wouldn’t object.”

“Anyone who knows Japanese would give me funny looks if I called you ‘*iroppoi*.’”

He hummed with interest. “Why?”

“Because it means ‘sexy.’”

“I love that the first word you think of about me is that.” Repositioning us so he could look at me, the playfulness in his blue eyes melted me further. “In that case, wouldn’t it be self-evident why you’re calling me that?”

It was impossible not to laugh at how right he was. “Yeah, but it’s not technically a term of endearment. It’s more of an aesthetic observation. I mean, I could call you just ‘iro’ and leave off the ‘ppoi’ part, but that’s weird, too.”

“Is that the ‘sex’ part of sexy?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

“No, it’s the kanji for the word ‘color.’ Considering how much color you bring to my cheeks and you’ve exploded my life into technicolor, it would be very appropriate.”

He tilted his head with a confused expression. “The word for ‘sexy’ has the word ‘color’ in it?”

“I’m not really sure how something that transliterates as ‘color-ish’ or ‘color-like’ ended up meaning ‘sexy.’ There are a lot of phrases related to sexy that use ‘color’ in it, like ‘iro-otoko’ for ‘sexy man’ and ‘iro-me’ to describe a seductive look. But if you say ‘iroiro,’ which is the kanji for ‘color’ twice, it means ‘several’ and not anything sexy. But that’s Japanese for you.”

“So I’d be the color in your life that also has a sexy meaning? I approve.”

“Even though it’s not an actual term of endearment?”

He smiled at me, melting me all over again. “If you’re calling me that because I’m dear to you, then it’s a term of endearment to me.”

I kissed him, hoping my lips would whisper what I was too overwhelmed to express.

“Now that that’s decided, what do you say to a shower?”

“The only way I’m making it there is if you’re carrying me.” Before I had finished laughing at the absurd idea, he swept me into his arms and started heading toward the bathroom. I yelped in shock as I threw my arms around his neck to hold on tight. “Wait, I was joking!”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you. I’ll carry you back to bed and tuck you in when we’re done. We can also sleep in tomorrow morning.”

His words were music to my ears. “If I get any happier, my heart might explode into supernova rainbows.”

“I accept your challenge.”

If anyone could make it happen, it was Armand. I didn’t know why I had been so blessed, but I’d thank all my lucky stars for the rest of time for gifting me the best partner in the entire universe.

Armand

Lazing in bed with Zio was becoming one of my new favorite things. Being near him brought me immense peace and satisfaction. I wasn't in a rush to do anything, so I let him sleep after such an invigorating night.

When he stirred, it was adorable watching his sleepy mind try to process my presence. His shyness warmed my heart as he murmured, "Hi."

"Bonne après-midi, mon petit chou."

His smile turned into a beautiful grin. "Since you didn't say, 'Bonjour,' I'm assuming I missed the morning?"

"You slept right through it."

"Good." He reached over and traced the outline of my jaw to brush against my stubble, then rubbed against the grain before smoothing it down. "Hmm."

"Are you trying to decide if you enjoy that?"

"It's different." He continued stroking my cheek to test the roughness. "My face doesn't do that."

I had to bite the inside of my lip to stop myself from laughing at his innocence. "Ah, that's because you're abébé, and I'm practically a grand-père next to you."

“Please don’t make grandpas sexy.”

I laughed that time. “Are you worried about developing a complex about it?”

“No, but if you keep it up, then I might have a reason to be concerned.” His expression turned pensive. “I had a girlfriend who always called me ‘babe.’ I hated it. But when you call me ‘bébé,’ it makes me happy. Why?”

“Perhaps it’s more palatable in my French accent?”

“Maybe. It helps you aren’t whining it at me, too. She whined about everything. I don’t know what I was thinking.” He scowled at the memory before frowning. “Actually, that’s not true.”

I rubbed my thumb over his eyebrows to smooth the stress lines away. “You were younger back then. We all made mistakes, me included.”

It broke my heart to see sorrow overtake him. “I’m such an idiot.”

“Not at all.”

“I didn’t date anyone in high school because my social anxiety was worse back then, if you can believe that. My parents assumed I was closeted because I never expressed an interest in girls, and it bugged the hell out of me.” He huffed in annoyance.

It was easy to connect the dots from there. “You dated her to prove you weren’t gay?”

“If I did that on a subconscious level, it backfired. I was miserable while I was with Sammie, so they used that as more evidence that I wasn’t straight.” He curled up on himself, so I reached out to stroke his arm in comfort. “I met my second girlfriend in

Japan, but my parents were convinced Mayumi was a figment of my imagination, especially since they never met her because she lived in Japan. It was only after I brought home my third girlfriend, Hyuna, to meet them that they finally believed me. And now they'll think they were right this whole time."

"Does that bother you?"

"Only in the sense that two people who don't know me at all somehow knew that about me before I did." He sighed before reaching out to trail his fingers along the length of my collarbone to my shoulder, then down my arm. "I'm so stupid. I was so determined to prove them wrong, it never occurred to me they might be right. Mom tells her friends I work in finance because she can't be bothered to understand what I study. Dad says I'm an attorney because he's embarrassed that I'm pursuing something as 'worthless' as art. How could they know more about my sexuality than me?"

I captured his hand in mine to squeeze. "It's not that they knew more about it than you. Sexuality has a fluidity to it that can shift as we learn more and grow. At that time, they were wrong. But you're not the same person now that you were then. Things change, sometimes in the most unexpected ways."

He traced the length of my fingers with his. "Have you always known you were interested in men?"

"As an unabashed hedonist, I only cared about pursuing pleasure in whatever form it took." As he followed the lines on my open hand, it reminded me of palm readers. Did he see his future with me?

He didn't quite meet my gaze. "Does that mean you've slept with women, too?"

"Oui, I've been with people of all types across the gender spectrum, because pleasure

isn't limited to the male-female binary for me. All I cared about was making myself and my partner feel good, no matter what body they possessed."

He gazed at me with a curious expression. "You really don't care if it's a man or woman?"

"Non. 'Either, neither, or both' has always been my philosophy when it comes to my partner's gender. Pleasure is pleasure, regardless of the form it takes. My only requirements were someone had to be of age and consented. Everything else is details."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

He seemed amazed by my answer. “You have to have some preference, though. If you saw a twenty-four-year-old beautiful woman and a forty-six-year-old handsome man at the same bar, who would you pick?”

“It would depend on my mood. Maybe that night I would be interested in enjoying her feminine curves. Perhaps I’d be craving a distinguished gentleman to dominate me. If I didn’t have to choose, then the three of us might entertain ourselves together. Those days are in the past, though.”

He bit his lower lip with an uncertain expression. “But won’t you miss that kind of freedom to be with anyone when you’re only with me?”

I knew I had to speak carefully to break through his anxiety. “When I experienced pleasure, I didn’t feel the pain of emptiness. Staying casual prevented me from forming attachments to someone who would be gone by the morning. I was so afraid to let anyone in, I took great care to not seek out things that would put me in danger of falling in love.”

“Like what?”

“Somebody with a brilliant mind and an inquisitive spirit, who is adorable without being cocky, and wants me for more than just my body.” I couldn’t hide my smile at his startled expression. “More than anything, I yearned for someone to fill the emptiness inside of me, who loved me and would make my soul feel safe at home. I wished to take care of and cherish a partner with all my love.”

It was cute how he tried to restrain his happiness. “Wow, you really shouldn’t have

talked to me at the bar if that was the case. I didn't realize I was such a perilous temptation for you."

"I never expected to find you, because you're everything I've ever wanted." I reached out and brushed the hair from his eyes before cupping his cheek. "Now, I understand why I was never serious with anyone else. My heart was waiting for you."

He moved closer to give me a sweet kiss that I welcomed. My soul sang a song of sunlight and happiness, especially when he shifted our positions until he was on top of me. His hardness pressed against me, stirring mine to life. Guiding him to move back, I grabbed the lube off the nightstand and dispensed some. I took both of our erections in hand to stroke, slicking them with lube.

It earned me a gasp as he thrust against me. "Oh! Why is that so good?"

"Because everything is better when we're together."

He laughed as he rocked against me. "I mean, we're basically rubbing two sticks together to make fire. It shouldn't feel this fantastic."

His colorful language caused me to laugh hard. "Frotting is an underrated pleasure."

"You're making me a big fan of it." He jerked his hips with a moan. "And of your foreskin moving against me. How did I not know that was a major turn-on?"

"There's an entire universe of sexual pleasure I can introduce you to." Once he opened himself to the possibilities, the fun we could have would be limitless.

"If anyone could pique my curiosity instead of my anxiety, it'd be you. I'm so close,iro." He scrunched up his nose. "Nope, that's weird. Gonna have to work on that name later. Can't think right now. Everything feels too good."

His movements became more sporadic, so I brushed my thumb over the tip of his cock, triggering his orgasm. Watching him at the apex of pleasure pushed me to come. He rewarded me by leaning forward to give me appreciative kisses. “If that’s a glimpse of the unknown pleasures you’re promising, I’m excited to learn more.”

“I’m an excellent teacher, and you’re a bright student, so there’s a world of possibilities for us to explore.”

“I can’t wait.” His smile was beautiful and joyous. “Do you have any specific plans for today?”

“We can do whatever you want.”

Hesitating, it took him a moment to build up the courage to make his request. “Could we maybe visit the Honolulu Museum of Art? They have anukiyo-ewoodblock print exhibit I was hoping to visit before I leave. Spending a beautiful day inside looking at artwork probably isn’t your idea of fun, but—”

“Being with you is my favorite kind of fun. I’d love to go and hear more about your passion.”

He lit up with happiness. “Thank you! That means a lot to me that you’re willing to go.”

“Not just willing to—I’m looking forward to going,” I corrected him.

