



A Mistake of Identity (Porte du Coeur: Mistakes #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Ellis knows his place in Porte du Coeurs brutal hierarchy: a non-union escort surviving day by day at Heart Court brothel. Then, a case of mistaken identity lands him in the bed of Gabriel Rohan—CEO, old money heir, and definitely not his assigned client.

Gabriel doesnt make mistakes. When Ellis approaches him, thinking hes someone else, Gabriel sees something he needs to possess. One night becomes a claim of ownership, catapulting Ellis into PDCs ruthless elite society. Ellis knows he should be terrified of Gabriels possessive nature and absolute control. Instead, hes addicted to the safety of belonging to one of the citys most influential men.

But in Porte du Coeur, even the powerful must play by rules. As Gabriels obsession deepens, threats emerge from all sides. Ellis must decide if surrendering to Gabriel means trading one cage for another or if hes finally found the home he never dared dream of.

Warning: Contains explicit content, power imbalance, and references to past trauma. Please see inside for Content Warnings.

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had perfected the art of looking available, but not desperate.

The sheer fabric of his crop top taunted as much as it covered, drifting away from his torso with every movement, only to settle back against his skin. Each slow turn or stretch sent the flimsy material dancing, teasing glimpses of muscled chest and dusky nipples before hiding them again. The contrast with his briefs was deliberate—while the top played coy, the skin-tight black fabric below left nothing to the imagination, cupping his cock and barely covering the top curve of his ass. Years of experience had taught him that the mix of revelation and mystery sold better than blatant display.

He shifted his weight, letting his hip cant to one side in a practiced motion that drew the eye. His body moved through the familiar choreography without conscious thought: subtle flex here, a languid stretch there, the occasional brush of fingers along the floating hem of his top that made the fabric flutter against his abs.

Eight businessmen had hurried past Heart Court's "display case" in the last hour, all trying not to stare and failing miserably. Dark suits, every one of them. amused himself by imagining them in hot pink instead—serious-faced men power-walking past in fluorescent formal wear.

He had to get his kicks somehow.

Above him, the neon heart pulsed, casting waves of pink and red light across his skin. "HEART COURT" blazed in cursive letters, turning another abandoned warehouse in Port du Coeur's industrial sprawl into something more sinister or inviting, depending on who you asked.

None of it mattered tonight. He'd be at the Lumière in two hours, meeting a mystery client who could make or break his future at Heart Court.

The display case's heavy glass door opened to Heart Court's lobby, separating the merchandise from the customers. knew the door's weight intimately, had felt it slam shut behind him more than once when Donovan was in one of his moods. The thick metal frame could only lock from the outside, ostensibly to keep patrons out of the windows rather than workers in, though Kevin Donovan, owner and proprietor of the Heart Court, had been known to forget that distinction when he was angry.

"Get your ass in back here, Anouilh." Donovan bellowed from a back room. Of course, Donovan butchered the name again—Uh-nule instead of Ah-new-ee. had given up correcting him after the hundredth time. Like his refusal to learn French, Donovan took pride in mangling anything that wasn't pure American English.

The display case's heavy glass door opened with its familiar pneumatic hiss. Caleb Winters slipped in, already untying his robe. "Here," he said, draping it over ' shoulders with a whispered, "good luck."

The kid was barely five-foot-five, with platinum blonde hair and doe eyes that had clients falling over themselves to book him. Like Jean, he played up the innocent act perfectly, even down to his signature outfit. The pure white corset hugged his slim torso, strategic lacing revealing teasing glimpses of bare skin, while the matching white thong left little to the imagination. Virginal fantasy with a promise of corruption. It was a look that worked. Even now, as he took ' place in the window, his movements had that practiced hesitation that drove the regulars wild.

slipped his arms through the sleeves and pulled the robe around himself, trying not to notice how the soft fabric barely reached mid-thigh on his taller frame. He padded barefoot across the lobby floor, cinching the belt tight around his waist. No matter how obsessive the cleaning crew was, he could never quite shake the skin-crawling

feeling of bare feet on these tiles, knowing what happened in the adjacent rooms.

A snicker from the front desk caught ' attention. Jean Devereaux bent over the appointment book, blonde curls falling forward to hide his grin, but when he peeked up to meet ' eyes, they shared a familiar eye roll. The kid spoke perfect Parisian French—he knew exactly how wrong Donovan's pronunciation was.

Unlike the barely-there outfits required in the display case, Jean's front desk uniform was a subtle tease: tight black shorts that rode high on his thighs paired with a crisp white button-down, sleeves rolled precisely to his elbows and open just enough to show his collar bones. His shirt was perfectly tucked, creating the polished look of an upscale maltreat d' who just happened to be showing a bit more skin than usual.

Behind the welcome desk where Jean worked, the hallway split. To the right, private rooms lined both sides; each door was numbered in peeling gold paint. To the left, the employees-only section began, marked by a change from decorative wallpaper to bare walls painted in cheap beige.

followed the left corridor past the supply closet, where shelves held everything a client might need. Each item meticulously inventoried and charged to their bill. His bare feet made soft sounds against the tile as he approached the employee lounge. The smell hit him first: stale coffee and the sharp tang of industrial cleaner, a far cry from the subtle perfumes that filled the front.

The lounge hit him like a slap of reality after the pretense up front: a tattered couch worn to some forgotten shade of blue, a mini-kitchen with its humming refrigerator and temperamental microwave, mismatched chairs around a folding table.

They kept the linoleum floor spotless—Donovan's one consistent rule. But no amount of scrubbing could hide its age, just like the fluorescent lights couldn't conceal the pallor they cast on everyone's skin.

Meaty fingers dug into ' shoulder, spinning him around. Donovan might be pushing fifty, but regular gym sessions kept him fit enough to manhandle his employees when he wanted to. He shoved onto the couch, looming over him with his tablet in hand. The man's patchy beard did nothing to hide his pockmarked skin or the sneer that twisted his face into something even uglier than usual.

“‘Lackluster.’ ‘Unsatisfying.’ ‘Just okay.’” His thumb scrolled with sharp, angry flicks. “And one complaint I had to have translated, fucking Paw-Paw, but trust me, it wasn't flattering.”

Every child in PDC grew up speaking Paw-Paw French, the Missouri French. had learned its history during those long days in the Fourth Cat's libraries, where warmth and kind librarians had been as welcoming as the books. They'd let him wash in their bathrooms, never minding his shabby clothes as long as he treated their books with care.

Like its cousins Quebecois and Southern Creole, Paw-Paw had evolved in isolation. The dialect twisted European French into something new, borrowing freely from German traders, Spanish merchants, and English settlers. Words mixed and merged in the mouths of people too busy surviving to care about proper grammar. The result was, like a particularly poetic book wrote, a language that flowed like water over rocks—familiar in its movement but shaped by everything it touched.

That Donovan, a Chicago transplant, still refused to learn it, said everything about why Heart Court struggled. The man was unadaptable.

“You have one more chance.” Donovan's face flushed red in anger. With thick fingers, the proprietor jabbed at his tablet, its dull glow highlighting every scar and blemish. The device chimed with each aggressive tap until ' phone buzzed in response.

The client profile was heavy on kinks and light on description: late thirties, brown hair, blue eyes. “How am I supposed to recognize him without a picture?”

“Black suit. Maroon shirt.”

“At the Lumière? That’s First Cat. You just described half their clientele.”

The backhand caught by surprise, the force of it sending him sprawling across the tattered couch. His tablet clattered to the cushions as pain bloomed across his cheek. Before he could recover, Donovan’s meaty fingers twisted in his hair, yanking him upright. ’ right hand flew up instinctively to grip Donovan’s wrist while his left braced against the couch cushion, steadying himself as the proprietor hauled him back to sitting. He knew better than to actually fight the hold. His scalp burned, neck wrenched at an awkward angle as Donovan used his grip to force to look at him.

When Donovan’s grip loosened slightly, let go of his wrist to gingerly touch his cheek, already feeling the heat of what would become a nasty bruise. He’d need to raid Jean’s makeup stash before heading to the Lumière.

Donovan rolled his eyes at the gesture. “You aren’t Union. Who’re you going to cry to? You’ve cost me three potential regulars with your attitude.”

“I was sick for two of those guys. Back-to-back appointments—”

“Don’t give me excuses.” Donovan’s breath hit ’ face in hot puffs, his fingers tightening painfully in ’ hair. “This guy has real money, actual connections. He did me a solid last month. That’s why you’re going at half your usual rate.” He released ’ hair only to grab his chin, forcing eye contact. “So you get your shit together, spread your legs, and make him moan, or you’re back on the street. Understand?”

forced himself to nod despite the grip on his jaw. Two years at Heart Court had

taught him when to submit. Four years walking PDC's streets had taught him when to fight. And the years before... He pushed those memories away. At twenty-three, he'd survived too much to risk losing his spot here over pride. A bruised face was nothing compared to what the streets would do to him. He'd learned that lesson long before he sold himself legally.

"What's his name?" He kept his voice carefully neutral.

"He doesn't want you to have it. Call him 'Sir.'" Donovan's sneer twisted deeper. "Job nice enough to afford you. Don't need trash like you trying to blackmail him. Man has a reputation to maintain."

"I wouldn't—"

"Eight PM. Lumière lobby. By the chandelier fountain." Donovan's eyes raked over , catching on where the robe had fallen open, revealing the barely-there underwear beneath. With deliberate slowness, he pushed the fabric further aside, his rough palm sliding down ' torso. A repulsive shiver ran through as Donovan's hand cupped his groin, the touch lingering and possessive. When Donovan squeezed painfully, ground his teeth together, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a response.

"And wear something appropriate," Donovan sneered, finally removing his hand. "Don't need you looking like a whore."

"I am a whore," mumbled.

Another backhand answered him. "And you dressing like it is why this place is going to shit. The Lumière is a classy joint."

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and Donovan glanced at the screen. "Fuck." He grabbed ' jaw again, fingers digging into the forming bruise. "Remember, you fuck

this up, you're back on the streets. And trust me, at your age? The streets aren't kind to used goods." He shoved 's face away and stormed out, already barking into his phone about a delivery issue at the back entrance.

had barely steadied himself when movement caught his eye as Jean burst into the lounge. A whirlwind of blonde curls and green eyes. He collapsed onto the couch beside . "Please tell me you'll blow this guy's mind."

"Aren't you supposed to be monitoring the desk?"

"Marie has it handled." Jean fluttered his fingers in a dismissive wave.

"Her name's not Marie." rolled his eyes. "Marie isn't the name of every girl who works here."

"Emma, then." Jean sprawled deeper into the couch. "Whatever."

"Rachel. Her name is Rachel."

Jean's nose scrunched up like he'd smelled something offensive. "That's not even French."

"Neither is mine." tugged one of Jean's curls. "Not everyone born in PDC has to have a French name."

"But your last name is French." Jean batted ' hand away. "And is lovely. Rachel Miller is just so..." He waved his hands as if trying to grab the right word from the air. "Boring."

rolled his eyes at Jean's antics. "So you do know her name?"

“She should go by Marie,” Jean said, finally laying full-out on the couch, head in Jean’s lap.

Three months ago, Jean showed up at Heart Court in clothes that screamed Nouveau Quartier. His perfect Parisian French had marked him as clearly as their expensive tailoring. He’d picked up Paw-Paw surprisingly quickly.

Why someone would flee NQ luxury was a mystery didn’t care to solve. But Jean’s old-money air made him an instant favorite. Every pervert wanted to pretend they were fucking some rich kid behind Daddy’s back.

In Jean’s case, they probably were.

was too tall, too muscular for most tastes. Brown hair, brown eyes—nothing to write poems about. Not drop-dead gorgeous like Jean or Caleb or most of the Union escorts. That’s why he’d ended up at Heart Court.

“You’re going to blow this guy’s mind tonight, right?” Jean asked again, peeking up at him. “I don’t want to be here without you.”

ran his fingers through Jean’s curls, earning a catlike purr. “Just had bad luck. Picky customers.”

“Still can’t believe he made you work while sick.” Jean burrowed into ’ lap like an octopus, ignoring attempts to dislodge him.

“Needed the money. Room might be free, but nothing else is.” gave up the fight. It was never a winning one with Jean. The boy was clingy. “You working tonight?”

“Regular. Owns a few bars in South First Cat. Third time this month.”

“Three months here and already regulars?”

Jean shrugged against ’ chest. “He bathes. Probably has a white picket fence and 2.5 kids.”

“Usually do. The ones hiding affairs avoid the popular houses.” checked his phone. “Speaking of, I need to get ready.”

“Think he’ll make you call him ‘Daddy?’” Jean snickered.

“They never want me to call them Daddy. Do I look like a sugar baby?”

“You could be. You’re handsome. Got that swimmer’s body.”

“I’m a swimmer. That’s what happens when you swim.” nudged Jean with his shoulder. “You should come with me sometime. YMCA has discounted memberships for us.”

Jean’s face scrunched up like he’d bitten into a lemon, tongue poking out in disgust. “No, thanks!” He reached up, fingers ghosting over ’ cheek where Donovan had struck him. His lips formed a perfect pout that couldn’t help but envy. It was the kind of pretty that came naturally to Jean, the kind clients paid extra for. “Grab my makeup kit from my room. The good concealer’s in the blue bag.”

finally extracted himself from Jean’s octopus grip. “See you after the Cat Hours.”

“Don’t be late!” Jean called after him. “I want every detail about this mystery client!”

The narrow stairs to the dormitories creaked under ’ feet, each step a reminder of Heart Court’s age. His room waited above—just a single bed and dresser, but better than the ratty tent he’d called home for four years. The communal showers weren’t

modern, but they were clean.

He grabbed his shower kit and Jean's makeup bag, heading for the showers. The enema attachment was the only modern thing in the room. Its self-sanitizing cradle glowing blue, Donovan's one concession to modern hygiene. went through his preparation thoroughly. Experience had taught him that "clean" meant spotless inside and out unless specifically requested otherwise. The lukewarm water never quite got hot enough, but at least it never ran cold.

stood before the mirror in his room, squinting under the harsh fluorescent light that made everyone look sickly. His fingers slid over his cheek, feeling the heat of the bruise blooming beneath. Jean's concealer was expensive—probably lifted from one of those high-end boutiques in the Fourth Cat where the Union escorts shopped. He dabbed the cream carefully over the darkening mark, but his unpracticed hands made the coverage look obvious and patchy. He sighed heavily. Makeup wasn't his forte, but it would have to do. The client probably wouldn't care anyway—wouldn't be looking at his face much, much less notice a poorly concealed bruise.

stared at his reflection, trying to summon the energy, the enthusiasm this client would expect. Half-price or not, he needed this to work. Heart Court wasn't much, but it was a roof over his head, electricity that mostly worked, and running water that was usually clear. His small luxuries, the tablet, the phone, and regular meals, depended on keeping Donovan happy. Better than the streets. It had to be better than the streets.

One last chance. He'd make it count.

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tugged at the sleeves of his cream Henley, the nicest thing he owned that wasn't obviously "working clothes." The soft fabric hung loose over dark-wash jeans that clung in ways that would draw attention without screaming escort. Beneath them, the lace thong, his only pair, bought with tips since Donovan didn't provide a clothing allowance like Union houses did—scratched against sensitive skin. The cheap material would leave marks, nothing like the silk and satin the Union escorts wore, but it satisfied the client's lingerie requirement.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the Lumière's extravagant lobby.

Of all the casinos in PDC, the Lumière stood apart—literally. While every other respectable gambling establishment had migrated to the neon-drenched shores of the Fourth Cat across the Mississippi, the Lumière remained firmly planted on the Missouri side, where the city's first casino had opened over a century ago.

The place had survived countless attempts to shut it down; the last effort had nearly sparked a riot when locals took to the streets to protect their historic landmark. Sure, there were other casinos on this side of the river—rough spots down in the Third Cat where dock workers bet their paychecks—but those were strictly locals only. No tourist would dare set foot there, let alone the clients who frequented the Lumière.

The lobby was awash in reds and gold, crystal glinting off nearly every surface that wasn't marble. Three-story-high ceilings stretched overhead, dripping with massive chandeliers that cast rainbow prisms across the polished floor. The air was perfumed with something expensive and subtle that cost more per ounce than what brought in for Donovan in a month. Around him, high rollers in designer suits and cocktail dresses mingled with tourists in resort wear, their voices a constant murmur beneath

the distant siren song of the slot machines.

Since he wasn't dressed like one of the typical Union Escorts in highly revealing clothing, the lobby clerk and security ignored him. The security guards, positioned strategically near the gaming floor entrance in their perfectly tailored black suits with the Lumière logo prominently displayed on their chests, watched the casino floor. The front desk staff, in their burgundy uniforms that probably cost more than his entire wardrobe, were too busy checking in guests who carried Louis Vuitton luggage sets.

Better they didn't spot him as a non-union escort—the Lumière had exclusive arrangements with a few of the nicer Fourth Cat union houses, and they weren't shy about charging hefty “fees” to anyone cutting into their profits.

made his way over to the extravagant chandelier fountain, which had some significant history, but didn't know or care about it. The fountain dominated the center of the lobby, water cascading down crystal tiers that had once hung from the ceiling, catching light and throwing it back in mesmerizing patterns. The marble basin below was studded with coins—wishes made by people with money to throw away.

A plaque with the details was ten feet from him, but had more important things to do right now than learn about some ancient lighting-turned-fountain. Like meeting the client who could afford to meet him at this establishment. Either someone wealthy enough that the Lumière's fees didn't matter, or stupid enough to think they could dodge them. Not his usual Johns booking rooms at those run-down motels on the outskirts of the Fourth Cat.

checked his phone. He was 15 minutes early.

Better early than late.

Or, at least, that was his thought until he spotted his client seated at the Café Rochelle.

Who Rochelle was, couldn't say.

The man sitting in the café section next to the fountain didn't seem like someone who would pay for sex, especially not from a rundown, non-union cathouse like Heart Court. Everything about him radiated old money and corporate power—from the black tailored suit that seemed to drink in the light to the deep red button-down underneath. He was the type who would usually seek discreet services tucked away in luxurious Second Cat mansions, not low-ball it at a Fourth Cat joint with one of Kevin Donovan's budget options.

Donovan's words from earlier rang in ' mind: "real money, actual connections." rubbed his chin, remembering the bruising grip. Someone who'd done Donovan a favor, now getting repaid with at half-price.

Maybe this was his client, after all, strange as it seemed. Instead of making private arrangements through exclusive channels, here he sat in the flashy Lumière Casino, staring intently at his tablet with a frown creasing the space between his eyebrows as if he were reviewing quarterly projections rather than waiting for an escort.

His height was apparent even seated—he would tower over when standing. His rich chestnut hair caught the light, and though couldn't make out the exact color of his eyes from this distance, he could tell they weren't brown.

Through long practice, kept his face neutral as he approached, even as his mind raced at how out of place this man was to be meeting him. Everything about him radiated wealth and status that Heart Court never saw—from the cut of his suit to his perfectly manicured nails. This wasn't the type of man who'd even know Heart Court existed, let alone seek its services. Even their wealthier clients were low-level executives and

local business owners, not whatever corporate aristocrat this man was.

Every instinct screamed that there had to be some mistake, but couldn't afford to walk away. Not if he wanted to keep his spot at Heart Court.

With a deep breath and all the desperate courage he could muster, approached the stranger. He slid easily into the seat next to the man, a smile plastered on his face.

He hoped it didn't look as fake as it felt.

The man's eyes shot up to meet his; they were intensely blue before roaming over the rest of his body. The man didn't say anything; he merely turned off his tablet before setting it next to his coffee.

never understood how people could drink coffee this late at night. Any caffeine that went into his system past 4 pm would keep him awake all night.

continued to smile, waiting for the man to say something that would confirm he was the client Donovan sent him to meet. The man's arctic stare traced over ' body before fixing on his cheek, where knew the concealer was doing a poor job hiding the darkening bruise. Every instinct told to turn his head, to hide the mark, but he forced himself to hold still under that cold assessment. The silence stretched uncomfortably, making his rehearsed greeting stick in his throat.

Awkward.

"I'm , from Heart Court." withdrew his calling card from his pants pocket and handed it to the man. "I'm yours for the night." winced internally. That sounded cheap and desperate.

"Are you now?" The man's bass timber rolled over like the tide. He studied the card

briefly before slipping it into an inner pocket on his suit jacket. “How much for the night, Anouilh?” His perfect, rolling pronunciation sent a pleasant shiver down ’ spine.

“Already taken care of,” said. Did this man not pay his own bills? Taking in the expensive, high-end, hi-tech watch, worth more than Heart Court’s monthly revenue, and where they were meeting, the answer was probably no.

There was likely some harried accountant somewhere crunching numbers and crying into an energy drink.

“Has it?” The man smiled, though it wasn’t altogether a pleasant one.

Something deep inside of screamed at him to run.

squashed the urge. He needed this to go perfectly, or he would be back on the streets by morning. Kevin Donovan was not a man to threaten eviction lightly. In the few years had worked for the man, he had already done so to half a dozen underperforming escorts. Whatever the client before him wanted, would give him.

He stretched out and ran his fingertips over the man’s hand. “Yes, sir,” He replied coyly or attempted to. It came off just a bit left of coy, verging on sarcastic. Jean was better at playing these games, even if he was new. did his best to keep his forced smile on his face. “Did you rent a room at the Lumière? Or at a nearby hotel?”

The man grabbed ’ wrist in a punishing hold, causing him to suck in air between his teeth. For hands that looked so refined, they clamped down with a strength that reminded of the bouncers at Heart Court—a grip meant to hurt, to control.

“I was meeting someone here.” The man said, squeezing ’ wrist painfully before releasing it. “I have a small apartment in Lafayette Square. We’ll go there.” He lifted

two perfectly manicured fingers in that imperious twitch that only the obscenely wealthy seemed born knowing how to do, summoning the server with his check.

“It was a pleasure serving you. Please, come again.” The server’s voice held all the warmth he’d likely been lavishing on the client all evening, though his eyes cut to with undisguised resentment.

’ client tapped his watch over the payment device, which dinged happily. The man closed his tablet and stood gracefully to his feet, pulling his suit jacket closed. With a few taps on his watch, the man turned back to .

“My driver will meet us out front.” The man gestured for to lead the way.

A driver? almost stumbled at that. In an age where even the most economical of cars drove themselves, having an actual human driver was the kind of old-money extravagance he’d only heard about. Still, he stood from the chair, nowhere near as gracefully as the man who seemed to unfold from it. strode with all the confidence he could muster toward the lobby entrance, painfully aware of how his movements must look in comparison. A warm hand settled on his lower back—possessive, steering—as they approached the doors. The bellhop bowed at their approach, reaching out and opening the doors with well-practiced deference.

“Always a pleasure, Monsieur Rohan. Please, come again.” The bellhop said, causing to stiffen momentarily.

Certainly, this man wasn’t...

“Of course, Carlo.” His client, Rohan, replied, urging forward. He handed the bellhop a crisp hundred-dollar bill. Carlo took it with ease, as if he was given large tips every day.

Maybe he was, didn't know.

Rohan shifted to his other side with casual authority, his broad frame suddenly blocking ' view of everything except the sleek black Mercedes sedan purring at the curb. The movement was smooth but absolute—like being caught in the current, found himself carried along in Rohan's wake. A man in the front passenger seat was out of the car before it came to a complete stop, pulling open the door for Rohan.

' breath caught as his client all but shoved him into the back seat before sliding in next to him. The interior smelled of leather and something subtly masculine that triggered a memory: last week, walking past that fancy cigar shop in the Fourth Cat with Jean, dreaming about better things like they always did. The digital billboard cycling through PDC's "40 Under 40" had shown that same face, that same commanding presence.

Gabriel Rohan—CEO of La Sauvegarde, a sprawling empire that touched nearly every corner of Porte du Coeur's economy. The conglomerate handled everything from complex financial risk modeling in its gleaming downtown headquarters to boots-on-the-ground security through its subsidiaries. They were one of the region's largest employers, and rumor had it their reach extended far beyond legitimate business—whispers of a private military force that operated in shadows where traditional security forces couldn't go.

And here he was, the man who controlled it all through both his position as CEO and his family's controlling share of stock, sitting next to in the back of a luxury car that need a driver. That same face from countless magazine covers and society pages, consistently ranked among PDC's Most Eligible Bachelors.

This had to be Gabriel, not his younger brother Henri. Henri was the family's golden party boy, more likely to be found drowning in admirers at some exclusive nightclub than sitting alone at a casino. Henri didn't need to pay for company; he had socialites

and models practically throwing themselves at him.

Besides, Henri was blonde.

turned to face the man as the car started moving. His heart hammered against his ribs as he considered his next words. Donovan had stressed discretion and barely given him any details about his client, but then the bellhop had openly acknowledged him, hadn't he?

"Are you," bit his lower lip, the question feeling dangerous even as it left his mouth, "Gabriel Rohan?"

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Rohan was pissed. His flake of a younger brother was supposed to have met him at the Lumière for dinner. Another mess of Henri's making—this time, he'd maybe-accidentally-on-purpose seduced élise Dubrule, an heiress whose family owned one of the largest hotel chains in Europe and whose father just happened to be one of their father's oldest friends—the kind of scandal that required careful handling, especially with both families' reputations at stake. had arranged this dinner to discuss what Henri had been thinking and hopefully contain the situation before it exploded in all their faces.

The chit was beside herself, having thought Henri was devoted to her. That they were bound for marriage. If she had known any better—or rather, if she hadn't willfully ignored Henri's well-documented reputation—she would have seen right through his false visage. But that was Henri's particular talent: making each conquest feel special, unique, and different from all the others who'd come before. He probably thought it hilarious, watching an Accor heiress fall for his practiced lines and manufactured charm, knowing full well he'd discard her like all the rest.

Now, she was making quite the spectacle of herself, acting the part of the wronged lover as if she were the first to fall for Henri's carefully crafted deceptions. It was as if Dubrule's family name somehow made her immune to becoming just another of his amusements.

And now, true to form, Henri couldn't even be bothered to face the consequences of his latest game. No call, no message, just sitting alone at the casino for over an hour, his anger simmering hotter with each passing minute. He was about to call his brother and demand answers when a different opportunity presented itself.

Ellis Anouilh had slunk into the seat next to him with a confident facade that belied his obvious nerves. The man was handsome, not pretty, like too many male escorts meant for male company. There was something appealingly solid about him—tall and lean, with a build that suggested strength rather than carefully crafted fragility. But what caught 's attention was the poorly concealed bruise darkening the man's cheekbone. A Union escort would never be sent out looking less than flawless, and certainly not with fresh marks covered by cheap concealer. When 's gaze fixed on the bruise, he caught the slight tensing in Ellis' jaw, the way the man clearly wanted to turn away but held himself still under scrutiny.

It was quite clear that Ellis had mistaken for a client—which was intriguing, as it meant this handsome escort didn't recognize him. The calling card had explained everything: Heart Court was a non-union brothel in the Fourth Cat. Ellis was likely from the lower classes or perhaps a runaway, servicing common laborers and mid-level businessmen. This begged the question of why he was at the Lumière in the first place.

Someone had planned to meet Ellis here, likely a visitor to Porte du Coeur. A financier or a tourist with enough money to indulge in a cheap escort but lacking the connections to arrange something more discreet or to meet at a high-class brothel.

Too bad they would miss their appointment.

's anger at Henri still simmered beneath his carefully controlled exterior, a familiar tension coiling in his muscles that demanded release. And here, walking right into his path, was the perfect outlet—not some fragile plaything who would break at the first hint of rough handling, but someone with enough fire in his eyes to make breaking him truly satisfying.

decided Ellis would be coming back to his Lafayette Square manor. He often used the place when the hour-long drive to the family estate in Second Cat proved too tedious,

and it was conveniently close to La Sauvegarde's headquarters. Tonight, it would serve a different purpose—helping work out his frustrations in the most pleasurable way possible.

Upon their exit, had spotted a squat man with a brown rat-tail snaking down his back. He was wearing a cheap black suit and an even cheaper maroon button-down underneath—the kind of outfit meant to pass as high-end to those who wouldn't know better. The man typed furiously on his phone as he approached the front doors, eyes down, oblivious to his surroundings.

It wasn't much of a leap to assume this was Ellis' intended client for the evening. Just in case, shifted his newly acquired escort to his left side, using his height and broader frame to block the man's view of Ellis entirely.

His suspicions were confirmed when the man began a frantic search of the lobby, eventually giving up to perch on the fountain's edge, waiting for someone who wouldn't be coming.

Someone who was now 's.

shoved Ellis into the backseat of the Mercedes and slid in quickly after him, positioning himself to block any view between the lobby and his unexpected prize. As they pulled away from the Lumière, he watched through the tinted windows as the man continued his futile wait. A few minutes into their drive, Ellis finally whispered that one question, as if he had feared the answer. knew the smile that spread across his face was predatory.

reached across the short distance and grabbed Ellis' chin between his fingers, forcing the man to maintain eye contact.

“I am. Does that frighten you, little bird?”

“Little bird?” Ellis asked, indignant, trying to pull away. pinched the man’s face, causing Ellis to wince.

“You appear as if you might take flight. It seemed fitting.”

Ellis stubbornly held his gaze. “I am not a bird. And I don’t want to ‘take flight,’ as you put it.” Ellis’ hand slid onto ’s thigh, and try as the escort might to keep his touch steady, could feel the slight trembling.

“Are you nervous, petit oiseau? After you so boldly approached me in the lobby?” watched as Ellis’ mouth pinched in annoyance briefly before that fake smile spread across his handsome features once more.

“I just wasn’t expecting a man of your caliber to be summoning the likes of me.”

hummed in response, content to let Ellis continue believing whatever he wanted. He didn’t want to give up his game just yet. He opened his mouth to reply when Ellis’ phone rang. Ellis went to answer it, but caught the name ‘Donovan’ lighting up across the screen, the same name as the proprietor on that cheap calling card his escort had handed him in the Lumière.

snatched the phone from Ellis, powering it down before tucking it into his breast pocket.

“Hey! That was my boss!” Ellis made a futile attempt to reach for the phone, but slammed him down into the seat. Looming over him, he pressed his thigh against the man’s groin, grinding down with deliberate pressure.

Ellis let out a delicious hiss.

“Don’t you think it rude to be accepting calls while on the job?”

“It was my boss,” Ellis repeated, as if that somehow changed things.

shifted the hand that had been cradling Ellis’ face a moment ago to his throat.

And squeezed.

It was not enough to cut off his air completely; it was just enough pressure to remind Ellis exactly who was in charge.

“Your boss can wait. Now, where is the dossier you received on me?” asked, not releasing the pressure on Ellis’ throat.

“Phone.” The man wheezed out.

hummed, trying to imagine that squat man’s sweaty hands pawing at what was now his. Just the thought of that cheap suit against Ellis’ fair skin, of those stubby fingers leaving marks that weren’t his own, made his jaw clench. No doubt the man would have bent Ellis over some tacky hotel bed, rutting into him like the common beast he was, treating this fascinating creature like just another Fourth Cat whore.

No. The phone would stay off. Let Donovan and his pathetic client wonder. had found something far too interesting to share, especially with someone who wouldn’t properly appreciate it. He tightened his grip on Ellis’ throat, savoring how perfectly it fit in his hand.

No, had Ellis now, and he planned to keep him.

“What did it say?” asked, releasing the pressure slightly so Ellis could speak easier. The man’s hands had wrapped around his wrist, his eyes wide with fear and arousal.

Ellis sucked in air, shifting slightly beneath , bringing their hard cocks into alignment

accidentally. Ellis let out another hiss.

squeezed the escort's throat again.

Ellis took that as the warning it was. "That you wanted to be in control. Needed it. And a list of preferences..."

"Preferences?" asked, amused. Curious about what the squat man's sexual preferences were.

Ellis tried to nod, but 's hand at his throat prevented it. He swallowed hard. The feel of the escort's Adam's Apple beneath his hand had 's cock hardening further. He ground it into the handsome man beneath him.

"List them, little bird."

"Is that all?" asked, running his thumb up Ellis' neck, stroking the man's pulse point. Lingerie. Now that was interesting. He'd never particularly cared for such things before, finding them too contrived on the delicate boys Henri favored. But the thought of what Ellis might be wearing beneath those carefully chosen clothes—what he'd put on expecting to please that worthless man in the lobby—had 's fingers itching to explore. To discover and claim whatever secrets his little bird had prepared for another.

Ellis' eyes darted to the driver and the man in the passenger seat, a flicker of unease crossing his face. smirked. His petit oiseau shouldn't worry about Alain Beaumont and Lucas Moreau. They had been by his side since they were fourteen, handpicked by his father, Maximilien Rohan, from families just wealthy enough to attend the same prestigious academy as the Rohans, but not quite wealthy enough to maintain their social standing. The arrangement had benefited everyone—their families gained connections and status, while gained two shadows who would grow into his most

trusted confidants.

Twenty years later, they were more than just a bodyguard and an assistant. They had weathered everything together: the brutal expectations of the Rohan name, 's rise to CEO, countless boardroom battles and bedroom conquests. They'd watched him break hearts and spirits with the same clinical efficiency he used to destroy business rivals. Their loyalty wasn't merely bought—it was forged, tempered by time and trust. They wouldn't blink at their boss's current entertainment. They never did.

Just as he never questioned theirs.

“I don't remember. If you gave me my phone...”

“No. You will get it back when our time together is over. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Ellis said, his voice a breathy puff across 's face.

“Good. We're almost there.” abruptly released Ellis, settling back into his seat. He adjusted his suit jacket with practiced indifference, enjoying how his escort's eyes followed the movement. The man was breathing hard from his little demonstration, a lovely flush creeping up his neck where 's fingers had been moments before.

Ellis was slower to right himself in his seat, and savored the wariness in those dark eyes. Not fear, no, his little bird wasn't frightened. Just appropriately cautious now, as he should be.

“Did you still want me to call you 'Sir' as you requested?” Ellis asked, finally settling into his seat. appreciated the deliberate emphasis on 'requested'—just enough defiance to be interesting, not enough to require correction.

He caught the brief chortle from Lucas in the passenger seat before the man wisely

covered it with a cough. knew well enough why Lucas was amused—the last man had picked up had practically mewled the word ‘sir’ at every opportunity, each utterance more grating than the last. He’d eventually gagged the insufferable twink just to shut him up.

A point that Lucas seemed to remember all too well.

“Yes,” responded, his eyes fixed on Ellis. Something told him that Ellis wasn’t the whining type. Unlike the others who parroted the honorific without meaning, suspected that when Ellis said ‘sir’, he’d mean it. doubted he would ever tire of hearing this man address him as such.

“And I will get my phone back?”

“Of course. I have no use for it. I simply want your full attention on me, little bird. You’ll receive it when our time comes to a close, as I said.” stretched out and ran his hand up the escort’s thigh, feeling it tense beneath his touch.

Ellis swallowed, and followed the movement of his throat. “And when will this arrangement come to a close?”

’s eyebrows shot up. Was that not in the dossier Ellis received? Had he not seen it, or had Ellis’ client bought him for an extended period? Either possibility was interesting—one suggested his escort was careless, the other that he’d walked into something far more involved than a simple night’s entertainment.

“Whenever I say.”

Ellis opened his mouth, but then shut it just as quickly. Choosing instead to nod his assent.

His little bird was quite smart. Smart enough to recognize which questions weren't worth asking.

Tonight was going to be fun.

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was silently panicking.

Gabriel had his phone, which contained all the information needed on the man. He wished he'd spent more time going over the packet Donovan had sent him instead of rushing to the Lumière, eager to prove himself. The details were frustratingly vague in his memory, and he couldn't even remember if the contract was for a few hours or the entire night.

This was his last chance to prove his worth to Heart Court. If he screwed this up, Donovan wouldn't just fire him—he'd blacklist him. No union house would touch him with his track record of "lackluster" reviews, and going independent meant working street corners again. The thought made his stomach turn. Heart Court might be a shithole, but at least it had walls and security cameras.

An awful thought began to twist in his mind.

Was this why someone like Gabriel Rohan sought out a nobody from a nowhere cathouse? Union escorts had protection—tracking devices, check-in protocols, bouncers on speed dial. had none of that. His disappearance would barely cause a ripple in the Fourth Cat's endless stream of statistics.

Or maybe he was overthinking this. It was just as likely that Gabriel would put him through a few intense rounds of sex and then cast him off before sunrise. Somehow, that possibility didn't feel as reassuring as it should. Either way, without his phone or contract details, he had no choice but to follow Gabriel's lead and hope he could earn whatever review would keep him off the streets.

All too soon, the Mercedes pulled up to what Gabriel had casually called his “apartment.” ’ breath caught. This wasn’t just some fancy Second Cat high-rise—this was one of those untouchable Lafayette Square mansions, the kind where old money lived and died. Where people like him weren’t even supposed to walk past, let alone enter.

The house loomed three stories high, its weathered brick and carved stone speaking of a century of wealth. A wrought-iron balcony wrapped around the second floor like black lace against brick, and above the imposing burgundy double doors, the Rohan family crest watched over all who entered—that blood-red shield with its white diamonds and golden crowns that had seen splashed across countless society pages. Warm light spilled from tall windows, making the place seem both welcoming and forbidding at once.

“This isn’t an apartment,” said dumbly when the man Gabriel called Alain opened his door. “This is a whole house.”

Gabriel’s hand pressed possessively against his back. “It belongs to the family. I only occupy a few rooms on the second floor. My apartment.” He guided them forward, up a stone walkway where spring flowers were just beginning to bloom between ancient archways. The Rohan colors seemed to follow them—deep burgundy and gold catching the evening light through stained glass panels flanking the entrance.

“A few rooms,” repeated faintly as an honest-to-god butler opened the door. The man was older, with graying blonde hair and calculating brown eyes that seemed to catalog everything at once. Though average in height and build, he carried himself with the kind of dignity that made swallow his initial urge to laugh at the cliché uniform.

“Good Evening, Monsieur Rohan. Will your guest be staying the night?” The butler asked, his gentle tone contrasting with his assessing gaze as the four of them stepped

through the entryway.

The entryway knocked the breath from his lungs. The space was larger than Heart Court's entire lobby, its burgundy walls climbing toward impossible heights. A massive crystal chandelier cast dancing light across marble floors laid in patterns so intricate that hesitated to step forward, as if his mere presence might somehow tarnish their perfection. To his right, a mahogany staircase swept upward in an elegant spiral, those same golden crowns catching light at every turn.

