



A Layperry's Hope (For A Chance At Us #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: It turns out every romcom was wrong about the whole 'secret baby' thing.

Everyone in Christian's life has eventually left him. He's built up walls around his heart and that wall comes crashing down when he meets Ghenie but before he can fully let Ghenie in, Christian runs.

Ghenie has the weight of leadership on his shoulders and the only thing that seems to leave his mind at ease, is being around Christian. He never gave up hope that Christian would return, and when he does, not only is Ghenie waiting, but so is their daughter.

Two traumatized men find solace with each other while navigating what it means to co-parent now that they're back together. Can they allow each other in, or has all hope of reconciliation run away along with Christian?

The local hockey team just launched a community outreach initiative, and winning it could change everything for my small town business.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

Chapter One

Ghenie

I run my fingers over the pillow beside me, staring at the light blue material. The smell of its last occupant has been gone for a year, but I swear I can still smell him if I concentrate hard enough.

I've been awake for a while but unable to get myself out of bed yet.

There's much to do today. I have things to prepare.

I have to make sure Maribel is up and ready to go.

I have to make sure I'm presentable. I have to prepare my mind and make sure I'm able to keep everyone out of my mind despite the fact that I'll be surrounded by my people.

I am already exhausted and the day hasn't started yet.

A year ago, another ship departed Deltourah , the planet that is my home.

That ship had some of my people aboard, such as Gendry.

It wasn't just Layperry though. There was also Christian, a human who came here during the very first Human Layperry Exchange.

He decided, at the end of his three years, to return to Earth instead of staying here.

Even just thinking his name has my heart seizing in my chest. It's been a year since he left but I still ache at the very pit of my soul.

We will all be in the town square, waiting for the ship to arrive. We will give them a proper welcome, celebrating the return of our brothers while also welcoming all those new to our planet. As the Toralleh , or the leader of my people, it is my duty to be there to welcome them.

The whispers are loud today, pressing against the back of my mind.

The burden I carry on my shoulders is heavy, but it is a duty I welcome and cherish.

The Ancestors speak to me and in return, I impart wisdom and rules onto our people.

I help guide our people into the future.

I keep them safe, I keep them in order, I love them with not only all the love I possess but all the love the Ancestors possess as well.

I sit up, feeling guilty once again for occupying this house.

After Christian left, I was a mess. I'd never felt such pain before in my entire life.

To feel close to him, I moved into the house he lived in while he was here, the one across the road from Miles and Timalah.

I sleep in his bed, I lie on his couch, I eat dinner at his table. All the while, I miss him.

Just as I am debating pulling the covers back over my head, Maribel begins to make noises in the bassinet beside the bed. Sitting up, I stretch my arms over my head until my spine gives a satisfying crack. Then I reach over and pull my daughter out of the bassinet.

“Good morning,” I say softly. I quickly remove my shirt and bring her to my chest, allowing her to have some breakfast from my body.

“Today is such a big day, darling,” I tell her as I run my hands over her back.

“There’s a chance your other father will be joining us once more.

It is a very small chance but a chance nonetheless. ”

Just saying it out loud leaves me breathless. I’ve never felt longing like this so strongly, even when I interface with our Ancestors. It is overwhelming and it takes all of my strength not to lose myself in the feeling.

Miles is my neighbor now. He’s human and mated with my closest advisor, Timalah.

He’s been Ancestor sent since Maribel has arrived.

He’s helped me learn everything I need to know about raising my human daughter.

He also happens to be Christian’s best friend.

He is certain Christian will be on the ship today.

I do my best not to hope, yet hope has a funny way of wiggling its way into places even when it’s not wanted.

Once Maribel has drunk her full, I make sure to get her changed and dressed for the day. Then I put my own clothes on, choosing my normal leather pants and vest. Then I take my long scarf, using it to make a little backpack for Maribel to sit in.

Normally, human babies are too small for something like this, but Maribel is growing so quickly. She's already so strong, able to keep her head up. Maybe it's because she has Layperry parentage or maybe she is just special.

Once she's in place on my back, I head outside. The air is cool against my skin, smelling fresh and light as I breathe it in. My shoulders relax slightly as I begin my trek into town.

The voices at the back of my head are murmuring with excitement. New visitors. Fresh faces. Old friends returned. Prosper, joy, health. I do my best to tune them out, trying to focus on my part in all this.

The closer I get to the center of town, the louder the voices get.

The Layperry people are all connected telepathically.

We can feel and sense each other while also having the ability to project speech into each other's heads.

Those who form close bonds have a stronger link, such as brothers in arms, or mates.

Because I am the Toralleh , the one appointed by our Ancestors to lead our people, I have a strong link with every single Layperry .

I have a connection to all of them, living and dead.

The inside of my mind is a constant buzzing of voices that I've learned to live with.

Sometimes it gets to be too much, but years of practice have given me the ability to shut them away when needed.

Though I've shut myself away from the voices, that doesn't stop the sensations of emotions from running through the links I share with people. I feel excitement, trepidation, worry, and awe. So many things from so many people. It is amazing I can keep my head on straight most days.

"It is about time for them to arrive," Timalah says, placing a hand on my shoulder. He gives me a gentle squeeze, his emotions coming towards me in soft, reassuring waves. He is my right hand man and without him and his wisdom, I would have drowned long ago.

"Hello, darling," Miles says, cooing at Maribel on my back. "She's so freaking cute when she's conked out like this. Milk coma."

A smile spreads across my face as warmth pools in the pit of my stomach.

She is my heart and joy, the one who helps wash away the worries when things feel like they're getting to be too much.

I love her more than I thought possible despite all the love already inside my chest for my people.

I give myself fully to them, but Maribel? Maribel is mine and mine alone.

Well, mine and Christian's.

"There it is!"

There are murmurs all around me, emotions welling up inside everyone.

I feel like a leaf bobbing in a body of water.

I suck in a long breath, just feeling it, letting it consume me for a moment before getting my head above water and allowing myself solace in the depths of my mind.

I close myself off to my people so I can properly welcome this ship.

If I'm also keeping them from feeling my fear and excitement, then that is only an added bonus to closing off the link.

I wait until the ship is fully settled and the doors slide open. A ramp drops down. At the bottom of the ramp is where I stand, ready to receive all those who have joined us.

“Hello,” I say warmly to the two humans who come down first. They both have beautiful brown skin, their eyes shining with excitement and awe. “Welcome to Deltourah. This is our capital city, Shentellah . I am very pleased to meet you. I am Ghenie.”

“It's really nice to meet you. Gendry has talked about you a lot.”

My chest aches with joy at the mention of my friend's name. I've missed him so dearly. He calls my name and bounds down the ramp towards me. My face breaks into a grin.

Gendry pulls me into a tight hug that I readily return. When I pull back, I look down at the baby in his arms, my stomach swooping. This human looks only a few hours old!

“And who is this?”

“This is MJ, my daughter. You’ve met Aldo, my partner. Beside him is my mother-in-law, Maria.”

It looks as though I am not the only one with a new member of the family. “I never expected this when you left. Are you happy?”

“More than I can say with words,” Gendry says.

He places his hand on my shoulder and we come together, allowing our link to be forged once more.

I open myself up to him and he does the same for me, allowing his emotions to flow through the tether we share.

I feel his excitement at being a parent, his peace at being home, and finally, my knees threaten to buckle as I feel the love he shares with Aldo.

“Oh,” I breathe out, finally pulling back so I can look into Gendry’s eyes. “That’s lovely. I am so very happy for you, Gendry.”

“Thank you, Toralleh .”

I can't help but smile at his formality. “I say this as your friend, not your Toralleh . You deserve this.”

Gendry opens his mouth to say something else, but a hand reaches up to his shoulder, pushing him out of the way.

That’s when I see him.

Christian is here. Christian is back on Deltourah . All of my hope has been rewarded

with him here , standing before me once more.

My knees grow weak and my stomach swoops almost violently. I do my best to close the link once more, closing myself off so I can have these emotions all to myself. When it comes to Christian, I am greedy. I don't want to share him, I don't want to share the way he makes me feel.

His hair is just as messy as I remember it, maybe even more so as he's let it grow out a bit while he was gone. His brown eyes look around before finally locking onto me. By the Ancestors, he's just as beautiful as I remember.

He steps into my space and before I can process what is happening, his hands reach out and grab a fistful of my shirt. Then he's pulling me down and kissing me square on the mouth.

In an instant, I'm transported back to that night about a year ago.

Christian is at my door, telling me he's leaving in the morning but wanting to spend one night with me.

Foolishly, I thought that if I gave him that, he would end up staying.

We kissed. We touched. We fucked. It was everything I hoped it would be, but in the morning he still left.

All too quickly, Christian is pulling away. Without a word or second glance, he walks away from me again, this time into Miles' arms. The two are hugging and holding each other. My heart is glad for them while also being broken simultaneously.

My fingers go to my lips, touching them, wondering briefly if the way they tingle is all in my head. Did he really just kiss me? Is he truly back? Will he be here to stay

this time?

All of that happens in a matter of seconds before I'm composing myself. I turn towards the crowd, lifting my hands to get their attention. As much as I wish to dissect every bit of that encounter, I still have a duty to fulfill.

"We welcome everyone here whether they're returning or only just starting their stay here! Tonight, we celebrate!"

There are cheers and joy through the air. My heart is racing in my chest and the voices are getting harder and harder to ignore. I carefully swing Maribel off my back and onto my chest, tucking her against myself. Her soft snores help soothe the ache inside of me.

I walk through the crowd, needing a place of quiet to catch my breath. Christian is back, which is everything I've been dreaming of. But I hadn't thought about what that would mean for the two of us and Maribel. Now that he is here, what now?

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

Chapter Two

Christian ~About A Year Ago~

I sit out on my porch, watching as the sun slowly sets. The sky turns a dazzling purple color, reminding me of Gendry's skin. What is it about this place that makes me all philosophical and shit?

I let out a deep sigh, rubbing tiredly at my eyes. Tomorrow is the day. Tomorrow I leave this planet and don't look back. I need to find my place in the world and that place doesn't feel like it's supposed to be here.

What the fuck does belonging even feel like? How does a person know they're in the place they're supposed to be?

This feels like one of those things a parent is supposed to teach you growing up but what would I know about that?

My parents were in and out of my life. Sometimes they'd be gone so long I'd have to go stay with my grandmother.

Other times I crashed at my friends' houses until their parents started getting concerned.

No matter how much I cried or begged or pleaded for them to stay, they'd always end up leaving.

The pull of their next fix was too strong for them even in the face of their child.

Maybe it's better this way. I can leave before the one person I trust most leaves me. I can be the one to run away for once. It'll be a nice change.

It's my last night here and I'm sitting on my porch all alone.

How fucking sad. I took a chance when I decided to come here and now I'm scared shitless to step outside the box again.

I'm terrified of being burned. I'm terrified of leaning on someone only to have them pull away, leaving me floundering and flat on the ground.

Fuck.

I'm so fucking tired of being terrified. I'm so fucking tired of never letting myself try because I'm terrified of the what if.

It's my last night here, and I'm ready to take a chance. I'll be gone tomorrow, leaving this place and these people behind. It's time for me to say fuck it and admit what I want.

What I want is Ghenie.

The man ticks each and every one of the buttons I didn't know I had.

He leaves me breathless while also winding me up more than anyone else I've ever met.

He's always in control, always strait-laced, always rising above.

He makes me feel things I don't want to examine.

I'm jealous of the way he's put together. I'm intimidated by his presence.

I desperately want to see that resolve crack. I want to see past the curtain, I want to see past the facade he puts on. He's the leader of his people but past that, surely he's just a man like everyone else. I want to know what makes him tick, what makes the plastered persona slip away.

Poking at him has become one of my favorite pastimes here and the more he holds firm, the more addicted I am to pushing him. He's in control but fuck, I want to be the one to make him slip.

Ghenie is a good man, there's no denying that.

Not only is he beautiful but he's also kind and generous and just. He knows when to smile but he also knows when to show his displeasure.

All around, I can confidently say that watching him has burned a fire inside my chest. I'm slowly growing obsessed, which is just another reason for me to get the hell out of here.

I can't be falling for someone! I can't let them have that type of power over me!

Standing up, I find my feet moving before I've even realized I've made a conscious decision. I walk down the road towards town, already instinctively knowing where my legs are taking me. There's only one person I want to spend tonight with and it's a toss up if he'll even allow it.

I'm not an idiot. I keep people at arm's length but I can still see when someone is attracted to me. I've caught Ghenie staring at me. I've caught the way his eyes light

up when I speak with him. I know this attraction isn't one sided.

Maybe I can have this, just for a night. I can throw away my insecurities, forget the ache in my chest, and enjoy one night with the alien I could see myself falling for. Then in the morning, I'll go back to being the grumpy asshole everyone expects me to be.

Just for one night, I can be the guy who takes a chance. I can be the guy that finally lets his walls come down and allow someone in.

It's just one night, what's the worst that could happen?

The sun has set by the time I find myself at Ghenie's door. I stare at it for a long moment, wondering if I'm actually doing this. Am I actually going to put myself out there? Am I really going to throw myself at the alien I can't stop antagonizing, hoping he'll look past that just for tonight?

Fuck it. I'm doing this.

I knock on Ghenie's door. My heart leaps into my throat and nerves threaten to get the better of me. I only have to wait a moment before the door is opening and I get to see Ghenie in all his splendor.

"Oh," Ghenie breathes out, his eyes widening before going soft. "Christian? Is everything alright?"

His voice washes over me. Now that I've opened myself up, it feels like I'm seeing him for the first time.

He's beautiful in every way. My chest aches with how much I wish things were different, wishing that I was a different man, one who could love fully instead of

always keeping that part of myself locked away.

“I’m okay,” I say, my eyes running over him. My eyes meet his and I’m praying they don’t reflect the desperation I’m feeling inside. The way his face morphs tells me that’s exactly what he’s seeing. Fuck.

“Christian,” Ghenie says slowly, his hand gripping the door frame. “Why are you here?”

I lick my lips and swallow around the lump in my throat. My heart is racking the inside of my ribs. I don’t know what to say so I stick with the truth. “You. I’m here for you.”

Ghenie freezes and I wait, holding my breath. He puts a hand on his temple and closes his eyes. It looks like he’s debating with himself. Or maybe he’s debating with the voices inside his head.

“Maybe this was a mistake,” I say softly when Ghenie doesn’t respond. I turn to leave only to freeze as a hand reaches out and grips my wrist. I turn back slowly.

“It was not a mistake,” Ghenie says. He doesn’t let go of my wrist, instead, his thumb rubs over my pulse point. “You are leaving tomorrow?”

“Yes,” I breathe out, just barely above a whisper.

“Then tonight is all we have.”

“Yes,” I say again.

My stomach swoops at the look Ghenie gives me. His pale eyes look me over before he’s taking a step back, opening the door for me fully. He closes the door behind me

and the click of the door shutting sends a shiver down my spine.

I don't even have time to turn towards Ghenie before he's shoving me back against the door, crowding against me.

"I am terrified that this is a mistake," he says, his voice going deeper, huskier than I've ever heard before. "But I also do not care. If tonight is all you will give me, then that is what I will have. For tonight, I am yours."

I close my eyes as Ghenie ducks down, placing his lips against my own. My arms go around him, holding him like the lifeline he is. One kiss and I am swept away. One kiss and my life is changed forever.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

Chapter Three

Ghenie

My heart hammers against my chest as I weave through the crowd. I don't know where I'm going, only that I need to be anywhere but here.

The voices in my head are a cacophony of emotions which feed into my own. We're a soundboard back and forth, feeding each other despite the fact that I need silence. I need time to process everything. I need solitude.

I go to the only place I can think to go; the place I've been staying in since Christian left. I hold Maribel against my chest and run, hoping that no one is watching. My people don't need to see me like this, frazzled and upset over someone. I need to be in control. I need to be above this.

Yet the ache in my chest is unavoidable. It throbs, like an open wound. I can barely pull in a full breath.

"Oh, Maribel," I whisper into my daughter's hair. "What am I going to do?"

I pull her away from my chest in order to look into her face. She gives me a giant grin. Apparently my run back home was entertaining for her. Some of that ache fades as I look into her face. She has his eyes.

I pull a blanket from the couch, stretching it across the floor before setting Maribel down on it. I set her on her stomach, letting her try to roll over. Then I sit on the floor

with her, my back against the couch.

Christian is back. I had hoped he would come back but now that he is here, I can't stop thinking about what happens now. I was so busy thinking about the what-if's, I didn't stop to think about what the reality of that would be like.

Not only is Christian back, but he kissed me. He didn't say a single word, but his lips met mine. My fingers go to my lips. I swear I can still feel it. Warm tingles run through my skin as I think about it.

Will he be happy? Will Maribel's presence mean something to him? Or will he hate me for not sending someone to Earth to inform him?

The Ancestors are a mixed bag when it comes to Christian. Some of them favor him, others tell me to stay away. They're all trying to protect me in their own way. One soft voice tells me they're happy for me at getting this second chance. That's the one I hold onto the tightest.

There's a knock on the back door. Before I can get up and see who it is, the door cracks open and my dad's voice calls out.

"I'm in here."

There's some shuffling before both of my parents walk into the living room.

My father, Plun, comes in first, his dark green brows furrowed in worry.

My dad, Scrintum, comes in second. His skin is a pretty light pink color, his cheeks brighter than the rest of him.

Both of them look like they're breathing heavily with sweat on their faces.

“Did you two run here?”

“Yes,” my father says, leaning against the back of the couch. “We saw what happened and we rushed to come check on you.”

“By the Ancestors, Ghenie! How the heck did you run so quickly while holding my grandbaby? You’ve had a child recently and you can still outrun us. It’s blasphemous!”

That makes me crack a smile. My dad is always a bit over dramatic in the best possible way. “What’s blasphemous is you taking the Ancestors’ name in vain. Again.”

