



Love Spell (Witches of London #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: Cursed to fall for Mr Wrong, London's sharpest trader discovers love is the ultimate insider tip.

In the bustling heart of London's financial district, Timo Volkov's life as a high-powered trader is about to be turned upside down.

When a chance encounter with a witch leaves him cursed to fall for the most unsuitable partner, Timo finds himself irresistibly drawn to Noah Cerveny, a shy junior employee from Alaska. It's a match that couldn't be more inconvenient — Noah is deeply closeted, still reeling from a traumatic past, and his visa is about to run out.

As Timo's cynical facade crumbles in the face of genuine attraction, Noah must not only stand up to his overbearing boss but also confront his own demons. With time running out and the stakes higher than those of any market trade, can these two polar opposites find a way to break the curse — or will they discover that sometimes love is the most powerful spell of all?

Love Spell is a bewitching gay romance that proves even in the world of high finance, the heart has its own magic.

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“How do you know the grooms?”

Had Timo missed the Londoners Shalt Get Eyebrow Piercings memo? Not that a mere memo could've made him mess with his features. They didn't need further embellishments.

He gave the questioner a once-over before deciding on his answer. Screamingly colourful fabrics, gemstone rings, female: uninteresting.

Timo said, “I almost married one of them.”

The triple row of eyebrow rings jumped, but Timo was already turning away, just as confident in his ability to murder a conversation as to spawn one.

Time was short with the ceremony over and this garden party reception underway.

He had to mingle while he still could, find out which men had arrived alone, which didn't want to leave alone, which ones weren't all hung up on heterosexuality, and he could tick off another social event.

Oh, and congratulate the newly married couple. Yeah, better do that now.

Shit, that guy in the black on black on black was striking.

He must be part of the group of oddities circulating around the other groom.

Unless Rhys had very much changed his own circles.

Perhaps it had been the near-death experience that gave Rhys a new lease on friends, or purely his lover's influence that meant astrology had apparently played a hand in choosing the first of September wedding date.

The garden party reception also gave nods towards nature and Norse gods in the flower arbours, relaxed dress code, and cake adorned in runes and sigils.

It all felt too Dungeons & Dragons, a bit juvenile to dwell on fantasy on your wedding day, but to each their own. Timo also prided himself on his ability to get along with anyone when he tried.

Speaking of fantasy and trying — he'd circle back to the man in black with those elfin cheekbones once he'd paid his respects.

That guy was in fact gazing at the newlyweds and perhaps about to move in the same direction.

If he walked up when Timo was already in line, Timo might get an introduction while also coming in first place.

Timo moved deftly with the flow of guests including friends, family, and coworkers, not a huge crowd, but a good fifty or sixty strong, and found himself before the grooms in short order.

“Congratulations.” Timo was well aware of how beautiful his own smile was.

It hadn't been cheap. Add the jawline that was fate's high card and the warmth in his eyes that could reassure a mother bear into letting him rock her cub to sleep.

“Rhys, Lars, that was the most beautiful vows ceremony I've ever attended.

Thank you so much for having me here.” He shook hands with both, noting the slightly bemused smile from Rhys, while Lars was the one totally at ease with his presence.

“Of course,” Lars said. “We’re glad to have you. You’re more than welcome to join us after this. Just a few friends and family going back home for drinks.”

It was as if the big guy, well named as he looked like a Viking with his ponytail and torc even in the tux, hadn’t the faintest idea that the man now shaking his hand had once nearly married the man Lars had just married.

If Timo was Charm with a capital C, Lars was SINCERITY with a capital everything.

All well and good, but didn’t he get boring?

If he couldn’t even get jealous over the ex-partner at his wedding, did he ever get worked up about anything? What did he do in bed? Purr at you?

“Thanks for being here, Tim,” Rhys said, polite, but with only a passing glance for Timo, the newlyweds all wrapped up in looking at one another. “How are you doing? I haven’t seen you in forever.”

Which is perfectly normal for your ex. God, was Rhys going as woo-woo as this lot with crystals around their necks and pride bracelets — probably made from vegan leather?

“Never been better,” Timo said. “Market’s solid, work always go-go-go, and I trounced that last marathon — run times are better than they’ve ever been. So much for turning forty, eh?”

Rhys’ eyes widened. “Did I miss a year or two?”

At the same time, Lars said, “You’re never forty.”

Timo grinned at him. “No. Just looming. But it’s never too early to start looking twenty-nine, right?”

The man in black had not approached. Instead, it was some old aunt or mum, grey-haired, dressed like Dame Judi Dench, pouncing on Rhys for a hug. Yes, an aunt. Timo remembered her. He’d never really met loads of family on the Turner side.

Since the man in black hadn’t moved — still seemed to be watching them, no, watching Lars — Timo hurried on to excuse himself with final best wishes for their future happiness.

There, wedding check and check. Next agenda? Date night.

He’d read somewhere that multitasking was a myth. That no one could do more than one thing at once because the brain didn’t work that way. Fine. Then he did one thing at a time. That didn’t mean he couldn’t fit twelve individual things into every sixty seconds.

Another hugger tackled the man in black. If hugging was from another memo, he was glad he’d missed that one, too.

Dame Judi needed to give this ... person fashion advice. And what was up with the partly shaved head thing on women? Not that she necessarily looked like someone who identified as a woman or a she, but going with a quick once-over and the lack of pronoun badge, he was left with little choice.

“Happy blue moon,” she told the man in black.

Timo missed whatever they said next, weaving through the crowd and half a dozen

conversations.

The man's scowl faded as he faced her, making Timo realise for the first time that he'd been scowling.

Was it his imagination or did that guy also have to tear his eyes away from Lars?

So, he had a thing for one of the grooms?

Had Timo found jealousy or resentment, or at least wistfulness after all?

Funny, he didn't look the sort to want to be purred at. But Rhys had fallen for the Viking, and Rhys had also fallen for Timo once, so Rhys obviously had good taste.

Timo dawdled with hors d'oeuvres, failing to eavesdrop as people, including the man in black and his confused friend, kept circulating through the sunny garden.

Anyone could be forgiven for being surprised to discover such a glorious, blooming, sprawling garden venue emerge on hotel grounds in southeast London.

Timo had long grown used to the idea of London's green spaces and these days took them for granted. He was spoiled for choice for his morning runs. Background pollution only made his lungs more resilient.

He was just wishing he could get his hands on another bite of the smoked salmon when he felt something hot trickle over his upper lip.

Instantly, Timo bent forward at the waist to save his flawless white shirtfront.

He had the handkerchief out of his pocket in another second and against his nose, but it was a slender thing, not meant for heavy use.

It would be soaked in a second and he'd end up with blood all over his fingers if he couldn't find something more.

“Hey!” Timo caught the attention of a passing server with a tray. “Please bring me a paper towel, quick, or I’ll be bleeding all over the party.”

“Bleeding? Do you need a doctor —?”

“Paper towel! Not an ambulance! Just get a paper towel!”

The man dashed into the hotel, tray and all, back in less than a minute with a handful of rough paper towels while Timo leaned on a brick wall below deep green ivy, pinching the bridge of his nose with one hand, pressing the wadded handkerchief against his nose with the other.

Fortunately, the party guests were too busy to notice him, and Rhys and Lars were swarmed with well-wishers. They were just the sorts to come over and pester Timo about his wellbeing if they'd spotted him, despite Rhys knowing that nosebleeds were simply a part of life for Timo.

He turned his charm back on to assure the worried server that he was perfectly all right, then accepted a glass of water before the man would leave him alone.

Not a bad bleed. Timo managed to get the thing to stop with another towel and a half soaked in scarlet, then cleaned up his fingers and face with water from the glass and the remaining two towels.

His shirt? Still spotless. Of course he had a spare in the car — always have a spare, but best not to need it.

Although the bleeds seemed to last an age for Timo, only a matter of minutes had

passed and he was pleased to discover the man in black was still there talking to his tattooed friend.

Patience was for second place, a.k.a. losers, but this time his inadvertent patience was paying off because the two started walking his way.

As they closed the distance, about to pass Timo on the stone path, he bunched the blood-stained paper and silk into a ball in his fist and refocused on their conversation. They were talking about ... ugh — gaming.

“You can’t just put a spell on anyone or anything to solve your problems,” Tattoos was saying.

“I never use spell work to solve my problems,” the man said. “I solve my problems. Magick can influence outcomes. That’s all.”

So they really were all into RPGs? Talking about their characters?

Still worth a shot. Wasn’t like Timo had to marry the guy. He hadn’t gamed since his early years visiting England when he’d been trying to improve his spoken English, but he remembered his way around some terminology.

“What system do you play?” Timo asked, smiling, meeting the man’s dark eyes with his own radiant ones. “D&D?”

The odd couple stared at him.

“Pardon?” Tattoos cocked her head.

“Sorry.” Timo chuckled, wishing he didn’t have that damn fistful of blood. “Eavesdropping. You were talking about gaming, right? You’re playing a wizard?”

Sorcerer?" To the man in black.

"We're talking about our lives," the man said coldly, no smile or meeting Timo halfway, just shy of a, "So fuck off." at the end.

Tattoos shot him an exasperated look. "Julian, really."

Julian's frown returned. He looked away and folded his arms. "You're right." He seemed to be addressing his friend. "It doesn't matter. The fact that who we are and what we do is invalidated by most people is totally irrelevant."

"Goddess, what is up with your pity-party today? What's going on?"

"Nothing. I need to congratulate the happy couple. Excuse —"

"Hang on," Timo cut in. "I'm still trying to figure out what we're talking about."

Julian rolled his eyes, landing on Timo. "I'm so sorry we failed to take you into account when planning our lives today."

"Julian. "

Timo bristled, stepping away from the wall to face Julian squarely. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"An excellent question," Tattoos snapped, and Timo felt a sudden warming for her.

Shoulders tense, Julian seemed to make himself look away this time, breaking some of the tension flowing between them.

"We weren't talking about our roleplaying group.

” His gaze flickered across Timo’s lips and reached his hand in a flash, noticing the bloody lump in Timo’s grasp.

“We’re pagans. I was referring to real spells I use in my day-to-day life. Magick for the real world. That’s all.”

Tattoos had relaxed, prepared to go on with him, making their way to the newlyweds. Julian also looked more resigned than annoyed.

Timo felt his own anger sharpen at receiving the once-over when he wasn’t at his best. Did he still have blood on his face? He should have walked away, let them go. All part of the rich tapestry, after all. People could believe whatever the hell they wanted.

Perhaps it was a feeling of being judged for a weakness he couldn’t help, or the irritation to discover this guy, Julian, was more interested in a married man than in Timo, that Timo was leaving here alone after all, or simply the tone Julian had used on him — a tone Timo wouldn’t even tolerate from goddamn royalty.

Timo didn’t bother to decide. He simply spoke. “You’re shitting me.”

Julian stopped. Tattoos grabbed his arm.

“Are you just messing with me?” Timo asked. “Or delusional? You can’t really believe you’re casting spells on people.”

Julian turned back to him, Tattoos talking to him all the time. “It doesn’t matter, Julian. Come on, no, Julian —”

He pulled his arm from her, facing Timo squarely, two feet away.

“You’re right, Manda. I would usually let it go.

” He stared into Timo’s eyes, sounding like someone bent on letting nothing go.

“The world is full of arseholes and we can’t plug them all.

But you’ve caught me on a bad day.” He took another step, nose to nose with Timo, who didn’t back down.

“So, instead, I’m going to give you the chance to be the bigger person and apologise.
”

“Apologise? For calling a spade a spade? Bullshit. If you honestly think you can do ‘magic’ —” Timo made air quotes, remembering late that one hand was full. “ — then prove it.”

Muscles tightened in Julian’s jaw, and Timo was sure he was about to be punched. “What?” His tone went flat, newly hushed.

Timo leaned in a bit. “I said prove it. Cast a spell.”

Silence fell between them, drowning out the garden.

Julian nodded once. “Fine.”

Behind Julian’s shoulder, Manda shut her eyes as if in pain.

Julian turned abruptly and walked away.

“That’s it? I blinked and missed it!” Timo called after him.

“Oh, you’ll see it.” Julian didn’t look around. “Give it a few days. You’ll fucking see it.”

They merged into the crowd.

Timo stalked out, tossing his blood-soaked fistful into the bin by the back door on his way. He didn’t have time to go to their damn afterparty anyway.

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Timo blazed through homework and calls to later time zones, got in a workout on the bike in the downstairs gym before dark while listening to an audiobook on double playback speed, gulped down a protein smoothie, showered, and hit the bars while the night was still young.

It wasn't as if it was difficult to find someone to bring home.

It would be stupid to chafe over that bastard in black when Timo hadn't even tried.

Timo could get anything he wanted when he tried.

What he didn't want was a delusional freak who belonged in a padded cell.

Now, tonight, at the club, he would try and succeed. Also simple.

He had a drink, then another. Sure, there were options, even good ones tonight. Always options. He could take his pick, not yet too old for the scene, looking younger than he was, fitter than nearly anyone in the place; of course he could take his pick.

So he did: Blond, hazel-eyed, easy laugh, eager to please, not remotely Timo's type, but more importantly light years away from a tall, dark, and handsome wizard.

He had another drink. All right. Move it along. He'd been in here, what? A couple hours? Back at the bar after mingling, Blondie cozied up close, ready to go at the least word from Timo. So just say the word.

What was the word?

Fuck it, where'd this headache come from?

Probably a Voodoo pin.

Timo laughed aloud.

Blondie paused.

What had he been talking about? Did it matter?

"Let's go." Timo stood abruptly, felt the dark room and flashing lights and whirl of bodies twist around him with the violence of a snapping bone, clutched the barstool, gasped, "Fucking hell —" and tried to remember the drinks he'd missed. This wasn't from three drinks.

Had he taken something? Hell no, he'd quit that shit.

A joint now and then to unwind, a few drinks, but he didn't do the hard stuff anymore.

That was the shit that had trashed his nose even though he'd never been a heavy user.

Timo had too much to get done to be a heavy user of anything but his own time.

"You okay?" Blondie had his arm.

"Fine, just felt a bit dizzy. I'm fine." Timo made his way through the throng and music for the bouncers, suddenly feeling frantic for what passed for fresh air in Soho.

He took it for granted that Blondie would follow, didn't even look around from gulping in deep lungfuls with his chin tipped back.

“Too bloody hot in there,” Timo said. “Stop a cab or I’ll get us an Uber if you don’t see one.” His hands moved as lightly as bricks trying to find his phone on the inside of his jacket.

“Sure.” Blondie stepped out to the curb while the nightly revelry of London swarmed past and traffic still surged after midnight. “I love your accent.” He grinned inanely back at Timo. “Where are you originally from?”

“You know what? Screw it. I’ll walk home.” Timo turned his back and started off almost at a jog.

“Whoa! Wait, what? Sorry, did I say something wrong?”

Timo kept walking while Blondie ran after him.

Had he said something wrong? Of course not.

Only pointed out that the one thing Timo had tried to achieve all his adult life and failed at — destroying his own accent — remained very much noticeable to everyone around him.

Even arseholes in clubs who’d exchanged only a few shouted remarks through the din.

“Hey, what is it? We don’t have to talk about anything like that, okay?”

Timo nodded, letting the guy fall into step beside him. No way in hell was he going to start talking about Russia, but he did like a good grovel.

They stumbled into a taxi, didn’t have to face the Tube full of drunks or wait on Uber, and Timo resigned himself to his company. The damn car was so hot.

Finally home in the penthouse, he opened windows, splashed water on his face at the kitchen sink when he should have been offering a drink to his uneasy guest, kept one eye closed against the intensifying pain behind it, and wondered vaguely if he had food poisoning.

Wouldn't he be sick by now? Nothing but a headache that was leaving him a bit disoriented, a bit hot under the collar.

Where would he even have picked up food poisoning? One bite of smoked salmon?

"Are you sure you're okay?" Blondie stood uncertainly by the counter, watching Timo, fiddling with his phone, glancing around the mood-lit penthouse and glittering skyline of London beyond the endless window glass.

The place wasn't huge. Timo didn't need huge.

But it felt huge with the open plan and all that glass, especially at night, when the whole of the city seemed to sprawl below his feet like the night sky to a god.

Of course he shouldn't go. Timo had been absently toying with the idea of him all day, like picking at a scab, hoping for a hookup at the wedding, but this was close enough. Now here he was, the culmination of a rather mediocre, unproductive day just begging to be saved by an enjoyable night.

Timo patted his own face with the towel, leaned back on the marble counter, and drummed his fingers on the edge.

Did he need a coffee? A painkiller? A joint?

Should he stick his fingers down his throat?

He wasn't much good at making himself vomit.

Objects down his throat rather agreed with him.

Too many drinks and just a touch of food poisoning?

That was probably it. Not enough to make him properly ill, only off-colour.

“Do you want a ...?” Timo rubbed his eyes. He'd been going to ask about a smoke, but marijuana wasn't tops for settling his stomach. His mum would have given him ginger tea and sent him to bed with a cool cloth over his eyes — but his mum had been dead for twenty years so there was that sorted.

He would feel better if he could go into work. Work always settled and focused him. Work was life and life was work. Not that Timo didn't know how to take time for his workouts and 10Ks. He had that balance in place, too.

But work came first. No use going into the office before 5:30 a.m. and that was hours away.

He did like to be first in. The whole team worked hard.

If they didn't, they didn't last. It was his team, his company, and the only thing he enjoyed more than discovering new talent to join his traders was firing the slackers and idiots who proved him wrong for having faith in them in the first place.

It did the whole office good to see Timo be the first to arrive in the morning and last to leave at night.

He couldn't always manage it. Marathon days and weddings and shit like that got in his way.

Still, Timo was pretty sure his reputation as a boss who was also the hardest worker in the office remained untarnished.

He had a couple of new guys who might need reminding.

Simon Brooks from Croydon, who was a hell of a lot smarter than his hometown implied, and that American fresh out of uni, Noah something.

Started with a C. Something Polish or Czech originally, wasn't it?

Ancestors would have been Eastern European immigrants to the States.

What the fuck was that kid's name? How could Timo forget a name?

He couldn't forget a name. He was the goddamn king of networking. He didn't forget names.

Noah was the newest junior on the team. He'd be assisting the more senior guys since they only had one PA right now.

Open email on his phone, find the CV. It was on the tip of his tongue.

Cervený! Noah Cervený. Of course. Meant "red" in Czech, but they'd have axed the character accents when they'd immigrated so perhaps it didn't really mean shit anymore.

He spotted new emails he had to check once he had that screen open.

What the fuck was wrong with Dave sending another email marked URGENT?

If it was urgent you picked up the bloody phone and made a bloody call.

If it wasn't, you texted, emailed, or waited to talk in person.

You didn't send an email and wave a flag over it proclaiming its urgency.

Damn, he wanted that man gone. There were days when being brilliant at the job just wasn't enough, days when you also had to be able to take a fucking memo or you were no use to anyone.

What he needed were more traders like Ranveer, brilliant at the job, lightning reflexes, always an eye on the ebb and flow of the market, and he could read a bloody memo. But Ranveers didn't grow on trees. Daves, apparently, did.

"Maybe I should go."

Timo glanced up from his phone. "Oh, sure." How long had Blondie been standing there staring at him? Why was he even here? "Do you need money for a cab?"

Blinking in apparent confusion, the guy shook his head. "I'm fine. I'll ... uh... see you around?" He let himself out.

Head still throbbing, oppressed with a skin-crawling sensation that he was supposed to be busy doing something at this moment, Timo strolled to the window.

He would have started pacing the room, making a figure eight with the leather sofa and kitchen island, but that needle pain blazed up again with a light behind his right eye and he winced.

Bed. A few hours of sleep, coffee, run, back to the office. All good.

He'd feel better in the morning.

Timo didn't feel better in the morning. He hardly even felt like Timo in the morning.

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“There’s that fucking whale again. I’m going to close that fucking trade ...”

“Just because you got wiped out last week doesn’t mean it’s the same guy.”

“It was that same fucking trade and it’s the same fucking guy, I know it.”

Noah fought for focus on his master screen, red and green lights flickering endlessly on his other three screens like a Christmas parody. His positions were doing okay. Not everything was moving in the right direction, but more of them were than not.

“Hey, Noah!”

Volatility was higher than he liked, though, the market feeling jagged and anxious.

But the latest CPI and retail data from the States had been solid — of course China wasn’t doing so hot but that had been priced in for months.

Almost no point trying to track this to any fundamentals, but Noah’s brain still tried to latch onto a pattern.

“Noah! We’re waiting on that coffee run. Holy shit, does he have in earplugs?” Walking up to him, Dave punched Noah’s shoulder. Hard. “What the fuck, mate?” Dave was laughing. “I’ve been talking to you. You can’t not hear at work.”

Noah yanked the foam earplugs out as he rounded on Dave, spinning his office chair, so furious his hands trembled. “I can hear you, Dave. I’ve been able to hear you.”

“So you’re choosing not to do anything about it? I don’t know which is worse.” Dave rubbed his brow in mock confusion.

“You better not let Timmy see you with those in,” Arthur said, all serious, while Dave thought of himself as a comedian. “He’ll lose his shit.”

“Yeah, well, one more for the list. If I don’t get the coffee, you two yell at me,” Noah tried, longing to tell both these assholes that he’d been wearing the earplugs at work on occasion for several days and no one had noticed or cared.

As terrifying as Timo was, working under him for the past seven weeks had already taught Noah that what the boss cared about wasn’t how his guys got the job done, it was that they got it done.

“If I get the coffee, Timo yells at me for not doing my job. I’m at my desk with my ears covered because I’m working .

I’m not trying to ignore you, Dave, I’m just trying to work. ” Which means ignoring you.

“And I’m telling you what work needs doing.” Dave leaned down into his face in the swivelled chair. “New bloke gets the coffee. It’s literally in the job description.”

Breathing hard, face and whole chest burning, Noah opened his mouth.

It’s not literally in the job description, it’s figuratively in the job description, you pompous, overbearing, power-hungry son of a bitch.

Noah shut his mouth, swallowed, shoved himself up from the chair, past a grinning Dave, past an eye-rolling Arthur, exasperated rather than amused by Noah’s stupidity, past other desks in the open-plan office with up to nine screens each, straight into his

boss coming around a corner and shouting back at someone over his shoulder.

“That’s what you said about Nigeria last time! Hello, Noah —” Timo, eye-catching as ever in one of his almost identical tailored suits, caught Noah’s arm as the two men narrowly avoided a collision. “Aren’t you supposed to be working?”

“I was just —”

“How will you get in the experience you wanted here before your visa runs out if you can’t spend two minutes in one go at your desk?”

“I’m sorry, I —”

“Look, Noah, I’m on your side.” Hand moved from arm to shoulder in a friendly squeeze.

Eyes fixed on Noah’s, Timo murmured confidentially, “Think I don’t know it’s hard work?

I get it. I’ve been in your shoes. We all have.

But the work comes first. Stalking around and avoiding your desk isn’t earning anyone a penny, is it? ” His smile was sublime.

Noah could take shouting. Since July, he’d learned to expect obscenities and raised voices and nerves stretched like bow strings along with the caffeine pills on desks and vulgar jokes and water-cooler gossip of his coworkers.

The biggest shouter of them all was Timo. Noah had grown up on the Alaska pipeline with his oil-engineer father, where long-bearded men still chewed tobacco, boasted about the racks on moose they’d shot, and dropped misogynistic comments with the

casual ease of asking the time.

He wasn't scared of a little rough talk or hard work.

He was scared of his boss. Because Timo didn't always yell.

Sometimes Timo was as sweet and understanding as an encouraging elder brother.

The man could be so charming, so sexy, then so damn explosive, working under his eye was more nerve-wracking than crossing thin ice on broken snowshoes.

Heart hammering, Noah glanced over his shoulder. No Dave or Arthur. Nothing but the backs of heads at trading terminals. They'd all heard "Timmy" coming and were working diligently. Just once, Noah was going to trick one of those jokers into saying that name in Timo's earshot. Once would be enough.

His proper name was Timofei Volkov, sounding like Tee-mo , not Tim-O , but trifling details like that didn't worry Dave or Arthur.

The trouble was that Dave said "Timmy" so often it was getting in Noah's head.

What if Noah slipped up one day and said it out loud under stress without thinking?

Worse than any stutter, at least that would resolve the many issues of his visa expiring now that school was over, losing his rental flat weeks ago, and how to handle his enigmatic boss.

He could only hope it would be a quick death.

Again, Noah swallowed. "I'm sorry. I'm just doing a coffee run. Back in five minutes."

“Haven’t you done that already?” Timo appeared shocked, although how that could be the case was beyond Noah.

“Of course I have.” Noah edged away. At least Timo took the hint and released his shoulder. “But that was all of forty minutes ago. I’ll be right back.”

“Spencer can get this one.” Timo still smiled at him, making Noah’s flesh crawl. “Why don’t you show me what you’ve got on?”

“Uh...?”

“Working on?” Finally, Timo’s smile wavered, as if he was even confusing himself.

What did he think Noah had going on? He was trading. Supposed to be trading. Supposed to be at his desk paying attention, practicing honing his reflexes on the few screens he was trusted with as a junior. You had to be at Timo’s level to get twelve screens all your own.

Was this some kind of test? If so, Noah couldn’t imagine the purpose or what Timo was hoping to uncover.

Something to chide him about? For all his eccentricities, most of Timo’s moods were not directed at Noah.

They’d seldom spoken to one another since the interview in which Timo had told him on the spot he was hired and hadn’t batted an eye when Noah said he could only do the work for three months because of his visa status.

In another business, Noah might have wondered at anyone being so careless about how long they could hold on to employees, but these were prop traders: pirates. These men came and went as easily as the tides in their frantic rat-race to make not only a

quick buck, but a quick few million.

Apparently, Noah wasn't the only one at a loss with the conversation. A painful silence settled between them in which Noah's mind raced for a way out and Timo blinked, scratched his eyebrow, and finally shook his head and turned away.

"Go on then. I think Spencer's on the phone."

Spencer, the PA, was indeed on the phone at his front desk by the door. But Timo wasn't usually troubled by such details.

Dazed but glad above all to escape, now relieved for the coffee run, Noah did as told.

Later, he was still behind and still frustrated, although of course keeping his mouth shut, while he had to sit through a meeting with Timo lecturing the team about performance and how to make the most of the three algos they'd just bought to help spot opportunities in the market.

Nothing special about that. Noah's mind was back on where he'd be sleeping next week by halfway through.

He'd been lucky to find a place that would take a month-to-month lease — he'd assumed. Only for the owner to yank the apartment out from under him to sell it. He was crashing at a friend's place from college until tomorrow when he had an Airbnb for five days. Then what?

He could pay for a place. He just couldn't find a place. A real monthly rental wasn't an option when he needed it for less than two months. Everything on Airbnb was booked up in chunks, with no way of finding a single place for so long in London last-minute.

That left living in a hotel, which he could also afford, but would be a massive chunk of cash when he desperately needed to save this money since he'd no idea where he was going to live or work once England spat him back out into the States.

Living in denial, he didn't even have a plane ticket yet.

How could he buy a ticket when he didn't know what city he was going to?

And how could he set up interviews when he didn't have a second to call his own and think and find jobs and send off cover letters in the first place?

His whole life since his interview with Timo had been work, find housing, work, move, work, find housing, work, work, and more work. Oh, yeah, and trying to learn the job.

He needed to pay out whatever it took to stay in a hotel so he could at least focus on what came next.

But could he even find a hotel room for that solid chunk of time at this point either?

No. He'd been looking. Yes, he'd set search-tool budget limits, but he wasn't going to spend ?300 a night on a hotel room for several weeks.