This wasn't just wealth—this was history, power, privilege. Everything had only glimpsed through iron gates. And here he was, a Fourth Cat whore about to walk these halls like he belonged.

“Yes, Jacob,” Gabriel replied, then turned to with a slight gesture toward the butler. “, allow me to introduce Jacob Fourier, who has managed this household for longer than I've been alive. Jacob, this is Anouilh.”

bobbed his head in greeting.

“Welcome, Master ,” Jacob responded, bowing slightly at the hip.

“Have fun with that one, Gabriel,” Lucas called as he and Alain crossed the foyer and continued deeper into the house. could hear the pair snicker before exchanging quiet words in French he couldn't quite catch.

He was still trying to wrap his head around the overwhelming luxury when his foot hit the first step, Gabriel's hand guiding him up that sweeping staircase. ' heart hammered in his chest, a sensation so foreign it took him a moment to recognize it as nervousness.

hadn't felt genuine anxiety about sex since he was fifteen, trembling in his first

client's car. Nearly ten years of selling his body had stripped away those kinds of feelings. Or so he'd thought. But here he was, pulse racing as he climbed toward Gabriel's "apartment," feeling as raw and unprepared as the teenage runaway he'd been.

Gabriel guided him down another hallway, all dark wood and more of those rich burgundy walls, before turning them into a room behind heavy double doors. As Gabriel clicked the lock behind them, took in the enormous bedroom. The king-sized bed dominated the space, but the floor-to-ceiling windows caught his breath, framed by thick burgundy drapes that had to cost a fortune. Through the glass, Lafayette Park stretched dark and empty, like a private show just for this room.

' shoes sank into the plush cream carpet, which felt like walking on clouds. Two doors led off the main rooms, one showing glimpses of a marble vanity that had to be part of a bathroom and the other opening into what looked like a walk-in closet.

"This is incredible." breathed, taking in the room.

Gabriel hummed, seating himself in a velvet chair hadn't noticed.

"Strip." The simple command startled , pulling him back from wherever his mind had wandered off to.

Right. He was here for sex. Gabriel had paid him to be naked, so he should be naked.

quickly shucked his shoes and pulled off his socks, placing them aside neatly. A lifetime of careful habits, impossible to break—knowing exactly where your clothes were could mean the difference between walking out or running out naked. He pulled off his shirt and caught Gabriel's eye, the man's gaze already roaming his exposed skin. The intensity there made something flutter in his stomach. He carefully folded his shirt and placed it on his shoes, each item within easy reach.

His fingers fumbled with the button on his jeans, unusually clumsy under that steady watch. As he slid them down his thighs, Gabriel's sharp intake of breath made him freeze.

"Stop." Gabriel's voice had dropped an octave. "Leave those on."

stood still as Gabriel rose from his chair, prowling closer. Large hands slid over the cheap lace that barely covered him, groping and possessive. The material scratched against his skin as Gabriel's fingers traced the edges where lace met flesh.

"Such poor quality," Gabriel murmured, thumbs stroking over ' hipbones. "These won't do at all. I'll have to get you something more suitable. Something in silk, perhaps. Or the finest French lace." His grip tightened. "Would you like that, little bird? To be dressed in things worthy of you?"

fought to keep his expression neutral even as his skin heated under Gabriel's touch. He'd requested lingerie in the dossier, after all. This must be part of the fantasy he'd paid for. knew his role, to be enthusiastic, to play along.

"Yes, sir," he breathed, arching slightly into those possessive touches. He'd worn cheap lace for countless clients with similar tastes. The only difference was that Gabriel could probably afford the real thing, not that he'd waste it on a Fourth Cat whore.

But for now, he let himself sink into the role, pretending he believed in promises no client ever kept.

Standing in nothing but the delicate lace, held still as Gabriel's gaze raked over him. Seconds stretched into what felt like minutes under that intense scrutiny. knew he looked good. That had never been in question. He'd worn lingerie for countless clients, but something about Gabriel's unwavering attention made his skin prickle

with awareness. Those dark eyes traced every inch of him like they were memorizing him, claiming him, and felt his body responding in a way it rarely did with clients.

His cock began to strain against the lace, and fought the unfamiliar urge to adjust himself. When he moved to do so, Gabriel's voice cut through the silence. "No." The command in his tone sent a shiver down 's spine. "Turn around. Slowly. I want to see all of you."

's face burned as he obeyed, turning in a slow circle. The humiliation of being displayed like this, his arousal evident through the thin fabric, confused him. This was just another client, another transaction—so why did Gabriel's possessive gaze make him feel so exposed? His skin flushed deeper as he completed the turn, his cock now painfully constrained by the tight lace.

This wasn't like the quick once-overs from Johns at Heart Court, sizing him up like merchandise. Deciding whether to stick their cock in him or one of the other escorts.

Gabriel looked at him like he was something to be consumed, owned completely. 's breath caught in his throat at the hunger in that gaze. The distinction shouldn't matter— knew better than to let it matter—but standing here under that commanding stare, he felt his professional mask beginning to crack. His body was responding like this was a lover's touch, not someone who'd purchased him for the night.

Without warning, Gabriel's hand slipped beneath the lace, wrapping around ' cock. barely suppressed a gasp as Gabriel adjusted him, arranging him how he wanted within the confining fabric. The casual possession of the touch sent another wave of heat through him, equal parts arousal and confusion. He didn't do this—didn't let himself feel this.

So why was Gabriel different?

Gabriel returned to his chair, settling back with predatory grace. “Come here,” he ordered with that imperious two-fingered twitch.

went.

“Kneel.”

dropped between Gabriel’s spread thighs, trying to make the movement look practiced despite his racing heart. The lace pulled tight as he settled into position, scratching against oversensitive skin. A hand ran through his short hair before grasping it tightly, sending pinpricks of pain across his scalp. mentally cursed himself for slacking on getting a haircut. He hated being held like this, hated how it made him feel. Vulnerable. Out of control. Like a puppet on strings.

Gabriel’s other hand touched his face, thumb brushing over the concealed bruise with deliberate pressure that made ’ breath catch. The dull throb reminded him of Donovan’s earlier grip, but Gabriel’s touch was different—possessive rather than punishing.

“Let’s see how that pretty mouth looks wrapped around my cock, shall we?” Gabriel met and held ’ gaze with an intensity that made his stomach flip. tried to nod, but the hand in his hair tightened, holding him completely still. His own racing pulse echoed in his ears as he forced himself to maintain eye contact, years of experience barely keeping his expression willing and eager.

“Yes, sir,” he managed, the words coming out in a husky whisper he didn’t recognize. raised steady hands and unbuttoned Gabriel’s slacks, the fine fabric soft beneath his fingers. He withdrew the man’s cock, his professional mask slipping as his pulse jumped. Not the largest he’d seen, but thick enough to make his jaw ache, long enough to make him worry about taking it deeper. The kind of cock that would leave him feeling it for days.

The hand in his hair suddenly yanked back, the sharp pain drawing a gasp from his lips as Gabriel forced his gaze upward. The man's predatory smile made ' cock jump, the lace now soaked with precum where it trapped him. Gabriel guided his cock to ' parted lips, the heavy weight of it on his tongue making his own arousal throb in response.

The lace had become a torment of its own, rough against his sensitive flesh with every slight movement. Each harsh tug on his hair sent jolts straight to his confined cock, making him squirm against the fabric that now felt more like a cage than clothing. The mix of pain and pleasure left him dizzy, professional detachment crumbling as his body betrayed just how much he was affected by Gabriel's casual dominance.

Gabriel's grip tightened, and the sharp pain bloomed across ' scalp, sending another wave of heat straight to his trapped cock. The lace was soaked now, clinging to him like a second skin, the wet fabric adding a layer of sensation that had him fighting not to squirm. His thighs trembled with the effort of staying still, every nerve ending alive with a need he wasn't supposed to feel.

"Suck, little bird, show me those years of practice." Gabriel forced ' head down suddenly, the thick length of him hitting the back of ' throat without warning. He gagged, unprepared, hands flying to Gabriel's thighs to steady himself.

On the second thrust, was ready, throat relaxing to take Gabriel deeper. The grip in his hair tightened impossibly further, and ' cock jerked in response, the rough lace dragging against sensitive flesh. This wasn't supposed to affect him like this—he was a professional, experienced. He didn't get hard from clients manhandling him.

Gabriel's soft moan sent an unexpected shiver down ' spine. "That's it, petit oiseau. You're doing so well." Then, without warning, Gabriel forced him all the way down, holding him there as his lungs began to burn.

' fingers twitched against expensive pants as he fought to stay calm. Breath play had been on the list—Gabriel would let him up soon. But seconds stretched endlessly, and his vision started to blur. His chest heaved uselessly, desperate for air. Panic rose as he tapped Gabriel's thigh, then began slapping it harder when the man didn't release him. Black spots danced at the edges of his vision, and for the first time in years, real fear gripped him. He was going to die here, on his knees in this fancy house, still wearing cheap lace panties like some twisted joke.

Hell of a gravestone marker that'd be.

Just as darkness started creeping in, Gabriel released him. pulled back violently, gasping as air rushed into his burning lungs. Spit dripped onto the carpet between harsh breaths.

"So beautiful." Gabriel's voice was almost gentle as he stroked ' tear-streaked cheek. "So good for me."

did not feel beautiful. He felt wrecked—head spinning, throat raw, body trembling. But worst of all was his cock, still achingly hard beneath the sodden lace, twitching at Gabriel's praise like it was being personally addressed. He found himself leaning into that surprisingly tender touch, eyes fluttering, craving more even as his chest still heaved for air.

The realization hit him like a bucket of ice water. This wasn't just another client using him. He was enjoying this—wanting this. His throbbing cock was proof, betraying how much Gabriel's mix of brutality and praise affected him. had learned the hard way that the clients who made you feel special were the most dangerous. They were the ones who could break you if you let them in.

would not be broken.

The thought had barely formed when Gabriel hauled him to his feet by his hair. instinctively grabbed Gabriel's wrist, a flash of defiance making him try to ease the brutal grip. The lace dragged against his cock as he was yanked upright, the sensation drawing an unwanted gasp from his lips.

He really needed to get his hair cut. And out of the lace.

Gabriel dragged him to the massive bed, shoving his chest down onto the plush surface. One large hand gripped the scruff of ' neck, pinning him in place while he balanced precariously on the balls of his feet. Before he could find his footing, Gabriel's foot kicked his legs apart.

The position left him splayed and exposed, the thin lace string cutting between his cheeks, the front soaked and clinging to his still-hard cock. The humiliation burned deeper knowing Gabriel stood over him still fully clothed, only his cock exposed.

had been bent over furniture more times than he could count. Had been arranged and displayed and used in every way imaginable. Years of selling himself had taught him every trick, every response clients wanted to see or hear. He knew how to fake enthusiasm, how to make the right sounds, how to keep himself detached while giving them exactly what they paid for.

But his body was betraying him. Each time Gabriel's controlling touch landed on his skin, real pleasure sparked through him instead of the practiced nothing he relied on. The firm grip on his neck, holding him down like an unruly pet, made his pulse race with need instead of the indignation he tried to cling to. His cock throbbed against the confining lace as Gabriel's other hand traced the edge of the thong where it stretched across his hip.

His attempts at rationalization shattered as Gabriel's fingers, slick with warmed lube, pulled the thin string roughly aside. The cheap lace protested the treatment,

threatening to snap under the force. The sudden exposure made shiver, but Gabriel didn't remove the thong entirely—leaving him in the degrading position of being fucked while still wearing the lingerie.

Gabriel's fingers pressed into him without warning, the sudden intrusion forcing a sharp exhale from him that was definitely not feigned. Gabriel's fingers pumped into him with businesslike efficiency, scissoring with the sole intent to stretch. tried to maintain some semblance of control, to pretend this was just another transaction, but his body yielded eagerly to every thrust.

This was fine. This was normal.

Just another client, just another night.

Except his trembling legs betrayed the lie. The tight ball of arousal in his gut wasn't faked for a client's ego. When Gabriel brushed roughly against his prostate, ' moan was genuine, his thighs vibrating with the strain of remaining in position and raw need. He couldn't stop himself from pushing back onto those long fingers as Gabriel continued to work him open, chasing a pleasure he wasn't supposed to want.

“When was your last testing?” Gabriel's voice was casual as if he wasn't currently knuckle-deep in ' ass.

“A few months ago,” replied, proud that his voice remained steady despite Gabriel crooking his fingers at the exact wrong moment.

“Pity.” Gabriel withdrew his fingers but kept the thong pulled aside. heard the crinkle of a condom wrapper. “We'll have to fix that. I prefer to feel everything when I take what's mine.”

' heart stuttered at the possessive tone, but the sound of the wrapper should have

brought relief, not disappointment. The thin string cut into his hip where Gabriel held it aside, the sensation grounding him in reality. Condoms were non-negotiable, his one absolute rule that kept him safe and alive in this profession. He'd learned that lesson early and hard on the streets.

So why was his gut clenching with want? Why did some reckless, dangerous part of him ache to feel Gabriel bare inside him, to be marked and claimed by his cum? Everything about his response to Gabriel went against years of careful rules, of walls built to keep him safe.

forced the feeling down. The possessive talk—they were just heat-of-the-moment words that would evaporate by morning. He knew better than to believe a client's promises. They all made them. They all lied.

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thrust his full length into the tight, welcoming heat, groaning when he bottomed out. Beneath him, Ellis let out a moan muffled by the sheets. He ran his free hand up Ellis' back before returning to grip his side, holding him in a bruising grasp. These marks would serve as the first of many reminders come morning. When he pulled out, he did so slowly, savoring the drag before slamming back in ruthlessly.

He thought back to Ellis in the car, how the man's pulse had raced beneath 's fingers, how his nervousness had made him stumble over that client's list. His little bird had been almost shy then, trying to maintain his professional facade. But had felt Ellis' hardness pressed against his thigh when he'd pinned him to the leather seat, just like now, aroused without a single touch to his cock. His escort's body had betrayed him twice now, responding to 's dominance in ways no practiced professional should.

Ellis didn't just accept rough treatment—he craved it. The evidence was there in every tremor, every desperate push back against 's cock. And had every intention of giving him exactly what he needed.

“So perfect for me,” purred, tightening his grip until Ellis whimpered. “Taking everything I give you so beautifully.” He watched a shudder run through Ellis' frame at the praise, noted how the boy's cock dripped steadily onto his thousand-thread-count sheets, staining the Egyptian cotton. Others might break under 's ruthlessness, but not Ellis. No, Ellis took everything gave him and asked for more, every barely-stifled moan that spoke of genuine need rather than practiced performance.

had known from the moment Ellis had knelt so prettily that he wouldn't be letting this one go. But now, feeling how Ellis matched his intensity, how he yielded without breaking, how he pushed back against every brutal thrust—now was certain. This

wasn't just about owning Ellis' contract anymore. He wanted everything: every genuine response, every crack in that careful mask, every desperate sound Ellis tried to swallow back. And soon, he would tear away that cheap lace—the last reminder of Ellis' other life—and replace it with silk and fine fabrics worthy of what was his.

“Tell me how it feels, petit oiseau,” commanded, punctuating his words with a particularly brutal thrust. He needed to hear Ellis' voice break with pleasure, needed more proof that his little bird was as unbreakable as he seemed.

tightened his grip, slamming into Ellis with renewed force. Each thrust pulled fresh sounds from the man beneath him, desperate little noises that proved right. He drew his hand away from the bruising grip and spanked his little bird's flank, eliciting a low hiss. A red patch blossomed on Ellis' skin.

“Perfect,” growled, savoring how Ellis arched into the sting. He released Ellis' neck, shifting to grip both hips in a punishing hold as he leaned back.

Keeping just the tip of his cock inside his little bird's quivering hole, seized the cheap lace in both hands. With one sharp motion, he tore the fabric from Ellis' body, drawing a startled gasp as the string snapped against sensitive skin. Red lines marked where the thong had dug into those perfect hips before surrendering. He tossed the ruined scrap aside with disgust before bringing his palm down hard across Ellis' now-bare ass.

Each strike painted his canvas in shades of red, marking what was his. The sound of flesh meeting flesh echoed through the room, punctuated by Ellis' increasingly desperate gasps.

scowled, still unsatisfied despite Ellis' sharp cries, the expensive sheets twisted in his grip, the way he writhed between trying to escape the intensity while arching into each thrust. He craved deeper surrender - wanted his little bird bent over his knee,

wanted to draw out those pleas for mercy until they transformed into desperate begging. But that would have to wait. That particular lesson deserved to be savored, perhaps as a forthcoming punishment. slammed into him again, his hands forcing Ellis' hips to cant at the precise angle that would brush the man's prostate with each thrust.

Ellis' responsiveness was intoxicating. Each moan, each tremor, each instinctive roll of his hips to meet 's brutal pace proved this wasn't the calculated performance of an experienced escort. His little bird's genuine pleasure fed something primal in 's chest, something that demanded more. He drove into Ellis relentlessly, forcing him to surrender more of his weight to the bed and into 's steadying grip. Ellis' balance faltered, leaving him practically suspended in 's hands as pleasure blazed up 's spine. He ground deep as his release claimed him, silently cursing the latex barrier that kept him from marking Ellis properly, from claiming him completely.

A desperate movement caught his attention as Ellis tried to slip a hand beneath himself.

"Please, sir," Ellis moaned, voice breaking beautifully. "Please, please..."

pinned the wandering hand to the bed, savoring the way Ellis' whole body trembled at the denial. He leaned close to Ellis' ear, letting his breath ghost over sensitive skin. "You'll only come when I allow it." His words drew a helpless whimper from Ellis as traced the shell of his ear with his tongue, already planning all the ways he would make his little bird beg.

pulled out, disposing of the condom in the trash can by the nightstand. Placing another condom within easy reach, he observed Ellis, who remained motionless where had placed him, save for the fine tremors running through his frame. Such perfect obedience. ran his hand up the man's smooth, warm back, savoring the flex of lean muscles beneath his fingertips.

“Exquisite,” murmured, his cock already stirring again at the sight. It should have been too soon—he hadn’t recovered this quickly since his university days. But something about Ellis stripped away years of careful control.

seized Ellis and flipped him onto his back, dragging him to the center of the bed. Too impatient to do more than discard his shoes and suit jacket, he gripped Ellis’ thighs and splayed them wide against his hips. Ellis’ cock strained against his stomach, precum pooling on flushed skin as tremors wracked his frame. Yet his face was hidden behind his arm, his other hand twisting in the sheets, betraying the internal battle raging beneath his skin. Despite his obvious arousal, despite how his body melted beneath ’s touch, Ellis was still clinging to that professional distance.

But had witnessed the truth in every response tonight—how Ellis surrendered not from years of practice, but from something deeper, something that longed to submit, to please, to belong. The thought made ’s blood burn hotter.

He needed to shatter that final barrier, to demolish the facade Ellis desperately maintained. He wanted to possess every inch of this man, to have him sinking to his knees not because he was paid to, but because something in him craved it as deeply as needed to command it. To own him so completely that Ellis would forget there was ever a time he hadn’t belonged to .

“Uncover your face,” ordered, his voice rough with need. Ellis hesitated, head turning away as that telling blush crept down his neck and chest. watched the war play out as Ellis’ body instinctively curved toward him even as his mind struggled to maintain control. “Now.”

When Ellis finally lowered his arm and met his gaze, saw that same conflict in his eyes: raw desire battling ingrained professionalism. His gaze caught on the bruise marring Ellis’ cheek—someone else’s mark, someone else’s claim. The sight made something dark twist in his chest. He slapped the unmarked cheek—just hard enough

to sting, deliberately holding back, though he wanted nothing more than to paint over that other man's bruise with his own claim.

But that wasn't something you did with a stranger, not without proper negotiations and boundaries. For now, he would have to content himself with watching Ellis' cock twitch against his stomach, a small whimper escaping those perfect lips that had nothing to do with practiced performance and everything to do with need.

"You will listen when I give you an order the first time. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Ellis breathed, the word barely a whisper.

"Yes, what?"

Ellis swallowed hard, turning to face again. "Yes, sir," he replied, his voice steadier now, that professional mask making one last desperate attempt to shield him.

's jaw clenched at the sound. He was so close to breaking through, could feel Ellis trembling on the edge of surrender. He hadn't brought Ellis here to watch him hide behind years of practiced distance. wanted to strip away every defense until nothing remained but raw need.

's lips curved into a smile. "Good boy," he murmured, sliding his hands up Ellis' chest. He pressed forward, urging Ellis' legs wider as he claimed his mouth in a demanding kiss. 's fingers wrapped around Ellis' throat, applying just enough pressure to make his intention clear. The sudden grip pulled a gasp from his lips, giving the opening he sought to deepen the kiss. He plunged his tongue into Ellis' mouth, claiming him with the same possessive intensity he'd used to claim his body. Ellis' fingers twisted into 's shirt, caught between his last shred of resistance and his body's desperate need to submit.

When pulled back, his gaze dropped to those swollen, wet lips, deliberately avoiding the bruise that made his blood boil. Watching that careful control splinter, he increased the pressure against Ellis' throat. Another sharp slap to the unmarked cheek was all it took—the final push that shattered what remained of his little bird's carefully constructed walls. The sweetest whimper escaped as tears gathered in his eyes, and there it was: victory.

Ellis melted beneath him, every line of tension dissolving as he yielded completely to 's hold. His head fell back, throat bared in instinctive submission, pupils blown so wide the brown was barely visible, gaze glazed with that perfect hazy look of absolute surrender. His true little bird emerged at last, stripped of pretense, of professionalism, of everything but pure, desperate need.

's cock fully hardened at the sight. He eased his grip just long enough to roll on the condom, savoring how Ellis tracked his every movement with naked hunger. stroked himself slowly, drinking in his victory as Ellis' gaze followed each motion with desperate want. His little bird, already so perfectly trained to look but not touch, even as his fingers twitched against the sheets with the effort to stay still.

“Are you ready, petit oiseau?” asked, positioning himself at Ellis' fluttering hole. “Ready to show me how beautifully you surrender?” He leaned closer, letting his breath ghost over Ellis' ear. “I'm going to keep you like this—desperate and wanting, existing only for my pleasure. My perfect little toy to play with whenever I desire.”

Ellis shuddered beneath him, cock twitching against his stomach at 's words. He started to nod, then caught himself. “Yes, sir,” he whispered, voice rough with need.

wrapped his hand back around Ellis' throat as he slammed his cock home. Ellis' groan echoed through the room, his spine bowing off the bed as his fingers twisted desperately in Egyptian cotton.

“That’s it,” purred, “take what I give you. You were made for this—made to be owned, to be used.” He drove into Ellis ruthlessly, gradually increasing the pressure on Ellis’ neck until his eyes rolled back, tears flowing freely down his flushed cheeks.

Tomorrow, Ellis would wear a necklace of bruises, a visible claim for all to see. The thought of his little bird marked and collared sent fresh heat coursing through ’s veins. He’d keep him in a gilded cage, pampered and pristine, until chose to mark him up again. Always available, always eager to please.

He released Ellis’ throat, drinking in the desperate gasps for air. “Soon you’ll forget there was ever a time you weren’t mine,” growled, covering Ellis’ smaller frame with his own as he rutted deep. “Every mark, every bruise, every ache will remind you who you belong to.” His mouth found Ellis’ neck, sucking hard enough to raise a perfect purple bloom. When Ellis’ fingers tangled in his hair with a broken moan, smiled against the damp skin before sinking his teeth into the tender junction of neck and shoulder.

Ellis cried out, his body clamping down around ’s cock as he spilled between them without permission.

Naughty boy. But oh, how sweetly he broke.

fucked him through his orgasm, drinking in every tremor and whimper while chasing his own pleasure. His second climax of the night crashed through him, and he collapsed onto Ellis, pleased his little bird was sturdy enough to take his full weight, unlike previous bed partners who’d been too delicate for his tastes.

Only when his pulse steadied did prop himself up on an elbow. He traced a finger down Ellis’ tear-stained cheek, catching another drop as it fell. “You came before I allowed it.” He felt Ellis tremble beneath him, watched fear and arousal war in those glassy eyes. “We’ll have to try again. This time, you’ll wait. You’ll learn to come

only when I permit it, won't you, petit oiseau?"

Fresh tears spilled from Ellis' eyes as he nodded. "Yes, sir," he whispered, voice utterly wrecked.

grinned, already imagining all the ways he'd train his little bird. Each lesson would strip away more of that professional veneer until nothing remained but pure submission to 's will. Ellis would learn obedience, one exquisite lesson at a time, until he forgot there was ever a time he hadn't belonged to .

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:52 am

snapped awake, years of practice overriding his body's desperate plea for more sleep. The crystal numbers on the bedside clock read 4:17 AM, and his heart clenched—he'd slept longer than intended. His fingers instinctively curled into the sheets, their thousand-thread count Egyptian cotton a world away from his rough, worn linens back at Heart Court that never quite felt clean no matter how many times they were washed.

Every muscle screamed in protest as he tried to shift away from the warmth radiating from Gabriel's sleeping form. The silken bedding whispered against his bare skin, a luxury that felt almost wrong against his body, like he was tainting something too fine for someone like him.

The full weight of the night crashed over him as he moved. His throat ached from Gabriel's grip, his hips and thighs burned with finger-shaped bruises, and the deep ache between his legs sent sparks of remembered pleasure mixed with pain shooting up his spine. But it wasn't just physical. Something deeper had cracked open inside him, leaving him raw and exposed in ways that had nothing to do with his naked skin.

Gabriel's words echoed in his head: "My perfect little toy." "Made to be owned." "Soon, you'll forget there was ever a time you weren't mine." In the darkness, allowed himself one moment of weakness, pressing his palm against his chest where an unfamiliar ache had settled. He'd given up everything Gabriel had demanded, surrendered to him, and for a few precious hours, he'd believed those words.

He turned back, unable to resist one last look. Gabriel lay sprawled across the far side of the bed, all elegant lines and casual dominance even in sleep. realized he'd spent the night clinging to the edge of the mattress, as if his body had known, even in sleep,

that he didn't belong in that massive bed. His skin ached to crawl back into that warmth, to press against Gabriel's side and pretend, just for a moment more, that all those possessive words had been real.

But he knew better.

The memory of other morning-afters stopped him cold. Rough hands shoving him away, cruel words spat at him, disgust replacing the tenderness of the night before. He'd learned early that no one wanted to wake up to the escort they paid for, no matter how sweetly they'd talked the previous night. It was better to slip away in the dark while they slept.

So he did what he always did: gathered his clothes quietly and prepared to disappear into the darkness of the cat hours. After dressing carefully in his neatly folded clothes, he hesitated, fingers brushing over the raw marks on his throat that his collar wouldn't quite hide.

scanned the room for his underwear, knowing he couldn't leave that kind of evidence behind—no client actually wanted to keep souvenirs, no matter what the latest erotic novella claimed. His gaze finally landed on the scrap of black lace near what looked like an en-suite bathroom door, clear across the room. The sight triggered another realization that made his chest tight—while his body ached in the most intimate ways, he didn't feel the usual sticky discomfort that came with these encounters. Gabriel must have cleaned him while he'd been lost in that hazy space after their final round.

That tenderness, beyond what any client had ever shown, made ' throat close. It was too much—the careful aftercare, the way Gabriel had held him afterward, how he'd whispered those possessive promises against ' skin.

His hands shook as he retrieved the torn thong, shoving it deep into his pocket along with his phone he retrieved from Gabriel's jacket. He had to get out now, before these

dangerous feelings could take root any deeper. A man like Gabriel Rohan might enjoy playing caretaker for a night, might even convince himself he wanted to keep a bought boy—but morning always brought clarity. It was better to disappear now while he could still pretend last night's possession had meant something more than a fantasy fulfilled.

His worn sneakers made no sound on the polished wood of the grand staircase. In the pre-dawn quiet, the mansion felt like another world—all old money, silence, and lurking shadows that reminded just how far this place was from his reality. He'd almost reached the massive front door when a quiet voice froze him in place.

"It was a pleasure to host you, sir. Is there a message you would like to leave for the master?"

startled, spinning to face the butler. Jacob materialized from the shadows like he belonged to them, his bearing as impeccable as if it were the middle of the afternoon. There was no judgment in his voice; it was just polite inquiry as if was any other overnight guest—as if the marks on his throat weren't clearly visible even in the dim light.

"Uh, no. Or, I guess, if he wants to call on me again, I'd be happy to—" cut himself off, heat flooding his cheeks. Happy to what? Submit again? Let Gabriel use him until he couldn't walk straight? What was wrong with him? The butler's carefully neutral expression only made it worse, like his stumbling response was perfectly normal, expected even.

"Of course, sir. Have a pleasant day." Jacob bowed slightly at the waist, the gesture as precise and proper as everything else about him.

slipped out the front door, closing it softly behind him. He had only taken a few steps when he heard the massive doors lock with a heavy click that seemed to echo in the

morning's silence. He hurried down the walkway to the street, trying to ignore how the sound felt like finality.

Once a block away and heading to the metro station, pulled out and powered on his phone. His hands were still trembling from the encounter with Jacob when the screen lit up, immediately exploding with notifications: missed calls, texts, and voicemails flooding the display. Confused, scrolled through the missed calls first, panic settling deeper with each swipe of his thumb. Over fifty missed calls glared back at him, most from Donovan, with a handful from Jean.

His heart pounding, skipped the voicemails and went straight for the text messages.

#

8:12 PM: Where the hell are you? Client's been waiting. Pick up your damn phone.

8:27 PM: I gave you a chance to clean up your act after those complaints. This is your gratitude?

8:40 PM: You're pushing it, boy. After I let those bad reviews slide, you pull this shit? I should've kicked you out weeks ago.

9:15 PM: Guess my generosity was wasted. Heart Court doesn't need escorts who can't even show up for work. I'll blacklist you at every cathouse in Fourth Cat!!

11:36 PM: Want to keep your spot? 8AM tomorrow, my office. You'll work the worst shifts until you've made up for EVERY complaint AND this no-show.

01:45 AM: Since I had to give him Caleb AND refund his money, you're paying back double - the refund AND Caleb's rate. 8AM tomorrow if you want to keep working.

#

's hands shook as he closed Donovan's messages, his phone nearly slipping from his sweat-slicked fingers. Cold dread washed over him, making him lightheaded as the full weight of his situation sank in.

How had he screwed up this badly? He'd followed his instructions: right time and place, and Gabriel Rohan matched the client's description perfectly. Dark suit, what he'd thought was the specified maroon shirt—okay, it had been a darker red, but close enough—and everything else: dark hair, blue eyes, clearly in his thirties. Hell, Gabriel had even been sitting by the fountain where his actual client was supposed to be!

A hysterical laugh bubbled up in his throat, quickly stifled by the back of his hand. This was Donovan's fault. How was anyone supposed to identify the right client with such vague information? But fault didn't matter now. He'd blown his last chance at Heart Court because he'd approached the wrong man, and that wrong man had... had...

swallowed hard, stumbling down the metro station steps as fresh memories flooded back—Gabriel's hands on his throat, that commanding voice in his ear, the way his body had betrayed him again and again. Each step sent jolts through his oversensitive body, a maddening mixture of pain and arousal that made him bite his lip to keep quiet. At the turnstile, his trembling hands could barely hold his phone steady enough for the card reader to register. The green light finally blinked, granting him passage into the underground darkness.

He collapsed onto a bench, wincing at the contact, his eyes automatically lifting to the ticker—three minutes until the next train. His numb fingers hovered over Jean's unread messages, but his mind kept circling back to the magnitude of his mistake. Everything had gone so catastrophically wrong, yet his traitorous body still

thrummed. With a shaking breath, he forced himself to tap the message chain, opening Jean's chat.

#

11:03 PM: , Kevin is raging that you were a no-show for your client. I know that isn't like you. ?a va? Où êtes-vous? Please let me know you're safe.

12:32 PM: Starting to really worry about here. No one's heard anything from you. I know things haven't been great, but you'd tell me if you were in trouble, right? Send me anything so I know you're alive.

01:58 AM: Have to head out to see my last client now. I'll be back at Heart Court during cat hours. Just... please be okay.

#

banged his head against the wall behind him, the dull thud matching his heartbeat. So not only had he monumentally screwed up with his client, he'd worried Jean—his best and only real friend at Heart Court. He quickly typed out a message: "I'm alive. Sorry to worry you."

Jean's response was instant: "T'étais où? Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé? ?a va?"

stared at the concerned messages, guilt churning in his stomach. He didn't have the energy to explain this mess over text, nor did he want a record of his colossal mistake. "Chu corrèc. I'll explain everything when I get back to Heart Court. Promise."

When his train arrived, staggered on, dropping into the first available seat with relief that quickly turned to regret. He jerked upright with a barely suppressed gasp,

Gabriel's thorough possession making itself known in ways that sent heat flooding his cheeks. Shifting uncomfortably, he tried to find a position that didn't make him wince, eventually settling for perching on the edge of the seat. His body ached in ways that would make the next few days interesting, to say the least.

"Long night?" The sympathetic voice carried from down the train car. A petite brunette lounged against one of the poles, an expensive vape sending sweet-scented clouds around her perfectly styled hair. Her outfit walked the line between high-class escort and wealthy patron, every curve strategically displayed. The cat hours timing and her practiced stance marked her as the former, likely heading home or back to one of the Fourth Cat's upscale establishments.

A classically handsome blonde man beside her, his designer clothes artfully disheveled in a way that spoke of expensive tastes, smacked her playfully on the hip. "Leave the kid alone, Lottie." His green eyes sparkled with knowing amusement as they darted between ' careful posture and the visible marks on his throat.

"It's a 25-minute ride back to the Fourth Cat, and he got on at Lafayette Park. I'm dying to know his story." Lottie sashayed over, settling next to . "You got bruises, honey." She pointed at her neck. "Here, use this. It's the FDA-approved stuff, not that homeopathic arnica nonsense they sell to all the hippies. This stuff will actually make your bruises vanish. I swear it's magic." She pressed a half-empty bottle of 'Smooth' into his hands. The expensive cream was well-known in their circles—capable of clearing light bruises and cuts within hours, the darker ones within a day or two instead of the usual week.

thanked her softly, trying not to wince as he accepted the bottle.

"You should carry one around if you're going to take on clients who mark you up like that." Lottie took another drag from her vape, watching with professional assessment as he dabbed the cream around his throat. Her tone carried no judgment, just the

matter-of-fact concern of someone who'd been there.

"I don't think I could afford to keep something like this in stock," admitted, carefully recapping the bottle. Even a small container like this would eat up most of a night's earnings. And with his clients, he'd probably go through them quickly.

"Keep it, honey. I have more. And..." her eyes flickered knowingly over his careful posture, "Looks like you might need it somewhere more delicate later. Our brothel keeps them supplied for us."

"You work non-union?" The blonde man asked, gracefully sliding into the seat across from them. Even with his disheveled appearance, his clothes screamed money—the kind of quality could spot from years of undressing clients.

"Yeah," confirmed. "Rough night."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Lottie asked, her voice carrying a gentleness sex workers often reserved for each other.

"Oh, come off it, Lottie. Not everyone wants to share their life story with you." The man's eyes rolled, but his tone held fondness.

"I'll start." She extended her hand with practiced elegance. "Charlotte Garten. Nashville transplant and failed country-music star."

couldn't help but smile as he shook her hand, noting the perfect French manicure that probably cost more than his weekly earnings.

"And I guess I'm Aric Duval." The blonde offered his own hand. "Former high-school teacher turned prostitute."

raised an eyebrow. “Former?”

“Well, I did both for a while.” Aric’s green eyes tracked the passing lights outside. “God knows the sex work paid more than teaching in the Third Cat. Had to get a Master’s degree to teach for the public schools in PDC. Worked at a non-union joint while in college, but wouldn’t you know it? Turned out sex work paid nearly twice as much as teaching.” He settled back, his casual posture at odds with his designer clothes. “In my second year on the job, I was caught servicing the vice principal’s wife. Been doing this ever since.”

“I’m sorry,” said, not knowing what else to say.

“I’m not. Teaching paid pennies. I make six figures a year with sex work, and I don’t even have to pay for my housing.”

Lottie shifted closer, her expensive perfume a contrast to the vape’s sweetness. “As I said, washed-up country singer. Made the mistake every wannabe with a dream does and slept with a man who promised to make me a star. Turns out, he didn’t think I could be one. Left a decent bartending gig behind in Nashville and came to PDC looking for a new start. Not surprisingly, singing gigs, and even bartending jobs are a hard market to get into. Started doing the singing escort thing a few months into my stay here. That was eight years ago.”

“She got pretty popular,” Aric said, smiling at her fondly.

“Damn straight, I did.” Lottie returned his smile before turning her attention back to .
“What about you, kid?”

took a deep breath, steeling himself. “Pretty typical PDC story, really. Mom and Dad died in the chemical plant fire fifteen years ago—”

“I heard about that, nasty stuff. The area is still condemned, isn’t it?” Aric asked, leaning forward in his seat.

nodded, the familiar ache of that loss dulled by time. “Yeah, most of the kids in my neighborhood ended up in foster care. Foster parents weren’t exactly clean—what with it being the Third Cat and all. The guy was a small-time member of some gang. Had me running drugs a few months after I got there. Ran away at twelve when I overheard him telling his buddies he was going to sell me to the gang. Been on the street ever since. Got the non-union gig a few years ago. Just trying to keep it.”

Aric’s expression darkened. “Did you finish high school?”

shook his head, fighting the familiar shame. “Never went. Self-taught. Easy enough to do with the libraries. The librarians always took pity on me. Bought me lunch more often than not. One taught me basic math when he realized I wasn’t in school.”

Lottie rested her delicate hand on his. “I’m sorry. That’s rough.”

shrugged, uncomfortable with the sympathy. “It’s not so bad. I survived. Made it this far.”

“So then, what has you looking so upset?” Lottie leaned in, her perfectly highlighted hair catching the fluorescent train lighting.

told them the entire story, start to finish. The pair listened intently, Lottie’s soft gasps and concerned murmurs punctuating his story, while her hand occasionally flew to her mouth in surprise.