My dad waves a hand at me. “Like they care. They’re dead!”

I rub my temples. They actually have a lot to say about that but I can’t deny the comfort that comes from a familiar inside joke.

My parents know about the hardship that’s been placed on my shoulders.

They know the basics of what it means to lead our people and be the living vessel for our Ancestors to speak through.

My father sits beside me on the floor and I immediately lean my head against his shoulder. His tail wraps around my back, holding me tight.

“How are you feeling?” My father might not be the most outspoken person but he’s always so gentle with me. He’s always here when I need him.

I let his question settle for a moment before covering my face with my hands and letting out a long groan.

“That bad, huh? I still think you should drag his ass to the maturous trial . Prove that you two belong together in the eyes of the Ancestors. Even if he’s not willing to brave the pit, surely you are, Ghenie.”

“I would run through the gauntlet if I thought that would do anything to win his heart but I fear it would not. Christian has made his feelings about our trial very clear. He believes one cannot win another’s heart, it must be given freely.”

The voices in my head perk up at that. More than half of them agree with Christian’s sentiment.

It’s why there hasn’t been another trial since Maribel was born.

As I piece through the chorus of voices, I know that times are changing and a new way of doing things is about to rise up.

I just have to find the right words in order to properly declare this new way of living.

But that will have to wait. I can only have one crisis at a time.

“Humans,” my dad says with a roll of his eyes. “They’re so strange and they’re tailless ! I just don’t see the appeal.”

I can’t help but smile at my dad’s teasing. “They have their perks,” I tell him with a shrug.

“If you say so.” He reaches down and picks up Maribel. “How is my favorite grandbaby doing? Huh? Are you so happy to see me?”

He takes her into the kitchen and I listen to the way he coos and sings for her.

My chest feels like it could burst with affection.

I don't know what I would have done without my parents' help the last few months.

They've been my emotional rocks, keeping my head above water when everything threatened to drown me.

My father stays, holding me and running his hand up and down my spine. There's a long moment where neither of us speaks a word, just content to stay like this.

"Everything will work out in the end," my father finally says, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I know you feel strongly for Christian. I won't ask you to hold yourself back.

Part of being a parent is allowing your child to make their own decision and helping them through whatever the fallout may be.

"I look over at my father, seeing his eyes follow my dad, a small smile on his lips.

I want the type of love that they have. "I know what it's like to have your heart stolen by another.

Fight for him and no matter what happens, you will know you did what you could. That can bring you peace."

I nod my head slowly. I reach over and take my father's hand, leaning my head on his shoulder once more.

"Things are changing," I confide, letting my words solidify in my chest. "The maturous trial will be a thing of the past. The pit will no longer be used for that

purpose but instead to demonstrate a person's resilience before they become a warrior.

Christian isn't wrong about that trial. It was unfair in a lot of ways.

What if two people love each other but neither can physically handle the trial.

Are they doomed to not mate? That's not right and the Ancestors agree. "

My father listens, humming at all the right times.

"I am in awe of all that you do, Ghenie, but as your father, I wish this burden had never fallen to your shoulders. I wish I could protect you more."

"I know what you mean," I tell him. "The thought of this happening to Maribel is unthinkable. Some day, I will train our next leader and I, in equal parts, dread and look forward to it."

"Things are changing," my father says, mirroring my words. "Maybe this will change as well. Maybe we can find a place to let our Ancestors rest, a place our leaders can go and pray with them instead of having a living vessel."

"Something to contemplate," I say, ignoring the volume of the voices inside my head. They are shouting over each other, their emotions rising so hot and high I can't push them down. That is apparently a subject we'll be deep diving into in the near future.

"Darling?" My dad walks back into the living room. "Would you like to come stay with us for a bit? Until you're feeling more settled now that Christian is back? It would be lovely to have you back in the house with us, and it would allow us to see Maribel more often."

I shake my head. “Thank you for the offer, but I think I am okay staying here.”

My dad raises his perfectly manicured pink brow, popping out his hip. His tail whips back and forth behind himself. “What about Christian?”

“What about him?”

My dad looks at me like it’s obvious. When he realizes I still don’t understand, he explains. “This is his house. Surely he will want to live here again now that he’s back, right?”

My eyes widen. Oh. Oh shit. I completely forgot that this is Christian’s home. I’ve been living here but now that he’s back, my dad is right, he’ll want his home back. I can’t believe I didn’t think of that until right now!

Just then, there’s a knock on the door. Oh, by the Ancestors! How could this possibly be happening?

My dad peeks through the front window. “Yep,” he says. “That’s him.”

“Fuck,” I hiss out, rubbing at my eyes. I stand up and grab Maribel from my dad’s arms. “You two need to get out of here so we can talk.”

“Do you want us to take Maribel?” My father asks softly. I shake my head.

“I think it’s time for Christian and I to have a long conversation. You’re right, it’s time I fight for him.”

Chapter Four

Christian

I wrap Miles in my arms. This hug is about to get awkward in about four seconds but I don't fucking care. My best friend is here, in my arms, after a year of being apart. The only thing that could stop me from hugging him is if this alien planet started shaking. Or if pigs started falling from the sky. Even then I probably wouldn't let go.

“Jesus,” Miles says, holding me just as tightly. “I’m so fucking glad you’re here, Christian. I know you hate when I get all sappy on you but I’ve missed you so much.”

“I missed you too,” I tell him, burying my face against his shoulder. I know Timalah is standing right next to Miles, holding their daughter but I can’t bring myself to let go and greet them properly. Not yet.

“Okay, okay,” Miles says, being the one to pull away. “I know how much you hate this mushy stuff.”

I look at him. “You can be as mushy as you want to be, it’s okay.”

Miles blinks slowly, looking up at Timalah before looking back at me. “What have you done with my Christian?”

“I have so much to talk to you about,” I say instead of responding to his joke. Then I look up at Timalah. “Hi, Timalah. It’s really fucking good to see you again.”

“I am glad you are here,” he says with a nod.

“And how is my godson? Jesus, he’s grown! He looks like he’s ready to head off to his accounting job anyday!”

Timalah tilts his head to the side. “I don’t know what this accounting is but our son does not have a job yet. He is only two years of age, Christian.”

My chest feels lighter than it has in years.

It might be the therapy I made myself go through while back on Earth or it might just be the fact that I’m back here, with my best friend.

Or maybe it was watching Gendry and Aldo bring a new life into the world together on the trip here.

Whatever the reason, I feel so goddamn happy.

Happier than I’ve been in a really, really long time.

It’s wild what an entire year can change. When I left this place, I was certain I’d never feel like I belonged. I had to unpack a lot of my past trauma, face it head on, and somehow I’ve come out the other side feeling better than ever.

By no means am I perfect. You don’t heal in a day. It takes work and time, but I’m on the path of healing from my past hurts. I’m tired of being the guy who pushes everyone away. It’s time that I took a chance at letting people in, starting with my best friend.

“I’ve missed you guys,” I say before looking at Druim.

He babbles, his face split into a wide grin.

Half of his words don't make sense but a few fly through that I catch like hi and bee and Dada .

He's got the most adorable chubby cheeks and his skin is just as golden as I remember.

"I've missed you, Corn. I'm your godfather," I tell him, reaching out and taking his little hand in mine, giving it a little shake. "It's lovely to re-meet you."

"Why are you being so cheery? I'm not complaining," Miles says, raising his hands in surrender. "I'm just really confused."

"Don't worry, I'll be back to my asshole self shortly. I think I'm just in shock that we're together again, that's all."

"Right," Miles says slowly, nodding his head. "Makes sense. Some people go into shock and shut down. You go into shock and turn into sunshine personified."

I narrow my eyes at him, my smile falling away. I cross my arms over my chest. "I wouldn't go that far."

"Oh good. There you are. I was worried they somehow replaced you on the spaceship."

"You're such a dick."

Miles grins. "I know! But you love me!"

"I do," I say, rolling my eyes. I wrap my arm around Miles' shoulders, guiding him

out of the crowd and towards the road that leads to our homes.

There's supposed to be a night of celebration, but all I want to do is get back home and get myself settled.

I want to toss my things in my cabin before going back to Miles' place that he shares with his mate and his child.

I want to sit on the couch together and catch up.

I want to see if things have changed or if they're exactly as I remember them.

"You don't want to stay?"

"Can we just go back home? I want to hear about everything that's happened while I was gone."

Miles and Timalah share a look before Miles is nodding. "Okay, you can come back to ours. Maybe you can even stay the night. It'll be like old times," Miles says with a grin.

"I think I can manage to walk across the street at the end of the night," I say with a snort. "Just because I've been gone a year doesn't mean I've lost the ability to find my way back home."

"Sure. Right. Of course," Miles says with a chuckle that sounds completely out of character. I'm about to call him out on the weirdness when Timalah jumps in.

"Thank you for keeping an eye on Gendry while he was gone."

"It wasn't difficult. Though it was surprising when he fell for Aldo. The first day they

met, he was head over heels almost instantly. It would have been all kinds of adorable if it wasn't so nauseatingly sweet."

"There you are," Miles says, chuckling to himself. "Still not sold on the whole love thing?"

My heart skips a beat as one face comes to mind. My lips are still tingling from the quick kiss I gave Ghenie. As happy as I am to be back with Miles, I can't stop thinking about when I can slip away and try to find Ghenie again. I need to talk to him and the sooner I can do that, the better.

We step into Miles' and Timalah's house. Timalah takes Druim into his room while Miles and I go to the couch. I toss my shit onto the floor, feeling the weariness of travel wash over me. It's nice to be in a comfortable, homey space again.

"I'm not so sure anyone really wants to love me ," I say, finally answering Miles' question. "But I'm not as against it as I was in the past. I don't know. It's complicated. I'm really fucked up, Miles."

Miles freezes, turning to face me. "Don't say that."

I shrug. "It's true. A lot of shit happened when I was a kid that fucked me up."

Miles opens his mouth so say something before snapping his mouth shut again. He processes what I've said. "That's not your fault, Miles."

"It's not and I know that a lot better now. That doesn't mean it didn't happen and it certainly doesn't mean I'm not dealing with the fallout still to this day."

Miles' eyes dart between my own. "Jesus, you really have changed."

I rub the back of my neck, staring down at my feet.

All of those insecurities and hurts threaten to choke me all over again.

I'm allowed to let people in. I'm allowed to let Miles in.

Out of everyone, he's the one person I've let in.

He loves me. I repeat this over and over in my head, desperately working on believing it.

"Hopefully for the better," I finally say. "I know I've never talked about it but my childhood was kinda fucked up. My parents were gone all the time."

"Fuck," Miles breathes out.

"Yeah. Umm, substance abuse. I stayed with my grandmother but she died. And then I hopped couches. Eventually I just got a place of my own. Told everyone I was eighteen, got a fake ID. It really screwed up my outlook on life for a really long time."

"Jesus, Christian." Miles pulls me into a fierce hug. I return it despite the way it's making me uncomfortable. Telling people makes me feel like they pity me, or maybe they'll think I should have gotten over it by now. If Miles thought that, I think it would break me.

"I'm really sorry you had to go through that."

"Thanks," I say, finally pulling back. "I just." I swallow. "Everyone in my life has left me. Always. You were the first person to stick around."

“I’m here to stay, for as long as you’ll have me. You’re my best friend and I love you.”

“Love you too,” I say, looking up at the ceiling. I feel flayed open and exposed in the worst possible way. It’s so gross, the way I have to heal and make myself better based on things that were completely out of my control. “Okay, way too mushy. I feel icky.”

Miles bursts out laughing and I can’t help but mirror his smile. I curl my legs onto the couch, getting comfy.

“Fill me in,” I say. “I want to hear all the piping hot tea.”

“Oh umm, not that much? I guess?”

“Is that a question or a statement?”

“It’s a statement?”

I turn fully on the couch so I can face my best friend. I watch his face closely. He can’t seem to look at me and he looks guilty as hell. What’s going on? Why is he lying to me?

“What’s going on? What aren’t you telling me?”

“I have no idea what you mean, Christian!”

“I know you, Miles. You’re lying. What are you lying about?”

“I don’t like that you can see right through me,” Miles says with a grumble. “Something happened. I don’t really know how to tell you.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. My stomach is a mess of nerves as my mind comes up with the worst possible scenarios. Did someone fucking die? Did another alien race show up? Are we being evicted from our homes? What the hell is going on?

“It’s about your house,” Miles says slowly. “Someone moved in while you were gone.”

“Oh,” I breathe out. “Okay. That’s not the worst news, I guess. I thought you were about to tell me we were in active war with another alien race and you and I were going to be forced to become warriors.”

“What?”

“I’m just saying!”

Miles shakes his head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Thank you,” I say, puffing up my chest.

Timalah comes back into the room with a freshly changed Druim. The little guy is up and running around the house. I don’t understand how that can even be possible! He should still be a swaddled little thing hanging from Timalah’s hip, right?

“Hey, lil Corn Man,” I say, holding out my hands for him.

Druim picks up a toy from the corner of the room and starts running towards me.

Then he stops a few feet away, cocks his little arm back, and yeets the toy at me.

I’m so unprepared that I don’t get my hands up in time.

The toy smacks the side of my head. Hard .

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

“Druim!” Miles says in shock. “Sweetheart, toys are for throwing outside, not inside.”

Druim’s tail whips back and forth behind him as he babbles to his dads. “Ball! Outside! Ball!”

I feel like my bell has been properly rung and if I were in a cartoon, little aliens would be swirling around my head. The kid has an arm on him already! I’m so fucking proud.

I get down on the floor so I can properly play with my godson. He’s quick and has far more balance and coordination than I thought someone his age would have already. He’s almost managed to start talking in full sentences instead of just shouting noises at me.

“So,” I say, rolling the ball across the room to Druim. “Who’s the lucky bastard who stole my house?”

Timalah and Miles share another look. They’re hiding something from me. I’m doing my best to be understanding but it’s really starting to piss me off. I’m a grown man. They don’t need to hide shit or try to protect me.

“About that,” Timalah says slowly. “Maybe you should go over there and see for yourself?”

“Is that really the best idea, Timalah? Maybe we should tell him first. Let him get his feelings out now.”

“I hate you both,” I say, standing up. “Not you, Druim, you’re perfect. But you two suck,” I say, pointing at Timalah and Miles. I grab my bags and head for the door. “You’re not gonna tell me so I’ll go find out for myself. Then I’ll head back into town and find a place to stay for the night.”

“Christian, wait.”

“No,” I say, turning back to Miles. “I’m fine. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll be here if you need me,” Miles calls out as I make my way across the street. Why would I need him? Why are they acting so strange? Why am I so nervous?

I walk up the step to my old porch. After taking a breath, I knock on the door that used to be mine. It feels so strange, being on this side of it. I wait. There’s some shuffling and some voices behind the door.

My stomach starts to sour the longer I wait. I don’t know if I should knock again to make sure they heard me or just leave and head into town. Indecisiveness keeps my feet planted in place. I wait. Just before I can turn to leave, the door swings open.

My breath is stolen from my lungs. The person staying in my house is Ghenie.

My eyes widen as I take him in. My stomach swoops and my chest warms. He’s just as beautiful as I remembered him.

Even though we’ve shared a kiss today, that does nothing to stave my desire for him.

While I was gone, he was never far from my mind.

I still feel all those insecurities when I look at him. He has it all and I’m just me. But now I know a lot of those thoughts aren’t my own, they’re baby Christian’s hurts. I’m

worthy of love just as much as anyone else.

“Hello, Christian,” Ghenie says softly, his voice like the sweetest honey dripping straight from the comb.

All I want to do is stand here and memorize everything about him.

His eyes are pale but shine so brightly, his smile is soft.

His skin practically radiates. He’s tall and strong and handsome and I feel so fucking insignificant before him.

How could someone so beautiful give someone like me a second glance?

As my eyes dart over him, they stop on the unexpected person against his chest. Is that a baby? Whose baby? And why do they look human?

The baby looks a few months old at most. They’ve got unruly dark hair on their head that reminds me so much of baby pictures of myself that I’ve seen. I look up at Ghenie who’s staring at me, gauging my reaction.

I think my head might actually explode. First my best friend was being weird. And now Ghenie is being weird. And there’s a baby on his chest.

What the fuck is going on?

I open my mouth but no words come out. I look down at the baby, then back at Ghenie, and then back down at the baby again. My head is spinning faster than a top.

“Christian,” Ghenie says slowly. “This is Maribel. My daughter.”

I swallow thickly, doing my best to keep myself composed. I drop my bags and the clunk of them hitting the ground makes us both flinch.

“Your daughter?”

“Yes,” Ghenie whispers.

“Who’s umm?”

Ghenie’s face morphs into something closed off. He looks terrified of my reaction. That makes my stomach sour. I don’t want to hurt him. I never want to hurt him, not ever again.

“I have been with only one person.”

The pieces are all flying through the air around my head before snapping into place all at once. Oh. Oh my god. Ghenie has only been with one person and that person was me, the night before I left.

Maribel is my daughter.

I have a daughter.

Oh my god, I think I might actually throw up. That’s going to freak Ghenie out. Fuck, keep it in, keep it together. I’m not freaking out. Not at all. Nope. I’m fine. Totally fine.

The inside of my brain feels like the equivalent to a keysmash.

“Are you well? You look pale, Christian.”

“Fine. Totally fine. Just processing.”

“Would you like to come inside?”

“Yes. No. I’m not sure. I think I might throw up. Or pass out. Maybe Druim’s arm is better than I thought and he accidentally knocked me unconscious and I’m actually on the floor in Miles’ house dreaming.”

“You dream of me often?”

“What?”

“You think you’re dreaming about me right now.”

“That’s not... I’m... fucking hell, Ghenie, don’t tease a man while he’s having a crisis!”