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He wouldn't spend that kind of money on a room even for a three-night luxury holiday.

He needed to save every cent right now. Even ?100 a night was too much.

So, London hotels were out. Not that many were available either, with random weekends and bank holidays booked out.

He'd looked up to ?200 per night and still found nothing.

He'd have to break it up — a hotel for a week or two, an Airbnb for a few days, then another hotel.

Sounded hellish, but he would sleep under his desk before spending through the nose just to stay in London until late October. Angela wanted to help, but her flat was already crammed with two roommates and Noah was on the couch while the girls wanted the use of their TV and living room.

Really, sleeping under his desk wasn't a terrible idea. Instead of invading her place again, just stuff his bags into the coat closet and curl up here.

He'd slept in old trappers' cabins on freezing wood floors in a sleeping bag with nothing but a caribou hide under him as a boy because his dad found such wholesome adventures stimulating.

He could handle a temperature-controlled office for a night or two.

None of the team had to know. He'd just make a point of being up and at his desk by the time they got in.

Being the first one in could only be a good thing in Timmy's eyes. Shit. Timofei, Timofei, Timofei.

Noah loved the Russian classics. This, with an interest in his own family heritage tracing back to Eastern Europe and southwest Russia, had instilled a fascination with the culture into him.

Too bad about their politics and leaders and wars and state of the world, yes, but Noah couldn't help his own interest shaped on the epics that he still devoured, or had up until this job.

When he'd first asked his new colleagues, purely making conversation, if Timo was Russian, Dave had gone on about much Timo loved to reminisce about the Motherland, and advised questions Noah should ask about his hometown and childhood to get Timo talking.

"He'll love you for it. You should hear him go on even when no one asks," Dave said seriously. "Timmy's always hard on new guys, but that's the best way to make him warm up to you — I guarantee it."

Just as gravely, Noah had thanked Dave for the tips. Then he'd carefully avoided mentioning any outside country, home countries, childhood, or even languages anywhere near Timo.

When Dave asked a few days later, with Arthur lurking behind, whether Noah had found a chance to talk to Timo about Russia, Noah had smiled and told Dave he'd been right, and thanks again for the help. He left the two looking from each other to Noah as he walked away.

Noah was new. Not stupid. The sooner everyone figured that out, the better.

“Noah?”

Noah looked up from the elongated oval meeting-room table to Timo’s eyes. He was smiling at Noah, again creeping Noah out.

Noah had just been asked to do something, to which there was only one possible answer with the whole room looking at him.

“Yes, absolutely,” Noah said.

“Brilliant.” Timo rubbed his hands together. “Back to work and I’ll see you all later.”

There was a hurried pushing back of chairs, Noah taken aback to discover the meeting was over.

He mentally scrolled on rapid rewind to review what he’d missed.

Timo hadn’t asked him to do something. He’d invited them somewhere.

Another male-bonding club or bike ride or conference or dinner.

They all seemed to be big on this kind of thing, the louder and higher energy the better.

Besides that, Timo was endlessly networking with industry insiders and trading buddies before, during, or after work.

Why weren’t they all utterly exhausted — knackered as they said here — after their work days? Noah had cottoned on pretty early in his own education that the industry

attracted extroverts. The whole culture was wildly male-dominated, macho, competitive, and didn't know the meaning of downtime.

It was the actual work that intrigued Noah, the trading, the math and fast thinking, the adrenaline rush of getting better and better, not only watching fortunes rise and fall, but playing a hand in the whole high-stakes game.

He was an outsider looking in, not only as the new guy, nor as a foreigner in London, but as a personality.

And he liked it that way. He'd been playing a role all his life, being who he needed to be to survive.

Next step was one better, not mere survival, but thriving.

Getting this experience on his résumé was exactly how he wanted to start.

Going out for drinks with the team after work, when he was supposed to be packing up his life at Angela's and promised he'd be cleared out tonight, was, apparently, the price one paid for greatness.

Stupid to say yes without realising what had been asked. Then again, he couldn't have said no. He might have got away with it if he'd had a really good excuse. An excuse like "I'm basically moving tonight, even if that only involves a few bags."

But there was no way he was going to start talking about his personal problems at work and become the butt of even more gossip and teasing, like being back in high school all over again.

He didn't mind the American jokes so much.

Hell, he didn't have a high opinion of the States either.

But the baby-talk was starting to grate on his nerves.

The last thing he needed was for the likes of Dave and Arthur to find out he'd lost his flat and been living on a friend's couch.

Having had to work, taking gap years, he wasn't even that young, just turning 26 before finishing college, but it was incredible how young a person could be made to feel by a few well-chosen comments about bottles and nappies by grown men who were so mature they said such things.

One more matter Noah couldn't bring up in all this team-building, back-slapping company: how much he hated beer.

Give him a cocktail, hard cider, bourbon on the rocks, even a glass of wine, but one glass was plenty for him, and one beer was one too many.

The drinking was part of the culture. He had to be bounced along in their wake just to be a good sport, to fit in, to make the grade and feel that team spirit.

There were about a dozen traders and a PA in the office.

Only seven to the party tonight. A few guys had managed to escape.

More likely a few guys legitimately couldn't be here.

Still, escape was all Noah could think of between wondering how to get rid of the foul liquid without actually having to taste it.

Could he switch glasses with someone? Pass two back and forth without notice so the

man on his left or right steadily drained the level in both?

Might get away with that if they were already drunk.

Just give it to someone and find a different drink. Not everything had to be a drama. Some people didn't like beer. So what?

Fit in. Fit in above all. Play your part.

Noah shut his eyes, held his breath, lifted the glass.

"So how've you been settling in?"

He jumped, sloshed foam over the rim and down his fingers.

"Settling in?" Noah couldn't help the impulse to shy away when he opened his eyes to discover his boss had just plopped down on the magically empty barstool beside him. Not only right there in his face, when he had the rest of his team to argue with and talk shop, but smiling again. Like a hyena.

"At work, the new job," Timo went on encouragingly, flashing white teeth. "How are you doing? Do you need anything?"

Need anything? What was going on? Was Timo high? Was this a setup? Had Dave told Timo something about Noah, real or invented, in a bid to get back at Noah for dodging the Russia bullet with the boss?

Noah was good at seeing patterns. For the life of him, though, he couldn't figure out this one.

He leaned away. "Yeah, it's good. Everything's good."

” From what Noah had observed of him all spring, Timo had an attention span about as long as a fingernail clipping for non-career-building social situations.

Work and his other driving passions like marathons took all his interest, leaving none for details like the wellbeing of juniors.

Smile and nod and Timo would move on to something else as quickly as a diving kingfisher.

“Are the other guys giving you a hard time?” Timo asked and Noah shivered. “I know how it is when you’re an outsider.”

Noah started very slowly to edge off his barstool away from Timo, as if sheer slowness could keep his actions from being noticed.

“Your team is great,” Noah said. “Everyone’s been really great.”

“I’m glad.” Move over, Cheshire Cat. “And how’s London? Been to any live shows? Music? Good meals? What do you do when you’re not at work?”

Half crouching away from him, oozing off the stool, beer pushed back on the bar, Noah weighed his options.

It was clear now: Timo had changed his meds, maybe a new prescription, or maybe stopped taking whatever it was that he was supposed to be on.

Obviously, there was nothing Noah could do about that.

He couldn’t even ask Timo about it because they weren’t friends or in any possible way the kind of people on prescription-regulation-discussing terms. Whatever was happening, with him launching into a kind of manic phase, for example, Noah just

had to be compassionate of his struggles and understanding of his challenges — and very far away.

“Excuse me. I ... uh... bathroom.” They said toilet here, not bathroom or restroom, but Noah could never get used to that. A toilet was a toilet. A bathroom was a room that housed a toilet. Although that wasn’t as confusing as torches being flashlights.

Noah all but ran for the back hallway, mind spinning with possible escapes.

He couldn’t literally climb out a window, could he?

Calm down, Cervený, enough melodrama. No, he’d already set the scene, hadn’t he?

Stay out of sight for several minutes, then return to the bar and say he was feeling ill and was going home.

Simple as that. Then Timo could switch his charm on some other victim.

He washed the stinking beer off his hand, then leaned against the wall behind the door, scrolling on his phone yet again in case he’s missed any cheap Airbnb rooms or flats not too far from work that just happened to be available for the next two months straight.

The door opened, prompting Noah to spring back in horror at sight of the suited figure. What the —?

No, it wasn’t Timo. Only Arthur, ambling casually to a urinal.

“Hiya.”

Great. Now he was going to stand here with Arthur?

Noah pocketed his phone and slowly moved for the door handle.

“Not so temporary after all, eh?” Arthur said to the ceiling.

Noah never understood some men’s propensity for conversation while taking a piss.

It had taken him years just to be able to force himself to pee while sharing a space like this with anyone else.

Air travel was hell when you had to hold it from door to door.

He still hated airport bathrooms more than anywhere else on Earth, those long rows, rush and stress and stink, possibly adding unfamiliar customs to the mix.

He’d rather have walked away, but, considering what waited on the other side of that door, chatting with a coworker who was currently holding his own dick ... sure. No big deal.

“What do you mean?” Noah asked.

“You know.” Arthur, who usually played straight man to Dave’s joker, actually cracked a smile. “Timo taking an interest in you all of a sudden. Think no one else noticed?”

“Wait, you know what that’s about?” Noah turned back to him.

“Sure I do. He’s impressed with the work you’ve been doing fresh out of uni. Your visa’s up in a few months, right?”

“Less than two, actually.”

Arthur zipped his fly. “Well, there you go. Running out of time and he’s suddenly taking an interest? Classic Timo. He wants to get to know you better, see if he thinks you’re worth keeping around and sponsoring for a proper work visa.”

“Does he?” Noah stared while Arthur washed his hands.

So it was genuine? Timo wasn’t altered but interested?

Would he really sponsor Noah? Could he? Could it be possible that Noah wouldn’t have to make that flight choice and pound the pavement for interviews and start all over again?

It didn’t have to be forever. Even an extra year in London would be incredible.

And Timo really thought his work was good?

The man with standards so high the moon must be scraping the bottom?

Noah hadn’t even known Timo noticed him around the office beyond the occasional reprimand or order.

So all this time — “Wait a minute ...” Noah folded his arms in front of his chest, facing Arthur while he yanked off a paper towel. “Dave put you up to this. Very funny.”

“Eh?”

“Please.” Noah snorted. “He must think I’m as dumb as a box of rocks.”

Arthur frowned at him. “What are you on about?”

“Telling me Timo thinks I’m great so I make a fool of myself and you all have a good laugh?” Noah jerked open the door with unnecessary force. “I wish somebody would apprise Dave of the fact that he’s not actually funny.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, mate.

” Arthur shook his head sadly as he followed Noah out into the dimly lit hall.

“But it’d be a shame to waste the chance to get on Timo’s good side when you can just because you think ...

what? That Dave wants you to get along with the boss? Is that a crime?”

Noah wanted to grab his head in both hands but resisted. Someone, somewhere, was playing him. He just knew it. But that didn’t mean it was Arthur. It might very well be Timo.

No matter who or what, Arthur had a point. When one paused to consider what were the best and worst things that could happen when someone like Timo abruptly decided you were a person of interest, best-case scenarios must wildly outweigh worst-case ones.

Arthur walked away. Noah followed as if through tar pits.

Go back, make his excuses, and flee? Go back to put all his cards on the table, even admit to Timo that he was terrified to leave London because he had nowhere to go and a work sponsor here would be life-changing?

Go back and play along, chat about college and work and London, playing it cool?

Or a fourth choice — he might still find a window to climb out of.

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“What’ll you have?” Timo asked, smiling, having passed Noah’s untouched beer down the bar, waiting eagerly for his return.

Timo should be with his team, now all settling at a table in the back, ordering food, all of it on Timo. He couldn’t be bothered to be the life of the party tonight, certainly couldn’t eat, not with these fire ants skipping across his skin.

He’d felt off all day after nightmares and failing to chase away the headache last night.

At least he’d slept, yet he didn’t feel like it.

Rattled and unfocused, thoughts circling back to Noah all day, ever since he’d run into his newest hire that morning.

What about Noah, though? It was as if he was trying to remember one of those dreams, something nagging, pressing, but what?

Now seeing him return to the bar, slide stiffly onto the barstool by Timo as if taking his place by a basket of snakes, inexplicably warmed Timo’s heart.

Not only warmed it; his heart was pounding to see Noah return to him.

No, only returning to the bar where Timo was, though it felt like returning to him, felt like Noah’s smile was just for him.

Wait, Noah hadn’t actually smiled. Timo couldn’t remember Noah ever smiling,

though he must have at the interview.

Must be a beautiful smile too. Just look at those serious hazel-green eyes and pursed lips, brow creased with tension begging to be conquered; begging for the warm, humorous, clever Noah inside to break free.

Timo could be that freedom for him, his light, his protector, his family to share all: the older man with his newly awarded and cherished UK citizenship after years of fighting for it now perfectly placed to mentor another immigrant who reminded him of his past self.

Except that Noah didn't remind Timo of himself.

Mere hours earlier Timo hadn't even been able to remember his surname.

Should Timo even be here? Still off-colour, but what choice did he have? If Timo couldn't get Noah drinking and drag personal information out of him, even walking away wouldn't help because Timo would keep on wondering and these fire ants would burn him up.

Noah glanced at his smile and quickly away as if Timo had said something rude. Too much? But it was so good to see him after a ten-minute absence that felt like hours, Timo couldn't help his own expression.

What the hell was going on?

“Um ... Aperol spritz?” Noah made the drink request sound like asking permission.

What an idiot. Grow some, you little — Just look at him: strong but elegant, youthful but sharp, like the wolf of Timo's surname's sake. Perfectly natural for Noah to be uneasy about drinks with the boss. Intimidating people was one of Timo's favourite

hobbies. He need only switch it off for Noah.

“Great choice,” Timo said, consciously softening his smile for Noah, flicking his fingers for the barman. “I should have asked you before. Not a beer drinker? It’s not my top pick either.”

“Oh?” From staring at rows of sparkling glasses behind the bar, Noah glanced at him. “Yeah, I really don’t care for beer.”

“That’s fine. You can speak up, you know?” Timo gripped his own right wrist with his left hand to stop himself reaching out to run the backs of his fingers along Noah’s jaw. “I welcome all preferences.”

“Oh ...”

“Aperol spritz, please. Two.”

The barman nodded and moved off.

“Even straights.” Timo rolled his eyes comically to the table with the rest of the team.

“Okay,” Noah said. “Look, uh, I’m sorry I wasn’t at my desk this morning when —”

“Noah, please ...” Timo chuckled. “Think nothing of it. We’re not here to talk about work.”

“We’re not?”

“Well, if you like?” Timo opened his hands to show his own agreeability.

Noah shook his head like a rat trapped in a maze.

“Tell me about yourself,” Timo tried. “University in New York, right? Then study abroad in London? No family over here?”

Drinks arrived and Noah seized his for a grateful sip.

“Right, just me. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to be over here.

” He finally met Timo’s eyes for more than a second.

“I’m learning so much and I love it here.

I know Londoners couldn’t sleep at night if they didn’t get in a few digs about what a cesspit London is every day.

For me, though, it’s incredible. I can’t believe how the history and architecture are so taken for granted here by most people.

I really would like to stay on if, you know, if you think that could become possible with a long-term work visa? ”

“What do you like to do here?”

“Work? I hope I’m doing a good job for you.”

Was work all the kid could think about?

Timo took a drink and tried again. “What about friends? Seeing anyone? Do you have a partner here?”

“I don’t have time for that. I like my job, I like the challenge and learning —”

Christ, this guy had a one-track mind. Enthusiasm of youth?

“There must have been someone? You had a full year of university here, right? I bet you had plenty of your fellows chasing after you. Guys? Girls?” Gentle smile, doing his best to be light, swirl the drink, not too much staring.

“No, actually. I was a few years older than my classmates and I always felt like we had different priorities.”

Well, your priorities are sure as hell wearing me out.

Timo just wanted to know if Noah was gay or straight, while anything in between would be perfectly acceptable, but he was starting to bank on ace at this point — and wouldn’t that be a massive letdown for the world at large? Although mostly for Timo.

He cleared his throat. “What’s your favourite thing to do in London?”

“Museums, walking in the parks to clear my head, people-watching. Stumbling into arcane bits and bobs of the city that I’ve never seen before and spending hours down the rabbit hole of researching some random statue or hidden building that turns out to have a fascinating history.

” Noah trailed off and shrugged while Timo was still waiting, still hoping for more, for even a shred of common ground.

Museums were boring. Why would you walk when you could run? People were too stupid and annoying to sit around and watch. Who had time to research bloody statues?

More importantly, he hadn’t mentioned such items as, say, musical theatre, Fashion Week, retail therapy, night life, social life, or parades. Not that such things had to

mean anything at all. But ... yeah ... Stereotypes sure were a time-saver.

After an uncomfortable pause, Noah asked tentatively, “How about you?”

“Me?”

“What do you ... you know? Like to do to unwind?”

Ah, he was interested! He cared about Timo: Timo had him now, right where he wanted Noah.

Buoyed on a warm glow of satisfaction, Timo smiled at him.

Wedding or partnership? Open or closed? And did he want kids?

Ugh, Timo hoped he didn't want kids. That seemed to be one of the “in” things these days, queers with kids, as if to prove a point.

Why anyone, anyone , would ever want a child attached to their lives forever was beyond Timo.

But if that was what Noah really wanted, well, one day?

No, he didn't just ... No.

What the fuck was happening? Forget food poisoning; was there a parasite burrowing in his brain?

A stroke? He'd heard people could have strokes and not know it.

He'd also heard a stroke could change your personality, that something could connect

or disconnect in the brain and suddenly your friends and family didn't recognise you.

Noah was waiting for him to answer, still tense, sipping his drink and glancing at Timo like someone unsure if the cat who'd climbed into his lap was a biter.

Museums and walks in the park? That was all? When Timo longed to know everything about this delicious specimen before him? Surely they could do better.

"Enough about me," Timo said. "What part of the States are you from?"

Noah blinked, eyes tracking left and right. "You haven't said anything about you."

"Then we're on the right track." Timo laughed. "New York?"

"No ..." Noah shifted in his seat. "I was in Brooklyn for college there before studying abroad. I'm from Alaska."

"Really? The one we sold you lot?"

Another eye-darting moment; bewildered, seeking escape, Timo wasn't sure. "Yeah ... Although it was a bit before my time, you know, being 1867 when Russia sold Alaska."

"For how much?"

"What?"

"You seem to know your history." Timo grinned. "Just wondering." He shrugged to show he was teasing, all light-hearted, no reason to look so terrified.

"Seven point two million dollars," Noah said.

Timo cocked his head. “No shit?”

“Yeah. I thought you didn’t — never mind.” He finished his drink at a gulp.

Absently flicking his fingers for the barman again, Timo couldn’t take his eyes off the elegant profile.

Noah’s hair, always combed back neatly at work, was starting to tumble around his temples.

His ears, which Timo had never noticed before, were small enough that Timo could easily get his mouth around one.

He’d never had a thing for ears before. Still, the idea was intriguing.

“I didn’t what?” Timo asked after a mental ear nibble.

“Nothing.”

“Talk about Russia?”

Noah cast him a darting glance and away. He cleared his throat.

“What do they say about me? No, never mind. Changing the subject again. What do you read? Have a favourite novel?”

Noah choked, only for Timo to realise he was, in fact, laughing, though it was a rigid, unwilling laugh. He finished with coughs as the barman reached them.

“You like sweet cocktails?” Timo prompted his coughing companion.

“Yeah, I guess I do.” Noah wiped the corner of one streaming eye with a knuckle.

“Couple of hurricanes,” Timo told the barman while Noah shook his head.

“No, I’m not really —”

But the man was already gone.

“... much of a drinker,” Noah mumbled. “Kind of strong, aren’t they?”

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“Hurricane?” Timo chuckled. “Not at all. You don’t have to finish if it’s too much.

” While Noah fished a tissue from his pocket, Timo again caught the bartender’s eye and made a double tipping motion with his own right hand.

The man nodded. Timo returned his smile to Noah. “Sorry, what was so funny?”

Noah stuffed the tissue away after dabbing his eyes. “Nothing.”

“No one likes a pathological liar, Noah.”

“What?”

“You keep saying somethings are nothings.” Timo tried for his sweetest smile, eyes hooded, showing Noah that it was okay not to take him seriously.

Instead of reassured, Noah only glanced around again, looking first to the table of his coworkers, then towards the door, all in a flicker before returning to Timo.

“All right, well, I thought Russia might be a sensitive subject, and coming off of that you ask what’s my favourite novel —”

“Russian?”

“Yeah —” This time Noah’s laugh was a breath, shaking his head again.

“I promise not to hold it against you if you promise not to hold it against me that my

favourite novel is American.”

“No shit?” He was actually smiling a bit, just a bit, but it was real — not panicky.

Timo grinned. “No shit.”

Eye contact in silence for three, four, five seconds before Noah looked away. A small cough. “I’ll tell you mine if you’ll tell me yours?” Another quick glance like an embarrassed schoolboy.

“Better yet, guess?”

“Oh yeah? You really think you can guess my favourite novel?”

“You first,” Timo said.

“That’s not fair. I mean, how many famous-enough-to-be-translated-into-English Russian novels are even around? Yet your American pick could be one among tens of millions.”

“Okay, I’ll go first —”

“No, I’ll have a guess.” Noah looked at him, frowning, while Timo kept grinning, having moved on from ears and imagining the taste of rum and passion fruit soon to be on Noah’s tongue.

Abruptly, Noah looked away. “You better go first.”

“What were you going to say?”

“Nothing.”

Pause.

Timo arched an eyebrow.

Noah laughed. “Oh, I don’t know. The Talented Mr. Ripley maybe?”

“ American Psycho .”

“No ... That’s what I was going to say but ... you know.”

“What do I know?”

“That you can’t suggest to your boss that American Psycho might be his favourite book?”

“We’re talking as friends, Noah.”

Noah’s bewildered expression was back in place as their new drinks arrived.

Timo couldn’t decide which was more adorable: scared or confused?

Then there was that smile, in those few fleeting moments when he laughed, when he really smiled and it was like a quick slap right in the testosterone.

Would Noah hold it against him if he reached over and —?

“To getting to know one another.” Timo lifted his glass.

Noah shyly touched glasses with him, drank, and gasped. “Whoa, that’s ...” He coughed. “Strong.”

“Delicious, you mean? Like I said, don’t feel like you have to finish it. But you’re not driving; night’s young; you should be enjoying yourself, Noah.”

“Should I?” His cheeks reddened. “Sorry —” Clearing his throat. “So, uh, you were going to tell me my favourite novel.”

Was Noah or wasn’t he? That was the question.

Before those five seconds of eye contact, Timo had been infuriatingly sure he was investing attention in not only a man too young for him, not only in his employ, not only as boring as a sliced baguette but also, worst horror of all, straight.

Then the eye contact. Then the laugh. Then the flush because of an entirely unembarrassing bit of impulse speech.

Maybe he was, maybe he wasn’t. Maybe Alaska was almost as unforgiving as Russia when it came to anything infringing upon the institution of heteronormativity.

But Timo wanted Noah to be who he needed so much that he hardly hesitated in his guess.

“ Anna Karenina, ” Timo said.

Noah’s head snapped back half an inch, a reflex hardly bigger than a micro-expression, less noticeable than a sudden chill.

“How did you know that?” His voice was so hushed Timo barely caught the words in the increasingly loud crowd circulating around bar and tables. “I know there aren’t loads to choose from, but even so ...?”

Timo smiled dreamily into his eyes, his own head on one side. It wasn’t that straight

men couldn't go starry-eyed over inane romantic tragedies as much as the next queer, but Timo wasn't about to second guess his own triumph.

Noah glanced to his left, as if he thought something was behind his head that had captured Timo's attention. "Are you —?"

"Hmm?"

"Nothing."

"Naturally."

Noah winced, took a proper drink. "Should we, you know, join the table?"

"Why?"

"Because we're here with a group?"

Were they? The boys didn't care as long as the booze kept flowing.

"What's your favourite museum in the city?" Timo asked.

"Oh, the Museum of London maybe? No, the Sloane — weird place. Historical bits and bobs exemplified."

"I've never been. Care to show me around on Saturday?"

Timo wondered if they called that the reindeer-in-the-headlights look in Alaska.

Noah took another drink. Nice that he was getting into the spirit of the thing at last. If he drained that, surely he would just fess up and express his own attraction to Timo

and there'd be no more of this treading-lightly bullshit.

“Are —? Like ... okay ...” Noah scratched absently at his throat as he gazed along glasses behind the bar. “What are we talking about?”

“Enjoyable local activities?”

“No, I mean, what are we really talking about?”

So alcohol was giving the kid a “smart mouth,” as they said on American sitcoms? No chance he'd have said that half an hour ago. Was he a cheeky drunk? Damn, Timo hoped so — sweating just thinking about it.

Timo ran one fingertip around the rim of his glass. “What do you want to be talking about, Noah?”

“Work.”

Well, that had backfired.

Timo arched a brow.

“Haven't we been talking about work?” Noah asked.

“Because, if I could stay on — you do know I want to stay, right? It's just the visa situation.

In October I'm done here without a work sponsor.

I didn't think you were interested, but if you are it's something we need to start working on now, and probably with an attorney.

Not last-minute.” Another drink. He’d drained more than half his glass and a gut-punch of rum.

“I know I’ve just started, but I really feel like I could fit in here and make a go of this.

Your team is incredible — even the assholes among them.

Shit, sorry, wow ...” He rubbed his brow with the back of one wrist. “Sorry.”

“Noah?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you run?”

“Run?”

“Exercise? We could go for a run before the museum on Saturday. Any idea if they open at nine or ten?”

“You know what? I better go. This is not ... yeah.” Noah downed the rest of the hurricane like a milkshake. “Thanks for the drinks and whatever this has been. See you in the morning.” He stood, one hand on the bar.

“Tomorrow’s not Saturday.”

“At work. I’ll see you tomorrow at work.”

“Right.”

Noah leaned into his face. “Because I work for you . So whatever you’re doing,

hitting on the juniors, please stop.”

“Have I made you uncomfortable?”

“Yes!”

“That wasn’t my intention. I usually mean it when I do that.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Let’s step outside.”

“I can find my own way.”

Timo followed him, not to the front door, but veering off to the passage towards the toilets. Noah leaned against the wall, arm raised to it and brow on the forearm.

“Sorry,” Noah mumbled, eyes closed. “I drank that too fast. What do they put in those things? Lighter fluid?”

Timo rested a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Why don’t we sit back —”

“Get your hands off me.” Noah jerked away, stumbled, and leaned his back into the wall instead. Then, just as quickly, “Sorry, again. Yeah, I probably should sit down. Or go home.”

“I’m happy to take you home.”

Noah snorted. “I bet you are.”

“You’d rather I didn’t?”

“See, we’re still talking about different things and you’re still not talking about what you’re saying.

” Noah displayed a palm before Timo’s nose in a classic stop sign, making Timo’s pulse race with the audacity of the move and his own impulse to respond by catching the hand, swallowing the fingers, perhaps licking sweat from the creases.

Timo stepped closer, so Noah’s pointlessly raised hand was almost resting on Timo’s shoulder, facing Noah very close with his back against the wall.

“Noah?” Timo lowered his voice, gazing into Noah’s eyes, this hooded smile now of a seductive rather than gentle kind. “You can’t tell me you feel nothing.”

“What part of this equation don’t you understand? I. Work. For. You. You can’t invite me on a date. You can’t ask if I’m gay.”

“Did I?”