Zio showered me with a flurry of kisses. “In that case, we should clean up and get lunch before heading out. I’ve worked up quite the appetite.”

While he seemed fine, I still wanted to check in with him. “Are you in pain from yesterday?”

He got off the bed and stretched. “A little, but not in a bad way. It’s a bone-deep satisfaction that reminds me I put my body to good use last night. Does that make sense?”

“It does. If you’re too sore later, you can explore me more if you’d like.” I stood up so we could start walking to the bathroom.

“I’d enjoy that no matter,” he said with a slight flounce of excitement in his step. Confidence was cute on him. It was such a privilege watching him grow even more beautiful, thanks to our blossoming romance.

* * *

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

After a fun afternoon at the museum, we visited the Tantalus Lookout to watch the sunset. Even though we both disliked heights, the view was too spectacular to be anything other than wowed by it. The city of Oahu stretched out below, surrounded by the sparkling blue sea. There were a few other couples scattered around, but they were far enough away to give an illusion of our own private oasis.

I spread out a hotel bath towel on the grass so we could sit while waiting for the sun to begin its descent. It thrilled me when Zio cuddled next to me and rested his head on my shoulder. He didn't say anything, so I lingered in the comfortable silence as I enjoyed being near him.

"I can't believe tomorrow is our last full day here," he eventually said with a hint of sadness.

"Oui, it has gone fast." Not wanting him to be melancholic, I looked at the bright side. "But thankfully, returning to Sunnyside isn't the end of our relationship. It is only part of the beautiful beginning."

"Will we go on dates and stuff?"

I squeezed him tighter to reassure him. "Absolument. I'm looking forward to spoiling you."

"That would be a first for me." He snuggled against me with a happy noise. "How often do you go on trips?"

"It depends on Arsène's schedule. During the school year, he stays in Sunnyside to be

with Felix. They'll be spending part of the summer here, in the Maldives, and Paris. Felix doesn't know it yet, but he's also going to Scotland."

"What a strange mix of places."

He wasn't wrong. "Felix writes under the pen name of Ever Princely. His series about Maltova royalty takes place in a country with a similar appearance to the Maldives. Arsène wanted to reward him for his first book doing well by taking him there to inspire his sequel. After that, they'll be in Paris so Arsène can conduct business and introduce Felix to our family. He'll surprise Felix by sending him and his friend North to a Scottish castle to collaborate on a new novel."

His sigh sounded envious. "Wow, talk about an amazing summer. But that means you're probably going with them, aren't you?"

"Not to Scotland, but I'll visit here, the Maldives, and Paris to assist Arsène on his photo shoots."

"Meanwhile, I'll be stuck by myself in the apartment because Rigby and Jude are visiting Japan." His grumpy harrumph was too precious for words.

"You don't want to come with me?"

He scoffed at the notion as he pulled back. "I couldn't ask Luca for that many points to cover stuff, and I'd never afford it on my own. Poor graduate student on a stipend with no parental support, remember?"

"You wouldn't need his help when you're staying in my room with me."

"But the airfare alone—"

I didn't let him finish his protest. "Your brother isn't the only one with frequent flyer miles to spare."

"That's way too generous! Even Luca would rightfully tell me to scale it down if I was greedy enough to ask."

I had my doubts about that, but I kept them to myself. "What if it wasn't a gift? What if you agreed to be my personal assistant? That would turn it into a business expense, which is covered by us."

It was easy to see he was once again fighting a battle within himself between wanting to accept and feeling too guilty to do so. "Would you let me work for it?"

"If that would ease your guilt about agreeing, then of course."

"We could really return here and go to the Maldives and Paris?" The sense of hope in his voice told me I was getting closer to winning the war.

"Oui, and I can introduce you to my dear Maman and Papa, which would make *metrès joyeux*." Imagining their pleased reactions warmed my heart. "With Arsène and Isidore bringing Felix and Wren home to meet our parents, it will be an exciting summer at the Château de Devereaux. Plus, there is no finer wine than at their vineyard."

It was cute watching his eagerness build at the prospect. "It's not too much trouble?"

"Nothing would make me happier than to travel the world with you." I couldn't resist adding, "Especially since I could introduce you to a proper croissant and the choux pastry you're named after."

He threw his arms around my neck as he almost knocked me down from the force of

his happiness. “Having real French pastries? That would be incredible!”

Considering Zio’s sweet tooth, his excitement over the dessert aspect didn’t surprise me at all. “I’d make sure you had nothing but the best. You must try proper macaroons, too.”

He leaned back with a look of wonder. “Oh, and I could have bonbons, too! Ilovebonbons.”

“They’re so good, they named it twice.”

“What do you mean?”

“Bonbon is the word ‘good’ twice in French.”

He lit up at the information. “That makes me love them more! Why didn’t I know that?”

“Because you don’t speak French?”

“OfcourseI’d love something called ‘good-good.’” His giggles of delight tickled me to no end. “That’s a much more appropriate name for you than ‘iro.’”

“Are you saying you wish for me to be your bonbon since I’m good-good and you want to take a nibble of me?”

He fell into me with peals of laughter as he gasped, “Monsieur Bonbon! I can’t! It’s too much!”

I couldn’t resist teasing him, so I held my arm out to him. “Are you in the mood for a taste?”

He stunned me by taking hold of my hand and placing a kiss on the inside of my wrist. I shivered when he gave me a tiny lick as he looked at me with laughter in his eyes. “Best bonbon ever.”

“Your bonbon forever.”

My reward was more affectionate kisses as he hugged me. “You might have been joking, but I kind of love it.”

“It’s not a joke if it makes you happy.”

He curled up at my side once more. “You’re so good to me.”

“I think you mean good-good to you.”

He cracked up again, which was wonderful to see him so free of his anxiety. “You’re right. I stand corrected.”

The sky shifted into breathtaking pink, purple, and orange tones. With the last flares of yellow light and red undertones across the horizon, it was a sight to behold. We quieted our amusement and watched the grandeur of an incredible day ending, which would welcome another wonderful evening. It was a magical experience that was all the better because we were spending time together.

As the colors faded into the dark of night, the stars came out to shine as the city lights glowed. It was a spectacular sight worth lingering to enjoy before we went to dinner. It was a glorious oasis paradise that I was already looking forward to returning to when we returned for our photo shoot.

* * *

Once we finished eating, we retired to Zio’s room. It was heaven to kiss and touch him as I stripped us bare. It pleased me when he got on the bed and held his arms open to welcome me into his embrace. “What is mon petit chouin the mood for tonight?”

“I need to feel you inside me again.”

His words sent a flare of excitement through me. “I’m all too happy to make that happen.” I reached over to the nightstand for the lube to prepare him. When I circled his entrance with slicked fingers, he broke into another giggle fit. “Will you laugh every time I touch you here?”

“Sorry, I remembered Dr. Feel Good.” He kept laughing as I continued teasing his hole with a hint of penetration. “Except it turned into a scene with the French version of him and me going, ‘Please help me, Dr. Feel Bonbon!’”

I wondered if I’d be able to tempt him into role-playing after all. “What’s your problem?”

“My brain won’t quit thinking about weird things,” he said with a laugh as his body moved toward my touch. “Sorry, I swear I’m not intentionally trying to wreck the mood.”

Easing a finger into him, I reminded him, “I have ways of helping refocus your attention.”

“Oh,no.” He sounded aghast at a sudden realization, hiding his face in his hands.

“What?”

“I can never get sick again.”

It was difficult to hold in my chuckle, but I didn’t want him to feel worse. “Why?”

“Because now I’m going to associate having fingers inside me with sexual pleasure.” He groaned in agony. “I’ll die of shame when my body gets the wrong idea about Dr. Felderman checking my prostate.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

I withdrew from him and focused on reassuring him before moving on. “Zio, look at me.”

“Nope, I’m too humiliated, and it hasn’t happened yet. Going to the doctor already makes me an anxious wreck. This adds a whole new layer of panic about my next visit.”

“If you won’t look at me, then listen. There’s a big difference between me pleasuring you and a doctor’s clinical examination.”

He slung his arm over his eyes to hide again. “Yeah, but my body will expect your touch and react to the memories of all the times you’ve made me feel good there. I could never see him again if I got aroused during an exam. Or worse, actually came.”

“Mon petit chou, do you think your anxiety would allow you to achieve a state of arousal intense enough to climax?”

It took a moment before he mumbled an answer. “Probably not.”

“Is your Dr. Felderman so attractive that he gives you confusing thoughts?”

His disgusted noise told me how grossed out he was by the idea. “No, he’s an old curmudgeon who’s always in a foul mood. He doesn’t want to be there any more than I do. That’s why I like him. He never tries to put me at ease with chitchat or ask more questions than is medically required by the standard of care. He’s grumpy as hell and wants me out of his office as fast as he can process me.”

“It doesn’t sound as if he would be there long enough for you to become aroused, then, non? Let alone be so appealing that your body would react to him.”

“But what if because he’s the antithesis of you, I think about you? Or remember Dr. Feel Good-Bonbon and giggle when he does my prostate check?” He made a pained noise. “I couldn’t be his patient anymore if I did that. He has zero sense of humor or patience.”

I arched an eyebrow at the description. “Finding a new doctor doesn’t seem like such a bad thing if that’s how he treats you.”

“No, he’s good at what he does. His bedside manner is atrocious, but I’m fine with that.” Zio let his arm drop onto the bed as he sighed. “Logically, I understand you’re right. But the asshole who lives in the back of my head is telling me all kinds of awful shit about how I’d be betraying you. I’m trying very hard not to believe him.”

It warmed my heart that he wanted to trust in me and not his doubts. “Let me beat him at his own game, then. Let’s say that the worst-case scenario happens, and you climax from Dr. Felderman’s touch. What would my reaction be?”

He started to answer but stopped with a consternated expression.