I let out a long breath, rubbing my face. I ignore the way my gasps are shaky and shallow. When I finally open my eyes again, Ghenie is still there, watching me carefully.

“I know this must be too much.”

“It’s not too much,” I say right away. “I’m sorry, my reaction is probably shit. It’s a lot, but it’s not too much, Ghenie, I promise.”

“Okay,” he says slowly. Then he takes a step back, opening the door wider for me. All at once, I’m back to a year ago. I’m back to when he let me in, when we gave ourselves to each other fully only for me to leave in the morning before he was awake.

I thought it would be easier that way. It wasn't. It sucked and we were both left brokenhearted because of my actions.

In that moment, I make a promise to myself that everything will be different now.

We're both the same people but I can choose a different path.

I can choose Ghenie. I can choose Maribel.

I want this. I want them. I've put in the blood, sweat, and tears to change myself, to heal those past hurts that caused me to lash out.

Do I still want to run? Hell fucking yes, I do. Will I? Not this time.

My parents left at every opportunity. Like hell am I going to do the same thing to my child. I've known about her existence for like a second and already I know I will devote all of my time and effort to her. I will be better than my parents before me. Nothing could keep me from her.

Stepping inside the house, I look around. Most things are the same but Ghenie has made this place his own while I was gone. Turning towards him, I give him a soft smile.

"It's really good to be home."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

Chapter Five

Ghenie

I feel as though my head has unattached itself from my shoulders and drifted into the sky. Christian is here. Not only back on this planet but he's here, in the home I've made my own. He keeps looking at Maribel, flashes of emotions playing across his features.

I so desperately wish I knew what he was thinking.

I wish I knew what was going on inside his head.

I can feel the emotions of every person on this planet and the one I actively want to feel is the one I can't.

I could push into his mind, but I would never do that without his consent.

I'll have to be patient for him to tell me.

We step over into the living room. Christian tentatively sits down and I find myself hovering. I clear my throat and Christian flinches. There's tension in the air and I wrack my brain, trying to find a way to bridge this gap between us.

"Would you like to hold her?"

Christian's head snaps up, his eyes landing on Maribel. His eyes are soft and filled

with longing. He holds out his hands and nods his head.

My heart is galloping inside my chest as I pass our daughter over.

Christian cradles her carefully. He lays her across his lap, her head against his knees.

He folds the blanket down so he can look at her face.

I have dreamed of this moment for months, thought about what it would be like to have Christian back, to have him embrace his new family.

“Wow,” Christian says, just barely above a whisper. “She’s beautiful, Ghenie.” He runs his thumb over her cheek and she leans against his palm, giving him a sleepy little smile. Just like that, I know he’s fallen in love. How can you not when she’s so perfect?

Seeing the two of them together like this is making my heart feel like it’s growing too large, like it might burst from my rib cage. Affection so strong it threatens to bring me to my knees washes over me. This is all too much, yet, it’s everything I’ve been dreaming of at the same time.

“I hope her name is alright. There was no way to consult you, and for that I am sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Christian says right away, his eyes never leaving Maribel’s face. “It’s not your fault. I was the one who ran away.”

“You did what you felt necessary at the time.”

“I did,” Christian says slowly. He finally looks up at me. “I’m sorry for leaving you. It was good that I left. It changed me. But I’m still sorry you had to do this alone. I’m

sorry I wasn't here for you when you needed me."

I sit down on the coffee table, facing Christian. He does seem different. Softer. More well rounded. Whatever happened while he was gone, was good for him.

"I am very glad you are back, even more so that you are feeling better."

Christian's eyes dart away. There's a long moment of silence as Christian tries to find the right words. "I don't want to keep running," he says, pushing the words out despite the fact that I can tell they're hard to admit.

"Then stay."

"It can't be that easy," Christian says with a snort, shaking his head. "You can't just tell me to stay and everything will work out."

"Maybe it will not be easy but stay anyway. Stay with me, with Maribel. We can make this work somehow."

"I've changed but I can't promise to be perfect. I'm going to say shit still. I'm going to be prickly. I'm going to be that same asshole." Christian meets my eyes. "I'm gonna wanna run sometimes."

My heart leaps into my throat. "Okay," I say, reaching out and placing my hand against his knee. "Run if you need to, but promise you will come back. Take the time you need, be an ass, put up your walls. But promise that when you're done, you'll come back."

"I can do that," he says after a moment of contemplation. I don't think my heart has ever soared the way it is right now, hearing him say that. "I can come back, if that's what you really want."

“It is,” I say right away, squeezing his knee. “I haven’t stopped thinking about you, Christian. I lie awake at night aching for you, for your touch. My heart has decided long ago that you are my one true partner, and I have not given up hope that someday, you would see me in the same light.”

Christian’s mouth drops open as he stares at me with wide eyes. Out of everything, apparently this is what he was most unprepared to hear. I’m about to speak again, to tell him not to worry himself with my feelings, but he speaks before me.

“Oh,” he says, the word stretching into silence.

I keep myself from squirming but only just barely.

“I wasn’t expecting that. Shit, okay. Wow.

Really? Me? Are you sure ? Because you’re you and I’m just this asshole human.

It doesn’t really make sense if you think about it longer than three seconds.

Jesus, Ghenie. You can do so much better than me. ”

That is not at all how I thought he would react.

“You are the one I want.”

“For now,” Christian says, shaking his head. “Don’t worry, I’m sure it’ll pass.”

“It hasn’t,” I tell him seriously. “It won’t.”

Christian doesn’t say anything for a long moment. He stares down at Maribel, caressing her cheek.

“Will you be diving into the underbelly of the city to win my hand in marriage?” It’s a jab that stings.

At the same time, I am thrilled to have his barbs back.

Part of the reason I fell so thoroughly for him is the way he pushes back.

He pushes and prods and pokes. He makes me rethink things in a new light.

He’s prickly and grumpy and gray. I love him for that even if he sees it as a fault.

“No,” I tell him truthfully. “I know you would not approve of that. You won’t wish for me to win your heart in a grand display. You crave for me to win it through small, everyday moments between just the two of us, such as the human standard. I respect that.”

“What will your people think? Their leader is above the trials he presents to the rest?”

I shake my head. “You’re not the only one who has changed while you were gone.”

“Really? I thought the whole living vessel thing meant you were stuck in your ways.”

I smile, remembering all the discussions we had about this very topic.

Watching Christian get so fired up about things, watching his passion was another thing that made me fall for him.

I was stuck in my ways, but I won’t let the Ancestors have too much of a say in my life any longer.

I’m more than just a vessel, I’m also a person and I deserve a life just as much as

anyone else.

Just thinking that leaves them erupting with opinions. They are so loud, so constant. Sometimes there is such a lull that I can ignore them and other times, like right now, they're overwhelming.

I cover my eyes with my hands, breathing through the moment until they finally settle once more. Then I look into Christian's eyes.

"They're dead."

Christian's facade cracks and he starts to laugh in surprise. "Jesus, you really have changed."

"I have. They are dead and I'm alive. It is time that things change. Some traditions will stay, but others we will leave behind. The people deserve to love without trial, don't you think?"

He nods his head, his features going soft again. "You know I agree."

"Christian, would you like to stay for dinner?"

"I wouldn't want to impose. I can go back into town and find a new place to stay."

"This is your home. You can stay for as long as you'd like."

Christian thinks about it for a moment before he finally nods. "Okay, but I'm staying on the couch. You keep the bed."

"If that's what will make you comfortable."

I stand up and walk into the kitchen. As I prepare dinner, I keep looking back into the living room, watching Christian and Maribel together.

I didn't think joy like this was possible.

We have a ways to go and many things to speak through, but for now, it means so much to me that Christian is here.

He's willing to have those conversations, he's willing to see where this will go.

I send up a quick prayer to the Ancestors, thanking them for bringing Christian back to me. Then I do my best to focus on making us a meal that won't be burnt due to my wandering mind.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

Chapter Six

Christian ~About Two Years Ago~

Miles tells me that running can be really good not only for a person's heart and body, but also for their mind. Apparently, a lot of runners find a sort of euphoria when they run and they're able to clear their minds.

I'm calling bullshit on this bullshit.

I'm practically wheezing as I go, just barely keeping my legs moving. Sweat pours down the side of my face and my shirt is almost completely soaked. I keep to the outskirts of town, heading in the direction of the water.

The plan is to either throw myself into the water to cool myself down or if I'm feeling especially dramatic, maybe I'll just drown. That would put an end to my suffering at least.

The air starts to cool the closer I get to the water. Once the smell of salt hits my nose, I slow down, going from a jog into a brisk walk. I suck in as much air as I can, trying to get my lungs to stop burning.

I realize way too late that as my feet hit the sand, I'm not alone. There's a figure sitting in the sand, staring out across the water. Their back is to me but I would recognize this person anywhere.

Ghenie's long, platinum hair is braided down his back in a very pretty, intricate

design.

His shoulders slump forward and he rests his face against his hands.

For a moment, worry rises up inside of me but I quickly push it back down.

Ghenie doesn't care if I worry about him.

He has so much going on, why the fuck would he care what I'm feeling?

"I didn't picture you as the type of guy to bury his toes in the sand," I say, taking off my shoes and socks so I can walk in the sand.

It's not a lie. Ghenie seems like he's always working, whether it's talking to his people, planning events, or negotiating with other planets. I don't think I've ever seen him do something fun that was just for him.

Ghenie's body goes rigid before he's looking over his shoulder at me. My stomach sinks as I see his bloodshot eyes and lines of tears drying on his cheeks.

"Umm. Shit. I can go if you'd like."

"It is a public beach," he says stiffly. "You are free to stay if you'd like."

It sounds like he's giving me permission to be here which really rubs me the wrong way. What is it about Ghenie that always drives me up the wall? He could tell me the color of the sky and I'd still look up to double check he wasn't pulling a fast one on me.

I flop down in the sand beside him, looking out across the water with him. I'm still sweaty as fuck and probably smell awful but I don't really give a shit. Why would I

want to impress Ghenie?

“What’s wrong?”

“It is nothing,” he says right away, completely lying through his pretty white teeth. “It is the burden that comes with being Toralleh .”

I snort. And then I immediately feel bad for snorting. Jesus, I really am an asshole, aren’t I? “Speak to me in terms I would understand. What’s so bad about being the leader?”

“You would not understand.”

I grit my teeth. “Try me. I’m more than just a dumbass human. I also have a very pretty face.”

Ghenie swivels his head and looks over at me, his bloodshot eyes narrowing. I don’t think I’ve ever met someone so unamused by my antics. That only serves to make me want to poke him more.

“The voices,” he finally says. “They’re loud and overbearing and I cannot stop them from shouting. They are persistent and angry and I am overwhelmed ,” he says, his voice catching on the last word. “I would like a break, just to exist, just for a moment.”

“The voices?”

“Yes, Christian. The voices of our Ancestors. They live on through me and someday, they will live on through the next Toralleh . Over and over and over, a cycle that has never been broken since it began. A living vessel who embodies the Ancestors, their wishes, and leads our people through them.” Ghenie buries his face in his hands. “It is

an endless, thankless job.”

Suddenly, I see him in a completely different light.

I always assumed he had it all together.

I thought he just saw himself above everyone around him.

It turns out, there's been a huge weight on his shoulders, holding him down until all he could do was hold his head up high so he wouldn't drown in it.

He doesn't just have it all together, he's somehow learned to rise above it all. Ghenie isn't just beautiful, he's glorious. The amount of strength he must have not only to be chosen for this role but to be able to execute it without it breaking him? I'm in awe.

“I shouldn't have said anything,” Ghenie says quickly, wiping the tears from his face. Before I can say anything, he stands up and starts stripping out of his clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“I am going to swim my worries away,” Ghenie says like it's obvious. And maybe it is to him.

I should look away. I should look literally anywhere but my eyes are glued to him, watching as each piece of clothing falls into the sand at his feet.

Ghenie's skin practically glows with how pale it is, iridescent against the white sand and blue water.

His back is strong and toned, his arms built like he's capable of picking me up over his shoulder.

His legs go on for days. His tail swings back and forth and my eyes follow the movement.

Then he wraps it around his own waist, getting it out of the way as he finishes stripping.

When his pants drop, I can't help but look at his ass.

I bite my bottom lip. His ass cheeks look like they would be the perfect handful.

I'm hard in an instant against my permission, all the blood leaving my head to race to my cock.

Maybe that's why I feel lightheaded with affection all of a sudden.

Ghenie is strong and kind, despite the shit his Ancestors have given him. Even when I'm throwing jabs at him, he still shows me kindness. I could learn a thing or two from him.

Also, he's more than easy on the eyes, he's beautiful.

Feelings wash over me. There's the obvious feeling of lust that comes from looking at a sexy, naked man, but there's more than that.

There's a soft warmth budding inside my chest, like a newly blossomed rose opening up for the first time.

It's terrifyingly small and in need of sheltering.

It buries into my chest where I can't quite reach it, unable to pluck it before it can really sink its roots in.

I can admit that I want him. I want him in my bed. I want him in my life. I have feelings for him. The kind that make your insides squirm and your chest warm. The kind that make you want to be a better man.

Jesus Christ. What's gotten into me? I thought I hated his guts but it turns out, I was harboring a school boy level crush!

Ghenie looks over his shoulder, finding me staring at his ass. I have enough self awareness to blush at being caught but not enough to stop looking. He raises his brow.

Before, that look would have had me growling with annoyance, but now, my chest does a funny little flip. It's like a button has been pressed and now I can't stop seeing Ghenie through a new lens. I've seen a side of him that makes the picture in my head grander, make more sense.

"Will you be joining me? Just a swim. Nothing more."

I only have to think about it for a second before I'm nodding. "Hell yeah. I need to cool down after," I pause, finally looking away from his ass. "After my run."

I swear he's smirking at me before he's running into the water. I make quick work of my clothes before following behind.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

Chapter Seven

Ghenie

I open my eyes, the sound of crying waking me from my slumber.

I cannot tell what time it is based on the darkness outside, but I know there must be hours left before daytime.

I sit up and look over at Maribel, letting out a long yawn.

Reaching over, I pull her into bed with me, lying her across my thighs, trying to calm her while I get my brain back online.

The door to the bedroom opens a crack before Christian is peeking inside.

“Hey,” he whispers, looking at me. “Everything okay?”

I hum and wave him inside. “Maribel is hungry and needs to be changed.”

“Okay, can I help? I can feed her for you so you can go back to sleep.”

I chuckle softly and hand Maribel to Christian. “You can change her but then I will need to feed her unless you have somehow developed some interesting new features since the last time you were here.”

Christian carefully takes Maribel before staring down at me.

“What?” Then his face morphs into understanding.

“Jesus, okay. I haven’t developed tits since the last time I was here.

I forgot you guys are built different. I’ll be right back,” he says, shaking his head at himself.

I can’t help but giggle at his retreating back.

I readjust the pillows behind myself, getting comfortable while I wait for Christian to come back.

Having him helping leaves me feeling confused.

On the one hand, it’s strange not doing everything myself.

I can hear my daughter crying in the other room, annoyed at being changed, but I am not with her.

On the other hand, my chest is warm with affection.

Watching Christian care for our daughter makes me feel things .

Many, many things. As much as I’d like to take things slow with Christian and keep him at arm’s length until I can trust him, seeing him like this throws all of those plans right out the window.

Maribel’s crying turns into soft whimpers before stopping all together. When Christian comes back, he has Maribel against his chest and a cup of water in his hand. He’s softly humming, keeping her happy.

And there goes my heart. So badly I wanted to keep myself from falling so quickly but all it took was this, listening to him hum our baby to sleep. I care for him so deeply that it hurts, it steals my breath, it completely consumes me.

“Here we go,” Christian whispers. “I sang her back to sleep.”

“She still needs to eat or she will be awake again in half an hour.”

“Shit, I hadn’t thought of that. Sorry.”

“No need to be sorry. You are new to all this. You will catch on to the routine soon enough,” I say without thinking. I’m not even sure he wants to be part of our routine. I’m not sure of anything when it comes to Christian.

Christian hands Maribel over to me and I make quick work of pulling my shirt down in order to give her access to her meal. She latches beautifully.

“I would like that,” Christian says eventually, pulling my eyes away from my daughter and up to her other father. “To be part of her routines. If you’ll let me.”

“Of course,” I say right away. “There is nothing I want more than for you to be a part of her life, Christian. I don’t think I’ll ever stop being sorry for not being able to contact you sooner.

I kept overthinking every single decision I made and the Ancestors’ voices didn’t make things easier.

I wanted to send a ship to Earth early, to have someone tell you. ”

“Hey,” Christian says, cutting me off. “Everything worked out in the end, that’s what matters. Even if the voices in your head are dicks.”

“Oh, they did not like that,” I say, bringing my free hand to my nose, pinching the bridge. “Maybe don’t insult them right before I am supposed to go back to sleep?”

“Shit, sorry,” Christian says with a wince. Under his breath I hear him call them fuckheads but I don’t call him out on it. “Here, you should drink this. I know breastfeeding can make you dehydrated.”

I take the water from him, sipping on it as Maribel continues to eat.

This is such a small gesture but it means the world to me.

He’s taking care of me in his own way, making sure I’m healthy.

How am I supposed to keep my feelings locked away when he’s showing me kindness?

How am I supposed to not fall even more in love with him when he is finally showing the soft side of himself instead of only the thorny parts?

“Thank you, Christian.”

“Don’t mention it,” he says. “Don’t need people hearing that I’m secretly a softie. I have a reputation to uphold.”

I can’t help but smile. After setting the rest of the water on my nightstand, I look up at Christian. “Your secret is safe with me. I feel special. I alone get to see this soft side of you.”

I know that I am pushing my luck, but I can’t help it. I’m so tired that it’s hard to keep my eyes open. I’m warm in my bed with my child resting against my chest. My mate is here . How could I not be just a little bit sappy.