“It’s your proprietor’s fault,” Aric said, his green eyes flashing angrily. “Sucks it’s not a Union brothel. They wouldn’t have allowed the anonymity bullshit. You would’ve been given his full name and face, not just some basic description.”

managed a sad smile. “I know. But no union brothel will take a kid without a high school degree. I didn’t even technically finish middle school.”

Lottie squeezed his shoulder, then reached into her designer purse and pulled out her calling card—one of those fancy electronic ones that was quickly becoming the new standard. Not that could ever afford them. She tapped it against his phone, her information immediately syncing to his contacts.

“If you ever need anything, you call me, you hear? Especially if that proprietor of yours gives you the business.” Her delicate features had hardened with determination.

The conductor’s voice crackled over the speaker, announcing Moulin Coeur, the heart of the Fourth Cat.

“This is our stop. You?” Aric asked, offering Lottie his hand as she stood.

“Four more, then a transfer to red. Five after that.”

Aric nodded knowingly. ‘ stop being closer to The Docks spoke volumes about his normal clientèle.

“Good luck, ,” Lottie called as they disembarked.

just waved, watching as their well-dressed figures disappeared into the station. He wasn’t looking forward to the confrontation with Donovan, but his mind drifted back to the mansion he’d left behind. To Gabriel. He pushed the thought away—he had bigger problems to deal with now.

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's alarm pierced the silence, and he silenced it with a sharp slap. His hand reached across the bed, seeking his little bird, only to find cold sheets where Ellis should have been. The emptiness jolted him fully awake. He hadn't given his little bird permission to leave. That he'd slept through the departure was even more disturbing. Either his little bird had been exceptionally quiet, or last night had drained him more thoroughly than he'd realized. The memory of Ellis surrendering so perfectly, breaking so beautifully beneath his hands, suggested the latter.

His jaw clenched as he processed the space beside him where his little bird should still be sleeping. A bitter anger crystallized in his chest. He'd been explicit last night—Ellis belonged to him now. The echo of those possessive words twisted with irritation as he recalled how sweetly his little bird had yielded to each command, how perfectly he'd submitted. That submission hadn't been pretense; knew the difference between genuine surrender and professional performance.

Grumbling, he moved through his morning routine with mechanical efficiency, mind already mapping out the steps needed to correct this... misunderstanding. The hall clock read half-past seven when he emerged, dressed for the board meeting at nine. A full day of meetings stretched ahead, which meant his wayward bird would have hours to contemplate his error before could retrieve him.

For a moment, he considered sending Alain to collect his wayward bird, but no—this needed a personal touch. Ellis needed to understand exactly what it meant to belong to Rohan. The enforced wait would give him time to set things in motion. He'd need to acquire Ellis's contract from that waste of space Donovan, among other things.

Settling at the breakfast table, allowed himself a small, dangerous smile as he

contemplated how thoroughly he would remind his little bird that he'd found his permanent perch.

Jacob placed a coffee and 's usual breakfast before him, along with his charged tablet. "Your young master left just after four this morning," the butler said quietly. 's hand stilled on the coffee cup—he'd forgotten the device in his car, too focused on getting his little bird inside.

"Ah, the cat hours," Lucas remarked, dropping into his usual seat and promptly stealing a piece of bacon from 's plate. The familiar theft did nothing to lighten 's mood.

Jacob set coffees before Lucas and Alain with well-practiced efficiency, his disapproving tut at their behavior carrying decades of fond exasperation. "Annabelle, perhaps breakfast for Masters Lucas and Alain before they devour Monsieur 's entire plate?"

Annabelle emerged from the kitchen, silver-streaked dark hair escaping its pins, carrying plates loaded with eggs and meat. Her presence filled the room the way it had since was a child, when she'd stepped into the void left by an absent father and a mother more interested in afternoon cocktails than her sons.

"The fruit platter was meant to share, Monsieur ," she scolded, snapping her kitchen towel near his hand with the authority of someone who'd raised him from boyhood. shifted the platter closer, earning an eye roll from the woman who'd been more mother than employee. When he'd chosen this quieter residence in Lafayette Square over the principal estate, Annabelle and Jacob's loyalty had never been in question.

Lucas reached across the small breakfast table and snagged some of the grapes, popping the whole handful into his mouth. "Have fun last night?" he asked around the fruit, earning another eye roll from Annabelle.

“Chew first, Lucas. Je n’ai pas élevé des loups,” Annabelle chided, turning back toward her kitchen.

“You might’ve,” Lucas called after her, grinning.

“Men! All wolves!” Annabelle’s hands flew skyward as she disappeared through the swinging doors, Jacob following with dignified amusement.

“Don’t antagonize her,” Alain warned, refilling his coffee. “She’s still the one who does your laundry. Or did you forget the bleached suit incident?”

Lucas wrinkled his nose at the memory. “I shall behave.”

shook his head, but his amusement felt hollow. The morning’s light mood couldn’t dispel the space where his little bird should be.

“Speaking of behavior,” Lucas’s tone shifted, playfulness giving way to careful inquiry, “how was the cat you picked up?”

“My little bird has temporarily flown away.” ’s voice carried a dangerous edge as he scrolled through his tablet. “I plan to retrieve him this evening.” The loaded silence drew his attention from the screen. He found his friends exchanging glances. “What?”

Alain cleared his throat, choosing his words with the caution of someone who’d known ’s temper for decades. “Were you serious about keeping him? It’s just... he’s an escort, .”

’s fist crashed against the table. Neither man flinched—they’d weathered too many of his storms for that. “He is mine,” he ground out. “And yes. I plan to keep him.”

“For how long?” Lucas asked quietly, pushing the eggs around his plate.

“I don’t know.” ’s voice softened, revealing an unfamiliar uncertainty. “I just know that I need him.”

Alain and Lucas exchanged another look but said nothing. They finished the rest of breakfast in thoughtful silence, broken only by the distant sounds of Annabelle clattering about her kitchen.

The ride to La Sauvegarde’s headquarters passed in similar quiet. Alain navigated PDC’s morning traffic with practiced ease while Lucas reviewed the day’s schedule from the passenger seat, tablet balanced on his knee. Neither mentioned Ellis, though caught their occasional glances in the rearview mirror. He ignored them, watching First Cat’s glass towers rise around them as they approached the financial district.

Brenda was at her desk when they arrived, her usually bright “Good morning” strained. Her eyes darted toward the conference room as she handed the quarterly reports. Through the glass walls, board members had already gathered an hour early. And there, in ’s rightful place at the head of the table, sat Maximilien Rohan.

Three hours later, stalked into his office, tie already constricting as his father’s voice echoed in his head. Each cutting remark had torn through his quarterly presentation as if were some fumbling intern rather than CEO. It should have been his triumph—profits up eighteen percent, three strategic acquisitions seamlessly integrated, international expansion ahead of schedule. Instead, he’d spent three hours defending himself against accusations about Henri’s latest public scandals.

His wayward brother—who should have been at the Lumière Casino last night discussing damage control—had left him waiting like a fool. No doubt Henri was somewhere adding to the list of indiscretions their father had just spent hours holding accountable for.

The only grace of the evening had been the unexpected approach of a beautiful young

man. 's fingers flexed unconsciously, remembering Ellis' confidence as he slipped into the seat beside him, how he'd yielded perfectly to 's control. Even now, that memory helped temper his rage at Henri's defiance of both his CEO authority and brotherly responsibility.

But not even thoughts of Ellis could fully cool his anger. His fingers twisted around his tie, yanking it free and hurling it across the room. The board had sat there, nodding along as Maximilien steamrolled the meeting as if hadn't spent five years dragging La Sauvegarde into the modern era. As if the Rohan name wasn't worth more now than it had ever been under his father's leadership. Yet the moment Henri's latest scandal hit the society pages, suddenly was "failing to maintain the family image."

A laugh escaped him, raw and bitter. The family image. Always the fucking family image. Because La Sauvegarde wasn't just a company—it was the Rohan legacy. Never mind the profits, innovations, or growth. No, must be perfect, above reproach, shouldering blame for every family indiscretion while maintaining an immaculate facade.

His fist crashed into his desk. His morning coffee toppled, the dark liquid seeping across quarterly reports he should have reviewed hours ago. He should have been back by ten, coffee still hot, focused on acquisition proposals. Instead, past noon, and he'd been dressed down like an errant schoolboy.

paced the length of his office, running his hands through his hair, destroying the carefully styled look that was part of that precious image. He could feel his control slipping, rage building beneath years of careful restraint...

Ellis.

The memory of his little bird's complete submission cut through his spiral like a

blade, bringing sudden clarity. Yes. This was what he needed when everything else slipped through his fingers—someone who would yield to his control completely, perfectly, willingly.

Cancel everything,” commanded into his desk’s intercom.

Brenda’s response was immediate. “Sir, the Thomson merger—”

“Can wait.”

The intercom clicked silent. turned to the floor-to-ceiling windows of his corner office, gaze sweeping past Old Town’s pristine cityscape to where the Mississippi carved PDC like a wound. Beyond it, the Fourth Cat sprawled in defiant contrast to the gleaming towers around him. Somewhere in that maze of streets, his little bird waited to be reclaimed.

The office door opened behind him. “.” Lucas’s voice carried warning as he entered. “Your father was out of line, but—”

“My father,” ’s words cut like steel, “seems to have forgotten who runs La Sauvegarde now.” His fingers drummed against his coffee-stained desk. “Henri’s behavior is a problem, yes. One I will handle. But right now...” His eyes found the clock. Past noon. “Right now, I have a wayward bird to collect.”

Lucas sighed but nodded, fingers already moving across his tablet. “I’ll have Alain bring the car.”

“Good.” retrieved his discarded jacket, shrugging it on with fluid grace. The board meeting’s tension still coiled in his muscles, but thoughts of retrieving Ellis curved his lips into something predatory. “It’s time everyone understood exactly who’s in charge.”

His shoes struck a sharp rhythm against La Sauvegarde's marble lobby, the sound bouncing off Italian stone. Employees scattered from his path with lowered eyes—a deference he usually savored. Today, his mind had already crossed the river.

Alain held the car door open, face impassive. slid into the back seat of the Mercedes, adjusting his cuffs as Lucas settled in beside him.

“Heart Court,” Lucas directed, passing the address forward.

The car pulled away from the curb, merging into First Cat traffic. For twenty minutes, watched Old Town's gleaming towers give way to the northern portion of the First Cat's sprawl as they approached the Missouri River bridge.

“Sir.” Lucas's careful tone drew 's attention. “The location is... further than expected.”

studied his phone, jaw tightening as he noted Heart Court's position near the Fourth Cat's northern edge. Thirty minutes by car—but the transit overlay revealed a maze of connections that would have taken his little bird an hour to navigate. Alone. In the dark.

The thought settled like ice in 's stomach as they crossed into the Second Cat. Luxury high-rises flashed past, their gleaming facades a stark reminder of the world his little bird had fled to reach this place. They crossed the final bridge into Fourth Cat's northern reaches, leaving behind the tourist-friendly facades of the entertainment district. Here, run-down bars lined the streets, their neon already burning in the afternoon gloom. Apartment buildings crouched behind chain-link fences, territorial claims spelled out in spray paint.

The Mercedes slowed, drawing hostile looks from the locals. Small strip clubs and non-union brothels dotted the block between pool halls and neighborhood bars. Heart

Court loomed ahead, its warehouse facade transformed by electric pink and red neon. A crowd of off-shift workers pressed against the floor-to-ceiling display window, their crude laughter carrying across the humid afternoon air.

Alain brought the car to a stop, the luxury vehicle an alien presence in this cesspool of the Fourth Cat. 's fingers drummed against his thigh, the only outward sign of his fraying control.

“Well.” His voice carried an edge sharper than his smile. “Shall we?” He stepped from the car, Alain and Lucas falling into position beside him.

Dock workers and locals pressed against the display window, their lunch break entertainment evidently found. Their crude laughter carried across the humid afternoon air, punctuated by the mechanical whir of... something.

Then he heard it. A muffled sob that stopped him cold.

The display window's lurid pink neon turned his pristine white shirt garish as approached. Then he heard it—a muffled sob from behind the glass that stopped him cold. Ellis—his little bird—knelt strapped to a padded bench, hands cuffed behind his back. A black bit gag stretched those perfect lips, a sodden blindfold covered his eyes, and behind him, a mechanical arm thrust rhythmically, forcing broken sounds from his trembling form.

The last thread of 's control snapped.

He didn't register crossing to Heart Court's entrance, didn't feel his suit jacket fly open with the force of his movement. The bell above the door chimed discordantly against his thundering pulse. The display case stood separate and sealed, a cruel glass cage where his little bird fluttered in distress.

's hands slammed against the display room's door. The thick glass didn't even shudder under his assault.

"Rohan." The word snapped from behind the counter as a young man with untamed blonde curls vaulted over it. "Ellis showed me how to break this piece of shit open—Donovan keeps locking people in here when they piss him off. Donovan tossed Ellis in this morning, won't let anyone go near him." The boy's fingers flew to the keypad, contempt thick in his voice even as he jabbed the zero repeatedly. "Come on, come on..."

A pneumatic hiss signaled the door's release. would have to thank his little bird later for teaching this trick to—

Outside, violence erupted as Lucas and Alain dispersed the crowd. The wet crack of Lucas' fist meeting flesh carried through the glass, followed by shocked gasps as Alain revealed his sidearm. The crowd scattered like roaches in sunlight.

moved the instant the door opened, channeling his fury into careful movements as he worked the buckle of the bit gag. Ellis whimpered as eased it from between his lips, the sound stoking his rage. Red marks marred the corners of that perfect mouth, each one a death sentence would deliver. But when he spoke, he forced his voice into something gentle, something safe.

"Shhh, little bird. I'm here now. Je suis là." The words emerged soft, controlled, though they tasted like violence on his tongue. Ellis released a broken sob at the sound of his voice, his whole body shuddering.

The blonde youth darted in beside him, key ring jingling as he worked on the handcuffs while released the straps holding Ellis to the bench. As the restraints fell away, 's gaze caught on the angry welts crossing Ellis' back. Crude, amateur strikes that spoke of brutality rather than skill.

Bruises bloomed across that perfect skin, marks hadn't placed there, hadn't authorized. Each one felt like a personal affront. Only he had the right to mark his little bird, to paint him with practiced, measured strokes. These savage marks... his vision darkened at the edges as rage threatened to overwhelm him.

yanked the machine's cord from the wall, silencing its mechanical whirl. Ellis whimpered as carefully eased him free, revealing the obscene size of the attached dildo. His vision went white—this brutal violation of what was his, this crude attempt to break his petit oiseau. The sound of Ellis' pain cut through his already fraying control.

"I have you," he forced out past clenched teeth, one arm wrapping securely around Ellis' waist, supporting him as tremors wracked his little bird's frame.

Only then did reach for the blindfold, carefully peeling the soaked fabric away. Fresh tears spilled down Ellis' cheeks as he blinked in the harsh light. Another sob escaped him, his entire body trembling as he surrendered his weight to .

slipped one arm beneath Ellis' knees, the other supporting his back as he lifted him in a careful bridal carry. Ellis curled into his chest immediately, face pressing into 's neck as carried him to the lobby's worn couch. The young blonde hovered nearby, his fitted uniform doing little to hide his agitation as settled them both, Ellis cradled in his lap, mindful of the welts and bruises.

"I have you, mon coeur," he whispered into Ellis' hair, uncaring of the witnesses to this moment of tenderness. "I have you now."

The desk clerk hovered anxiously nearby as Ellis curled deeper into 's chest. The lobby door burst open as Lucas and Alain entered, both men freezing at the threshold. barely registered their presence, his attention fixed on each of Ellis's shuddering breaths.

“Jean Saint-Clair?” Lucas’s voice cut through ’s focus, equal parts surprise and certainty.

The blonde youth stiffened. “You’re mistaken. It’s Devereaux.”

“Your mother’s maiden name?” Lucas arched an eyebrow, his usual playfulness edged with steel. “Not much of a cover, kid. Your father’s been telling everyone you’re at some prestigious boarding school in Sweden.”

The boy’s defiant posture faltered at the mention of his father, though his chin remained lifted. “Yeah, well, Sweden’s overrated.”

“Was Heart Court the first brothel you tried after running away?”

A flush crept up the youth’s neck. “...fourth. First one that didn’t look like it’d give me an STD just walking in.”

Jean Saint-Clair. The name finally penetrated ’s consciousness—Henri’s friend Marc’s younger brother. That explained the earlier contempt, the flash of recognition. Another complication, but one that could wait.

“I can’t imagine what Olivier Saint-Clair would say if he knew you were here,” Lucas mused, stepping closer.

“My father doesn’t need to know!” Jean’s shout echoed off the lobby walls as he settled protectively beside Ellis. Before Lucas could provoke the boy further, heavy footsteps thundered down the hallway.

“What the hell is going on down here?” Kevin Donovan’s voice boomed through the lobby.

The sound of the man responsible for his little bird's suffering ignited every spark of rage had suppressed since the board meeting. He carefully lowered Ellis onto the couch, shrugging out of his suit jacket to wrap around Ellis's trembling form. "Keep him safe," he murmured to Jean, then stood.

His first punch connected with Donovan's jaw, the satisfying crack of bone a symphony to his ears. The second punch split his lip, blood spraying across 's knuckles. Each subsequent impact fed the fury that had built since morning—his father's contempt, Henri's betrayal, Ellis's pain—until everything narrowed to the wet sound of flesh meeting flesh, to the primal need to destroy the man who had dared touch what was his.

He barely registered Donovan going limp, his fists continuing their assault until strong arms yanked him back. Lucas and Alain's voices cut through his haze of violence, but the damage was done. Donovan lay unconscious, his face a ruined masterpiece on the lobby floor.

The sight cleared 's mind like ice water. He shrugged off his friends' restraining hands, already turning back to Ellis. "Everyone in the car. Now." His voice emerged with deadly calm as he gathered Ellis into his arms, ensuring his suit jacket covered as much of his trembling form as possible.

"I'm not going anywhere," Jean announced, defiant even as Lucas grabbed his arm.

"Enough." 's patience had evaporated with the last of his rage. "Lucas, bring Saint-Clair. We'll deal with his father's Swedish boarding school fantasy later." His focus returned to Ellis, to the precious weight cradled against his chest. "Alain, drive."

They exited Heart Court, Jean fighting Lucas's grip every step of the way. Lucas tossed the boy unceremoniously into the backseat alongside and Ellis. Jean's shriek of indignation at the engaging child locks barely registered over the sound of Ellis's

shuddering breaths against 's neck.

paid no attention to Jean's outrage or Lucas's amusement. His world had narrowed to the precious weight in his arms, to each hitched breath against his neck, to the way his little bird instinctively curled closer with each subtle shift. This—this was what control meant. Not the illusion of power he wielded in board rooms, not the facade of authority his father had stripped away, but this: his little bird, trembling but safe, finally back where he belonged.

#

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:52 am

The Mercedes glided across the Missouri River bridge, leaving the gritty edges of Fourth Cat behind as they entered Second Cat's pristine streets. shifted Ellis carefully in his arms, each pained whimper stoking the rage still burning beneath his skin.

"Explain," ground out.

"Explain what?" Jean crossed his arms. "That you poached Ellis from an important client? A client who happened to be a good friend of Donovan's? The man was livid. Donovan gave him Caleb instead, and now Caleb's looking at bed rest for days."

"Why would Donovan give Ellis to someone like that in the first place?" 's voice went dangerously soft.

Jean shifted uncomfortably. "Because Ellis had nowhere else to go. Most of the others—the high earners especially—will eventually end up at Union houses. You can't risk damaging merchandise that has options. There are rules, even in Fourth Cat. Donovan doesn't want to get shut down." He glanced at Ellis. "But Ellis... he never finished school. Any of it. He's not qualified for Union work, so places like Heart Court were his only option. Donovan took advantage, gave him to the sketchier clients more often than not."

's hands tightened, and Ellis made a small sound of distress. He forced himself to relax his grip, wishing he'd done more than just beat Donovan unconscious.

"You seem to know a lot about Donovan's business practices," Lucas observed, voice sharp.

Jean let out a harsh laugh. “Trust me, I know exactly how the wealthy treat their servants. I grew up watching it. Donovan’s no different; took calls right in front of me and discussed clients openly. People like that never think the help is paying attention.”

His gaze dropped to Ellis. “But this? This is your fault. You should have told him you weren’t his client.”

“I didn’t want to.”

“Typical Rohan,” Jean threw his hands up. “You see something you want and just take it, never mind who gets hurt in the process.”

“As opposed to running away and hiding in a brothel while your family thinks you’re at boarding school?” Lucas shot back.

“Fuck you, Moreau.”

Lucas twisted in his seat, fixing Jean with a hard stare. “You sat at that desk and watched them hurt Ellis.”

“What was I supposed to do?” Jean asked, tears forming at the corner of his eyes. “I tried to stop them! Donovan said he’d make sure I was next if I didn’t shut up. Ellis—” Jean’s voice caught. “Ellis begged me to stay quiet, to not make it worse.” His hands were shaking now. “I wanted to help. But what could I do?”

“Something,” Lucas growled, turning back around.

The silence stretched until Jean spoke again, subdued. “We have contracts. You’ll have to take us back.”

“Missouri and Illinois are at-will states,” Alain said from behind the wheel.

“Shows what you know about sex work law,” Jean said wearily. “Union or non-union, the contracts are binding until renewal. Unless something egregious happens—”

“What they did to Ellis doesn’t count as egregious?” Lucas’s incredulous voice cut through the car.

“No, it doesn’t. Shut up,” Jean snapped. “Or there has to be a mutual parting of ways.”

“How is what happened to Ellis not egregious enough to break a contract?” Alain’s voice remained calm, a stark contrast to Lucas and Jean’s barely contained fury.

“Maybe at a Union house, but at Heart Court?” Jean exhaled sharply. “Punishments were part of the contract.”

“And you signed it? Are you insane?” Lucas’s pitch escalated with each word.

“I didn’t really read it until after...”

“You’re an idiot.”

Jean lurched forward, swatting at Lucas like a cornered kitten. “I’ll show you idiot!”

Alain grabbed Jean’s shirt collar, yanking him back into his seat. “Enough. Both of you.” His temples throbbed. “Stop antagonizing him, Lucas.”

Half-hearted murmurs of acceptance followed. Jean sulked against the window while Lucas folded his arms, muttering French curses under his breath.

“I’ll send lawyers to Heart Court first thing to deal with the contracts,” Lucas said when he’d finally exhausted his vocabulary of curses.

“Send Nika,” said, still stroking Ellis’ hair. “He’s a viper.”

Nikolai Rykov had been a Bratva lawyer in Los Angeles until met him in the Maldives three years ago. He’d liked the man’s ruthless efficiency enough to offer double his salary to relocate to Porte du Coeur.

The rest of the drive passed in taut silence. kept Ellis cradled against him, one hand rhythmically stroking through dark hair, the other supporting Ellis’ back to keep him from jostling against the car’s movement. Every small whimper or shift drew his muscles tighter until he felt like he might shatter.

When they pulled into Lafayette Square and Alain disengaged the child locks, gathered Ellis close and stepped out onto the smooth concrete of the private drive.

“Alain, take care of Jean and contact his—”

“No!” Jean lunged for the door. Lucas caught him before he could bolt. “You can’t!”

“Your family thinks you’re at boarding school in Sweden,” Lucas started.

Jean’s laugh was borderline hysterical. “They know damn well I’m not in Sweden! They made up that story because it looks better than admitting they lost track of their youngest son.” He struggled against Lucas’s grip. “They have no idea where I actually am and I plan to keep it that way.”

“What did they do to you?” Lucas asked quietly.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not going back.” Jean’s voice shook. “I’ll die before I let you

send me back.”

“I’ll run,” he added, glaring at . “The second you try to contact them, I’m gone.”

“Enough.” ’s voice cut through Jean’s rising panic. “Lucas, get him settled and make sure he doesn’t go anywhere. We won’t contact his family.” His eyes met Jean’s in the mirror. “Yet. So behave yourself.”

“Alain, get Nika and bring him here.” His attention returned to Ellis’s trembling form. “Now.”

“Yes, sir,” Alain said, sliding back into the driver’s seat as Lucas guided Jean from the car.

carried Ellis through the front door while Lucas managed a still-resistant Jean. Annabelle appeared immediately, her usual composure fracturing at the sight of the group.

“Oh, le pauvre,” Annabelle said, fussing over Jean. “Come with me. We’ll get you settled.”

Jean glanced over his shoulder at Ellis as Lucas and Annabelle escorted him further into the house, his worry etched plainly on his face.

“Jacob,” called, knowing his butler would materialize as he always did. “Call Dr. Nguyen. Tell her it’s urgent.”

“Of course, Monsieur.” Jacob’s voice followed him up the stairs.

In his bedroom, laid Ellis on the bed. His hands shook slightly as he eased his suit jacket open where it draped over Ellis’ body, cataloging every mark that shouldn’t be

there. Every few minutes, Ellis' eyes would flutter open, confused and pain-glazed, before slipping closed again.

“Je suis là, mon petit oiseau,” murmured each time, gentle words at odds with the rage still simmering beneath his skin. “You’re safe.”

He cleaned what he could with warm water and soft cloths, his touch careful despite his trembling fingers. The practiced control he'd maintained his entire life felt gossamer-thin, ready to tear at the sight of each new bruise blooming across Ellis' skin.

For an hour, stayed beside Ellis, watching each pained breath. When Dr. Rose-Marie Nguyen arrived, Annabelle followed her into the bedroom. Rose-Marie had been the Rohan family's private physician for over a decade, treating everything from Henri's cocaine overdose to 's occasional migraines with quiet efficiency and absolute discretion.

forced himself to step back, knowing Ellis was in capable hands. In the hall, he found Nika waiting with Alain. He led them to his study, leaving Annabelle to assist the doctor.

His study had always been a sanctuary, its mahogany paneling and leather-bound books a barrier between himself and the world's demands. Tonight, not even the familiar scent of tobacco and aged paper could calm the rage still coursing through him.

“Tell me exactly what you want done about Heart Court,” Nika said, his Moscow accent lingering despite his years in America. He settled into one of the leather chairs with predatory grace, fingers drumming against worn leather.

poured three fingers of scotch but didn't drink. “I want Jean and Ellis' contracts in

my hand by sundown.” The crystal caught the lamplight as he swirled the amber liquid. “Every other escort transferred to Union establishments by week’s end. And Heart Court?” He paused. “Shut it down.”

“And Donovan?” Nika’s fingers stilled, a shark scenting blood.

“I’d prefer he not be a problem anymore.”

“Kevin Donovan has powerful friends in the Fourth Cat.”

“Does he? I somehow doubt Donovan’s friends are drawn to his charm, more likely his money.” ’s public mask slipped, revealing something darker beneath. “Once word gets out about his... unfortunate business practices, I doubt they’ll remain loyal.”

“Ah.” Nika’s smile widened. “You want more than just elimination. You want destruction.”

“Complete and thorough.”

“Full discretion on spreading word of his business practices?”

knew what his lawyer was asking: permission to create whatever narrative would bring Donovan down fastest.

“Yes.”

“How much are you willing to spend on their contracts?” Nika asked, his fingers resuming their endless rhythm against the leather.

took a sip of the whiskey. “Whatever he wants. We’ll be reimbursed after he’s no longer an issue.”

“And the other escorts at Heart Court?”

“Make sure they know which Union establishments are hiring. I want that building empty by the time you’re done.”

“Consider it done.” Nika stood, adjusting his cuffs. “I’ll have both contracts for you by the end of the day, along with NDAs regarding Monsieur Saint-Clair’s... employment history.” He paused. “Your brother’s friend Marc... should I expect complications?”

“Handle it.”

Alain shifted slightly, drawing ’s attention. The question in his eyes was clear - was sure about doing all this for someone he’d known one night?

“Ellis is mine,” replied.

Nika’s smile turned sharp. “So be it. I’ll see you at dinner.” His gaze flicked to Alain. “I trust Annabelle is preparing steak?”

“I’ll have her informed,” said.

After Nika left, turned to Alain. “Satisfied?”

Alain shrugged, unrepentant. “You’ve only known him a day, and you’re willing to go scorched-earth on total strangers. I feel justified in double-checking.”

merely grunted before he sat heavily in the vacated chair. Alain settled across from him, tablet already in hand.

“I want private security stationed around the property. Discreet but thorough. Both to

keep my newest acquisitions safe..." He paused. "And to ensure they stay put."

"I'll coordinate with our usual team," Alain said quietly.

"Make sure they all sign the NDAs Nika's bringing tonight, along with our standard ones."

"Of course."

"And make sure—"

"I'll handle it, ." Alain's calm certainty was why trusted him with the most delicate matters. "Ellis has no connections beyond Heart Court, and Donovan won't be an issue once Nika's finished. The real concern is keeping Jean's presence from Henri."

"Yes, Jean is a complication I don't want to deal with right now." pinched the bridge of his nose. "Lucas will manage him until we decide how to approach the Saint-Clairs."

"The Saint-Clairs won't take kindly to that."

"They're not meant to." took another sip of whiskey.

"And then there is your father."

scoffed into his glass.

Alain scowled. "He won't be pleased to see you've taken up with an escort."

"Maximilien Rohan is rarely pleased about anything. He's especially non-pleased that his oldest son prefers men."

The silence settled between them, broken only by the occasional clink of 's glass against the side table when Dr. Nguyen entered. She closed the door behind her, petite and fierce in her pressed slacks and tailored blazer, her black hair coiled in a practical twist at the crown of her head. Taking in 's state, she frowned.

“You should change. You’re a walking biohazard.”

“Thank you, Rose, for that unnecessary statement,” said. “How is he?”

“Asleep.”

set his empty glass aside and made to rise, but Rose held up her hand. “He needs to continue to sleep. He wasn’t in as bad of condition as he could have been.” She flipped open her tablet, scrolling. “Extensive bruising and contusions, not including the whip marks. Three of his ribs are bruised, likely from multiple kicks. His anus was swollen and torn, and the rectum was much the same, caused by, I can only assume, a large object he wasn’t properly prepped for.” She glanced up from her tablet, scowling at .

“I didn’t do that to him.”

“If I suspected you had, I wouldn’t be here. And neither would he.” Her voice softened slightly. “Ellis needs rest and fluids. He’s on an IV drip now with sleep aids and pain relievers. You’ll swap it out three more times when the bags are empty—they’re all pre-mixed. Annabelle helped me cover his external injuries with prescription-strength Smooth cream. The visible marks should fade in a day or two, but his internal injuries, especially the ribs, will take longer.”

She paused, glancing at her tablet. “For the anal tearing and rectal damage, I’ve left a combination antibiotic and Smooth cream on the nightstand—it’s prescription only, specially formulated for this type of injury. The regular Smooth cream works

wonders on surface trauma, but internal damage needs something more targeted.” Her tone remained clinical. “Apply it internally every six hours for the next twenty-four hours, then twice daily for three days after that. No sexual activity until the tissue is fully healed. Even with the enhanced healing properties of Smooth, this type of injury needs proper time to recover and is prone to infection if not properly treated.”

“I understand,” said quietly, his rage at Donovan temporarily overshadowed by concern for Ellis. He’d ensure every instruction was followed precisely—his little bird would heal properly under his protection.

“I’ve drawn blood for testing and should have results in a few hours. Annabelle mentioned you also want tests for Jean Saint-Clair—who I thought was supposed to be in Sweden.” Her brown eyes pierced . “I’ll draw his blood before I leave. And ? Be careful with Ellis. Call me if anything changes.”

“Nika will send over an NDA this evening. We expect your discretion,” Alain said quietly.

“You have it.” Dr. Nguyen spun on her heel and left.

Let him sleep. could do that.

Probably.

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With its deep squares and lines, the ornate ceiling came into focus as blinked away the lingering haze of sleep. His entire body felt like one big bruise, but the sharp pain he remembered had worn down to a steady ache. As he moved, the silk sheets made a soft sliding sound against his skin, and for a moment, he couldn't grasp where he was.

Someone had cleaned him up while he was unconscious, washing away the evidence of his humiliation in the Display Case. That thought should have mortified him—someone handling his body while he was out—but instead, there was only relief. He hoped it hadn't been Gabriel. The man had already seen him at his lowest: naked, bound, and sobbing on that machine.

Then it all came rushing back—Donovan's face twisted with rage, the first crack of the belt across his back. The slaps, the kicks when hadn't responded fast enough to his demands. Being forced to his knees, choking when Donovan shoved his prick down his throat.

' breath hitched as the memories assaulted him. The blindfold cutting off his vision, the bit-gag stretching his jaw painfully wide. Then that machine—that massive dildo forcing its way in when he'd had nothing but the lingering traces of his night with Gabriel to ease the way. The mechanical whir, the crowd's laughter, his muffled screams...

A sound nearby made jerk, his body trying to curl into itself despite the protest of overexerted muscles. Something brushed against him and he flinched hard.

"Easy there," Jean's voice cut through the panic. "You're safe. You're in Gabriel

Rohan's house."

forced his eyes open—when had he squeezed them shut?—to find Jean perched in an oversized leather chair nearby, one leg tucked under him as he played with the sleeve of his too-big sweater.

The familiar sight of his friend helped ground him, even as fragments of memory kept surfacing: Gabriel's voice cutting through his pain, those strong arms lifting him, cradling him while he wept. God, he'd buried his face in Gabriel Rohan's neck and probably gotten tears and who knows what else all over his expensive suit. Yet Gabriel hadn't seemed to care, had held him closer, whispered soft French words into his hair.

"Gabriel..." tried the name, but his voice came out rough. "He came for me?"

Jean's laugh had an edge to it. "Oh honey, he came in like wrath personified. Grabbed us both and brought us to this fancy prison of his." He waved his hand around the enormous bedroom. "Where, might I add, we're basically trapped. The guards won't even let me walk in the garden. There's a huge brick wall out there! Where exactly do they think I'm going to go?"

frowned, trying to keep up. "But why would he..." His voice cracked. "I'm nobody. Just a—"

"If you say 'just a whore', I will throw this stupid expensive pillow at your head," Jean cut him off. "Gabriel Rohan has decided you're his now. And trust me, when a Rohan man decides something, that's that." The last words came out so bitter that stared at his friend.

"How would you know?"

Jean's fingers stilled on his sleeve. Something crossed his face—like he'd been waiting for this question. "Because my real name is Jean Saint-Clair. Henri Rohan, Gabriel's brother? He's best friends with my brother Marc."

felt like the room tilted sideways. "You're..."

"A runaway rich kid? Yeah." Jean's smile wasn't happy at all. "Before you ask why—why does any spoiled rich kid run away? Got bored, wanted to rebel, you know how it goes." The words sounded rehearsed, hollow, like 's own practiced explanations to clients about choosing this life.

"Okay," nodded, recognizing the need to hide behind convenient lies. His bladder chose that moment to make itself known, demanding attention. "I need to..." he started pushing himself up, trying to hide his wince.

"Bathroom? Here, let me help. Dr. Nguyen said you're not supposed to move too fast yet." Jean was already reaching for his arm. "And don't worry, Gabriel's keeping busy at the office. Looks like he can actually stay away when it comes to letting you heal."

The words shouldn't have disappointed him, but they did. pushed that feeling aside as Jean helped him stand. He didn't even think about his nakedness—after years at Heart Court, being nude around others was unremarkable. But something felt different now, like his body wasn't just his anymore. The thought should have frightened him. Instead, it sent an unexpected shiver down his spine.

His legs trembled as Jean helped him across the thick carpet, and he couldn't tell if it was from his injuries or from the weight of these new, confusing feelings. Gabriel Rohan had saved him, had seen him at his absolute worst, and instead of disgust or dismissal, had treated him like something precious. Something worth protecting. But how long would that last?

“I can manage from here,” mumbled, face heating.

“You sure?” Jean’s hand stayed steady on his arm. When nodded, Jean let go, like he was making sure wouldn’t fall. “Okay, but I’m staying right outside this door. You need anything, and I mean anything. You just say the word. One of my clients liked me holding his dick while he peed. Weird kink, but it doesn’t bother me.”

grimaced. “Thanks, but I’ll manage.”

“Don’t lock it. If I hear you fall, I’m coming in.”

closed the door carefully behind him, then turned around and froze. The bathroom was bigger than his entire room at Heart Court. He shifted his weight, and something felt odd. The floor wasn’t cold like tile should be. It was warm under his bare feet, like someone had stuck a giant heating pad under it. Who even had heated floors?

Gabriel Rohan, apparently.

A large marble counter with two sinks extended along one wall, topped by a mirror that reached to the ceiling. had only ever seen something like it in movies.

In the corner, there was what had to be the largest bathtub he’d ever seen. It sat up on its own little platform like some kind of throne and looked like it could fit half the baseball team’s lineup. The thought made him bite back a smile despite everything.

Then his eyes landed on the shower. It took up most of one wall, all glass sides, and chrome fixtures. His throat went tight, memories of the Display Case at Heart Court flooding back—the trapped feeling, the eyes on him, nowhere to hide. He glanced away, relief washing over him when he spotted a little separate room with its own door. Just a normal toilet. Thank god.

used it quickly, not bothering with the inner door. Who was going to see him in here, anyway? The relief was so intense it made him a little dizzy. He shuffled over to one of the sinks afterward, and that's when he caught his reflection in the mirror. The sight stopped him cold. The bruises that should have been dark purple were already fading to yellow at the edges. His split lip was nearly healed, just a faint line where it had been cracked and swollen.

Something wasn't adding up. He'd been beaten black and blue yesterday, but his body looked like it was a week into healing.

He shuffled back to the door on shaky legs, pulling it open to find Jean right where he promised he'd be. "How long have I been here?"

"Just over a day," Jean said, helping limp back to the bed. "You slept through most of it, which is probably good, considering. Plus, you know—" he gestured vaguely at 's healing bruises, "—the magic of Smooth."

sank into the mattress, his head spinning. "Smooth?"

"Yeah, the good doctor's been applying it every few hours while you were out. The prescription strength stuff, not the watered-down crap they sell at pharmacies. Must be nice having a Rohan's private physician looking after you." Jean paused, picking at a loose thread on his sleeve. "Though fair warning—Gabriel's taking over that duty from now on. Dr. Nguyen showed him how this morning."

Something warm curled in 's stomach at that thought. He should have been uncomfortable with the idea of Gabriel applying the medication, but instead, he found himself anticipating those careful touches. He pushed that feeling aside, focusing on his healing body. Just how much money had Gabriel spent on him already? "What happened? I remember Donovan putting me in the Display Case, and then..."