It was time to play devil’s advocate. “Do you think I would get angry with you? Are you afraid it would hurt my feelings? Do you believe I’d break up with you over such a thing?” My questions caused him to tense up, so I talked him down. “Or, would I be understanding about the incident and do everything possible to reassure you it was okay? Can you imagine me turning it into an opportunity to erase his touch with my own? Do you think I can’t make you come so hard that you forget to be anxious about the experience?”

“You wouldn’t be mad at me?” he asked in a tiny voice.

I reached out with my clean hand to stroke his thigh in comfort since it was closest to me. “The only thing that would upset me is if you didn’t go to a doctor. Your health is too important to avoid medical professionals out of a fear that your body might react to them because you’re so attuned to my touch. Even if you did, I would take it as a compliment about my skills.”

That finally drew a laugh from him. “I was unaware that one of your talents was finding a positive way to spin another person making me climax into being about you.”

“I’m happy to accept the blame for being so arousing that your body loses control at the mere thought of my touch.” I reached down to circle his hole once more. “But if it will lessen your anxiety, I won’t tease you about role-playing doctor scenarios.”

He melted at my promise, so I slid my finger back into him. “If I can ever get out of my head long enough to do that, please stick only to fantasies that can’t happen in everyday life. I’d have a nervous breakdown over a sexy teacher-student thing between us when I want to be a professor. I’d shoot myself out of a canon into the sun if I got aroused in front of a class while teaching because of you.”

It was a pity that was off the table, because I would have enjoyed acting that situation out. “In that case, I will stick to the realm of the fantastical.”

“What does that mean?”

I tried to come up with the most absurd idea possible to help him laugh and forget about his fears. “Perhaps I’d be a unicorn in search of a rider.”

As I had hoped, he burst into hysterical laughter. It took him several attempts to gasp, “That’s so wrong! I keep imagining you penetrating me with your horn, and—” He giggled so hard, he had to wipe tears from his eyes.

I laughed along with him but focused on adding a finger to work him open.

His voice cracked as it got higher in pitch as he continued trying to talk through his amusement. “What if unicorn dicks were rainbows and their cum was glitter?”

I lost it as much as him. It took a bit of time before both of us composed ourselves. He sighed in relief. “Oh, man. I needed that, thank you. I’m not sure I’m ever going to stop laughing about that, wow.”

“It’s one of the many reasons I adore you, *monpetit chou*.” I worked another finger into him, waiting for him to relax into my motions. “I can’t wait for you to meet Felix, Wren, and North. You’ll have three new best friends who will love that about you, too. Their imaginations are equally vivid, so you’re in good company with them.”

“How vivid is vivid?”

“If you read Ever Princely or Finch Northish’s books, you’ll understand.” I grinned as another thought occurred to me. “And when you meet North’s mother and sister, you’ll learn the joys of being surrounded by so many people without filters. It’s quite shocking at times but makes things much more fun.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

He propped himself up to look at me. “Didn’t you say North and Felix were best friend working on a book together?”

“Oui.”

“Why would I meet Arsène’s boyfriend’s best friend’s mom and sister?”

I chuckled at the long string of connections. “Felix and Isidore’s circle of friends are very close-knit. If you’re friends with one, you’re friends with all of them. Being friends with North means Linda and West will adopt you. Linda has become my American mama, so she’ll adore and spoil you, too. She’s the mother everyone should be blessed to have.”

“Wow, that’s a huge compliment.”

“When you meet her, you’ll understand.” I applied a slight bit of pressure to his prostate to get him refocused on us. “Are you ready to move on?”

“Yes, please!”

I withdrew my fingers from him and stroked my arousal to slick it with lube. “What do you say to a change of location?”

“Where?”

Tilting my head toward his balcony, I grew more excited about the idea. “Out there.”

He looked scandalized by the suggestion. “We can’t do that!”

“Sure we can. It’s all the fun of public exhibitionism with none of the risks. Since we’re so high up, nobody can see us.” I got off the bed and held my clean hand out to him. “Let’s take advantage of it.”

He accepted my assistance before he stunned me. “Well, I guess if I already jerked off out there once, I’d be a hypocrite to say no.”

I grabbed a washcloth before I led him out to the balcony. Choosing one of the wide chaise lounges, I settled on it before helping Zio position himself over me. “When did you do that?”

“The first night after I met you.” With the lights from the room, I could see the faint blush in his cheeks. “I came out here to cool off but ended up getting off instead since you had me so spun up. It messed with my head, because the taste of you on my skin pushed me over the edge.”

“Trèssexy.” I helped line myself up with Zio’s entrance. “Ease onto me. Even if it’s taking forever, go slow as you get used to the position. Remember to breathe.”

Obedying my instructions, he didn’t rush to take me in deep. He let me slide in as he made himself comfortable. When I was all the way inside, he sighed with relief as he relaxed.

“Start off easy and work up to whatever feels good as you ride me.”

He once again burst into laughter, his body shaking so hard that he had to rest his forehead on my shoulder as he tried to regain control. “Sorry, it’s just I remembered the unicorn thing from earlier when you said, ‘Ride.’ Then, I imagined getting fucked by your humanoid unicorn form, and—” He dissolved into more giggles and couldn’t

finish his sentence. “Sorry, I swear I’ll eventually get to a point where being penetrated doesn’t cause me to laugh like a dumbass fourteen-year-old boy joking about dicks.”

“No apology is necessary when I chuckled, too.” I kissed his temple twice before I wiped my hands clean on the washcloth I brought with us. It allowed me to cup his pert ass to help redirect his attention. “You’ll feel better once you move.”

Taking the hint, he started with tentative movements as he tested out the new position. He continued adjusting his angle until he found one that worked. Grabbing onto my shoulders to steady himself, he grew bolder as his instincts took over. His gasps turned into soft moans as he bounced with more force as I helped him take more of me. There was nothing more beautiful to me than the sight of him with his head tilted, awash and lost in the pleasure of our bodies connecting. I caressed his back and sides, raising chills on his skin along with the gentle breeze. There was something magical about hearing him enjoying himself while the ocean swell crashed on the shore. It was a moment I wanted to preserve forever and savor any chance I could.

Using one hand to hold him steady, I used my other to tease his erection. He cried out as he lost his rhythm from the burst of sudden pleasure. He leaned forward as his body blindly moved in search of another sexual high. It didn’t surprise me when he guided me to tilt my head so he could worship my neck. The area had always been an erogenous zone for me, so I welcomed his lips and tongue teasing me there as he indulged. Knowing he derived so much pleasure from it made it even better for me.

The unexpected nip of his teeth triggered my orgasm as I called out his name. All it took was one more lick before he climaxed with a gasp. After he finished, I pulled out of him. He sagged against me with a prolonged moan as he wrapped his arms around my shoulders. I had the wherewithal to wipe my hand clean with the nearby washcloth before I embraced him.

When he eventually spoke, he caught me by surprise. “Huh, it seems that would be the ultimate fantasy, doesn’t it?”

“What would?”

“Vampires.” He caressed the side of my throat, sending shivers through me. “I get off on the taste of you there, and a single bite makes you come. What better fantastical role-playing scenario is there for us?”

I made an approving noise. “You’re right. I’ve got perfect outfits for it, too.”

He laughed hard. “Of course you do. Why wouldn’t you have a sexy suit worthy of a fancy Victorian vampire in your closet? I hope you don’t think I have anything like that in mine.”

The more I considered the possibility, the more exciting it became. “Luckily for you, West is a very talented fashion designer who will jump at the chance to dress you up, since it’s her favorite aesthetic.”

He snorted at the idea. “What are you going to tell her? ‘Hi, could you make my boyfriend into a sexy vampire so he can enjoy ravishing me?’ You can’t be serious!”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

“Oh, I am. She’s the only one I would trust to turn you into a gorgeous prince of the night.” Imagining him that way stirred my desire once more, although my body wasn’t there yet.

“Sorry, I’m still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that the sister of your best friend’s boyfriend’s friend would make you sexual cosplay.”

I chuckled at his reasonable reaction. “It’s not so random. Arsène is fond of her since she’s so close to Felix, so he did a photo shoot of her first collection. That launched her career into the stratosphere, so to speak. She also dresses quite a few of our clients, like Rune and Rook Warrick. When she finds out about this idea, she will beg for the chance to turn our dreams into a reality.”

“Can we not tell her about the sex part, please? I can’t handle her knowing.”

I stroked his hair with a fond smile. “I’m sure it would be her very first guess, and it would delight her to be right. As I mentioned before, filters are nonexistent with them. It makes things quite fun.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” His mouth turned up into a grin. “I still can’t figure out which is more surprising: me biting you or you coming from it.”

“Sometimes a little pain brings a lot of pleasure.”

He seemed skeptical. “Is that one of the kinks you plan on introducing to me somewhere down the road?”

“Only if you’re comfortable exploring that.”

Cupping my face in his hands, he gave me sweet kisses. “If anyone could make me enjoy that, it would be you.”

“Right now, I’d like to take you inside and get you cleaned up.”

“Sure, as soon as I can move.” He hugged me as he lingered in my embrace. With the stars shining above and the ocean waves dancing on the beach, it was a perfect memory to treasure forever.

Zio

In the blink of an eye, our trip was over. While our time in Hawaii had ended, our adventure would continue once we returned to Sunnyside. It made it easier to walk away from paradise when I knew Armand would stay in my life.

Traveling was always hell on my anxiety, as I double-checked my quadruple checks for all my documents and possessions. Although the rational part of my brain understood I had everything, my OCD demanded I be extra super sure. If I hadn't already fallen for Armand, him accepting my behavior would have sent me past the point of no return. He didn't get mad at me or tell me to stop checking so many times. When my parents got irritated by my compulsive need to repeatedly confirm I had all my stuff, I didn't take his patience for granted.

We were on the same return flight, which meant we could sit together in the waiting area. It kept me in a calmer state than I'd normally be in since his easygoing nature counteracted my stress.