“You are special,” he says softly, so quiet I almost miss it. “Are you okay? Do you want me to stay?”

I want him to stay. I want him in this bed with me. I want him as my mate.

“You can go back to sleep, Christian. After this, she should sleep through the rest of the night.”

“Perfect. Good night, Ghenie.”

“Good night, Christian.”

Once Maribel is fed and burped, I set her back in her bassinet. Then I lie back and almost immediately fall back asleep.

I wake up to the sun shining through the window. It has been a long time since I’ve slept in like this. I sit up, looking down at Maribel only to find her bassinet empty. For a split second, panic overwhelms me. In the next second, I remember Christian.

Standing up, I hear him singing again. He must have woken up and grabbed Maribel before she could wake me up. I’m surprised she hasn’t been crying for more milk, but maybe Christian’s voice has been entertaining her enough for now.

I get dressed and tie my hair into a knot at the top of my head before leaving the bedroom. I follow the sound to the kitchen, finding Christian there, swaying back and forth with Maribel tucked against his chest.

Leaning my hip against the doorframe, I just stay right where I am and watch him. He’s looking out the window, his back to me. He looks good. Better than good, Christian looks healthy, happy, and light.

The last time he was here, something weighed against his shoulders. Even now, I still see traces of that prickly asshole I came to care about, but now the edges are filed down into something more manageable. His jabs are more in jest than they are to hurt.

He's still my pruiist , but now he's different.

He's grown while he was gone. It's made him into a better man, into someone who can be a better father.

I try not to get my hopes up but I can't stop wondering if this difference will make him a better partner as well. If he wants to be my partner, that is.

"Good morning," I say, making Christian turn around in surprise.

Christian's cheeks turn red and his features harden. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough," I tell him with a grin. In response, Christian rolls his eyes. The gesture makes my heart skip a beat. It's been far too long since I've seen him like this.

"Whatever. The only reason I'm singing and swaying is because of the baby. She deserves the world even if her dad is a prickly asshole."

He's trying for a joke but it falls flat. I can tell he's actually worried about the type of dad he's going to be. In the time we spent before he left, I learned to read Christian, at least a little bit.

"You have been a father for a day and already you are mastering it. Give yourself a little grace, Christian."

Christian shakes his head but doesn't argue with me. Instead, he passes Maribel over to me. "I think she's itching for breakfast. While you take care of her, I'll make us something. Do you still enjoy brown tea or do you need something without the caffeine?"

"There is a box of tea above the stove I enjoy. Your brown tea is still there as well. I couldn't bring myself to drink it while you were gone."

Christian looks at me, his expression unreadable. Apparently, it'll take time before I can read him as easily as before. This man has layers and secrets and walls. I hope someday, he will let me see behind them.

I am willing to be as patient as he needs me to be because I am not going anywhere.

Now that he's home, I'll do everything I can to keep him here.

I sit down on the stool at the breakfast island. I tug down my shirt and get Maribel to latch. Christian fills up the kettle and sets it on the stove to start heating. Then he digs out a few eggs from the fridge and gets a pan heating.

I'm nervous to admit how good this all feels.

Christian is here, sharing the same space as me.

He's showing himself to be a doting father and a caring partner.

He's making sure I'm drinking water, making sure I'm fed.

He's allowed me to sleep in. I don't just love this attention, I'm slowly coming to crave it.

Some of the voices in my head whisper that it won't last. They warn that this isn't wise.

A few voices remind me that there are plenty of Layperry on this planet who would do anything to become my mate, that they would be a much better pairing for me.

Other voices congratulate me for having my mate back with me, celebrating this as a win.

One voice calls out that I should hightail it out of here with him back to Earth.

There's always one voice saying the most random things.

Christian makes my tea before sliding it over to me, starting on the eggs. Neither of us share a word, just stay in the same space in comfortable silence. The silence makes the voices worse, but that's okay. I can ignore them for now. Nothing will make me ruin this moment.

I sip my tea as Christian finishes up his cooking. Then he's sliding a plate of eggs and toast towards me. He has his own plate along with a cup of brown tea. He says it reminds him of coffee, a morning drink he enjoyed back on Earth.

"Thank you, Christian."

"No worries. Gotta make sure my baby daddy is fed." Christian's face twists into a grimace. "Never tell anyone I said that or I'll throw myself out a window. Gross."

I chuckle fondly. "We wouldn't want that."

"No, we wouldn't. The windows in this place are really nice. It would be a pain in the ass to replace them."

“Oh yes. I am far more worried about replacing the windows rather than replacing you.”

Christian looks up at me, his mouth full of food. He gives me a tiny grin that’s made cutest by the way his cheeks are puffed up with food. I take a bite of my toast, doing my best not to cover Maribel in crumbs.

“Thanks for letting me stay here, Ghenie.”

Taking a page from his book, I nod and say, “don’t mention it.”

Christian chuckles, shaking his head at me before digging into his food. I help Maribel off my chest and close my shirt. Then I place her against my shoulder and pet her back until a burp works its way out.

“Whoa. Nice one, Maribel,” Christian says with surprised, wide eyes. “I didn’t know she had it in her!”

“You will be surprised the amount she has in her. Wait until you get your first poopy diaper.”

“Is it weird if I say I’m looking forward to it?”

I shrug. “A little, but I will not hold it against you.”

“Appreciate it,” he says, pretending to tip his hat at me. He scarfs down the rest of his food before taking his plate to the sink and washing his hands. “I can take her so you can eat,” he says, holding out his hands for Maribel.

It’s so wonderfully strange to have an extra pair of hands around. The weight of parenthood is crushing, but now that Christian is here, it doesn’t feel like it will

flatten me. It feels manageable.

I pass our child over. He lifts her in the air, hovering her over his head.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Christian narrows his eyes. “I can’t hold my daughter in the air? Really?”

“I wouldn’t.”

Ah. There’s my prickly asshole. He scoffs and turns around in a circle. “You love this, don’t you, sweetheart?”

Christian grins up at our daughter and in response, she opens her mouth and projects vomit right into his open mouth.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

Chapter Eight

Christian

I've been back for a few weeks and somehow, Ghenie and I have worked out a routine that works for us.

When Maribel wakes up at night, I change her before bringing her back to Ghenie along with a glass of water.

In the morning, I'm usually up first and get the day started with tea and breakfast. In the afternoon, Ghenie puts Maribel down for her nap while I head over to Miles' house so I can visit with him and Druim, and sometimes Timalah if he's not busy doing things in town or with his brothers-in-arms.

When Ghenie has things to do in town, he often straps Maribel to his chest and brings her with, but sometimes he leaves her home with me.

The first time, I could tell it was a struggle to leave her.

The faith he's putting in me is humbling.

I still struggle, feeling like I don't deserve it.

He should just throw me out and be done with me, but I'm thankful he's decided to keep me around.

I keep wondering when this will blow up in my face. Surely, I'll fuck this up and hurt him again. I'm a broken man. Yet, for whatever reason, Ghenie always greets me with a smile, like it's a marvel that I'm actually here with him. Jesus Christ, I'm going to hate myself if I fuck this up.

It's still so hard to wrap my head around the fact that I have a daughter.

She looks exactly like me with her dark eyes and messy brown hair.

She wrinkles her nose just like me too. Yet her skin is almost as pale as Ghenie's.

One night. One night of taking a chance and somehow this beautiful person was made.

It barely feels real. Some nights I wake up, convinced this has all been a dream instead of my real life.

"If you think any harder I'm going to start to smell something burning," Miles says as he sits down beside me on the porch. I shove my shoulder into him.

"Asshole."

"Takes one to know one."

I snort, shaking my head at him but gratefully accepting the brown tea he hands me. It's not the same as coffee but it's the closest thing they have here. I take a sip, letting the flavor wash over me.

"I am an asshole. I think I always will be."

"That's okay. I like that about you," Miles says, nudging me with his elbow. "You

don't take anyone's bullshit, you're not afraid to say what you think. You're all prickly which means the fact that you let me in makes me pretty goddamn special."

I hum. "If that's how you wanna look at it, I ain't gonna stop you."

We drink our tea, staring across the road at my house.

There are fields of flowers behind my house which softly sway in the wind.

To our right is a giant stone wall, used to keep monsters away.

When we first moved here, the idea of monsters really freaked me out and that fear doubled when Timalah showed up one day hurt while over there.

Thank Christ that Miles and I were trained in medicine and could help.

That was the day things changed for Miles and Timalah. They stopped dancing around each other and allowed themselves to fall. It took a grand gesture, a serious slap in the face moment.

Is that what I need?

Ghenie and I haven't sat down and talked about what's going on between us.

We move around like we've been living together for years.

We share soft words, gentle barely there touches, smiles.

We're coparenting like we've been a team since the start.

But that's all that's happening. So far, we've been keeping emotional distance from

each other.

I get it, I really do. Am I even ready to venture into something more?

“So,” Miles says, letting the word stretch out until I groan with annoyance. “What’s going on with you and Ghenie?”

“Nothing,” I say right away, more out of habit than anything else.

“That’s a lie. You two are fucking.”

“We’re really not.”

“You two used to fuck.”

“Still wrong.”

“Jesus, Christian. Give me something to go off? Or should I keep guessing until I figure it out?”

I groan, covering my face with my hand. “You’re not gonna let this go, are you?”

“Nope. I’ve given you space, it’s time for you to spill the tea.” Miles puts his hand on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “How the fuck do you expect me to be here for you when I don’t even know what’s going on?”

“You could just leave me to my misery?” “Can’t do, bestie. Spill.”

If I had a pillow I would press my face against it and scream. So much for just spending a little time with my friend before going back home to start dinner. Now I’m expected to talk about my feelings. It’s practically gag inducing.

“We fucked one time.”

“Really? Just once?”

“Yeah. The night before I left.”

“Oh shit,” Miles says, blowing out a long breath. “That must have been awful for both of you. One night together and then you’re gone.”

“Nah, it was a walk in the park. I’m all about that hump and dump lifestyle.”

Miles slaps the back of my head and I laugh, rubbing the spot he just smacked. “Shut the fuck up, Christian.”

“Okay, okay,” I say, holding up my hand in surrender. “Yes, it was hard. Obviously. It’s still hard and I’m not talking about my dick.”

Miles raises his hand like he might hit me again. He narrows his eyes before placing it in his lap instead.

“What’s going on now? You’re obviously living together. Seems like you’ve worked things out for co-parenting Maribel. Where does that leave the two of you? Are you like together?”

“Yeah, we’re going steady. I think I’ll be taking him to prom this year.”

Miles smacks me again and yeah, okay. I totally deserved that one. “I swear to god.”

“We’re not together,” I tell him. “We’re settling into a routine.”

“Okay,” Miles says slowly. “And do you want to be together?”

Do I? Do I want to cross that line again? Do I want to do things differently this time, giving him my heart instead of just my body?

I know the answer and it terrifies me.

“Yes,” I say softly, just barely above a whisper.

“Yeah, Miles. I fucking do. Fuck me, right? I’m a mess of a person.

I’m an ass. I don’t let people in, but fuck me, I want Ghenie in every way he’ll let me.

” My mouth snaps shut and my body goes tense.

I turn away from Miles, covering my face with my free hand.

“Can we pretend I didn’t say all that? I will literally pay you. ”

“You babysit for me next time I want a date night and you have a deal.”

“Fine,” I say with a sigh. “Speaking of date night, you and Timalah gonna make me another godbaby?”

“He keeps trying to get me pregnant but it just won’t stick,” Miles says, completely serious. I sputter before letting out a long, hearty laugh. God, I’ve missed Miles so much while I was back on Earth. It’s so good to be back with him.

“I wish I’d never asked.”

“You’ll understand when you’re older,” Miles says, patting my shoulder.

I finish my brown tea and hand the cup over. “I should head back and start dinner.”

“Ghenie will make a houseboy out of you yet.”

“It’ll be a cold day in hell before I let someone call me their houseboy,” I say with a grumble, standing up and dusting off my pants. “Love you or whatever. Bye.”

I walk away before Miles can respond. He tries to yell something back but I cover my ears as I walk across the road over to my house. Before I walk inside, I turn around and flip him off for good measure.

The house feels weirdly empty without Ghenie and Maribel here. I thought having the place to myself would leave me feeling peaceful and content, but instead, all I do is miss them, counting the hours until they’ll be back.

I get straight to work making dinner. I put some type of poultry-like meat into the oven to bake and then chop veggies for a salad. It keeps my hands busy but doesn’t do anything to settle my mind.

Thankfully, I don’t have to be lost in my thoughts for too long before Ghenie is walking through the front door, calling out for me as he comes inside.

“In here,” I call back, setting everything down and quickly washing my hands. When I turn around, Ghenie is standing in the doorway. “Hi.”

“Hello,” he says in greeting. He smells the air and smiles. “Smells good in here.”

“It’s nothing,” I say, waving him off. “Where’s my girl?”

“Oh. Umm, about that,” Ghenie says, picking at his fingers. He looks nervous and my stomach turns to stone inside of me. What’s going on? What’s wrong? “She’s with my parents.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. “For how long?”

“Not too long. Just a few hours. She still only eats from my chest so I can’t be away from her too long,” he says quickly. “I just thought...” Ghenie’s words trail off and he looks past me at the wall, biting his bottom lip.

“You just thought?”

“Would you like to go for a walk with me?”

“You want to go for a walk? Right now? With me?”

“Yes. Just a little walk. I thought maybe we could find a nice spot to sit and talk.”

My stomach explodes with nerves. Is this the part where he finally tells me this isn’t working out? Has he grown tired of my presence here? Is he going to tell me he’d rather parent Maribel on his own?

Fuck.

“Christian,” Ghenie says softly, pulling my eyes up to his. “Breathe. It’s just a talk, nothing bad. I promise.”

I can’t find my words so instead, I nod my head. I turn around and turn off the oven. I take the food out of the oven and carefully put everything away so it will still be good when we get back home.

“Okay,” I say, turning back to him. “Let’s go for this walk that’s definitely just a talk and nothing bad.”

Ghenie cracks a smile. “You have always been so suspicious of me,” he says, shaking

his head. “I really should not find that charming.”

“You really shouldn’t,” I say in agreement. “It says something about you that you find me charming at all. Your standards are too low, Ghenie.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

“They’re exactly where I need them to be.” He reaches over and takes my hand in his own. Tingles run up and down my arm at the simple touch and my stomach flips, but this time it’s not from nerves, it’s from excitement. “Come. I have the perfect place in mind.”

I’m powerless to do anything but follow, doing my best to hold on to hope that this is the time to talk things out instead of break things off. I want anything and everything that Ghenie is willing to offer, now I just need to convince him to offer it.

I know where we’re going before we get there.

The sun is starting to set, leaving the sky brilliant tones of orange and red which reflect off the water.

It’s magical and dare I admit; romantic .

Normally, I would find that gross but for Ghenie, I keep my lips sealed.

He deserves romance and affection and feeling gross over.

He deserves vulnerability even if it makes my skin crawl a little bit.

“I hope this is okay,” he says softly, kicking off his shoes and walking into the sand. The sand is warm against my bare feet. “I thought there would be no better place to have this conversation.”

“This is more than okay.”

Somehow, we're in the same place where I first admitted to myself that I had feelings for Ghenie. We sit in the sand, looking out across the water as the sun slowly sets. It's beautiful. I turn and look at Ghenie. He is beautiful.

"Christian," Ghenie starts but I reach over, placing my hand on his thigh.

"Can I start? Please?"

Ghenie nods his head, touching the back of my hand. A shiver runs through me. The gentle gesture makes that knot in my chest loosen ever so slightly.

"I'm all sorts of messed up," I say finally, getting the words to start flowing.

"My parents left a lot when I was little. It took me a long time to realize neglect is abuse and it took me even longer to admit to myself that I was abused. I don't let people in because the people who're supposed to be there for me always left.

Always. It didn't matter if I begged or cried or held on to their pant leg.

No matter what, they'd push me off and leave for their next score.

I jumped from home to home, stayed with my grandmother for a while but that only lasted so long before she died. "

My free hand digs into the sand, letting the grains fall through my fingers. I don't look at Ghenie, can't. If I look at him, the words might stop and then all of this will have been for nothing.

"I learned to rely on no one but myself. I stopped smiling, stopped caring. I closed myself off because then I knew I couldn't get hurt.

And then I met Miles.” I shake my head as a small smile lifts the sides of my lips.

“That bastard wouldn’t let me shut him out.

He started to form cracks in my perfectly built wall.

That wall was hit with a fucking wrecking ball when I met you.

It was terrifying, the way I wanted to let you in but I just couldn’t.

So I ran as fast as I could, as far as I could.

It was safer to run because it was me leaving instead of being the one left behind again. ”

My eyes are suspiciously watery and my chest feels like it’s been cracked open for Ghenie to see. I hate it. I hate this. I suck in a shaky breath, trying to keep my composure.

“I started seeing a therapist back on Earth and worked through some of this shit. I have a ways to go, but the whole healing thing has started. This is a lot to drop at once and I can’t promise I’m all better or whatever.

I’m still fucked up. I still hate all this mushy gushy shit.

I hate talking about my feelings but,” I pause to take another shaky breath.

I force myself to look up at Ghenie. “But you’re worth it. ”

Tears fall from Ghenie’s eyes, running down his cheeks as he looks at me. Fuck. I didn’t mean to make him cry!

“Shit. Sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Ghenie turns to me fully. He brings his hands to my face, cupping my cheeks. “You have nothing to apologize for. Nothing .”

The fierceness of his response leaves me speechless. All I can do is nod slightly.

“I am so sorry you went through that, but this only makes my heart long for you more. You have gone through hardships no one should go through and yet, you have been brought through to the other side a stronger man. You have worked on yourself and allowed yourself to come back, to come back to me . I cannot promise to never hurt you but I can promise to never intentionally hurt you. And I can promise I will never leave you, for as long as you will have me, it would be my honor to spend my days at your side.”