“The museum! The ... whatever you just said! Stop it!” Noah’s hand moved to Timo’s chest, hot and solid, touching Timo squarely with all five fingers and palm, through no more than shirtfront and tie.

In a flash, Timo could imagine Noah’s hand closing around that tie, yanking Timo close, burning mouths connecting through rum and passion fruit and sweat.

Timo would step in, pulled in tight, and Noah would feel the unyielding bulge in Timo’s trousers and bring his other hand into action.

Instead, Noah’s hand landed on Timo’s chest, fingers splayed, shoving him back with a sharp, “ I’m not gay. Which is totally irrelevant since, no matter who I’m into, it’s never psychopaths!”

Noah pushed past him and almost ran for the front doors, Timo watching him go without moving to follow, mindful of the current shape of his own trousers.

Well, as first dates went, Timo had experienced much worse. Safe to call that a solid start.

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For the first time in his life, Noah thought of calling in sick when he wasn't sick.

He wasn't the kind of person who called in sick even when he was if he could possibly still get the work done.

Going into work on Tuesday morning, though, head aching and mouth dry on the Tube with a mild hangover, his pulse raced before he was anywhere near the office.

By the time he used his passkey on the elevator, his breaths were also rapid.

What was he going to say or do? Ignore it. Totally ignore it and hope that Timo's meds were sorted and last evening had been a bad dream.

The trouble with ignoring Timo was that it was as likely as ignoring an earthquake.

He stalked around the office like a panther.

He cursed traders he disagreed with. He leaned over your shoulder to point out things you'd missed on your screens or dropped into your chair while you were on your feet so you couldn't have it back until he moved on.

The man was a menace even on a good day and even when he mostly ignored Noah. But now? Now ... what?

Shit — Noah should have called in.

His palms were soaked in sweat by the time he reached his desk and veered off,

needing the kitchen first — wash hands, rinse his cottonmouth, take a painkiller for his head, see who was already in and ready for the coffee run.

Maybe Timo wasn't even here yet. He was always running or biking in company, unpredictable, often the first in but occasionally the last. Or maybe he was home in bed sick?

His own insanity having taken its toll? Or he might have been out for bike laps this morning and been run over by a black cab at Hyde Park Corner — such a dangerous place.

Yes, that could happen. It didn't make Noah a bad person to recognise that anything could happen. Not as if he was silently cheering for the cab. It just, well, it could happen. Of course Noah would respectfully attend the funeral.

“So then he gets up —”

“Who?”

“Noah.”

Just outside the kitchen, Noah froze. Dave and Arthur?

“Does a runner?”

“But Timmy went after him.”

“You bet he did.”

No, it was Dave and Chandler, that prick with the fuchsia ties, newly a senior, built like Jack in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* .

Chandler was the kind of condescending, elitist, gay man who tarnished the whole identity.

The kind of person who'd vote Tory without a qualm if it suited his financial interests.

Noah would take a crude, slap-you-on-the-back, thinks-he's-funny frat boy like Dave any day over a snake in the grass like Chandler.

Noah had been relieved Chandler couldn't be at the boy's night yesterday. Now, though, it meant Dave had the satisfaction of recounting all the sordid details.

"Making a dash for the toilets," Dave went on.

"And it wasn't for a piss. How long were they out of sight?"

"More than five minutes. I'd say close to ten."

Chandler whistled softly.

"Right?" Dave laughed.

"So who was doing what on next sighting? Red faces? Tucking in shirttails?"

"Noah ran from the hall and beelined it out the front door. Jacket buttoned, but face like a boiled lobster."

"Dusty knees? Scuffed?"

"Damn, I didn't notice. Ask Arthur. He watches for that kind of thing. He's the one who figured out Timmy was fucking AAM's solicitor."

That acronym apparently stood for Anunnaki Asset Management, and rumour had it their boss was into Ancient Aliens kind of stuff, not real archaeology.

“Everyone knew that.” Chandler’s tone was dismissive, exasperated with Dave’s obtuseness, as Chandler was perpetually exasperated by everyone’s obtuseness. “Even AAM eventually, or he’d still be around. Then what happened? Timo follows him?”

“Nope. Took a few minutes before Timmy emerged and joined us at the table.”

“Looking?”

“Normal. Neat as a pin.”

“Acting like nothing happened?”

“No ... That was the funny thing. He kept looking at the door. Didn’t say a lot, had another drink, but I don’t think he ate anything. Maybe a few bites of appetisers.”

“You don’t say? That almost sounds ... serious.” He drew out the word with malicious relish.

“That’s what Arthur said. I’d say it was a simple case of blue balls.”

“When’s the next family night? I’ll be sure not to miss it.” Chandler’s tone held the silken swish of a tiger crouching in long grass.

“Friday probably — but do you think the Yank will show?”

“Why not?”

“I’m telling you, he didn’t look happy. About sprinted out of there. Not all guys want to irrigate their tonsils with another guy’s dick, you know.”

“You’re so old-fashioned, Dave. That kid will want the attention, you mark my words. Does it matter which way he swings if he’s serious about this game? And what simpler way is there into any business than sleeping with the boss?”

Dave huffed out a breath. “Better him than me. When are we going to get some women in this business?”

“Because a sexual harassment suit would help your trading prospects?”

“Sometimes I think you buggers have all the fun.”

“Sometimes you’re right.”

“What I want to know is where did this come from?”

“What?”

“Timmy all over Noah — as of yesterday. Rivals? Sure. Opposition’s solicitor? No problem. But a new junior? Who knew old Timmy would fuck anyone with net assets of under ten million?”

“Standards are slipping everywhere these days,” Chandler said contemptuously. “Perhaps he started having a thing for Yanks after the last New York trip and he’s fresh out of other options for a baseball fan with a stupid accent.”

“I can’t wait to ask Noah how it went talking about his career advancement with Timmy yesterday.” Dave was laughing. “That’s what Arthur told him Timmy was interested in.”

“No one’s that gullible, surely — not even an American.”

“Don’t you bet on it. The look on his face? I wish we had a video. We kept watching him at the bar while Timmy was laying on the charm.”

“Oh God ...” Chandler groaned.

“Fucking priceless.” Dave’s voice was moving as he approached the open door. “Noah looked like a nun waking up in Las Vegas. I just wish I’d thought to take a look at those knees.”

Dave was still laughing as he stepped through the doorway into Noah.

“How about a closeup now, Dave?” Noah said and Dave’s eyes widened. He had no time for any more response at the sight of Noah facing him before Noah’s knee made contact with his balls and Dave hit the floor screaming — like a nun waking up in Las Vegas.

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Was he really going to let this beat him? Was he going to throw away this big break, maximising the time he had left in London, by letting bullies win?

It was just about when he'd tucked his lucky cactus into the box that he'd changed his mind. He hadn't come all this way to quit before squeezing every ounce of experience and every cent of commission and profit from London before the sand ran out in his hourglass.

If he left now, where was he going? Back to his mouldy little Airbnb room in Croydon for the next five days while he booked a flight and another room wherever he was going? Just so he could run away?

He could do better.

Except that he probably couldn't because he'd physically assaulted a coworker in a foreign country.

Jail time seemed unlikely, but free choice about exactly what he did next and when and how also seemed unlikely.

Deportation might be just the start of a long list of headaches, from legal fees to a criminal record to a lifetime ban from the United Kingdom.

Noah gritted his teeth, palms rammed painfully against his eye sockets while he suppressed a scream.

He'd been at his desk, not working for half an hour at least. Everyone was in now. No

one had asked him to get coffee. No one was shouting. The voices were murmurs and chortles, either focused on their work or passing along the gossip.

Dave's voice didn't feature. Neither did Timo's. Could they really still be in Timo's private office? Or had Dave got his wish of proving what critical condition he was in by ringing for an ambulance? Hobbled down there with one arm around Arthur's shoulders while he gasped out his last requests?

That was how he'd been acting when Timo, Arthur, Ranveer, and Maksim had descended upon the three of them in the kitchen doorway. Chandler thought the whole thing was funny, but Chandler always thought other people's pain was funny.

Maksim had actually rolled his eyes when he'd understood what happened, muttered, "What a baby," in that thick accent, and went back to work. No one else was laughing, though.

Noah did think it was a bit much when Dave barfed up his coffee.

Hadn't he ever been kicked in the balls?

Noah had been pounded until his ribs broke and he'd nearly lost an eye, but had he thrown up?

No. He'd crawled home because you either got yourself home or you froze to death. Maksim had a point.

Maybe Noah could present said point at his police interview.

What would Dave tell Timo? "Just saying good morning to Chandler, grabbing a protein bar, and Noah shows up in the doorway out of nowhere and wham! " That'd be Dave all over.

Noah didn't care anymore what Timo thought of him. Dave could say whatever the hell he wanted. But the police? Deportation? A lifetime ban once Dave filed charges?

For what? For one moment of losing his temper? Ultimately, he'd handed the win to Dave on a silver platter. Whatever happened now, it was Noah's own doing.

Slowly, stiffly, he stood, teeth aching from his clenched jaw, eyes burning and vision spotty from the pressure on his face.

He shook out his hands, worked his jaw, sucked in a breath, straightened suit and tie, rolled his shoulders, and marched down to Timo's office.

* * *

"Come in," Timo called in answer to the knock on the door. "Hello, Noah. I hoped you might call on us. Please, have a seat."

Timo's palatial, windowed office accommodated not only his twelve screens, all begging for attention with global headlines scrolling ever downwards, chat windows, Bloomberg Surveillance running in a small window to the side, endless rows of flickering green and red numbers, but three extra chairs to host guests.

Temporary guests. Timo had made sure they were wickedly uncomfortable, clean line wooden affairs of the kind that looked nice for modern interior design.

It wasn't often that those chairs let him down in the form of having to keep company with the likes of Dave for this long.

Dave had, in fact, spent the first ten minutes in here on his knees and doubled over, sure he needed a hospital.

Best to start early making statements that might later be needed in any legal or medical capacity?

If anyone ever rear-ended Dave's car, he'd probably stagger from the vehicle screaming about the burns and crushed bones.

Funny, Timo was the one who wanted Noah to touch his balls, yet here they were.

Noah did not accept the invitation to sit. Looking at Timo instead of Dave, who still sat rather folded in on himself, glaring at Noah, he said, "I just wanted to talk to Dave."

"By all means." Smiling at him, Timo extended a hand to Dave, palm up, as if serving the conversation to Noah.

Noah started to speak, changed his mind, took a chair after all, turning it to face Dave.

"I'm really sorry, Dave." His tone was stiff, struggling not to be, to make this real.

He was a poor actor, but you had to give the kid points for trying.

"That was completely out of line and unacceptable behaviour for any situation, much less in a workplace. I'm really, really sorry I struck you. "

Having just come down from a long rant to Timo about what a useless, scheming, homicidal little son of a bitch Noah was, Dave, for once, seemed at a bit of a loss.

"Are you okay?" Noah asked. "I've got ibuprofen, and I can run down to Boots to get anything you need."

Dave mumbled about already having such things in the kitchen as Timo became aware of the hot fluid trickling over his own upper lip.

Honed from years of practice, he was sitting forward in a flash, one bright crimson drop hitting the floor, but never his clothes, and the handkerchief was in place against his nose in two seconds flat.

“Excuse me,” Timo said thickly as he scrambled up, one hand and silk over his nose.

The two men in the designer chairs only glanced at him. Timo’s nosebleeds were hardly headline news.

As he stood with his head in the sink a minute later, breathing through his mouth, he wondered if he should tell Noah that he’d just managed to talk Dave down from threats to file charges. That Dave had, in fact, said he’d let it go if Noah apologised.

Why spoil the day? No matter how much Timo wanted to be the hero in Noah’s eyes — and yes, Timo was the one who’d talked Dave down, not Noah, not Dave’s natural magnanimity, definitely Timo — he wanted even more to give Noah that rush of feeling that he’d saved himself.

It would be enough for Noah to know Timo had calmed Dave down and that Timo was on his side.

He’d never have really let Dave pursue Noah legally, of course.

But he’d not needed to resort to gently pointing this out to Dave since diplomacy had won the day.

Wasn’t it nice when everyone got along? One big happy family, as they said.

Timo needed a happy family right now.

He released the pinch on his nose but it was still flowing.

How much had he slept last night? It had to be an hour or two because he remembered nightmares about seeking Noah in a dark, shrinking space. Barring that, the sleeplessness had left him with plenty of time to search for Noah on Google and every possible social media he could name.

The most interesting had been the Instagram account, inactive for years, but replete with all black-and-white photos before then of New York City and Seattle, then scrolling down and down, Fairbanks, Prudhoe Bay, and unspecified Alaskan wilderness and everyday pictures of the type people posted: dogs, a few wild animals like moose, reflections in summer puddles, a carved pumpkin in snow, a holiday meal, the northern lights.

There was not one photo in 644 that showed Noah, even the profile picture being of a tiny, round cactus in a terracotta pot; the same cactus, presumably, that Noah kept on his work desk.

There was, in fact, not one photo of a human being anywhere in his feed. And, other than the first year or so, when Noah would have been in his mid- or late teens, not one photo in colour.

There was something so unsettling about the feed, Timo had completely forgotten his original ambition of finding a good photo of Noah to jerk off to, though he still couldn't put his finger on it. Plenty of people didn't post human photos. Plenty of people were into black and white. So what?

Noah didn't even keep up the feed anymore, followers in the double digits only, probably just family and old school friends. Then why had Timo spent half the night

looking at those pictures, reading every single sparse caption?

Timo gave his face a final rinse, then studied his nose in the mirror.

Impersonal was what they were. Cold, flat, some of them beautiful; he had a good eye for an amateur only taking phone snaps; but devoid of life, of context, of any kind of story or feeling.

If he didn't care, why had he posted 644 photos across several years?

If he did care, why didn't he put any soul into what he was sharing?

Timo dried his face with paper towels, dragging himself back to focus on the situation in his office that hopefully had resolved itself. Those two should have moved on by now and Timo could find Noah returned to his own desk and ask if he was okay and what had happened.

Timo didn't much care what had happened, but he knew how much people loved feeling supported and understood and all that other crap.

Once Noah felt supported and understood, Timo could make sure they were still on to meet at the museum on Saturday. Or, why wait? What about dinner tonight? It wasn't as if Timo thought of anything else when he wasn't with Noah, so everything else was really wasted time.

Stepping into his office, Timo found a best-case scenario: Dave gone, Noah still there, waiting for Timo.

Timo smiled at him. "You okay, Noah? You've had quite the morning."

"We need to talk," Noah said, voice as stiff as his perch on the streamlined chair.

“Of course. What happened with Dave?” Timo sat back on the edge of his desk, again ignoring the screens, gaze only for Noah.

“Not about that.” Noah met his eyes and Timo’s pulse quickened. “About how you’re behaving.”

“Me?”

“I don’t have much time left to work here, but I want that time. I want to make this a success and stay as long as I can.”

“Indeed —”

“I can’t do that if you’re going to keep acting like this.”

“Like what?” Timo was taken aback. Now it wasn’t just attacking your colleagues that was illegal but being friendly?

“Don’t bullshit me. Put it this way: Will you leave me alone to do my job and only talk to me about work-related things for the next seven weeks?”

“Then what?”

“Then what ... what?”

“After the seven weeks?”

“Then I’m going back to the States. Maybe more like six.”

“Oh.”

“I did tell you my exact dates at the interview.”

“I understand keeping things professional at work, Noah. That’s absolutely fine.”

“It is? You’ll respect that?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Oh ...” Noah sat back, as if having been braced against a heavy burden only to let go. “Thanks.”

“How about dinner?” Timo said.

“Wait — w-wha-what did you say? Fuck. ” Noah shook his head violently, eyes closed. Very clearly and precisely, he repeated, “What did you say?”

“At dinner, after work, we can catch up about other matters. Totally work focused here. Okay?”

“No.”

“Have you been to the new Mongolian place on —?”

“No!” Noah jumped to his feet. “Will you leave me alone, or do I have to leave the office and go back home right now even though I d-d-don’t have a home!”

Timo cocked his head. “You mean, to North America?”

“Yes! We can only have interactions in a professional, work-related capacity, or I’m l-le-leaving right now and never coming b-back. You choose. Just t-tell me which it is.”

Timo swallowed. If Noah only understood how much he meant to Timo, how much Timo wanted his arms around Noah at this very moment, how much it was tearing him apart to hear Noah say Timo was worse than nothing to him, then surely Noah would change his mind.

But how was Timo supposed to explain the simple truth when he was banned from non-work topics and when the truth was, well, really bloody stupid?

Timo cleared his throat before saying, “Work only, of course. You don’t have to go anywhere, Noah.”

“Thank you.” Noah’s jaw twitched. Again, he spoke in a measured, clear, clipped fashion, as if aimed at particularly inept speech-to-text software. “Then I’ll get back to work.”

* * *

Noah was shaking with his own adrenaline come-down by the time he sank into his desk chair. It took him a minute, just breathing, eyes closed, before he could pull everything back out of the box for his desk.

Years of speech and cognitive therapies, essentially conquering his speech disorder by adulthood, and now this?

Yes, they’d told him that stuttering would be with him for life and to be compassionate with himself and remember the exercises, especially in times of stress, but how long had it been since anything like that had happened?

He wouldn’t let it come back. It was a blip. It was his damn boss, not his whole life. He was fine. He’d stood up for himself; he’d got what he wanted, and he wasn’t even facing criminal charges. Better than fine.

Why, then, did he feel like the one who'd been kicked this morning?

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By the middle of September, Timo had fallen into a new routine: Extra biking, extra workouts, extra insider meetups, extra podcast and audiobook listening, extra work, extra networking parties, extra drinking, extra coffee, extra joints, four or five hours of sleep a night, start again.

It had to work; his tactics could save him from whatever was happening to his brain.

Disallowing space for thoughts about Noah would force him to snap loose of this uncontrollable obsession that had crawled into his ear one night and laid its eggs.

No one could focus on Noah when they had to focus on keeping up with Timo.

So he worked and he ran and he worked and he smoked and he worked and he went from thinking about Noah three or four times an hour to a dozen times an hour to every bloody minute of every bloody day.

Imagined conversations with Noah interrupted his audiobooks.

Imagined holidays with Noah interrupted his party nights.

Imagined sex with Noah interrupted his showers.

Imagined visions of Noah interrupted numbers feeding onto a dozen screens in his office.

At work, he was missing patterns he'd never missed.

Trading patterns became nonsensical. He stared as red and green candlesticks turned into head and shoulder patterns, saw wedges and triangles forming, cups and handles, saw it all reverse again — and none of it made sense, none of it prompted him into committing to a trade.

He used to love this stuff, but he hesitated, second-guessing himself until the opportunity had passed.

He took to prowling corridors more than usual, talking with everyone else, making sure at least they were staying on their toes to conceal the fact that Timo wasn't.

He never knew if he wanted to run into Noah or not.

Rather, he always wanted to run into Noah, but always regretted it, so he shouldn't want to.

After Noah's ultimatum, threatening to leave early, Timo played his part.

He wouldn't be the one to drive Noah thousands of miles away, so he went out of his way to demonstrate how much he would only talk to Noah about work-related matters.

He might ask Arthur about the game last night, or tell Simon to get a proper tailor, that those trousers were practically capris, or generally discuss which clubs to visit with the Arab traders who would be at the conference next month, but with Noah it was only numbers and trades.

Surely his efforts would win points. Surely Noah would accept more invitations to their nights out, or at least offer polite conversation in the kitchen.

No. Not only did Noah refuse to go out with any of them after the night he'd stormed

out on Timo; if Timo entered the kitchen, Noah exited it.

His work was capable. Not brilliant, but not a travesty like some juniors who never found their feet and only lasted a matter of weeks.

He was always in early, often left late — in fact, often left after Timo — and he wasn't taking anymore grief from the likes of Dave and Arthur and Chandler thanks to a gentle word to them from Timo after the incident.

If Timo did everything right, everything Noah wanted, then Noah would come around. Except that he wasn't. If Noah didn't, Timo could train his own thinking out of caring what Noah did, so it wouldn't matter. Except Timo was also failing there.

Two weeks of his new strategy and Timo was at a loss, his profit/loss ratio suffering, his restless nights tangled in disturbing dreams and muddled images interwoven with dreams of Noah when he could sleep.

It didn't at first occur to him that extra sex might also be a workable strategy to add to his improved life of extras since the only person he wanted anymore was Noah. Desperate to try anything after the first fortnight, he rang an old fuck buddy, only to end up walking out.

He just didn't care, kept thinking of Noah, even felt uncomfortable about the whole thing — a queasy, breath-quickening sensation that he only later began to suspect might have been guilt.

As if he'd been going to cheat on Noah, which was so incredibly stupid he tried again the next night just to prove to himself he could.

He trolled a club, spending two hours watching for anyone who looked like Noah, brought the guy home, kept all his focus on pretending this was Noah, and ...

it was okay. Like ordering a Ramos gin fizz and getting sparkling water.

He wouldn't die of thirst, but there wasn't any other point.

He'd rather be alone thinking of Noah, imagine the whole event with the help of his right hand, than have to make such an effort with a tedious partner.

Just as well since he could always manage to squeeze in a few minutes of quality time with himself lately, especially after anything that resembled close contact with Noah, such as stopping at his desk when Noah had a legitimate trading question.

Luckily, Timo spending slightly excessive amounts of time in the toilet at work was perfectly normal thanks to his nosebleeds.

Timo hadn't thought this much about another person since the height of his time with Rhys, in between the first rush of discovery and his own stress- and drug-fuelled breakdown that led to him accepting a transfer to Hong Kong when his company offered either that or a one-way ticket back to Moscow as the only options.

In hindsight, he should have told them to go fuck themselves and stayed in London, but everything had worked out. A year in Hong Kong, then back to London, finally got his citizenship, relinquished the Russian citizenship, and set up his own prop shop.

His biggest regret wasn't anything to do with the work. It wasn't even that he'd allowed himself to remain entangled with Moscow for so many years; it was Rhys. If he'd not fled, not accepted the Hong Kong placement and left Rhys in London, how different might his life be right now?

He should have started his own shop long ago, should have pressed Rhys to marry him, knew perfectly well that Rhys wanted to take that step. They'd talked about it,

made it sound like it was mostly for the visa in case the other one used it as emotional leverage.

But no, Timo had had other priorities. Some in the form of white powder, some in the form of adding extra zeros on the tail of every pay cheque, and he'd never been willing to make that choice to stay.

That could have been him two weeks ago: tuxedo and cake.

Was that what he wanted in his life? Was it Rhys?

Because he'd never really got over Rhys?

Reminded of that time when Rhys had almost died and Timo had been a world away in Hong Kong and that realisation had shaken him more than he could ever admit?

It was easy not to worry about being far from loved ones when you didn't love anyone who was still living.

Then Rhys and ... was that what this was about?

This Noah obsession had started right after the wedding.

Was Timo's own brain messing with him? He had to resign himself to no second chances with Rhys, so he woke up the next morning smitten with someone totally unsuitable? More self-sabotage?

Timo didn't have time for self-help and Psychology Today and shit like that, but he was finding time to wonder what insanity felt like; to wonder if he already knew.

He got into work on Wednesday morning after three hours of sleep and three

espressos, still reliving a dream of Noah. One of the type that meant changing shorts; not one of the seeking, twisting, unsettling ones.

He'd no sooner dropped into his chair and checked his morning news feed than he entirely forgot both Noah and his own troubles for the first time in weeks.

* * *

Noah didn't have in earplugs this morning, but they wouldn't have helped much anyway. This level of noise, whooping like a football stadium in the fourth quarter, was new even for a morning of profitable trades.

He tried to ignore it at first, reached for the earplugs. But, no, it had to be something work-related, though he couldn't see anything unusual on his own screens. He better find out what was happening.

They were still howling by the time Noah started for Timo's office, as they occasionally did when they needed to blow off steam, although it was usually after a few drinks. Timo's team called themselves the Wolf Pack thanks to his last name.

Most of the other guys were already in that office, or just arriving.

"What's going on?" Spencer, paper tray with to-go cups in hand, came running.

"AAM are fucked!" Chandler shouted back above general yelling, congratulating, fist-bumping, and back-slapping happening in the office.

"Fucked?" Spencer, the office PA, held back with his tray lest it be knocked from his hands in all the uproar.

AAM was a rival firm, a thorn in Timo's side, though Noah knew little about them,

except for their founder's alleged aliens obsession.

"Chandler, Maksim, Noah, Spencer, get in here!" Timo was splashing something — brandy? — into shot glasses on his desk, the men crowding round, snatching up glasses and toasting one another, laughing.

While Spencer protectively clutched his tray, the rest pushed into the packed office.

"A toast!" Timo thrust his glass in the air and so did everyone else, Noah finding one pushed into his hand. "To AAM maintaining course and speed!"

"Hear, hear!" The men bellowed as if several rooms away, laughed, and drank.

"I don't get it!" Noah had to yell at Arthur to be heard.

"They're going to prison," Arthur called back. "It's all over the news. The whole lot of them!"

"What? What'd they do?"

"Fraud, market manipulation, insider trading, and that's for starters. It was just on the news feed," Maksim explained.

"Who thinks this calls for a celebratory holiday?" Timo called over their heads, waving a fresh bottle in the air to get their attention. Where did he keep the stuff?

There was a general cheer of agreement.

"This weekend! On me! Where to?"

A barrage of shouts answered him, mixing together and speaking over one another so only half were decipherable.

“Beach!”

“Highlands!”

“Monte Carlo!”

“Mykonos!”

“Barbados!”

“Everyone shut up!” Timo vaulted onto his desk with one hand, the ceiling being high enough for him to stand up there without difficulty. He grinned, still holding the neck of a bottle. “Distance limit of ...”

Everyone settled as they looked up at him, finally listening.

“Three hundred miles from London or closer. No flights because I’m bringing a mountain bike.”

There was a yell from bike enthusiasts in the group, like Arthur and Haoyu, and a groan from the less athletically inclined, like Ranveer and Chandler.

Timo pointed to the men one at a time. “Maksim?”

“Mountains.”

“Ranveer?”

“Beach.”

“Haoyu?”

“Mountains.”

“Chandler?”

“Mykonos.”

“Shut up. Noah?”

“Uh... Paris?”

“Out of range,” Timo snapped.

“No it’s not.”

“Spencer, enlighten us! Driving — not as the crow flies.”

Spencer scrambled with his phone. “Two hundred and eighty miles by car.”

“New rule! Two hundred and fifty mile max .” Timo tipped out a few refills into shot glasses that were eagerly held up to him.

“Fine. Then mountains, I guess,” Noah had always wanted to see the Cotswolds, but in a room like this that felt like admitting he wanted to play miniature golf at a petting

zoo.

“Arthur?”

Maksim cut in, yelling at Timo, “Just say where we are going, dickhead. You already know.” Maksim, who’d been with the same Russian company that first sent Timo over to work in London many years ago, and had joined him when he’d set up shop, could get away with calling Timo anything he liked.

“He’s right,” Dave chipped in. “You knew before you started asking!”

“But a good manager seeks the opinions of his team,” Timo told them happily.

“Can a good contractor get another refill?” More glasses were raised.

“That settles it.” Timo emptied the second bottle.

“We’re going to Wales. Eryri Peak Resort and Spa, in the mountains, beach half-hour drive away, trails for the bikers, spa and Michelin-star dining for the sloths.

We leave Friday. Back Sunday night. Five-hour drive, unless you know how to drive; then it’s three and a half. ”

More laughter.

“I’ll drive.” Timo jabbed the empty bottle around the room from his towering perch. “Who else? We need ... everyone coming? Two or three more cars? Spencer, confirm who all’s celebrating this fine milestone and make the booking. Who wants to share a room with Chandler?”