Despite heading to the same place, I experienced a sense of disappointment when they announced over the loudspeaker, "Now boarding our priority and platinum members."

"That's me," I said. "What about you?"

"I'll board with the last group." He gave me a sweet kiss that I savored, despite public displays of affection being something I hated prior to being with him. "I'll see you when we land."

“I’ll wait for you outside the gate when we arrive.” After another kiss and a quick double check of my stuff, I left him to line up to board. I tried to be subtle about glancing over at him to confirm he was still there, almost as if I half expected him to disappear forever. He waved when he noticed, making me blush. So much for being subtle.

Once I got on the plane, I sat in my window seat in first class that I had thanks to my brother’s generosity. The comfort and spaciousness made flying less hellish, as did the flight attendant giving me two small bottles of Irish whiskey with a glass of ice. I took it as a good sign that there were six cubes.

Putting on my headphones and pulling out my e-book reader, I settled in to read Ever Princely’s *The Prince & His Librarian*. Since it was Felix’s pen name and I was going to meet him soon, it seemed important to check out his book. A tiny part of me also hoped I’d glean some helpful tips from it; I still had a lot to learn about having sex with a man.

I had never read a romance novel in my life, but Prince Leander Montarelli’s charming nature sucked me into his story. When I discovered the librarian, Cyrus Valan, was a handsome, older gentleman, my interest in their relationship grew. Their banter was so engrossing, I forgot about all the people filing onto the plane. I barely noticed when someone sat beside me, but I eventually registered a seductive and alluring scent.

Glancing up from my book, I startled when I saw Armand sitting next to me with a pleased expression. I took my headphones off to rest around my neck as I asked in awe, “What are you doing here?”

“It seems we were destined to meet each other after all.”

“But how’s that possible? You boarded with the final group, which would mean you

were in coach.”

He chuckled as he shook his head. “I’m part of the first group, but I’m always one of the last people on before they close the doors. I don’t enjoy having a parade of passengers banging into me with their bags when I sit in the aisle. It’s easier to wait until the end to take my seat. Finding out I’m sitting next to you was a pleasant surprise.”

I leaned over and kissed him with all the overflowing joy in my heart. If I had been looking for a sign that we were meant to be, I couldn’t have asked for a clearer one than that.

* * *

My nerves spiked after we landed because Armand’s friend Arsène was picking us up at the airport. It was intimidating to meet someone who was so important to my boyfriend, especially because I wanted to make a good first impression. I was already desperate for his approval that I was worthy of being with his best friend. It tempered my immediate excitement over getting to stay with Armand a few more nights.

After we collected our bags, he stopped me and held my gaze to convey his seriousness. “You have nothing to fear from Arsène. We’re as close as brothers, so if you get along with me, you also will with him. He likes you, so you’re not fighting an uphill battle for his approval. You already have it.” He gave me a reassuring kiss on the forehead and another on the lips that turned my insides into goo.

Nodding that I understood, I held his words close to my chest. I tried to ignore the asshole who lived in the back of my head, who whispered about all the ways I could fuck up my initial impression.

Exiting the airport, Armand led us over to a luxury sedan where an older and younger

man waited. I was unprepared for Arsène to be so attractive that he looked like he should have a career in front of a camera instead of behind it. He was tall, handsome, and dressed in tight jeans and a black blazer with the sleeves rolled up into cuffs that had floral finishes. He had a friendly smile that set my anxious heart at ease.

Arsène embraced Armand before greeting him with air-kisses on each cheek. They said something to each other in French that caused them both to laugh before they parted.

While Arsène was masculine, Felix had a boyish charm. His lanky frame, faded T-shirt, and tattered jeans emphasized his youth, although he was probably only a few years younger than me. His unexpected appearance normally would have thrown me into a panic, but his sunny smile kept my fears at bay. If he was anything like the characters he had written about in his book, he would be nice and funny. He embraced Armand next. “Welcome back!”

“You must have missed me if I’m getting a hug from you,” Armand teased him.

“Now that you have a boyfriend, I don’t have to worry about giving you the wrong idea.” Felix laughed as he stepped away. He startled me by hugging me. “I’m so excited to meet you, Zio! I can’t wait to know more about the man who did the impossible.”

I tilted my head in confusion. “The impossible?”

“Tame our Armand,” Arsène explained with a chuckle. He hugged me, then air-kissed both of my cheeks as well. It allowed me to smell his woodsy cologne that was almost as tantalizing as my boyfriend’s. Was smelling incredible a French thing? “I am so happy that you two have found each other. Come, let me take you both home. You must be tired after your long flight.”

The warm fuzzies in my heart bloomed that Arsène implied that my home was with Armand. It helped distract my fears as we loaded our luggage into the car before I sat in the back seat on the passenger side. When Armand got in, he took hold of my hand and gave it a squeeze.

Arsène began driving to Armand's apartment. "How was your flight?"

"Quite enjoyable since we ended up sitting next to each other," Armand answered. "It seems fate wasn't taking any chances of us missing out."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

I hesitated before I forced myself to reply. “Um, I read Felix’s book on the flight. It was so good, I forgot I was on a plane which was a first.”

Felix turned to glance at me over his seat. “Really? That’s awesome! What did you think of it? Honest answers only, please.”

“It was my first romance novel of any kind, so I have nothing else to judge it against. Because of that, I wasn’t sure what to expect, but Prince Leander and Cyrus had one of the most beautiful stories I’ve ever enjoyed. It was an enlightening experience.”

His grin turned wicked. “Translation: you picked up some sexy tips to try out later on Armand?” He laughed when I flushed scarlet. “If you want some great ideas, read Finch Northish’s books next. I’m gay, and I still learned some fun stuff from him.”

Arsène reached over and caressed Felix’s hair. “The two of you combining forces will be quite the formidable duo.”

“We’re going to try really hard not to make it nonstop sex.”

“Ah, so hard,” Armand moaned, making my blush deepen as Felix cracked up. His comments about Arsène’s boyfriend not having a filter made more sense. “I can only imagine what your brainstorming sessions are like.”

Felix moved to rest his head on Arsène’s shoulder with a nuzzle. “Thankfully, I have the best research assistant in the world to help me. Joking aside, North and I are still kicking around basic plot ideas at this point. I’m too focused on finishing *The Duke and His Valet* and getting started on *The Viscount and His Violinist*.”

“I am sure you both will come up with a spectacular story,” Arsène said. His lack of contractions caught my attention.

Armand’s grin turned ornery. “I’m also certain that the sex will be quite the spectacle.”

“Yeah, if we do it right.” Felix sat back up with a snicker. “If nothing else, it’ll keep me entertained while Arsène is working on catching up with his European clients this summer.”

Arsène surprised me by shifting the conversation to me. “Speaking of which, I was wondering if I could ask you something, Zio?”

“Of course!”

“Armand told me about your studies. Yourkintsugicaptivated my imagination. It inspired me to consider doing a photo shoot through a wounded warriors foundation, where I would use gold paint to highlight and honor the story of their survival. Then, I would donate all the proceeds to their charity. What do you think?”

My jaw dropped from the overload of information to process all at once. I hadn’t expected Armand to share my research with anyone, let alone someone as famous as Arsène to take it seriously. It took me several tries before I could find my voice to say, “That sounds incredible!Wow. I never would have thought to usekintsugin such a way, but that’s an amazing concept.”

“Honoring the scars of the past by making them beautiful through art as a testament to enduring hardships would be my pleasure. If you are open to it, I would like to talk to you about it in more depth later.”

It was difficult to speak through the lump in my throat. “Yeah, I’m happy to chat

about it anytime.”

“Merci beaucoup.”

Armand brought my hand up to his lips to press a kiss to it. “See? It’s not just me who finds it fascinating.”

“I don’t know shit about ceramics, and I thought it was cool as hell.” Felix turned to look back at me again. “You’re coming to Sunday dinner this week, right? West and Linda are going to lose their minds when they hear about it. I’ll bet five bucks that West comes up with a corset line based on kintsugi after you tell her about it.”

I had spent most of my life having people not care about the things I liked. It was overwhelming that Armand’s friends had embraced me and my interests with sincerity. Other than Rigby and Jude, I had never had anyone do that before.

“I’d love to bring you to Sunday dinner to introduce you to Linda and West if you’re comfortable with it,” Armand added. “Felix is right. They’ll both be eager to talk to you at great length about your studies.”

“It’ll also give you the opportunity to meet the rest of the group, since I think pretty much everyone is going this week,” Felix said. “Everyone is dying to find out who captured Armand’s heart.”

Normally, being thrown into a massive gathering was hell on my nerves. But after receiving such a warm welcome, it gave me the confidence to agree. “I’d like that, thank you.”

* * *

Once Arsène and Felix dropped us off, I got my first look at Armand’s apartment. The

furnishings were elegant, sophisticated, and looked like they cost a fortune. At the same time, everything seemed comfortable and unpretentious.

Armand pulled me into his embrace. “Do you want to eat now, or would you prefer to take a shower?”

I perked up at the latter option. “Showering is always the first thing I do when I come home because I don’t feel clean until I wash off all the travel germs.”

He placed a gentle kiss on my forehead. “Alone, or would you enjoy some company?”

Offering me privacy instead of assuming I’d want company made me want him to join me even more. “As long as I can wash first, I’d appreciate it if you joined me.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

My answer delighted him. He led me to his bedroom, which had the biggest bed I had ever seen. The comforter was white with purple trimming, making it feel like an expensive hotel suite. His spacious bathroom distracted me. It surprised me that his shower had a bench in it.