All of my breath leaves me at once. The tears I’ve been desperately trying to hold back fall against my permission. Ghenie’s thumbs rub them away for me. He looks at me like I’m precious, like I’m worth something. Maybe I am. Maybe I am worthy of his love.

His hands are so big against my face, making me feel small. I’m cracked open and exposed, but Ghenie doesn’t just hold my face, he holds my heart in his hands. I know he’ll be gentle. I know that I can trust him, the same way I eventually learned to trust Miles.

“So,” I say slowly, my eyes finally meet his pale ones. “Now you know.”

“Now I know,” he repeats, just barely above a whisper. “And I am not going anywhere.”

I move forward and Ghenie follows me. Our foreheads press together.

I close my eyes, breathing the same air as him, letting his soft confession wash over me.

It takes everything I have to let the words sink in.

It takes even more to actually believe them, not because I mistrust Ghenie but because it's hard for me to see myself as someone worth staying for.

“Christian?”

“Yeah?”

“May I kiss you? I have been dreaming of it for years. I had one taste of you and now, I fear I will never be sated.”

My heart aches . I've never been a guy interested in romance or love or affection, but with Ghenie, everything feels different. His words are like a balm that's helping soothe my very soul, healing wounds I didn't even know I had.

Instead of answering with words, I lean forward and kiss Ghenie's lips. Everything has led to this moment and for that reason alone, I can't be upset by the ups and down because this has all been worth it. Kissing Ghenie is everything. My head feels light and my heart feels full.

His lips fit perfectly against my own. Ghenie tilts his head, slotting us together even more comfortably. When he opens his lips, mine part as well, allowing his tongue in. The taste of him is even better than I remember.

Ghenie's hand cups my face as we exchange slow, deep kisses.

Our tongues tangle, our breath mingles. Not only does my body long for him, but so

does my very soul.

It aches for him in a way I've never felt before.

The Layperry people believe that there is one person out there designed especially for them; their mate.

In this moment, I'm not sure if I subscribe to the same belief but it's hard to argue when everything inside of me is screaming at me that Ghenie is mine .

Ghenie is the one who pulls away, resting his forehead against my own.

We stay like that for a long time. I feel connected to him and I can't stop thinking about all the ways I want to make things up to him, to let him know that I'm serious about this relationship, serious about him.

I never want him to go another day wondering if he's cared for.

I might not do all that mushy shit but that doesn't mean I won't put in the work to let Ghenie know I'm his.

"My plan was for us to speak and then take a dip in the water," Ghenie says slowly, "but I'm suddenly feeling something else. I think I will go pick up Maribel now. You can meet me back at the house. Once she's asleep, I would very much like to take you to bed."

"Take me to bed?"

Ghenie raises his brow at me and it suddenly hits me.

"Oh? Oh! Yeah, umm. Okay. Go pick up our daughter."

Ghenie's features all turn soft at that. He leans forward and kisses my lips again. "I love it when you call her that," he confesses before standing up and pulling me with him. I just barely keep myself from full on running back to the house.

This time is going to be different. This is the first time we'll be coming together as two people who care about each other instead of a last ditch effort before I run. This time is the first time that'll start the rest of our relationship and I want it to be special.

Chapter Nine

Ghenie

My stomach is a whirlwind of emotions. The talk I had with Christian went better than I could have ever imagined.

His words play over and over in my head, giving me a better understanding of him.

I want to rip his parents to shreds and protect him from every person who has ever hurt him in the past.

I have a child and cannot imagine doing anything like that to her. How could they just abandon their son? It leaves me equal parts baffled and enraged. Christian didn't deserve that. By the Ancestors, no one deserves that.

Even the voices in my head agree. So many of them have softened towards Christian. Many of them wish for me to travel back to Earth and make sure his parents have been dealt with. One promised to wake me up in the middle of the night for eternity if I ever pulled something similar on Maribel.

It makes sense that Christian feels the need to keep himself away from those he cares about.

It makes sense that he would keep everyone at arm's length.

I do not think it possible to be prouder than I am, seeing how far he's come, how

much he's grown in such a short time.

I am not naive, I know there will be hardships in our future but they don't feel as scary now.

They feel like we will tackle them together head-on.

As I walk through the door, my mind is miles away which is why I don't notice what's going on at first. It takes longer than I care to admit to notice the flowers and the candles.

I stop in my tracks, staring around the living area in wonder. Christian is not the romantic type and yet, he has managed to completely surprise me.

"Right this way," Christian says, walking into the room and gesturing me towards the couch. "I got your favorite spot comfortable so you can feed Maribel before bed."

I'm powerless to do anything but follow Christian's lead. I sit down in my seat and a warm blanket is placed around my shoulders. A glass of water is beside me, knowing how important it is to stay hydrated while nursing. Everything is perfect.

Dare I say, Christian is perfect.

I know he won't be ready to hear this for some time, but I love him. I love him so much. When I imagine the future, it always features him by my side.

"Do you need anything else?"

I shake my head. "This is perfect. Thank you."

Christian leans down, leaving a soft kiss on my forehead, right between my antennae

before he's leaving the room and heading to the bedroom.

I pull my shirt down and bring Maribel to my chest, allowing her to latch. Then I tip my head back against the couch, letting out a long breath. There's so much time between our beach confessions and now. Has the spark died? Will Christian still want to follow through with what we implied?

Am I ready to be intimate again?

That last question is the easiest to answer. Of course I am. I have been aching for him for years. My ass has been growing slick since I left the beach which made for a very uncomfortable walk back home.

A sound catches my attention and I look over, finding Christian rolling Maribel's bassinet out of the bedroom. He doesn't go far, leaving it in the hallway right by the door. We'll be able to hear her if she starts crying but there's enough distance that we won't accidentally wake her up.

It seems as though Christian has thought of everything.

I'm not sure how much time passes but eventually, Maribel drinks her fill. Before I can stand up, Christian is suddenly there.

"Let me," he says softly, careful not to wake her up. "I'll change her and meet you in the bedroom once she's down."

"Alright," I say, standing up and getting my shirt back into place. Then I make my way to the bedroom.

Once inside, I'm hit with a wave of awe all over again. Christian has lit candles in here as well. The room is filled with warm, flickering orange light. There is a flower

on the bedside table, one of my favorites.

I sit on the side of the bed, wondering what I should do to prepare. Should I get naked and wait on the bed? Should I be standing so we can start kissing the moment he's back? Is there a third option I haven't thought of?

The first time we had sex, it was all heat of the moment. It was rushed and forceful. There was a tinge of desperation and aggression to it all. I didn't have time to have nerves because one moment we were standing apart and the next we were in the middle of fucking.

This time couldn't have been more different. This time I have a moment to overthink everything, and the voices screaming at me are not helping.

Christian walks into our room, closing the door behind him. He turns towards me and I realize I haven't moved from my place on the bed. He looks me up and down, his forehead wrinkling in the middle with worry.

"Is everything okay? If you changed your mind I totally understand."

"I haven't," I say right away. I put my hands against my face, rubbing at my eyes until I can see stars. "I want you, more than anything, Christian. That will never change."

"Then why do you look so worried?"

"I am overthinking everything. Are you sure you want this?"

"Never been so sure of anything in my life," he tells me, getting on his knees before me. He runs his hands over my calves and up to my thighs. "I want this time to be different. I'll be here when you wake in the morning. I'll take care of you. I'll be

gentle, Ghenie.”

I swallow around the lump in my throat. “Not too gentle.”

Christian looks up at me with a little smirk. “Not too gentle,” he says in understanding before he’s reaching for my feet, removing my socks. His fingers run up my body, tugging on the bottom of my shirt and pulling it over my head.

My body is softer than the last time we were together. My chest is swollen, my middle still soft from Maribel. Christian takes me in, that look of lust and desire never leaving. My body might change but Christian’s desire for me has not.

I stand up, pushing Christian back slightly so I can get myself out of my pants. Christian stands as well, stopping my hands. He leans up in order to run his mouth over my jaw as his hands get to work getting me out of my pants.

I let him take control of the situation. In everything I do, I always have to be the one in charge, the one to know everything. It feels so good to let Christian be the one to do that here, when it’s just the two of us. He can take control. He can take care of me when it comes to this.

Once I’m completely naked, Christian nudges me back. I crawl onto the bed, lying back against my pillow. Christian is still completely clothed and that difference makes a shiver run through me. I’m at his mercy in the best possible way.

“You are beautiful,” Christian says, his voice shaky. He gets onto the bed, crawling between my thighs. His hands grip my inner thighs, pushing my legs open. His hands are so tanned compared to how platinum white my skin is.

“Christian,” I breathe out as his eyes wander my body. My cock is rock hard and my ass is so slick it’s starting to grow uncomfortable. I want him to do something. I want

him to do anything .

“I want to make you feel so good, Ghenie. Can I do that?”

“Yes. Please, Christian. Come on.”

Christian leans down, taking the tip of my cock between his lips. I bite my bottom lip, keeping myself from crying out at the warm sensation of his mouth. He slowly pushes himself down before pulling back up.

“Use your tail between your legs,” he tells me. “Get yourself nice and ready for me. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes,” I say with a sharp gasp as he goes down on my cock again.

He runs his tongue over the bumps on the side.

His hand goes just under my dick and I remember that humans have balls under theirs.

I don’t have the same type of anatomy but it still feels nice, the way he presses against the skin there.

I bring my tail to my ass, wedging just the tip into my wet hole. I carefully wiggle it into myself, making it as thin as possible at first before slowly widening it more and more. I toss my head back against my pillow, letting out a gasp of pleasure.

“Christian,” I say, reaching down and running my fingers through his messy brown hair. “I can’t keep going.”

“Come for me,” he says before licking the tip of my cock. “This won’t be the last

time, it's okay. Let me taste you, Ghenie."

He sucks my cock, his eyes never leaving my face.

It feels so good but it's also so intimate, the way he is watching me as he pleasures me.

My tail rubs against that sweet spot inside of me.

I cover my mouth as I come, careful to keep myself as quiet as possible despite the way I want to cry out in pleasure.

Christian continues to suck me through it, drinking down every last drop of my cum before he's finally popping off my cock. He crawls over my body, resting himself against me. He presses kisses against my face, murmuring how sexy that was, how it made him feel good to see me come.

One of the most beautiful things about having sex with Christian is that for just a little while, the voices inside my head go quiet.

Tears spring to my eyes at the blissfulness of silence.

I can still feel my connection with my people and I know the Ancestors are still there but just for a moment, they are quiet .

My hips move up, thrusting against Christian. That's when I realize he's still fully clothed.

"Christian," I whisper, pulling his face away from my throat. "Get naked. Please. I need to feel you. I need your skin against my own. I need you inside of me. Please. Own me. All of me."

Christian ducks down and kisses my lips instead. He's the one person I cannot tell what to do. He is not someone I need to lead. He's my partner. He is my equal. By the Ancestors, I have missed him.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

His tongue tastes like my spend and that makes my stomach tighten in pleasure.

My ass is dripping down onto the sheets beneath me with how turned on I am.

It's all too much and yet, I am prepared to beg for more.

I want it all, everything Christian is willing to give me so long as he promises to actually do it and not leave me begging forever.

My tail continues to slowly fuck my soaked hole because he hasn't told me to stop yet. His mouth ravages my mouth, leaving me breathless. My cock is already perking up once more despite having only come just a moment before. With Christian, I feel as though I will never get enough.

Christian's mouth moves to my jaw once more, nipping and sucking a mark into my skin. Then he moves lower, kneeling between my thighs. He stops to kiss each of my nipples. Then his teeth skim my stomach. He licks my cock once in a teasing fashion and then just like that, he is gone.

"Christian," I call out with a whine.

"Let me get naked."

"Pruist , please. I need you."

Christian begins taking off his clothes but he tilts his head in question. "I know you like calling me that. You finally gonna tell me what that word means?"

I've been calling Christian pruit for years. I bite my bottom lip for a moment before nodding. He deserves to know the truth.

"It's a type of flower. It has big purple leaves around it and a bulb of thorns in the middle. If you are careful and can pull the shell away from the thorny bulb, you will find nectar sweeter than you have ever tasted." I hold out my hand for him when he's finally naked. "Just like you."

Christian crawls back into place between my thighs. His skin is so hot against my own that I suck in a sharp breath, overwhelmed with the feel of him. He runs a finger over my cheek.

"You see me in such a flattering light. Thank you."

"I see you as you are even if you do not wish to see it yourself," I say as I pull him down into a kiss. This time when my hips move, our cocks are pressed together, rubbing against each other. We moan into the kiss as we move together.

"Are you ready for me? Do you want me to fuck you, Ghenie?"

"Yes," I gasp out against his lips. "Fuck me. Consume me. I need it, Christian. I need you."

"You have me. You have all of me, I promise."

"Then show me," I say, biting his bottom lip. He smirks down at me before he's flipping me onto my belly. I moan, long and low at being manhandled like that. Christian is smaller than me and yet, he has total control. It's so sexy!

Christian moves my hips slightly and pulls my tail out of the way.

Then he replaces my tail with the tip of his cock.

I push back but his fingers dig into my hips, keeping me still.

I'm at his mercy. My mind is blissfully blank.

I don't have to think, I don't have to hear the voices.

All I have to do is allow Christian to do exactly what he pleases. I am more than capable of that.

"You are everything to me, Ghenie," Christian breathes out as his cock enters me fully.

It's scorching hot as it moves inside me, stretching me just right.

I'm suddenly breathless, my entire body tensing with pleasure.

More than that, my heart aches with affection.

My mate is here. He's inside me. He's touching me in the most intimate way possible. My heart belongs to him.

As Christian bottoms out, he leans his chest against my back, his breath hot against my shoulder.

He's inside of me but he is also completely surrounding me.

The only thing inside my head is a mantra of Christian, Christian, Christian .

I feel bliss throughout my body from the tip of my tail to the top of my head.

“Feels so good,” I gasp out, doing my best to tip my hips up so I can somehow get Christian even deeper inside of me. “Shit, Christian!”

“You’re perfect,” Christian says as he slowly slides his cock back out. Then he plunges back in, his thrusts coming faster and harder until I have to put my hands against the wall, keeping myself from slipping forward.

This is everything I didn’t know I was craving. Christian fucks me hard, keeping my head silent, keeping my thoughts blank with bliss. He fucks me until my toes are curling and my tail is whipping back and forth behind us.

Christian stills my tail by wrapping his fingers around it at the very base.

His thumb rubs the skin between my tail and my hole.

Pleasure like I’ve never felt before surges through me.

I had no idea that spot was so sensitive .

I have to cover my mouth as I whimper, doing my best to keep myself quiet.

“Use your tail, Ghenie. Wrap it around your cock just the way you like. Dip the tip into your slit. Make yourself feel good for me. I need your ass to throb around my cock as you come.”

I bury my face against my pillow, letting out a long and ragged moan at Christian’s words. I do exactly as he has asked me, wrapping my tail around my cock. Then I use the very tip to run around my cockhead, swirling through my precum before dipping into the slit.

“Oh,” I gasp out as pleasure races through me.

Christian is nailing my sweet spot and my tail is stroking me just right.

He's still holding onto the base of my tail.

My head is spinning with how good everything feels.

"I am going to come. It's too good. Please.

Need you to fill me up, Christian. Make me yours. "

"Mine," he says, leaning down and latching his mouth onto my shoulder.

The pain mixes with my pleasure and my mind goes completely white as my body locks down around Christian's cock.

It's too much. It's too good. I can't hold my orgasm back a moment longer, and why would I when Christian is practically begging to feel me come.

I bite my pillow as I come, flooding the sheets beneath me with my cum, my ass becoming so wet that it splashes against Christian's hips. My body is a conduit of pleasure and I shake with it, overwhelmed in the best possible way.

"Fuck, Ghenie," Christian breathes out as his hips slap against me a few more times before he's stilling. I can feel him filling me up, I can feel his cock throb and twitch. I squeeze around him, needing to milk every last drop from him.

I feel claimed. I feel owned. I am Christian's and I hope with all my heart that he is mine as well. He wraps his arms around me, holding me tight. This is what I have been dreaming of for years and to finally have it leaves me breathless.

This is so much better than the first time because I know he will be here in the

morning. No more running. No more guessing. No more hoping because I know .

It's Christian who moves first, pulling his cock free from my ass. I wince at the feeling.

"I'll be right back," Christian murmurs, kissing my head before he goes to the bathroom. He returns with a cloth, using it to wipe my body clean.

I do not remember a time I have been cared for with such gentleness. My chest aches with how much I adore this man. I care for him more than I thought possible.

Once I am clean, Christian carefully rolls Maribel back into the room with us. Then he blows out all the candles before getting into bed beside me. I lie my head against his chest, listening to his heart beat beneath my ear. His arm wraps around me, holding me tight.

"That was everything I hoped it would be and somehow so much more," Christian whispers into the dark. "You are everything I hoped you would be. I wish it hadn't taken me this long to get out of my own way."

I squeeze around Christian's middle. "Do not trouble yourself with that. The only thing that matters is that we're here now. We're together. We are going to plan a future together with Maribel. That's what matters, Christian."

Christian makes a playful little growling noise. "Hate it when you're right. Pisses me right off."

"Yes," I say with a chuckle. "I do remember how much you hate that and how many arguments we had."

"Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up, asshole."

I really shouldn't find that nickname so affectionate but it's the way he says it that makes my heart melt. I carefully nod my head. "Your asshole."

I can feel Christian cringe and I can't stop grinning. "I hate that. Never again. Putting the 'your' in front of it made it so much worse."

We're careful to keep our giggling as quiet as possible, not wanting to wake up Maribel. I lean up on my elbow just enough to get my mouth on Christian. We trade barely there, soft kisses until I have to break apart in order to yawn.