General hisses and boos and stomping feet.

“Sorry, sorry, I meant; who wants to share with Maksim?”

No one thought that was so funny, edging away from the six-foot-six, unsmiling Maksim, accompanied by much muttered swearing.

Among this grumbling, Dave stage whispered to Arthur, “We all know who the boss wants to share with.”

“Thanks for the reminder, Dave.” Timo was still grinning. “Spencer, don’t forget to ring Dave’s mother for an invite and book us the bridal suite. Next time someone calls me a motherfucker, I want to have earned it.”

That brought down the house; Dave’s face brick red, Arthur howling and pounding him on the back, final traces of amber liquid sloshing from several shot glasses.

Everyone was still laughing, a few men volunteering to drive, when Timo jumped down from his desk, nimble as a fox. He threw the bottle in the air with a spin and caught it as he stepped through a gap to Noah, who remained just inside the doorway.

“Do you really want to go to Paris?” Timo’s smile had gone supernova, hair golden, red and yellow tie a flame, his own high spirits blooming in palpable waves of jovial self-confidence until his nearness made Noah’s skin tingle.

The man had so much damn presence it was as if everyone else in the world had their dimmer switch engaged.

He could have been a household name if he’d made his way to Los Angeles instead of London all those years ago — even if the Russian accent meant he was typecast as a villain. Every story needed an antagonist.

It took Noah a beat to answer while Timo flicked the bottle into the air again. “Who

doesn't? I'd love to see all the European capitals. I've been into history since I was a kid, starting with knights, then Greek mythology."

"That so? How many have you reached so far?"

"Does England still count as Europe?"

"No."

"Uh... zero."

Timo cocked his head. "If you ever want to grow your portfolio, you'll let me know? But we're not starting with Paris. Come on the grand tour with me and we start in Rome."

They stood, staring into one another's eyes, as the other men still talked around them, discussing cars and bike racks while Spencer tried to pin down the exact number and who wanted a full spa package or room only.

Noah should have been irritated that Timo was talking to him about travelling together.

He'd been doing just as Noah asked, to the point of being a dick about it — chatting with others about Tube congestion or best sushi places nearby, then abruptly asking Noah how his numbers were looking for the day.

Now, bobbing in the wake of his thrill to discover his rivals faced not just reputational ruin but prison time, Timo didn't even seem to notice he'd made a misstep.

Or was he hoping Noah wouldn't notice? Just a risk he was willing to run in the heat

of the moment?

As a trader, Timo lived and breathed risk.

If he couldn't think of anything witty to say, Noah should have disengaged, shrugged and turned to Spencer to say he didn't care about the spa, only the room and meals.

Instead, he couldn't tear his own gaze from the ice-blue one fixed on him.

Timo had the fashion sense to wear grey rather than black suits to avoid making his Nordic complexion look bleached, but he favoured warm tones for his ties.

A shame. If he matched a tie to his eyes, an Arctic or Alice blue, they would pop like searchlights.

By the time Noah realised what he was doing, it was far too late to shrug and turn away as if he'd not noticed anything; as if he didn't care; as if he didn't feel the air crackle between them like frostbite.

"Why Rome?" he said stupidly.

Timo took a step closer, eyes fixed on Noah's, voice dropping impossibly low against the babble, yet Noah still heard clearly, as if able to hear nothing else. "Ask me when we get there."

Noah shivered, stepped back, hit the doorframe. "I need to, uh — Spencer?" Noah looked around.

Spencer was there as if by magic, taking rapid notes on his phone. "Noah? Spa?"

"No."

“Yes,” Timo said.

Spencer glanced at him, then back to Noah. “Meals?”

“Yes.”

“No,” Timo said.

Again, Spencer looked between them. “I’ll just put you down for everything and you can use whatever you want. No worries. Bringing anyone?”

“Bringing ...?”

“Partner? Only if you’re sharing. Not an extra room.”

“Oh. No. Thanks, Spencer.” Noah hurried for his own desk, heart in his throat, breathing like he’d just run up the stairs.

It didn’t dawn on him until he’d dropped gratefully into his chair that he could have simply said no, he wasn’t going. Too late now.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:44 am

Hairpin turns, wind and rain in his face; it had been a long time since Noah had been on a mountain bike.

It all came back, the borrowed bike better than any he'd ever owned, his muscles no longer trained for the work, but he was lighter and wirier than he'd been, his reflexes more honed, and he managed to keep up with the more practiced older men.

The first time he fell in the foothills of lush green, wet with first autumn rains rolling in through Snowdonia, it was nothing. Just a bruised elbow and streaks of mud on jacket and hip. He'd misjudged the downhill, thought he could turn when he couldn't: simple mathematical mistake.

The second time, on the steeper elevation, he didn't get away so easy and it wasn't his fault.

Arthur skidded on a rocky switchback below Noah at the turn.

Instead of leaning into it or letting his bike hit the inside of the slope if a fall was inevitable, Arthur panicked and hit the brakes.

He wrenched the bike sideways, didn't call a warning, didn't try to swing clear of the trail as Noah took the turn just after him.

It was either hit him or go over the side.

If it had been a sheer drop to certain death, of course Noah would have hit him.

But in the half-second he had to make his decision, it seemed that a rocky slope was a worthwhile risk versus the certainty of crashing into man and bike while going at a good pace.

He must have yelled something, couldn't remember, only catching the edge of the trail and his bike suddenly travelling down the slope on its side until smack , and Noah blasted through several feet of mud and boulders, scraping skin off a palm, bashing his knee, and ending up on his back with the bike on top of him, breath knocked from his lungs.

He thought he'd be jeered for it — the new guy who couldn't even keep his bike upright on an easy switchback, no matter that it was Arthur's fault.

But no, Haoyu, the first on the scene to help him up while Noah was still trying to get his breath back and fight the bike off him, told Noah that was the best wipeout he'd seen in years.

Haoyu seemed to regard the whole thing as having been staged for his benefit.

Timo had to climb back up the trail to join them, rain dripping off his helmet visor, almost unrecognisable out of his suit and panting with the straight-up-and-over climbing method he'd used to reach them.

"Bloody hell, Noah, I missed it," Timo chided him. "Can you do it again?"

"Shut up." Noah spat mud. "Arthur! You're supposed to say something if you brake hard in front of someone on a downhill!"

"I didn't know you were that close!" Arthur was still above them, leaning out from the trail. "You okay?"

Bullshit he didn't know.

Noah let a cheerful Haoyu pull him to his feet.

“Stay up front with me,” Timo said. “I never wear out a set of brakes.”

“I believe that.”

Then he'd been okay, scraped hand, and bruised, but exhilarated and actually feeling like one of the team by the time they returned to the hotel, soaked to the skin, sprayed in mud, triumphant in a way that only a hard workout and covering those glorious mountain miles could achieve.

Noah hadn't been in a wilderness like this in years and, although city life was very much a choice for him, it also surprised him how deeply he could breathe all of a sudden.

He was far more dubious about the massage and sauna and whatever other supposed pampering came along with it, but he was even starting to decide those elements were good for team bonding.

Showered and changed into a fluffy white robe, bleeding hand patched with ointment and a small gauze pad, proud of his bruised elbow and leg, he found the sauna also brought back good memories, and the massage turned out to be worth the hype.

Never having had one and not comfortable with people he didn't know touching him, Noah was surprised, even embarrassed, to discover how incredible that massage turned out to be.

He tried to pass on the facial, but the massage therapist encouraged him, explaining all the products and benefits, and she seemed to know her stuff. Noah relented for

that one too.

She wore a silver pendant with an unusual symbol that Noah recognised.

“Is that Capricorn?”

“That’s right.” She glanced down as if she could see it. “Are you into astrology?”

“No, I mean, just a bit. I’ve always wanted a chart done. Curious, I guess.”

“You should. My partner got me a reading with an astrologer for my last birthday and it was astounding.”

Noah grinned. “Not a word you hear a lot. I’ll look into it.”

“What’s your sun sign?”

“Libra.”

“Happy birthday!”

Laughing, Noah would have shaken his head if she wasn’t smoothing some kind of mineral mud goo on his face. “My birthday’s not until October 6th.”

“My favourite month. I know spring has its merits, but I’ve always thought October was the most beautiful time of year.”

Silly as it was, Noah couldn’t help feeling a bit chuffed, as they said in England, by that.

He’d been slow at learning to love October.

It had been hard to greet it with joy growing up when it meant the settling of snow and failing light that wouldn't reverse until April.

Give him summer any day. Now, though, he did love October, the colours and change and new texture to the air that had been too warm, too soft, until October touched the leaves and wrapped a filter around the sun.

While he lay back for the full facial treatment, sinking into silence, only a water fountain bubbling in the background, Noah remembered why he was dreading October this year: He didn't even have until Halloween to wrap up his life here and leave the country.

It was frustrating to think of such things when he was supposed to relax and enjoy this moment.

Nothing he could do about any of it on this weekend away, and trying would be a total waste of the free vacation.

As soon as he got back, he had to move out of the current Airbnb, but at least he'd been able to leave his bags there since it was all paid through Monday. Small blessings.

Worry on Monday. Not now. Not today. Today he was part of the team, fitting in, just another one of the guys. Today, he was relaxing, as people did on weekends and vacations. Today, he was even grateful for the first time for a boss like Timo.

* * *

“To the Wolf Pack!” Cheers, howls, clattering glasses. The earlier toasts had started with AAM and reasons to celebrate. On the third round of drinks, everyone was getting more and more chummy — not to mention loud.

Noah would rather be in the company of actual wolves, who were quieter, formed loving family groups, and were all-around far more civilised.

Still, he'd had a good Saturday. Best time he'd had since he'd reached England just over a year ago.

The hard morning workout when he wasn't used to it left him sore all over; his hand and leg ached, but he felt loose and drowsy after his spa afternoon and an hour's break to read before the rowdy dinner got underway.

No one had been really nasty to him all day, and he'd even got the chance to talk a bit with people on the team he actually enjoyed being around, like Ranveer and Spencer.

He'd figured out at dinnertime why Timo hadn't wanted Noah booked in all-inclusive as soon as Timo suggested they drive down to the village to experience local Welsh cooking and more sights before sunset. Not the team; just him and Noah.

Noah chose a place between two occupied chairs to make sure of keeping a distance from Timo at the big hotel dining room table, but he needn't have worried. Once Noah refused the offer of date night, Timo returned to his role as pack alpha with his hyena smile by settling at the head of the table.

Noah got the chance to talk with Haoyu about his own work visa status and the process he'd been through, having followed Timo back from Hong Kong to join his new venture in London.

It wasn't the kind of thing Noah felt he could ask about at work, but Haoyu seemed happy now to go on at length about timelines — long — and paperwork — lots — plus institutional racism he'd encountered.

Noah capped his own intake at two cocktails, not because it wouldn't have been fun

to overindulge on a night like this, but because he couldn't let his guard down with Timo still prowling around, pretending he wasn't.

Besides, it wasn't every day he had a Michelin-starred dinner and he didn't want drinking to blunt the experience.

Dessert was another matter. He'd always had a sweet tooth and he was happy to go all in on the large round of dessert orders, then swap with Spencer and Haoyu so he got to try not only his own chocolate orange mousse cake but the pistachio cake with glazed cherries and the refreshing crème fraîche panna cotta with cucumber sorbet.

He'd forgotten all about his injured hand by the time the final plates were cleared, all the men talking shop, showing no sign of letting the party run down, and Noah couldn't help thinking it was the ideal end to a great day.

Might he even have a soak in the bath before bed?

He'd had to shower off mud earlier, but that wasn't the same.

The whole weekend was for indulgence, right?

Sunday morning was supposed to be sunny.

They'd get another bike ride and lunch at the hotel or a beach visit and fish and chips before starting back for London.

Then all he had to do was make sure he was in Ranveer's car, not Timo's, for the return and he was home and dry. Pretty damn perfect weekend, really.

Some chairs were pushed back, the talk breaking off into groups of two or three, so Noah didn't feel too conspicuous being the first to stand. He might just take a

lavender tea up with him if the kitchen had it. He made his way into the next room to ask a bartender.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:45 am

He'd no sooner reached the now sparsely populated bar with a welcoming murmur of voices instead of the loud voices and laughter of the team, when Timo appeared beside him like a shadow.

Noah jumped, not only startled, but unsettled that Timo, who'd been talking and laughing with Maksim and Ranveer seconds before, had been watching Noah closely enough all the time to dart after him.

"Nightcap?" Smiling, Timo rested a hand on his shoulder.

Noah pulled away, though he found he didn't mind as much as he should have. Perhaps he was buzzed from the drinks and sugar and overall day, but he almost didn't mind Timo following him either.

"I've had enough."

"You eat light and you hardly drank anything."

"How do you know?"

"We just had dinner together, Noah."

"I was four people away from you. We didn't 'have dinner together' like that."

"Have a seat." Timo pulled out a barstool for him. "Just one drink? How's your day been? Hand okay?"

“It’s fine.” Noah still stood, but didn’t retreat. “And it’s never just one drink with you, is it?”

There was that hooded smile again, the come-hither one that made Noah want to run far more than to draw near.

“Noah,” Timo crooned, “are you afraid to drink with me in case you become so intoxicated you start ripping off my clothes and begging me to fuck you right here on the bar?”

Noah stared blankly at him for a solid five seconds. “Timo ...” Noah imitated his silky tone. “Nothing could ever make me that drunk. Nothing. Ever.” He leaned closer. “ Ever. ”

Timo pressed his right hand over his heart. “You wound me. That really hurts my feelings.”

“It’s a relief to know you have any to hurt.”

“Do you fancy emotional weakness in others?”

“It’s not weakness.” Noah rolled his eyes. “It’s called ‘emotional awareness’ or ‘emotional openness.’ Not weakness.”

Timo hesitated, gaze flickering to the ceiling, clearly trying to work out what was the difference between openness and weakness, then decided to drop the matter. “I assure you, I’m a marshmallow at heart. Deep down.”

“Yeah. Sure you are. Thanks, but I think I’ll go up to bed.”

“I’m also generous.” Timo opened his hands as if to say, Just look around you. “And

I have an impeccable character.”

“Is that so?”

“I had to have one to get my citizenship.”

“So you lied?”

Timo closed his eyes and let out a breath. “You’re a very difficult man to talk to.”

“I’m difficult? You agreed to leave me alone —”

“This is a holiday —”

“Besides that, I’m not interested. I told you that.”

“Yet here you are.”

“Because you cornered me!”

Timo squinted around. “I see no corners.”

Face flaming, Noah grit his teeth. Okay, so he could have walked away, could right now even, but that would be ... rude?

Instead of turning, Noah crossed his arms and said quietly, “What is this?”

“It’s a bar. In a restaurant. In a resort in Wales.” Timo smiled expectantly, as if waiting for his trivia prize.

Noah imagined a quick uppercut to smash that ever-bleeding nose.

The guys said Timo had done crack, crystal meth — just about everything — in his younger days, that it had destroyed his sinuses.

If it was true, Noah had to be impressed with the man before him.

Because, if it was true, he'd got himself clean, avoided any criminal record, immigrated, started his own company, and was now a multi-multi-millionaire and counting.

If it was true ... it was actually pretty damn impressive that he stood here facing Noah at all, much less the rest of it.

Noah tried again. "What is this that's going on with you?"

Will you just tell me why you won't leave me alone?

Did someone put you up to it? Is it a wager?

Are you proving a point? Experimenting on me?

Seeing if you can make a younger man fall for you by lavishing him with attention?

Because I know I'm not your type and I know you had absolutely zero interest in me until a few weeks ago.

So just tell me what's going on. What's the game here? "

Frowning now, Timo actually looked confused, which only confused Noah more. For the first time ever, Timo shifted in place, glancing around vaguely as if for inspiration. It was unsettling to see him at a loss, like watching a cat spooked by a mouse.

Finally, Timo said, “Do you find it so difficult to believe that someone could be attracted to you?”

“Don’t turn this on me,” Noah growled.

“Struck a nerve?” Timo cocked his head. “Just one drink?” He touched the back of the barstool.

“Then they’ll be closing down anyway. I can’t keep you here long.

” He offered a smile so gentle, so placating, it had to be something he rehearsed in a mirror.

“I wish you’d tell me about yourself. About Alaska, or your family, New York, your IT work before coming here — anything you like. ”

Noah pulled back, knew better, but the smile, the softened tone, the interest ...

Timo was right: Noah hadn’t thought for an instant that Timo was into him purely because he was honestly attracted to Noah and interested to see if that could become more.

Ultimately, it wouldn’t change anything one way or another. Still ...

Noah took the stool. “Just one.”

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:45 am

One drink didn't turn into two: Noah was firm about that. But it did turn into Noah accepting Timo's invitation to step outside with a joint after the bar closed.

Based on his luck so far, Timo didn't think Noah would go for it.

He was giddy with his own success to find himself with Noah under the stars in the dark landscape of Snowdonia National Park.

The rain had cleared and they climbed a trail just above the resort to sit on damp boulders overlooking hotel lights and a billion stars on a chill night with autumn newly upon them.

There was so little light pollution out here, even the talon of a moon looked shockingly bright.

Warmed with the good food and alcohol, Timo wasn't cold and Noah didn't seem to be either. They sat in silence at first, just watching the stars, Timo lighting the joint and taking a carefully small hit before passing it over.

Noah hadn't exactly been a chatterbox at the bar, but Timo was able to drag out of him that his parents were divorced, still living in Alaska, he was an only child, yes, he knew how to drive a snowmobile, but there was nothing to it, and no, he didn't want to talk to Timo about his family.

They'd talked about books mostly, Noah going on about how Anna Karenina was the greatest novel ever written, generations ahead of its time in its style, that many people didn't know part of it was written by Tolstoy's wife, and that Noah wanted to read all

the great Russian classics but he was still working on it.

Yawn. Oh well, at least it got him talking, even smiling, and into such a good mood he'd accepted the invite out here.

Timo took it easy, harnessing every inch of charm, every ounce of patience in his bag of tricks.

Noah took a hit and passed it back. "Doesn't it bother you?"

"Already getting to the metaphorical questions? That didn't take much."

"No." Noah laughed a bit and Timo's heartbeat quickened. "The guys talking about you behind your back? The whole bloodthirsty pack taking an interest in your love life? Not in a good way."

Again, Timo was careful not to inhale too much. "What could be more flattering?"

"What?" Noah accepted the joint again.

"Do you know whose sex life is the only one to interest many an animal group? Or often even get to have one?"

"The leader? The dominant stallion or lion or wolf of the territory?" After a slow inhale, taking way more than Timo, Noah rocked back to gaze upwards. "Weird place to find affirmation if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you."

Noah laughed again.

Oh, yes ... Timo shivered, smiling into the darkness, glad Noah couldn't see his expression and he didn't have to monitor it so as not to alarm the kid. Keep laughing all the way to the bedroom.

Timo had made sure to have a bottle of sparkling wine and a vase of red roses in his room, bed turned down before he stepped out for dinner, only one dim reading light on by the bed, curtains drawn.

Although he personally found the idea of giving someone a bundle of dead plant stems to get them in the mood one of the more bizarre quirks of human evolution, Noah seemed like the type to enjoy such gestures.

Even Rhys, a keen gardener, hadn't been immune to their supposed charms.

They traded the joint a few more times, Noah getting the bulk, and he started talking about constellations and astrology.

Ugh. Even Anna Karenina was more interesting than this.

But Timo waited, even indulged when Noah asked his sign.

That was showing more interest, wasn't it?

The sort of thing people did? What's your sign? What's your enneagram? Shit like that?

Noah laughingly said that it made sense Timo was a Gemini.

Whatever.

"You finish that," Timo purred, resting a hand on Noah's thigh. "I've had enough."

They were facing the same direction on a shared boulder, non-confrontational, and Noah didn't even seem to notice the hand.

Noah told him some story about a hunter and dogs tracking across the night sky in constellations and Greek myths and whatever all it was about.

“Uh-huh.” Timo would start with a kiss because, again, Noah seemed that kind of guy. The flowers type. Then again, what if that only gave him time for a negative reaction? No, he'd go straight for the balls, then a kiss. Fast, then slow, then fast, then slow once the bedroom door was closed.

Timo drew his hand up Noah's thigh, inching more towards the inside as he went.

It was black jeans now, everyone casual for their holiday, and Timo longed for the more yielding softness of khakis or formal trousers.

At least they weren't too tight; he had a bit of give to work with and get his fingers into.

“You okay?” Timo asked sweetly. “After the trails? You're a good rider but we threw you in at the deep end. Sorry about that.” Timo had also learned from Rhys how far an apology, merited or not, felt or not, could get a man when it came to bedroom perks.

“Huh? Oh, I'm fine. Won't even notice it by the end of the week.

Did you know ‘constellation’ is Middle English, but before that it was Latin *constellatio*?

Is that still the word they use for constellations in Italian?

It must be. Do you speak Italian? I would love to learn Italian.

You must have been speaking English since you were a kid. It's perfect."

Noah was a cheeky drunk, but a bit of an annoying stoner. Timo added that to his mental pinboard. Sweet cocktails. No weed.

"I know that," Timo said in his ear. "Because I work at it."

"Not anymore." Noah laughed like that had been a stupid thing for Timo to say. "Since it's already perfect."

"Except the accent."

"But you'll always have the accent. I love your accent," Noah said dreamily. "Makes me think of my favourite books."

The electric jolt that lanced down Timo's spine was enough to make him jump.

I love your , which was exactly the same as I love you with a tiny extra sound, not even a syllable, not even counting.

How many years had it taken him and Rhys to start saying that to each other?

And now here was Noah saying it before the first kiss.

As to the accent, Noah couldn't know how tirelessly Timo had worked for years, first to get his vocabulary and speech patterns perfect, and now to soften his accent.

First language-learning audio programs even when he was mostly fluent, then endless audiobooks, novels with dialogue and good narrators doing accents and finding real

speech cadence in the text.

But no, Timo didn't suppose he could ever truly throw his accent.

Not when he'd come into fluency relatively late, only speaking a bit of English until his late teens.

Still, he never made syntax mistakes anymore and he hunted for an English word less often than the English did.

He'd even eventually mastered when to add an article.

Triumphing over "the" and "a" had been the hardest fight of his life.

None of that was any concern of Noah's. Noah loved his voice. He loved Timo. He was going to love the red roses Timo had for him.

Timo was so hard it was a painful struggle to get his own fly open while Noah still stargazed, talking about ...? Stars.

He captured Noah's hand at the same time he got his fingers around Noah's balls in those unfortunately chunky jeans. Noah gasped, tensed, leaned away from him.

"Timo, don't —"

Timo pulled Noah's hand to his own hot erection in the cool night, leaning in at the same time, going to find his mouth, but Noah reacted like he'd touched a live wire, springing back.

Timo didn't let go, still gripping Noah's wrist in one hand, crotch in the other, so they ended up staggering to their feet together, locked for a moment in a breathless

wrestling match.

“Noah — I’m not going to hurt you.” Unless you want me to.

“You’re hurting me right now! Let go of me!”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Stop it! I said no! ”

“What do you want? We’ll do anything you want —”

“I want you to leave me alone!” Noah twisted his arm free and slammed his heel down into the toe of Timo’s shoe. With no give below it, only rock they stood on, the impact landed like a hammer.

“Fucking hell!” Timo dropped to his knees on muddy rocks, sure his toes were broken.

“Why won’t you listen to me?” Noah was yelling.

Even through the pain, Timo was bewildered. “You’ve had a workout, a massage, a spa day, dinner, three strong drinks, and a joint! How bloody relaxed do you need to get before you can enjoy yourself?”

“I’m not enjoying myself! I keep telling you to stop!”

“That’s the problem!”

“No! You’re the problem! I told you I’m not even gay!”

“But you were lying!”

Silence, aside from Timo’s ragged gasps and Noah’s heavy breathing as he stood over Timo. The night all around seemed suddenly much darker, much quieter, much colder than it had been a minute before.

Panting against the pain in his foot, Timo fumbled to get his fly done up, then pulled himself onto the boulder so he was again sitting and could get his shoe off.

Better not, though. If it was in bad shape, he needed that shoe to stay on so he could get back to his room, then remove it if the foot wasn’t too badly swollen and assess the damage.

“Where did you ... learn to fight?” Timo panted, voice hushed now, holding his shin pulled up to the other knee but avoiding touching his foot.

“Self-defence class,” Noah muttered, carefully backing away from him in the dark.

“That ... explains your strategies. You know, in civilised countries we tend to have strong feelings about striking above versus below the belt. So I was once told by a young Englishman who first informed me that I was from an uncivilised country soon after I arrived here.”

“Told you that after you kicked him in the nuts?”

“I bit him, actually.”

“In the nuts?”

“No.” Timo tentatively shifted his crushed foot. “I kicked his feet out from under him, then bit his arm when he got me in a chokehold from behind.”

“He attacked while your back was turned but called you uncivilised?”

“The English are a contradictory people.”

“Appropriate for you to have joined their ranks then.”

“How’s that?”

“You just assaulted someone and then chided him for hitting below the belt.”

“‘Assault’ is a strong word.”

“Strong words are meant for strong deeds.”

Timo sighed. “I’m sorry.”

Noah simply stood there for several seconds, then, “If you’d dodged the foot stomp I’d have broken your nose, but I didn’t want to do that because ... you know. That’d be awfully visible. And you’ve got the conference next month.”

“Thanks for sparing my vanity. It means a lot to know you care.”

“No problem.” Again, Noah hesitated, looking from Timo to the hotel. Timo couldn’t see his expression in the dark but wondered if Noah was about to offer to help him back. Instead, he said, “Leave me alone, okay? You said you would leave me alone.”

Timo only nodded while Noah walked off, picking his way carefully back down the trail in the dark.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:45 am

Timo sat on the edge of the tub, trousers rolled up to his shins, feet soaking in a few inches of hot water, one hand over his eyes. Every toe on his left foot was bruised and swollen. Thankfully no worse, but he might not be able to avoid a limp for a day or two.

What was happening to his life? Tonight was impossible.

Everyone knew that. The whole goddamn universe knew how tonight was going to end: two twined souls, eyes meet across a crowded room, a holiday, an overnight resort, a day of luxury, boozing, smoking, chemistry between them fogging the windows — he even had the bloody roses.

Everyone, everyone, knew how the night ended. Everyone except Noah Cerveny. So it wasn't happening, which was impossible, defying all the laws of physics. Just impossible.

The muscles in Timo's jaw worked as he clenched and unclenched his teeth, eyes screwed up below his hand, squeezing his temples with thumb and middle finger.

What more could he possibly have done? Slower?

Kiss first? No, he was positive that wouldn't have worked.

Pushed Noah a bit more? Noah had been correct about Timo needing his nose intact right now.

It was bad enough that it sprang regular leaks.

He wouldn't be able to do his job of networking at the conference if he had a plaster on his nose and bruised face like he'd been in a car wreck.

Somebody more unscrupulous might already have slipped something into Noah's drink.

Not that Timo would ever sink that low. He liked his partners at the very least conscious and ideally enthusiastic.

And he'd never do Noah any harm. Of course not.

Noah needed protecting, watching over, wooing.

What would be useful was if someone else tried such tactics on Noah and Timo saved him and executed the perpetrator and Noah saw what a hero Timo was, how devoted and selfless he was, thinking only of Noah, and be reminded that he was in the process of falling madly in love with Timo.

This scenario being unlikely, Timo wondered if he might stage something else. Could he save Noah from being struck by a car while crossing the street, for example? Or from a mugging? Or from a bear?

Yes, a bear would be the ideal thing to save someone from and earn his undying devotion as a result, looking incredibly ripped and heroic in the process. So ... a trip to Russia? Not happening. Alaska then. Basically the same thing once you went outdoors.