Jean perched on the edge of the bed, his face going hard. “Your knight in expensive armor showed up. Never seen anything like it, Gabriel just walked right in and...” He described how Gabriel had beaten Donovan bloody. His voice caught between admiration and fear. “Didn’t even mess up his suit doing it.”

“Oh god.” ’ stomach dropped out. How was he going to make this up to Donovan? He’d never be able to pay back what he would owe for a client smashing the proprietor’s face in on his behalf, not if he worked every night for the next—

“Stop that.” Jean poked his arm. “Whatever you’re thinking, stop. Neither of us is going back to Heart Court.” He said it like it was a simple fact but wouldn’t meet ’ eyes when tried to ask what he meant.

The bedroom door opened, and Gabriel filled the frame, still in his work suit. ’ heart stuttered, his body instinctively relaxing at the man’s presence

Jean rolled his eyes. “Ah, the conquering hero returns.”

“Get out.” Gabriel’s voice was low and dangerous. shivered at the tone.

“No.” Jean lifted his chin. “I’m not leaving him alone with—”

Lucas appeared behind Gabriel like a shadow. “Come on, my feisty kitten. Time for your dinner.” He walked over to the bed and hauled Jean out, ignoring the stream of creative curses that followed.

started to get up—Jean had helped him, he should do something—but Gabriel was already moving to sit beside him on the bed, his weight making the mattress dip. found himself swaying toward that solid presence before he could catch himself.

“How are you feeling, mon coeur?” The anger that had edged his voice with Jean was

gone, replaced by something soft that tightened ' chest. The endearment shouldn't have affected him so strongly—he'd been called worse, better, a thousand variations by countless clients. But something about the way Gabriel said it...

let out a soft laugh to cover his confusion. "Big leap from 'little bird' to 'my heart,' don't you think?"

Gabriel just stared at him.

blew out a breath. "I'm fine, sore, but fine. Jean said you bashed Donovan's face in and that I can't return to Heart Court. Where am I supposed to work after—"

"You aren't leaving." Gabriel's voice was firm, brooking no argument.

"Excuse me?"

"There is no 'after,' . You're staying here." Gabriel gripped the back of ' neck, pulling him in for a hard kiss. "You are mine."

stared at him, caught between wanting to argue and wanting to surrender. "You cannot just own people."

"I can." Gabriel shifted his weight to blanket , pressing him into the mattress. He kissed again, softer this time. "Now, tell me. How are you feeling?"

Heat buzzed through ' body, making his cock twitch. He swallowed hard, watching Gabriel's eyes follow the movement. His body was already responding, already yielding, and he couldn't bring himself to fight it. "Sore in places I didn't know existed. Everything's stiff. Tired." reached up and ran a hand through Gabriel's perfectly styled hair, allowing himself this small liberty. "And... if I'm being honest, relieved. Donovan was so angry." His body shuddered at the memory, but Gabriel's

weight anchored him.

“I never would have let you return to him if I knew how he would treat you.” Gabriel brushed his lips up ’ neck, then pulled back. “But first, we need to take care of those injuries. Turn over for me, little bird.”

complied without hesitation, surprising himself with how naturally he followed Gabriel’s command. He heard Gabriel moving, then the distinctive click of the Smooth container opening. The sound shouldn’t have made his pulse quicken, but it did.

“This might be cold,” Gabriel warned, but his hands were warm as they began spreading the cream over ’s bruised back. His touch was firm but careful, working the medication into the worst of the marks with a precision that made wonder how many times Dr. Nguyen had demonstrated the technique. When Gabriel’s thumbs found a particularly tight knot, couldn’t help the soft moan that escaped.

Gabriel’s palms glided over ’ shoulders, the expensive cream providing a cool contrast to the heat building within him. “Good boy,” he murmured, working his way lower. “Let me know if anything hurts.”

buried his face in the pillow, heat flooding his cheeks as Gabriel’s hands kneaded his muscles, spreading the cream with decidedly non-clinical attention. When those strong fingers reached his rim, gasped, his body instinctively arching into the touch. He bit his lip, fighting back a whimper as Gabriel’s thumb circled slowly, applying more cream with deliberate care that had trembling.

“Turn over,” Gabriel commanded softly.

obeyed without hesitation, watching through heavy-lidded eyes as Gabriel applied more cream to his hands, rubbing them together to warm it. His touch was tender as

he began with ' face, thumbs brushing over the fading bruises. sighed, surrendering to the gentle strokes. But as Gabriel's fingers trailed down his neck, felt his pulse quicken where fresh marks bloomed alongside old injuries.

"Spread your legs for me."

complied instantly, earning another "good boy" that sent a shiver straight to his cock.

Gabriel's cream-slicked fingers pressed against his entrance, drawing a soft whimper. "Relax for me, little bird."

focused on steadying his breathing as Gabriel worked him open with careful attention. Then Gabriel reached for something new—a clear package containing what looked like a miniature loofah mounted on a slim handle.

"What is that?" asked, voice hoarse.

"Medical-grade applicator," Gabriel explained, removing it from its sterile packaging and coating it liberally with cream. "Deep breath now. This might feel strange, but I want you to relax and let it happen."

The applicator slid in slowly, the unusual texture creating sensations that had gasping. Gabriel's free hand settled warm and heavy on his abdomen. "That's it, just breathe. Let me take care of you."

When Gabriel wrapped his other hand around 's cock, starting a slow stroke that matched the careful movements of the applicator, couldn't hold back his moan. The dual sensations—the applicator spreading cream deep inside while Gabriel's skilled hand worked him—had him trembling on the edge almost immediately.

"Please..." he managed, barely recognizing his own voice.

“I’ve got you,” Gabriel promised, his grip tightening just right. “Come for me, little bird. Show me how good it feels to be taken care of properly.”

arched off the bed as his orgasm hit, Gabriel working him through it with both hands until he collapsed, trembling. Gabriel carefully withdrew the applicator and disposed of it in the nearby waste bin. He wiped his hands clean on a nearby towel, his movements precise and controlled. When ’s breathing steadied, he reached for Gabriel’s zipper, but his hand was knocked away.

“Not tonight, little bird. I’ll have Annabelle bring you dinner, then you’ll sleep.” Gabriel slid off the bed with a grace knew he’d never manage. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Wait!” lurched forward. “Please, I’m sleeping in your bed, using your stuff. Please, there must be something I can do—”

Gabriel moved so fast that barely saw it. His hair was caught in the man’s grip as he was dragged up to his knees, his lips claimed in a demanding kiss. Gabriel pulled back suddenly.

“There will be, just not tonight. Tonight, you rest.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you weren’t my client?” asked, the question that had been burning in his mind since that night at the casino finally spilling out.

“I wanted you. I spotted your shabby client as we were leaving. There was no way I would let him have you.” Gabriel sucked another mark into his neck, drawing out another groan as fisted his hair with one hand and clung to his back with the other. “No one but me will have you ever again.”

“Fuck.” shivered at the possessive tone. “You can’t just say stuff like that. You barely

know me.”

“I know enough,” Gabriel growled against his neck, sending shivers down ’ spine. He released and strode from the room, leaving staring at the closed door.

‘There will be,’ Gabriel had said. Good. Gabriel planned to use him still. For now, had worth. He wasn’t sure how long it would last, but he had a place to recover until Gabriel got everything he wanted from ’ body. Though, the way Gabriel had applied that medication... shivered at the memory. No client had ever taken such care with him before.

But Jean made it sound like Heart Court was closed to him now. Which, if Gabriel really had beaten Donovan bloody, made sense—the proprietor probably never wanted to see again. He’d have to look at other non-union brothels. Maybe some closer to the core. There were a few.

wrapped his arms around himself, feeling exposed. The Smooth cream made his skin tingle pleasantly where Gabriel had worked it in, but that only reminded him of how much Gabriel must have spent on him already. No matter what Jean had said, unlike him, was just a whore.

Annabelle burst through the door then, carrying a loaded tray. “Oh, my stars, , you’re still naked!”

“Sorry,” quickly grabbed the sheet, pulling it over himself. “I don’t have any clothes here.”

Annabelle gave him a sympathetic smile. “I’ll remind Gabriel to buy you some. Here,” She set the large tray on the nightstand. “Eat up. I’ll come back for it later.” With that, she left, closing the door behind her.

stared at the food, his stomach suddenly growling like it was angry at him for forgetting about it for so long. The tray had salmon, mashed potatoes, and broccoli. There was also a glass and a pitcher of water. He filled the glass and drank it all before filling it again. Then he grabbed the fork and ate everything on his plate.

After he was done, he settled back into the sheets, pulling up the comforter from where it had been pushed aside. The bed still smelled faintly of the Smooth cream and Gabriel's cologne. He wasn't sure what was coming over the next few days, but for now, he was safe.

He'd just have to worry about what came next later.

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Three days of carefully controlled touches, of Ellis writhing beneath his hands twice daily as applied Dr. Nguyen's prescription healing cream, had left him perpetually on edge. The quarterly projections sprawled across the conference room's main screen, numbers and charts that should have had his full attention. Instead, his eyes kept drifting to his tablet, counting the hours until the final treatment. Tonight, there would be no need to hold back.

Dr. Nguyen's test results for Ellis and Jean filled his tablet screen. Ellis was clean, completely clean, and shifted in his leather chair as heat pooled in his gut at the implications. Once the evening's treatment was complete, he could take Ellis bare, feel every inch of him with nothing between them. Fill him up with his cum. Breed him...

"?" Henri's voice cut through his thoughts. His brother stood at the head of the conference table, one eyebrow raised. "The Q2 projections?"

"Are optimistic. We had quite an impressive Q4 last year and Q1. Eventually, it will slow down," he said as if he'd followed along the entire time. Henri, his brother, and CFO scowled at him but turned back to the projections display, rattling on about how wrong was in his assumptions that they were slowing down.

ignored him. His tablet buzzed with another message from Annabelle, the third one today: "Don't make me come down there. The boys need CLOTHES. Proper ones."

He'd delegated Jean to Lucas days ago. His friend and Personal Assistant seemed amused by the teenager's defiance, treating Jean's daily attempts to escape the grounds like an entertaining training exercise for the security. The man was keeping

score. So far, 's highly trained security remained undefeated.

The antibiotics Dr. Nguyen prescribed for the boy would be Lucas's problem, too. Apparently, Jean had been reckless during his three-month rebellion.

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But Ellis... shifted again, remembering how his little bird had trembled under his hands during the morning's treatment, the way he'd bitten back moans as worked the healing cream into sensitive flesh. Three days of seeing Ellis spread out on their bed, having to maintain clinical detachment while touching him so intimately... was grateful for the conference table hiding his growing erection.

"Have Jacob order proper clothes for Ellis," he typed back to Annabelle. "For now, he can keep wearing mine."

The reply was immediate: "Everything is too large for him."

's lips curved into a slight smile. His petit oiseau had been swimming in 's shirts these past days, drowning in fabric that carried 's scent. The sight of Ellis in his clothes had been its own kind of torment.

"That will do for now," he responded, then forced his attention back to the meeting.

Or tried to. All he could think about was Ellis in bed, wearing his clothes, waiting for him.

"If you're done sexting your latest conquest," Henri drawled, "perhaps we could return to the fiscal projections?" His brother's words and the edge in his voice made the other C-Suite Executives shift uncomfortably in their seats. But met Henri's gaze steadily, letting the silence stretch until his brother looked away first.

“By all means,” said, his voice carrying just enough warning to make Henri’s jaw clench. “The projections.”

The rest of the meeting proceeded without incident, though noted every subtle jab Henri tried to land. When the C-Suite filed out, he caught his brother’s eye. “My office.”

Henri followed him into his office, slouching into one of the leather chairs across from ’s desk. “What now?”

settled into his chair, studying his brother. “Jean Saint-Clair. You’re close with his brother, aren’t you?”

The question seemed to catch Henri off guard. He straightened slightly. “Marc? Yeah. Why?”

“How is Jean doing? At school?”

“He’s fine. Some fancy reform program in Sweden before university next year.” Henri’s brow furrowed. “I haven’t seen him in months. Why do you care?”

kept his expression neutral. “I’ve received reports suggesting he’s not in Sweden at all.”

“Maybe it was Denmark.” Henri waved his hand dismissively, but there was tension in the gesture. “Or Norway. One of those places. They’re all the same, aren’t they? Is that really what you called me in here for?”

“No.” leaned back. “Your behavior in the board meetings this week has been inappropriate. We can’t afford to appear divided, especially not in front of the rest of the C-Suite.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did I embarrass you?” Henri’s smile was cruel. “Should I have pretended not to notice you mentally undressing your latest acquisition during our fiscal review?”

“You missed our meeting Tuesday evening.”

“I was busy.”

“With your own conquest?”

“Fuck you.”

“Father is concerned about the image you’re projecting. Your image is the company’s—”

“The company can get fucked.” Henri stood up, hands planted on ’s desk. “And so can Father’s precious image. Are we done? I have to go berate my VPs for the ‘optimistic’ fiscal projections.”

watched his brother, noting the slight tremor in his hands and the way his pupils were just a touch too wide. Fourth day in a row he’d shown signs of being high. He’d have to have Alain look into where Henri had been spending his evenings.

“For now.”

Henri stormed out, slamming the door behind him. pulled out his phone, sending a quick text to Alain: “Keep an eye on Henri. Find his whereabouts these past few days and report back.”

He received a short, but affirmative response from Alain moments later.

Another message came through his tablet, this one from Lucas showing various, rather skimpy lingerie with the caption: “Like any of these for your little bird?”

“The blue one,” he responded, imagining Ellis in it. “ And the matching jock I see behind you.”

Lucas sent him a string of fire emotes as a response.

The rest of his day passed in a blur of meetings and paperwork, his mind constantly drifting to what waited for him at home. When he finally stepped into his Lafayette Square mansion that evening, Lucas materialized at his elbow with a discreet black shopping bag.

“I may have gotten carried away,” Lucas murmured, a slight smirk playing at his lips as he handed over the bag. The tissue paper inside barely concealed multiple glimpses of midnight blue, emerald, and deep burgundy silk. “But they’re all his size.”

Before could respond, an incensed Jean stormed down the main staircase.

“I demand you let me leave,” Jean snapped, planted firmly in ’s path.

“No.” tucked the bag under his arm as he examined the boy’s new outfit, tailored perfectly to his slight frame. Maybe a touch too fitted. Lucas was clearly enjoying his new dress-up doll. decided to let him have his fun.

Jean made a sound of pure frustration and stomped off. noted the absence of his little bird on the first floor and made his way upstairs to his bedroom, the weight of the bag a promising reminder of later possibilities. The sight that greeted him made his blood run hot.

Ellis stood by the window in ’s clothes, a shirt that hung just slightly too large on his

frame, sweatpants riding low on his hips. He wasn't drowning in the fabric. Ellis wasn't a small man by any means, but seeing him in 's clothes sent a surge of possessive desire through him.

set the shopping bag on his dresser for later as he asked, "How are you feeling?" His voice was rough with anticipation of the evening's treatment.

"Surprisingly good, actually," Ellis replied, turning to face him. "The cream is working better than I expected."

allowed himself a small smile. "Dr. Nguyen is very good at what she does. One more application tonight."

"More like you have access to medical care most people can only dream of," Ellis retorted.

The words had barely left Ellis' mouth when moved without thought. One heartbeat, he was by the dresser; the next, he had Ellis pressed against the wall. "Are you complaining about my care?" The double meaning hung between them.

"No," Ellis breathed, his eyes dark.

"Good. Because I intend to be very thorough with your final treatment." placed a hand on his shoulder, applying gentle but firm pressure. Ellis sank to his knees without resistance, his pupils blown wide as unzipped his pants. Ellis' eyes tracked every movement hungrily as freed his hard cock. Without waiting to be told, Ellis leaned forward and swallowed him down..

A low moan escaped at the exquisite suction. Ellis' tongue was masterful, though the thought of how he'd gained such skill made something dark twist in 's chest. He cupped the back of Ellis' head with one hand, protecting him from the wall, while the

other gripped his jaw. Then he fucked his little bird's mouth in earnest.

Ellis whimpered around him, the sound going straight to 's cock. Glancing down, he saw Ellis had grown hard from the rough treatment. When Ellis moved to touch himself, stopped him with a savage thrust.

“You only touch yourself when I say you can,” growled, grinding deeper into Ellis' throat. When he pulled back, the sight of Ellis looking already thoroughly debauched made his cock twitch. He hauled Ellis to his feet.

“Strip,” commanded, remaining fully dressed as he watched Ellis hesitate briefly before pulling off the borrowed clothes. Only two items— had no intention of giving him more anytime soon, except maybe the panties. The sight of Ellis naked and waiting made his cock throb, but he forced himself to move deliberately as he retrieved the prescription cream and applicator from the nightstand.

He settled on the edge of his king-sized bed, patting his thigh. “Over my lap.”

Ellis hesitated again. could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

“This is punishment for leaving me that morning,” explained, his voice stern but not unkind. “I’ve been waiting to discipline you properly until you healed enough.”

Ellis moved slowly, carefully arranging himself across 's lap. His voice was quiet when he spoke. “No one wants to wake up next to a wh—”

The first spank cut off Ellis' words, hard enough to make him gasp. followed it with a gentle caress over the reddening skin. “You’re not a whore. Not anymore. You’re mine.”

Ellis let out a shaky exhale. “Yes.”

“Is that how you address me?”

“Yes, sir,” Ellis quickly corrected, his voice trembling.

began in earnest then, alternating between sharp smacks and soothing touches. Each strike drew a unique sound from Ellis—gasps, whimpers, and barely contained moans. He watched Ellis’ skin flush pink, then deepen to red, feeling the man’s cock twitch and leak against his thigh with every blow.

“Please,” Ellis gasped after a hard strike. “Sir, I—”

landed another sharp smack. “You what, petit oiseau? Want me to stop?” He rubbed his hand over the heated flesh, feeling Ellis arch into the touch despite himself. “But your cock is telling me a different story. So hard for me, dripping all over my pants.”

Ellis buried his face in the bedding, but couldn’t hide the way his hips rocked slightly, seeking friction. rewarded the movement with a gentler strike, followed by a firm squeeze that had Ellis moaning.

“I’m sorry,” Ellis sobbed, his voice breaking. “Please, sir, I’m sorry I left.”

When Ellis started to shake, tears soaking into the sheets as he begged to stop, his ass a beautiful shade of red, changed tactics. He reached for the prescription cream on the nightstand - the last dose. One final treatment.

“Stay just like that,” ordered, coating the applicator with the cream. Ellis shivered at the first cool touch, then moaned as worked the applicator’s textured head inside him with practiced ease. Three days of twice-daily treatments had taught him exactly how Ellis would respond.

When the applicator was was fully seated inside his little bird, slicked his fingers with

more of the cream, circling Ellis' entrance before pressing one finger slowly inside alongside the slim handle. Ellis' breath hitched at the intrusion, his body still trembling from his punishment. took his time, working that single digit in and out, moving the applicator in the opposite direction, until Ellis pushed back against his hand, soft sounds of pleasure replacing his earlier sobs.

Dr. Nguyen would likely have opinions about him using the remainder of the prescription cream this way. dismissed the thought as he added a second finger, scissoring them carefully to stretch Ellis open. His little bird's answering groan went straight to his cock. Ellis' hips rolled, trying to take 's fingers deeper.

"Eager little bird," murmured, adding more lube before working in a third finger, and removing the applicator, tossing it in the nearby bin. He kept his thrusts measured, deliberately brushing Ellis' prostate only every other stroke. Each time he did, Ellis' cock would twitch and leak against his thigh, the man's breathing growing more ragged.

"Please," Ellis whimpered, trying to force 's fingers deeper.

"Not yet," said, continuing his careful preparation. "I won't have you coming until I'm buried inside you."

guided Ellis to the center of the bed, arranging him on his back before stepping away. He took his time undressing, watching Ellis watch him. His little bird's eyes tracked every movement hungrily as loosened his tie, unbuttoned his shirt. When shrugged the fabric from his shoulders, Ellis' tongue darted out to wet his lips.

felt his predatory smile spread as he undid his belt, drawing it slowly through the loops. Ellis' breath hitched at the sound of leather sliding against fabric. The rest of 's clothes followed until he stood naked, drinking in the way Ellis' pupils had blown wide with want.

He coated his cock generously with the remaining cream. “No barriers between us,” he said, voice low as he settled between Ellis’ spread thighs. “Never again.”

He leaned down, wrapping his hand around Ellis’ throat. His thumb found Ellis’ pulse point, and savored the rapid flutter beneath his touch. “I’m going to claim you properly this time, mon coeur,” he whispered against Ellis’ ear, sucking another mark into his skin, reveling in the moan Ellis emitted.

Ellis swallowed hard against ’s palm. “I haven’t... not since I was young. My first time. I was inexperienced then. I’ve never let anyone since.”

Something dark and possessive unfurled in ’s chest. That long-ago encounter was meaningless. This would be Ellis’ real first time.

No one else would ever have him this way again.

His. Only his.

’s grip on his little bird’s throat remained firm as he positioned himself at Ellis’ entrance.

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' breath caught as Gabriel filled him, each inch stealing his ability to think. When Gabriel finally buried himself completely, he claimed ' mouth in a kiss that made the world spin away.

Gabriel barely gave him time to adjust before he was slamming into him, using him, forcing so hard into the mattress he felt tears well in his eyes. Gabriel's mouth swallowed his moans, his tongue plunging deep with every brutal thrust of his hips.

He clawed at Gabriel's wrist on his throat, the pressure increasing, depriving him of air. His head spun as his cock leaked a steady stream of precum from the rough treatment.

Every brutal thrust drove him higher, vision blurring at the edges as Gabriel claimed him with a ferocity that stole his breath even without the hand on his throat.

had never enjoyed being treated roughly before. It had always felt fake, clients playing out their fantasies while he pretended to enjoy it. But with Gabriel, every bruising grip and harsh demand lit him up from the inside.

Gabriel fucked him like he needed him, like he couldn't get deep enough, couldn't get close enough to satisfy the hunger burning between them. The thought made dizzy with want.

For the first time in his life, someone wasn't just using his body. Gabriel was consuming it, desperate for every gasp and shudder, every mark of submission. His rough possession felt less like taking and more like claiming, branding as his in a way that made ' whole body sing with the rightness of it.

Gabriel mouthed along his jaw, sucking marks into his skin. A brutal thrust sent over the edge, his vision whiting out as his body convulsed. Gabriel fucked him through it, cruel and selfish in his own pleasure. shuddered and gasped beneath him, overwhelmed and used and perfect.

Gabriel grunted into his neck as he ground against , pinning him to the mattress. He could feel Gabriel's cock throb just before the warm sensation of cum filled him, marking him from the inside.

The feeling was foreign, raw, and primal. Heat bloomed in his chest as Gabriel's release claimed him, made his, made him belong. felt drunk on it. The intensity of being wanted this much, needed this much, made ' head spin.

Just as thought it was over, he found himself flipped onto his stomach, hips yanked up roughly.

“What... “ let out a groan as Gabriel's fingers entered him, pushing the cum that had leaked out when he withdrew back inside.

“I am going to fill you up, mon petit oiseau. Fill you, and plug you, so my claim stays inside.” Gabriel thrust his fingers into him roughly before withdrawing, replacing them with his hard cock.

“I thought—” ’ words cut off in a hiss as Gabriel gave a brutal thrust, sinking back into him.

Gabriel grunted above him, pinning to the bed by the back of his neck. “It seems when it comes to you, I have the stamina of a much younger man.” His free hand reached beneath to stroke his cock.

fisted the sheets as Gabriel stroked the oversensitive organ back to life.

“Please,” begged.

“Please, what, little bird?” Gabriel’s hips never stopped, his thrusts causing the bed to shake beneath them. Each snap of his hips sent shockwaves through ’ oversensitive body. Caught in an endless spiral where pleasure crested into pain, only to spark back into blinding pleasure. Again and again until he couldn’t tell where one ended, and the other began.

“I don’t—” he choked, “I don’t know. It’s too much.” His cock throbbed painfully where Gabriel stroked it, every nerve ending raw and electric, pushing him toward a precipice he wasn’t sure he could survive.

“It’s never enough,” Gabriel growled into his ear before sinking his teeth into ’ shoulder.

gave a startled cry as a second orgasm crashed over him, painful as it was pleasurable. Gabriel fucked him through it, pounding into him relentlessly until he stiffened behind , the warmth of his cum flooding him again.

For several moments, they stayed suspended in the moment. Gabriel’s weight pressed against his back, both of them panting. Then Gabriel withdrew slowly, leaving empty and aching. The bed dipped as Gabriel rose, and heard his footsteps pad across the hardwood floor. The sudden rush of running water echoed from the bathroom.

drifted, pleasantly numb, until strong arms slid beneath him. Gabriel lifted him effortlessly against his chest, carrying him into the steam-filled bathroom. The water was perfectly hot as Gabriel stepped into the tub, settling between his legs, back to chest. Warm water lapped at his oversensitive skin as Gabriel began to wash him with gentle, careful strokes.

tensed as Gabriel’s fingers drifted lower, brushing his sensitive entrance. “Shh, mon

petit oiseau,” Gabriel murmured against his temple. “Détends-toi, et laisse-moi m’occuper de toi.”

A small whimper escaped as gentle fingers cleaned away where Gabriel had marked him inside. Gabriel’s other arm tightened around his waist, holding him close as squirmed at the sensation.

“Tu es à moi maintenant,” Gabriel whispered, his voice a soothing rumble against ’ back. “Mon coeur, mon précieux.” Each endearment was punctuated with a soft kiss to ’ shoulder, his neck, behind his ear. “Relax for me, little bird.”

He should feel exposed right now, raw and vulnerable, like he always did after. Instead, melted deeper into Gabriel’s embrace, surrounded by a possessive tenderness that felt more like protection than weakness.

When made a small sound of loss, Gabriel’s lips curved against his skin. “Don’t worry, I’ll fill you again soon enough. You’ll never be empty for long.” His hands continued their gentle cleansing, but the promise in his words made shiver. “For now, let me take care of what’s mine.”

The warm water lapped around them as Gabriel finished washing with careful attention, then gave himself a quick, efficient cleaning. drifted, secure in Gabriel’s arms, the gentle rise and fall of Gabriel’s chest against his back lulling him toward sleep.

“Oui, Gabriel.” Annabelle’s voice from the bedroom doorway startled fully awake. He jerked upright, the water sloshing, but Gabriel’s arm tightened around him.

“Shh, she can’t see into the bathroom from there,” Gabriel murmured, amusement clear in his voice. When tried to sink lower in the water anyway, face burning, Gabriel’s chuckle rumbled through his chest. “Besides, she’s already seen you naked.

After Heart Court, remember?”

slid further down until the water reached his chin, his face flaming. “That’s different,” he muttered.

Gabriel’s laughter deepened as he rose from the tub in one fluid motion, water streaming down his body and onto the heated tile. He turned back to , catching his chin in a gentle grip. “No one else will ever see you naked again,” he promised, his voice dropping to that possessive tone that made shiver. “Your body is for my eyes only now. Understood?”

noded, flushing deeper but feeling an unexpected warmth in his chest at the possessive declaration. “Yes,” he whispered.

Gabriel helped him from the tub, drying him thoroughly before leading him into the bedroom. was dressed in impossibly soft sweatpants and a shirt that felt like clouds against his skin.

“What did Annabelle want?” he asked belatedly, watching Gabriel pull on perfectly fitted jeans.

“Dinner’s ready downstairs,” Gabriel replied, sliding on a shirt that somehow looked casual and impeccable. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

Gabriel led him down from the second floor to the dining room on the first. paused in the ornate archway, taking in the unexpectedly intimate space. Where he’d expected something cold and formal, the room felt warm and welcoming. A dark wood table dominated the center, sized for just eight people, with three chairs running down each side and heads at either end. The honey-colored trim work softened the burgundy

walls, while custom cushions on each chair displayed the Rohan family crest in burgundy, gold, and white.

Lucas sat with Jean beside him, helping themselves to a few rolls from a basket, while Alain watched from across the table with barely concealed exasperation. The moment Jean spotted , he launched himself from his chair.

“Mais là! The monster releases you.” Jean wrapped in a tight hug.

Gabriel rolled his eyes as he sat at the head of the table, gesturing for to sit at his left, next to Alain. sank into the chair, trying not to shiver as Gabriel’s hand immediately found his thigh, a warm, possessive weight.

“How generous of Rohan to let you leave his lair. Though we’re still stuck in this prison.” Jean said, dropping back into his chair at Gabriel’s right.

“Not a prison,” Lucas said, placing a buttered roll on Jean’s plate. Jean snapped it up, shoving the entire thing in his mouth. Lucas’ grin was wolfish as he watched Jean struggle to chew.

frowned, looking across at Jean. “I don’t feel like a prisoner. Gabriel’s helped us both—”

“Indeed, he has,” Lucas interrupted, reaching over to ruffle Jean’s hair with obvious delight at the man’s antics. “And you should be more grateful. After all, Gabriel spent quite a bit buying out both your contracts.”

froze. “My contract?” He turned to Gabriel. “You bought my contract?”

Before Gabriel could answer, the dining room doors burst open as Annabelle and two maids swept in, bearing steaming dishes.

The smell of lemon and pepper filled the air as Annabelle and her assistants set down plates of perfectly roasted chicken accompanied by caramelized Brussels sprouts and mushrooms. Two male servants followed with wine, filling crystal glasses with a rich burgundy liquid.

stared at his plate, relief flooding through him at the sight of a single set of silverware. The entire scene felt surreal, with the elegant plating, the coordinated service, and the casual way everyone else accepted it as normal. He took a tentative bite and couldn't stop the groan of pleasure that escaped him. Gabriel's eyebrow raised, and felt his face heat. The hand on his thigh disappeared as Gabriel ate, and was surprised by how much he missed its warmth.

After a few minutes of appreciative silence, broken only by the clink of cutlery, gathered his courage. "About my contract," he started, watching Gabriel's profile. "An individual can't buy out a contract."

Jean scoffed, opening his mouth to say something, but suddenly went rigid. His hand shot to his wineglass as Lucas's arm disappeared beneath the table beside him. Jean gulped the wine loudly, eyes wide above the rim, as Lucas continued eating calmly with his free hand, though his wolfish grin had returned.

"Confluence Asset Management acquired it," Gabriel said smoothly, sipping his wine. "It's one of those rather dull investment firms that manage property portfolios, acquisitions, that sort of thing." He waved his hand dismissively as if discussing something entirely mundane. "They handle various holdings that don't quite fit under La Sauvegarde's direct umbrella."

"Like me," mumbled, pushing his food around his plate.

"The contracts will expire naturally. Yours in two months, Jean's in nine. Should the labor office inquire, everything is perfectly in order." His thumb stroked slowly

against ' leg. "I have no intention of selling either contract."

"Then why—" stopped and swallowed. "Can I at least go outside?"

"You can go wherever you like, petit oiseau." Gabriel's voice was gentle. "Jean, however, must remain here."

"What?" Jean's fork clattered against his plate. "That's not fair! You can't just keep me locked up here like—"

"Like your father doesn't know where you are?" Lucas cut in mildly, though his eyes were sharp. "Would you prefer we let him know?"

Jean went rigid, the color draining from his face. He stared down at his plate, jaw working. "No," he said finally, voice small. "I wouldn't."

The silence stretched for a moment before Jean picked up his fork again, continuing to eat without further protest. Gabriel's hand reached under the table and squeezed ' thigh once more, and when looked up, Gabriel was smiling at him. Despite lingering confusion about why exactly he was there, smiled back.

Alain cleared his throat, drawing Gabriel's attention. "About your brother's whereabouts that night..."

"Ah, yes." Gabriel's hand remained steady on ' thigh. "What did you find?"

"He spent both evenings with Marc Saint-Clair. First at Club Essence, then Le Rouge. The morning of the C-suite meeting, they were spotted leaving The Crown around four in the morning."

Jean's derisive snort cut through the tension. He swirled his wine, not looking up.

“Tell me something that isn’t obvious. Where else would Henri be? Marc says jump, Henri asks how high.”

Gabriel’s brow furrowed. “That doesn’t sound like my brother.”

“How well does any older brother know the younger?” Jean’s laugh held no humor. He took another sip of wine, letting the bitter words hang in the air. “Marc’s kept Henri on a short leash for years. Everyone knows it.”

watched Gabriel study Jean with growing concern, saw questions forming behind those blue eyes. But before Gabriel could voice them, Annabelle swept in with dessert, her cheerful presence breaking the tension.

The conversation moved on, but couldn’t shake the chill Jean’s words had left. He’d seen that same bitterness in Jean’s eyes in the mirrors at Heart Court. Whatever was happening between Marc and Henri, Jean knew more than he was saying. And from the way Gabriel’s hand had tightened on ’ thigh, he hadn’t missed it either.

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woke before his alarm, as he had every morning since bringing Ellis home. Dawn had barely begun painting the sky in watercolor shades of pink and gold, casting long shadows across their bed. For several minutes, he simply watched Ellis sleep, taking in how his little bird had already changed their space.

Ellis's tablet and phone lay on the nightstand, connected to their chargers. His clothes from yesterday were carefully draped over the chair, a habit from years of protecting the few possessions he owned. Even in sleep, Ellis curled slightly toward 's side of the bed, seeking warmth.

traced the curve of Ellis' spine with his finger, watching early morning light paint shadows across bare skin. Over a week had passed since bringing Ellis home, and each morning grew more difficult. The thought of leaving Ellis alone in their bed while he attended to La Sauvegarde's demands was becoming increasingly... distasteful.

Ellis shifted in his sleep, the sheet sliding lower to reveal the marks had left the night before. Beautiful bruises in the shape of his fingers decorated Ellis' hips, a visible reminder of ownership.

He had no major meetings today. A few video calls, some private discussions with department heads...

An idea formed with surprising ease. "Ellis." He pressed his lips to a marked shoulder. "Wake up, mon coeur."

Ellis stirred, blinking slowly. "?"

“We’re going to the office today.”

That woke Ellis completely. “What? We?”

growled at the adorably confused expression, unable to resist capturing those parted lips. Ellis melted against him as deepened the kiss, one hand sliding down to wrap around them both. Ellis gasped into his mouth, hips jerking as stroked them together.

“Yes, we,” murmured against Ellis’ throat, drinking in the soft whimpers as he picked up the pace. “You’re coming with me today.” He twisted his wrist just so, drawing a broken moan from Ellis.

“, please—”

“Come for me, petit oiseau.”

Ellis shuddered beneath him, spilling over ’s hand with a choked cry. followed moments later, marking Ellis’ stomach with his release. He pressed their foreheads together, sharing heated breaths as their pulses slowed.

After bundling a still-dazed Ellis into the shower, pulled out his phone. He fired off a quick message to Jacob about requiring a suit, then joined Ellis under the spray.

After their shower, heard Annabelle’s familiar, efficient movements in the bedroom. He wrapped Ellis in a thick robe before they could exit the bathroom.

“No one sees you naked anymore,” murmured against his ear, possessiveness darkening his tone. “You’re mine alone to look at now.”

By the time they emerged, Annabelle had already swept through the bedroom like a domestic hurricane. She’d laid out ’s favorite charcoal suit, but her real triumph was

apparent in how she hovered near the door, practically vibrating with suppressed excitement.

“Jacob tells me you’re finally letting me dress him properly,” she announced, unable to contain herself any longer. Her eyes sparkled as she gestured to where Lucas’s suit hung. “Though this is just temporary, n’est-ce pas? We’ll need a proper wardrobe. I’ve already made lists...”

“Annabelle,” warned, though he couldn’t quite suppress his smile.

“Oui, oui, I know. Within reason.” She didn’t look remotely chastened. “But the boy needs proper clothes. Even Jean has a full wardrobe now, though he insists on wearing those awful ripped jeans...”

“Annabelle...”

“I’ll be shopping. Send a message with any requests, mon cher,” She said, addressing Ellis. “I will do what I can to get them.

“Thank you, Annabelle,” Ellis said, grinning.

“Of course!” Annabelle practically bounced as she left, shutting the door behind her.

moved to the dresser, selecting a pair of “cheeky” briefs in a delicate powder blue, the sides crafted from fine mesh that would hug Ellis’ thighs. “These first,” he said, holding them out.

Ellis flushed. “Under a suit? To the office?”

“Yes.” ’s voice dropped lower, heated. “Only we’ll know what you’re wearing beneath those borrowed clothes. It will please me to know you’re dressed in what I

chose.” His thumb traced Ellis’ bottom lip. “Don’t you want to please me, petit oiseau?”

Ellis’s breath caught, but he nodded. stepped close, slowly unwrapping the robe from Ellis’ shoulders, letting it pool at his feet. His eyes darkened as Ellis slipped on the delicate underwear, the mesh panels clinging perfectly to his thighs. The powder blue fabric contrasted beautifully with Ellis’ skin, still flushed from the shower.

“Perfect,” murmured, pressing a kiss to Ellis’ shoulder before turning to dress himself.

Once fully dressed in Lucas’s suit, Ellis couldn’t stop fidgeting with the jacket. caught his hands, pulling them away from the fabric. “You look beautiful.” He pressed Ellis against the wall, claiming a kiss that left no doubt about his appreciation. “And if you continue fidgeting with that suit, I’ll be tempted to remove it entirely.”

“I don’t understand why I am going to the office with you,” Ellis said as guided him downstairs and into the breakfast room.

The rich aroma of fresh coffee greeted them before they entered, mingling with the scent of warm pastries. Morning light streamed through the wall of windows, catching on the crystal glasses and pitchers filled with an array of juices set out on the intimate table.

Ellis had grown used to the warmth of this room over the past week—the way sunlight painted the pale walls in amber tones, how the heavy curtains were always drawn back to flood light across the table that seated only six. Even the gleaming buffet had become a comfortable sight, steam rising from covered dishes while fresh fruit glistened on silver platters.

Lucas glanced up from his tablet, sunlight catching his grin as he lounged in his usual spot between Jean and Alain, who sat at the window-end of the table. “So that’s what Jacob wanted my suit for. And here I thought Jean had finally convinced him to aid in another escape attempt.”

At the mention of his name, Jean’s head snapped up from where he was sullenly pushing eggs around his plate. His gaze narrowed at Ellis’ attire. “You’re letting him leave?”