After the flight, the hot water was heavenly as all the residual tension left my body when I exhaled a heavy sigh. I expected I'd be in charge of cleaning myself, but Armand took it upon himself to bathe me. He took his time lathering me up with his woodsy bodywash, starting with my extremities before working toward my chest. I didn't fight the arousal over how sensuous the experience was as he made his way lower. Our slick bodies slid against each other, allowing me to feel his hardness pressing against my ass. It filled me with an almost unbearable longing.

To my disappointment, he didn't linger while cleaning my intimate areas. But that frustration disappeared when he dispensed shampoo and started working it into my hair. Not only did I appreciate he was honoring my request to get clean first, but the scalp massage he gave me melted me into mush.

"Your fingers are magical," I moaned as I savored the experience. "I never want you to stop doing that."

He pulled the shower wand from its holder and changed from a wider spray to a more focused one. "You're going to enjoy this even more."

Before I could ask why, he washed the shampoo out of my hair. He took great care to cover my ears so he didn't get water in them. Between his talented fingers working me and the massage setting on the wand, I had to brace myself against the wall for

support. I was in real danger of melting into a puddle and sliding down the drain. It was a type of pleasure I had never experienced before. The longer it went on, the better it felt. I trembled with a whimper as it pushed me to my limits in my tired state.

When he reached the base of my neck, the combined sensations triggered my orgasm with no other stimulation. It sapped the last of my strength, and my knees buckled. Thankfully, Armand kept a firm hold on me and guided me to sit on the bench.

I rested my head against the wall behind me as I looked at him in wonder. “What kind of sorcery is that?”

He returned the wand to its holder and put on a show of cleaning himself. “It’s a massage setting where the spray comes out in spirals. You’ll never have a better shower experience in your life.”

While I was satiated, I still derived enjoyment from watching water sluicing over his skin as he lathered up his hair with more shampoo. “I’d love to return the favor for you, but I have no clue how you did that.”

He winked at me before he pulled out the wand to use on himself. “A hedonist never tells his secrets.”

“You could explain it to me with diagrams, and I doubt I’d ever understand how water and your fingers working me in a nonsexual way caused me to come that hard without touching myself.” I was boneless as I basked in the afterglow, although I felt a tiny bit of guilt he was suffering with a hard-on. “Maybe by the time you’re done washing off, I’ll be up to helping you finish.”

“If you’re not, that’s okay.” He ruffled his hair under the spray, sending water cascading everywhere. “I understand traveling is exhausting for you.”

“Why?”

He pushed his bangs back from his face, making me swoon. “Your anxiety leaves you in a state of hyperawareness, which means you have to be at full alert for long hours. Constantly being on your guard combined with the stress of so many unknown variables is enough to exhaust anyone.”

“No, I meant why do you understand anxiety so well? You act like you haven’t been anxious a day in your life.”

Armand changed the spray to the wider one before he straddled himself over me. I wrapped my arms around his waist as he embraced my neck. “While I live very carefree now, that wasn’t always true. As a child, I was anxious about everything because of my family situation.”

“How did you overcome it?”

He brushed the stray hair away from my face. “It took a long time for me to feel secure in the Devereaux household. Once I accepted they were my home I would never lose, my fear left me except in the darkest moments. I embraced the unknown and never looked back.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

He caressed the nape of my neck with his thumb, raising chills on my skin despite the heat. “I wish it was, but we both know that it’s the hardest thing sometimes. You have my word that I will always be accepting and patient with you, Zio.”

I leaned forward to give him a tighter hug. “I’m so glad for whatever I did that brought you into my life.”

He kissed my temple. “I feel the same way.”

Pressed that close, his hardness brushed against my stomach. It drove me to reach between us and start stroking his arousal. He rewarded me with kisses as I worked his length. It didn't take long for him to spill all over my hand as he moaned against my lips and then kept kissing me.

I had never received such a wonderful welcome home.

Armand

Holding Zio while he slept was its own form of pleasure. The closeness comforted me, even when he was blissfully lost in dreams. Curled up behind him as I held him, I savored the quiet moment together.

His sleepy chuckle drew my attention from its wandering. “What amuses you?”

“You have the most enormous bed I’ve ever seen, but you’re still hugging me like a determined octopus,” he said through a yawn.

“Do you want me to stop?”

To my great delight, Zio placed his hand over mine and gave it a squeeze. “No.” He fell silent, making me think he had drifted to sleep until he continued speaking. “I like it.”

I hugged him tighter. “Good, because I like it, too.”

It thrilled me when he snuggled in my hold. “And I finally understand.”

“Understand what?”

He brushed his thumb over my hand holding him. “You’re going to laugh.”

“I won’t.”

He interlaced his finger with mine. “I get why being the big spoon never felt right.”

That wasn’t the answer I had expected. “Why?”

“Because I was never strong enough to make my exes feel safe in my arms. I constantly worried about whether that was the last time she’d let me hold her before she broke up with me. Holding them brought me endless anxiety but never comfort. It was an obligation I had to complete as part of the boyfriend checklist.”

His answer made my heart break for him. “And now?”

“I finally feel safe.” He hugged me closer to him. “I can surrender all my fears and anxiety, because something deep within me trusts that you’ll protect me from harm. Rightly or wrongly, I have an unshakeable conviction that nothing bad can happen to me when you’re holding me.”

His words moved my heart, since I knew what that meant for him in the face of his anxiety disorder. “I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe.” I sealed my promise with a lingering kiss on his shoulder. “Always and forever.”

“It’s amazing how I keep finding new things to love about you.”

His words overjoyed me. “May I share a revelation in return?”

“Sure.”

“You’ve introduced me to an unexpected pleasure.”

His little giggle was so cute. “How did I do that?”

“By showing me the joy of being in bed with someone without sex.”

He snorted in disbelief. “By definition, isn’t that a lack of sexual pleasure?”

“It’s not about that.” I tried to think of the best way to explain it to him. “The only time I’m in bed without sex is when I’m sleeping alone.”

“I have a question about that later, but go on.”

“Being allowed to hold you and enjoy the physical comfort without sex is a pleasure I’ve never had before.”

I could hear the grin in his voice. “I’ll try not to ruin the moment by getting turned on.”

“If you do, I won’t have any complaints about it.” I couldn’t resist caressing his chest, smirking when he shivered from the ghosting sensation. “What was your question earlier?”

“Um, it’s kind of impertinent.”

I chuckled. “That’s fine.”

“What about when you’re alone in bed and not sleeping?”

I didn’t quite follow his thread of logic. “Meaning?”

He squirmed against me. “Are you going to force me say it?”

“Oui, because I don’t understand what you are trying to ask.”

Taking a deep breath, Zio worked up the nerve to clarify his question. “When you’re by yourself, do you ever enjoy pleasure by yourself?”

“You wish to know if I touch myself, eh?”

“A guy like me doesn’t have a choice, but you could have anyone. You don’t have to be alone if you don’t want to be. Nobody in their right mind would turn you down.”

I chuckled at his assumption. He wasn’t wrong, though. I never had a shortage of partners when I was in the mood. “While I appreciate the compliment, I’m not unfamiliar with entertaining myself.”

“How do you make that sound so classy?” He scoffed in protest. “I’m blaming your French accent. It makes everything fancy and sexy.”

Zio was too adorable. It made me want to tease him all the more, so I slid my hand lower and discovered he was already half-hard. “Shall I show you how I touch

myself?”

A high-pitched squeak escaped from him, making me laugh. “I thought we weren’t supposed to turn this sexual?”

“Do you wish for me to stop?”

“My brain is telling me to say yes to respect your enjoyment of not needing it to be about sexual pleasure.” He whimpered when I brushed my thumb over the head of his cock to spread the bead of precum that had gathered. “But my dick has a very different opinion.”

“I have a better idea.” Getting out of bed, I got a washcloth and a bottle of lube before lying down on my back.

He rolled over to face me with a curious expression. “What are you doing?”

Dispensing some lube, I reached down to slide two slicked fingers inside myself. “Readying myself for a different kind of pleasure.”

“Shouldn’t I be doing that?” He propped himself up to watch the process with fascination. I used my other hand to tease my nipples to harden peaks as I readied myself. Having his rapt attention fueled my arousal and eagerness to move on. “Why is that so sexy?”

“Because you know what comes next.” Since I didn’t need as much preparation as Zio, I withdrew my fingers and repositioned myself over him. I slicked his erection with more lube before I helped guide it inside me. “It’s the fun part.”

He gripped my thighs hard as he gasped in shock. “Are you sure that’s enough? You usually take more time preparing me.”

“That’s because this is still a new experience to you, and I wish for it to be as painless as possible.” Once seated, I reached over for the washcloth to wipe my hands clean of the remaining lube. “Are you ready?”

He nodded, staring up at me with eyes wide in awe. “Yeah.”

That was the permission I needed to move. I braced myself on his stomach as I rode him hard, loving how he thrust up to meet me with each bounce. His hands slid up my thighs before grabbing my ass. I encouraged him with moans and pleas for more as I worked myself up into a frenzied need.

He moved to brush his thumb against my surgery scar. “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

I braced myself as I leaned forward for a better angle. It allowed me to rub my arousal against his stomach while letting him hit deep enough to curl my toes with delight. The dual sensations sent me racing toward a fast climax. When he reached out to work my length, a few quick tugs were all it took for me to spill all over his hand.

It didn’t take long for him to reach his peak as he came with a gasp. I relished his cum leaking out of me when he pulled out; it was an intimate experience only he had ever given me. To reward him, I leaned down for a passionate kiss that made my sexual high even better. It was my new favorite way to start a morning.

* * *

As we finished lunch, Zio’s phone trilled with a text message alert. It fascinated me to watch him cycle through a wide range of emotions from surprise, excitement, and worry.

“Is everything okay?”

He shut off his screen and gave me his full attention, a hint of apprehension lingering in his expression. “Yeah, but I have to go home soon.” Toying with his phone, he built up the courage to ask me something. “Would you be willing to come with me? My brother is coming over for a visit, and it would mean a lot if you’d meet him, Rigby, and Jude.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

My sadness at his departure morphed into joy. “It would be my honor.”