All right. So all he needed to do was get Noah to invite him home to Alaska, get him out into the forest, find a bear, and make sure he was carrying ... what? Not a gun. Nothing brave about shooting an animal. A bowie knife? Sure. Or two? Just one and a rock?

So they'd go out hiking and — was it a brown bear or black bear?

Had to be brown. Had to be big. Had to be a male.

And this was the perfect season because they would go into hibernation soon.

They were all busy getting fat as butter right now, feasting on salmon and reindeer calves and human hikers who weren't saved at the last instant by their Russian-English lovers wielding nothing but a bowie knife and a fistful of sand thrown in the bear's eyes.

There'd be a media buzz and they'd end up getting married and become the famous bear couple.

Better get the bowie knife in Alaska. Airline security might be fussy about that.

Trouble was, after how Noah behaved tonight, throwing the law of averages and the whole universe out of whack by his impossible behaviour, by his not being in Timo's bed at this very moment, begging Timo for more and deeper, gasping out Timo's name as he came, he'd probably not respond correctly even if Timo saved his life from a rampaging grizzly bear with nothing but a pocketknife.

Yeah, make it a pocket knife. Not so small that it looked stupid in the press photos, but small enough to draw gasps from the crowd — “No, you tackled a grizzly with nothing but that? ”

The whole world would be fawning over their story and Timo would be recovering from a dozen ghastly wounds in hospital and Noah would be there at his bedside saying, “Meh, whatever, dude. Leave me alone.”

Because he was an idiot. The fact of the matter was that Noah was an ungrateful,

useless little idiot who couldn't even play his part in the universe, who had no idea how the world worked or how to follow cues. Son of a bitch.

There was a knock at the main room door.

Timo flew off the bath edge, didn't bother to towel his feet, didn't pause, spraying water everywhere. With no trace of a limp he ran for the door as if to disable a bomb.

He's come back. He's figured it out. Noah had realised his mistake and knew how the night would end and all was forgiven.

Of course Timo would welcome him back with open arms because everyone made mistakes and their bond would be all the stronger for the traumas and missteps they'd endured along the way.

Noah would be begging for a second chance. Timo should be stern with him after his mistake. Of course, he wouldn't be. He was too much of a softy. One look at Noah pleading for Timo's forgiveness and Timo would melt.

Timo ripped open the door, catching his breath against the wild throbbing of his heart.

"Hey." Arthur held something out. "You left your car keys downstairs."

Timo stared at the hand, at the keys, at the face, red with intoxication.

Arthur rattled the keys impatiently at Timo to get him to take them.

Timo still stared.

Arthur's gaze travelled to his rolled trouser cuffs, landed on his mud-stained knees,

and his own stare grew fixed, eyes widening.

A slow grin spread over Arthur's stupid face. "So ... how's your night going?"

Timo snatched the keys out of his wobbly hand. "You're lucky I don't have a knife." He slammed the door.

* * *

On Sunday morning, Timo breakfasted alone aside from unknown guests and Ranveer, the two of them likely being the only ones of the party not hungover and getting up at normal operating hours.

Timo meant to go for an early ride since there was no way he could run for a few days but his foot should be manageable on the bike pedal. He didn't want company, only a race with himself. Up the slopes? No, head for the sea and perhaps he could drown himself by mistake.

Ranveer didn't believe in small talk. It was one of his many charms. He was also technically vegetarian and tee-total. Although technicalities sometimes met in the great, dirty crossroads of Real Life and things happened. He'd had a drink with the rest last night but you'd never know it now.

"Ranveer?" Timo looked up from his coffee in the sunny breakfast room.

Ranveer arched a brow at Timo, his default instead of a "What?"

"Did someone pinch the keys out of my pocket last night at dinner? So they'd have an excuse to come knocking on the door later?"

Ranveer finished chewing his bite of toast, giving the question careful consideration.

“Do you want them to have pinched your keys? Or you to have dropped them?”

Timo tapped the tabletop with one finger.

He was irritated to discover he’d not thought of it that way.

Ranveer was the kind of person who was always pointing out things Timo hadn’t thought of.

One of the very few people Timo knew who managed to do this, and not the least of the reasons that Timo was convinced Ranveer was the smartest person he knew.

He looked past Ranveer when he spotted a big, broad-shouldered guy enter the room who wasn’t Maksim. Nearly as big as Maksim, but this man had a ponytail and —
“Lars?”

Ranveer looked around.

Timo hadn’t spoken loudly enough to carry across the room.

Lars found a window table and pulled out two chairs, turning to look back the way he’d come.

Sure enough, Rhys followed, carrying a card he’d picked up with menu specials.

Before he sat, he pointed out something on it to his husband and Lars grinned, nodding.

Timo sprang up.

The two men had hardly dropped into their seats before Timo was at their table.

“Rhys? What are you doing here?”

His eyes widened to see Timo. “This is a surprise. Why shouldn’t we be here? I am the one who introduced you to this place.”

“You just got married. You should be off on your honeymoon.” Timo’s mind was spinning, pulse racing, and he wasn’t sure why.

Something about Rhys, something critical, life or death, was sparking around in his brain, but what was the problem?

He hated this sensation, loss of control, unsure where to turn or what he felt, and it made him snappish, though it wasn’t as if he minded Rhys being here.

“We were. We’re back, had a few days to spare, and I’d been meaning to show Lars this place for ages. We thought it would be nice to spend the days here before we return to work.” Rhys frowned. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Are you okay?” Far from annoyed by the interruption, Lars looked worried as he watched Timo.

“I have to talk to you,” Timo snapped at Rhys. “Right now. Alone. It’s urgent.”

“You can say whatever you have to say in front of us both.” Rhys still frowned, not budging, but Lars leaned in, perhaps nudging Rhys with his foot under the table, giving Rhys a meaningful look.

“Please.” Timo just stopped himself from plucking at a sleeve. He had to see Rhys and he had to find out — yes. All at once he understood what was buzzing through his blood and rattling his skin. Or at least knew the right questions to ask.

Exasperated, Rhys followed him around the corner to the empty stairwell.

“What’s going on, Tim?” Rhys asked. “Are you on holiday?”

Million-pound question.

“Business outing. Rhys?” Timo turned to him at the foot of the stairs. He was still striking. They must have made an incomparable couple and Timo had failed to appreciate it enough, as if men like Rhys grew on trees.

Rhys rested a hand on the newel post, waiting. “Yes?”

Timo kissed him, grabbing his face, shoving him back into the banister.

He had only a couple of seconds worth of pure surprise to work with, Rhys reacting fast, shoving violently back so hard that Timo almost fell, staggering and grabbing the opposite post. Rhys followed, his whole energy transformed, wrathful, fists bunching.

“What the fuck is your problem?” His lowered voice was actually shaking with rage.

Hmm. Timo gripped the post at his back, considering. No ... That hadn’t done anything for him. Sure, there were moments he still missed Rhys, perhaps always would, but that had nothing to do with anything lately.

No electricity. No blinding flash to tell him that his misguided fixation on Noah was nothing more than redirected passion thanks to seeing the man Timo should have married three years ago marry someone else. Nothing.

At the end of the day, Timo was honestly happy for Rhys. Rhys deserved someone like Lars who would take care of him, who probably told Rhys he loved him every

day.

So it wasn't anything to do with Rhys? Where did that leave Timo?

It left him about to get punched.

Rhys was right in his face, lecturing him about years ago, and telling him to stay away from Rhys and Lars if he was going to act like this.

Timo had always been the volatile one in their relationship. It was kind of sexy to see Rhys so worked up. Still not sexy enough to make him revise his new conclusions.

“Well? Are you going to say anything?” Now Rhys was apparently also annoyed that Timo wasn't defending himself.

“It's ... too hard to explain.” Timo, still leaning away from him, tried for a smile. “I'm sorry I did that.”

“No you're not. I'm the one who trained you to say that. You're only able to read people enough to know when it's called for; not able to feel it.”

“Really, Rhys, I didn't mean anything by it. It's not as if I don't know the magic is gone and wish you and Lars every —” He stopped, mouth open, eyes blipping out of focus. Then breathed, “Fuck it ...” He blinked. “Rhys ... Magic?”

“What?”

Timo snatched at his arm.

Rhys jumped back. “No. Keep your hands off me.”

Why did Timo keep hearing that lately?

“Rhys, something did happen that day.”

“What day?”

“Your wedding day.”

“Yes. I got married.”

“No ...” Timo snapped his fingers several times. “Julian. His name was Julian.”

“What about him?”

“I have to speak to him. It’s urgent.”

“You said this was urgent,” Rhys snarled but Timo cut him off.

“Please, I’m begging you. I’m sorry I did that. I haven’t been myself; I’ve been ... fuck ... I don’t even know. Strung out and I’m not even taking anything. Something’s wrong and it started that day and I don’t ... I really, really, really need to talk to Julian. Please.”

Rhys watched him, stance finally softening a bit. Still he hesitated, but something about Timo’s tone or expression must have got through to him. At last, he said, “You can reach him on his website. He’s an astrologer in London. Julian Ardenghi. Just search and he should come up.”

Timo nodded, gulping a breath, newly discovering he’d skipped several. “Thank you.”

Rhys backed away from him, his frown returned, although no longer furious. Perhaps more worried. “Sure. Look after yourself, Tim.” He turned for the breakfast room, leaving Timo alone.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:45 am

It had been so easy to sleep at the office on Monday night without anyone being the wiser, Noah assumed he could get away with Tuesday as well. No one had noticed his bags tucked under his desk. No one questioned him being first in or last out.

Then Tuesday evening rolled around and everyone drifted out, two or three at a time, Noah pretending to leave as well, only to discover Timo was still in his office. Leave and come back? He did need dinner.

Without a word, he slunk past Timo's office so as not to say goodnight and risk a conversation. Although "altercation" would be a better word for his time alone with Timo.

Over his solitary Thai dinner with fresh summer rolls and ginger prawns in vegetables, his mind played on loops that he'd been reliving since Saturday night.

His parents, his first love, that night in February, city life, school, London, Timo, all leading to Saturday night in Wales, to Noah spending his spa vacation night staring at the ceiling, fighting suffocation, fighting tears, wishing he hadn't walked away.

Timo's behaviour was so inappropriate, so unacceptable, of course Noah had to walk away. He couldn't encourage someone like that. Timo was Noah's boss; he was abusing his power; sexual harassment now escalated to assault. Noah had 100% done the right thing. No question.

No matter how many times Noah reminded himself of that, he still lay awake wishing he'd done the wrong thing. However stunning and magnetic Timo was, however amazing the sex might promise to be, he could not let pure instinct take over.

He hadn't been carefully avoiding Timo ever since Sunday because he was afraid Timo would try something again. He'd been avoiding Timo because he wanted Timo to try something again. That was what turned his stomach.

Noah had a month left in the country. After that, he would almost certainly never see Timo again.

He couldn't possibly get into anything complicated now, couldn't commit in any way.

That said, he also didn't have much to lose.

So why not? Why not try being with someone again?

Why not tell Timo the truth? Why live in this endless state of panic?

Then what? Set the scene for a predator to go after the next junior he hired?

Instead of encouraging him, Noah should be reporting him.

In order to drag out his time for as long as possible before going back to read and sleep on the floor, Noah ordered a scoop of coconut ice cream.

He ate as slowly as he could, tiny licks off his spoon one by one, watching the round scoop begin to melt into the bottom of the glass dish.

What if it was real? What if — yes it seemed wild and impossible and hardly worth thinking of — Timo really was in love with him?

What if instant action and pressing his company at Noah was all he knew to show his feelings and, given Noah's impending departure anyway, it wouldn't hurt to explore

the possibility?

No ... Noah was romanticising a creep. He couldn't help being flattered on some level by the lavish attention, but the whole thing was messed up and Noah had to stay away.

Even if he didn't want to? Well, if Noah didn't want to stay away it was only a result of unruly hormones and these mind games, more akin to Stockholm Syndrome than genuine, healthy affection.

His regrets about fleeing on Saturday, about lying awake all night alone instead of going back, were just the same: unhealthy.

But what if he did tell Timo the truth? How would Timo respond? What if not telling him was ultimately hurting Noah more than anyone because Noah regretted not going back and —?

Ugh.

Noah screwed up his eyes, trying to focus on the taste of coconut melting on his tongue.

He'd never told anyone the truth about that February night — not doctors, not cops, not his mother — and he wasn't going to start now. One day. One day when he'd met someone who really was special to him, who could be the one; someone with whom he shared all. Not his predatory boss.

If this was all so hard, why not leave? Book a flight, go back to the States, get a job.

It was what he would be doing anyway. But he'd be in a sorry state trying to get all that done on the fly if he didn't save up another month's worth of pay so he could live

on it for a good chunk of time once he got back there and had time to choose where he'd live and what he'd do.

Did he even want to keep trading among wolves? Or go back to IT?

Finally, Noah returned to the office. He would stay, get the income and experience, avoid Timo; everything would be fine.

He needed something else to focus on. That was the problem.

How about rentals and job listings? He could do that tonight, lull himself to sleep browsing Manhattan lofts: Serious motivation to stay and work those remaining weeks.

He started down the dim hallway, only for a man to step into his path.

Noah sprang back, heart in throat, swearing.

Timo also jumped, lifting his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Hell," Timo muttered, "you startled me. Heard someone after the cleaning crew already came and went ..."

He was startled? Noah was shaking with the shock and comedown.

"What are you doing here?" Noah asked.

"Just playing with numbers." Timo shrugged. "I stay late sometimes, watch Wall Street in real time. What are you doing here? Forgot something?"

"Uh... Yes." Big enough that he'd come back two hours after leaving? "My phone."

Timo made a face. "Was it a long way? Where are you staying?"

Noah was hit with a fresh wave of panic, only to decide that no, Timo wasn't suspicious. It was, in fact, a perfectly normal question.

"Just an Airbnb room ... south. So, uh, do you learn anything interesting by staying in late?"

"More like useful." Timo drifted back into his office.

Noah didn't hang about making conversation. He power-walked to his desk, rummaged for a moment, pretending to find his phone, turned, and again jumped to find Timo at the edge of Noah's trading terminal.

"I have people coming into the city on Friday. Tell me, if you could see only three things in London, what would they be?"

"Oh ... The Tower, Hyde Park or Oxford Street depending on their tastes, and ... a river cruise to see the city from the Thames?"

"River cruise ..." Timo mused as he turned away. "Very good."

Noah let out a breath.

Here they were, all alone in the world, at night, and Timo didn't start anything. Wasn't that a good sign? That they could have a normal working relationship? Or was Timo trying to lure him into a false sense of security?

Noah started to follow him out, about to hurry away, maybe go to a movie? Or just sit in the stairwell listening until Timo left for the night so Noah could go to bed?

Timo turned around just beyond the doorway, making Noah stop abruptly and take a step back.

Timo was frowning. “Is that luggage under your desk?”

“What? No.” Noah winced. “Yeah, it’s my bags.”

Timo gazed past him to the bags nestled in shadows below the desk, then to Noah, waiting expectantly.

When Noah said nothing, Timo asked, “Am I supposed to guess?”

“I just needed to leave some stuff here.”

“You were here when I got in this morning,” Timo said.

“So?”

“Are you sleeping here?” His tone was interested, not heated or accusatory, as if still asking about the best local attractions.

Noah cleared his throat. “It’s really inefficient to constantly move from room to room and also have to take the horrible commute morning and evening.”

“Am I not paying you enough?”

“I can afford a room. Everything’s booked up or too far away or hundreds of pounds a night — and that’s just stupid. I need to save —”

“So you don’t actually have anywhere to stay right now?”

Noah shifted, glared at the desk. “Kind of.”

“Come to my place. I need to get home anyway.”

Noah snorted. “Yeah, right.”

Timo cocked his head. “You can have the bedroom. I’ll take the couch.”

“I bet.”

“Do you want to sleep here?”

Noah glanced at him. “Obviously, if I stayed at your place, you would take advantage of the situation because that’s just who you are. So, yeah, compared to dealing with that shit? I’d rather sleep here.”

Timo blinked, took half a step back, his gaze unfocused. “Understandable. I’ve not made your life easy lately, have I?”

“No, you haven’t.”

“I’ll make it up to you. What is it you need? A room for the next five weeks, close to work, and not chopping into your income?”

“Yeah, that about sums it up. And a unicorn.”

“Let’s find you a room.” Timo returned to his office.

Uneasy but too curious not to follow, Noah watched while Timo pulled up London hotels on his desktop.

“Here we go ...” Timo murmured as he checked dates and rooms. “I don’t know what you’re complaining about. You can get in here starting ... tomorrow. Five weeks? What’s your departure day?”

“I don’t know for sure. Haven’t got my flight.”

“We’ll just say an even five for now. King suite?”

“Wait, Timo, that’s the —”

“Breakfast? See? No problem.” Timo clicked Book to be directed to a payment page.

“Christ! Stop it! Timo, that’s over sixty-six thousand pounds.” Noah grabbed his hand, pulling it away from the mouse.

“So it is.” Timo swivelled in the chair to look up at him, tone mild. “But just imagine all the overhead the Ritz juggles — and I’m sure the breakfast is good.”

Noah was sweating, heart pounding at the thought of wasting all that money. “No, no, no, do not book that. I’d rather you donate it somewhere than spend that much on a stupid hotel room.”

“Where?” Again, Timo seemed interested.

Noah opened and closed his mouth.

“So, where are you going to stay?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“I wouldn’t be looking after my pack if I didn’t make sure you had a place to sleep at night. How about this: I’ll book the room, or, for absolutely free, you can stay with me until you find a better option.” Timo smiled up at him. “One or the other.”

“That’s blackmail.”

“We usually call it ‘a helping hand’ in this country, but I cannot claim to have mastered every cultural intricacy.”

“You have to realise why I can’t stay with you. Do you even have a guest room?”

“I have a couch. I will take the couch. You can have the bed. Breakfast optional. Depending on if you make it or not. Hands off, unless you say otherwise.”

“That would last about thirty seconds.”

“Cross my heart.” Timo rested a hand over his heart. “I do have that conference coming up next month, you know? I must look smart. No broken bones. And if you don’t like the view, we can always find you a hotel room.”

Noah chewed his lip, glanced at the glowing screen.

True that he could simply leave if Timo’s bad behaviour escalated.

Classic stupid move, going to live with a guy like this.

But Noah looked at him and remembered lying awake regretting, not what Timo had done on Saturday night, but what Noah had done. Finally, Noah nodded.

“You’re sure you won’t have anything?”

“I really did just have dinner.” Noah sat stiffly in the middle of the couch, feet squarely on the floor, hands on knees, looking like someone awaiting a mug shot. “Thanks, though. It smells good.”

“Wine? Tea? Make yourself at home.” Timo started to eat.

“I don’t suppose you have anything herbal?”

“Ginger. In the cabinet beside the fridge. Mugs in the next one over.”

“Thanks,” Noah said again and stood. “Kettle?”

“Instant hot water tap. The one on the left.”

“That’s genius.”

“I invented it myself.”

Noah laughed a little nervously.

By the time he returned to the couch, he still looked as comfortable as a lobster dangling over a boiling pot, but at least he had something to do with his hands.

Timo said nothing, only ate, smiling on the inside.

Everything was going to be all right now.

Whatever was happening to him was going to stop tomorrow because he had a meeting with the man in black over his lunch break and he was going to get to the bottom of this and see that it stopped.

He'd talked to Julian by text on Monday, set up the meeting at a coffee shop on Wednesday, and knew he had only two more days to get over this whole thing with Noah.

What and how and details didn't matter. Somehow, someway, something had happened to him starting the night of the wedding and it was Julian's fault.

Now he was going to get it sorted and the fact that in the meantime, in these last few hours of his own insanity, Noah was actually in his home, right here, about to sleep here, a couple rooms away from Timo, was totally unimportant and uninteresting because Timo willed it to be so.

Just thinking about the meeting was distracting enough that Timo hardly even noticed Noah here with him.

Right here. Right now. Much more interested in his dinner, in fact, than his casual work friend employee person who just happened to need a place to crash and Timo offered because that was what friends did.

Practically invisible as far as Timo was concerned.

He ate and Noah fiddled with the string on his tea bag and looked at the view.

The penthouse was quiet. Timo didn't like quiet. He liked action, conversation, getting things done, seeing things happen and making them happen. Normally, he'd

have on news or be listening to one of his audio programs over dinner, possibly texting someone or checking trades at the same time.

But no, he had a reticent guest and he ate and didn't turn anything on.

Chivalrous. That was what Timo was. It was a good word. His picture could be beside it in the dictionary. Other relevant, interesting English words included imperturbable and valorous, which was one of the many words Americans didn't know how to spell.

"I'm fine out here," Noah said. "Really. I'd rather be on the couch than turf you out of your bed."

Turf was an excellent example of the many English words that could sound the same, possibly be spelled the same, and mean totally different things.

Noah's use of it was quite unusual in Timo's experience, however.

Timo appreciated that. Day-to-day vocabularies tended to be so limited he needed his audiobooks to make sure his own did not sink to the same level as the average English football fan's.

"If you're sure," Timo said, finishing off his dinner. "It's entirely up to you. Wherever you like."

Noah shifted, rubbed the back of his neck, turned the mug in his hands, and took a careful drink. He pursed his lips, tapped the mug with a finger, looked at Timo, then away.

Timo cleared his plate and took his dishes to the dishwasher.

“I do get up early, but it’s just to get out for my morning run.

I’ll be quiet. Then it takes about fifteen minutes to get to the office from here.

Please help yourself to anything in the kitchen and bathroom and plan your own schedule accordingly.

I’ll show you where the linens are. Use whatever you like to make up the couch. ”

Noah joined him to see where everything was, then they returned to the kitchen while Timo also got a cup of ginger tea.

“Are there any programs on British television you enjoy, Noah?”

From standing by the bar, again looking out the mighty windows, Noah rounded on him. “Okay, what is this? What are you doing?”

Timo pressed his tea bag with a spoon to extract the air bubbles and make it sink and steep. “Making tea? Hot herbal beverage if you want to be factual. Tisane , if you prefer.”

“Why are you acting like this?”

“How am I acting?”

“Like a normal person.”

“Am I?” Timo was startled. No wonder most people were so boring. Those must be the normal ones.

“Yeah, you’re like ... calm and reasonable and all ... mild-mannered.”

“You don’t like it?”

“No. I mean ... I would if I thought this was just you. But it’s not.”

“How do you want me to be?”

That shut him up: looked like he’d walked into a glass wall.

Timo smiled down at his ginger beverage.

“I — it’s not that bad. It’s just that you’re obviously scheming, so that’s the problem. It’s not how you’re acting — it’s that it’s an act.”

“You’re saying you like me best when I’m my authentic self?” Timo squeezed out the bag with the string wrapped around the spoon. This was turning out to be more fun than he’d expected.

“I didn’t — I don’t —” Noah turned away. “You’re putting words in my mouth.”

“A strange expression.”

“Most of them are when you start to think about it.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to it. Feel free to watch TV. I’ll use earbuds so you won’t bother me, and I’ll be up for a while yet. Just knock if you need anything, or you can always text me.”

“Sure ...” Noah watched him in apparently stunned silence while Timo walked away for the bedroom.

He’d only meant to keep his mind focused elsewhere, to keep reminding himself that

he was going to do something to stop this whole disaster tomorrow.

He'd no idea the results would be so satisfying.

Indeed, by the time he'd retired, he half expected Noah to come knocking on the door, at least for an argument, if not to climb into bed with him.

Timo's mother used to tell him to run at a dog if he wanted to scare it away; only run away from a dog if he wanted it to follow.

He'd been a small boy at the time and her advice was in no way meant to be metaphorical.

Now, though, for the first time in many years, the words came back to Timo as he settled his earbuds in place to continue his audiobook. How very interesting.

* * *

He'd almost allowed himself to become distracted last night, letting Noah get in his head, make him start thinking of new wooing strategies instead of remembering that he was going to put an end to this nightmare.

Then getting up in the morning for his run and protein shake and Noah was there, right there, T-shirt and boxer shorts to sleep, in Timo's home, and he'd felt lucky to escape with his life.

If this continued — it just couldn't. His profit/loss ratio suffered, his sleep was destroyed, his life was in chaos, and now the source of all the trouble was living with him while still holding him at arm's length.

Surely all the troubles he'd been having with Noah before were nothing compared to

this.

But there was one bright spot, one hope: Noah wasn't the source of all this trouble, was he?

What had really happened to Timo? Was it possible, really possible, that Julian had somehow cursed him?

It was completely ridiculous. But so was his whole life right now.

Something was happening, something beyond Timo's control, and this man in black who turned out to be an astrologer of all things, might possibly know something about it.

To save himself any slip-ups in his new casual attitude towards Noah, Timo left for work half an hour early just to escape. Even the smell of Noah's shampoo turned out to be alluring.

The day cartwheeled past in a blur until lunch when Timo dashed to the Tube, then to the south London coffee shop several minutes early.

He started for the small queue to get his drink and wait, only to spot Julian, all in black again, already at a table, reading on his phone, coffee mug in front of him.

Timo thought he was going to keep calm for the chat.

He thought he was going to ask what was happening and keep an open mind and clearly but firmly state that it all had to stop.

Then he saw that man with his black boots, his amulets, and arrogant expression, chill and unconcerned as a tray of ice, and Timo knew in a flash that what he really

wanted, deep down, was to murder him.

He dropped into the chair opposite Julian and sat forward, arms on the little round table, pulse pounding, chest hot.

“What the hell have you done to my life?” Timo growled.

Julian looked up from his phone. “Good morning. Fine, thanks for asking. I’m Julian.”

“Don’t fuck with me. You were at the wedding. You said you cast magic spells. I said that was bullshit. You said I’d see one, or you’d cast one on me or something. The next day my whole life was in tatters. What did you do?”

“Is that so? Sounds like you’re the one who needs to tell me what I did.” Julian sat back, taking his coffee cup with him. His expression was hard to read but possibly bored.

“No. You tell me what you did and how it works. What is going on with me?”

“I really couldn’t say, but I can offer referrals for professional help if you —”

“I’m not playing around. I want to know what you did and I want to know how you’re going to undo it. Now.”

Julian simply looked at him while Timo fought with his own tone and the burning anger that bubbled up against his throat.

He tried again. “Will you please tell me if you’ve done something to me?”

“What difference would that make? You said yourself my magick wasn’t ‘real’. So

why ask?"

"I don't know about that. All I know is that I was fine when I went to the wedding, then I ran into you and I started having problems."

"Yeah, I'm going out on a limb to say, I didn't cause your problems." Julian took a drink.

"So you didn't do anything? This is all in my head?"

"Did I say I didn't do anything?"

Timo leaned in. "What is going on?"

"How should I know? You haven't even said what's wrong."

"What did you do? "

"Nothing sinister. Just demonstrating that bit of magick you were so eager to see. I'd have thought the effects were obvious, but perhaps one of us missed something."

"Obvious how? What's it do?"

"My spell? The spell I didn't cast on you because there's no such thing?"

"What's it do? "

"What do you think it does?"

"Makes me obsessed, a single-minded addict, destroying my work, taking over my life, absorbing all my time, looping thoughts, recurring dreams dropped into sleepless

nights.”

“Sounds about right. Also known as a love spell.”

Timo stared at him, silent for the first time. Julian took a drink, gazing back into his eyes. Although unsmiling, his eyes were dancing — laughing at Timo.

Timo spoke slowly and carefully, trying to make himself understand, to force this to be real and therefore fixable. “You put a love spell on me?”

“That’s right.”