“Jean—” Lucas started.

“No!” Jean shoved back from the table. “This isn’t fair! You can’t keep me locked up here while he gets to—”

“Jean.” ’s voice cut through the tirade. “Until we better understand your family situation—”

“There’s nothing to understand!” Jean’s voice cracked. He stormed from the room, the door slamming behind him.

Lucas watched him go, concern etching lines around his eyes. He opened his mouth, but waved him off.

“Technically, Confluence Asset Management owns his contract. He’s an adult, and we’re not required to inform his family of anything.” squeezed Ellis’ hand as confusion flickered across his face. “The situation is... complex. High society doesn’t work in brothels. Jean being under this type of contract, could cause problems, especially since we don’t fully understand why he ran away.”

caught the slight tightness at the corner of Lucas’ mouth—a tell he’d known since their school days. Lucas knew why Jean had run. That his oldest friend hadn’t shared

this information was... interesting. trusted Lucas with his life, which was why he'd wait. Though not for much longer.

The remainder of breakfast was a quieter affair, without Jean's usual dramatic sighs and pointed comments. Lucas seemed distracted, his eyes occasionally drifting to the door Jean had stormed through.

The drive to the office was also quiet. Alain navigated the Mercedes through morning traffic while Lucas reviewed 's schedule from the front passenger seat.

"Mostly written reports today," Lucas confirmed, scrolling through his tablet. "Video call with the London office at nine, Berlin at eleven, and then the quarterly review with New York at two." He glanced back at . "Though I still don't understand why we couldn't push the New York meeting to tomorrow. Anderson is always a bit long-winded."

's lips curved in amusement. Nathaniel - don't call me Nat - Anderson had been a year ahead of them at Chaminade, the crown jewel of Second Cat education, where the region's most influential families had sent their children for generations. While most students came from the surrounding estates and old-money neighborhoods, the prestigious boarding program attracted scions of powerful families worldwide. Nathaniel, son of a New York banking dynasty, had been one such resident of the ivy-covered dormitories.

Even then, Nathaniel carried himself with the slightly pompous air of old East Coast money, tempered only by his genuine passion for lacrosse and mathematics. No one was surprised when he captained Yale's lacrosse team while double majoring in economics and business administration.

"Remember those pre-game speeches?" asked, allowing himself to sink into the memory.

“God, yes.” Lucas moaned. “We’d be standing there in full gear, waiting to start the match, while he waxed poetic about honor and tradition and the sacred brotherhood of lacrosse.”

“There’s a sacred brotherhood of lacrosse?” Ellis asked.

“No,” all three answered in unison before breaking into laughter, the sound filling the car with unexpected warmth. Even Alain’s usual stoic expression cracked into a smile in the rearview mirror.

“Though Nathaniel certainly thought so,” added, his hand finding Ellis’ thigh again. “Now he brings the same enthusiasm to running our New York office.”

“Speaking of offices,” Lucas shifted in his seat to face them, his amused expression giving way to his more familiar efficiency. “And what exactly is Ellis supposed to be doing all day?”

“He’ll be assisting you as an intern.”

Lucas’s eyebrows shot up. “I don’t need an assistant.”

“I know that. It’s merely a cover, should anyone ask.”

“An intern.” Lucas’s voice was flat. “With no labor records in the company system.”

“I can have Nika create them,” Alain offered from the driver’s seat. “He’s meeting me for coffee in an hour, anyway.”

“Why are you meeting Nika?” Lucas asked.

Alain shrugged, remaining silent. decided to let it go. Alain could do as he pleased

while was in-office. “That works.” He smiled, his hand finding Ellis’ thigh.

Lucas sighed the sigh of a man who knew when he was beaten. “Fine. But he’s your responsibility, not mine. I have a busy day.”

“But... doesn’t Confluence own my contract?” Ellis asked hesitantly.

’s thumb stroked along Ellis’ thigh. “One can have multiple contracts, mon coeur. The labor board has no issue with overlapping employment agreements.” His tone was casual, as if discussing something as mundane as the weather rather than the intricacies of Ellis’ legal status.

The Mercedes turned into the underground parking garage of La Sauvegarde’s headquarters, tires whispering against polished concrete. They entered through a private entrance, Alain peeling away to park the car and meet with Nika. Ellis pressed closer to ’s side as they entered the elevator, and dropped a kiss on his temple. “Ready?”

They emerged from the private elevator into a sleek reception area where Brenda Whitaker, who had been manning this desk since was trailing after his father as a teenager, glanced pointedly at the clock on her desk’s embedded screen. “Ten minutes late, Mr. Rohan.”

“I’m the boss, Brenda,” flashed her his most charming smile, the one that hadn’t worked on her in twenty years. “I’m allowed to be late now and then.”

Brenda just hummed, fingers dancing across her keyboard without missing a beat. “Your packets for London and Berlin are loaded on your computer. And the new VP of our Climate Risk Division, Jackson Razier, is rather insistent about meeting with you today.”

Her hand moved in a practiced motion across her touch screen. Lucas's tablet chimed in response.

"Wonderful," Lucas muttered, studying whatever she'd sent. "I'll head down and see what's wrong now." He paused at the elevator, calling back casually, "Oh, Brenda, this is Ellis Anouilh, our new intern. He'll be assisting me."

Brenda's only response was a noncommittal "hmm" as she continued her rapid typing.

suppressed his amusement at her familiar efficiency as he guided Ellis through the heavy wooden doors of his office. The morning sun streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting long shadows across the rich burgundy carpet. Ellis immediately gravitated toward the bookcases lining one wall, fingers trailing over the spines of reference guides and industry analyses.

"What am I supposed to be doing?" Ellis asked, turning from his examination of the books to face .

retrieved one of the oversized leather chairs near the long couch in the corner, positioning it beside his own at the imposing desk. The mahogany piece was a masterwork of old-world craftsmanship, with an enclosed design that wrapped around three sides. The raised panels and deep recesses created a private sanctuary for whoever sat behind it. Even someone standing directly before the desk couldn't see what lay underneath.

"Just be here," he said, motioning Ellis to sit as he handed him his tablet. "That's all I want for now."

Ellis shrugged, settling into the chair, and began to scroll through news feeds while immersed himself in the London meeting packets. At precisely nine, the video call

connected, filling one of his monitors with the faces of the London office executives.

Thirty minutes into the President's quarterly updates, noticed Ellis' attention wandering, his petit oiseau's fingers drumming restlessly against the tablet. Without breaking his attentive expression, muted his microphone and made a subtle motion toward the space between his knees.

Ellis' brow furrowed in confusion. Then his eyes widened as understanding dawned. He hesitated, glancing between and the video feed. 's slight nod was all the encouragement he needed. Ellis slipped from his chair to the floor, disappearing into the sheltered space beneath the desk.

shifted in his seat, adjusting to accommodate Ellis. Without taking his eyes off the presentation, he watched from his peripheral vision as Ellis' nimble fingers worked to open his belt and zipper. His arousal grew as Ellis freed his half-hardened cock.

Ellis took him in his mouth, sucking gently. Before he could become more enthusiastic, gripped his hair, gently stopping the motion. Instead, he guided Ellis' head to rest against his thigh, his length simply resting in the warmth of Ellis' mouth. Ellis tensed briefly before settling into a more comfortable position beneath the desk, relaxing into his role as 's cock warmer.

Ellis closed his eyes as he settled into position, and could feel his little bird's tongue working slowly, throat swallowing gathered saliva. Running his hand through Ellis' hair in silent praise, sat back in his chair, re-engaging with the London team's presentation. He kept his fingers threaded gently through Ellis' hair, both possessive and soothing, as he enjoyed the intimate warmth.

"The Q2 projections look promising," he commented, his voice steady. "Though I'd like to see more detail on the renewable energy initiatives."

The London President nodded, gesturing to a younger executive who immediately took control of the shared screen. “James will walk us through the regional impact analysis.”

The young man immediately launched into a detailed explanation of how the UK’s shifting energy policies affected their risk modeling across different territories, his slides filled with complex projections and color-coded maps.

’s fingers remained tangled in Ellis’ hair as he tried to focus on the presentation, occasionally using his free hand to make notes on the tablet on his desk. Ellis remained perfectly still beneath him, laving at his half-hard cock in a manner that made it increasingly difficult to concentrate on James’ earnest delivery.

The conference dragged on well past ten, each slide generating new questions and discussion points. By the time the President finished his final summary, ’s composure was hanging by a thread.

“Thank you for the thorough presentation,” he managed, voice tight. “Send me the revised reports by Friday. Unfortunately, I need to drop so I can prepare for Berlin.” He ended the call immediately, not bothering with further pleasantries.

The moment the screen went dark, used his grip on Ellis’ hair to force the young man down fully on his cock, groaning at the sensation. He gripped both sides of Ellis’ beautiful face and fucked into the man’s mouth. With each thrust, he slipped further into Ellis’ throat, tears forming at the corners of his little bird’s glazed eyes.

“You’re doing so well for me,” he said, eliciting a whimper from Ellis at the praise. “So good. Fuck. Fuck.” held Ellis down on his cock as he emptied down his little bird’s throat. As his softening cock slid from Ellis’ mouth, tipped his chin up so he could see him better.

The man looked fucked out.

Face flushed and lips swollen, Ellis blinked up at through tear-spiked lashes, his pupils blown wide with arousal. 's grip tightened on the nape of his neck before hauling him up into a bruising kiss. Ellis whimpered into his mouth, scrambling to straddle 's thighs, pressing closer as if he could crawl inside 's skin.

“Please,” Ellis breathed against 's lips, hips rolling unconsciously. “Please, sir.”

“Not yet, petit oiseau.” 's voice held that dangerous edge that made Ellis shiver. He pushed Ellis to stand, steadying him when his knees threatened to buckle. “Strip for me.”

Ellis swayed slightly, still dazed. “What?”

The corner of 's mouth curved up as he loosened his tie. “Take off your clothes.” His eyes raked over Ellis' body at a leisurely pace. “We wouldn't want to get them dirty, would we?”

Ellis glanced at the office door. “It's not locked.”

“No, it's not.” pulled up the Berlin meeting details on his laptop. “And I have another meeting in fifteen minutes.”

“Then shouldn't we—”

“Strip now and bend over the desk,” cut him off, nodding toward the right side of the massive mahogany piece, “or you'll be putting on quite the show for Berlin.”

Ellis flushed darker, frozen in place. simply leaned back in his chair, waiting. After a long moment, Ellis' fingers moved to his shirt buttons.

Ellis flushed darker, frozen in place. simply leaned back in his chair, waiting. After a long moment, Ellis' fingers moved to his shirt buttons.

"This is crazy," he muttered, but continued undressing. Each piece of clothing was carefully folded and placed on the nearby chair, his movements growing more hesitant with each layer removed. When his fingers touched the waistband of the powder blue panties, stopped him.

"Leave those on," 's voice was rough with desire. "I want to see you in nothing but my gift."

Standing in just the delicate underwear, Ellis wrapped his arms around his chest. His eyes darted over 's shoulder to the wall of windows behind the desk.

"One-way glass," assured him, amusement coloring his voice. "And Midwest Bank is the only building tall enough to see in. They're across the street." He adjusted his laptop camera until it would show only his shoulders and face. "Now. Turn around and bend over."

"The camera..." Ellis' eyes darted to the desktop.

"Won't see you," assured him, enjoying the way Ellis shifted nervously. "Last time. Bend over the desk."

He watched Ellis draw in a steadying breath. Despite the man's obvious nerves, his cock remained hard—a detail that sent a surge of satisfaction through . Ellis turned and bent forward over the indicated spot, and took a moment to appreciate the sight. The powder blue mesh clung perfectly to Ellis' curves, a delicate frame for what belonged to him.

Reaching forward, slowly dragged the panties down to mid-thigh, the fine fabric

stretching taut. The sight of Ellis displayed like this, the delicate underwear had chosen pulled down just enough to expose him, made something possessive twist in his chest.

Using his foot, nudged Ellis' feet further apart, displaying his little bird fully to his gaze. He stood, tucking himself away before letting his presence loom over Ellis' exposed form. "You hesitated to obey me earlier. That requires correction."

The sharp intake of breath from Ellis made his cock twitch.

"Ten strikes," he said, running a possessive hand down Ellis' spine. "I have a meeting, so we'll keep it brief. But I won't go easy on you." He waited for a beat. "How do you answer me?"

"Yes, sir," came the shaky response.

"Count them."

brought his hand down hard, savoring Ellis' jerk against the desk. "One, sir!"

He delivered each strike with precision, watching the pink bloom across Ellis' ass deepen to red. His little bird counted steadily through five, voice growing increasingly rough.

"Six, sir!"

On the seventh strike, something changed. Ellis flinched away, hands flying back protectively. immediately stilled, studying the tension in Ellis' shoulders.

"Tell me honestly, Ellis." He gentled his voice. "Do you want to stop? We will. Just say the word."

He watched Ellis' hands tremble in the air before slowly, deliberately returning to the desk.

"I need a verbal response," pressed, needing to hear the words.

Ellis' exhale was shaky but clear. "No, sir. Please continue."

leaned down, pressing his lips between Ellis' shoulder blades. "Good boy," he murmured against the warm skin before straightening. His little bird shivered at the praise, repositioning himself slightly to better present for the remaining strikes.

The seventh strike landed harder than the previous ones. Ellis' body jerked, but his "Seven, sir" came clear and steady.

"Eight, sir!" The sound echoed off the office walls. Ellis' knuckles were white where they gripped the desk edge.

paused briefly before the ninth, drinking in the sight of Ellis spread before him, ass beautifully reddened. The strike landed with a sharp crack. "Nine, sir!" Ellis' voice had grown hoarse.

The final blow was delivered with particular force. Ellis' whole body tensed, but he remained perfectly positioned. "Ten, sir," he gasped out.

's gaze dropped to where Ellis' cock hung heavy and dripping between his thighs, precum smearing against the polished mahogany and falling onto the delicate fabric of his underwear. Something feral stirred in his chest at the sight. His petit oiseau was hard and leaking from the spanking, making a mess of his desk. The evidence of Ellis' arousal spoke to something primitive in him, a deep satisfaction at having his boy so perfectly responsive to his discipline.

ran his palm over the heated skin, admiring the even spread of color he'd achieved. His other hand moved to check his watch. "Perfect," he murmured. "Now, stay exactly as you are. Berlin connects in two minutes."

sat back in his chair, savoring Ellis' questioning look over his shoulder. "Stay, sir?"

His smile turned predatory as he reached for the bottom drawer of his desk. The small bottle of lube appeared in his hand with practiced ease. "For the next hour," he said, voice rich with dark promise, "I'm going to stretch you open. Prepare you. Edge you." He ran a possessive hand over the curve of Ellis' ass. "And you're going to stay right here, on my desk, through all of it."

Ellis' breath hitched, but before he could respond, the laptop chimed with an incoming call.

"You're completely out of camera view," assured him, slicking his fingers. "Now, be good for me, mon coeur. Stay quiet."

"Yes, sir," Ellis breathed shakily.

clicked to accept the call, his professional mask sliding seamlessly into place. "Guten Abend, Berlin."

maintained perfect composure through an hour of risk assessments and quarterly projections, his voice never wavering even as he worked Ellis open with slicked fingers. His little bird trembled against the desk, fighting to stay silent while 's fingers stretched him wider, deeper, occasionally brushing that spot inside him that made his cock jerk and leak fresh streams of precum onto the mahogany.

Unlike their London counterparts, the Berlin office ran their meeting with characteristic German efficiency. Each agenda item was addressed with precision,

giving a perfect rhythm to work with. With each new item, he either added a finger, thrusting in and out of Ellis' tight hole, or scissored them, stretching Ellis until he had four fingers, nearly to the last knuckle.

Ellis tried to stifle his moans, pressing his hands over his mouth. admired his attempt, but it only made him want to make Ellis scream. Part of wanted the Berlin team to know what he was doing behind the camera. Show them and the world that Ellis was his.

His to play with. His to fuck. His to control.

Unfortunately, had to restrain himself. The scandal and gossip that would follow such an exhibition would be untenable. Image was everything to a Rohan.

When the call ended precisely on schedule, didn't bother with pleasantries. He clicked off, taking in the sight before him. Ellis lay sprawled across his desk, body trembling, chest heaving, and skin sheened with sweat. His hole was stretched wide and glistening, the rim pink and puffy from 's relentless attention. A substantial puddle had formed beneath where Ellis' cock hung heavy and dripping, evidence of how close had kept him to the edge without letting him fall.

stood, unbuckling his belt. "Such a good boy for me," he murmured, positioning himself. "Now I'm going to take what's mine."

sank into the wet, velvety heat, Ellis' thoroughly prepared body accepting him without resistance. His petit oiseau quivered beneath him, thighs trembling as desperate little whimpers escaped his throat. When remained still, savoring the moment, Ellis grew impatient, grinding back onto his cock with a breathy moan of "please."

The sight of his boy so desperate for him shattered the last threads of 's control. His

fingers dug bruising marks into Ellis' hips as he set a punishing pace, their shared moans filling the office.

The door burst open without warning.

Ellis' panicked gasp cut through the air. He withdrew immediately, tucking himself away with practiced efficiency as Ellis scrambled to the floor behind the desk, jerking the briefs back into place around his hips.

Maximilien Rohan stood in the doorway, his stern features hardening as he took in the scene. His eyes flickered to Ellis' discarded clothes on the chair, then to where Ellis had disappeared. "Another one of Henri's cast-offs?" He asked, voice dripping with disdain. "Really, ?"

Before he could respond, Maximilien's eyes narrowed. "Is he a prostitute?" The question hung in the air for a moment before he answered himself. "Of course he is. Your brother's tastes are... predictable."

He stared at his father, brain struggling to process the abrupt shift. Henri's cast-offs? Where had that come from? And why would his father assume Henri regularly consorted with prostitutes? His brother might be causing problems at the company lately, but this... this was something else entirely. His mouth opened, closed, opened again, but no sound emerged. Through his stunned haze, he registered his father's judgmental gaze sweeping over the scene, the disheveled desk, Ellis' clothes on the chair, the unmistakable scent of sex in the air. Something snapped. The words finally exploded from him, raw and furious.

"Get out," His voice started low and rose to a roar. "GET OUT!"

Brenda appeared in the doorway, wringing her hands. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Rohan, I tried to—"

“You can’t keep me out of my own office, woman,” Maximilien waved her off dismissively.

“It’s not your office anymore, Father,” snapped. “It’s mine.”

Maximilien scoffed as he circled the desk, peering down at where Ellis hastily pulled on his clothes. His laugh held no warmth. “I need to speak with my son. Get out.”

watched as Ellis’ eyes darted between them, fear plain.

“Waiting to get paid?” Maximilien pulled out his phone, tapping at the screen. “The prostitute’s name is Ellis, yes?”

“He’s not a—” started, but Maximilien was already hitting send.

Ellis’ phone buzzed under the desk. His little bird stared at the screen—\$2000 had been transferred—before meeting ’s eyes.

rubbed the bridge of his nose, exhaling slowly before reaching down to help Ellis out from under the desk. He pressed a soft kiss to Ellis’ lips. “Wait with Brenda, please?”

Ellis nodded, gathering his socks and shoes before slipping out, carefully avoiding Maximilien’s gaze.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:52 am

sat on the leather couch beside Brenda's desk, his phone's screen still glowing with the notification. \$2000 transferred from Maximilien Rohan. The leather stuck uncomfortably to his thighs where sweat had dried beneath his hastily donned suit pants. His shirt buttons were misaligned, the expensive fabric catching against places still sticky with lube and dried sweat. The collar pressed against a fresh mark on his neck—Gabriel's mark.

Through the glass walls of the reception area, he could see other La Sauvegarde employees moving about their day. A woman glanced his way, then quickly averted her eyes when she noticed his disheveled state. fought the urge to shrink into himself, to make himself smaller. The silk lining of his borrowed suit jacket felt suffocating.

He'd been getting paid for sex since before he could legally drink. Had taken money from men who looked at him like he was nothing more than a convenient hole. But somehow, this hit differently. Made him feel dirty in a way that a decade of sex work never had. His skin crawled where Maximilien's dismissive gaze had touched him, the casual cruelty of the transaction making his stomach turn.

The rhythmic tapping from Brenda's desk faltered, then stopped. looked up to find her watching him, her face tight with concern. She reached into her desk drawer and pulled out a small packet of facial wipes, sliding them across her desk toward him.

gradually became aware that the rhythmic tapping from Brenda's desk had stopped. He looked up to find her watching him with a pitying expression.

"Here." She produced a steel water bottle from somewhere in her desk. "You look like you could use it."

took it with trembling fingers.

“I’m sorry,” Brenda continued, her voice dropping so the passing employees couldn’t hear. “Maximilien’s a right bastard. Always has been.”

The sudden sound of raised voices behind the heavy office door made flinch. Lucas seemed to materialize in the reception area, striding quickly to ’ side with an urgency that spoke of more than mere coincidence.

Lucas dropped to one knee beside the couch, positioning himself between and the curious glances from the hallway.

“Are you okay?” Lucas asked, his voice pitched low and steady.

couldn’t find his voice. He just held up his phone, showing the transfer notification. Lucas’ face darkened for a moment before he did something completely unexpected—he pulled into a tight hug.

The embrace shocked into stillness. Besides Jean and Gabriel, no one had ever hugged him like this. Purely for comfort, with no expectation of anything more. Lucas’ embrace was warm and protective.

“Please don’t think this is how Gabriel sees you,” Lucas murmured. “Maximilien... he’s from an older world.”

Before could process what that meant, the office door slammed open. Maximilien Rohan stormed out, his icy gaze falling on with such contempt that shrank further into Lucas’ arms, trying to make himself smaller. Lucas shifted, shielding from the man’s cruel stare.

“One month!” Maximilien shouted over his shoulder. “I expect you at the

LaMontagne fundraiser!” His footsteps echoed down the hallway as he disappeared toward the elevator.

Gabriel emerged from his office, looking both angry and exhausted. “He thought today was the board meeting, which he attended last week. No, crashed.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Just a reminder of why I am CEO of La Sauvegarde now, not him.”

His expression softened when he saw Lucas holding . With a quiet sigh, he turned to Lucas. “Call Alain? Have him bring home?”

Lucas nodded, releasing to make the call. Gabriel took his place on the couch, drawing into his arms and pressing a kiss to his temple.

“I’m sorry about my father,” he murmured. “The money... you can keep it, donate it, send it back. Whatever you want to do with it.”

“I don’t know,” whispered. “I’ll ask Jean when I get home.”

Gabriel’s smile was gentle at ’ unconscious use of the word. “Yes. Lafayette Square is your home.”

They sat in comfortable silence until Lucas returned. Gabriel kissed goodbye before returning to his office, and Lucas escorted down the private elevator where Alain waited with the Mercedes.

stared out the window but wasn’t really seeing the city blur past.

Gabriel’s hands. So gentle.

Just another whore, a convenient hole to fuck

His kisses, like mattered.

Two thousand dollars in exchange

Lucas hugging him. No expectations.

But Maximilien saw the truth

Home. He called it home.

What was home to someone like him?

Gabriel claiming him, but...

He realized he was crying only when a tear splashed onto his hand.

“Maximilien was out of line today,” Alain’s quiet voice said, cutting through ’ spiral of thoughts.

“Was he?” asked, voice barely above a whisper.

“Yes, . He was.” Alain’s voice was firm, confident. “What you witnessed... it’s complicated. The board made Gabriel CEO because his father’s mind was slipping. His memory, his impulse control...” Alain sighed. “He was leading La Sauvegarde down a losing path.”

sniffled, trying to process this new information as rain began to patter against the car windows, matching his mood.

“The problem is,” Alain continued, navigating smoothly through traffic, “many board members are old friends with Maximilien. They still trust his word over Gabriel’s,

despite everything. It makes Gabriel's position delicate."

The car fell quiet again, but it was a different kind of silence. watched raindrops race down the window, thinking about Gabriel caught between being a good son and a good CEO. About how maybe he wasn't the only one struggling with who he was supposed to be.

The Lafayette Square manor appeared ahead, and could see Jean's blonde head bobbing impatiently at the front door, clearly waiting for him. Something in his chest loosened at the sight.

Alain pulled into the private drive, placing the car in park before fully turning to face . "I have never seen Gabriel care for someone the way he cares for you. Please, don't let Maximilien's words or actions get to you. Shower. Rest. Watch the terrible movies Jean seems to enjoy."

swallowed hard, meeting Alain's gaze. "Thank you," he managed, the words feeling inadequate for the quiet understanding Alain had shown. The driver gave him a small nod, something protective in his eyes that tightened ' chest.

Before he could overthink it, slipped out of the Mercedes into a drizzle. Jean practically flew down the front steps, wrapping him in a fierce hug that smelled of expensive cologne—Lucas' influence, no doubt.

At the top of the stairs, a mountain of a man watched Jean's enthusiastic greeting with careful attention, his dark eyes scanning the street even as he tracked Jean's movements. His olive-skinned face remained impassive, but there was something reassuring about the quiet efficiency of his presence. This must be Peter, the shadow Lucas had discussed assigning to Jean during business hours. He must have started today.

“All society men are awful,” Jean declared against ’ shoulder, the words muffled but vehement. “Absolute monsters, every single one.”

stiffened, his stomach dropping. The household already knew what had happened in Gabriel’s office. Humiliation crashed over him in a hot wave, making him want to crawl out of his skin.

But why? Why did this matter so much? He’d been thrown out of cars, had men refuse to pay, had been called every degrading name imaginable. He’d serviced men in alleys and back rooms who treated him like garbage, and he’d walked away without a second thought. But Maximilien’s dismissal had cut deep. The casual transfer of money. That contemptuous glance that reduced him to exactly what he was. Why did this make him want to disappear?

And now everyone knew. The thought made his chest tight with panic. They all knew exactly what had happened, how Maximilien had put him in his place. Had reminded everyone that no matter what Gabriel said, no matter how they treated him, at his core, he was still just a whore who could be bought and dismissed.

“Allons-y,” Jean tugged at his arm, pulling him toward the house. “Lucas said we could order whatever we want for dinner and watch movies until we pass out.”

“I need to shower first. And change.”

“Sure! Oh! Annabelle left your new wardrobe in Gabriel’s room. Meet me in the entertainment room when you’re done!” Jean bounded off toward the house, Peter following like a silent shadow.

made his way upstairs, movements mechanical. The borrowed suit felt wrong against his skin, the fabric a constant reminder of the afternoon. He unbuttoned his shirt with trembling fingers, dropping everything down the laundry chute before stepping into

the shower.

The hot water didn't help. He went through his routine automatically—shampoo, soap, rinse. When he entered Gabriel's walk-in closet, he stopped short. Half the space had been transformed, filled with new clothes in his size. A note in Annabelle's elegant handwriting was pinned to the nearest hanger, explaining these were for him.

stared at the clothes, unable to process this recent development. Instead, he reached for Gabriel's drawer, pulling out one of his soft shirts and a pair of sweatpants. Something about wearing Gabriel's clothes settled him. It made him feel grounded in a way he couldn't explain.

Downstairs, he found Jean sprawled across the entertainment room couch, phone in hand. Across the room, Peter sat in a chair positioned to see both Jean and the door, his dark eyes flicking between his tablet and his charge.

Jean hadn't acknowledged Peter once since arrived—hadn't even glanced his way. Knowing Jean, this stubborn refusal to accept his extra shadow was precisely calculated to irritate Lucas. The fact that Peter seemed utterly unbothered by the silent treatment probably annoyed Jean.

"I'm thinking sushi," Jean announced without looking up. "That okay?"

"I've only had it once," admitted, curling into the opposite corner of the couch. "On my birthday a few years back. It was good."

Jean looked up then, his expression softening. "I'm so sorry about what happened at Gabriel's office."

' stomach clenched. "Word's already spread?"

“Lucas told Alain, who told Annabelle and Jacob to have comfort food and tea ready... and well, you know how household gossip works.” Jean shrugged at ’ blank look. “Oh. I guess you wouldn’t. But yeah, the staff always knows everything. It’s like a law of nature or something.”

Jean turned back to his phone, scrolling through menu options. “That’s how society works, you know. Rich men using people until they get bored. Using them up and moving on.” His voice had taken on a bitter edge. “They think money makes everything okay.”

“Is Gabriel...” couldn’t finish the question.

Jean laughed, but there was no humor in it. “Of course. The Rohans are no exception. Why do you think Maximilien transferred that money so easily? It’s what they do.”

pulled out his phone, staring at the notification again. “What should I do with it?”

“Keep it,” Jean said immediately, looking surprised at the question. “Put it in your go-bag account.”

“My what?”

Jean sat up, staring at with genuine confusion. “Your go-bag account. You know, the money you keep separate in case you need to leave?”

’ blank look made Jean’s brows furrow. “Like the one my mother had when she left my father. No waiting for courts or lawyers.” He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture that screamed old money. “All the mistresses in the NQ keep one. It’s just... smart.”

Understanding dawned in Jean’s eyes, his privileged background suddenly glaring.

“Oh. You wouldn’t need to hide money, would you? You just kept what you earned?”

had spent everything he earned on essential, everyday things. There was rarely any left over to save.

Jean’s fingers fidgeted with his phone, his casual tone forced. “I put everything from Heart Court in an account nobody but me knows about. Set it up as soon as I could when I hit 18. No way I was letting daddy dearest see that money if he went looking.” The bitterness in his laugh betrayed the lightness he was trying for. “Guess some habits from home stick with you.”

felt something cold settle in his chest. “You think I’ll need to leave?”

Jean’s expression softened with something like pity. “They all leave eventually. Or make us leave. Rich men get... fixated. Obsessed. But it never lasts.” He picked at a loose thread on his sleeve, voice quieter. “I watched all three of my brothers do it. Alexandre was the worst—he’d bring these girls home, swear they were ‘the one,’ then two months later there’d be someone new. Marc and Philippe weren’t much better. They all ended up gone, one way or another. Even the ones my brothers swore they loved.”

Jean’s fingers tightened on the loose thread. “That’s why you need to be smart about it. Get what you can while he wants you. Money, clothes, connections. Whatever he’ll give you. Because once the shine wears off...” He trailed off, shrugging.

“What about you?” asked softly, remembering vaguely that Jean was here because of his family’s reputation. Something about a Swedish boarding school cover story.

Jean’s entire body went rigid, his fingers stalling on the phone screen. “I mean, I hope I don’t have to go home, but...” He let out a hollow laugh. “At least I’ve got a few months. Gabriel owns my contract now, after all. And he’s trying to protect his, and

my, reputation by hiding it with Confluence Assets.”

slumped deeper into the couch. It explained so much—Gabriel’s instant obsession, the intensity of his possession. Maximilien’s dismissive treatment, like was just another pretty distraction that would eventually fade.

“Oh!” Jean’s voice suddenly brightened with forced cheer. “Sushi’s ordered! Should be here in thirty minutes. And don’t worry, oh, stalker mine. I ordered some for you, too.” Peter grunted in response. could see his tablet switching to views of the outdoor cameras.

Jean grabbed the remote, pulling up some action movie with explosions, clearly eager to change the subject. Things exploded in spectacular fashion on the screen, but he couldn’t focus on any of it. was too busy wondering how long he had before Gabriel’s fixation faded—before he became just another name on the long list of discarded lovers.

He pulled out his phone and found Lottie’s number from their chance meeting on the metro. His thumbs hovered over the keyboard before he typed: “Hey, it’s . From the metro the other day. Remember me?”

The response came almost immediately: “YESSS!! I was hoping you’d text! How are you??”

Taking a deep breath, began typing out everything—from that first night at Lumière when he’d mistaken Gabriel as his client, through the growing intimacy and confusion, right up to today’s humiliation with Maximilien and conversation with Jean.

Lottie’s response took long enough for to watch three more explosion sequences on screen before his phone buzzed.

“Hate to say it, but your friend’s right. Always smart to prepare for the worst. BUT...”

frowned at the ellipsis until the next message appeared.

“I’ve never heard of ANY escort getting that kind of rescue before. And speaking of Heart Court... you know it’s gone, right? That lawyer of his, Rykov, went full scorched earth. Donovan’s in the wind.”

blinked in surprise. He hadn’t known.

“Caleb landed with us at Crown Club,” Lottie continued. “He’s doing good here. Aric’s showing him the ropes.”

Relief loosened something in ’ chest. He and Caleb hadn’t been close, but they’d been friendly. Caleb had always been kind, and knowing he’d found a place at the union brothel where Lottie and Aric worked made feel better about everything falling apart at Heart Court.

“Look,” Lottie texted, “be smart about it. But also? WANT him to want you. Cautious but optimistic, yeah?”

“Thanks, Lottie,” responded, letting the phone drop to his lap. Cautious but optimistic. He could work with that.

Later that night, after Gabriel returned home and they’d fallen into bed together, they lay tangled in the sheets, ’ skin still humming from orgasm.

“Is there anything I can do?” Gabriel murmured against his temple. “To make today up to you?”

almost said no reflexively, but stopped himself, remembering Jean and Lottie's advice. "I... I used to swim. At the old YMCA near Heart Court. Had a scholarship membership." He traced a pattern on Gabriel's chest, not meeting his eyes. "I miss it."

"Lafayette Square has an aquatics club three blocks away," Gabriel said immediately. "Indoor and outdoor lap pools. They even have water polo. I'll have your membership set up tomorrow."

"Thank you," whispered, settling deeper into Gabriel's embrace.

As he drifted toward sleep, held onto Lottie's words. Cautious but optimistic. Even if this was temporary, even if it would eventually end... maybe he could let himself enjoy it while it lasted.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:52 am

was halfway through his croissant when Jacob materialized beside the breakfast table, bearing a cream-colored envelope on a silver tray. The elegant, old-fashioned card could only be one thing. He rolled his eyes, reaching for it with exaggerated reluctance.

“The LaMontagne Foundation’s annual fundraiser tickets have arrived, monsieur,” Jacob announced as if the ornate envelope wasn’t announcement enough.

Had it been a month already?

“Wonderful,” muttered, slicing it open. Three tickets, as expected. He glanced around the table—Ellis carefully cutting his fruit into pieces, Jean drowning his pancakes in syrup while Lucas watched with fond exasperation, and Alain nursing his coffee like it held the secrets of the universe.

“Well, Lucas? Ready for another thrilling evening of Porte du Coeur’s finest patting themselves on the back at Pavillon Rivière?”

Lucas dabbed his napkin to his lips, the picture of careful consideration. “Actually, I thought I might stay in tonight. Keep Jean company.”

Jean’s head snapped up. “I don’t need a babysitter!”

“Of course not,” Lucas agreed smoothly, a teasing smile playing at his lips. “But you are far more entertaining than a stuffy fundraising ball.”

didn’t bother hiding his smirk at the exchange. Lucas hadn’t been subtle about

claiming Jean, and was quite certain their evenings involved far more than watching movies.

“Alain?” turned to his security chief. “I assume you’ll be—”

“May I be excused from attending?” Alain interrupted, not even bothering with an excuse.

“You never want to attend these events.” shook his head, sipping orange juice.

Alain shrugged, eyes fixed on his coffee. “I just don’t like them.”

“Too bad,” said cheerfully. “Shared misery and all that.”

Alain’s only response was to take another long drink of coffee, but caught the slight downturn of his mouth. Good. If had to endure another LaMontagne Foundation event, he wasn’t suffering alone.

turned to Ellis, who was still focused on his methodical fruit-cutting. “Would you like to accompany me tonight?”

Before Ellis could respond, Jean’s fork clattered against his plate. “Is that—is that a good idea?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” felt his jaw tighten slightly. “Ellis is mine. He belongs at my side.” He softened his voice as he turned back to Ellis. “If you’d like to attend, of course.”

Ellis set down his knife. “Yes,” he said quietly. “I’d like that.”

“They’re going to eat him alive,” Jean snapped. “All you’ll succeed in doing is

making a spectacle of him. Is that fair? To parade him in front of all those sharks?”

Lucas quietly slid Jean’s fork back into his hand. “That’s enough.” The warning earned him a glare from Jean, but he fell silent.

dismissed Jean’s concerns with a slight wave of his hand. He was La Sauvegarde’s CEO, heir apparent of the Rohan Estate. Ellis was his. No one would dare say a word.

“I’ve never been to the yacht club before,” Ellis said, clearly trying to dispel the tension. “I’d like to see the boats. I’ve always wondered what it would be like to sail on the ocean. Swimming in a pool is the closest I’ve ever gotten.”

looked up, surprised. “You like boats?”

“Sailboats,” Ellis clarified. “Or... the idea of them, at least. I’ve never actually been on one. But the thought of sailing, seeing the world that way...” He shrugged, looking almost embarrassed. “It seems freeing.”

“I’ll buy you a hundred boats,” declared. “One in every port.”

Ellis laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m never going to see the ocean, much less set foot on a boat,” Ellis said, shaking his head.

frowned but held his tongue. His petit oiseau clearly didn’t believe would buy him a hundred boats.

He was wrong.

made a mental note to have Nika look into yacht brokers. Perhaps start with something modest in Miami. Or no—the Mediterranean. Ellis would look beautiful against the backdrop of the French Riviera. The Rohan family estate on the Côte

d'Azur hadn't been used since his mother passed. The thought of Ellis there, golden in the Mediterranean sun, salt spray on his skin...

"More coffee, monsieur?" Jacob's quiet inquiry pulled from his planning. He waved the butler away, already composing a mental email to Nika. It was time to have the estate opened up again.

Several hours later, leaned against his bedroom door frame, watching Ellis adjust his tie for the third time. The bespoke suit fit him perfectly, and the burgundy waistcoat gave a subtle nod to the Rohan Family colors. had foregone a tie with his black suit, but Ellis seemed more comfortable with the extra armor of proper formal wear.

Ellis caught his reflection in the mirror and stilled. "What?"

crossed the room, coming up behind him to press a kiss just below his ear. "You look handsome." He felt Ellis relax slightly against him, their eyes meeting in the mirror. For a moment, they both just stood there, taking in their reflection, 's hand resting possessively on Ellis' hip.

Ellis turned in his arms, reaching up to smooth an imaginary wrinkle from 's lapel. His fingers lingered there before he lifted his face, pressing a soft kiss to 's lips. indulged in its sweetness, these careful kisses that Ellis so rarely initiated. Not their usual heated exchanges, but something new. Something that felt almost domestic.