“I shouldn’t spring that kind of thing on you, but I didn’t know he was in town since he wanted to surprise me.”

Waving away his concerns, I did my best to reassure him. “It’s no trouble at all. I’m excited to meet your family and friends.”

“Thank you. It means a lot to me.”

His gratitude was sweet. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

“When we’re done, could I maybe come back here with you?” His hopeful expression was so precious. “I’m not quite ready to return to reality full-time yet.”

I smiled at him with all my love. “Of course. You may stay here whenever and for as long as you wish.”

The way he beamed at me with radiant joy filled me with light. It took so little for him to be happy, which was a far cry from the demanding people who used to warm my bed. I’d never stop being grateful that those days were behind me, thanks to him.

* * *

The first thing I noticed when I entered Zio’s apartment was how they decorated the small space with his kintsugi artwork. There were beautiful bowls and vases that I wanted to inspect later. But my attention focused on the three men waiting in the

living room.

The oldest looked closer to me in age, with a trimmed beard and striking gray eyes. He was stylish in white jeans with a navy blazer and a striped shirt underneath. When he smiled, it was easy to tell he was Luca.

He got out of the chair to gather his younger brother in a tight hug. Zio hugged him with a fierceness that made me wonder how long it had been since they had seen each other. Knowing what I did about their family dynamic, it wasn't surprising to see Zio clinging to Luca for comfort.

Zio beamed up at him with joy. "I can't believe you're here! I assumed I wouldn't see you before you left for Wintervale."

"I didn't want to go that long without seeing you. Plus, I have to vet your partner as part of my older-brother duties." Luca came over and gave me a firm handshake. "It's nice to meet you, Armand."

"The pleasure is mine."

"Oh my god, he really is that pretty in person," said one of the men on the couch. He wore a pale blue T-shirt with a cute white kitten sitting inside an open banana peel. "I've gotta say, I'm impressed, Zio."

The guy beside him had on a gray V-neck sweater and jeans, wearing adorable purple glasses. "Sorry, my boyfriend doesn't have a filter sometimes. I'm Rigby, and this is Jude. Nice to meet you."

I shook both of their hands. "No apology is necessary. Many of my friends are the same. I find it quite delightful." If I didn't, being around Felix, Wren, North, West, and Linda would make my life very painful.

“Well, now you have to marry him,” Jude said with another laugh, causing Zio to blush like a beautiful rose.

“Um, we haven’t talked about that,” Zio nervously replied.

We all took our seats, with Zio and me on the small love seat. I draped my arm around the back of it to give him a comforting brush on the shoulder with my thumb. “There would be no greater joy than being your husband after you graduate.”

It was sweet how hard he tried to smother his happiness. “Really?”

“Oh, he’s definitely serious,” Jude insisted. “I’m so happy for you, Zio. You deserve a partner who thinks you’re the sun, the moon, and all the stars.”

“I’m still getting used to it,” he admitted with a sheepish grin. “I keep expecting to wake up in a hospital after bashing my head on a cliff I fell off of during my vacation.”

“Your fear of heights would never let you go anywhere near one that you could fall off of,” Luca pointed out. “That alone should reassure you that this is real.”

“You can’t blame me for being in disbelief. Look at him!” Zio gestured at me, making everyone laugh. “But somehow I’m lucky enough that he loves me.”

“That’s because you deserve the best, which is why I’m having so much fun spoiling you.”

Zio sought relief from his embarrassment by shifting the conversation focus to Luca. “How long are you here?”

“I can stay for dinner, but after that, I’ll have to drive to Palomina. I’m so excited to

leave that place behind and go to Wintervale next.”

He frowned at his older brother. “You were supposed to take a vacation between jobs.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

“In his defense, Wintervale is a great vacation destination. My family used to visit there every Christmas break. They loved it so much that my parents moved there,” Rigby said.

“Yeah, but he’s going there to work, not play.”

“I’m sure I could find someone to play with if I was so inclined,” Luca assured him. “But not all of us can be as lucky as you.”

Zio scoffed. “Between the two of us, you’ve always been the lucky one.”

“I think Armand has officially tipped the scale in your favor in that department,” Jude teased. “Hopefully, karma will deliver a cutie for Luca to fall for next to even out the balance.”

Luca shook his head in disagreement. “Please be careful what you wish for. The last thing I need is love complicating my life.”

“Sorry to break it to you, but you just doomed yourself,” Rigby said with a laugh. “Mr. I’m-Too-Busy-For-Love is going to find himself enamored with a cute spitfire named Albie who’ll show him the error of his ways.”

“I love how you assume a cute spitfire is what I’m looking for in a partner,” Luca chuckled. “I mean, you’re not wrong. It’s been a long time since I’ve enjoyed someone spirited. But Albie is the son of the hotel owners, so that would be a terrible idea.”

“I’m calling it now. You’ll have your fire-and-ice romance in Wintervale,” Jude declared. “If I’m right, you’ll arrange for Rigby and me to stay at that awesome Luxurian Hotel in Osaka you booked for him before.”

“I’d do that for you, even if you’re wrong. I’ve got more points than I could spend in three lifetimes.”

Jude pouted. “Come on, at least give me the illusion of having to fight for it. That’ll make victory sweeter than you being a nice guy and giving it to us.”

Luca laughed at his antics. “Fine, I accept your challenge. Happy?”

He hugged his boyfriend to snuggle up against him. “I am now that I’m with Rigby.”

“If nothing else, I’ll need to get a partner to keep up with all the lovey-dovey cuteness around here.”

“As somebody who avoided that for a long time, I can assure you it’s worth it,” I told him. “Life is more fun to share with somebody you love.”

He tilted his head in acknowledgement. “We’ll see what happens. Now, what are we going to do for dinner?”

As everyone began discussing options, I checked in on Zio. “Doing okay?”

He beamed up at me with happiness. “I’ve never been better.”

“I can say the same thing, thanks to you.”

Zio leaned closer to rest his head on my shoulder with a smile as we joined the discussion. It was one of the best feelings in the world.

* * *

My dinner with Zio's brother and friends was an enjoyable way to spend the evening. There was a special magic that came from having such tight-knit friends. I was happy that he had that kind of bond with Rigby and Jude.

Luca leaned over and told his brother, "I'll be back."

Zio nodded in acknowledgement as he continued paying attention to Jude's outrageous story about his sister's latest antics.

I assumed Luca would go to the bathroom. However, he caught my eye and tilted his head toward the exit for me to join him before going outside to wait. While I never wanted to lie to my boyfriend, I made an exception for a tiny, harmless one. "I have to make a quick business call. I'll be back soon."

"Okay." He squeezed my hand before I got up to leave.

There was a pleasant crispness to the air when I exited the restaurant. Luca was waiting for me off to the side of the pathway to the parking lot. "I hope you don't mind that I wanted a moment alone with you to talk."

"Not at all." I gave him a reassuring smile. "I'd expect nothing less from an adoring older brother to somebody as sweet as Zio. To protect him is only natural."

"He hates it when I worry, so I try not to show it too often." Luca sighed as he ran his fingers through his chestnut-colored hair.

"Because it makes him feel bad that you have to worry about him, so he wishes he was strong enough you didn't have to, non?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

He nodded in agreement. “Exactly. I can’t tell you what it means to me you get that about him. From what he’s told me, you understand him quite well, despite knowing him for such a short time.”

“I’ve lived a lot of life in my years. It helps me understand how people tick, so to speak.”

“Tonight has been amazing. I’ve never seen him so relaxed and having such carefree fun before, especially not after traveling yesterday. It’s amazing when he’s the type who needs a vacation from his vacation to recover.” He studied me like he was trying to solve my mystery. “I’m not sure how you did it, but you’ve already made an enormous difference.”

“He knows I accept him as he is, which takes off his internal pressure to be somebody that he’s not.” I held Luca’s gaze. “I’ll never ask Zio to be anyone but himself. You have my word that I’ll take good care of him.”

“I’ve thought about quitting my job so many times so I could stay here to be closer to him. I hate leaving him alone when I go away for months.” He sighed with a heavy weariness. “But it would make him feel too guilty if I did that. Since he moved in with Rigby, I haven’t had to worry as much. But knowing he has you to watch over him, to protect him, to love him, it means everything to me.”

I clasped him on the shoulder in solidarity. “He’s lucky to have such a devoted older brother.”

Luca gave me a small smile. “Thanks. I used to wonder if maybe I was too

overprotective and that's why I hated all of his girlfriends in the past. I feared he would resign himself to being with somebody who only put up with his quirks to be accepted as being normal. But he was so miserable when he was in a relationship. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't glad he remained single most of the time. There were fewer chances for someone to break his heart."

"I'm not interested in playing games with him."

The relief on his face betrayed how grateful he was for that. "Anyone with eyes can see you love him with all that you are. It's what I've always wanted for him but never thought he'd allow himself to have. But he needs a partner like you that he could trust to take care of him. That's why I wasn't completely surprised when he told me about you."

"I'm strong enough that he doesn't always have to be." That was important for Zio, who needed to surrender his burdens when they were too much to bear. "But he'll also be stronger because I'm there to support him, too."

"From the bottom of my heart, thank you for being what my brother needs. I can worry a little less now that he has you to rely on while I'm gone." His radiant smile made it easy to tell the two men were siblings. "But we should head back in before he gets worried."

"I'll follow you so he doesn't think we were out here talking about him."

He grinned. "Wow, you really know him, don't you? I'll see you inside."

I lingered outside a little longer. The talk with Luca made me feel good that by helping Zio, I was helping him, too. They were fortunate to have a close bond, especially considering how their parents treated them so differently. When I returned, I gave my boyfriend a kiss on the cheek before sitting down beside him.