“You somehow made me obsessed with my most junior employee , who has absolutely no interest, who is more than a decade younger and scared shitless of me, wrecking my whole life, to prove a point? ”

Julian grinned. “Nice. I only worded it to be someone totally and maximally wrong for you to fall for. I’d no idea who it’d be.”

“You think this is funny?”

“That you still don’t believe in magick while also claiming that your life was destroyed by it? Yeah, that’s pretty funny.”

“Take it off,” Timo ordered.

“Sure, but we’ll have to go in the back. Public decency laws in this city.”

Timo half stood, hands on the table, leaning towards Julian. “Take your fucking spell off me and Noah.”

“There’s nothing on Noah. You’re the one lucky winner.”

“Then take it off of me. Stop it, destroy it, burn it, whatever it is you do. Cancel that spell.”

“Or what?” Julian raised an eyebrow. “You’ll sue me?”

Timo looked down at the coffee cup.

Your Honour, this man put a magic spell on me and I demand that he remove it.

I see. What kind of magic spell?

The kind that drives a man mad.

Indeed. The court can see as much.

Slowly, Timo sat, only for Julian to stand.

“It’s been time-consuming running into you again, but I must be on my way.”

“You’re not going to leave? You haven’t even explained what’s happening.”

“I did. And you did,” Julian said coolly.

“I put a spell on you to drive you to fall for the most unsuitable person in your social circles. You’ve been managing all the rest brilliantly.

You, however, don’t believe in magick or energetic influences, do you?

So that’s that.” He drained the final swallows from his coffee cup.

Timo also stood. “You can’t leave me like this.”

“Why not?”

“It’s taken over my life. I don’t deserve to be tortured for no reason.”

“Sounds very character-building to me.” Julian pocketed his phone. “Now I must be off to actual clients. Yours is just a charity case.”

“Charity —?” Timo moved to intercept as Julian turned away. “That’s it then? I’ll pay you. I’ll pay you to undo whatever it is you’ve done. How much do you want?”

Julian directed a cold gaze at him. “You know, I didn’t like you from the moment I saw you. But I do love being validated on first impressions.” He walked out.

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The trouble was that Timo had allowed himself to get all worked up over something that wasn't real.

Not that how he felt for Noah wasn't real.

That was as real as a nuclear bomb — and nearly as inconvenient.

No, it was the whole magic spell rubbish.

He had grasped at straws, risen to being taunted by some asshole.

Obviously there was no spell on him because such things did not exist.

Equally obvious, he'd been played: Julian had kept asking what Timo thought was wrong, relying on questions to get Timo to explain himself, not unlike a fortune-teller using apparently innocent questions and simple observational skills to say whatever the victim wanted to hear. Just basic cold reading.

What Timo had momentarily forgotten was that he, and only he, was in control over his own emotions, life, and destiny.

And yes, how he felt, by his own free will and free desires, was utterly consumed and enthralled, which was a perfectly normal thing to happen to anyone.

Nothing wrong with that. A robust, healthy way to feel, in fact.

All he had to do to put this right was embrace it, make it his own: take charge.

If there was a spell on him, which there wasn't because that was impossible, but if there was a spell, and if someone like Julian had put it on him, it all came to the same thing.

He had to prove he was the better man, the one in control, the one who could spin shit into gold.

Two could play the proverbial game; and if Timo was going to play, he was going to win.

What did winning look like when someone, no, something, inexplicable had overrun his mind by making him fall for someone who was avoiding him?

Timo swivelled his office chair back and forth, back and forth at his desk.

His positions were closed and he should be taking the time to check in with others.

He'd been in his office all day, sitting or pacing.

Instead of trades, he had Julian's webpage up on his master screen.

Lunch had come and gone. He never felt hungry these days.

A protein shake, dinner out of habit, but how could he eat when he was suffering a bereavement by the love of his life shunning him?

He was losing weight, which meant losing muscle, and that had to stop. Just another example of how what was happening to him had shunted him to the back of the field and he had to shift strategies if he ever hoped to win this.

He let the chair come to a stop, imagining first kisses with Noah. At home? A club?

Here in the office? While walking through a museum together? In Paris?

None of that. That was how he became distracted and failed to find his way to the front of the field. What was he missing?

Timo drummed his fingers on the desk, pulled apart the magnetic beads there and popped them back together with satisfying clicks, morphing the lump into several positions while he imagined several positions with Noah, then again shook himself out of the reverie.

“Timo?” Spencer in the doorway.

“Not now,” Timo said absently, never glancing around.

Spencer vanished.

Timo popped the beads, spun the chair around, wondered if there was anything Noah liked to do for fun that was actually worthwhile.

He was a good biker but out of shape for it.

You had to be in practice to tackle real hills.

Although he'd managed well for someone who'd not been on a mountain bike in years once the likes of Arthur hadn't been slamming on the brakes in front of him.

Perhaps Timo could talk Noah into local rides together? Just the two of them, start to get Noah back into it? Surrey Hills? Less than an hour from London with mixed but easy trails compared to Snowdonia. Saturday?

Noah would never go for it.

He might if Timo kept being chill at home and Noah also relaxed. Timo should get him a bike.

But it wasn't all about gifts, was it? Noah hadn't even wanted the hotel room. Run away to get the dog to chase you.

He was distracted again. What about winning? How could he beat this?

Timo's fingers stilled on the magnets. He rested them on his desk. His feet stilled on the floor and he faced his master screen.

How did you beat someone at their own game?

Step one: know the game. Step two: know the rules. Step three: play the game better than anyone else at the table.

Timo rested his fingers on the keyboard. He paused.

He opened a new browser window. Another pause.

Carefully, he typed in, How to make someone fall in love.

* * *

"Timo?" Noah tapped at the office door before opening it. Timo wasn't there, screens still lit up. Probably a nosebleed.

"He's gone," Spencer said and Noah turned.

"Is he?" Noah frowned again at the office. "In a bit of a hurry looks like. Where to?"

“Socialising with his stable of insiders, I assume. But I didn’t have meetings on the schedule for him this evening.” Spencer shrugged. “Need anything?”

“It’s okay. I can ask Ranveer. Thanks.”

Spencer went on down the hall and Noah slipped into the office to see the displayed website that was clearly unrelated to work, wondering if this was what had called Timo away.

But no, it was, of all things, a site for a local astrologer.

Bewildered, Noah couldn’t help reading through the page for a minute, leaning past Timo’s luxurious desk chair.

Timo had no interest in astrology. Could it be that he was looking for other ways to treat Noah? Gifting him a reading? That wasn’t Timo’s style. But his behaviour all week hadn’t been Timo’s style, ever since Noah had come to stay at his place he’d been weird.

Or, rather, normal Timo was weird and suddenly he’d not been weird. It actually seemed that he was the one avoiding Noah lately, and when their paths crossed Timo was skin-crawlingly pleasant. It was creeping Noah out more than the obnoxious Timo had.

He couldn’t know that Noah’s birthday was coming up, could he? Some of his memories from the Welsh spa were a bit hazy, but he did remember telling Timo he was into astrology and Timo showing not the slightest interest.

He should leave it alone. Still, as long as the page was here, inviting him, why not get in touch and see if he could set up a meeting on his own?

He'd had such a thing on his mind since meeting the Capricorn massage therapist in Wales.

If Timo surprised him with a gift reading, all the better; Noah wouldn't have to pay.

Noah dialled the number and turned away to the window. Like his penthouse, Timo's office had a million-pound view. Noah gazed across the City of London while he listened to the rings, then left a voicemail, asking about getting in for a chart within the next week or two.

Leaving the office as he found it, Noah shut the door, returned to his own desk, and had just remembered he had a question for Ranveer when his phone, still in his hand, buzzed and he answered without thinking.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is Julian. I thought that was a junk call from a US number."

"Oh, thanks for calling back. I'm only staying over here for a while."

"You're in London?"

"Yes, wondering if you have any openings to do a chart sometime soon?"

"How about now?"

"Uh..."

"I had a cancellation at five. If you can tell me or text me your birth details, exact time and place, I can see you then, otherwise it'll probably be a couple weeks."

“I have a photo of my birth certificate on my phone thanks to student visa paperwork. But I’m at work. Not sure if I can get to you that fast. Where are you?”

Noah took notes on scratch paper, said he’d text the image right over, then that he’d also text right back once he figured out if he could get there, and scrambled to do both as soon as he hung up. Could he just leave?

He’d lost money trading today and he didn’t usually do that, which was why he’d been going to Timo before Timo saw and pointed it out to him.

Timo loved pointing out to people when they were losing his money on bad trades.

Noah had thought he could turn it around, maybe with some advice from Ranveer, not let the day close with him in the red, even if it was a minor amount, and even if his record was usually sound.

Noah wasn’t a massive earner like Chandler, who would take any risks and had the luck of a leprechaun, but a solid, steady earner who was quickly learning his way.

Ending the day in the red was not okay. Then again, his positions were closed, Timo himself had left early, and he would do better to wait for advice and tackle this on a new day.

Considering how weird his life was lately, he really wanted this reading, craving all the help he could get. Besides, what was the worst that could happen? Timo would fire him? As if.

Noah wrote back that he’d be there by five pm.

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Julian, a sharp-featured, black-haired man in his late twenties or early thirties, faced Noah across a table, tapping with a gel pen and making notes on the chart printout and a second sheet with a symbol key and more notes that he kept adding to.

They were in his office, a dimly lit, stone-walled space of candles and astrology-related prints in an old church in Bromhurst.

“Well, at least Saturn will move on from your natal Venus pretty soon, that should generally mean a more relaxed vibe when it comes to connecting with others, also romance, of course. Saturn restricts and puts up limits, so it can feel claustrophobic, and Venus prefers a more flowy existence. Once he’s moved on, your love life and general pleasure level are going to get a boost or at the very least return to normal.

Couple months, maybe? The pressure should already be easing.

And there’s a lot going on in your ninth house at the moment — great for higher education and long-distance travel.

You might also question and update your belief system and overall philosophy of life.
”

Noah grimaced. “I wish I was travelling a bit less. I don’t want to leave London but I have to with my visa running out in a month. I could do with less travel and more stability right now.”

“Ah, yeah, with Uranus in the fourth, where you live and overall family life has been somewhat turbulent and subject to abrupt changes. The bad news is Uranus stays

seven years in every sign, but the good news is you're five years into this transit.

The best way to deal with Uranus is to stay open-minded and flexible and put some trust in the universe.

It can feel like Uranus is just flipping tables, but the goal is to upgrade that area of your life and liberate you from restrictions.

The bad news is, as the saying goes, resistance is futile.

He also brings plenty of new experiences.

It's a perfect time to meet new people or try new things. ”

“That’s been happening. Honestly, I’ve been experiencing too many new things lately. Graduation, new job, lost my flat, and now my boss is hitting on me and driving me crazy.” Noah sighed.

Very slowly, Julian looked up from his notes. “Your boss wouldn’t happen to be a Russian named Timofei?”

Noah wasn’t stunned that Julian might know who Timo was since he’d possibly just been in touch with Julian to arrange a reading for Noah. But he was stunned because “boss” and “hitting on me” shouldn’t have been part of Julian’s toolkit of information if that was how he knew Timo.

“Uh... yeah. Timofei Volkov. He runs a prop shop in London. How do you know that?”

Julian sat back, staring at Noah. It took him a moment to reply and, when he did, it wasn’t to answer Noah’s question.

“How’s that working out?”

“How’s what working out?”

“Your boss. Is he bothering you?”

“Bothering me?” Noah snorted. “Timo’s a menace. I know I should have reported him for harassment, and then the whole assault thing, don’t get me started —”

Julian, who’d been very businesslike and direct all through the meeting, almost brusque, now stared at Noah with his eyes slowly widening as Noah talked.

“— but I’m just trying to get through the next month and then I’ll be gone anyway. I want this job. I have the chance to bring home tens of thousands if I do it well, so it’s no small matter to walk away just because the boss is a jackal.”

“He assaulted you?”

“It was ...” Noah shrugged. “We’d been drinking. I got away from him. I’ve told him no again and again, but he won’t back down. I can deal with him for another month, it’s just damn hard to feel like you’re being circled by vultures all the time. How do you know Timo?”

When Julian only looked at him, the silence growing uncomfortable, Noah glanced down at the pages. “So, anything else I should know? Can you tell me more about moon sign influences? I’ve never really been clear on how the sun sign and moon sign affect you differently.”

Julian abruptly stood. “Ever had a tarot reading?”

“No, but that’s okay. I’m more interested in astrology.”

“On the house.” Julian was back in his seat in a flash, shuffling the cards.

“Okay ...” Noah watched while Julian plunked down the deck and turned over the first card.

Both men gazed at it for a moment in silence: the devil.

“Yes,” Julian said quietly, “but him or me?”

Noah looked between card and card reader. “What’s going on?”

Julian flipped another card. Seven circular flowers or coins interwoven through vines.

“Are you a gambler, Noah?” Julian still didn’t look up.

“I’m a prop trader. So yes, gambling is my job right now.”

“Right now?”

“I’ve been in school and working in IT, still not totally sure where I’m going. Especially after a lousy day like today.”

He glanced up. “You’ve been losing?”

“Yeah.”

Another card, a golden wheel with runic-looking symbols on it, and Julian laughed.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about what?”

“Never mind.” Again, Julian sat back. “I’m really sorry about what’s happened to you. That was shortsighted of me.”

“Happened to me?” Noah glanced from the three cards to Julian’s face. “You’re only the messenger. You didn’t do anything.”

“Oh, but I did. Are you familiar with the practice of modern witchcraft?”

“Heard of, not familiar.”

“My skill set is not limited to astrologer and coffee connoisseur. About a month ago, I attended a friend’s wedding, where I ran into one of life’s little critics.

I should have walked away, but there’s no fun in that and I was in a bad mood.

He called me a charlatan, said he wanted proof, so I said okay and put a spell on him as soon as I got home. ”

“Come again?”

“He was there alone, had a bad nosebleed that he got under control while standing in a corner alone, and I’d a hunch he was trying to pick me up when he first addressed us.

With that information, nicking one of the blood-soaked paper towels from the bin that he’d used, and learning his name from Lars, I decided what such a poor lonely soul needed was a love spell. Really just doing him a favour.”

“You’re joking.”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

Noah stared at him. Julian stared back.

“Okay —” Julian shrugged. “So I didn’t mean it as a favour.

But how was I supposed to know he’d go for you?

To be clear, we’re talking about nudging existing energies and influences in our perceived waking reality.

Not fireballs and summoning flesh-and-blood dragons.

Your boss had it in him to fall for you, or there’d have been nothing on Earth or beyond I could have done to push him your way by magick.

But he did and I did — and it looks like you’re the one suffering for it. I’m sorry about that.”

“You’re serious? You cast some kind of spell on Timo? Like a long-distance hypnosis, a power-of-suggestion thing?”

“Sure, something like that.”

“And made him obsessed with me? Won’t leave me alone?

Like a damn stalker for a boss?” Noah’s voice kept rising as he went on.

He had no idea if he even believed Julian, but it made more sense than anything else that had happened between Noah and Timo in the past month.

“No subtlety, either. I’ve had to put up with his advances, my co-workers’ mockery and back-stabbing, and now I can hardly even get away from the man for an hour at a

time because, in addition to working together all day, I'm living with him! ”

Julian sat back, eyebrows raised. “I can't take the credit for that. If you want to move that fast it's up to you.”

“I don't want to live with him!” Noah was on his feet. “I don't have any other good options! I happen to be homeless right now!”

Julian gazed for a moment at the ceiling, as if considering offering a space, as if wondering how sorry he really was. Either that wasn't it, or he decided he wasn't sorry enough to actually do anything about it.

“I shouldn't have kicked all this off,” Julian said calmly. “You've every reason to be upset, but it was never meant for you. You said you're soon returning to North America?”

Noah snorted and started pacing in a circle around his own chair. “As if that would stop him. He'll probably follow me. Even if I leave prop trading. He's certifiable. Don't you know the Spider-Man quote?”

Julian frowned. “Does whatever a spider can?”

“‘With great power comes great responsibility.’ You can't go around doing that kind of thing to people. Saying it's only a little energetic nudge is no excuse. Hypnosis can lead someone to walking off a bridge!”

“Voltaire said that.”

“Well, Spider-Man made it famous to a modern audience.”

“You mean Stan Lee?”

“Shut up!”

Julian opened his mouth, dark eyes glinting, but he again sat back, lacing his fingers together, making a point of demonstrating that he was going to let that one go, which only annoyed Noah more.

“You did this.” Noah faced him. “You have to put it right. How do you undo the spell or lift the hypnosis or whatever? What has to be done?”

Julian regarded his own locked fingers for several seconds that seemed an age in Noah’s furious turn of mind.

Finally, he said, “I can lift the spell.”

“Yes, please, now —”

“If ... Timofei makes a full apology.”

A chill spiked down Noah’s spine. “Apologise for what?”

“For doubting. For how he acted at the wedding.”

Noah mouthed at him like a fish. “Am I hearing this right? This spell you’ve worked has trashed my whole life, and you’re not going to lift it because Timo hurt your feelings?”

“I will be more than happy to lift it. Just as soon as your boss owns up and apologises for being the arrogant, judgmental, obnoxious prick that he is; and begs my forgiveness for ever doubting me.”

“That’s never going to happen.”

Julian shrugged. “Too bad for him.”

“No, too bad for me . You just said you were sorry this was affecting me so much. So do something!”

“You may be underestimating the influence you have over this man.”

“Influence?”

Julian rolled his eyes. “Exactly. Yes, you can get him to apologise. Tell him what I told you. I met with him yesterday and he thought shouting at me would get me to lift the spell.” Julian added this last rather pointedly.

“Of course, that didn’t get him anywhere, but you can tell him the solution and see if he doesn’t jog right out to see me. ”

Noah gripped the back of his chair, facing Julian with the chair between them, thinking fast. “Timo came to see you about all this?” That explained the website. “Why hasn’t he told me that he knew he was under outside influences?”

“Because he doesn’t want to believe he’s being impacted by outside influences at all.

He knows what I’ve done, but he’s loath to acknowledge it.

Sweep it under the rug and pretend there’s no magick is his policy.

You, on the other hand, are more open-minded and you can explain what he needs to do to lift the spell. ”

“And if he won’t?”

Julian smiled at that. “In the state he’s in right now? If you bat your eyes at him, you could probably get him to feed his leg to a shark.”

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So Noah almost jumped when he walked into rich, savoury aromas, and Timo in the kitchen.

Timo turned at the sound and smiled like a floodlight. “Welcome home.”

Noah thought of slamming the door and going ... where?

He slunk in, closed it after him. “Hey. I didn’t think you’d be here.”

“It occurred to me that you’ve been living here all week and we’ve yet to have a homemade meal together.”

“We don’t have to do that because this is just for —”

“So I said to myself, ‘What does Noah like?’ Old Russia, for some reason. I popped out to the shops and this has been cooking ever since. You’re in good time. We’re ready to put the noodles in soon. Change, relax, make yourself comfortable. Wine?”

“Timo —”

“I’d recommend a red.” He’d not changed into lounge clothes or even donned an apron, cooking in his spotless work shirt and trousers, jacket hanging across the back of a chair, tie gone and top few buttons of his shirt open.

He looked like the host of a mock cooking show titled something like Food Porn with Wolves .

Noah gulped. “What are we having?” No, idiot. That wasn’t what he was asking. He was storming in here to demand that Timo put all this right.

“I’m glad you asked.” Noah had never seen anyone so able to smile enough to show half his teeth while talking and making it look like a normal thing to do. “Beef Stroganov, or as you probably call it, Stroganoff. My mother’s recipe, formerly her mother’s recipe.”

You did not just pull the granny’s-recipe card.

“I thought beef Stroganoff was German,” Noah said.

“Afraid not. But I do have a classic Sp?zburgunder, now that you mention it. Should be a perfect pairing. May I pour you a glass?”

“Uh...” Why was it so hot in here? Was it the kitchen? Was it Noah? Had Timo deliberately turned up the thermostat so Noah would sit around in a T-shirt? True, September had been warm, but it was nippy now and it shouldn’t be this hot inside.

Dinner smelled outrageous. It was probably only the cooking that raised the temperature.

Noah had walked to the dining room table in the open-plan penthouse in a daze, nearly resting his hand on Timo’s wool jacket on the chair, before catching himself and shaking his head.

“No, thanks. I need to talk to you.”

“Please do. What would you prefer to drink? Are you sure you don’t want to change first? We can sit while this finishes off. Then I’ll just need ten more minutes and dinner is served.”

Was it rehearsed? Was it deliberate to throw Noah off his stride? Was it a self-serving way of stealing the spotlight? Look at you! While really saying, Look at me!

Looking into his eyes made everything worse. Timo's smile never wavered from Noah's face. A smile, an intensity, a slightly glazed joy, that Noah could best describe as besotted.

If Noah walked away to ditch the suit and tie, or got a drink, or so much as pulled out a chair, Timo would keep distracting him, on purpose or otherwise.

Before Timo could say another word, Noah said, "I just met with Julian."

"Who?" Timo asked distractedly, standing by the kitchen island, one hand on the marble countertop, waiting for Noah to choose his beverage.

"The astrologer, Julian, in south London, just now."

At last, Timo lost his smile, expression clouding. "That son of a bitch. Why?"

"I've been wanting a consultation, and I saw his webpage in your office a few hours ago. He had a free slot." Noah stepped forward. "Why didn't you tell me what's really happening?"

"Nothing is happening. Did he spin you some fairytale of magic spells and love potions?"

"Don't you dare belittle someone else's beliefs. And don't start telling me that his putting a love spell on you is fantasy either. I don't know what to believe, but right now his explanation is the only thing that makes sense. The good news is that you can put all this right."

“He’s the one who ‘cast a spell,’ but I can put it right?”

“Yes. You can go back to him, meet with him this weekend, and apologise.”

Timo waited a beat, as if to hear the rest of the sentence. Then, “Apologise for what?”

“Apparently for ridiculing him. I don’t know? Challenging his abilities, mocking his faith, whatever it is you said to him at the wedding you went to.”

Timo crossed his arms, leaning one hip into the counter.

His expression grew sanctimonious. “Noah, think about what you’re saying.

I didn’t do anything wrong. I don’t owe anyone an apology.

Even if I did, I certainly wouldn’t go offering one to a man who thinks he’s put a curse on me when he’s done no such thing. ”

“No, you think about it. Are you under a spell? I don’t know. But I know that all it takes to find out is a quick text and a ten-minute meeting. Case closed. You have to see him.”

“I did see him. He told me to go fuck myself. Not that it matters because there is no ___”

“You can at least try it!”

“We cannot allow ourselves to cave to bullies.”

“ You are a bully! All you have to do is say you’re sorry and put this right, for both our sakes, but you won’t do it, even for my sake.”

“Me?” Timo pressed a hand to his own chest, taking a theatrical step back.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.

I’m strong-willed and know what I want. There’s nothing wrong with that.

But it doesn’t matter. The main point that you keep losing sight of is that there is no magic spell.

There is no potion. There is no curse. It’s just a wild story, like a fortune-teller or a medium.

Those people know how to get into your head but it’s all just a con —”

“Bullshit ‘not real’!” Noah yelled over him. “You never noticed I existed after the interview until one day, it was like being hit in the face.”

“Because I finally did notice you.” Now Timo opened his hands, shifting tactics to try his placating tone.

“What’s that they say about smelling the roses?

Well, I stopped and took a deep breath, and I noticed someone I shouldn’t have been overlooking.

These things happen. Am I a criminal for loving you? ”

Noah’s breath caught halfway down. He gripped the back of the chair and Timo’s jacket after all.

“You don’t.” Despite valiant efforts to keep his voice cold and firm, Noah knew he

sounded breathless.

Timo was the one who sounded perfectly controlled. “I’m in love with you, Noah, and that’s on me. Not on a stranger’s magic spell.”

Noah pressed his fist against his own forehead for a moment, eyes squeezed shut. “You can’t really think you love me just like that — totally out of the blue.”

“Yes, I do.”

“But we don’t know if that’s real.” He looked at Timo. “We can never know if it’s real if you don’t go back to him.”

“I know it’s real. I know what I feel.”

“Sure.” Noah’s shoulders sagged. “Because you’re just the kind of guy who’s super in touch with his emotions and skilled at communicating them to other people.”

Timo continued, “And I’ve got four weeks to prove it to you.”

What did he mean by that?

There was a pause while they only looked at one another in a kitchen basted in lusciously meaty aromas.

At last, Noah said, “You really think you can?”

“I’ll have a bloody good go.” Timo smiled.

To his own shock, Noah laughed, breaking razor-edged threads of tension that tracked between them. “You know, you just about swapped your Russian accent for

an English one there.”

* * *

For another long moment, Timo simply looked at him, Noah looking anywhere else while Timo tried to catch his eye. Because who could resist Timo’s eyes? Noah, apparently.

“I still think it started with a spell,” Noah said quietly. “At least it’s possible. Wouldn’t it be arrogant to assume that something isn’t possible just because we don’t understand it?”

“Does it matter?”

“What?”

“Well ...” Timo gave a little shrug. “Say I’m under a spell. I pissed off the wrong man and he’s taken out his anger on me. So what? Couldn’t we find an opportunity to turn a curse into a blessing?”

Noah chewed his lip.

“Tell you what.” Timo stepped closer, right up to him, and Noah did meet his eyes. “If you still doubt that I’m right for you by the time you’re leaving for the States, I’ll go back to him. I’ll go back and say I’m sorry and that can be that. If it’s really what you want in a month’s time.”

Except that it won’t happen because you’ll be mine by then. I’ll never, never, never go back.

Noah let out a held breath and again looked away, surely overwhelmed by Timo’s

nearness and pure magnetism. Timo could tell Noah was resisting the impulse to rip off Timo's partly open shirt right now by the way he kept looking at other things, his face flushed.

"Okay," Noah said. "But then you'll go back to him? When my time here is up?"

"If that's what you want." Timo inclined his head, all but turning it into a bow.

Noah nodded and sighed. "I ... guess I'll go change. Thanks for cooking."

"My pleasure. I'll just get the noodles in and finish everything up now." Timo offered his sweetest smile. Too bad it was wasted since Noah was already turning away. It was a real charmer, too.

Not to worry. Noah would see plenty of it over their dinner date.

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Timo continued with his charade throughout dinner — all nice, smiley, asking Noah questions that were interested, sometimes personal, but never invasive or crossing lines.

Noah wished he would make suggestive comments or boast about his latest marathon.

Just so Noah was Noah and Timo was Timo and the world wasn't perfect but it kept running on the same track as usual.

With Timo in dress shirt and slacks, Noah didn't feel that he could change into jeans and a T-shirt. He'd followed along, only removing his tie and jacket, washed face and hands, and returned to accept a glass of wine and dinner.

Thanks to the sun setting and mood-lighting with dimmers on and the glittering skyline beyond huge windows, the atmosphere was uncomfortably romantic, not helped by a hushed background of classical music.

No candles, but there was a crystal vase of orange calla lilies on the table.

Nothing wrong with having flowers on a table, though they hadn't been there that morning.

Noah only stole glances at them when Timo wasn't looking his way.

They were quite arresting, the thick bunch of blooms reminiscent of leaping flames at the top of their dark green stems in the narrow vase.

The whole display looked like a burning torch.

It was the meal itself, not Timo's supposed charm or the alcohol, that helped Noah calm down. Noah couldn't remember the last time he'd had a proper, all homemade, sit-down-with-another-human-being meal at home.

It was so good, so damn good, creamy and savoury, hot and fresh, with tender mushrooms, noodles cooked just right, and beef that melted in the mouth, Noah struggled to get through it.