"Thank you," Ellis murmured against his lips, "for the suit. For everything."

tightened his arms around Ellis' waist, wanting to freeze this moment. But they had a party to attend, and the world was waiting.

Downstairs, they found Alain waiting by the front door, impeccable in his black suit, without a waistcoat or tie. The drive to Pavillon Rivière was quiet, Ellis watching the

city lights reflect off the river as they approached the Second Cat.

Pavillon Rivière rose before them, palatial in its limestone grandeur, its facade glowing warmly in the evening light. had grown up attending events here but saw it anew through Ellis' wide eyes. The main building stretched along the artificially expanded Lake Saint Louis, its reflection dancing on the water.

The Mercedes glided to a stop at the entrance, where a valet, in crisp navy blue livery, stepped forward to open their doors. Alain handed over the keys with a warning look that made the young man stand straighter.

"It's enormous," Ellis breathed, taking in the sprawling resort complex.

"Three ballrooms, two restaurants, over a hundred rooms," listed off, his hand settling protectively at Ellis' lower back as they climbed the grand steps. "There's a spa, fitness center, indoor waterpark, even a movie theater. The marina has thirty full-service slips for larger vessels and twice that many smaller slips with partial or self-service options."

"Where Peruque Creek once was, they carved out the Peruque Canal," Alain commented dryly. "So the members could take their ridiculous boats straight to the Mississippi."

"All this in the middle of Missouri?" Ellis shook his head.

"What the rich want, they get," explained. "And they wanted a yacht club thousands of miles from the ocean. So they made sure it was worth the investment."

Before they reached the entrance, caught Alain's arm. "Keep an eye on him if I get pulled away?"

Alain nodded, understanding exactly what was asking. “Of course.”

They entered the marble-floored lobby, Ellis’ head tilted back as he took in the soaring ceilings and gilt details. , however, noticed the stares—not the usual appreciative glances he was accustomed to, but something more calculating. More curious. Jean’s words from breakfast echoed in his mind, and he pulled Ellis closer.

The massive crystal chandeliers threw rainbow patterns across Ellis’ face as they entered the main ballroom. found himself watching Ellis rather than their surroundings—the way his eyes widened at each discovery, the slight parting of his lips as he absorbed the contrived opulence.

Behind them, Alain shifted position, automatically moving to block the most direct line of sight from the gathering crowd. The evening hadn’t truly begun, and already felt the weight of everyone’s attention. But Ellis was his, and he wouldn’t let anyone make him doubt that.

As they circulated the room, Alain moved between them and the buffet table, bringing plates of delicacies and fresh champagne glasses—the latter mostly for himself, noticed. His security chief was drinking more than usual, eyes constantly scanning the room with unusual tension.

“!” Patricia Taylor’s voice carried across the marble floor. “How wonderful to see you!”

“Mrs. Taylor,” smiled with practiced ease. “How are you? I don’t see Earl this evening.”

“Oh, you know Earl,” she sighed, adjusting her diamond tennis bracelet. “Always at one of the dealerships. He did mention how pleased he was with your latest Mercedes purchase. The AMG, wasn’t it?”

“Sedan style, and it’s serving me well. And how’s Michael? I haven’t spoken to him in a while.”

“In London now, did you know? Working with that tech startup of his. Earl’s being far too permissive with the funding, if you ask me, but...” Her lip curled slightly. “I suppose I don’t have a say in how he chooses to risk the Taylor reputation. Though I suppose that’s better than some of the stories I hear about dear Henri. That latest scandal with the Dubrule girl. *é*lise, wasn’t it? The older one.”

“Ancient history,” cut in smoothly.

“Yes, well, tell that to the society pages.” Patricia let out a forced laugh. “One must be so careful with the Rohan image these days.” Her gaze slid to Ellis, sharp with curiosity. “And who might this be?”

“,” Nikolai Rykov greeted smoothly, effectively shouldering Patricia aside. Nika’s timely intervention prevented from having to answer. “Good to see you and your boyfriend again.”

He didn’t miss the predatory grin Nika flashed toward Alain, or the way Alain determinedly looked anywhere else, snatching another champagne flute from a passing tray.

Patricia gave an indignant harrumph at being dismissed but walked away without further inquiry, back to her society ladies, no doubt to spread the gossip she had learned.

The moment was broken by a server offering hors d’oeuvres. Ellis’ sudden flush and wide eyes told everything before the server even opened his mouth.

“Moving up in the world, eh, Ellis? I was sad to hear about the Heart Court

shutdown.” The server snickered, glancing between Ellis and ’s possessive grip on his hip.

Nika’s expression turned dangerous. “Should you wish to maintain your employment here, that will be your last word of the evening.” The server paled and scurried away.

“Thank you,” Ellis murmured, tense against ’s side.

“Not a problem,” Nika shrugged before turning to . “Mind if I borrow Alain for a moment?”

“I mind,” Alain said immediately, draining his champagne.

Nika ignored the protest, already steering Alain away. “Wasn’t actually asking. Come along.”

“I need to stay with—” Alain’s protests faded as Nika practically dragged him across the room.

stared after them, baffled by the exchange. When had Nika and Alain become close?

The whispers had grown more noticeable, and he could feel Ellis’ discomfort mounting. “Shall we check out the silent auction in the second ballroom?”

The second ballroom had been transformed into a showcase of wealth and excess. Display cases lined the perimeter, their lights catching the facets of rare gems and designer pieces—more fine jewelry than most boutiques carried. Antique furniture dotted the floor alongside modern art installations, while luxury vehicles gleamed under perfectly positioned spotlights. Local artists’ works hung on temporary walls, their current bids suggesting they weren’t struggling painters from the Fourth Cat.

Interactive screens were mounted throughout the space, displaying high-resolution images and detailed specifications of items too large to fit within the ballroom or too abstract. Potential bidders could swipe through multiple angles of luxury yachts, examine architectural plans for vacation properties, and scroll through box seats at local venues. Modern Rolls Royces and Mercedes shared physical space in the ballroom, while million-dollar classics like the 1962 Ferrari 250 GTO and 1937 Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic rotated in perfect digital detail on nearby screens.

It was on one of these screens that found the Fountaine Pajot Tanna 47 catamaran listing—the company owner hoping to make inroads into the local market where the brand hadn't yet gained traction. Currently docked at slip #8 in the marina, the vessel was a beauty, easily worth over a million. The interactive display allowed him to examine every detail, from the spacious suites to the latest navigation systems.

While Ellis was distracted by a display of vintage wines, quickly scanned the QR code and entered a bid high enough to discourage competition. He opted for outbid notifications, though he knew they wouldn't be necessary.

"I've never been to a soccer game," Ellis mused, studying the box seat offering for PDC Soccer Club's upcoming season.

immediately scanned the code, making his bid.

"Must be nice," Ellis said, shaking his head, smiling fondly, "having all that money to throw around."

"It isn't his money to throw around." Maximilien's cold voice cut through their moment. "It's the family's."

"My trust fund from grandfather. My salary as CEO. Both are mine to spend as I choose," said coolly.

Maximilien grunted. “Everything handed to you on a silver platter.”

“Just as it was handed to you,” countered. “Or have you forgotten it was your great-great-grandfather who came here in the 1800s? Third son of French nobility who started La Sauvegarde with old-world money. You’ve done little, but maintain what generations before you built.”

“How dare you—” Maximilien’s face flushed with anger.

“Perhaps we could go outside?” Ellis suggested quietly, touching ’s arm. “I’d love to see the boats.”

Maximilien’s gaze snapped to Ellis, recognition dawning. He let out a harsh laugh. “Ah, now I remember. Really, ? Buying a whore from that shuttered brothel to escort you to society events?”

went rigid, his mind racing at his father’s knowledge of Heart Court. “Ellis is not a whore. He’s my boyfriend, my partner. And he isn’t going anywhere.” Beside him, Ellis flushed from ear tip to shirt collar.

Maximilien studied Ellis with new interest, something calculating in his expression. “We’ll see,” he said before turning away.

was still seething when Alain approached, his collar slightly askew and his usual pristine appearance somewhat disheveled.

“Where the hell have you been?” snapped.

“That’s none of your business,” Alain replied calmly. “I’m your friend, not your slave.”

deflated immediately. “You’re right. I apologize.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache forming.

“Why don’t we head back to the ballroom? Speeches should be starting soon.” Alain suggested.

They returned to the main ballroom, finding their places among the crowd as Alain dutifully retrieved fresh champagne for everyone. The speeches were as predictable as they were endless—the same words about charitable giving and community responsibility that echoed through every society event in Porte du Coeur. caught Ellis trying to stifle a yawn behind his champagne glass while Alain didn’t even bother hiding his as he handed them their drinks. They joined the mechanical applause between each speaker, a synchronized performance of social obligation that had mastered since childhood.

After the final speaker, their host for the evening, Pierre LaMontagne, climbed the stairs to the stage and announced the close of the silent auction. Electronic notifications chimed throughout the ballroom like an expensive symphony, accompanied by delighted gasps and murmurs. ’s watch buzzed twice in quick succession.

“Did you win the seats?” Ellis asked, head tilted toward .

smiled. “And something much better.” He placed his hand at the small of Ellis’ back, guiding him toward the ballroom’s garden doors. Alain followed, still nursing what had to be his tenth glass of champagne.

The night air was cool as they walked through the manicured garden and down to the marina pier, their shoes clicking against the wooden planks.

“Did you buy Ellis a boat?” Alain asked, amusement coloring his words.

“You didn’t!” Ellis spun to face .

“I did.” stopped them at slip number 8, where the Tanna 47 catamaran bobbed gently in the dark water, its sleek lines illuminated by the marina’s lights.

“Can we go on it?” Ellis asked hopefully, taking a step toward the vessel.

“Not yet. I haven’t received the keys yet, but soon.” watched Ellis’ profile in the marina lights, memorizing the way wonder transformed his features.

“Why would you...” Ellis’ voice caught. “Why would you do something like this?”

“Because I love you.” The words came easily, naturally, as if had been saying them his whole life.

Ellis turned to him, tears catching the light. pulled him close, feeling the tremors running through Ellis’ body as he pressed his face into ’s chest. “Mon petit oiseau,” he murmured, lips against Ellis’ temple. “Mon coeur, mon trésor.” Each endearment punctuated with a soft kiss, tasting the salt of Ellis’ tears.

“Perhaps we should head home,” Alain suggested quietly from behind them, his voice gentle. “It’s been quite an evening.”

nodded, pressing one final kiss to Ellis’ hair. “We’ll come back as soon as the paperwork is done. I promise.” He waited for Ellis to nod before turning to Alain. “I’m driving.”

“What?”

pointed to the empty champagne glass in Alain’s hand. “You can ride in the back. Or sleep in it.”

Alain grumbled but didn't argue.

They left the glittering lights of Pavillon Rivière behind, Ellis' hand warm in 's as they walked to the car. Above them, stars dotted the sky, competing with the city's glow, while behind them, the massive yacht club cast long shadows across the water where Ellis' new boat waited.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:52 am

couldn't keep the smile off his face as he walked back from the Lafayette Aquatic Club, his hair still damp from his morning swim. The humid May air clung to his skin, but he barely noticed, too caught up in thoughts of tonight. After years of dreaming about the ocean, staring at pictures of sailboats, and imagining what it would feel like to be on the water, Gabriel was finally taking him to see the Tanna 47—his boat.

His. Boat.

The reality of it still felt like something out of a dream. He'd spent hours reading about catamarans online, trying to understand all the technical terms. Every new detail he learned made the dream feel more real—the dual hulls that would make it more stable, the way the sails could catch the wind, the freedom of being able to go anywhere. Tonight, he would finally see it in person. And maybe, if was lucky, they could christen it...

The sleek black limousine gliding alongside him derailed his thoughts. Before could react, a tall man in an impeccably tailored suit stepped out, positioning himself directly in ' path. The man's expression was professionally blank as he opened the rear door.

"Mr. Rohan would like a word."

took a wary step back as he glimpsed the imposing figure in the backseat, but the man in the suit caught his arm and unceremoniously tossed him inside. His gym bag with his damp swimwear thumped against the floor as he landed on the leather seat beside Maximilien Rohan.

Despite his pressed slacks and fitted shirt, felt shabby under the elder Rohan's dismissive gaze.

"I must say," Maximilien said as his eyes traveled over ' carefully chosen clothes, "one can dress up a pig, but it remains, nonetheless, a pig. I'm rather surprised by my son's current choice of companionship. Gabriel has never had to scrape quite so low before."

The words struck like a knife in his chest, finding all the insecurities that Jean's impromptu etiquette lessons over the past few weeks hadn't managed to smooth away. tried to sit straighter, feeling like a child in a school play—acting a part he'd never quite learned his lines for.

"I had such expectations for him," Maximilien continued, reaching for a folded newspaper. "La Sauvegarde requires someone who can stand beside its CEO as an equal. Someone who understands the delicate art of hosting the right dinner parties, attending the proper fundraisers without becoming..." His lip curled slightly as he dropped the Port du Coeur Post-Dispatch society pages onto ' lap. "The subject of unfortunate speculation."

' breath caught at the photo: he and Gabriel at the LaMontagne fundraiser. Gabriel's hand possessively at the small of his back, looking up at him with naked adoration. The headline made his chest tight: "MYSTERY MAN: Rohan Heir's Latest Scandal?"

The article was brutal in its casual cruelty. Speculation about ' conspicuous absence from society events that Gabriel otherwise attended in the weeks before and after the La Montague fundraiser—pointed comments about his obvious "low birth," suggesting that the Rohan family was deliberately hiding him away. But it was the business implications that made ' hands shake: La Sauvegarde's stock dropping twelve points, whispers of another Rohan scandal in the making.

Patricia Taylor's words from the fundraiser echoed in his mind, that sharp curiosity in her gaze as she'd discussed Henri's latest scandal. "One must be so careful with the Rohan image these days." Those words felt heavier now, trapped in this limousine with living proof of how much image mattered to the Rohan family.

looked up from the paper to find Maximilien studying him with cold calculation.

"I believe we can come to an arrangement that benefits everyone," Maximilien said, removing his tablet. "You seem like a practical young man. Someone who understands the value of appropriate compensation."

"Appropriate compensation..." repeated back, stunned. Maximilien Rohan wanted to pay him off, again.

Maximilien's fingers tapped on the tablet, his bank application opening with a soft chime. "Fifty thousand?"

' throat closed so tight he could barely breathe, remembering nights when even fifty dollars meant the difference between eating and going hungry.

"No? Perhaps we need to adjust the figure. Two hundred thousand?" Maximilien's lip curled when ' hands began to shake, his nails digging into his palms.

"Very well. A million. More than generous to make you return to whatever hovel you crawled out of. You must be the most expensive whore in Porte du Coeur."

"I'm not a whore," whispered, his voice smaller than he wanted it to be.

Maximilien's laugh was sharp as broken glass. "Years selling yourself on the streets, well before you were even legal, says otherwise. Only two of those years at Heart Court. Did you think I wouldn't have you investigated, Anouilh?" He leaned forward,

his voice dropping to a silky whisper. “By twenty-four, you could be in Florida. Your own sailboat. Your own life. All you have to do is take the money and disappear.”

“Gabriel loves me.”

“Gabriel has ‘loved’ half a dozen men over the years.” Maximilien’s voice dripped with disdain. “None lasted past a year. Do you really want to leave this relationship with nothing but bitter memories?”

“He bought me a boat—”

“Gabriel bought himself a boat,” Maximilien cut in. “Tell me, is this catamaran suddenly in your name?”

felt the tears he’d been fighting finally spill over.

“Name your price, little whore,” Maximilien said softly. “Everyone has one.”

The casual cruelty of the words snapped something in . He grabbed his gym bag and pushed open the car door, stumbling onto the sidewalk. The limousine rolled alongside him as he walked, but he kept his eyes forward, refusing to look.

“This is your last chance,” Maximilien called through the open window. “Take the money, live a good life. Or leave with nothing. Which will it be?”

“I’d rather end with nothing,” said, “and have these few happy months than make deals with the likes of you.”

Maximilien’s bitter laughter followed him down the street. broke into a run. His vision blurred, not stopping until he reached the Lafayette Square manor. He took the stairs two at a time, bursting into Gabriel’s study, where the man sat reviewing work

notes on his tablet.

Gabriel glanced up with concern. “Are you alright, little bird?”

Little whore

Without a word, he dropped his bag to the floor with a dull thud, crossing the room in swift strides. Gabriel’s steady gaze tracked him, those dark eyes never wavering as straddled his lap. He captured Gabriel’s mouth in a desperate kiss, pouring everything he couldn’t say into the contact—his frustration, his anxiety, and something deeper, an emotion he wasn’t ready to name. Gabriel tasted of coffee and security and home .

Eventually, Gabriel eased him back, those intense eyes studying his face. “What’s wrong, mon coeur?”

“Please, Gabriel.” His voice cracked. “I feel like I’m crawling out of my skin. I can’t—can’t...” His fingers dug into his own arms, nails pressing crescents into flesh. The urge to scratch deeper, to watch crimson wells appear, was almost overwhelming. “I want to scratch until I bleed, just to watch it flow because...” He couldn’t finish, couldn’t explain the chaos in his head.

“It reminds you you’re alive,” Gabriel’s voice was soft as his fingers carded through ’ hair before cupping his face. The touch was grounding, real. “Pain can anchor you when everything else feels disconnected. Is that what you need?”

Relief flooded through him at being understood. collapsed against Gabriel’s chest, breathing in his familiar scent. “Yes,” he shuddered out the word.

“Come then.” Gabriel shifted him gently from his lap and stood, taking his hand. “Let’s go to the bedroom.”

The bedroom door clicked, then locked, behind them. Gabriel's chest pressed against his back, one arm wrapping around ' waist while the other snaked up to his throat.

"I won't go easy on you." Gabriel's breath was warm against his ear. "If you truly need me to stop, if you can take no more, say 'red.'"

' breath caught. The stoplight system. Safe. Professional. Familiar ground. Every BDSM brothel used it. But this wasn't a transaction. Gabriel was offering him a real choice, a way out if he needed it. Something tight loosened in his chest.

Gabriel's fingers tightened on his throat. His lips found ' neck, sucking hard enough to mark. To claim. Then he released him, moving to lean against one of the bedposts with casual grace.

"Strip."

drew in a steadying breath. His fingers trembled slightly on his buttons. Gabriel's eyes tracked each piece of clothing that fell to the floor, his expression hungry. Predatory.

When stood naked before him, Gabriel made that imperious two-fingered gesture that sent warmth blooming in ' chest. Stupid, to be so fond of such a small thing.

He crossed to Gabriel, who guided him down with a hand between his shoulder blades until his chest rested on the cool sheets. shifted his legs wider, offering himself up to Gabriel's gaze. Fingers carded through his hair.

"Good boy."

The praise settled warm in his chest. He tracked Gabriel's footsteps around the bed, heard a drawer open. When he glanced back, his breath caught at the size of the plug

in Gabriel's hand, larger than any they'd used before. A shiver of anticipation raced down his spine.

Slick fingers breached him, first one, then two, as Gabriel worked him open. Soon, the fingers withdrew, replaced by something impossibly large and blunt pressing against him.

gasped, shaking his head against the sheets. "Too much, it's too-"

"You can take it." Gabriel's voice brooked no argument. "Take it for me, little bird."

tried to relax, to bear down against the relentless pressure. The plug stretched him wider, wider, until he thought he might split apart. When the widest part finally breached him, he let out a broken sound, his ring clamping tight around the base as it settled deep inside.

"Mon précieux oiseau." Gabriel's hand stroked up his spine. "Such a good boy for me."

Cool air hit his damp skin as Gabriel guided him upright. The movement shifted the plug inside him, pressing mercilessly against his prostate. His legs trembled. The soft leather around his wrists barely registered until Gabriel was already securing them to the metal loop above the bedpost.

thought them decorative, but now realized they had a purpose.

Gabriel's foot knocked his ankles further apart. shivered, exposed and vulnerable, anticipation coiling tight in his belly. ' skin heated as he shifted restlessly, his cock hard and dripping. Each small movement caused the plug to shift inside him, drawing desperate little sounds from his throat. His body craved friction, urging him to rut shamelessly against the post, but he resisted. Gabriel wouldn't like that.

Gabriel's footsteps returned. glanced over his shoulder, his breath catching at the sight of the whip. He recognized the deceptively simple design: a handle connected to a tightly rolled leather thong that tapered to a wickedly sharp point. The kind of toy that could deliver anything from a teasing sting to searing pain.

"You know this toy?" Gabriel asked.

"A dragon tail," confirmed, voice steady despite his racing heart.

Gabriel's fingers caught his chin. "Don't worry, little bird. This is only the beginning." Something in his tone made shiver.

nodded, trusting him completely.

Behind him, Gabriel fiddled with the base of the plug. Looking back, saw him attaching some kind of cord. Before he could ask, Gabriel held up a small remote.

The first pulse caught him completely off guard. "Fuck!" The sensation was unlike anything he'd experienced—waves of energy coursing through his most intimate muscles, making them contract and release in a rhythm he couldn't fight. Each surge felt like being fucked from the inside, the current stimulating nerves he didn't know he had. His cock jerked, leaking steadily now as another wave pulsed through him.

"Oh god," he gasped, fingers curling around the restraints as his legs trembled. He could feel every millimeter of the plug now, the electricity making his muscles clench and release around it in waves that had him seeing stars.

The rhythmic pulses had so lost in sensation that the sharp sting across his shoulder caught him completely off guard. He jerked against the restraints, a gasp torn from his throat. The dragon tail's bite was precise, each strike leaving fire in its wake as Gabriel worked methodically across his back.

Another strike. Another surge from inside. The dual sensations blurred together, pain and pleasure tangling until he couldn't tell them apart. Gabriel kept increasing the intensity of the plug with each downward progression of the whip, until ' entire world narrowed to the points of contact—the sharp sting of leather, the relentless pulses inside him, the mahogany of the posts warm against his forehead, sweat making his skin stick slightly to the polished wood.

By the time Gabriel reached the curve of his ass, was barely coherent. Tears streaked his face, his cock achingly hard and dripping. His legs had long since given out, leaving him sagging against the post, the leather cuffs biting into his wrists as they bore most of his weight.

Each strike now pulled broken sounds from his throat, his body weakly caught between trying to escape the sting and pressing back for more. The electricity pulsing through him had his muscles clenching rhythmically, every nerve ending singing with overwhelming sensation as he hung there, suspended between pleasure and pain.

“Please,” he sobbed, though he wasn't sure what he was begging for.

The strikes suddenly stopped. floated in a haze of sensation, muscles trembling, face wet with tears. The first thing to penetrate the fog was Gabriel's solid warmth behind him, taking his weight as gentle fingers released his wrists. slumped back against him, whimpering as the relentless pulses inside him continued at full intensity.

Gabriel guided him forward, draping him over the bed. The pulsing abruptly ceased, leaving him gasping. When Gabriel eased the plug free, moaned, overwhelmed by the sensation. His entire body felt electrified, every nerve ending singing.

Gabriel's heat vanished. The absence left him shivering, hyperaware of the radiating sting across his back and thighs, until those strong hands returned, pulling him up the bed, flipping him onto his back. Each welt pressed against the cool sheets sent sparks

of pleasure-pain racing through him. Through heavy-lidded eyes, he found Gabriel above him, naked and gleaming with sweat.

Gabriel positioned a pillow under ' hips before draping his legs over his arms. When he finally pushed inside, ' world narrowed to that single point of connection. Gabriel took him with ruthless thrusts, and came embarrassingly fast, shouting his release after only a few deep strokes. Gabriel's dark chuckle tickled his ear.

"That's one."

groaned as Gabriel continued fucking him through the oversensitive pain. One leg dropped to the bed as Gabriel reached between them, skilled fingers coaxing his sensitive cock back to hardness. Without conscious thought, he grasped Gabriel's wrist and brought it to his throat. Gabriel's fingers tightened, cutting off his breath. ' mind went blissfully blank as Gabriel continued his relentless pace.

His other leg dropped. A sharp crack across his cheek.

came apart again.

"That's two. My turn." Gabriel grunted, rhythm faltering, and felt him pulse deep inside, filling him with warmth.

"Mon précieux oiseau," Gabriel murmured against his temple. "Si parfait pour moi."

The French endearments washed over him like warm honey as darkness claimed him, Gabriel's voice following him into unconsciousness.

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held Ellis close as his breathing steadied, noting how completely his petit oiseau had surrendered to exhaustion. The total trust in that vulnerability stirred something fierce and protective in his chest. Ellis needed looking after, especially now.

Careful not to disturb him, retrieved a warm washcloth from the en-suite. As he gently tended to Ellis, he cataloged the marks he'd left—nothing that would raise Dr. Nguyen's ire, but enough to remind Ellis who he belonged to. The possessive thought should have troubled him more than it did.

His phone buzzed on the nightstand. Lucas.

“Your brother has been asking questions about certain acquisitions through unofficial channels. I thought you should know.”

's jaw clenched. Henri's persistent interest in Jean was becoming problematic. “Keep me informed of any developments. Also, ‘certain acquisitions?’ Why not just say, Jean?” mocked.

On the other end, Lucas cleared his throat, and could hear clearly as Jean shouted, “I am not a fucking acquisition!”

snickered, hanging up as Lucas began a string of colorful French curses directed at him, Jean's indignant protests growing louder in the background. Lucas had certainly met his match in the youngest Saint-Clair.

After ending the call, he studied Ellis' sleeping form. He laid Ellis on his stomach, mindful of the marks he'd left. His fingers traced the emerging bruises and welts,

considering the jar of Smooth in the bathroom cabinet. But no—he wanted Ellis to feel these marks, shift uncomfortably during dinner, and remember who had put them there.

Something had triggered this desperate need for pain, for punishment. It wasn't like his little bird to beg for it. Opening his messages, he quickly texted Alain: “ Check the aquatic club. I want to know if anything unusual happened during Ellis' visit.”

Alain replied immediately with a thumbs-up.

After tucking the blanket around Ellis' shoulders, quickly showered and changed into comfortable jeans and a soft shirt. He left the bedroom and study doors open as he settled behind his desk. Whatever had upset his petit oiseau, he'd find out soon enough.

was reviewing the acquisition details for a promising geospatial company when movement caught his eye. Ellis padded into the study, drowning in 's clothes, hair still mussed from sleep. Something caught in 's chest at the sight, his petit oiseau looked impossibly young and vulnerable like this, especially with the marks peeking above his borrowed collar.

Rising from his desk, met Ellis halfway across the room. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.” Ellis' cheeks flushed prettily. “Thank you.”

's lips curved into a predatory smile. “I'm always happy to oblige such requests, mon coeur.” He drew Ellis closer, claiming his mouth in a gentle kiss that promised more.

The sound of something shattering downstairs broke them apart. Raised voices followed, though the words were too muffled to make out clearly.

frowned, heading for the door with Ellis close behind. It wasn't until they reached the stairs that he recognized his brother's voice, sharp with anger.

"What the fuck is this? Are you fucking kidding me?"

They walked quickly toward the entertainment room where the shouting originated. pushed the door open to find Henri standing rigid with fury, while Lucas positioned himself protectively in front of Jean. The younger man clutched a blanket around himself, but it was painfully obvious he was naked underneath.

There was no mistaking what Henri had walked in on.

"You're supposed to be in Sweden!" Henri's voice cracked with betrayal and rage. "Marc said—I can't believe this. I can't fucking believe you didn't tell me, !"

"What are you even doing here, Henri?" 's voice was sharp with suspicion.

Henri's laugh was ugly. "Father sent me. He wanted to ensure your little pet had come to his senses and left." His gaze shifted to Jean, fury building. "He also wanted me to check if Jean was here. Said it was ridiculous, but wanted to humor Olivier." He gestured at Lucas and Jean with barely contained rage. "Guess the old man's instincts were right about Saint-Clair's youngest son."

"I ran away," Jean said, chin lifting defiantly despite his trembling. "Please don't tell them, Henri. Please."

"Why would you—" Henri's gaze snapped to . "Did you take him? And now you're letting your staff fuck him?"

"Lucas isn't staff," 's voice carried dangerous quiet. "And no one took anyone. As he just said, he left of his own accord."

“Then why—”

“Because they’re cruel!” Jean’s shout echoed off the walls. “All of them. You, of all people, should know that, Henri!”

“Shut up!” Henri’s face contorted. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” Jean’s laugh was bitter. “I’ve seen the way Marc—”

“I said shut up!” Henri advanced a step, but Lucas blocked his path. “It’s not like I had a choice about Marc.”

“What does that mean?” asked.

“None of your fucking business.” Henri ran shaking hands through his hair. “Just... just send him back. You have to send him back, . You don’t understand—”

“No!” Jean pressed against Lucas’ back. “Please, I can’t go back. You know how Marc is, Henri. You know what Father lets him do.”

The accusation hung in the air like poison. Henri went still, face draining of color as he stared at Jean in horror. The silence stretched, heavy with an unspoken understanding that left and Lucas exchanging confused glances.

“He needs to go back,” Henri repeated numbly. “He has to go back.”

Jean’s fingers dug into Lucas’ shirt. “Henri, please...”

Henri’s shoulders slumped. “Fuck.” He dragged a hand down his face. “Fine. I won’t tell them where you are.” The words seemed dragged from him. Then, almost absently: “Though speaking of family secrets, —” He gestured vaguely toward where

Ellis stood partially hidden behind . “Father knows he’s still here.”

shifted, blocking Ellis completely from view. Henri’s bitter laugh cut through the room.

“Don’t bother hiding him now. You know how Father gets when he’s crossed. And he’s made it clear your... investment has overstayed his welcome.”

Ellis made a small sound. ’s hands clenched into fists. “Ellis isn’t going anywhere.”

“Your funeral.” Henri turned and stormed out. The front door slammed moments later.

stared after him, chest tight. “I should have paid more attention to him growing up.”

“How?” Lucas asked quietly, running soothing fingers through Jean’s curls. “He’s ten years younger than us. And he always had Marc.”

Jean flinched at the name. Lucas pulled him closer.

“Why did he run, Lucas?” asked.

“Please.” Lucas’s voice was uncharacteristically serious. “Trust me when I say Jean doesn’t want to go home and shouldn’t. Leave it at that.”

studied his old friend’s face, then nodded once.

“Though next time,” said dryly, “perhaps fuck in your room instead of on the entertainment room couch. We all have to sit there.” He paused. “Or I suppose I could just buy a new one.”

The attempt at humor fell flat. was never good at diffusing situations. That was Lucas' talent.

Jean remained pressed against Lucas, clearly shaken, while Lucas' worried gaze never left the boy in his arms. A sob caught in Jean's throat, and recognized the signs of the imminent breakdown.

"Come on, petit oiseau," murmured, placing a gentle but firm hand on Ellis' lower back. "Let's go back upstairs." Behind them, Jean's composure finally shattered, his muffled cries echoing in the hallway. Ellis tried to turn back, but 's steady pressure kept him moving.

settled Ellis in his lap on the leather sofa in the study. "Do you know why he ran?"

Ellis curled closer. "Not really. Just that he hates his father and oldest brother. When he first came to Heart Court, he had these marks around his wrists and ankles—rope burns, I think. At the time, I hadn't thought much of it." Ellis shrugged. "I'd seen worse. Had worse."

's jaw clenched at the casual way Ellis referenced his past trauma, but his mind was spinning with darker implications.

What exactly were Olivier and Marc Saint-Clair doing to Jean?

And Henri... what did he know? What had Jean seen Marc do to his brother?

He'd been so wrapped up in his own world that he'd missed something terrible happening right under his nose. To his own brother. And he didn't even know what that terrible thing was.

Though, the darker part of his mind was running wild with speculations.

Ellis had started to drift, head on 's shoulder, relaxed and pliant, when 's phone buzzed. Two images from Alain - a familiar limousine outside the aquatic club, and a security camera still of Ellis being roughly pushed inside.

's blood ran cold. His father. Of course.

Ellis saw the images and pressed closer.

“What did he say to you, mon coeur?” carded his fingers through Ellis’ hair in what he hoped was soothing.

“He offered me a million dollars,” Ellis said quietly. A bitter laugh escaped him. “Told me you never keep anyone around long, and that I could take the money and start a new life anywhere else. Far from you.”

caught Ellis’ chin, turning his face up. “You chose me over money?”

Ellis nodded, not meeting his eyes.

“Mon coeur.” kissed him softly. “He’s right that I never wanted a long-term partner before. But you...” He traced Ellis’ lower lip with his thumb. “You appeal to me greatly. I plan to keep you, Ellis. And do everything in my power to make you happy.”

Ellis’ eyes welled with tears. “Fuck,” he muttered. “I never used to cry so easily.”

laughed, drawing him into a deep kiss. “Only with me, petit oiseau. Only with me.”

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padded down the hallway, leaving behind the increasingly heated sounds coming from the entertainment room. There were only so many times he could watch Jean “accidentally” drop things and bend over to retrieve them while Lucas pretended not to notice. Then they got shandy on the couch, and had given up trying to play video games altogether.

He was happy for Jean and Lucas. He was, he just also wished they would stop it with public displays.

decided to check on Gabriel. He had been working for hours since breakfast; maybe he could convince him to take a break and have lunch with him.

The doorbell’s chime echoed through the empty foyer. hesitated—usually Jacob or Annabelle handled visitors, but they were out shopping for the week’s groceries. With the influx of people, the quantity of things Annabelle needed required a second pair of hands. When the bell rang again, more insistently, sighed and changed course.

He opened the heavy door to find a striking woman in her early twenties on the doorstep. Her cream designer suit probably cost more than used to make in a year, and her jewelry sparkled with obvious wealth. Her professionally styled blonde hair framed a face that might have been beautiful if not for the hint of cruelty around her mouth.

“Yes?” asked politely.

She barely glanced at him. “I’m here to see Henri Rohan. I know he’s been spotted here.”

“I’m sorry, but Henri isn’t here. We haven’t seen him in several days.”

Her perfectly manicured hand shot out, shoving the door wider as she brushed past into the foyer. “I’ll wait.”

“Excuse me,” said, letting his anger sharpen his voice. “You can’t just—”

She turned, really looking at him for the first time. Her eyes widened slightly before her lips curved into a cruel smile. “Ah. You must be the little whore everyone’s talking about. , isn’t it?”

felt heat climb his cheeks but kept his voice steady. “I’m sorry, who are you?”

Her perfectly painted lips parted in shock. “You don’t—” She recovered quickly, lips curling into a sneer. “I suppose a gutter rat wouldn’t recognize refinement if it walked up and introduced itself. I am élise Dubrule, Henri Rohan’s fiancée.”

“Funny,” said. “I didn’t think Henri had a fiancée.”

Her smile went razor-sharp. “Of course we’re engaged. There was just some unpleasantness with the papers. Though I suppose someone of your background wouldn’t keep up with society news.”

Color flooded her cheeks. “Now, where is Henri? I know he’s been seen here.”

“Like I said, he’s not here. And you need to leave.”

“How dare you? Do you have any idea who I am? Who my family is?”

“Do you have any idea how little I care?” crossed his arms. “Henri isn’t here. You need to leave.”

She laughed, the sound like breaking glass. “Oh, that’s adorable. The little prostitute playing at being lady of the house. Tell me, does Gabriel make you answer the door often? Or were all the real servants too busy to do their jobs?”

“I’m not playing at anything,” said quietly. “This is my home. Gabriel is my partner. And you are trespassing.”

“Partner?” She practically purred the word. “Is that what you think you are? Oh, you poor thing. I suppose no one’s told you about Gabriel’s history with pretty little diversions like yourself.” She stepped closer, voice dropping to a mock whisper. “Did you know about Christian? Or Thomas? What about dear sweet Jamie? They all thought they were special too.”

felt a sting in his chest, but he refused to let it show. “I know exactly who I am to Gabriel. And I know exactly where I stand in this house.” He lifted his chin. “Which is why I can tell you to get the fuck out and know that Gabriel will back me up completely.”

“Such language,” she tsked. “Though I suppose we can’t expect better from someone of your profession. Does it bother you, knowing that everyone who sees you with Gabriel knows exactly what you are? What you’ve done? The society papers have been having quite a field day with your history.”

“You seem very interested in my profession,” said sweetly. “Are you looking for career advice? Because honestly, from what I hear about your social climbing attempts, you might actually make more money on your back than you do trying to marry up.”

Her hand shot up, but before she could slap him, another voice cut through the foyer.

“I wouldn’t.” Gabriel’s quiet warning carried clearly from the stairs. “Not if you ever

want to show your face in PDC society again.”

hadn't heard Gabriel approach, but he felt the warm press of his body as Gabriel descended the stairs and moved to stand beside him. Gabriel's arm slipped possessively around ' waist.

“Gabriel.” élise's voice dripped honey. “I was just looking for Henri. I heard he'd been seen here.”

“And informed you that Henri isn't here,” Gabriel said coldly. “Yet you chose to enter my home uninvited and insult someone under my protection.”

“Protection?” She laughed. “Is that what we're calling it now?”

“We're calling it exactly what it is,” Gabriel's voice carried dangerous quiet. “ is my partner. He lives here. This is his home. And you have exactly thirty seconds to leave it before I call the police and have you charged with trespassing.”

She opened her mouth, probably to argue, but something in Gabriel's expression made her think better of it. With a sharp laugh, she turned on her heel and strode toward the door. At the threshold, she paused.

“When he gets bored of you,” she said to , “don't say I didn't warn you.”

“If you're still waiting for Henri to change his mind about you,” replied calmly, “don't say I didn't warn you.”

The door slammed behind her. sagged slightly in Gabriel's arms, then caught movement at the edge of his vision. Turning his head, he spotted Jean and Lucas peeking around the corner from the hallway leading to the entertainment room. Jean practically vibrated with contained commentary until Lucas pulled him back out of

sight.

turned back to Gabriel. "I'm sorry," he said. "I probably shouldn't have antagonized her."

Gabriel's laugh rumbled through his chest. "Mon coeur, that was magnificent." He pressed a kiss to ' temple. "Though I particularly enjoyed the career advice. Very thoughtful of you."

turned in Gabriel's arms, studying his face. "The names she mentioned..."