"Get some sleep," Christian whispers, tucking some of my hair behind my ear. "I promise I'll be here in the morning."

"You better be or I'll kick your ass."

Christian snorts so loud that Maribel startles. We both freeze, waiting. Thankfully she just turns her head and continues to sleep.

"You dick," Christian whispers against my hair. "You almost made me wake her up."

"I was just using your own phrase! I cannot be blamed!"

The two of us continue whispering into the night until we can barely keep our eyes open anymore. It's the most wonderful night I've had in a really, really long time.

Chapter Ten

Christian

“Okay, Maribel,” I whisper into my daughter’s hair as I walk across the street to Miles’ house. “We’re gonna go on a nice long walk with your uncle and cousin. Then we’re gonna go see your daddy.”

Maribel makes the most adorable noise that almost sounds like a giggle or a coo.

My heart feels like it might literally burst out of my chest. I’ve only known her for a month but I’m already so deeply in love with her.

I didn’t even know I was capable of feelings like this, but here I am, being the best dad I know how to be.

I might have had the most rotten examples of parents but thankfully, I’m surrounded by amazing parents now that I can lean on and learn from. One of those parents happens to be leaving his house right now.

“Come on, Druim. Do you wanna walk or should I carry you?”

Druim holds up his hands. “Shoulders.”

Miles grins as he grabs Druim under his arms and hauls him up onto his shoulders. Then Miles turns towards me. “Ready to go?”

“Timalah’s not coming?”

“He’s already there. I think he was planning on going for a long walk with Ghenie to talk everything through before the town meeting.”

I nod my head. “That makes sense. Glad he can talk to someone since you know, I’m just a filthy human.”

“Shut up,” Miles says, hip checking me.

“Shut up!”

I look up at Druim, unable to keep myself from chuckling. “Oh, you’re a sponge aren’t you. It would be terrible if I taught you some curse words, wouldn’t it?”

“Don’t you dare,” Miles grits out through clenched teeth, doing his best not to laugh. “I swear, Timalah will be so upset if we accidentally teach him the F word.”

“But Miles,” I say with a fake whine. “Think about how funny it would be.”

“It is funny when kids say stuff like that but alas, we’ll have to wait for it to happen naturally.”

“You used to be fun.”

Miles looks over at me, shaking his head. “You used to be a raging asshole.”

“Dada? Dada? Dada?”

Miles’ grin drops as he looks up as best as he can at his son. “Yes, Druim?”

“Ash hole?”

I can't stop laughing as we make our way into town, walking towards the town square.

I look over at my friend, remembering the day he ran here and dove into the underbelly of the city.

The Layperry have a tradition where a person fights their way through the maze below and if they make it out and find their mate, they were destined to be together.

It's always rubbed me the wrong way. Today, all of that changes.

Ghenie and Timalah are already up on the stage, their heads close together as they speak.

My heart does a funny little flip at the sight of Ghenie.

He's wearing his long, platinum hair in two braids that meet in the middle and run down his back at the center.

His pale skin shines in the sun. He looks like he's glowing.

“I didn't realize how bad you had it until right now.”

I look over at my best friend and roll my eyes. “Whatever. Like you're one to talk.”

“I'm just saying. You should see your smile right now. You practically have hearts in your eyes.”

“I do not. Love is not in the air. Gross.”

“You can’t fool me!”

“Maybe if you were looking at your mate instead of me you’d see the way Timalah is trying to wave at you.”

“What?” Miles quickly turns around, his face morphing into a grin as he waves up at Timalah.

Now that I’m not being scrutinized, I wave up at Ghenie.

He nods his head at me, raising his hand.

He always looks so dignified. In the past, that always pissed me off.

It made me feel like I was beneath him. Now, I still feel beneath but more like I’m on my knees for him.

Now, I know he has to rise above, to keep himself distanced from everyone as is his station as leader.

Now I see the whole picture instead of getting stuck on the hurt inside my own chest and allowing that to color everyone around me.

“Hello everyone,” Ghenie calls out, his voice ringing out through the square for everyone to hear.

“Thank you for coming. I have a very important announcement I would like you all to hear. This is something I do not announce lightly. It is something I have spoken to the Ancestors about and with my closest counsel. Today I announce a change.”

I hold my breath, listening.

“Today is the start of a new age filled with new traditions. No longer will the maturous trial occur. Instead, the underbelly of our great city will determine the fate of those destined to join our warriors. If you feel called, you will be called to prove yourself. To prove your worth, your bravery, and your skills. The underbelly will be your final stage before being declared a warrior!”

There are murmurs and a few cheers at the news. For the most part, everyone seems to be on board with what’s been announced though there are still a few confused voices in the crowd.

“I will no longer be preparing matches unless you wish my council. It will be your choice,” Ghenie continues.

“Instead, you will come to me when you feel ready. You and your mate, your one true partner, your matron will come to me and we will talk things through. When everyone is ready, we will have a public declaration in front of friends, family, and our Ancestors to declare your match made. It will be a time for celebrations and promises, to pledge yourself to your mate.”

A wedding. Instead of physical combat and dangerous encounters, the Layperry people will have weddings. My head is spinning with this new information.

I have never subscribed to the idea of proving yourself to your partner like the old tradition held but a wedding or a handfasting ceremony? I think I could handle that, especially for Ghenie. He deserves to celebrate with his people.

“If anyone has further questions or would like to discuss anything with me, I will be instating an open door policy in my office here in town. Any time I am in, you are free to come speak with me.”

Timalah raises his hands. “That will be all. Our Toralleh has spoken. So it will be.”

“So it will be,” a few people say in agreement. People start to disperse, going back to their homes or gathering together to talk.

I turn towards Miles only to freeze when my eyes lock onto a very strong, toned pale pink chest. I look up and meet this person’s eyes. They stare down at me, a wide smile across their lips.

“Hello, Christian. It’s wonderful to officially meet you,” he says, grabbing my hand and shaking it. “Ghenie has been keeping us away, not wanting to spook you but we thought it was time to officially introduce ourselves.”

“Umm?”

“My name is Scrintum,” he says in explanation. “I’m Ghenie’s dad and behind you is Plun. He’s Ghenie’s father.”

I swallow around the lump in my throat. “It’s nice to meet you too,” I say out loud instead of turning around and running as far and as fast as I can. Shit, shit, shit. I’m not good with parents! They’re going to see right through me and remind Ghenie of what an ass I am!

“Nice to meet you,” Plun says, resting a hand on my shoulder. I turn around so I can look at him. He’s tall with dark green skin and a beard to match. “Ghenie sure is taken by you, son.”

“Don’t embarrass them,” Scrintum says quickly, reaching past me and slapping Plun’s arm. “Don’t listen to him, Christian. Ghenie is just as enthralled by you as you are of him. Very normal. Nothing extravagant. Nothing to worry about.”

“You’re making things worse, love.”

“Am not!” Scrintum looks up at me. “You’re not freaked out right now, right? Tell him.”

I look at him, then at Plun, then back at Scrintum. I swallow and run my fingers through my hair. I open my mouth to respond but nothing comes out.

“See! Now you’ve done it, Plun! You’ve scared him speechless!”

Plun chuckles softly, moving around me so he can stand beside his mate. He wraps an arm around his waist. “I’m sorry, Christian.”

“It’s fine,” I finally manage. “I’m just a little surprised, that’s all.”

Plun hums and nods his head. Scrintum jumps back in. “We can be a little much but we’ve seen how happy Ghenie has been lately. It would be a shame not to officially meet the reason for that smile.”

My heart skips a beat. The confirmation that I make Ghenie happy does something weird to my insides. He makes me happy too. More than I can say.

“I’m glad he’s happy. That’s all I want. Really.”

“I believe you,” Scrintum says. “Please don’t run away again.”

“Scrintum! We promised not to bring that up!”

“Shit, sorry. Pretend you didn’t hear that.”

“Didn’t hear what?”

Scrintum giggles. “Good man! I knew you and I would get along.”

“Father? Dad?”

Both of them freeze and turn slowly to face Ghenie like children caught with their hands in the cookie jar. It would be comical if I wasn't so tense from meeting them.

“It's not what it looks like. Umm, we were actually fucking! No, shit. Sorry. That's weird,” Scrintum says, covering his face with his hands. I burst out into laughter at what he's just said, surprised that's his go to for getting caught.

Maybe I don't actually have anything to worry about with these two. Maybe they're just ordinary people who happen to be Ghenie's dads and not someone I need to try to win over.

Plun hums, squeezing his mate even harder. “We were just saying hello to Christian.”

“And this is going... well?”

I nod my head. “They seem lovely. Maybe we should have them over for dinner this weekend?”

Scrintum lets out a squeal of excitement. “I would love that! I'll bring some dessert!”

Ghenie lets out a long sigh but I can see the smile he's pretending to hide. He loves this. I can't say that I hate it.

Plun cups Ghenie's face gently, his thumb rubbing over his cheek. “How's your head?”

“Loud. I could use a walk.”

“Why don't we take Maribel and you two can relax?”

“I would like that.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

I get Maribel out of the chest harness, kiss her cute chubby cheeks, and then hand her over to Plun. She immediately starts to smile in a way that lets me know she's going to need a diaper change soon. Perfect timing.

I place a hand on Ghenie's lower back. "Shall we?" He nods his head. "It was nice meeting you. I look forward to getting to know you better at dinner."

"You too, son," Plun says. The words were simple yet they strike a chord within my heart. He called me son. He called me son . I'm not sure how I feel about that. My chest warms but at the same time, that's yet another terrifying thing, to allow another person in.

For now, I focus on getting Ghenie out of the crowd and into a quieter place so he can rest his mind. Timalah and Miles fall into step with us once we're on the outskirts of town.

"To the water?" Timalah asks and Ghenie nods his head. He reaches down and laces our fingers together, leaning against my side.

The smell of the salt hits my nose before our feet hit the sand. I don't think I'll ever grow tired of this place, this view.

"I know a special place," Timalah says, guiding us to a small alcove naturally made into the side of a hill. "This place is sacred. It holds many, many memories. Fondness practically radiates from the stone, from the sand."

Timalah shares a look with Miles and it takes all of my willpower not to wrinkle my

nose at them. They totally did it here. Gross.

Ghenie steps inside, ducking his head. He looks around in wonder. There's some type of foliage here, lighting up against the stone, allowing us to see.

"It is beautiful."

"Just like you," I say, turning towards Ghenie.

"Oh my god."

I freeze, turning back towards my best friend. I hold up my hand. "Don't. Don't you dare. I'm not afraid to throw you in the sea right now."

He opens his mouth but I step towards him. He holds up his hands in surrender before pretending to zip his lips closed.

"We should go," Timalah says, leaning down to kiss Miles' head. "Let them have a moment alone."

The last time Timalah kept throwing looks like that, I found out I was a dad.

I narrow my eyes at him but he makes a hasty retreat out of this little cave he's led us to.

That was weird. What the fuck was that about?

Is a giant snake about to jump out and eat us?

Surely my best friend wouldn't have a hand in my ultimate demise.

He better take care of Maribel when I'm gone.

Once they've made their way out, I turn towards Ghenie. "What was that about?"

"No idea what you mean," he says right away and now I'm even more suspicious. Ghenie walks deeper into this little cave, running his hand over the stone wall. "In all my time here, I have never seen this place before."

There are carvings in the stone. Ghenie's fingers rest over T+M carved by a knife and I smile. Is this Timalah and Miles or has another couple come and carved their initials into the wall?

"This one," Ghenie says softly, tilting his head like he's trying to listen as he runs his fingers over a smiley face. "A young man came here and found solace during a storm. He drew this smiley face to show he made it through."

"This place holds a lot of memories," I say softly, suddenly feeling like I'm intruding on something special. The voices in Ghenie's head have a lot to say about this place.

"So many," Ghenie agrees. "This could be a special place. Something sacred." He turns around, looking at the entrance.

"What if we redesigned it slightly, opening the mouth and allowing people to come here. What if--" his voice trails off until his eyes finally find mine.

"What if we found a way to leave the Ancestors here. Make this a place where anyone can come and pray to them, to find solace in their presence. Do you think such a thing could be possible?"

My heart leaps into my throat. This might have been a tradition for a very long time, but knowing how loud the voices can be has always made me wish that Ghenie didn't

have to have them.

They can be demanding and loud and straining, yet Ghenie has always held their presence with grace, allowing them a place at the table. Ghenie deserves peace if it's possible.

"I think that would be amazing," I say truthfully. "Not only would that give you your own space, but people would be able to come themselves. I'm not sure how that would work with the Ancestors talking back, but I think it could be good for you and your people."

"Our people," Ghenie says, looking around. The comment is almost off handed but it leaves me feeling some sort of way. I feel accepted. I feel like I'm a part of something bigger than myself. Could these truly be my people too?

"What do the Ancestors think?"

Ghenie hums, closing his eyes and listening.

He holds his head in his hands. It takes a long time before he answers.

"There are a few against the idea but the majority would like me to research this further and see if it is possible. They would be okay being disconnected from me if it means being more connected to our people as a whole."

I step into Ghenie's space, wrapping my arms around his waist and pulling him against me. "They'd have their own space and wouldn't have to watch us have sex anymore. It's a win all around."

"Christian!" Ghenie huffs, chuckling. "You are terrible."

“Maybe so but for some reason you keep me around.”

“It is the size of your dick, obviously.”

The gasp of shock I let out is incredibly overdramatic but still comes naturally because when did my up-tight, have-it-all-together alien start telling jokes like this?

I always knew he had a sense of humor behind all that seriousness.

Maybe if we can get the Ancestors out of his head, I'll get to see more of this side of Ghenie.

“I'd be happy to give you a repeat performance,” I say, letting my hands run down Ghenie's back in order to grab his cute little ass. He gasps before leaning down and stealing a kiss.

His hands come around me, holding me, like he's afraid I might pull away.

There's no place I'd rather be. I might have been a run risk in the past, but that part of me has found peace.

I'm not going anywhere, not unless Ghenie sends me away and I have the utmost hope that that's not happening.

We're it for each other. He is my partner and I am his.

“Christian,” Ghenie whispers as he pulls back, keeping his forehead pressed against my own. I can feel his antennae against my skin and they tickle. “There are so many voices, but there is a new one.”

“I'm sorry, did someone pass?”

“No, no. Not like that.”

“Then what?”

“This one is a new voice. Well, that is not correct. They are new but they do not have a voice, not yet.”

I pull back so I can look up into Ghenie’s eyes, trying to comprehend what he’s saying. “What do you mean?”

Ghenie takes my hand and brings my palm to his stomach. “They are here.”

I blink, processing this news. It takes me longer than I’m willing to admit to realize what Ghenie is telling me. Then it hits me all at once. He’s pregnant. We’re going to have another baby.

Oh my god.

How did this happen? Nope, stupid question. The ridiculous amount of sex we’ve been having would be the how. Fuck. Okay. This is fine. Totally fine.

I’m totally not freaking out.

“You are freaking out, aren’t you?”

“No! Of course not! There’s nothing to freak out about!”

Ghenie’s eyes scan my face and I do my best to present myself as level headed and calm. He sees right through me.

“You’re freaking out.”

“I’m not! I’m just surprised though now that I admit it, I really shouldn’t be. We’ve been fucking. A lot. In many different positions.”

“Yes. It’s been lovely.”

“But that’s also how babies are made. Jesus, I’m an EMT!

I work in healthcare! I know these things,” I blurt out, covering my face with my free hand.

“I was just swept up in our reunion I didn’t stop to think about things like protection and babies.

Especially because you’re nursing still. Dickbrain took over!”

“Dickbrain?”

“Yes, all the blood went to my dick instead of my brain!”

Ghenie cracks a smile, showing off his little fangs. “I like your dickbrain. It’s been my utmost pleasure.”

“Ghenie! I’m being serious.”

“For once.”

Okay, he got me there. I take my hand away from his stomach in order to cup his face instead. I look up at him, seeing his smile, the excitement in his eyes. He’s happy. Seeing him happy in turn makes me happy.

“We’re really doing this? Having another baby?”

“We are.”

“Can you tell if they’re human?”

Ghenie grins even wider. “I’ve felt them throw emotions in my direction which means they’re either Layperry or hybrid.”

I try to picture them and my stomach floods with warmth. I’m going to be a dad again. I’m going to have another child. Maribel is going to have a sibling.

Sure, this is still a shock and I still need time to process this news but the overall feeling I have is joy. I hold onto that with all my might.

I lean up on my toes and kiss Ghenie’s lips. He makes a surprised noise before he’s sinking into the kiss.

“I’ll do better this time. I’ll be here to take care of you and rub oil on your belly and fetch you your cravings. I’m not going anywhere, Ghenie.”

Ghenie’s eyes fill with tears. “That’s all I could ever hope for.”

Chapter Eleven

Christian

Sweat drips down the side of my head as I put the finishing touches on everything. I really shouldn't be nervous. I don't normally care what people think of me. They never last long enough to really make a difference if they like me or not anyway. But this is different.

Instead of just hosting Ghenie's parents, I got the bright idea to have a dinner party. I figured it would be a nice buffer so that things never get awkward, but that also means they're all going to be here at once. So many things could go wrong.

"Are you well?"

I freeze before slowly turning around, finding Ghenie watching me. His eyes sweep over my face before he's stepping into my space, wrapping his arms around my back.

"I'm fine," I say right away, lying through my teeth. "Totally not freaking out about impressing your parents. Nope. That would be silly."

"Very silly indeed," he says, nodding his head. "They will love you because you are you. You have nothing to prove."

"Except I'm working overtime trying to make up for leaving."

"Oh, Christian," Ghenie says, squeezing me tight. "You don't have anything to make

up for. You did what was right for you at the time. You have to forgive yourself eventually.”

“If you say so,” I whisper. “Will you help me set the table?”