“Is everything okay?” he asked with a worried expression.

“Everything is perfect.” I meant it in every sense of the word, thanks to him.

Zio

Since Luca was leaving from the restaurant to Palomina, I walked him to his car to say goodbye. “Thanks again for surprising me with a visit. I’m so glad I could see you before you leave.”

“And I’m happy to see you and meet Armand.” His smile set me at ease. “He’s good for you.”

“Do you really like him?”

Luca nodded. “A lot, actually. He’s the perfect partner for you.”

“How so?”

“Please don’t take this as a criticism. But he’s someone you can trust to care for you when you’re too overwhelmed to do it yourself,” Luca explained in a gentle voice. “He’s strong enough to keep you safe, even from yourself sometimes. You can relax your guard with him, unlike your previous demanding partners who expected you to cater to all their whims. He’ll cherish you if you let him.”

Before I met Armand, my brother’s answer would have sent me into a spiral. But now, I understood what he meant because my boyfriend had already proven to me he was the sanctuary I never thought I’d find. “Somehow, he doesn’t make me feel bad about being me. I’ve always had to apologize for being me, but I don’t have to do that with him.”

Luca squeezed my shoulder. “That’s how it’s supposed to be. You should never be with a partner who makes you hate yourself. I’m relieved that you’re with someone like him who builds you up and supports you with his love.”

His words filled me with warm fuzzies. “You don’t think I’m rushing into this?”

“Love doesn’t operate on a timeline. For some people, they only need one dinner to know they’re going to marry that person. For others, they take twenty-five years to realize they’re in love with their best friend. It doesn’t matter if anyone else thinks you’re moving too fast. The only thing that’s important is that it feels right to you.”

“Everything about him makes me feel better than I ever thought possible. You know I’m always comatose after I come home from a trip because all the stress catches up to me and I can’t do anything. But I’ve been fine all day. It’s weird.”

He laughed but not unkindly. “I’ll admit, it surprised me we ended up at a restaurant instead of doing takeout like normal. But that’s just more proof that he’s perfect for you.”

“I really love him, Luca.” Biting my lip, I looked at my brother for approval. “I’m afraid it’s too early, but...”

“We would have a very different conversation if I had met a playboy on the prowl. But tonight, I met a man who is head over heels in love with you, too. Is it fast? Technically. Is that a problem? Not at all. When you know, you know. It’s blindingly obvious that you’re meant for each other. I couldn’t be happier for both of you.”

I hugged my brother, relief washing over me at earning his approval. “I’m so glad. I didn’t want you to hate him or worry I’m making a terrible choice by being with him.”

He returned my embrace. “I couldn’t have picked a better partner for you. As long as he’s good to you, I’m happy. And from what I can tell, he’ll be very good to you.”

I blushed at the implication. “He definitely is.”

“Then I’m thrilled. It comforts me to know he’s here for you while I’m away.”

“You kind of played matchmaker for us.” I grinned at him. “I met him because you booked my stay at the Luxurian Resort.”

“That should give you more confidence he’s perfect for you.” He gave me another lingering hug.

“Thank you for everything, Luca. Promise me you’ll try to have a little fun while you’re in Wintervale, okay?”

“Something tells me I’ll have a wonderful time while I’m there. I’ll text you when I reach my hotel in Palomina tonight to let you know I arrived safely.”

I appreciated when he checked in to give me peace of mind about him traveling alone late at night. “Thanks. I’ll talk to you soon. Love you.”

“Love you, too.” With a final wave, he got in his car to leave.

I walked over to where Armand was waiting with Rigby and Jude. Even though we were in public, I gave him a bear hug that he returned. He wasn’t anything like who I imagined I’d end up with. However, I was the luckiest guy in the world to have a partner who was perfect for me in every single way.

* * *

At Armand's apartment,I couldn't wait to show him how much I appreciated him and everything he had done for me. But he surprised me by flipping us over so that I was on the bed with him pinning me down.

“Are you up to experimenting?”

“Um, maybe?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

He started trailing kisses down my neck and collarbone. “I promised Luca that I’d take every good care of you, tonight and forever.”

“When?”

“I spoke with him when I went out for my call earlier. We had a very pleasant conversation. You’re lucky to have such a caring older brother.”

My normal paranoia about finding out people were talking about me behind my back didn’t emerge. Instead, I experienced a weird sense of relief that they had talked. It gave Luca an important opportunity to meet my boyfriend, to judge him away from me. “I am. Thank you for speaking with him. That means a lot to me.”

Armand stopped distracting me to make eye contact. “He’s one of the most important people in your life. That’s why I wanted him to understand that I’m serious about wishing to cherish you.”

“You have no idea how happy that makes me. All of it.”

“I’d like to uphold my promise tonight.”

Maybe it was my arousal, but I wasn’t following his leap in logic. “Okay?”

“Will you surrender yourself to me so I can take care of you completely?” He kissed down the other side of my neck to keep things balanced for me. It was such a small thing, but it meant everything.

If that was what was being offered, I had no problems with that. “Absolutely.”

“May I bind your wrists together?”

As he teased one of my nipples with his tongue, I struggled to think. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“With your hands tied, you’ll have no choice but to rely on me. I’ll provide you with all the pleasure you need.” His words caused me to draw a shuddering breath. “All you have to do is lie there and enjoy yourself while I attend to your every demand.”

“And that’s enjoyable for you?”

“Oui, because it shows that you trust me to fulfill your desires.” He continued lavishing attention on my nipples, making me squirm under him. “I’ll tie your hands, but you’ll still maintain complete control of the situation. This isn’t about pain, so the bindings won’t hurt at all. The second you ask for me to remove them, I will. If you agree and change your mind at any point, we’ll stop. You don’t have to suffer through something you discover you hate. But if you enjoy it, then we’ll keep going.”

If it had been anyone else, the mere possibility of them tying me up during sex would have triggered a panic attack. But I trusted Armand, and I knew he would never hurt me. He would be true to his word and free me if I tried it and got scared. My curiosity also triumphed over my nervousness. The idea of submitting to him so he could take total control of my pleasure was a little exciting. It took off any pressure to perform on my end, which was alluring. “Can we try it and see how it goes?”

“Of course.” He gave me a reassuring kiss before going over to his nightstand to pull out a red silk tie. Returning to my side, he held it up for my inspection. “I promise to keep it loose so you won’t experience pain.”

Taking a deep breath, I extended my arms out to him in offering. “I trust you.”

It was fascinating watching him bind my wrists together with a practiced ease I tried not to think too deeply about to avoid getting uncomfortable. True to his word, he kept it tight enough that I couldn’t easily slip free, but loose enough that I didn’t panic. When he finished, he guided my arms over my head and looped the tie over his headboard to keep me in place. “How is that?”

I wiggled my fingers as I got accustomed to the strangeness of being bound. “It doesn’t hurt.”

“If it does, let me know and I’ll loosen or remove it completely. You only have to stay like that as long as you’re comfortable. You can change your mind at any time you want.” His reiterating it helped soothe my nerves.

“I’m good.”

He calmed me further with a tantalizing kiss. I shivered as he kissed me all over while exploring the contours of my body. It surprised me how strong my urge was to touch him now that I couldn’t. I hadn’t realized I took it for granted that I could run my fingers through his dark hair and over his broad shoulders.

Whenever he got close to my arousal, he diverted to kiss my hips instead. It made me quiver over how badly I needed his attention there. He chuckled as he began kissing down my inner thigh. The hint of suction he used drew whimpers from me as I tensed under the teasing. As he began kissing up my other one, it broke my self-restraint. “Please.”

“What would you like?”

My lust made me selfish. “I need more.”

Guiding my legs over his shoulder, he then leaned down to trace the seam of my balls with his tongue. I moaned when he drew one into his mouth. He sucked on it with just the right amount of pressure to make me go wild with desire. When I thought I couldn't take more, he switched to the other side. I tugged at the restraints as I instinctually tried to reach down to touch him to ground myself. I cried out when he eased a slicked finger into me.

He paused his oral attention. "How does this feel?"

"Sogood," I gasped, "but I needmore."

His eyes lit up with delight that I had broken down and made a demand. "That's it,mon petit chou. Tell me what you want so I can give it to you."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

My shyness was at war with how desperate I was for relief. “I thought I was just supposed to lie here and enjoy what you give me?”

“I’d rather you demand what you desire so I can give you exactly what you need instead.” He slid another finger into me as he continued working me with a patience I didn’t share.

“Wait, are you saying you want me to tell you to suck my dick?”

He chuckled at my question. “If that’s what you wish for me to do for you.”

“But isn’t it demeaning if I do that?” I bit my lower lip as worry encroached on my arousal. “I hate being bossy.”

He caressed my thigh with his other hand to comfort me. “It would bring me enormous pleasure if you were to command me.”

“But wouldn’t I sound like a huge asshole doing that?”

“Non, because you ask for so little. Knowing I’m the only person you trust to demand I do things for you is incredibly arousing to me.”

I tried to wrap my mind around what he was saying. “It would turn you on if I demanded that you blow me?”

“Oui. I would obey with tremendous joy.”

As he ghosted over the spot that made me shiver, I caved to my body's demands. "In that case, please suck my dick."

Armand rewarded me by doing what I asked. He put on a show of letting me slide deep into his mouth, teasing the head while stroking the rest of me with his free hand. I arched under him with a cry, straining against my restraints as my hips moved without my permission. He worked my length with an enthusiasm that made it a struggle for me to stay silent and still. As he worked another finger into me, I pushed against him to draw him in deeper.

The combined stimulation ensured I wouldn't last long. When he applied pressure to the spot that always caused me to see stars, I came with a loud gasp. He drank me down, then licked me clean.

My orgasm made it easier to say what I wanted. "Please get inside me."

"I already am." He curled his fingers within me as a reminder.