"Past relationships," Gabriel admitted easily. "None of which lasted more than a few months." His fingers traced ' jaw. "None of which made me feel the way you do."

nodded, letting himself believe it. After all, none of those other men had been given a home here.

"Now then," Gabriel's voice dropped to a growl that made heat pool in ' belly. "I believe you were coming to see me?"

smiled. "I was going to suggest you take a break."

"Excellent idea." Gabriel's kiss held possession and promise. "I think you've earned a reward for handling that so beautifully."

Their "break" left deliciously sore and thoroughly claimed. Afterward, as they caught their breath, 's stomach growled loudly enough to make Gabriel laugh.

"I suppose we should feed you," Gabriel murmured against ' temple. "Come on. Annabelle and Jacob won't be back for hours yet. She's having too much fun buying your wardrobe."

rolled his eyes, secretly touched by the housekeeper's enthusiasm. "I have plenty of clothes already. She bought out half the stores last week."

"And the week before that," Gabriel said, watching as deliberately ignored his own closet full of designer clothes to steal one of Gabriel's shirts instead. pulled the soft cotton over his head, breathing in the familiar scent that always made him feel safe. He'd never had many possessions before—a few changes of clothes, some toiletries, whatever could fit in a backpack. Now he had more clothes than he could wear in a month, but he still preferred Gabriel's well-worn shirts that smelled like home.

"She keeps buying things I don't even know how to wear," admitted, catching the sweats Gabriel tossed him. "Yesterday she tried to explain the difference between morning suits and dinner suits for twenty minutes. I thought Jacob was going to hurt himself trying not to laugh."

The fond exasperation in Gabriel's smile made 's chest tight. "You know she'll just buy more."

"I know." couldn't help smiling. No one had ever cared enough to worry about whether he had the right clothes before. Even if he didn't understand half of what Annabelle bought, her determined mothering made him feel... cherished.

followed Gabriel down to the kitchen, his body still humming from their activities. He watched, amused, as Gabriel opened the refrigerator and stared at its contents like they might rearrange themselves into lunch.

"I can make something," offered, but Gabriel shook his head.

"I'm perfectly capable of making sandwiches." Gabriel started pulling out ingredients with the same precise confidence he showed in everything. "Besides, you're still moving a bit carefully after our... break."

felt his cheeks warm but couldn't argue. He settled onto one of the kitchen stools, watching Gabriel methodically arrange bread, meats, and condiments on the counter. There was something endearingly domestic about seeing him perform such a mundane task.

"Gabriel?" traced a pattern on the counter's surface. "What am I supposed to do around here?"

Gabriel looked up from where he was carefully spreading mustard. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I feel like I'm just—" struggled to find the right words. "Everyone else has a purpose. Annabelle and Jacob keep the house running. Jean, well, Jean seems happy to be doing nothing. Well, he's made antagonizing Peter a sport. I just... exist."

Gabriel set down the knife, giving his full attention. "You can do whatever you'd like, mon coeur."

"Mais c'est ca. I don't know what that is." ' voice got smaller. "I didn't even finish middle school, much less high school. The union houses wouldn't even take me without a diploma. Outside of sex work, I'm not really qualified for anything."

Gabriel was quiet for a moment, thoughtful. "Would you like to study?"

"What?"

"There's an equivalency test—the HiSET. Like a GED." Gabriel moved around the counter to stand closer to . "I could hire tutors to help you prepare. You could work at your own pace, no pressure."

stared at his hands. "You'd do that?"

“Of course.” Gabriel’s fingers caught his chin, tilting his face up. “I want you to feel confident in yourself, . If education would help with that, then we’ll make it happen.”

felt hope flutter in his chest, even as an unwanted thought tried to surface—even if Gabriel eventually tired of him, a diploma would give him more options. He pushed the doubt away, focusing instead on Gabriel’s warm eyes.

“I think... I think I’d like that,” said softly. “It would be nice to not feel so... ignorant all the time.”

“You’re not ignorant,” Gabriel corrected firmly. “You’re self-taught under difficult circumstances. There’s a difference.” He pressed a kiss to ’ forehead. “We can look into tutors later this week. For now, how about lunch?”

smiled, watching Gabriel return to his sandwich-making with the same focus he gave everything else. This was what security felt like, he realized. Not just the promise of education or the luxury surrounding him, but this—being supported, being seen as someone worth investing in.

Gabriel slid a plate in front of him, the sandwich cut into triangles. Such a simple thing, but it made ’ chest tight with emotion. He was more than just a pretty distraction or a charity case. Gabriel saw him, really saw him, and wanted to help him grow.

“Thank you,” said, meaning far more than just the sandwich.

Gabriel’s smile suggested he understood. “Anything for you, mon coeur.”

And believed him.

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guided the Mercedes AMG sedan—Gabriel’s latest gift—into the circular drive of the Lafayette Square mansion. He still couldn’t quite believe Gabriel had bought him a car, even if he could only drive it the three blocks between the mansion and the aquatic club until he got his license. Until then, he had to use it in auto-drive mode for longer trips.

The sleek black vehicle responded to his touch like it was reading his mind, making him feel powerful and alive. His muscles were pleasantly tired from swimming, and as the late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the manicured lawn, he allowed himself a small smile. Two weeks had passed since Henri discovered Jean, and life had settled into an almost normal rhythm.

The past few days especially had been good. The tutors Gabriel hired had done an assessment, and it turned out wasn’t as far behind as he’d feared. His English grammar was appalling, according to the kind but honest woman who’d reviewed his writing sample, and his French needed work, but his math scores had been acceptable. They seemed confident he could complete his HiSET in a few months if he applied himself.

He wasn’t sure about rushing it like that, but it was nice to know it wouldn’t take years.

Even Annabelle’s enthusiasm for dressing him had become endearing rather than overwhelming. He’d started accompanying her on shopping trips, letting her play dress-up with him in the fancy boutiques she loved. She got so excited about it, he didn’t have the heart to tell her he still preferred Gabriel’s old shirts at home.

The squeal of tires on the pavement behind him shattered that peace.

Three black SUVs pulled up, blocking the driveway. ' hand froze on his car door as men emerged—a dozen or more, wearing casual clothes that somehow looked wrong, their faces obscured by dark sunglasses and surgical masks. Something about their fluid movements sent ice through his veins.

“Jacob!” backed toward the house, fumbling for his keys. “JACOB!”

The butler appeared in the doorway, his usual composure cracking as he took in the scene. “Inside, now—”

The men moved with military precision. Three headed straight for Jacob while others fanned out around the property. heard the muffled pop of silenced weapons and saw the security guards at their posts crumple.

“No, no, no—” turned to run, but strong hands seized him. He fought, connecting with a jaw, an eye, earning a grunt of pain. More hands grabbed him.

Through the open door, he saw Peter moving like a dancer, taking down two attackers before a third shot him from behind. The sight of Peter falling made ' stomach lurch.

A scream cut through the air. “Let me GO!”

Jean's voice. thrashed harder, managing to slam his head back into someone's nose. Blood sprayed, but it didn't matter. More hands replaced the ones he fought off.

They dragged him toward one of the SUVs. Jean was wrestled into another, his blonde curls wild, face red with fury. “I'll kill you!” Jean shouted. “My father will—”

“Your father sent us,” one of the men said calmly, removing his mask. Jean went

pale, then his eyes locked on something beneath the man's jacket.

“Sentinelle Tactical?” Jean's voice cracked. “He's using ST?”

felt his blood run cold at the name. He'd heard Gabriel mention it once—some secretive military branch of La Sauvegarde that officially didn't exist.

They shoved into the middle SUV. Through the tinted windows, he watched Jean's vehicle pull away. A man in the passenger seat turned around, wearing the same distinctive patch.

“Goodnight, ,” the man said almost gently, raising a small canister.

The spray hit his face. coughed, tasting chemicals. The last thing he saw was Jean's SUV turning west toward Second Cat while his vehicle headed north toward the industrial sprawl of The Docks.

Then darkness took him.

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was in a video conference with the Berlin compliance team. Attention focused on the risk-mapping inconsistencies they'd found in the mobile platform. The issue wasn't critical yet, but could create vulnerabilities if left unchecked. On his screen, Kristoff Weber, their head of European compliance, was walking through the technical specifications.

His phone vibrated again—Annabelle calling. For the third time in two minutes. Dread coiled in 's chest; Annabelle never called. In the decade she'd run his household, every communication had been through texts. Even emergencies warranted nothing more than a succinct "Urgent: Please call when available."

"Pardon me," he said to the Berlin team. "I need to address something urgent. Brenda will reschedule for tomorrow morning, and I'll review your preliminary corrections then."

He ended the call and immediately dialed Annabelle back. Her voice, usually so composed, trembled. "I just got back from the weekly shopping and—" A shuddering breath. "There are bodies, . Five of the security team, dead in the foyer. Peter and Jacob were barely alive when the ambulance took them. The police are here now, but Ellis and Jean are gone. They're just... gone. What should I do?"

The world tilted sideways. 's mind raced through possibilities, each worse than the last. "Wait there. I have some ideas where they might have been taken." His voice sounded distant to his ears. "Have Dr. Nguyen meet Peter and Jacob at the hospital. Once stable, have them transferred to St. Lucius in Second Cat. I'll cover any costs. When the police leave, call in a provisional cleaning crew. Annabelle, do not try to clean it yourself."

Annabelle agreed and hung up.

As he left his office, he found Lucas by Brenda's desk, where he'd been chatting. His friend's easy smile vanished at the look on 's face.

The elevator doors opened, and Alain emerged at a near-run, his usually impeccable composure fractured. One look at his head of security's face told he was about to report the same nightmare.

"What the hell is happening?" Lucas demanded as they moved back toward the elevator.

"The security feeds just came back online," Alain reported tersely. "Someone looped them—professional job. When they cleared, I saw the police and the bodies being removed."

"Ellis and Jean are missing," said as they entered the private elevator, jabbing the button for his private entrance. "Five of our security team are dead. Peter's the only survivor, along with Jacob. Both were shot, and both were rushed to the hospital. I'm having Dr. Nguyen move them when possible. We have to let the police handle the scene for now. I'm sure they'll have questions, though."

"Already texting Nika to head over to the manor to handle it," Alain said.

"Where are we going?" Lucas asked, an urgency in his voice.

"The estate." 's jaw tightened. "My father and brother have some explaining to do."

They emerged into the private garage, Alain already moving toward the Mercedes. As they settled into the car, tried Henri's number.

Voicemail.

He tried again. Straight to voicemail.

A third time—voicemail.

“Tabarnak!” dialed his father.

The phone rang.

And rang.

And rang.

No answer. No voicemail box. wanted to throw his phone out the window.

“Try Henri’s PA,” Alain suggested, taking a corner at twice the recommended speed. Everyone braced.

The PA, Eric Thompson, answered on the first ring. “Mr. Rohan’s office.”

“Where is my brother?”

“Sir, uh, Mr. Rohan, Mr. Henri has been working remotely all week. I... I actually don’t know his current location.” Eric stuttered out.

“You’re his PA!” shouted into the phone before hanging up on flustered and sputtering man. “Henri’s hiding.”

“Or is in a meeting?” Alain suggested, merging onto the I-70 at mind numbing speeds. They flew past a cop, who started to follow them, but likely recognized their

license plate number and stopped.

“Merde,” Lucas swore, slamming his hand against the dashboard. “We should have had more security at the house. After everything with Henri—”

“It wouldn’t have mattered,” Alain cut in, weaving through traffic. “Not against Sentinelle Tactical.”

“You think it was Sentinelle?” Lucas said, disbelieving.

“Had to be a private military. To get in and out of Lafayette Square that quickly and cleanly? I doubt it was some low-life gang or guns-for-hire. Had to be contractors. My bet is on our guys. Maximilien is still friends with their President.” Alain said, while swerving madly around the slower automated cars—which was everyone.

was already dialing.

Antoine Dufort, President of Sentinelle Tactical, answered on the third ring.

“! To what do I owe—”

“Did you authorize any off-books operations today? Specifically, at my Lafayette Square manor?”

A pause. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t play games, Antoine. Six of my security team are down, and five are dead. Oh, and also my butler. There are no other Private Military Contractors in the city, and the hit was too professional.”

“A terrible situation,” Antoine’s voice dripped false sympathy. “But I’m afraid

there's nothing in our logs about any operations today, inside Porte du Coeur, at least."

"You might be chummy with my Father, Antoine, but remember who signs your paychecks."

A low chuckle. "Prove it, . Otherwise, don't waste my time with threats." The line went dead.

"Bastard," Lucas spat.

"He's lying," Alain said, taking another turn at breakneck speed.

"Obviously." was already dialing Olivier Saint-Clair.

Unlike the others, he picked up on the second ring.

"Where is Jean, Olivier?" asked without preamble.

"Jean is at the International School of Gothenburg," Olivier said, his tone clipped and cold. "As you well know."

"Don't lie to me, Olivier. A security team just murdered five of my people."

"Such accusations. I don't appreciate your tone, ." A sound like the slurping of a drink came through over the speakers. "In any case, where my wayward youngest is, is none of your concern."

"If anything happens to Jean—"

"My son is exactly where he should be." Olivier snapped. "Stay out of family

matters, . You're not as untouchable as you think. And if you or your associates set foot on my property—any Saint-Clair property—I'll have you arrested for trespassing." The call ended.

's grip tightened on his phone until the case creaked. In the rearview mirror, he saw Lucas' face darken with fury.

"Rohan Estate, 15 minutes." Alain said.

The wrought-iron gates parted smoothly at the touch of Alain's fob, their gilded family crest catching the late afternoon sun. The Mercedes glided forward onto the oak-lined drive, white crushed shells crunching with a distinctive whisper beneath the tires.

The house revealed itself gradually through the trees—a sprawling testament to his great-grandfather's determination to outshine the old St. Louis families, long before the birth of Porte du Coeur. The architecture was a peculiar marriage of Romanesque strength and Greek Revival grace, as if the builder couldn't decide which ancient civilization to honor. Gray stone formed the base and wings, while white marble columns and accents caught the light like fresh snow. The effect should have been jarring, but somehow, the careful balance of materials created something uniquely commanding.

Twin fountains flanked the circular drive before the main entrance, water arcing in precise patterns that hadn't changed in over fifty years. The lawns stretched out in every direction, each blade of grass exactly the regulation height his mother had once insisted upon. A separate drive curved toward the equestrian center through the pristine rose gardens, where the family's prized horses were stabled in better accommodations than most people's homes.

The entire estate radiated the kind of old money that couldn't be replicated—the

patina of generations of careful maintenance, the absolute certainty that everything was exactly as it should be.

They found Maximilien by the pool, lounging on a canopied daybed with the casual arrogance that had defined him for decades. A crystal tumbler dangled from his fingers, ice clinking against glass as he watched their approach with faint amusement.

Behind him, the pool stretched like a liquid sapphire, its waters flowing seamlessly from the climate-controlled interior to the outdoor terrace through a massive wall of crystal-clear glass. The engineering marvel could seal the indoor section off completely during winter, but today, the barrier was raised, allowing the afternoon breeze to ripple across both surfaces.

A young woman in a crisp white uniform approached with practiced grace, carrying a fresh whiskey sour on a silver tray. She kept her eyes downcast as she exchanged Maximilien's empty glass for the full one, then retreated with the silent efficiency expected of the household staff.

noted how his father's gaze followed her movements with predatory interest before returning to rest on his visitors, that familiar mocking smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Father—"

"If you're here about the Saint-Clair boy, I'm staying out of it." Maximilien sipped his scotch. "Olivier call. It's a family matter, you understand."

Lucas lunged forward. Alain caught him, muscles straining. "Don't," he warned.

"And Ellis?" asked, teeth grinding.

“Who?” Maximilien sipped his whiskey sour.

“Who... you know damn well who he is, you bastard!”

Maximilien laughed. “Il s’est envolé.”

“Not on his own, he didn’t.” all but snarled.

“Why don’t you change? Join me by the pool. It’s a lovely day for it, and the view is fantastic.” Maximilien’s gaze slid back to where the female staff member was fluffing pillows on nearby daybeds and loungers, completely unnecessarily.

pinched the bridge of his nose. Punching his father might feel cathartic, but it wouldn’t get him any answers. “Do you know where Henri is?” He asked through his teeth, the tension in his jaw aching its way into a migraine.

Maximilien made a show of checking his watch. “At this time of day, I assume the office.”

“He’s been working remotely, according to his PA.”

“Well, he isn’t here. Perhaps Marc’s penthouse?”

Getting any information out of his father was unlikely. The trio searched the house for Henri anyway, though none believed he was there. More than one of the servants had told them that Henri had all but been living at Marc’s penthouse for the past few months. considered it odd, as Henri was fond of some of the horses in the stables, his old polo ponies, and was usually one to ride multiple times a week.

“Do we know where Marc’s penthouse is?” asked as they exited the house after a fruitless search.

“I’ll have to look into it,” Alain said, sliding behind the wheel. The air in the Mercedes felt thick with unspent fury and mounting dread.

They drove back to Lafayette Square in tense silence, the earlier breakneck pace replaced by a measured control that seemed to cost Alain visible effort. Each traffic light felt like an eternity. He watched the familiar landmarks of Second Cat blur past his window, unable to shake the image of his father’s mocking smile.

Nika was waiting on the front steps when they arrived, his usual predatory grace somehow sharper in the late afternoon light. His perfectly tailored suit seemed incongruous against the lingering chemical smell of bleach, the marble steps still showing faint traces of hasty cleaning.

“Police have been handled,” Nika said as they approached. “All questions answered, all concerns addressed. They won’t trouble you further.” He adjusted his cuff links with precise movements. “Initial cleanup is complete. A more thorough crew arrives within the hour.” His gaze flicked to the front door. “Annabelle has taken refuge in the kitchen. The house already smells like a French patisserie.”

His expression softened fractionally. “Dr. Nguyen called. Jacob is out of surgery; transfer to St. Lucius will be approved once he’s stable. Peter...” A measured pause. “Peter’s injuries were more severe. Several more hours of surgery are ahead. Transfer won’t be possible for at least twenty-four hours, but I’m applying appropriate pressure to expedite matters. Did you learn anything at the estate?” Nika asked, though his tone suggested he already knew the answer.

His jaw tightened. “No.”

“I have contacts,” Nika said, a dangerous glint in his eyes. “People who owe me favors.”

Alain's lip curled with familiar distaste. "Bet you do." He murmured.

"I'll reach out, see what can be found." Nika's smile was razor-sharp but held a hint of genuine concern. He tipped his head in farewell and stepped down to his sleek Cadillac Blackwing, the engine purring to life.

pushed open the front door of his home, the familiar space suddenly alien. Industrial cleaners couldn't mask what his mind insisted was still there—blood and gunpowder, violence poorly concealed beneath pine and bleach. His shoes struck each step with hollow sounds that echoed wrong through the silent halls.

The heavy oak door of his study promised refuge. Inside, nothing had changed—the same leather chairs, the same wood panels, the same crystal decanters catching afternoon light. The normality felt obscene.

Annabelle materialized with a silver tray of still-warm croissants and pain au chocolat. Her hands trembled slightly as she set it down, though her voice remained steady. "You should eat something." She disappeared before he could respond.

Lucas' measured steps marked time across the carpet while Alain dismantled his Glock with mechanical precision, the pieces arranged in perfect lines on the side table. 's fingers found the crystal decanter without conscious thought. T

Every twenty minutes, Annabelle returned.

Brownies. Macarons. Tiny quiches.

Each offering received with tense silence. The garden beyond his window blurred green, the ice in his glass melting away untouched.

None of them had answers. None of them had plans.

The tepid whiskey burned going down.

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woke... maybe... did he wake? Was he still sleeping? Everything felt... wrong wasn't the word. Different? No...

He tried to sit up but something pushed him back down to the not-hard but not-soft surface.

His hands... he had hands... where? They wouldn't... wouldn't... move?

Confined. Was that metal around his wrists?

The world swam in and out. Close then far. Far then gone. Nothing felt... real wasn't right. Nothing felt... anything.

There was someone on top of him. It wasn't Gabriel. Gabriel... Gabriel should be... where was Gabriel?

felt panic wash through him. Someone took him from Gabriel. He felt himself thrash and scream. Cry. Muffled voices. Above him looked gray until a hazy figure blocked the gray.

There was a prick in his arm. A burning moved through him.

Sound turned to cotton. Feeling turned to... to... nothing had names anymore. His body was everywhere and nowhere. Floating. Sinking. Both?

wasn't anywhere. Or was he? Wasn't he supposed to be somewhere? The pressure on top of him barely registered. was breathing. Breathing was nice. Cool air through his

lungs was nice. Was that a light? didn't like lights. He should close his eyes again...

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The screen's glow cast harsh shadows across 's study as security footage played for what must have been the thousandth time. Three seventeen in the morning, and he hadn't moved from his position behind the desk in hours. Days had begun to blur, marked only by the timestamps on endless hours of footage.

Eight days. Ten hours. Twenty-two minutes.

Ellis had been gone for eight days, ten hours, and twenty-two minutes.

The coffee at his elbow had gone cold, joining three other untouched cups scattered across the normally immaculate desk. Papers and tablets created a maze of dead ends and false leads. His jacket hung forgotten on the back of his chair, sleeves rolled up, tie long discarded.

On the screen, the Mercedes AMG sedan pulled up to the manor. Ellis would have been smiling, still damp from the pool. The timestamp showed 4:55:13 PM. At 4:55:34, three black SUVs would appear. At 4:55:56, professionally equipped men in tactical gear would swarm the car and the house. At 4:58:21...

's jaw clenched until his teeth ached. A logo on one of the bags, stowed in one of the SUVs, stood stark on the screen. These men were La Sauvegarde's security force. Sentinelle. Antoine was still stonewalling every inquiry, hiding behind his father's protection like the coward he was.

The quiet click of his study door opening made him look up. For the first time since had known him, Nika looked... disheveled. His usually impeccable suit was wrinkled, tie loosened, and dark circles shadowed his eyes. Even his perfectly styled hair

showed signs of running his hands through it too many times.

“You have something?” ’s voice was rough from disuse.

Nika’s expression tightened. “Henri’s gone completely dark, no credit cards, no phone, no facial recognition hits. According to HR, he’s suddenly taken a month’s leave.” Nika’s frown deepened. “A CFO doesn’t just take a month off, especially not Henri. His PA says he was working remotely the day Ellis and Jean were taken, but the last confirmed sighting we have is him leaving La Sauvegarde the previous Friday evening with Marc Saint-Clair. Nothing since.” He paused, running a hand through his already messy hair. “Antoine’s locked down Sentinelle’s internal communications—even my best hackers can’t get in. But... I found something else. Something we missed.”

“Explain.” The word came out as more growl than speech.

“I had my team pull Ellis’ cell records again. There’s a contact we overlooked. Someone named ‘Lottie.’ They texted nearly every day, sometimes multiple times. It’s mundane stuff, mostly complaints about clients and jokes about the weather. But she’s an escort too, works at one of the top union houses in Fourth Cat.”

went very still. The kind of stillness that made even Nika take a half step back. “You’re telling me,” he said softly, dangerously, “that for over a week, we’ve had a direct connection to someone who knows Ellis, knows his world, and no one thought to check his text messages?”

“We were focused on Sentinelle’s movements, on Henri, on your father’s—” Nika stopped himself, likely seeing something dangerous flash across ’s face. “Yes. That’s exactly what I’m telling you. I fucked up. We all fucked up.”

’s chair scraped against the floor as he stood. “Bring her here. Now.”

“It’s three in the morning.”

“Do it!”

Nika straightened his wrinkled tie. “I’ll have her here within the hour.” He turned to leave, then paused. “... there’s something else. Your father called an emergency board meeting for tomorrow—” Nika checked his watch, grimacing. “Rather, later today. Nine a.m. He’s claiming you’re emotionally compromised.”

’s laugh was sharp enough to cut. “Of course he is.” He turned back to the screen where Ellis’ Mercedes was frozen in frame. “Get me Lottie. I’ll deal with my father after.”

Nika pulled open the study door, only to freeze. Lucas and Alain stood on the other side, Lucas’ fist raised to knock. watched Alain’s eyebrow lift at Nika’s unusual appearance.

“I’ll call as soon as I have her,” Nika said, brushing past.

Lucas watched him go, then turned back to . “Was that actually Nikolai Rykov with his tie crooked?”

“Apparently, none of us are sleeping anymore.” didn’t look up from the screen. “What do you have?”

Alain took up his usual position near the desk, his appearance as immaculate as ever despite the hour. Only the tightness around his eyes betrayed both his exhaustion and the anger he’d been carrying since his security systems had been compromised.

“The new system will be installed tomorrow,” Alain reported, each word precise and clipped. “Completely closed circuit, no cloud access. Only I will have remote

viewing capabilities, and even that will be through dedicated hardware, not any network.” His jaw tightened briefly. “I’ve vetted the tech company personally. They’ll have no access once the installation is complete.”

Lucas leaned forward, his shirt gaping where it was unbuttoned to his chest. “We found who sold us out. Johnson had a hundred and fifty thousand deposited to his account the morning of the kidnapping.” His lip curled in disgust. “He managed to spend almost twenty grand before Sentinelle put a bullet in his head. The rest was withdrawn that same day.”

“Money trail?” asked.

“Untraceable,” Lucas confirmed. “But it proves what we suspected—someone on our security team was feeding information to your father.”

“Peter’s being released next week,” Alain added, a hint of respect softening his rigid tone. “The doctors say he’s lucky to be alive after taking three bullets. He’s asking to come back.”

nodded. “Good. We need men like that—ones willing to die protecting what’s mine rather than selling us out.” He glanced at the clock, nearly three-thirty now. “Speaking of loyalty, Nika was here with an update.”

“I saw.” Lucas’s exhaustion momentarily lifted. “He looked like he slept in those clothes. Did he find something?”

“A connection we missed.” ’s voice held barely controlled fury. “Someone named Lottie. She and Ellis texted nearly every day. She works at one of the union houses in Fourth Cat.”

Alain’s perfect composure cracked slightly. “We missed a direct connection to Ellis’

world?”

“We didn’t have his phone. Nika’s getting her now.” ’s fingers drummed once on his desk before he caught himself. “But that’s not all. My father has called a board meeting for 9 a.m. He’s claiming I’m emotionally compromised.”

“Bastard,” Lucas breathed. “He takes them, then tries to take the company too?”

“He won’t succeed.” The cold certainty in Alain’s voice drew both men’s attention. “The security footage shows Sentinelle’s involvement. Antoine might be your father’s friend, but the board won’t ignore a La Sauvegarde security force being used to kidnap the CEO’s partner and someone under his protection.”

“Especially since he’s claiming you’re compromised,” Lucas added, straightening in his chair. “We can use this.”

“First, we get answers from Lottie.” turned back to the screen where Ellis’ Mercedes sat frozen in frame. “Then we deal with my father.”

The quiet that followed was heavy with exhaustion and rage. Lucas broke it first.

“What exactly did Nika find in Ellis’ texts?”

“They talked almost daily. About everything, apparently. Clients, weather...” ’s jaw tightened. “She might know things about Ellis’ world that we don’t. Places, people... anything that might tell us where they’ve taken him.”

“.” Alain’s steady voice cut through the tension. “We know Jean’s with his family, even if we haven’t pinpointed where. We’ll find him. But Ellis...” He left the darker possibility unspoken.

Lucas had gone still. “He could be anywhere by now.”

“No.” ’s voice was raw. “No, I refuse to believe they’ve moved him far. There has to be something we’re missing. He’s here, somewhere. I have to believe he is still in PDC.”

The silence after his admission stretched until Lucas cleared his throat.

“When does Nika expect Lottie to finish her shift?”

“Within the next couple of hours.” glanced at the clock again. “He’s going to intercept her at her brothel.”

“I’ll have Brenda clear your morning schedule,” Lucas said. “Everything except the board meeting.”

“Speaking of which,” Alain straightened slightly, “what’s our strategy there?”

’s laugh held no humor. “Oh, that’s simple. My father wants to paint me as emotionally compromised? Fine. Let’s show the board exactly why. Starting with footage of his pet security force kidnapping my Ellis.”

The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon when the study door burst open. looked up from the board presentation he and Lucas had been reviewing to find a petite brunette stalking toward his desk, dressed in the revealing end of high-class escort wear. Nika followed behind her, looking more exhausted than he had two hours ago.

“What do you mean, Ellis has been kidnapped?” she demanded, slamming both hands on his desk, her curves accentuated by her fitted dress. “It’s been over a week since he’s responded to my texts, and you’re just now thinking to tell me?”

“Miss Garten—” Nika started.

“Don’t you ‘Miss Garten’ me, you absolute pillock.” She didn’t even turn around. Her rage focused entirely on . “I’ve been worried sick, thinking maybe he was ghosting me, or hurt, or—” Her voice cracked slightly. “And you’re supposed to be taking care of him. What the hell happened?”

studied her for a moment, noting the genuine concern beneath her anger. “Eight days ago, a private security force broke into my home. They took Ellis and another boy under my protection.”

“A private—” Lottie straightened, her eyes narrowing. “Which security force?”

“Sentinelle Tactical.”

“The La Sauvegarde—” She cut herself off, connecting the dots. Her fury shifted to something colder. “Your own company took him? Why?”

“My father.” ’s voice was flat. “He’s never approved of Ellis. Or of me choosing a male partner. Particularly one from...” He gestured vaguely at her outfit, “your profession.”

“So daddy dearest decided to what? Make the problem disappear?” Lottie’s lip curled. “And you haven’t found him yet? With all your money and connections?”

“We need someone who knows PDC’s underbelly,” Nika said quietly. “Places where people disappear to. The kind of operations that stay hidden even in plain sight.”

Lottie seemed to think for a moment before responding. “The trafficking rings.” It wasn’t a question. “You think they sold him into the underground networks?”

Lottie sank onto a leather couch, her earlier fury transforming into focused determination. “I don’t have direct connections to those circles. No one in the union houses does. That’s the whole point of being union.” Her fingers flew across her phone screen. “But we look after our own in this city.”

“What are you doing?” Nika asked.

“Putting out feelers. Carefully.” She didn’t look up. “We have networks, ways of passing information that stay under the radar. Someone sees something, a client doesn’t act right, they tell their friend, who tells their friend...” Her gaze flicked up to meet ’s. “We don’t take kindly to people snatching one of ours off the streets. Even the non-union workers will keep their eyes open for Ellis.”

watched her work, recognizing the same desperate need to act that had been driving him all week. “Nika can take you home.”

“Not now. I need to focus.” She dismissed the offer without looking up, already responding to incoming messages. “I’ll catch the train back later.”

“Sir,” Alain’s voice drew ’s attention. “We should prepare for the board meeting. Shower, change. Meet downstairs in an hour?”

nodded. “Have Annabelle bring Miss Garten some breakfast. And make sure she has a ride home later.” Alain dipped his head.

Lottie’s fingers paused at the mention of breakfast. “Coffee?”

“Annabelle makes the best in PDC,” Lucas assured her.

“Fine.” She was already back to typing. “But I’m not leaving until I hear back from some people.”

left her to her work, the steady click of her nails on the screen following him and his men out of the study. The morning light spilling through the windows reminded him how little time they had before facing his father.

The La Sauvegarde boardroom held its usual chill at 9 a.m. sharp. sat at the head of the table, Lucas a steady presence behind his right shoulder, as Maximilien delivered his carefully rehearsed performance.

“...the company’s reputation to consider,” his father was saying, pacing with practiced agitation. “The past few weeks have shown a concerning pattern of distraction, of poor judgment.” He turned to the board members, many of whom had known him for decades. “Under my leadership, La Sauvegarde maintained certain standards and upheld traditions that have served us well for generations.”

let him continue, watching the familiar faces around the table. Some nodded along with his father’s words. Others maintained careful neutrality. He waited until Maximilien paused for breath before touching the tablet in front of him.

The boardroom’s screens came to life with high-resolution images. Ellis’ Mercedes. The Sentinelle Tactical teams swarming his home. Jean being dragged from the house. The company’s logo clear on their gear.

“Speaking of leadership,” ’s voice cut through his father’s sudden silence, “let’s discuss the use of company resources for personal vendettas.” He zoomed in on the Sentinelle logo. “Antoine Dufort continues to stonewall any investigation into this operation. An operation that resulted in five dead security personnel.”

He let that sink in before continuing. “You claim I’m distracted? Let’s look at the numbers.” Another tap brought up financial charts. “In the three months since Ellis entered my life, has La Sauvegarde’s growth slowed? Has our stock price fallen?” He met each board member’s eyes in turn. “No. We’ve continued the upward trajectory

that began when I took over from my father, after his tenure saw us hemorrhaging money from a series of failed deals and questionable acquisitions.”

leaned forward, his voice carrying the weight of certainty. “Many of you are my father’s friends. I respect that loyalty. But today, you have a choice to make: your pocketbooks or Maximilien’s wounded pride.”

The silence that followed was deafening.

The first response came from the far end of the table, where one of La Sauvegarde’s longest-serving board members sat. Her family had been invested in the company for three generations, and she’d never been one to let sentiment cloud her judgment.

“Five dead employees.” Her voice cut through the silence. “And the use of company security forces for a personal matter.” She turned to Maximilien, her expression hard. “Explain.”

“Marie—” Maximilien started, but she held up a hand.

“No. Not to me. To the shareholders you put at risk with this stunt. To the families of those dead men.” She gestured at the screens still showing the assault on ’s home. “We’re looking at potential lawsuits, regulatory investigations, stock price impact if this gets out.”

Other board members were nodding now, the spell of Maximilien’s performance broken by her practical concerns.

“I move to dismiss the motion regarding ’s leadership,” said another board member, leaning forward. “And I suggest we open an investigation into Sentinelle’s recent operations.”

“Seconded,” came the immediate response.

watched his father’s face as the vote proceeded, saw the moment Maximilien realized he’d overplayed his hand. The old man’s mask of concern cracked, revealing a flash of raw fury before he could compose himself.

Maximilien stood still, that flash of fury now buried beneath a veneer of dignified disappointment. “I see.” His voice carried just the right note of paternal concern. “I hope you all remember this moment when my son’s proclivities become public knowledge.”

“Your concern for the company’s reputation would carry more weight,” said, “if you hadn’t just used our security force to kidnap my partner in broad daylight.”

“Alleged use,” Maximilien corrected, but the words lacked conviction as the screens still displayed the damning evidence.

“This meeting is adjourned,” one of the board members announced, already gathering his papers. “The motion is dismissed. The investigation into Sentinelle will begin immediately.”

remained seated as the board members filed out, some pausing to shake his hand, others merely nodding. His father was the last to leave, pausing at the door.

“You’ve made a grave mistake,” Maximilien said quietly.

“No, Father.” finally looked up from the frozen image of Ellis’ Mercedes. “You have. Eight days ago. Where is he?”

“I have no idea who attacked your home.” Maximilien’s lip curled. “Though I can’t say I’m devastated by the outcome.”

's fists clenched at his sides. One step. That's all it would take to reach his father.

"The investigation will reveal everything, Maximilien," Marie de Guise cut in smoothly. "Every call, every order, every payment."

Maximilien's smile didn't reach his eyes. "If I had ordered such an operation, I certainly wouldn't want to be kept informed of how they disposed of the trash." He turned away, dismissing them all as beneath his notice. "Do let me know when you've finished playing CEO,."

watched his father leave, his words burning in his ears like acid.

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The metal around his wrists clinked against the bed frame. blinked at the ceiling, trying to make the water stains stop moving. The drugs weren't as heavy today. He could almost think.

Almost remember.

Days... weeks? How long? Time blurred between needle pricks and rough hands and... and...

He wanted to cry, but there didn't seem to be any tears left. Maybe they'd dried up somewhere between the first man and the tenth. Or the twentieth. He'd stopped counting. The drugs made everything hazy, made it almost bearable. Almost like it was happening to someone else.

Think of Gabriel instead.

Gabriel would be looking for him. Gabriel had to be looking for him. Unless... unless he thought had run. Left him. The thought made his chest tight. Or maybe... maybe Gabriel wouldn't want him anymore. Not after this. Not after so many men had...

Who would want him now?

No. Focus. Gabriel's hands. Gabriel's voice. The way he said 'mon coeur' like was precious. Before he was ruined. Before he was nothing but used goods again.

Somewhere nearby, water dripped. The sound echoed oddly, as if it were coming from far away. A warehouse, maybe? The air smelled of rust and river mud. Voices

drifted through the walls, Paw-Paw French, the dialect of his childhood. Of the streets and the docks. Of people who stayed in shadows and moved things that shouldn't be moved.

His body ached. Everything ached. But the drugs made it distant, made it someone else's pain. Someone else's body being...

Think of Gabriel. Think of Gabriel. Think of Gabriel. Even if Gabriel would never touch him again.

The door creaked. Footsteps. turned his head away from the light spilling in, but not before catching glimpses: concrete walls, metal shelving, other beds.

"Holy shit." A whispered voice. Male. Young. "I think Lottie is looking for you."

A flash went off, searing white behind ' closed eyes.

Then darkness again, but not before he caught the kid's face - barely more than a teenager, looking terrified.

Lottie?

The thought slipped away as new footsteps approached. The familiar sting of a needle. The world began to fade, but clung to two names now.

Gabriel.

Lottie.

Then nothing.

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The familiar click of Jacob's shoes in the hallway barely registered. hadn't moved from his desk since dawn, reviewing the preliminary findings from the Sentinelle investigation. Coffee had long since gone cold beside financial reports and surveillance photos. Lucas and Alain had taken up their usual positions, Lucas in one of the leather chairs reviewing security reports, Alain standing near the window, his attention split between the grounds and the conversation.

"Sir. Mr. Henri Rohan and—" Jacob's formal announcement cut off as a blur of motion shot past him.

"Lucas!"

looked up just in time to see Jean launch himself at Lucas, who caught him instinctively, stumbling back a step. Then Jean was kissing him, seemingly oblivious to their audience. The joyful reunion made Henri's appearance in the doorway all the more stark. He looked like death warmed over, his usual polished facade cracking at the edges.

"I missed you so much!" Jean finally pulled away from Lucas, though he stayed in his arms. "Henri was amazing! He kept arguing with Father about letting me come back because everyone knows I was taken from 's house and people were starting to talk and—" Jean's rapid-fire explanation halted as he caught 's expression. "What?"

"Why," kept his voice carefully controlled, "would Henri need to argue for your return?"