The food, complete with a salad of baby kale with toasted walnuts, pear, and a homemade raspberry vinaigrette, made Noah think of home and family and dinners in a way he had not thought in years.

“Won't you have more? No, don't get up; I'll get it.” Timo had switched his smile from top-of-the-food-chain to angelic. Even his tone was melting, somehow softening the Russian accent, which tended to grow a trace more pronounced when he was excited or had a couple drinks in him.

Noah dutifully sat, shaking his head as Timo brought the pot with seconds for them both. “How can you possibly think you're not under some kind of outside influence?”

“Pardon me?” Timo paused in taking up more.

“Okay, even you saying that — argh ... Never mind.”

Once Timo settled again, he asked another question. Noah would have tried some of his own, but he didn't want Timo to think he was interested enough to ask personal questions. Could send the wrong signal.

“If you could have anyone as a dinner guest, who would you choose?”

“From any time?” Noah asked.

“Absolutely anyone.”

“Mrs Tolstoy.”

Timo laughed.

“How about you?”

“My mother.”

“Is she in Russia?”

“Technically. She died when I was seventeen.”

“I’m sorry ...”

“I just wish she could see that I reached all she ever wanted for me — aside from the wife and kids bit.” Timo’s smile returned. “She gave everything for us, got me to stay in school by her own example of hard work when no amount of lectures by teachers or police could pin me down.”

“Were you poor? Your family?”

Timo appeared to consider the question as he chewed a bite. “My mother used to mix a spoonful of corn syrup, cheapest sweetener we could get, in warm water, pour it in empty jam jars, set sticks in it, and put it outside overnight to freeze. That was our after-school treat.”

“That’s ... poor.”

“It was certainly frugal. We made do.”

“Who we? Siblings?”

“Three sisters, two brothers, in that order. I was the eldest boy, right in the middle.”

“You don’t strike me as a middle child. Where was your dad in all this?”

“Gone. He left when the youngest was a toddler.”

“He walked out on six kids? Why?”

“Because he was a bastard.” Timo regarded him sadly, as if disappointed that he must explain something so obvious. “He’d had his fun and I suppose he was fed up with my mother thinking more of our needs than of his needs.”

“Oh.”

“Tell me something else,” Timo said. “What does a perfect day look like to you?”

“Seventy-four Fahrenheit, a few fluffy clouds, light breeze.”

This time, Noah didn’t get the joke when Timo laughed. “What would you do for it to be a perfect day? Not the forecast.”

Noah felt his cheeks burn and kept eating.

So he really was as dim as Timo was finding him.

“Right, uh, good food, time with friends, discovering something new — art, city, museum, I don’t know.

But I like to be outdoors too. I wouldn't say no to zip-lining in Thailand.

The perfect day depends on the mood you're in at the time, the season, the people you're with — it's kind of impossible to answer. ”

Timo had refilled their wine glasses and they'd both emptied their plates before he had another one: “If you could spontaneously gain one quality or ability, what would it be?”

“Where are you getting these questions from?”

Widening his eyes, Timo showed both open palms as if to demonstrate his own lack of cheating. “Only curious. Is that also a sin now?”

“Hmm. Okay, I'd have a flawless sixth sense about the market so all my trades turned out well.”

“You think about work too much.”

“ Me? How about you?”

“Anyway, I already have that power,” Timo added with a glint of his old seductive smile. “Also known as experience and friends in high places. So you don't need it.”

Noah considered other options, the wine letting him speak more freely. “I'd love to instantly know a new language. In a better world, I'd say Russian. But considering Russia these days ... I guess French.”

“You really want to learn Russian?” Watching Noah, Timo ran one finger along the rim of his glass.

“Sure. Half my favourite literature’s from there, even if it’s outdated.”

“How strange, when I’m deliberately trying to lose mine.”

“Lose your first language? That’s terrible.”

“Why?” His tone sharpened. “I’m never going back. I’m not using it. It’s just taking up mental space.”

“The brain isn’t a laptop. I’m sorry, but it seems like a shame. Having two perfect languages is a gift. You could read all of Anna Karenina in the original but you wouldn’t even if you had it, would you? You’d read it in English.”

“I wouldn’t read it at all. But if it was pressed upon me, yes, English.”

“That’s sad. I think so, anyway.” Noah took a drink. “What about you? If you could gain one quality or ability?”

“Be hung like a stallion maybe? Except I’m nearly there already, so better not waste my wishes.” He ignored Noah’s choking as he went on, “I know ... I’d be able to joust.”

“What?” Noah coughed.

“Yes. I’d be the world champion joust.”

“Joust ... as in Renaissance fairs? Modern jousting tournaments with horses and armour?”

“Exactly. You’re not the only one who was into knights when you were a boy.”

“But that wasn’t Russian history. I didn’t think you were allowed to study any other kind in school growing up under the Iron Curtain.”

This time Timo coughed. He thunked his glass down with unnecessary force. “How old do you think I am?”

“Uh...?”

“I wasn’t born many years before the downfall of the Soviet Union. My textbooks included Europe, and of course North America, which was the height of cool growing up, especially Hollywood.”

“Dubbed or subtitled?”

“Russian voice-overs, of course,” Timo said rather haughtily. “We had our own A-names in the world of voice talent. I didn’t know what Mel Gibson or Tom Cruise really sounded like until I was twenty-five.”

“What did you think when you found out?”

Timo pulled a face. “Massive disappointment.”

Noah laughed. “I want to see one of those ’90s dubbed movies.”

“I’m sure we can find you one.” Timo’s good spirits seemed to have been restored after the age insult. “Speaking of childhood cinema, do you have a favourite memory?”

“That’s easy. Christmas at my grandparents’ house in Fairbanks when I was a kid.

That was the big city to me. Hardly any daylight hours, wood-burning stove, Grin’s

stories about wild animals and strange lands I longed to see by the glow of the Christmas tree, sugary cereals and junk food I was never allowed at home, fitting together jigsaw puzzles, opening presents in flannel pyjamas, drinking hot chocolate with candy canes to stir in pink marshmallows.

” Noah stopped, staring at nothing, lost in visions and scents of pine and peppermint, feelings of safety and home.

After a hush, Timo said, “Grin?”

“Huh?” Noah glanced up, blinked, flushed.

What was happening to him? He’d totally forgotten who he was talking to.

Too much wine. “My maternal grandparents. When I was little, they tried to teach me to say Gran and Gramps, but I mangled it into Gram and Grin. So my grandfather was always Grin to the family after that.”

“Your whole family is from Alaska?”

“Mother’s side only. My dad is an oil engineer from Wyoming. But Wyoming wasn’t big enough or wild enough for him. He worked on the pipeline while I was growing up.”

“Tell me about them.” Timo reached out with the bottle but Noah pulled his glass away.

“I’ve had enough.” Noah chewed his lip. Here was his chance to say what he’d been thinking of saying to Timo about his family if he had to, if it came to that.

Suddenly, he wanted to tell Timo, to justify himself.

Also, to never tell Timo because it was a lie.

Or, rather, it was a surface truth. A close-enough truth.

What if he told Timo the real truth? The truth he'd never told anyone?

No.

"I ..." Noah took a breath, squeezed his hands together in his lap, sat back, looked away. "I, uh... What I told you —"

"Is this about you not being gay?" Timo asked mildly.

Noah gazed into his empty glass, wishing it was full.

"When I was thirteen, my mom left my dad for another woman."

"Good for her."

Noah glanced at him.

"Sorry? Wrong thing to say?"

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“Well, it kind of trashed my life at that age. Not that she didn’t deserve to live her own life too, but just about everyone we knew turned on her and Sarah.

My dad was the worst of all. I came under attack at school from a score of homophobic bullies.

That stress made my stutter worse, which in turn increased the bullying.

And so on ... I’ve never been out. Not after I lived through that fallout as a young teen.

I know I’m in a metropolis now. I know I should be, and all that’s behind me and my family is a world away. It’s just ... It’s still hard.”

“You’re certainly out now, like it or not.”

Noah glanced at him. “After what I just said?”

Timo frowned. “After moving in here. Everyone at work thinks we’re sleeping together.”

“Oh, that. Funny, but I haven’t heard a single whisper to that effect. In fact, when I walk to my desk or into the kitchen lately everyone smiles and goes quiet or talks about their trades.”

“Shouldn’t they be smiling and talking about trades? I do like to provide a good working environment.”

“No, you like to yell at people and tell them that if they were being paid by the brain cell they wouldn’t earn enough in a year to get dinner out of a vending machine.”

“Have I said that?” Timo appeared genuinely surprised.

“Or fire people on the spot who have lost you money several days in a row even though they might have made good traders if you’d given them a fair chance.”

“The world’s not made of chances, Noah. It’s made of opportunities that are waiting to be captured by the man out front after the flag drops.”

“You’ve told them to leave me alone, haven’t you?”

“Who?” Timo asked innocently.

“The whole Wolf Pack. I got here on Monday, now it’s Thursday night. Not a word.”

“Isn’t that nice. Must have a few brain cells after all.” Timo smiled. “Dessert? I got you a treat.”

“If it’s made of leather or rubber I’m not interested.”

“I wish you would drink more often. It brings out your natural sense of whimsy.”

“It’s only making me more likely to say what I’m thinking. Speaking of which, I can’t believe you just used the word ‘whimsy.’”

“Me too, now that you mention it. Next thing you know I’ll be collecting cat figurines and admiring pictures of other people’s grandchildren.”

“Based on tonight, you’re halfway there.”

“Noah? I have heard of a phenomenon in the States known as a sundae bar.”

Noah meditatively scratched his throat with one finger. “I think a lot of bars are open on Sundays.”

Timo sighed. “Why don’t you stay there?”

Noah, however, followed him into the kitchen to load the dishwasher while Timo got out their dessert. Noah’s motor skills were fine after only two glasses, but he did finally feel relaxed sharing the space with Timo, which must be a sign of profound inebriation.

While Noah cleaned up from dinner, Timo laid on a spread of pints of organic Yorkshire ice cream in three flavours, roasted salted pistachios and crushed almonds, salted caramel sauce and warm chocolate sauce, chocolate biscuits for crumbling, real whipped cream that he must have whipped earlier and had in a glass dish, macerated strawberries, and whole fresh cherries.

Noah had never seen Timo eat anything like ice cream. Timo didn’t even eat a biscuit with his coffee in the kitchen. But he happily asked Noah to show him how one made an American sundae, as if they didn’t have such things over here, and Noah, much to his own shock, greatly enjoyed doing so.

* * *

“You can’t just sit there in silence.”

“I’m not translating the whole movie for you —”

“Why not?”

“Watch the original if you care.”

“You shouldn’t lose your Russian.”

“I should.”

“There! What’d he say?”

“How can I tell when you’re talking over the dialogue?”

“I’ll be quiet.” That lasted thirty seconds before Noah was laughing again. “That is the best voice. Like a Russian Chris Hemsworth. No wonder you were disappointed when you heard them speak for themselves.”

“I told you we had the finest voice talent.”

They were on the couch, each at one end, Noah’s blankets smoothed out like a slipcover. Timo’s sundae dish was empty and set aside while Noah was still scraping out the last of the pooled chocolate and strawberry, so distracted by the movie Timo had found online, he ate slowly.

“Another glass?” Timo offered.

“Ginger tea?” Noah couldn’t drag his attention from the TV. “But I’ll get it. You stay here and tell me what they’re saying.”

“Talking over the talent isn’t the point of the film.” Timo stood. He whisked both glass dishes to the sink, not about to let Noah be the one to get the tea because Noah would again sit at the wrong end of the couch.

It made Timo’s heart pound, having to listen to all that spoken Russian, giving him

flashbacks of breaking with his Moscow employers not so long ago, finally severing ties.

An old colleague had approached Timo at a London conference last July and started addressing him in Russian. Timo had nearly punched the man, but settled on grabbing a lapel.

“We’re in England,” Timo had growled into his face. “Address me in English or leave me the fuck alone.”

Timo had been pleased when the man chose the latter option.

Now this. It was a proverbial question, wasn’t it? What wouldn’t we do for love? Tonight, Timo was pushing the matter to extremes and still hadn’t found out.

He leaned across Noah when he returned to rest Noah’s mug on the coaster on the end table. So it made sense to sit right next to him, Timo naturally falling into place almost touching.

He feigned both his smile and his interest in the film, only to find that Noah, although buzzed, wasn’t devoid of attention.

Noah edged away and found nowhere to go. “You promised hands off.”

“Unless you say otherwise. That’s right.” Beaming at him, Timo displayed his own hands-off hands above his lap, just happening to frame his crotch to direct Noah’s attention as he looked at them.

“I didn’t say otherwise.”

“I’m not touching you. But how can I translate for you if I’m all the way at the other

side of the couch and have to shout to be heard?”

Noah glanced past him to the far arm of the couch a few feet away. He looked at Timo, their noses inches apart, while Timo beamed with adoration.

Noah’s gaze skated across Timo’s face, eyes to lips and back, his own face flushed. He looked away.

“I ... don’t think ...”

“Noah —”

“Bathroom.” Noah scrambled up.

Timo sat back, chin tipped to the ceiling, jaw clenched. He swore fluently under his breath to help relieve his feelings. Not that he could. What would relieve his feelings was finding out that Noah had only gone in there for lube.

Timo had been doing perfectly. He’d asked some of the 36 questions that allegedly made people fall in love. He’d gazed deeply into Noah’s eyes. He’d been light-hearted, indulgent in treats and silly dubbed movies, not overbearing. He’d mostly moved away, not closer, allowing Noah to follow him.

He’d taken an interest; he was listening to bloody Russian for Noah’s sake.

Timo failing? This couldn’t be possible.

No, keep it together. This had been the first day.

Reciprocal love and the other guy taking the first steps for physical contact might take, oh ...

two or three days? Did it? That was a lot of days.

Even more when he looked at it as hours.

The few times Timo had found himself involved in an emotionally romantic relationship had started the same way he'd kicked off purely physical relationships.

This whole “talk first, sex later — maybe” bullshit was about to lead him straight into an early grave because he was going to suffer a breakdown from the stress long before Noah figured out the part he was playing in this drama.

Run away for the dog to chase you; run away, run away, run away.

Fuck it.

Timo banged his head on the back of the couch.

He couldn't do this. If Noah slept here one more night while keeping apart from Timo, Timo was the one who needed a hotel room.

He could run a marathon and tackle Snowdonia on a bike and slay a bear with a knife if he had to.

He could turn a pound into a million on oil trading with his eyes closed and read the market like a wolf reads an injured deer.

He could not get through another night two rooms away from Noah.

One hand over his eyes, happy visions of intercepting Noah in the hallway flooded his mind.

Noah had called him a liar, right? Might as well justify the claim.

He could pin Noah to the wall, kiss him, melt him, slide fingers down his trousers.

Noah would cave — had to. In half a minute he would be begging Timo for more.

Timo bunched his free hand into a fist so as not to open his own fly.

He had played nice, given Noah a fair chance.

It wasn't Timo's fault if Noah couldn't see what a good thing he had here.

What next? If this was going to take dozens of hours, he really should get himself a hotel room.

What about both of them in a hotel? What if being on Timo's home turf was what made Noah so uncomfortable?

Then again, Noah had always been uncomfortable around Timo. Just Timo's personal power, he supposed. He couldn't help it if he was a force of nature.

How could he put the weekend to best use? He likely had social engagements, but never mind. He'd tell Spencer to cancel all of them because he and Noah would be busy — "Timo?"

Timo jerked his head around to look over the back of the couch.

Noah was on the far side of the kitchen, empty-handed. "Is your phone in your room? Something's buzzing."

Something was buzzing all right.

Timo sat forwards, elbows on knees, hunched into a ball for a moment. “Yeah, thanks. I’ll ... check it.”

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At first, Noah thought he was mistaken: he couldn't be seeing what he thought he was seeing. Was he seeing double? Was he looking in the wrong column?

His heart beat faster and faster, palms sweating as the reality of his screens beckoned, the zeros mounting up before his eyes.

Someone walked past behind Noah's terminal, talking on a phone.

"Hey!" Noah waved a hand behind his back, not daring to take his eyes off the numbers on his master screen. "Hey, come here. Look at this."

He didn't even care that it happened to be Chandler who drifted in. Chandler tended to move his stick-figure frame at an amble. He didn't bother to end his call. Just a lazy, "Hold on a minute. One of the juniors wants a word." Then to Noah, "What?"

"Chandler, look. Am I seeing things? Because, if this is doing what I think it's doing ..." Noah finally broke his fixed gaze to look at Chandler as he leaned closer, one hand on the back of Noah's chair so their heads were at the same level before the screen.

There was a pause in which Noah felt sure he could hear his own heart hammering in his ears.

Chandler blinked. "You bought those contracts?"

"Yes."

“Oh ... shit ...” Chandler said so slowly and softly it sounded reverential. Then he murmured into his phone, “I’ll call you back,” and hung up.

* * *

Timo couldn’t get there at once when he started to hear shouting at the far end of the terminals. He had to focus on his open positions, but the noise grew and he itched to find out who’d struck gold today.

It wouldn’t be Ranveer, Haoyu, or Chandler. They were Timo’s current highest earners and no one would crow over them turning in new records. Probably Dave. Dave was unreliable, but quick and profitable when he was on form, and definitely a crower.

Timo should take the whole team out to dinner.

Besides, he actually felt good. He’d had a proper night’s sleep without nightmares and he’d been on fire all morning with his own trades.

Maybe taking the pressure off Noah with a celebratory Wolf Pack dinner, team bonding and all that, would be just right to keep things gently moving.

As soon as Timo could get his positions closed he’d head down the hall and offer congratulations. Dinner and a gift for the new hero? Depended on the amount. And who it was. Timo wasn’t sure he could bring himself to give Dave a new car even if Dave brought in a million a minute.

“Timo!” Haoyu grabbed Timo’s doorframe. “You’ve got to see what Noah’s done!” He dashed back down the hall.

Noah?

Timo flew out of his spinning desk chair, at the door before he whipped around to close everything, then ran after Haoyu.

Sure enough, a few of the pack were crowded around Noah's desk, some of the other guys with active trades shouting from their seats, also watching the numbers.

"What's going on?" Timo ran behind Haoyu.

But he could see it with his own eyes — Noah's screen showed a list of short-dated derivatives contracts that must have been far out of the money, but now all showed juicy green. The return stood at 10,000%, and continued to tick up.

Timo didn't particularly care what the underlying was, or what had kicked off their spike — might be a blip, might be a data release, might be a short seller going to war with a company, or might be a whale distorting the patterns as it plied its path, unaware of the small fish in the same waters momentarily scattering, struggling against the sudden currents.

This might be a freak thing, or Noah being lucky.

Whatever it was, the return was huge for a small risk.

"How did you find the trade?"

"Oh, I tweaked the code for Geri and Freki. I've been working to understand the algorithms, and they flagged it to me. And I thought, why not put my money where my mouth is? Well, your money."

Chandler's eyebrows jumped — Timo knew he used their algorithms, but Chandler was a contrarian with his own increasingly complex spreadsheets and systems. He'd never dig into the code itself, let alone change it.

“Seems that IT experience pays off again. Well done, great job. That’s what I like to see here — initiative, out-of-the-box thinking, and then taking a calculated risk.”

“I’ll ... I’ll just close these positions now.

” Noah’s fingers flew over the keyboard.

Finally, he sat back in his desk chair, chest rising and falling on fast breaths.

“Damn,” he panted, “my hands are shaking. Sorry — I must look like an idiot. I know it’s not much money by your standards, but that’s a first for me. ”

Haoyu laughed before walking out. “Wait until you make your first million in a day.”

Noah blew out a breath, shaking his head.

Even Chandler grinned as he followed Haoyu. “Not bad for the new kid.”

“Come on.” Timo slapped Noah’s shoulder. “Have a drink; settle your nerves.”

In an apparent daze, Noah followed him past other terminals. “That was incredible.”

“You didn’t think we did this just to earn a living, did you?” Timo laughed as he gestured to let Noah step ahead of him into the office. Noah’s silly grin and his own giddiness made it impossible to remember hands off and he touched Noah’s arm when they moved into the room.

Just inside, Noah breathlessly faced him. “I didn’t even have a rush like that on those mountain trails.”

Grinning back, Timo stood very close. “Nothing else like it.”

Noah kissed him.

* * *

Noah's whole body still tingled as he opened his mouth, the source of all this heat and blistering energy suddenly seeming to stem from his lips.

In almost the same instant as contact, Timo had kicked the door closed behind him without looking and grabbed Noah's head in both hands.

Noah's back hit the wall before he knew Timo was shoving him into it.

He would still have been laughing if he could breathe, instead lifting his hands in return to hold on to Timo, sharing pressure while Timo's mouth and chest and hips ground into him.

His own high already left him lightheaded, walking on air, so these new layers merged, making it impossible to single out one thrill from the next, one euphoria from the next.

He ached for Timo's hands all over him, even more now in this rush of emotion than last night after dinner, when pride had made him flee the couch, when he'd just accepted a challenge about falling in love with someone.

He couldn't have turned right around and started making out on the couch two hours later.

Now, though, he was hard and didn't care about spells or challenges, this man being his boss or appropriate workplace behaviour.

He cared about the praise Timo had given him and his own trading victory and about

welcoming this gorgeous, magnetic, split personality to show Noah one more side of himself.

True to form, Timo wasn't shy about going straight for the fly once Noah parted his lips.

How did one breathe? Noah wasn't a newcomer to all this, but certainly a novice compared to the man flattening him against the paintwork.

He fought to catch air through his nose while Timo's tongue burned a trail through his mouth, only to gasp violently, wrenching his face sideways in his own fight for breath.

Timo's hand was already down Noah's briefs, hot skin on skin, fingers around Noah's cock with a force and urgency that should have been painful, but reached Noah's brain as an all-consuming appetite for even more contact.

Timo didn't bother trying to follow Noah's mouth.

While Noah fumbled with one hand to open Timo's fly in return, clumsy and awkward as a brick wall compared to Timo's lightning reflexes and honed movements, Timo's mouth found his neck.

He kissed into the hollow of Noah's jaw, trailed his tongue along the curve of bone, and closed his mouth on Noah's throat like a wolf trying to decide if this was the right place to bite down.

His left hand held Noah's head; Noah's left hand on the back of Timo's neck, while all his focus went into his right hand.

With the last barrier of briefs surmounted, Timo thrust against him and Noah once

more struggled to catch his breath. He scrambled to hold their rigid cocks together but Timo again beat him to it, every movement ten times more adept than Noah's stumbling efforts.

Noah could have blissfully come with him like that, never mind stains on his suit. Instead, Timo's pushing against him brought him back with a bump to wondering what Timo had in mind. Probably more than a quick hand job; and he probably wasn't going to ask Noah's opinion.

Not at all sure he was ready for much more, not here, in the middle of the day in the office with a thin door separating them from nearly a dozen colleagues, with a dozen blazing monitors in their faces, Noah rested a hand on Timo's chest, trying for a few inches of space. What about lube? What about being safe?

"Timo —"

Timo moved with him, the pressure of his chest and mouth against Noah vanishing at a touch.

Startled, wishing it hadn't been that easy, wanting the force, the heat, the heart-pounding rush just as much as the downhill ride with no switchback in sight, Noah instead leaned forwards, trying to follow him, only to discover Timo wasn't stepping back from him at all.

Timo hit his knees, his own cock in one hand, Noah's in the other.

Noah swore, almost choked, at the inferno-intensity of Timo's tongue snaking around his tip before the whole length of his shaft seemed to be impossibly in Timo's mouth.

Noah couldn't forget for a second that there were people just on the other side of this wall, but knowing he had to shut up and grit his teeth and actually doing that were

two different things.

He swore again, hissing out his breath, his body a mass of tight muscles to keep himself quiet as he gripped Timo's head in both hands, fingers twisting into hair, toes curling in his shoes.

How the hell could he do that?

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There was no way, no fucking way, Noah could ever compete with that. Had Timo been a damn sword-swallower to make ends meet back in his early life in Russia?

Timo's fingers played with Noah's balls while Noah thrust against his mouth, braced for pain, but Timo let him off easy there, the massaging pressure just right, firm enough to make Noah's eyes roll back in his head even if Timo hadn't been swallowing his whole cock, but not so firm as to hurt.

Noah lasted all of a minute with this treatment, and felt he deserved a hearty handshake at least for managing that long.

Whispering steadily to force himself not to cry out, Noah dug his fingers in even harder, gripping hair and skull, pushing into Timo's mouth until Timo would surely suffocate, while Timo gave every appearance of not minding in the least.

"Timo, fuck, oh... Fuck ..."

How? Timo wouldn't expect Noah to be capable of such a thing, would he? Could he teach Noah to deep-throat like that? Why hadn't Noah stepped into the bathroom with him that very first night at the bar when Timo started harassing him?

Most important of all, could they do this again in about half an hour? Noah could think of not one reason to continue working for the day, no matter that it was only lunchtime.

He was still riding his high, spine-tingling remnants of the orgasm making his nerves sing, when Timo pulled back enough to lick final drops from his tip, then run his

tongue up the length as if to make sure he hadn't missed anything.

His fingers were gentle, skating down the still rigid shaft with his tongue to give Noah a last jolt before he started to lose his erection and such caresses became uncomfortable.

Noah leaned back into the wall, a sheen of sweat covering his body below the suit that was still mostly in place, gasping with all the dignity of the famed landed fish. He shook from head to toe, fingers rattling against the wall for an instant before he bunched his fists.

One rush leading into the next with the sustained nervous-system drain seemed to have left him with legs made of custard. He had to sink to the floor or he was going to fall, but what about Timo? What was Timo expecting from him?

To his surprise, Timo's mouth again found his, loose and caressing, wet and tasting of salty, bitter pleasure. Without breaking the kiss, Timo pulled Noah sideways until he could guide Noah into his own office chair. Noah gripped one chair arm, sinking as gratefully as if into a lifeboat.

Timo held his face, kissed him deeply, running in reverse, from wet open mouth to gentle closed-mouth kisses to a final parting touch of a fingertip on his lower lip, as if lightly bidding Noah to hush. From the moment Noah had first kissed him, Timo had not said a word.

He did up his slacks, grabbed the tissue box that saw heavy use battling nosebleeds, plucked out a couple, then gave the box and a water glass to Noah.

"Thanks." Noah gulped gratefully before noticing what Timo was doing.

Oh. Noah got himself cleaned up while Timo got the wall cleaned up, then handed

over the tissues when Timo offered his hand to chuck the whole lot in the bin under the desk.

He turned back to Noah, stepping behind the chair, Noah beginning to feel weirded out by his silence.

He shivered when Timo snaked his arms around Noah's chest, leaned over him from behind, lips brushing Noah's skin when he did speak.

"You deserve a proper celebration after today." Timo kissed his ear.

"I've had it," Noah puffed a little laugh. "What do you call what we just did?"

"A coffee break." He kissed Noah's neck.

Again, Noah shivered. Christ, what must the dinner parties be like? He swallowed, suddenly sure he knew why Timo had been quiet for more than thirty seconds at a stretch: scheming.

"I suppose you have something in mind?" Noah asked, hating how breathless his own voice still sounded, how totally ruled by Timo he felt right now and how much it must be showing.

"How about this weekend in Paris?" Timo crooned, lips again brushing Noah's ear.

"You said we'd start in Rome."

"I said we'd start the grand tour in Rome. This is only a preview." Another soft kiss. Noah could feel the pulse pounding in his own throat. "Tonight," Timo whispered. "Now. We'll leave whenever you want."

“How do you have so much free time all of a sudden? You were always dashing into the office from breakfast meetings and leaving it for lunch meetings and going to the gym with insider workout buddies and I don’t even know what all when I first started here.