"You know what I mean." I shimmied with a tiny growl I couldn't believe came out of my mouth. "Are you going to make me say it out loud?"

"Tell me what you want."

I groaned. "But it sounds so vulgar."

"That's okay. I enjoy vulgar." His smirk further emphasized how much he liked it.

While I was uncomfortable demanding it, I needed it to happen more. "Please fuck me with your dick." I wasn't about to risk something weird by not being specific.

He withdrew his fingers, leaving me feeling empty. "With great pleasure." Slicking

himself with lube, he held up my legs to allow him to penetrate me. He took his time sliding into me before he pulled out almost to the tip, then pushed in again.

It didn't satisfy the ache inside me. "Harder, please." He obliged me with more forceful movements, but the slow pace wasn't working for me. I hooked my legs around his waist and tried to take control of the speed, but it didn't help. It left me with no choice but to ask for more. "And faster, too."

Obedying without question, he gave me what I was after. My body moved to his rhythm, but I tugged on the restraints from my instinctual urge to touch him somehow. I clenched my hands into tight fists as he worked me into a frenzy, bringing my arousal back faster than I thought possible. When he shifted angles, I couldn't hold in my cry. "Right there! Oh, fuck! Please, just like that! Yes!" It was great but still not enough. The pleasure and his positive reactions made it easier for me to be bolder. "Please touch me!"

Armand started caressing me all over. My muscles were taut as the tingle built up inside me again, like a rubber band that was about to snap. I only needed a little more to send me over the edge. "I'm begging you, touch my dick!" When he trailed his fingers along the underside of my length, the growl that escaped me would have stunned me if I wasn't so worked up. "Not like that!"

"And how would you prefer me to touch you, mon petit chou?"

My needs were too powerful to be shy. "Please jerk me off. I'm so close, I just need—" I cut myself off with a whine low in my throat. It pushed me to my limits when he wrapped his hand around my hard-on to work it with firm strokes. "Fuckin' yes!"

I gripped him tighter with my thighs as I pulled on my restraints with a groan. I'd go out of my mind if I didn't get relief soon. "Please let me come, I'm begging

you,please!”

Armand shifted positions and hit deeper than before. I couldn't stop myself from getting louder as I edged on the precipice of my second orgasm. When he brushed his thumb over the head with a slight twist, my back arched off the bed as I climaxed hard with a shout.

I gasped for air as I tried to remember how to breathe after my intense release. My last functioning brain cell reminded me there was one more thing I needed to demand to satisfy Armand. “Please come inside me!”

He pushed in deep before he came, making both of us moan.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:20 am

All my nerves fired in rapid bursts from the overwhelming pleasure the experience had given me. I trembled from the intensity, wrung out in the best way possible.

He pulled out of me and then moved to untie me from the bed and release my wrists from the binding. As soon as I was free, I pulled him down for a demanding kiss as I tried to tell him without words how phenomenal his experiment had been.

Our kisses calmed from passionate need to gentle comfort as we came off our high. I let my arms drop to the bed as I stretched with a moan. “That was incredible.”

“There is no greater pleasure than giving it to you.” He settled at my side. “Did you enjoy the experience?”

“So much.” My entire body hummed with satisfaction. “I never knew being a demanding bastard could feel so good.”

He laughed as he nuzzled against my palm. “You can’t call yourself that when you said, ‘Please,’ every time.”

“You were right, though. It felt great to trust you to give me what I needed.” I gave him a tender kiss I hoped told him how much I loved him. “Thank you for knowing me better than I know myself.”

“I will always be happy to give you what you want and what you need.” He kissed my forehead, sending my butterflies into a tizzy. “Let me clean you up. Then we can sleep as long as you wish tomorrow.”

As he walked into his bathroom to fetch a washcloth, I called after him, “You’re serious about spoiling me, aren’t you?”

He chuckled as he returned to tend to me. “Absolument.”

“I can live with that.” While I didn’t want to move, I lifted my hips. It allowed him to pull out the comforter and sheets from under me so I could crawl under them. “It doesn’t get any better than this.”

He shut off the lights and got into bed with me. “Au contraire. It gets better every day that we’re together.” He gave me a sweet good-night kiss before curling up around me.

For the second time that evening, I surrendered myself to him completely. “You’re right. I love you so much, bonbon.”

“As I love you, mon petit chou.” He kissed my shoulder as he hugged me close. “Forever and always.”

How did I get so lucky?

Epilogue

Zio

Life was great as I sat under an umbrella on the outside patio of a restaurant in Oahu with Felix. We had returned to Hawaii for Arsène's photo shoot with the famous musician, Iason Leyland. It felt like things had come full circle since that was where my journey with Armand had started. Felix and I watched from afar as our boyfriends continued working down on the beach.

"We're going to get spoiled." I sipped my Royal Hawaiian cocktail, a decadent drink with a beautiful blue, purple, and yellow ombre fade. It felt like I was living the high life every day I spent together with Armand.

Felix laughed before taking a sip of his. "I'm pretty sure we already are spoiled. It doesn't get much better than this."

I closed my eyes for a moment as I savored the warm ocean breeze. "It really doesn't."

"Hawaii, the Maldives, Paris, and Scotland all in one summer? Returning to school in the fall after that is going to suck."

His point made me groan. "Don't remind me. I'd like to keep enjoying the dream that this is our real life instead of worrying about my dissertation."

"You should come with me to Scotland," Felix suggested. "North and I are staying at

a Luxurian boutique hotel specializing in giving guests special experiences. This one caters to writers on a retreat. You stay in an awesome castle, and you're assigned an 'editor,' who will be as involved or hands-off as you want them to be."

"I know Luxurian Hotels are all about luxury, but offering editing services?" The concept boggled my mind. "That's absurd."

"They don't just do that. If you like having accountability, they'll check in with you to make sure you're hitting your word count goals. When you're stuck, you can talk with your editor and bounce ideas off of them, which would be awesome. You can even have them turn off your internet during certain hours to keep you from falling down the time-suck rabbit hole. I'll definitely need to take advantage of that last one."

"Is there any writer who doesn't require that at some point?"

We shared a laugh. "Right? They also have communal spaces where you can meet up with the other writers staying there and chat with them. It'll be the perfect place for North and me to brainstorm on our first collaboration." Both of them wrote gay romance novels and had unique styles, so I was curious to see how they would work together. I enjoyed reading both of their books. As embarrassing as it was, I had gleaned quite a few useful tips from them regarding things in the bedroom.

Armand, Arsène, and Iason joined us during a break from their photo shoot. Our boyfriends greeted us both with a kiss as they sat down, with Iason taking a seat at the head of the table. For someone so famous and with such an unusual name, he was shockingly down-to-earth and easy to talk to. He was always quick with a joke and had a natural way of putting you at ease. Or maybe I was getting better about being around people, thanks to Armand boosting my self-confidence. At the same time, it was very weird being so casual with the same man who had released the sexy song, "Midnight Magic."

“How’s the shoot going?” Felix asked.

“There’s nothing better than working with Arsène in paradise,” Iason replied with a satisfied sigh. “This is definitely one of the best perks of being famous.”

Armand chuckled as he wrapped his arm around me in a loose hug. “Luckily for me, I get the same benefit by working for somebody famous without having to be in the spotlight.”

“There are some bright sides,” Arsène agreed with a charming smile. Sometimes it was hard to believe he and Armand weren’t brothers by blood when they were so alike.

“We were talking about how lucky we are to be spoiled by both of you.” Felix grinned at his boyfriend. “I was also trying to persuade Zio to come with me to Scotland. He could work on his dissertation at that cool castle hotel for writers that you surprised me with.”

“I have enough time to worry about that once the fall term starts. I’d rather enjoy my vacation without my dissertation looming over me and putting a damper on things.” The last thing I wanted to do was think about that while I was in heaven.

Armand brushed his thumb against my upper arm, making me shiver despite the warm day. “There’s plenty of time for that later. I have other plans that will be much more enjoyable for the both of us.”

I perked up at the mention. “Oh? What plans?”

He leaned closer and lowered his voice, raising chills on my skin. “The kind I can’t speak about in front of others.”

Everyone laughed at the squeak that escaped from me. Swallowing hard, I tried not to

get too sidetracked by what he was alluding to. “You’ll have to tell me about them later.”

“I’d rather show you.” He kissed me on the cheek, making me blush.

Felix grinned as he watched us. “I’ll never stop being amazed that Armand has been tamed by a sweetheart.”

“I’m far from tamed, I assure you,” he retorted with a wicked grin. “But it’s true that I’m devoted to my beloved.”

“I am so happy for you both.” Arsène gave his boyfriend a teasing kiss. “I am also thrilled that I found the love of my life with you, mon amour.”

“You’re both making an excellent pitch for why I need to slow down long enough to find a boyfriend,” Iason said with a laugh. “There’s some sad irony that I’m a musician who writes love songs but isn’t in love with anyone.”

“If our experiences have taught us anything, it will happen without warning and with someone you least expect,” Arsène replied. “But there is no greater surprise in life than discovering the other half of your heart.”

“Aww, you say the sweetest things,” Felix cooed. “If you keep talking like that, you’ll have to call it an early day to take me back to the hotel, though.”

“To make it a late night,” Iason added, causing everyone to laugh.

“I’m happy to have any excuse to showmon petit chou how much I love him, so keep going.” Armand kissed my temple twice. I had always hated public displays of affection in the past with my girlfriends, but I loved it when it was my boyfriend.

As we kept joking, I rested my head on Armand’s shoulder as he held me. I never

would have expected my love life to take that kind of turn, but being with him was the greatest thing that had ever happened to me. Not only did I have the best partner in the world, I had also gained a new circle of friends, thanks to his tight-knit group adopting me as one of their own. It was a mystery to me how I had gotten so lucky. I was grateful that I had fallen for Armand and that he loved me back with all of his heart and soul.

* * *