Jean's brightness dimmed slightly. "Well, you know. Father likes to... share me. With

his business associates. Has since I was fifteen.” He said it so casually, like discussing the weather. “But I couldn’t be passed around now because of all the gossip about where I’d disappeared to, and Henri kept pointing out how suspicious it looked, especially after your board presentation, and—”

“Jean—” stared, horrified. But Lucas’s lack of surprise caught his attention. His friend’s face held pain and anger, but no shock at Jean’s revelation.

“You knew.” It wasn’t a question.

Lucas met his gaze steadily. “It wasn’t my secret to tell.”

“Father said I was beautiful,” Jean said, his forced brightness slipping. “That I could help the family... entertain his associates. Be charming.” His laugh held an edge of hysteria. “The board presentation, the investigation, suddenly everyone’s whispering about why one of the Saint-Clair heirs had to be kidnapped back from the Rohan Estate. Why he ran in the first place.” He straightened in Lucas’s arms. “Father’s friends are terrified of the scandal. No one’s going to... to touch me now. Henri made sure they understood what would happen if anyone tried to claim their old ‘privileges’ in the middle of the investigation.”

“That was generous of you, Henri,” said, studying his brother more closely. Something was wrong. Henri’s usual easy confidence was nowhere to be seen.

“The kid means a lot to Lucas. Lucas means a lot to you.” Henri’s voice was rough, exhausted. He rubbed at his neck, the movement causing his collar to gap. “Just wanted to do something right for once.”

The glimpse of dark marks ringing Henri’s throat stopped ’s breath. In two steps, he had Henri’s arm, the sleeve sliding up to reveal more bruises disappearing under his cuff.

“Everyone out.” ’s voice left no room for argument.

Lucas immediately swept Jean into his arms, earning a delighted squeal as Jean wrapped his arms around his neck. They disappeared through the door in a tangle of limbs and breathless kisses, Jean already whispering something in Lucas’s ear that made him walk faster.

Alain moved more deliberately, his eyes flickering between Henri’s collar and wrist. When his gaze met ’s, the message was clear: he’d seen the bruises, too. He closed the door behind him with a soft click.

Henri immediately moved away, putting ’s desk between them. Without his usual polish, the designer suits, the rakish grin, the carefully styled hair, he looked... young. Fragile. The shadows under his eyes spoke of sleepless nights, his usually immaculate appearance showing signs of strain. For the first time, let himself really look at his brother, see past the carefully crafted playboy facade to the exhaustion etched in every line of his body.

“You look like shit,” said quietly.

Henri laughed, the sound brittle. “Thanks. Your concern is touching.”

“Why were you at the Saint-Clair estate? Why haven’t you been answering your phone?” watched his brother fidget with his sleeve, trying to hide the bruises. “And don’t tell me it was all for Jean’s sake.”

Henri wouldn’t meet ’s eyes. Something in ’s tone must have cracked his defenses because when he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper. “You remember when La Sauvegarde took that hit? Back when you were finishing high school.”

“The market crash.” frowned, remembering the stress of that final year of high

school, when everything seemed to fall apart just as he prepared for college. “Father pulled us through somehow.”

“No.” Henri’s laugh was hollow, nothing like his usual practiced charm. “Olivier Saint-Clair pulled us through. Offered us an exclusive contract with his property insurance division. Still one of our biggest accounts.” He paused, fingers finding his collar again. “He didn’t do it out of the goodness of his heart.”

“What are you saying?”

“Marc was...” Henri swallowed, seeming to shrink in on himself. His words came slowly, as if each one hurt. “Marc was becoming a problem. Started with small animals—”

“What started with small animals?” ’s voice cut through Henri’s rambling, though he feared he knew the answer.

Henri seemed to collapse further into himself. “Torture.” The word fell like lead between them. “He—he liked to see how long they’d last.” His voice dropped to barely a whisper. “Then, his younger brothers. Olivier was worried he’d get out of hand. So he offered Father a deal, a generous insurance contract to save La Sauvegarde, in exchange for... for giving Marc someone to practice being human with.” His voice softened, and for a moment, saw his little brother at seven years old, desperate to please. “I was good at it too. Marc said I was the only one who saw him. Who didn’t judge him for being different.”

“Different?” The word tasted like acid in ’s mouth. His brother had been handed over to a budding psychopath—a monster who’d graduated from torturing animals to tormenting his own siblings.

The truth hit like a physical blow as memories realigned themselves: Henri’s

mysterious accidents over the years, the cocaine that had appeared in his teens—not rebellion, self-medication. All the signs he'd ignored, dismissed, choosing to believe in Henri's carefully constructed image of the carefree playboy. His baby brother, almost a decade younger, had been just seven years old, while had been consumed with college applications and preparing to take his place at La Sauvegarde...

"You were seven." The words came out like broken glass.

"Marc needed me." Henri's voice took on an almost tender note, but without his usual polished charm, it just sounded broken. "Still does. You don't understand. When I'm there, when I'm good, he can be so different. Sometimes he even..." His arms crossed protectively over his midsection, the gesture making him look impossibly young. "I just have to try harder. Not make him angry. And he was not happy that I wanted to bring Jean back to you. To Lucas. It took some convincing."

studied his brother's face, really seeing him perhaps for the first time in twenty years. The dark circles under his eyes weren't from late-night parties. The slight tremor in his hands wasn't from too much coffee. The careful way he held himself wasn't sophisticated poise but pain. How long had Henri been silently screaming while chose to see only the mask?

"What did you do?"

Henri smiled sadly at him. "Nothing I haven't done before. It's alright, though, I promise."

"Let me help you." took a step forward, his voice rough with desperation. "Please, Henri. We can get you away from him. I can protect you—"

"Protect me?" Henri's laugh was brittle. "Like you protected me before?" The words should have been accusatory, but they came out tired, matter-of-fact. "No, . This is

who I am now. This is what I'm good at."

"That's not true. You're my brother—"

"When was the last time you acted like it?" Henri's smile was painful to see. "No, Marc needs me. Really needs me. Nobody else has ever—" He cut himself off, shaking his head. "You don't understand. You can't."

"Then help me understand." 's hands clenched at his sides. "I know I've been a terrible brother. I know I failed you. But let me fix it. Let me help you now."

"Fix it?" Henri's voice went soft, almost gentle. "There's nothing to fix, . This isn't something you can throw money at or solve with your corporate connections. This is my life. Has been for twenty years."

"Henri..."

But Henri was already backing toward the door, trying to pull his usual charming smile back into place. It looked grotesque now that could see the pain behind it. "I should go. Marc's waiting back at the penthouse. He doesn't like it when I'm late." He swallowed. "Besides, he's been better lately. Really." He paused in the doorway, and for a moment, the mask slipped completely, showing raw fear. "Just keep Jean safe? Please? He deserves better than—" He gestured vaguely at himself. "This."

Then he was gone, leaving alone with the morning sun, the crystal decanter, and twenty years of blind failure to protect his little brother.

reached for his phone. His hands shook only slightly as he dialed. "Nika? Start digging into the Saint-Clairs. Everything. And Nika? I want them brought down."

The phone slipped from his fingers onto the desk. stared at the morning light spilling

across polished wood, his pulse thundering in his ears. Everything was unraveling. His father's legacy. His brother's life. Ellis still missing. He grabbed the crystal decanter, not bothering with a glass, and took a long swallow.

How had he missed it? All those years watching Henri play the careless playboy while Marc... while their own father... took another drink, his vision blurring at the edges. He'd been seventeen, already half-grown, when they'd effectively sold his little brother. He'd been so focused on following in Maximilien's footsteps, on being the perfect heir, he'd failed to see what that same legacy had cost his baby brother.

The decanter hit the desk with more force than intended. Morning or not, couldn't bring himself to care. Not when his world was crumbling around him, one revelation at a time.

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The cat hours were winding down, dawn creeping over Porte du Coeur's skyline as Lottie trudged toward home. Her feet ached, her makeup was probably a mess, and all she wanted was to fall into bed. Fifteen days. Fifteen days since Ellis disappeared, and a week since she'd started asking questions. At first, she'd been hopeful. Someone always knew something in their world, especially when she'd dropped Gabriel Rohan's name. But the days had dragged on with nothing but dead ends and false leads.

Maybe Ellis had been moved out of PDC, as some were saying. Maybe she'd waited too long to start asking around. Maybe—

“Hey, beautiful.”

Lottie didn't even break stride. “Not tonight, Gage.” Her last client had been particularly demanding, and she just wanted a hot shower and sleep.

“Aw, come on, baby. You're looking fine tonight.” His footsteps quickened to catch up with her. “Let me buy you breakfast.”

“I said no.” She kept walking, not bothering to look at him. “Go home.”

“Don't be like that. Been thinking about you all night.” He moved to block her path, that eager puppy smile on his face. “Just give me five minutes of your time.”

Lottie side-stepped him. “My time costs money, honey, and you can't afford it. Now fuck off.”

“Maybe we could work something out?” He fell into step beside her again. “I got information you might want. Trade you for a drink?”

“Jesus Christ, Gage.” She said, running a hand over her face. “I’m exhausted. I’m not in the mood for your games. Either say what you need to say or leave me the hell alone.”

His smile turned sly. “Found your missing boy.”

That stopped her cold. She turned, ready to tell him exactly what she thought of his bullshit, but the words died in her throat. Gage held up his phone, and there was Ellis: handcuffed, face bruised, eyes glazed.

“Where?” Her voice came out sharp.

“South Affie’s warehouse.” Gage’s grin made her skin crawl. “Just got back from there myself. Wanted to show you I found your boy.” He leaned closer, like they were sharing a secret. “See? I can be useful. Maybe now you’ll—”

Everyone knew the South African’s, Don Haldeman’s, warehouse. Everyone knew to stay the hell away unless they wanted to disappear.

“What were you doing there?” She cut him off, stomach turning at the implication.

Gage shrugged. “Getting my kicks.”

“With Ellis?” Her hands curled into fists.

Another shrug, that sly smile still playing on his lips. “Maybe we could discuss it over—”

Her knee connected with his groin before she could think better of it. He doubled over with a satisfying wheeze as she snatched his phone.

“Hey!” he gasped.

“Shut up.”

She was already running for the metro, her exhaustion forgotten. The warehouse district was a death trap, but Gabriel Rohan could call in the kind of backup that might stand a chance. And Gabriel would want to know immediately.

The pre-dawn streets of Lafayette Square were silent as she sprinted from the metro station a long half-hour later. She’d spent days carefully crafting contacts, asking just the right questions in just the right places. And all along, Ellis had been in that bastard’s warehouse. Her heels clicked against the pavement as she ran, each step fueled by fury and fear.

She pounded on the mansion’s door until it opened, revealing Jacob’s perfectly composed face. Lottie did a double-take—did the man ever sleep? Even at this ungodly hour, he looked like he’d stepped out of a butler catalog, not a wrinkle in sight.

“I need to see Gabriel.” She pushed past him into the foyer, not caring about etiquette or hour. “Now.”

“Ma’am, you can’t—”

A tall figure appeared at the top of the stairs. Dark hair, olive skin, built like a Greek god. Lottie’s brain supplied ‘Peter’ even as her mouth said, “Well, aren’t you a tall drink of water.”

The blush that crept up his neck was adorable, but his stance was pure security professional. “Miss, you weren’t invited—”

She held up the phone, Ellis’ battered face visible on the screen. Peter’s expression hardened.

“Jacob, wake Mr. Rohan. Now.” Peter gestured for Lottie to join him on the stairs. Jacob slipped past them on silent feet, practically vanishing into the shadows. Definitely supernatural, Lottie decided. No human moved that quietly at this hour. Or ever.

Peter escorted her to Gabriel’s study, his hand warm on her lower back. Any other time, she might have enjoyed that, but right now, her thoughts were on Ellis and what two weeks in that warehouse might mean. The image on the phone haunted her: his glazed eyes, the bruising, the way his wrists were rubbed raw from the cuffs...

Gabriel strode in, wearing nothing but sleep pants, his hair still mussed.

She handed Gabriel the phone without preamble. “A guy named Gage took that picture a few hours ago. Ellis is in Haldeman’s warehouse.” She watched Gabriel’s face darken. “The South Affie’s been branching out from his usual smuggling.”

Gabriel held up the phone to Lucas and Alain as they entered the study, both in varying states of undress. “We found him.”

Alain was already dialing. “Nika? We need that favor.” He listened for a moment. “Yes, now.”

“Where?” Nika’s voice crackled through the speaker.

“Haldeman’s warehouse,” Gabriel said, his voice carrying clearly to the phone. “The

South Affie has Ellis.”

“The Bratva won’t come cheap,” Nika replied. “They’ll want something in return.”

“I don’t care what it costs.” Gabriel’s voice was ice. “Get them.”

“I’ll make the call.” A pause. “Get dressed, all of you. We’re going on a raid.”

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Cold. Always so cold now, despite the sweat coating his skin.

Not his sweat. Someone else's. Many someone else's.

The metal bit into his raw wrists as shifted, trying to find a position where it hurt less. There isn't one.

His head pounds. His eyes burn. Every part of him aches in ways he doesn't want to name, doesn't want to remember.

He's so tired. So very tired of... everything.

Maybe if he just closes his eyes. Just... stops.

Stops fighting. Stops hoping. Stops... being.

That would be better, wouldn't it? Than this. Than becoming nothing but a body for strangers to use. Than remembering Gabriel's gentle hands only to feel rough ones instead.

Just sleep. Sleep and never wake up...

A crash somewhere beyond the ratty curtain.

Shouting. French and... something else? Russian? The sounds blur together, meaningless.

More crashes.

Gunfire.

Screaming.

tried to drag his mind back from the edge of oblivion. Tried to... to think.

He pulled against the cuffs weakly, attempting to sit up. To see past the shabby hospital curtains separating him from... from others. Others like him. He can hear them stirring, whimpering.

A voice.

A voice he knows.

But that's... that's not possible. The drugs. The drugs are making him hear things again. Making him hope again when hope is dead, and he should be too.

Gabriel steps into view.

No. No, it's just another hallucination. A cruel trick of his dying mind.

But this Gabriel looks... wrong. Shocked. Angry. So angry. Real Gabriel would never look so... so devastated.

Would he?

The hallucination moves closer, rattles the cuffs at ' wrists.

"Did you..." ' voice cracks, barely a whisper. "Did you really come?"

“Yes, mon petit oiseau.” Gentle fingers brush his cheek. “Mon coeur. Je suis là.”

A shadow appears. Nika has keys that click and scrape. Then his wrists are free.

Nika vanishes, shouting orders in English and Russian, but barely notices. Gabriel’s arms are around him, real and solid and warm. Then pulling back slightly as something soft—a blanket, Alain’s doing—wraps around him.

He’s being lifted. Cradled against Gabriel’s chest like something precious. Like something worth saving.

His head finds Gabriel’s shoulder as the world starts to fade again.

If this is his final hallucination before the darkness takes him... it’s a good one.

closes his eyes one last time.

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The steady beep of medical equipment pierced 's consciousness. He hadn't moved from his vigil beside the guest suite bed, one hand resting carefully between the IV lines and bruises that marked Ellis' pale arm. Dr. Nguyen's earlier words echoed in his mind: dehydration, malnutrition, infections, and various illegal substances that would take time to clear his system. But with proper care, she'd assured him, Ellis would recover.

Physically, at least.

The bourbon in his glass remained untouched. He couldn't tear his gaze from Ellis' face, peaceful now in medicated sleep. Every mark, every shadow beneath those closed eyes, every place where that already slim frame had grown gaunt fed the icy rage building in his chest.

#

Twenty-four hours earlier

#

Diesel fumes and stagnant water had saturated the abandoned warehouse in The Docks. fought to keep his expression neutral as the Bratva lieutenant's scarred face hardened at their explanation.

"Human trafficking?" The Russian's accent was thick with disgust. "We do not touch this trade."

“Criminals with hearts of gold?” The words slipped from ’s mouth before he could stop them, dry despite the tension crackling in the air.

Nika cut in, his tone matter-of-fact. “It’s too much hassle. Easier ways to make money.” The casual indifference in his voice made ’s skin crawl. Alain’s sharp elbow caught Nika in the ribs, and for just a moment, something cold and empty flickered behind Nika’s eyes before his usual predatory smile slid back into place.

Nika’s blank stare settled on Alain until the security chief shifted uncomfortably and added, “The Bratva do have a code. Loose as it may be.”

The lieutenant jabbed a thick finger at the map. “Here, our warehouse. Here, three blocks away, these idiots with their human cargo. And here,” his finger stabbed several more locations, “federal surveillance. Task force. They see this operation, they tear apart everything nearby. Don’t care what belongs to who.”

“We will help remove rats,” the lieutenant continued, switching the map for blueprints. “Three floors. Basement for the merchandise. Ground floor, guards, more cargo. Top floor, operations. “

’s hands clenched at his sides, his jaw tightening at the casual way they referred to human beings as ‘merchandise.’ Somewhere in that basement, Ellis was waiting. Suffering. His little bird reduced to inventory in their cold assessment. But five million dollars had bought their help, along with whatever dark promises Nika had made, and wasn’t about to jeopardize the rescue by objecting to their terminology. No one with any sense questioned the Bratva’s methods, not when you needed their particular expertise.

“Sooner done, sooner back to business,” the lieutenant concluded, folding the blueprints. “Your people are ready?”

Nika nodded, and they were moving.

The raid proceeded with unexpected precision. watched the Russians clear floors like a well-oiled machine. No wasted motion. No unnecessary violence. Though, he noted with grim satisfaction, that the traffickers received no gentle treatment.

But the basement...

He'd thought himself prepared.

The stench slammed into him first. Sweat, blood, human misery. Then the sounds. Whimpers, rattling chains, broken sobs. Row after row of hospital curtains, each concealing another body.

Chained. Naked. Eyes unseeing.

He forced the horror down. Compartmentalized. Find Ellis. Focus on Ellis.

"We'll need arrangements for the others," Alain said quietly at his shoulder.

"The shelters in Fourth Cat," Nika replied. "They have experience with trafficking victims, protocols for family notification, a few non-profits."

"We'll coordinate everything," Alain said, clapping Nika on the shoulder with slightly more force than necessary.

"Excuse me, but my billing rate for humanitarian work is—" Nika stopped mid-sentence, catching Alain's expression. He let out a long-suffering sigh. "Is... exactly zero dollars. Pro bono. How unexpectedly charitable of me." His smile showed too many teeth. "Though I should warn you, my pro bono work typically involves significantly more paperwork and considerably fewer positive outcomes for all

involved.”

“Nika.” Alain’s voice carried a warning.

“Fine. Shelters. Paperwork. Happy endings. Got it.”

barely registered their exchange, his focus drawn to the rows of curtained areas ahead. The dim lights cast sickly shadows through the thin fabric.

Then he saw him. Ellis’ skin was almost gray. Raw, bleeding wrists bound by metal restraints. Those usually bright eyes glazed with drugs and defeat.

“Did you...” Ellis’ voice emerged as barely a whisper, “Did you really come?”

“Yes, mon petit oiseau.” couldn’t stop his fingers from trembling as they brushed Ellis’ cheek. “Mon coeur. Je suis là.”

#

Present

#

A small sound of distress pulled from the memory. He leaned forward instantly, running gentle fingers through Ellis’ hair until the younger man settled again.

“Shhh, mon coeur,” he soothed. “You’re home now. You’re safe.”

He watched the shallow rise and fall of Ellis’ chest, studied the bruises already fading under regular applications of Smooth. The medical-grade cream was working—the abrasions on Ellis’ wrists were healing, the brutal marks on his skin slowly

diminishing—but not fast enough. Never fast enough.

The quiet click of the door announced Dr. Nguyen's arrival for her hourly check. He didn't look up from where his thumb traced careful circles on Ellis' palm, but he asked the question burning in his mind: "When will he wake?"

"Not yet." Her tone was gentle but firm. "The first course of treatment is aggressive. This new combination therapy has only been available for the last decade, and while its effectiveness is remarkable, the interaction between the compounds causes severe physical distress as they work. We need to flush the cocktail of drugs they used to keep him compliant from his system, and that process alone..." She paused, choosing her words carefully. "The withdrawal would be excruciating if he were conscious. Keeping him in a medically induced coma for this initial three-day course is kindest. We've barely finished day one."

He watched her check the IV drip rates with her usual efficiency, though her movements seemed gentler than her typical brisk manner. She turned to face him, her professional mask firmly in place.

"Along with the detox therapy, he's on an aggressive course of antibiotics and antivirals," she stated matter-of-factly. "Two weeks of forced contact with multiple unknown partners means we're treating him for every possible exposure. These medications need time to work through his system properly. We can't rush this,."

His jaw clenched. "And after?"

"Five more days of oral medication while awake. Then, we run another full panel. He was lucky," she added, checking Ellis' IV lines with practiced efficiency. "No surgical repairs were needed, but the trauma was still extensive. I'm prescribing complete bed rest for a minimum of one week after he wakes, followed by at least a month of minimal physical activity." Her dark eyes met his. "And I will be

monitoring his recovery closely.”

“Understood.” The word came out rougher than he intended.

Dr. Nguyen nodded, made a few notes on her tablet, and quietly left them alone.

turned back to Ellis, taking in how vulnerable he looked against the white sheets. The untouched bourbon forgotten, he took Ellis’ hand again, carefully, mindful of the healing skin.

He would find every person responsible for this. Would dismantle their operation piece by piece. Would ensure they suffered as Ellis had suffered, and then some.

But that was for later. For now, there was only this, Ellis’ cold fingers gradually warming in his grasp, the quiet beep of monitoring equipment, the knowledge that his petit oiseau was home and safe and his.

pressed a gentle kiss to Ellis’ palm. “Je suis là,” he whispered again. “Je serai toujours là.”

The room darkened gradually as evening crept in, broken only by the soft glow of medical monitors and a small lamp in the corner. A plate of food Annabelle had insisted on bringing sat mostly untouched on the side table, his fork occasionally pushing a piece of chicken from one side to the other.

The quiet knock at the door revealed Alain. His security chief entered silently, waiting until nodded before speaking.

“Twenty-three total, including Ellis.” Alain’s voice was soft but clear. “Two were already dead when we found them. Another didn’t make it to the hospital.”

's hand tightened fractionally around Ellis' before he forced himself to relax.

“The police are questioning survivors, but the Trafficking Survivor Advocates stepped in quickly. They're mediating, keeping the more zealous officers in check.” Alain moved to stand by the window, his reflection barely visible in the darkened glass. “Most victims were as heavily drugged as Ellis. The few coherent enough to speak only mentioned Russian rescuers.”

A slight smile touched Alain's lips. “The Bratva are already being hailed as heroes in the press. Word is they're trying to leverage this ‘humanitarian intervention’ to get federal surveillance moved from their territory. No idea how that will play out.”

He shifted, and recognized the posture that meant there was more.

“Nika and I secured rooms in Fourth Cat shelters for those without immediate family connections. Nika is...” Alain's smile widened slightly. “Well, he's complaining extensively about pro bono work, finding families, arranging travel home, dealing with people in general. But he's satisfied this should fulfill his annual pro bono requirements.”

A soft exhale that might have been a laugh. “He's also apparently appointed himself efficiency expert for the Survivor Advocates organization. They're overworked, underfunded, and while well-intentioned...” Alain shook his head with what looked suspiciously like fondness. “Nika's already reorganizing their entire management structure. They seem too relieved for the help to question his methods.”

Alain checked his watch, then looked pointedly at the untouched food tray beside . “You should try to rest. Dr. Nguyen said she'll keep him under for at least two more days.” When didn't respond, Alain added quietly, “I'll stay with him. He won't be alone.”

knew he should move, should attempt to sleep in something other than the chair he'd occupied for the past eighteen hours. But the thought of leaving Ellis, even with Alain's watchful presence...

“.” Alain's voice was firm but gentle. “You won't do him any good if you collapse. Four hours. That's all I'm asking.”

Reluctantly, nodded. He pressed a soft kiss to Ellis' palm before laying it carefully back on the bed.

The next three days blurred together in a cycle of quiet vigils and reluctant departures.

“Sir.” Jacob appeared at 's shoulder late the next night, as silent as ever. “The shower has been prepared, and fresh clothes laid out.”

“I'm fine—”

“And Annabelle has threatened to force-feed you herself if you don't eat a proper meal.” The butler's tone remained impeccable, but could have sworn he heard amusement. “Mr. Moreau has already offered to sit with Ellis.”

Lucas did indeed take the chair by Ellis' bed, already pulling out his tablet. “Go. Rest. You're no good to him exhausted.”

The pattern repeated. Alain's quiet presence while handled unavoidable calls. Jean curled in the bedside chair reading aloud from some novel, voice soft but steady. Dr. Nguyen's efficient visits, changing IV bags and noting Ellis' improving color with satisfaction.

On her final check before Ellis was due to wake, she handed a business card. “Dr.

Sarah Chen. She specializes in trauma recovery, particularly for survivors of trafficking. I've already briefed her on Ellis' case."

studied the card. "Thank you."

"She's excellent, . After the bed rest period—"

"I'll make sure he goes."

The morning Ellis was scheduled to wake, sat in his usual place, holding Ellis' hand. The bruises had faded significantly under repeated applications of Smooth, though the memory of them still made 's jaw clench.

A flutter of eyelashes. A slight increase in pressure against his fingers.

"Ellis?" leaned forward, heart pounding. "Mon coeur?"

Brown eyes opened slowly, confusion giving way to recognition. Then tears.

"Not...not a dream?" Ellis' voice was rough from disuse.

"No, petit oiseau." carefully shifted onto the bed, gathering Ellis into his arms as the younger man began to sob. "You're home. You're safe."

"I'm sorry," Ellis choked out, fingers twisting in 's shirt. "I'm so sorry, I tried to fight but they—"

"Shhh." pressed his lips to Ellis' temple. "None of this was your fault. None of it."

Ellis' grip tightened. "I thought...I thought I'd never see you again."

“I will always find you.” ’s voice was fierce. “Always. Je t’aime, mon coeur. And when you’re better?” He pulled back just enough to meet Ellis’ tearful gaze. “We’re taking that beautiful boat of yours around the world.”

A watery laugh escaped Ellis. “Promise?”

“Promise.” pulled him close again, feeling Ellis’ tears soak into his shirt. But these tears would heal, not harm. These tears meant Ellis was home, was safe, was his.

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leaned against one of the newly installed French doors in the breakfast room, still able to smell the fresh paint beneath the lingering aroma of morning coffee. The renovation had been rushed—money buying speed and discretion if not his neighbors' approval. Their complaints about “historical authenticity” and “property values” had fallen on deaf ears with him.

cared far more about the way sunlight now flooded the expanded space, about how the glass walls and doors brought the garden inside, letting Ellis feel connected to the outdoors even on days when leaving the house felt overwhelming.

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the lawn, but the day's heat still lingered in the air. The newly installed pool, another rushed to completion in just three weeks after Ellis had mentioned missing the water, sparkled in the sunlight. It had been worth every rushed permit, every expedited delivery, every contractor bonus to see Ellis slowly reclaiming his love of water in the safety of their home.

From his vantage point, he could see Ellis now, floating peacefully on his back in the crystal-clear water. Even with Aric's booming voice claiming absolute dominion over the nearby grill, Ellis seemed perfectly at ease, as if the water itself created a bubble of serenity around him. had noticed how Ellis seemed most like himself in the water, the tension easing from his shoulders, his smile coming more naturally. It was like watching his little bird find his wings again, one gentle lap at a time.

“I'm telling you,” Aric's voice carried across the garden, “if anyone else touches this grill, we're all eating charcoal.” He brandished his tongs at Peter, who had been eyeing the grill with clear skepticism. Aric snapped the tongs menacingly in his direction. “That means you, mountain man. Back away slowly.”

Peter scowled but retreated, his massive frame making the strategic withdrawal look almost comical. Lottie cackled from a lounge nearby.

“Don’t look at me,” Ellis laughed from the pool, the sound still rare enough to make’s heart catch, and raised his hands in a playful splash of surrender. “I know better than to challenge the grill master.”

The sight of Ellis relaxed, surrounded by friends, eased something in’s chest that had been tight since the rescue. His little bird was healing, slowly but surely. The nightmares still came, and crowds still made Ellis tense, but he was making progress. Being in the pool was a victory, though noted how Ellis kept glancing at Alain, positioned discretely by the garden wall with several other security personnel.

“You’re hovering,” Lucas remarked, appearing at’s side with two glasses of whiskey. He handed one to before following his gaze to where Jean had joined Ellis in the pool, practically draping himself across the pool’s edge to chat with Aric.

“Hard habit to break,” admitted, accepting the drink.

“How are the sessions with Dr. Chen going?”

“Better since we moved them here. Ellis is opening up more. Having familiar surroundings helps.” took a slow sip of his whiskey. “Has Jean agreed to see her yet?”

Lucas sighed, his eyes tracking his young lover’s movements. “Finally, yes. But actually getting him to commit to a start date...” He shook his head. “Every time we set one, he finds a reason to push it back. He’s determined to pretend the last three years never happened.”

nodded, watching as Lottie’s laugh rang out from across the garden. She was perched

comfortably in Peter's lap by the pool's edge, her hands dancing through the air as she spun what appeared to be an elaborate tale. Ellis had drifted closer to listen, his arms folded on the pool's edge, while Jean lazily commandeered one of the floating loungers nearby, occasionally kicking it closer when it started to drift too far from Lottie's story. Aric paused in his grilling duties, all of them captivated by her storytelling. Even Peter, despite his characteristically stoic expression, betrayed his amusement with the barest hint of a smirk.

The stoic mountain of a man looked utterly besotted, though only those who knew him well would recognize the signs. still couldn't quite figure out how that particular relationship worked, but he had to admit, they seemed good for each other. His investment in her singing career was already proving profitable—the woman had genuine talent once given the chance to showcase it.

"They've been good for both of them," Lucas observed quietly. "Lottie and Aric. Having friends who understand, but weren't there..." He trailed off, watching Jean trail his fingers through the water as he listened to Lottie's story. "It helps. Having that bridge between then and now."

studied Jean's relaxed posture in the floating lounger, so different from the defiant, frightened boy they'd first brought home. The sight only hardened his resolve. "Speaking of Jean," he said, keeping his voice carefully neutral, "Nika's team is still unraveling the investigation into his family. The scope is extensive."

Lucas's expression darkened. "Olivier Saint-Clair's connections to the South African?"

"Among other things. It goes deeper than we thought." took a slow sip of his whiskey, watching Nika prowl along the garden's edge, phone pressed to his ear. The lawyer had been working his contacts relentlessly, each new revelation darker than the last. "We'll need to handle it carefully. Henri..."

“Have you found any connection?” Lucas asked quietly. “Between Henri and the Saint-Clair operations?”

“No.” For the first time discussing Henri, smiled. “That’s the one bright spot in this mess. Everything we’ve uncovered suggests Henri was just another pawn in their game. One they used against both the company and me.” His smile hardened. “One I intend to take back.”

“How is he?”

“Working. But Marc’s influence...” trailed off, watching Nika approach Alain with that predatory smile that seemed to be his default expression. Alain steadfastly ignored him, though noted how his security chief’s posture changed subtly, becoming more alert. “I’m considering sending Henri to London for the EcoSphere acquisition. Get him some distance while we dismantle the Saint-Clairs’ empire.”

“Does he want distance?”

“No. But he needs it.” ’s grip tightened on his glass. “I failed to protect him once. I won’t make that mistake again, whether he likes it or not. Speaking of distance, the board meeting went well?”

Lucas’s smile was sharp. “Maximilien’s ban is official. Antoine Dufort has been encouraged to pursue other opportunities. The old guard is falling, one by one.” He paused, swirling his whiskey. “A few board members noted your absence, of course, but most understood. Even Miller admitted that being with Ellis during these first weeks of recovery was important.”

“Good.” watched as Jacob emerged from the house with another tray of food, Annabelle directing traffic from the kitchen door with her usual efficiency.

“Have you told him about the boat yet?”

shook his head. “Not yet. Dr. Chen says he’s making excellent progress in therapy, but leaving the manor is still difficult.” He paused, remembering Ellis’s panicked breathing after their one attempt to visit the grocery store. “The nightmares about being taken again are still frequent. He doesn’t feel safe beyond these walls yet.”

“So getting to the marina...”

“Will happen when he’s ready,” finished firmly. “The boat isn’t going anywhere. Neither are the keys. We have time.”

“He’ll get there,” Lucas assured him. “You both will.”

A burst of laughter drew their attention back to the pool area. Jean had said something that had Ellis doubled over, while Aric threatened them both with his tongs. The sight of Ellis so relaxed, so genuinely happy, made ’s chest tight in the best way.

“Yes,” he agreed softly. “We will.”

The sky was fading toward dusk, the first stars appearing in the east. Soon, the massive fireworks display had arranged would begin in Lafayette Park, perfectly visible from their garden. He’d made sure Ellis could enjoy the celebration without having to leave the safety of the manor grounds. That their neighbors would benefit from the display was merely a fortunate side effect, one that might even soften their ongoing complaints about the pool construction.

pushed off from the doorframe, deciding it was time to join his guests properly. As he crossed the garden, Ellis looked up and smiled, that real, unguarded smile that still took ’s breath away. Yes, they had survived the storm. Now it was time to learn how

to sail in calmer waters.

First, though, he had a Fourth of July celebration to host, a family to protect, and a little bird to keep safe within these walls until his confidence returned. The rest would come in its own time.

“Come save me from these two,” Ellis called as approached, though his eyes were bright with laughter. “They’re going to burn dinner arguing about marinades.”

“I never burn anything,” Aric protested with mock offense.

stepped into the shallow end of the pool, still in his slacks and dress shirt, ignoring Aric’s snort of amusement. “I trust your expertise completely,” he assured Aric solemnly as he scooped Ellis from the water, earning an approving nod from the self-proclaimed grill master and a surprised laugh from Ellis.

“Your clothes,” Ellis protested weakly, though he wrapped his arms around ’s neck as he was carried to one of the cushioned loungers.

“Just clothes,” murmured, settling them both onto the chair. Ellis immediately curled against his chest, water-warm skin soaking through ’s expensive shirt. pressed a soft kiss to his temple, then another when Ellis tilted his face up, seeking his lips. The kiss was gentle, unhurried.

As the sun set over Lafayette Square, held his little bird close and watched their makeshift family gather for the coming fireworks display. It wasn’t perfect—they all carried too many scars for perfect—but it was real. It was theirs. And for now, that was more than enough.

6 months later...

While winter crept into Porte du Coeur with its usual determination, Roatán basked in eternal summer. emerged from the crystal-clear Caribbean waters, board shorts clinging to his restored frame. Five months of recovery in PDC, followed by two months of sailing and proper meals, had rebuilt his strength, though Dr. Chen checked in via video calls twice weekly and Dr. Nguyen at least once a month.

His dive instructors chatted easily with him as they helped remove his tank, treating him like any other resort guest at the Barefoot Caye. After months of enduring PDC's endless scrutiny—the news cycles that had connected his disappearance and return to Gabriel's side with the sex trafficking bust in the Third Cat, the stares that mixed curiosity with pity or barely concealed contempt, the simple normalcy felt like a gift.

Here, they were just another pair of wealthy tourists enjoying the private resort's amenities. No whispers following him across restaurants, no sideways glances, no need to constantly remember he was a source of gossip and speculation.

Gabriel sat in his usual spot on the private stretch of beach, the resort's signature white canopy shading his lounge from the fierce afternoon sun. Even in the Caribbean heat, he looked perfectly composed—crisp white linen shirt unbuttoned just enough to be casual while still elegant, loose-fitting tan linen pants breaking perfectly over leather sandals that probably cost more than most people's entire beach wardrobes. His tablet rested easily in one hand.

thanked his instructors and padded across the sugary sand. Water traced paths down his chest and dripped from his hair, his blue board shorts hanging low on his hips as

he approached.

"How was the lesson?" Gabriel's eyes traced appreciatively over as he dropped onto the lounge beside him.

"Good. Jorge says I'm ready for—" ' words cut off in a yelp as Gabriel hauled him into his lap. "Gabriel! Your clothes—" squirmed, face heating as several nearby guests grinned at their display. He'd never quite get used to Gabriel's casual possessiveness in public.

The protest died against Gabriel's lips as he claimed a thorough kiss. melted into it despite his embarrassment at being manhandled so blatantly in front of others.

"Worried about my clothes again, petit oiseau?" Gabriel's whisper held wicked promise. "When we both know you'd happily bounce on my cock right here if I asked?" His teeth grazed ' ear. "In front of all these witnesses?"

' blush deepened, but he didn't deny it. Instead, he gestured at the tablet. "What were you reading?"

"Mm." Gabriel's thumb traced idle patterns on ' hip. "Henri's official resignation. He's taking a position with Michael Taylor's startup in London."

"Really?" shifted to see the email. "That's wonderful. He's finally getting away from Marc..."

"And our father," Gabriel added quietly. His arms tightened fractionally around . "Logan's handling the transition well. La Sauvegarde will survive without a Rohan as CFO."

Logan Scott had been Gabriel's COO for the past three years, a shrewd businessman from Boston who'd earned Gabriel's trust through competence and unwavering

loyalty. When Gabriel had announced his need for an extended leave, Logan had stepped up without hesitation, already familiar with running the company during Gabriel's shorter absences.

hummed in agreement, watching a sailboat catch the afternoon breeze. Their own Tanna 47 bobbed gently at the marina, gleaming white against the turquoise water. They'd left PDC in October, sailing her down from Lake Saint Louis, through the Mississippi, and into the Gulf, island-hopping their way south. She wasn't built for crossing oceans, but for exploring the Caribbean's hidden coves and secret beaches? Perfect.

"Three more months?" asked, though they'd discussed the timeline endlessly.

"Three more months," Gabriel confirmed. "Logan can handle CEO duties until April. Unless..." His lips brushed ' shoulder. "You'd rather stay longer?"

turned in Gabriel's lap to face him fully. "I love it here. But PDC is home." He touched Gabriel's face. "You're home."

Gabriel's response was another kiss, deeper this time. barely noticed the wolf-whistle from one of the passing dive instructors.

They had time. Time to heal, time to explore, time to simply be.

But for now, there was just this: and salt air, the gentle lap of waves, and Gabriel's arms holding him safe and loved beneath the endless Caribbean sky.

* * *