“Of course,” he says before leaning down and kissing the tip of my nose. It’s such a silly gesture that I find myself blushing. And then I immediately curse myself for blushing. I don’t blush!

We carry platters into the dining room, setting them out on the long table we brought in just for this dinner.

Maribel is lying on the floor on a blanket, making adorable gurgling noises at the toys that hang above her.

She reaches up and hits one, giggling to herself.

I don’t think I’ll ever stop feeling so much wonder when I look at her.

Instead of preparing a huge meal for everyone, I’ve made a bunch of random finger foods.

Everyone can assemble their own charcuterie boards.

There are random cuts of cured meats, there are veggies that have been cut into sticks.

Next to those are some crackers and some soft bread.

I’ve added a bit of chocolate and other sweets along with some fruit.

I've also whipped up two different types of dips for everyone to try.

The variety should make for interesting tastes and textures while being small so it's easy to eat as we all talk. Ghenie also got us two bottles of wine so everyone can have a drink while we eat.

God, I really want this to go well. Since when do I give a shit what people think? This is downright maddening, but I can't deny the pull to impress Ghenie's parents.

"I think that's everything."

Ghenie plucks a fruit from the table, popping it into his mouth. "It's perfect, Christian. Stop fussing."

"I feel like our roles are reversed today. You seem so carefree."

Ghenie shrugs. "I'm about to be surrounded by my favorite people without any responsibilities or tasks. It is going to be a good day."

"You just jinxed it," I murmur as someone knocks on the door. I give Ghenie a look as I walk over to the door, leaving him giggling behind me. If anything goes wrong, I can absolutely blame it on him.

"Hey, bestie!"

I take the bottle from Miles' hands and turn around. "Don't ever call me that again."

Timalah lets out a booming laugh. "Did I not tell you he would hate that?"

"I thought he would make an exception!" Miles says and I can hear the pout in his voice. "Hello, Maribel. Aren't you so sweet? She's so aware these days, it's

amazing!”

“She’s captivated by the mobile. I think she likes the churato the best.” A churato is something similar to a rhino. It has a horn on its nose but its skin is dark purple and it has giant floppy ears. There’s one on Maribel’s mobile and she’s always trying to grab it.

“Smart girl,” Timalah says as he walks over to the table full of food. “What do you think, Druim? Would you like to try some fruit?”

“Fruit. Fruit. Fruit.”

“Very good,” Timalah says, grinning from ear to ear. “He is catching on quick. Soon enough he will be outspeaking us all.”

Ghenie gives him a soft smile. I know he has some sort of weird Toralleh connection to everyone but he’s also mentioned to me that he’s fairly certain Druim will be the next Toralleh after him.

It’s weird knowing that. Druim is just a baby still, but someday he’ll be grown and when he is, he might well be leading the Layperry people.

The next people through the door are Maria, Aldo, Gendry, and their daughter, MJ. I clasp Gendry on the shoulder and welcome the rest inside.

“I have to poop,” I say to Gendry. Aldo bursts into a fit of giggles.

“Excuse me?” Maria asks, looking put out. I hold up my hands.

“Sorry, it’s an inside joke.”

“When I was on Earth, Christian told me that was a phrase humans used to greet each other. That is the first thing I said when meeting Aldo.”

Maria raises her brow at her son. “That’s how he introduced himself and you still fell for him?”

“I did indeed,” he says with a grin, looking up at his mate. These two are somehow sappier than Timalah and Miles. Okay, enough eye fucking before I toss up my lunch.

“Right this way,” I say, ushering them towards the table. “You can make your own plate and mingle as you see fit. The kids have a little area in the living room. Let me know if you need anything.”

Now I sit by the door and wait, hoping I don’t look like an idiot to everyone else already here. When there’s a knock at the door, my heart jumps up to my throat. I take a breath before opening it up.

“Christian! Hello! It’s so lovely to see you. Thank you again for inviting us,” Scrintum says, pulling me into a tight hug. I let out a squeak of surprise before composing myself and hugging him back.

Plun on the other hand reaches over and takes my hand, giving it a firm shake. “Nice to see you again, son.”

There’s that word again. Son. He says it with such warmth and casualness but it leaves me feeling some sort of way.

“Come in,” I say, closing the door behind them. “I have a table of food for you to pick from and a bottle of your favorite wine. Ghenie picked it out because he knew you liked it.”

“That is quite thoughtful, Christian.”

Timalah, Gendry, and Ghenie are talking in a corner together while Miles, Aldo, and Maria are sitting in the living area with the kids. I guide Scrintum and Plun to the food table, showing them the selection.

“You seem nervous,” Plun says, picking up a plate and piling food onto it. He’s a man of few words so when he speaks, it usually means something.

“I’m not! Of course not! What do I have to be nervous about?”

“Nothing,” he says, reaching over and clasping my shoulder. “Take a breath.”

I suck in a sharp breath and I have to admit, I do feel a lot better afterwards. I go to grab the wine but I misjudge the distance. Christ on a cracker, I spill it across my pants.

“Fuck.”

Scrintum is there, pushing me into the kitchen. “No worries. Let me get you cleaned up.”

“No, you don’t have to.”

“I insist. Let me dote on you.”

Scrintum pushes me down onto the breakfast stool, running around the kitchen in order to grab a rag and some water.

Then he wipes the mess from my shirt and pants.

Plun on the other hand, grabs a different rag and cleans up the table in the other room.

Both do it without any fuss. There's no shouting or anger or resentment that I've ruined the moment.

They take care of me and do it with soft smiles on their faces. Like they're enjoying being able to care for me.

I am floored with emotions. They hit me square in the chest so hard I suddenly can't breathe.

My entire life, I wondered what it would be like to have parents who loved me and suddenly, out of nowhere, I have them. Plun and Scrintum barely know me but I think they've adopted me without me realizing.

"There we go," Scrintum says, tossing the rag into the sink. "All fixed. Please don't fret. Mistakes happen. There's no reason to cry over spilled wine."

"Table is clean," Plun says as he walks back into the room. "That spread you have made looks delicious, Christian. I am looking forward to getting my plate."

I look at them for a long time, doing my best not to do something ridiculous like burst out crying. My throat is tight, my eyes are watery, and my chest aches something fierce.

"Thank you," I tell them, hoping to convey everything I'm feeling in those two words.

Scrintum grabs my cheeks, squishing them together. He's being silly in order to break the tension and I appreciate him for it. "You are getting sappy in your old age. Do not worry, we won't tell Ghenie."

“Won’t tell me what?”

Scrintum quickly lets go of my face, looking guilty at being caught. He tucks his hands behind his back and rocks back on his heels. The perfect picture of innocence. I can’t help but laugh and in response, he narrows his eyes at me.

“Don’t worry,” I say, looking back at Ghenie. “They were just taking care of me.”

“Should I be jealous? You let them care for you but always argue when I try.”

I smile so wide my cheeks hurt. “Nothing quite like the care of a parent, huh?”

Plun hums, the sound soft and understanding.

Scrintum looks like he’s about to burst a blood vessel trying to keep himself quiet but his eyes shine with joy.

Not only have I been blessed with someone like Ghenie as a partner, but I’ve also somehow gotten adopted by two wonderful people who’re willing to show me the love I never got when I was younger.

I was so worried about this dinner party but apparently, it was exactly what I didn’t know I needed.

“Thank you for that,” Scrintum finally says, like he needed to say something or he would burst. I nod my head in acknowledgement. Plun gives me a look before he’s wrapping his arm around his mate and pulling him back out towards the food.

Ghenie replaces his dad in front of me. He places his hands on my cheeks but he doesn’t squeeze them like his dad did, instead he caresses my cheek.

All of those unworthy feelings are back, but they're getting easier and easier to ignore.

I do deserve good things. I do deserve this love that these people are offering me. It's up to me to accept them.

"I think today is a success."

"Very much so," Ghenie says. Then he leans down and kisses my lips.

The kiss is soft, barely there. Our friends and family are so close and if someone walks in, I might throw myself out the window but for a moment, I sit here and let Ghenie show me love.

I can be soft for him and him alone, everyone else can fuck off.

"I lo.." the words catch in my throat. I try again. "I adore you, Ghenie."

Ghenie's smile is breathtaking. "And I you." Then he grabs my hand and hauls me out of my seat. "Let us get back to our party before they think we are back here. Umm, what's the phrase? Right. They might think we are back here fucking."

"Ghenie!" I gasp out in fake surprise, chuckling softly as we go back and join the others. The rest of the night goes off without a hitch.

Page 16

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Chapter Twelve

Ghenie

I rest my hands on my round stomach, looking around at my most trusted comrades. It has been a few months since my announcement to my people. Construction has been done on the alcove near the sea and today is the day we've all been working towards.

Today I am going to present our Ancestors with their new resting place.

It is my duty to usher them into their new home, making sure it's cared for, making sure it's never abused.

The Ancestors have explained I will have new duties if this works.

As Toralleh of our people, it will be my most sacred duty to gently guide those who pass into their new resting place.

I will harbor them in my own mind until I can safely bring them to their new home, here in the alcove.

When I was given this title, there was a small ceremony where the last leader, for lack of a better explanation, shifted the Ancestors from his mind to mine.

I will do this same ceremony but this time, no one will receive them.

They will stay here, encased in the walls of stone nature has made just for them.

A place that has been shared with our people, a place of joy and memories and loss and love.

The People's Hope is what we've named this place and it is my desire that it encompasses that name to its fullest extent.

"Are we ready?"

Everyone around me nods their heads, witnesses to the ceremony. I will lean on them for strength. Christian kneels beside me and takes my hand, bringing it to his mouth so he can kiss my knuckles.

"Are you sure this is safe?"

"The Ancestors would not allow anything to happen if they thought it might harm our baby."

Christian's eyes grow soft. "I appreciate that but right now, I'm more worried about you. Are you going to be alright, Ghenie?"

My heart skips a beat at his worry for me.

He loves me, even if he hasn't said those exact words yet.

He shows me his love through his actions, by granting me the privilege of seeing his softness.

I know that when Christian is ready, he will finally say those words and when he does, that will be a privilege all on its own.

“I will be alright. Thank you for being here and lending me your strength, pruiist .”

He rolls his eyes at the familiar pet name. With one last kiss pressed into the middle of my forehead, Christian is standing back, slotting himself into place in the circle around me.

“Thank you all for being here,” I say from my place on the ground.

“Today, we welcome Layperry history to be made. No longer will our Ancestors be tied to one person, but instead, they will be tied to each and every one of us, available for prayer and supplication. Today we embark on a new chapter of our story.”

I lie back in the dirt, resting my mind.

There are waves of voices crashing through me.

Soon, they will finally be free in a way they haven’t been before.

Just as I was tied to them, they were stuck being tied with me.

They were forced to see me live my life, forced to see my love for Christian, forced to feel not only my joy but also my pain. This will be good for all of us.

I take some steadying breaths, doing my best to clear my mind, putting myself away. I bring the Ancestors to the front, focusing on them. Then I repeat the process that was once carried out when the voices of our people were bestowed to me.

“Ancestors,” I say, my voice sounding like many to my own ears. “I release you.”

Normally, this is where our next Toralleh would call out, embracing them. But this time, no one embraces them. Or maybe it would be more appropriate to say that we

all embrace them. I can feel them trickling out, leaving my mind. The alcove around us grows warm with their presence.

They are all around me, a tangible presence within The People's Hope. If I concentrate, I swear I can still hear their voices but instead of them shouting, it's a gentle whisper.

When I open my eyes, everything is exactly the same yet completely different.

I am me but my mind is blissfully silent.

I feel as though I can hear myself think for the first time since becoming my people's leader.

Tears slide down my cheeks against my permission.

It takes all of my control not to openly weep in relief.

My breath is shaky as I suck in a giant gasp.

I look around, finding Timalah, Gendry, and Christian looking around in wonder.

They can feel it too, they can feel the Ancestors' presence.

This is exactly what I dreamed would happen.

This is a sacred place for all those who need guidance and acceptance.

This is the place my people can come when they need hope.

"Ghenie," Timalah says slowly, his eyes wide. "I can feel them. I can almost hear

them. This is--" his words leave him.

Christian quickly gets on the ground with me, wrapping an arm around my back. I tip sideways, leaning against him fully. "You must feel so relieved," he whispers so only I can hear. "I'm so happy for you."

"I am so happy too," I say right back. "I am happy for my people but I am so happy for me. I can think again. I am myself. I don't have words to express the things I am feeling."

"That's okay. Save your words. Just take a moment and enjoy the peace."

That's exactly what we do. I'm not sure how much time passes but we stay like that for a long time, sitting together in the Ancestors' presence. Eventually, the sun begins to set and it is time to finalize these changes.

"Timalah, it will be your duty to make sure this place is always protected. A warrior with eyes on the entrance at all times might be necessary. We will never bar entry, but we also do not want people misusing this place."

"Understood," Timalah says, nodding his head.

Christian clears his throat, getting everyone's attention. "May we have the room please? I just need a moment with Ghenie and umm," he waves his hands around in the air. "And with the Ancestors. Or whatever."

Timalah, Gendry, and everyone else files out. I can hear them outside, Timalah already planning a schedule for his warriors to take on sentry duties. My heart feels so full while my mind feels so empty. It will be an adjustment but one I truly look forward to.

Christian moves until he's kneeling in front of me instead of against my side. He takes my hands in his own, squeezing them.

"Are you well?"

Christian nods. "Very." He licks his lips, trying to find his words. Finally, he just blurts them out. "I love you."

I suck in a sharp breath. Hearing those words hits me square in the chest. It feels like a warm balm, covering my soul. It feels so good and leaves me breathless.

"I love you, Ghenie. In front of your Ancestors, I have a question to ask you. Would you consider marrying me? We can follow your new tradition. We can get in front of everyone, declare our feelings for each other, and be united as a family unit." Christian clears his throat, doing his best to stay composed but I can see how hard this is for him.

That makes these words even more potent, more special. "I am yours."

"I am yours," I say to him, mirroring his declaration.

I can feel the warmth around us increase, the Ancestors are cheering in their own way, revealing to us their feelings about our match.

"I have been yours for a long time. It would be my honor to publicly declare that. But I would also be happy with something smaller to fit your comfort. Something for just us and those closest to us."

Christian gets a soft look on his face and I am once again honored that I get to see this side of him. "I appreciate the offer," he says softly. "We can plan something together, something we're both comfortable with."

“I love you. Your comfort is important to me.”

“ You are important to me,” he says before he’s wrinkling his nose. “Okay, that’s my line. That was too sappy for me.”

I chuckle softly, overwhelmed with my love for this man. Without saying another word, I pull him forward and hug him tight. All around us, it feels like the Ancestors are hugging us too, holding us together, approving our relationship in a new way that I haven’t felt before.

“There is one more thing I wish to discuss with you.” I bite my bottom lip, running my fingers over his arm. “I feel more free than I have in years and I wish to share that with you. May I?”

“Yeah, Ghenie, of course.”

I take his hand in one of mine, my other hand going to his face.

Then I close my eyes and push into Christian’s mind.

I have kept myself from invading his space while my mind was clouded with the Ancestors.

I never wanted to accidentally push them into his mind or share his thoughts with them. I wanted him to have his privacy.

I push my feelings into his mind, letting him feel them for himself.

Christian sucks in a sharp breath, his body tensing. I hope this is okay. Now that my mind is fully my own, I want you to experience this with me. I want us to be open to each other. I want us to form a bond.

Christian's eyes lock onto my own. I want that. Not here, not now. We'll do this when things feel right, when we're alone in the comfort of our own space. We'll make it special .

I nod my head. "Your thoughts are still your own, but now I feel comfortable speaking to you in this way."

"Thank you for sharing this with me." Christian kisses my forehead gently.

"Pruist ?"

"Yes?"

"Will you take me home?"

Christian pulls back and smiles at me. "It would be my pleasure."

Chapter Thirteen

Christian

“Is everything alright in there?”

“Yes! No! I do not know! Shit!”

“Do you want me to come in and help?”

“No! That I know for certain! I need to do this myself.”

I stare at the closed door for a long time before finally sighing. “If you need me, just call.”

The scrap of something being tugged across the room sounds through the door but instead of asking again, I walk away. Picking up Maribel, I pack up a few spare diapers and some clean clothes and head across the street.

“Hey, what’s up?” Miles asks as he opens the door, looking between me and Maribel.

“Is there any way I can cash in a favor?”

Miles raises his brow. “Is everything okay?”

“Ghenie is stressed out. I can hear him rearranging shit inside our bedroom but he won’t let me help. Plus, he’s been having awful back pain the last few days. Can you

watch Maribel for a few hours while I try to get Ghenie more settled?"

"I would love to watch my goddaughter," Miles says right away, holding out his hands for her. I pass her over, letting out a sigh of relief. "I think I should warn you. Layperry men nest right before they're ready to give birth so don't be surprised if that's what's happening right now."

I blink slowly at my best friend. "Well fuck."

Miles snorts. "Yeah. He's probably feeling the drive because he's almost ready for your baby to be born."

"Fuck," I say again, running my fingers through my hair. "That makes sense but Jesus, for some reason I thought there would be more time!"

"It sneaks up on you," Miles says with a laugh. "Remember how it went with Timalah and me?"

"It's different when it's happening to you!"

"You're right. Go on," he says, giving me a little push. "Go be with your mate."

"Thanks, Miles. I owe you one."

"You owe me a ton, but that's okay, what else are best friends for?"

After making sure Miles has everything, I head back over to my house, my heart jumping up into my throat. My plan was to give Ghenie a back massage that could possibly lead to other stress relievers but now I'm rethinking my strategy.

Is it baby time? Should I be preparing too? Does he need anything specific from me?

Jesus, I suddenly feel completely unprepared.

“Christian? Christian, where are you?”

My pace quickens as I run through the house to our bedroom. “Hey, I’m here. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine! I came out here and found you gone! Where were you?”

“I was dropping Maribel off with Miles for a bit to give us some alone time.”

Ghenie finally opens the door, letting me inside the bedroom.

Our bed has been moved from the middle of the room to the very corner.

It’s tucked against the wall so that he can sit in the very corner with a wall against each of his shoulders.

It’s completely covered in blankets and old clothes to make a nest. Fuck, Miles was right.

“Are you well?”

Ghenie nods. “Well enough. What do you have planned for this alone time?”

I look over his features, making sure he’s being honest with me. He seems okay. More than okay, he seems great. He’s got a small smile on his face, his eyes are bright.

“I was going to give you a back massage since you’ve been having lower back pains.”

Ghenie sighs. “That would be lovely.”

Because of his stomach, Ghenie can’t just lie face down on the mattress.

Instead, I guide him to stand, leaning with his chest resting against the side of the bed.

I stand behind him, letting my fingers tuck his shirt up so I can get my fingers on his bare skin.

I start to massage him earnestly, wanting to ease the tension and pain.

I dig in my thumbs at the dimples of his back, smiling as I’m rewarded with a deep, long groan of pleasure.

“Oh,” Ghenie breathes out. “Just like that, pruiist .”

“Keep talking like that and this massage will be ending in a very different way than I intended,” I say with a chuckle. “I’m kidding. I’m glad it feels good.”

“I am not opposed to that,” Ghenie says, looking over his shoulder at me. “It would bring me great joy to make this nest smell like you.”

I raise my brow, letting my hands skim over Ghenie’s sides and up to his shoulders. I continue the massage. “I think that could be arranged if you ask nicely enough.”

“Don’t be an ass.”

I can’t help but laugh. I’m really rubbing off on Ghenie. He’s picked up some of my slang and I find myself softer because of the time we’ve spent together.

I reach down and pinch his ass. “Your ass is perfect so really, if I’m an ass that’s a compliment.”

“I do not think that’s how this works,” Ghenie says, shaking his hips. Then he pushes back until his ass is rubbing against my groin. “Oh, hello there. What is the phrase? Oh, umm right. Is that a pipe in your pocket or are you happy to see me?”

I fall against Ghenie’s back, burying my face against his shoulders laughing. “Oh my god, Ghenie.”

Ghenie’s tail slaps my ass before wrapping around my waist. It worms its way under my shirt and it tickles, a shiver running down my spine at the feeling.

“Do you really wanna dirty up your nest? Right now, I’ll do anything to help you feel good.”

“Anything?”

“Of course,” I say. “I am yours.”

Ghenie pushes his hips back, making some space for himself so he can turn around. He sits on the edge of the bed, pulling me between his thighs.

“You are mine,” he says softly, his voice dripping with wonder. “It is still so hard to wrap my head around.”

I cup his face, leaning down to kiss his lips. Then I cup his belly. “This is proof. I’m not going anywhere. You, me, and the kids. This is my life and I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

“Oh, Christian,” Ghenie says, his voice cracks and his eyes water.

“Here, let’s get ourselves comfortable.” I reach down and pull Ghenie’s shirt over his head. Then I take a step back and get myself out of my clothes. Ghenie stands, kicking off his pants and underwear. “How are you feeling? Tired at all?”

Ghenie’s eyes look me up and down, pausing on my cock. He starts to grin. “I am feeling very well. Up for anything.”

I reverse our positions so I’m leaning against the bed.

I give him one kiss before leaning my elbows against the bed, my chest down and my ass up.

I feel my entire body heating as Ghenie makes a rumble of approval.

Normally, I’m the one who tops when we have sex but today I want to try something different.

I want to lay not only my heart out for him, but also my ass.

Tentative hands grab my hips, running over my skin. Ghenie’s nails run down my ass cheeks and I moan against my permission. I hear him get on his knees behind me and I hold my breath as he parts my cheeks.

“Ghenie,” I gasp out, feeling more exposed than ever before. “Do something! Quit staring at my hole!”

“But it is a lovely hole, Christian.”

“Ghenie, I swear to god I’ll--” my words are cut off by a gasp as Ghenie runs his tongue over my hole.

His tongue is hot and wet, swirling around my hole before dipping into the tight bud.

I cry out, my fingers digging into the sheets below me.

I feel so vulnerable in this position but that's okay.

Ghenie is worth being vulnerable for. I focus on the feeling of his mouth on my ass, opening me up, making my hole wet and soft.

His tongue is longer than mine, able to reach inside of me further than I thought possible. It's so fucking good.

"Jesus Christ," I cry out, tilting my hips back and riding against Ghenie's face. "Fuck, Ghenie. Yes!"

A moment later, I feel something press into my hole and I realize it's Ghenie's tail. He fucks me open as his mouth moves lower, taking my balls into his mouth. I've never felt anything like this before and my orgasm comes rushing towards me faster than I thought possible.

"Ghenie. You have to stop. Fuck, I'm gonna come."

"Is that not the point?" Ghenie asks, biting my ass cheek hard enough I'll feel it when I sit down. My cock jolts where it's pressed against the bed.

"I want to come but not until you're inside me."

"I am inside you, Christian," he says, his tail wiggling where it's pressed against my prostate. I make a wounded noise, gritting my teeth together and doing my best not to blow my load.

“I want your cock,” I say. “Get your cock inside me, Ghenie. Now!”

Ghenie’s tail pulls away from my ass and I sigh, my body losing some of its tension. When I’m sure I won’t immediately come, I move so that I’m kneeling on the bed, my ass hanging off the edge. One of the perks of having such a tall partner is the bed gives us the perfect height for fucking.

“You are stunning,” Ghenie says, running his hands over my ass again. I hear some wet noises coming from behind me before fingers are pressing into my hole, making sure my ass is slick and ready.

“Less talking and more fucking.”

Ghenie chuckles as he gets into position behind me. His cock is so much bigger than mine which is why Ghenie usually bottoms. Plus, his ass is self slicking which makes for easy access. It’s just easier all around!

The tip of his cock breaches my ass and I suck in a sharp breath, doing my best not to tense up. Jesus fucking Christ. He’s so big, splitting me open. His cock has bumps on it that rub against my hole, massaging the inside walls of my ass. They hurt so good.

“You take me so well,” Ghenie breathes, his hands sweeping along my sweaty back. “I am honored to call you mine.”

Ghenie pushes deeper and deeper and deeper until somehow I’ve taken his entire cock. I swear I can feel him all the way up in my stomach. I’m stretched beyond what I should be able to handle and yet, I feel like I can’t get enough.

“Ghenie,” I breathe out before burying my face against the sheets. All the breath is stolen from my lungs as he starts to pull back, those same bumps rubbing against my hole again. My toes curl and my lungs seem to seize up.

“That’s it. Take me. Take all of me.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

“Fuck,” I gasp out as Ghenie slides back in. He starts up a steady pace, fucking me with long, strong thrusts. All I can do is hold onto the sheets and take it. My dick is drooling precum, making a mess of the sheets below me which is exactly what Ghenie wanted. They’ll smell like us now.

Ghenie’s tail snakes its way between my legs, wrapping around my cock. He strokes me as he fucks me. One of his hands reaches below me to my chest, flicking my nipples. It’s all so much. It’s all too much.

“I’m going to probe you with my mind,” Ghenie says, his voice strained. “I will reach for you and I will need you to reach back. Can you do that, pruiist ?”

“Yes,” I gasp out. “I can do that. Probe me, Ghenie.” We’re having a moment but I can’t help but chuckle at my choice of words.

Ghenie’s movements never slow down, fucking me hard. I feel a warmth within the back of my mind that doesn’t belong to me. It’s different than when Ghenie speaks within my mind. This is stronger, more intimate while also being more foreign.

I close my eyes and breathe out through my nose, doing my best to clear my mind.

Then I push back with everything I have.

I want this connection. I want to be Ghenie’s.

I want him to be my mate in every way possible.

With this bond, there will never be a way for either of us to run away and part of me finds that terrifying but the majority of me welcomes it.

It's a tether that will keep our bond strong and permanent. There's safety in that.

Ghenie stutters as the bond slips into place, forged between us. I can feel him and he can feel me. He is mine and I am his. I can feel his love, his devotion, his desire for me. I can even feel his pleasure.

We both gasp out, a feedback loop of pleasure back and forth, feeding into each other and driving our pleasure higher and higher.

I cry out as I come, covering the blankets beneath me in cum.

I can feel Ghenie coming as well, his huge cock throbbing inside of me.

I feel stuffed to the brim with not only his dick but also his cum. I feel so fucking full. I feel claimed.

Ghenie , I say within my head, doing my best to project it to him. This thing on?

Our bond is solidified, yes. I did not know it would feel like this. It is overwhelming.

Now that I know it's working, I do my best to steel myself. Letting out a stuttered breath, I project into Ghenie's mind, I love you.

Ghenie gasps behind me. He pulls himself free from my ass before pushing me over so he can look into my face. His eyes are wide and a tear drips down.

"I love you too," he says softly. "I love you in a way I did not know possible. I love you with everything I have and with everything I am. I am yours, Christian."

I swallow around the lump in my throat, suddenly feeling overwhelmed. “I know I don’t say it enough and I’m practically allergic to emotions. But I love you, Ghenie.”

I wince at the feeling of cum dripping from my ass but that’s easy to ignore as I stand up and kiss my mate. I kiss him for as long as he’ll let me. I kiss him and kiss him and kiss him. Eventually, Ghenie pulls back but instead of smiling, he’s wincing.

“What’s wrong?”

A moment later, I hear a splash of something hitting the ground. We both look down as liquid drips down the back of Ghenie’s thighs.

“Oh,” he says, looking back up at me. “I think this baby is ready to come.”

“Oh fuck!” I look down at myself and then down at Ghenie before laughing at how absurd this moment is. This timing couldn’t have been worse. “They’re not even born yet and they’re cock blocking us!”

“That is not true,” Ghenie says with a smile. “They let us finish before coming.”

I usher both of us into the bathroom in order to clean both of us up. Then I help Ghenie back into his nest. I get all of our supplies ready; clean towels, water, ice chips, and snacks.

“Do you need anything? Should I run into town and get your parents?”

Ghenie shakes his head. “Just stay here with me? Please?”

“Anything you need. I mean that,” I tell him, crawling into the bed with him. Ghenie moves onto his side, his hand on his stomach. I curl up behind him, holding him as he goes through the pain of contractions. I wish there was something more I could do to

help, something to take his pain away.

I'm thankful for my training in becoming an EMT, it helps me keep a clear head. It helps me know what to expect as labor progresses. I wipe sweat from Ghenie's brow, massage his lower back, and help him through his breathing.

"It is time. I can feel it," Ghenie eventually says. I help him get into the position that's most comfortable for him and I'm there to help our baby into the world, catching them on their way out.

I'm honored that I get to be in this position. I'm honored that Ghenie trusts me.

I stare down at the person in my hands. He's so small, fresh in the world. His skin is the most dazzling turquoise color with some light fuzz on the top of his head. His antennae are flat against his head and his tail is wrapped around his upper thigh. He is perfect.

Maribel taught me to love in a way that was uniquely just for her. Now my heart somehow grows in size, making room for my son. He will have a piece of me just for him. I love him. I love him so much.

"We have a son," I say, carefully passing him over to Ghenie.

"He is beautiful." Ghenie runs his fingers over his face. "His antennae will straighten and grow as he gets older. He is perfect." Ghenie looks up at me, a grin across his face. "We have one of each. We will have to try again and see if we can have a hybrid next."

A startled chuckle leaves my throat and I shake my head in disbelief. "You've only just had a baby and you're already thinking about the next one?"

“Yes. I would not mind a large family. As many as we’re granted.”

I never thought of myself as a family guy. I always just assumed I would be alone forever by choice. Now, I can see what Ghenie sees. A bigger house on the outskirts of town filled with kiddos and love. I don’t just see it, I suddenly crave it.

“Okay,” I say softly. “That sounds good to me.”

Ghenie smiles so wide I can see his fangs. I lean down and steal a kiss before kissing the top of our son’s head. Ghenie brings him to his chest, allowing him to feed for the first time.

“Are you still certain of your name now that you’ve met him?”

“I am,” Ghenie says with a soft smile. “Thane.”

“Thane,” I say as well, touching our son’s head. “He’s perfect.”

We stay cuddled in bed for as long as we can. Miles brings Maribel over, congratulating us before leaving so we can have time together as a new family. He promises to bring food over in the morning.

“Hey, baby girl,” I say, holding onto Maribel. “This is your new baby brother.”

Maribel coos, making noises that are so close to words but not quite. It’s hard to believe she’s just over a year old. Two babies under two. We’re gonna have our hands full but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

I cannot believe this is my life. How did a kid abandoned by his parents who put up walls upon walls upon walls around his heart somehow end up here? I’m not sure I’ll ever know the answer but I’m more thankful than I can articulate.

Once upon a time, a picture like this would have made me wrinkle my nose and run away. I was terrified of committing. I was terrified of being hurt again. Now, I can't imagine ever running. These are my people and I am here to stay.

I love you. Apparently now that I've said it once, I can't stop saying it. I'm gonna annoy you until you push me away.

Ghenie meets my eyes. There is nothing in this world that could make me push you away. I love you, Christian .

It says a lot about how far I've come that when I hear that, I believe it.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

Ghenie

I stand in my backyard, overwhelmed with joy.

Christian and I talked about this in great detail.

We went back and forth about where we wanted our ceremony and finally landed on our backyard.

Tonight, we will have a large celebration in the town square so that my people can congratulate us.

If I was not Toralleh we would have skipped the large celebration but I owe it to my people to celebrate with them.

Thankfully, Christian does not seem to mind.

This morning, just as the sun was rising, Christian and I visited The People's Hope.

We kneeled in that little alcove and explained our plans to the Ancestors.

Christian might be able to feel them a little bit but I felt them enough for the both of us.

When I close my eyes and focus, I can still hear their voices when I'm there.

They approve of our mating. They approve of this new ceremony.

Their warmth surrounded me like a warm hug and when we left, I felt refreshed and renewed instead of weighed down.

Timalah is my best man while Miles is Christian's. Druim sits in his own seat next to Maria, Aldo's mother. Druim is getting so big. When other parents told me that time goes quickly as children grow, I did not realize it would happen quite this quickly!

Next to Maria is Aldo, his daughter in his lap.

Next to him is his mate, Gendry. On the other side of the aisle are my parents, each of them holding a grandchild.

Maribel is starting to walk and she chatters more and more every single day.

Thane's antennae are starting to sprout beautifully.

I feel so blessed to call them my children.

Timalah and Miles are already in front of everyone, waiting for Christian and I to walk down the aisle together. Timalah has his hands on his round stomach and Miles keeps throwing glances his way. They are so adorable together and my heart soars for them.

A hand wraps around my elbow, giving it a gentle squeeze.

Are you ready?

I look over at Christian and give him a soft smile. I am.

Arm in arm, we make our way to the front of everyone.

Our closest friends and family are here, ready to witness our union.

It wasn't that long ago I sat alone, lamenting that Christian would never be involved in a maturous trial to win my hand.

Now I stand before those who mean the most to me, ready to hear him declare his heart as mine.

Oh, how things have changed and I have to admit, they have changed for the better. There will be no fighting, no running, no proving. There will only be love and acceptance. I am so glad I never gave up hope even when things seemed so bleak because pushing through has led me here.

I turn towards our little crowd. My eyes dart around, taking them all in. They are here for us, because they support us and want to see the best for us. It's so moving, knowing so many people love us.

"Welcome everyone," I say, in greeting. "Normally, because I am Toralleh I would be tasked with guiding a couple together in their mating before our people and our Ancestors. Instead of doing a formal reading, the two of us have decided to write vows that we will recite before you. Vows of promise that our closest allies will help us stay accountable to. We thank each and every one of you for being here to witness our union."

I turn towards Christian and take his hands in my own. His hair has grown a bit, the ends curling around his ears and forehead. His dark eyes watch me, so soft and full of love. His thumbs run over the backs of my hands.

"Christian," I say softly, doing my best to keep my voice from shaking.

"It is my great honor to call you mine. I promise to never run away when things get tough. I promise to always seek you out when things are bothering me. I promise to help you hold up every burden that falls before us. I promise to co-parent our children together to the best of my ability so they will never know loneliness. If I am

breathing, then you are loved.”

Christian squeezes my hands. He clears his throat a few times before finally speaking.

“Ghenie. Thank you for waiting for me. Thank you for keeping hope even when I was angry at everyone around me. I might not be able to promise I will never run but I can promise I will always come back to you. I promise to keep our children happy and healthy to the best of my ability and just like you, I promise to make sure they never know true loneliness. I promise to help you with the weight on your shoulders. I promise to never leave things unsaid. I promise to care for you when you’re sick, to celebrate your wins, and comfort you through hardships.

” Christian licks his lips, his voice catching.

“This is the sappiest shit I’ve ever said out loud but you deserve all the cavity-inducing sweetness.

Ghenie, I promise to be yours and yours alone. If I am breathing, then you are loved.”

I can hear my parents sniffing from their seats and oh, I am crying too. With our declarations said, we seal our promises with a kiss.

The crowd cheers for us. When we pull back, Timalah shakes my shoulders while Miles slaps Christian on the back. Our bond is sealed physically but now it’s sealed publicly as well.

Thank you for this .

Christian looks up at me, shaking his head. Thank you for sticking with me even when I was a little shithead. I love you, Ghenie.

It is alright because you are my shithead.

Christian lets out a startled laugh before pulling me into a tight hug.

We spend the rest of the day together celebrating our newly sealed mating.

I may no longer have the Ancestors in my head but after my visit with them this morning, I know they approve as well.

Things are changing, but that is a good thing.

Stagnation is what makes a people stumble and fall.

We will keep moving, and I will keep hope that we are moving in the right direction.

If there's one thing I am good at, it's hoping.

The End