Now it’s like you have nothing better to do than ... well ...”

“Spend time with you? It’s true. I don’t have anything better to do than spend time with you.” Trail of light kisses down the side of his neck. “I can do no better. We must make the time for what’s important to us.”

“I thought your work was the most important thing to you.”

“It was. You don’t have to fish. You are the most important thing in my life, Noah. I can book the Eurostar tickets right now. Some trains will be sold out, but I’m sure we can be in Paris by tonight.”

“Just us? What about your pack?”

“They’ll manage to have a lovely weekend right here in London.”

“Speaking of them, you just slammed the door.” Noah, blood still burning, tried to look at him but it wasn’t easy with Timo nuzzling his neck. “Everyone knows ...”

“You don’t want them to know?”

“No. ” Noah again had to force himself to keep his voice down. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Why?” Timo let him go, slipping around to rest on his knees beside the chair so he was looking up at Noah. “Are you embarrassed that I’m in love with you?”

“That’s nothing — no, I’m — Timo, why are you so weird?”

“Am I?” Timo’s tone was mild but there was a glint in his eye, an upwards twitch tickling the corner of his mouth like the spike on a devil’s tail. “On Monday night you called me normal. Right to my face. That really hurt.”

Noah rolled his eyes. “Don’t try to distract me. It’s making out — and then some — at work that’s embarrassing.”

“For who?”

“Uh…” Noah shook his head. “Stop it. My point is we can’t do that.”

“We’re not hurting anyone,” Timo murmured, trapping Noah’s hand in his. “We’re not even showing off. Door’s closed. If anyone here has a problem with the boss’s closed office door they are welcome to bring me their complaints. Or quit.”

Noah simply looked at him, unwillingly allowing Timo to claim his hand.

“That booking?” Timo kissed his knuckles, then traced the lines in Noah’s sweaty palm with the tip of his tongue. “Ready to go?”

Noah swallowed, able to manage no better than a breathless, “Yes.”

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Noah was no fun as a travel companion. Never mind that they sat side by side in first class because Timo had charmed a solo traveller into giving up their window seat for the window seat he'd had to book so they now had a window and aisle together, nestled in close for over two hours.

Never mind that both he and Noah had jackets to throw over themselves and plenty of privacy this way if a hand strayed under said jacket. Never mind that Timo was the master of subtlety, quiet and delicate as a hunting cat.

Oh no: Noah not only couldn't enter into the spirit of the moment, not only jumped and swore when Timo tried to demonstrate, snarling at Timo that they were in a public space, as if Timo didn't know that was half the thrill, but he even sunk to threats.

Noah issuing threats. It would have been amusing if Timo didn't believe him.

"I'll find a seat in standard class if you don't leave me alone."

"They're reserved."

"They're not sold out. I can find one."

"Noah, calm down. Look, if you keep the jacket over the arm and turn a bit towards me you have a tent —"

"How many times have you done this before? Quit it — no, Timo, shit — that's enough .

” Noah grabbed his wrist and twisted Timo’s hand into the back of the seat, sending a rush of blood to Timo’s groin, so aroused by Noah’s tone and sudden show of strength, he wondered if he could instead lure Noah into a seat-to-seat wrestling match to achieve the same results.

Noah whispered with cold venom in his ear, “If you don’t respect my boundaries on this trip, we’re getting separate rooms in Paris. I can look after myself, you know.”

Timo shut his eyes, breaths short and balls tight, Noah still gripping his wrist, hot breath on Timo’s skin. Threats. Bloody good threats. What next?

He couldn’t see Noah willingly holding a whip, but psychological play with the odd toy or restraint was more Timo’s flavour of choice anyway. This could be the start of a long and ever-evolving power-play if only Noah would embrace the moment.

Noah let go and sat back, returning to looking out his coveted window, though the South of England wasn’t exactly the Alps, and half the trip was in tunnels.

Timo was sweating. He leaned out of his seat to look up and down the aisle, pretty sure the toilets were in the rail carriage behind theirs.

“Seriously?” Noah snapped, his tone again making Timo’s eyes glaze.

Timo had to fight for his innocent expression. “What?”

Noah leaned closer so as to drop his voice against noise of the running train and voices of other passengers. “We were in your office three hours ago. Can you not keep it in your pants for one train trip after that?”

“Noah?” Timo licked his lips, wondering if the sweat was starting to bead on his brow. “Do you enjoy controlling when your partner can get off?”

“This isn’t about controlling anyone. It’s about common decency, social laws, and respecting other people’s boundaries. So stop it. Don’t you have something to listen to or read?”

Wrong answer, but still a spark of potential.

“How do you feel about handcuffs?” Timo asked. “Rather have them on or put them on someone else?”

Noah held a hand up in front of his face. “Do not talk to me until we get to Paris or I’m finding another seat.” Noah pulled wireless earbuds from his jacket pocket.

Damn, that was cold while sitting right next to a travel companion. Sometimes it was shocking how rude Americans were.

“Can I say one more thing?”

Noah cut his eyes sideways to Timo as he placed one bud in his ear.

“I forgot to mention that I have an appointment with my immigration attorney late next week.” Timo settled back in his seat to give Noah space, closing his eyes. “Just thought you’d want to know.”

Timo waited happily. He won either way now.

Either Noah caved and asked what for, was there a chance Timo could get the work visa for Noah, could Noah attend the meeting, and all those questions that must be whirling through his mind, or he remained silent out of pride and stubbornness just to prove a point, while suffering all the rest of the train journey as he was desperate to know more.

Noah kept quiet.

* * *

They reached Gare du Nord an hour before sunset, launching the next argument about rushing straight into quick sightseeing or checking in at Maison Albar — Le Pont-Neuf, leaving their bags, and getting dinner.

“We have all of Saturday and Sunday to be tourists. There’s no rush.

Enjoy the moment.” While Noah gazed around, fascinated even by the rail station and immediate street out front, Timo steered him with a hand on his shoulder to the tram stop.

“We’ll be at the hotel in ten minutes; much faster than a car.

Still plenty of time to stroll along the river for sunset, or wherever you want to be. ”

“Will there be a pool? I don’t have swim trunks.”

“A pool, a spa, a gym, a restaurant — they have anything you like.”

“Do you speak French?”

“ Un petit. ”

“Do you know where we’re going?”

“Calm down.” Timo rested a hand on Noah’s waist while he watched up the street to the approaching tram, their stop crammed with what must be the end of rush-hour commuters, seeming like several hundred people swirling for trams and buses.

“I have been here before, you know. Trust me. Just enjoy yourself.”

Noah gazed out the window, gripping a handrail as he swayed on his feet for the quick ride to the hotel, then kept stopping to look at shops and architecture on the few blocks they had to walk. Timo was unusually patient with him.

“Does everyone in Paris smoke?”

“This is it.”

“What’s it?”

“Our hotel.”

“That was fast.”

The cream-coloured Haussmannian building seemed to sprawl across a whole block, reaching six stories up, with the top being dormers, and elaborately detailed in the balcony railings.

The street was treelined, quintessential and, Noah had to assume based on Timo’s choice of the place, in the heart of Paris.

“Are we near the Seine?”

“Across the street.”

“And the Louvre?”

“Five-minute walk. Really, you must have faith in me. I’ll look after you.”

“Can we do touristy stuff? I’m doing touristy stuff even if you won’t. Like a walking tour. Or one of those tacky bus tours. Or both.”

“We can do absolutely anything you fancy. The man’s holding the door, Noah. Go on.”

Their room turned out to be an upstairs suite with impending sunset views along rooftops, leaving Noah torn as to extracting the full savour of the moment. This room was worth spending time in, and they would have two days.

But no, he had to get out to the river at least, go for a walk, giddy with being here, setting foot in Paris for the first time in his life.

Timo was such a world traveller, he could no longer appreciate what this rush was like for a kid from the Alaskan pipeline escaping to a five-star Parisian hotel.

Timo spoke to their attendant at the door while Noah drank in the view and shrugged out of his backpack. No, he couldn’t wait, had to get out and see more right now.

Timo closed the door and Noah dashed to him, grinning, feeling he’d won the lottery.

“This is incred-”

Grabbing his face, Timo kissed him.

Noah returned it, catching his shirt front, but too distracted for more than a new rush mixing into the high he already felt.

“River!” Noah struggled up for air, only for Timo to get his mouth on Noah’s neck. “I want to go for a walk and see the river and — shit. ”

The backs of Noah's legs hit the bed. Timo's mouth again covered his own.

He pulled off Noah's jacket and opened the buttons on his shirt with startling speed.

They'd changed at home and thrown together overnight bags, but still wore business casual.

Noah had to expect upscale venues with Timo involved and knew better than packing jeans and a sweater for the trip.

"We'll lose the light," Noah gasped. "We can come back for this."

"We can come now. And still come back."

"Timo —"

"Ages of light left —"

"No — you keep telling me to relax." Noah was sitting on the bed by then, knocked off his feet by the force of Timo trying to climb down his throat. "So you relax. Don't rush."

"There's a bridge. Pont Neuf, just there, down the street. Sunset — all the pictures you want. Plenty of time."

Noah's shirt and Timo's jacket were off and Timo stopped speaking abruptly, mouth around Noah's nipple.

"I'm all train-grimy." Noah's eyes were glazing, but he still tried to squirm out from under Timo. "Let me wash my hands at least."

Timo kissed across his chest, then back to his mouth, while Noah tried to twist away, though he opened Timo's shirt at the same time, aching so much to see Timo undressed, it was finally beginning to win out against the vision of seeing Paris at sunset. He knew which one would be more breathtaking.

"You too. You've been holding those filthy handrails." Noah crashed to the floor to get out from under him, cursed Timo, dashed for the bathroom while Timo pulled off his own shirt, and had to pause to marvel at the luscious double sinks and fluffy towels even in the heat of the moment.

Quick hand and face scrub, towel, then Timo was there, barefoot, now in nothing but his slacks, allowing Noah no time to admire him because he always closed the gap so fast. His kisses had calmed, ready to relax with Noah after all, hands running down Noah's chest to his abs, around his waist, pulling them together.

Noah's pulse soared and he wished they were on the bridge now, Timo kissing him in the blazing evening sunshine, river sparkling below, the City of Light stretched around them, hands all over each other.

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Following where Timo led, pressing in to feel Timo's naked chest taut with muscle and his own tense excitement, Noah was the first to drop his fingers to a fly button.

Timo obligingly moved back a few inches, still kissing him, but inviting Noah with plenty of space to carry on.

Noah freed the button and found the zip bulged towards him, tightening seams.

He couldn't bear progressing any farther blind and broke a kiss to duck his brow against Timo's collarbone so he could see down.

While Timo kissed his neck, Noah drew down the zipper like a caress and hooked his fingertips into the waistband of the briefs.

He slipped his right hand in to encircle and free Timo's erection.

Timo shivered, breaths quickening. He kept himself still, only kissing Noah, hands on his shoulders, then his back, stroking along muscles down his sides, while he allowed Noah to discover him.

Noah had to keep swallowing, nerves tingling, pulse hammering at this unveiling.

He stepped back so he could see properly, not looking straight down the hills and valleys of Timo's chest and ab muscles.

Again, Timo let him, forced to break off kisses, watching Noah's face while Noah drank him in.

It seemed to take a long time to glide his fingers up and back down the length of that shaft.

Noah cupped his palm against the engorged tip, giving Timo the chance to push for more contact.

Still, Timo hardly moved, silently inviting Noah to take all the time he wanted to admire and caress him.

Noah grinned. Of course, the one moment when Timo could find it in himself to wait on someone else was when that someone was drooling over Timo's cock.

Noah had to get his mouth on Timo, had to trace those swollen blood vessels with his tongue and not just with fingertips. But the floor was marble. All the comfort rested one room over. He pushed down Timo's slacks and Timo finished undressing himself before turning his attention to Noah.

They moved to the bathroom doorway, kissing again, while Noah kicked off his shoes and Timo opened his fly. Noah's pants followed Timo's to the floor, and they stood for a moment in the doorway, a chill breeze from the window Noah had opened tickling their overly hot skin.

The room was bathed in sunlight that was about to vanish behind the next roof, now lancing in the windows like a manifestation of the fire that flickered up from the soles of Noah's feet, devoured his balls, and spread and twisted like a bonfire in his chest.

In the time it had taken Noah to wash his hands, Timo had moved fast. He had his little rolling bag open on the floor, a travel pack of tissues and tube of lubricant on the foot of the bed.

Noah's already flighty heart raced at the sight of them. It wasn't that he didn't want

them. But it had been a long time and even then his experience was limited. Timo was going to think he'd walked in on Amateur Hour.

Not so amateurish as to miss the obvious. He frowned at Timo, again pulling back. "What about being safe?"

"What about it?" Timo again went for his neck, one hand around Noah's back, one reaching for his cock.

"Sorry. I obviously said that wrong. What I meant was, ' You sleep around. We are going to be safe.' End of story."

"I don't, though. Not anymore. I'm only with you. I only want to be with you."

"Uh-huh. Well, that exclusivity started about four hours ago. So, for the sake of argument, let's say it's a moot point for this weekend."

"And you're fine. You haven't been sleeping around — or haven't you told me?"

"Of course I wouldn't have told you! You're my boss!"

"Not tonight."

"No." Noah sighed. "Who are you tonight?"

"All your fantasies made flesh."

"Arrogant, much?"

"Only honest."

“Safe?” Noah prompted him.

Timo let him back up, finally looking around as if for inspiration.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t bring condoms,” Noah said, certain this wasn’t his responsibility.

“No ... But that doesn’t mean I don’t have any. Check all my pockets.”

While Timo searched his bag, Noah searched Timo’s jacket, inside and outside pockets, passport wallet that was zipped inside, and slacks.

To his astonishment, he turned up four condoms. Timo returned half a dozen.

It seemed the only place the man didn’t carry any around was the insoles of his shoes, and Noah wouldn’t have been surprised to see a couple there after his own bemused search.

“There you go.” Timo beamed as he dropped his handful on the foot of the bed with the lube and tissues. “Anything you need is my command.”

“Still waiting on that unicorn,” Noah muttered.

“But what would you do with a unicorn if you had one?” Timo kissed him. “Surely I’m better.”

“Well ...” Noah held a kiss. “You’re more unusual.”

“Does this mean we’ve done away with normalcy?”

“Oh, I’d say so.” Noah tore open one of the foil packets. “Have you ever had sex in a

public place? Like a park?”

Timo chuckled. “Jardin des Tuileries, tonight, but don’t make me wait for that right now.”

“No —” Noah’s face burned even more. “I was just wondering.”

Kissing him, Timo pulled the condom from his fingers. “Wondering what it’d be like on that bridge?”

“Maybe.” Noah took it back. “Have you, though?”

“Never in Paris. I’d love to have a first with you, Noah. A hundred firsts.” Timo caught his hand.

Noah ducked his head to Timo’s shoulder, trying to see to roll the condom down his own cock while he was blinded by streaks of sunlight.

Likely startled but taking care not to show it, Timo also looked down. Noah bit the insides of his cheeks to suppress his own grin, waiting for Timo to pretend all was good and he was cool with whatever Noah proposed.

Noah was right: there was that beat, that glance down and micro-expression and pause, then Timo went on caressing him as if everything was going exactly to plan in Timo’s world.

Noah gloated on the inside. He didn’t wish anything against Timo.

He passionately wanted to enjoy this experience for both of them.

Still, pushing Timo a bit off balance, making him a bit uncomfortable, could only be

a good thing after the month of torment Timo had subjected Noah to.

Timo stroked the lube onto him while Noah realised he'd missed his moment to go down on Timo during the condom distraction. Later. It wasn't as if he'd lost his chance. What was the Jardin des Tuileries?

"Can people across the street see in here?" Noah asked, eyes still closed against the light while Timo rubbed his cock with the lube and cupped his balls with the clean hand.

"I'm afraid not." Timo's voice was hoarse, his own cock straining between them, touching Noah's hip, as if begging to get in on that lube action.

"Afraid not? You want them to?"

"You're the one who asked about exhibitionism. I don't mind either way, but since you want them to, I'm sorry they can't."

"I don't want them to. How do you know they can't?"

"Sun glare. We have the sunlight striking our windows and reflecting back into the faces of anyone across the street. Even with the window open a bit, we'll have to wait ten minutes and turn on the lights in here if we really want an audience."

"Fuck, that feels good."

"The bridge is stone. The same colour as this building. There's a wall all along the pavement on each side, less than chest-high.

"While he talked, Timo led Noah by the balls to the dazzling window, bringing the tube.

“There are rounded alcoves along the wall to stand and admire the river and city and setting sun above rooftops and trees lining the Seine, just beginning to turn golden with autumn.”

“I want you against that wall,” Noah said in his ear, pushing Timo ahead of him with one hand, the other on his own slick cock. “In the alcove, facing into the sun.”

Timo gripped the writing desk and window frame. “There’s a river boat passing below. Think they can tell what we’re doing?”

“Depends.” Noah guided himself in, his breaths catching, muscles bunching as he felt his tip penetrating Timo.

He forced some semblance of calm, shifting his grip, fingers digging into Timo’s hips, holding himself back as if doing a push-up against his partner to make himself give Timo a minute to relax and adjust to him.

“On what?” Timo didn’t sound as breathless as Noah.

Noah pushed deeper. The intense pleasure of the physical mixing into the bridge fantasy and the honest reality of this moment gave him a premature high, so aroused he was already kicking himself for coming too fast while he wasn’t there yet.

“On your reactions,” Noah gasped. “They can hardly see me behind you, can they?” He knew he had to go slow, but he needed more, his body electric, the sun and breeze and scent and knowledge of Paris around him firing his nerves, and Timo didn’t tell him to wait.

“So they only know if they can see from your face. Do they know? You tell me.”

Noah was already finding a rhythm with shallow thrusts that he needed like

breathing, then deeper, chasing that all-over pressure, stepping into Timo.

He held fully inside then, pulling Timo against him, his cock hot and wet in its sheath with precum, wishing both to take in the moment and that he could distract himself into taking more time.

“Can they tell?” Noah prompted him.

“Yes.” Timo finally sounded breathless, as overwhelmed as Noah felt. “Yes, they can tell.”

Again, Noah struggled to calm himself, willing this to last, feet planted, gripping Timo while that image of fucking him on the bridge played through his vision, a red haze in his eyes that were almost shut against the sunlight blasting him.

He was sweating, his muscles tight, needing to take in the full pleasure and impact of what he was doing, his cock buried in Timofei Volkov, topping him in Paris mere minutes after arriving in Noah’s first European capital.

But savour the moment that much and he’d be coming already.

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What was the weekend for? Postponing pleasure? Did he think he wasn't going to get another chance? That he'd have to beg for it?

Noah laughed. He thrust deeply, his pace suddenly rapid, lost in sensations that no other touch could replicate, a contact he'd not known in over a year, not since Brooklyn, and even then rare and fleeting. He should cut himself slack for not being able to last.

His release was no mellower for his orgasm that afternoon in the office.

He kept thrusting up to his balls, picturing having Timo just like this on the bridge with the sun in his face and skin tingling from the breeze, soaked in sweat no matter the mild day.

Even as the rush eased off and his thrusts slowed, he held on just as tight, drawing out his own pleasure and making sure Timo stayed with him while he suspected Timo still needed to get off.

He was right, though Timo waited, let Noah stay for as long as he wanted him. Noah only stopped pushing when he couldn't maintain the erection, the pressure already aching, and still he wished he could have more, could remain connected to Timo all night.

He finally withdrew, pulled the condom off with a tissue for the bin, and found the sun had sunk, the only rays now touching the back wall and ceiling, no longer in their faces.

Timo kissed his mouth, pressed his shoulder, the power of the silent command growing until Noah took the hint and let his knees buckle.

He was anxious about putting in a poor performance after the example Timo had set earlier.

Still, it didn't diminish how much he wanted to taste Timo's cock.

He needn't have worried. Timo was wet, holding his head but surprisingly gentle, apparently not expecting his partner to swallow his whole shaft.

Noah got to drink the precum off his tip, suck as much of Timo as he could get in his mouth, and lick along the veins coursing the length of his erection.

Noah wanted that cock inside him — and at the same time thought he'd never be ready for it.

He was going to have to admit to Timo how inexperienced he was. But not yet.

Technically “safe” should include oral, especially with someone as promiscuous as Noah had reason to believe Timo was.

Noah remembered at about the same moment Timo's cum coated his tongue.

Noah pulled back, hands on Timo's cock and balls to give him the contact he needed while Timo thrust, splashing Noah's chest.

A minute later, Noah tugged him to the shower for both to have a lukewarm rinse, still kissing and caressing one another.

Even out of the bathroom they didn't get dressed.

Now the room was dim with approaching twilight.

It wasn't too late to go for that riverside stroll while night settled, then find their way to a splendid French dinner.

Instead, Timo turned down the bed and they couldn't help making out, even when they couldn't yet get hard.

"What do you think of Paris so far?" Timo murmured, on his side kissing along Noah's collarbone while Noah lay on his back. Timo held Noah's balls lightly in his palm, simply a soft embrace. Noah found the intimacy of this completely undemanding contact the most erotic thing he'd ever experienced.

He should tell Timo now. Instead, he said, "It's surpassing my wildest dreams."

"Then you didn't dream big enough." Timo wrapped one leg around him so his cock was against Noah's thigh.

Noah laughed. "What about ... the city and ... dinner and stuff?"

"Just say the word." Timo licked his nipple. "We can go out whenever you want."

Noah slid his fingers through Timo's hair, realising he wasn't hungry for anything but this moment and this man. He would say the word later.

Instead, later, when they were hard again and Timo wordlessly passed a condom to Noah, Noah rolled it down Timo's shaft with only a hesitant, "It's been a while since I've done this.

" Massive understatement and withholding information, but the best he decided he could do.

Gazing at his work, Noah swallowed. He was sweating again as they lay on the sheet in the now dark room, lit only from outside city lights, curtains still open and window also coaxing in that breeze.

“Are you worried?” Timo sounded amused as he handed Noah the lubricant to rub on him. “I hope I’ve adequately demonstrated how considerate I can be.”

“You’ve certainly demonstrated how conceited you can be. Can you shrink your dick, too?”

Timo chuckled. “Honestly, Noah, is that what you want?”

Noah caressed him with the gel. “No. Except for right now. Just for right now, yeah, it honestly is.”

Still laughing at him, Timo kissed his brow. “Relax. I’ll take care of you.”

To Noah’s surprise, he did. Timo was shockingly patient with him, as good as his word, taking so long, kissing and caressing, often talking to Noah, they might have been trying to fall asleep together.

Grateful that Timo had already got off with him twice in the last several hours, not wishing to test Timo’s good intentions otherwise, Noah found he was able to relax enough with time to let Timo fill him.

Timo’s composure only slipped when he could properly thrust, the easy rocking of his hips giving way to pushing deeper, saying in a gasp how much he needed Noah.

“You have no idea. I’ve been dreaming about you — every fucking night. I’ve wanted you so much, Noah.”

The last few minutes were almost too much: Timo fucking him with a fierce intensity borne of suppressed lust and anticipation, while his staying power was thanks to his own recent satiation and fitness; a perfect physical machine.

Once he claimed Noah with the burning rhythm he craved, Noah could only hold on until Timo came in him, saying Noah's name, kissing and biting him, still thrusting, skin damp with sweat.

He seemed to want to be as slow to pull away as he'd been to get started, loath to leave Noah, as Noah had been to leave him. At last separated, he met Noah's mouth again with long, deep kisses before moving lower to take Noah down his throat.

Then just lying together in the darkened room, city sounds of traffic and people, sirens and dogs, almost lost to them from their lofty perch, simply curling their bodies together as if used to it, Timo's arm around Noah's chest, perhaps even lacing fingers together.

There was still that walk and dinner, but he wasn't sure how much more he could get out of this evening with Timo beyond simply being together.

He'd not been with anyone like that since Caleb, his first and only love, and that had also been fleeting, been before college, whole lifetimes ago, before Noah had the sense to understand and acknowledge how precious their bond had been.

Timo didn't ask. Noah thought to tell him no, but Timo once more surprised him. It turned out he needed no time to get Noah hard and change his mind. This annoyed Noah, proving Timo right, even though Timo didn't know that Noah had been considering saying no.

Timo could still make him want more, no matter what had already happened between them. It was unnerving because Noah liked to think both that he had a greater

measure of control over his own responses than this and that Timo didn't get to call all the shots.

Noah would have to push back at some point: make sure he wasn't the comet's tail in this relationship.

Was this a relationship? Or just a mess?

Hadn't he already pushed back? He'd said no on the train and Timo, if not respecting that, had at least backed down.

He'd put the condom on himself, which Timo also hadn't predicted.

Yes, Noah was standing up for himself. It was only in his head that Timo was taking charge of everything, as he had all along. Hadn't he told Noah they could do whatever Noah liked, go out whenever he liked?

Maybe that was the problem. People who were honest didn't usually make a point of saying how honest they were. People who saw themselves as equal partners in a twosome didn't usually make a point of saying the other party could do whatever they liked.

The trouble was, even with the warning bells sounding in the back of Noah's mind, Timo was being as good as his word. Timo was, in fact, a fantasy incarnate. Noah had nothing whatever to complain about.

What was it that Noah didn't approve of? I wish you wouldn't be so perfect. I wish you wouldn't keep getting me aroused. I wish you weren't so good at this.

It must be Noah. Noah was the one who couldn't accept that someone was this smitten with him. Timo would move mountains for him and Noah still didn't believe

that. Hadn't Timo said as much? Do you find it so difficult to believe that someone could be attracted to you?

The truth was, Noah didn't find it difficult to believe. He found it impossible to believe.

The love spell had been the answer, an explanation that not only made sense in a weird, paranormal way, but also had a solution: the spell could be lifted.

What was the solution to how Noah was beginning to feel? What was the solution to the force of nature that was Timo?

Look at him — he was in goddamn Paris and this, whatever else it was, was a fantasy worth submerging into.

If Timo occasionally struck an awkward chord with his own insistence of what a nice guy he was, then Noah was just as guilty for mistrusting this moment when there was no reason and nothing at stake.

A fun, sexy weekend in Paris emerging from Noah finally striking a small jackpot at work.

Just let it go and have fun. Noah was aware that he wasn't good at having fun.

The world was too dangerous, too unpredictable, and Noah had learned many years ago that no one would watch his back for him.

He couldn't trust anyone. He couldn't love anyone.

He could face down a mountain, but he couldn't afford risks when it came to human beings, the most dangerous of all beasts.

But just now? Just for this weekend? For the first time since he'd been seventeen, couldn't he try? Couldn't he pretend that this one time, for two small days, he might actually be safe?

Timo lay on his back, pillows and covers pushed away, just the two of them on the white sheet, curves of his pecs, abs, and biceps, still damp with sweat, highlighted by the orange glow that reached them from city lights and windows across the street.

His drowsy smile and extended arm invited Noah closer and Noah, still buzzing, pressed against him, head on Timo's chest. Timo's fingers skated through Noah's hair. He kissed the top of Noah's head.

Noah lay motionless, silently praying Timo wouldn't say anything so Noah didn't have to try speaking against the lump in his throat.

Timo kept quiet, only stroked his hair while his heartbeat in Noah's ear sounded impossibly calm.

Noah kept his burning eyes squeezed shut.

It was a long time before his own heartbeat matched.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:45 am

They never did go to dinner. They didn't go down for breakfast either, sleeping through half the morning after being up half the night.

It was lunchtime before they both showered and shaved and Noah, after gulping three glasses of water in quick succession, finally stood before the windows to look out at their view in midday light.

He was shirtless in trousers and socks, smelling of soap and wintergreen toothpaste, holding a fourth glassful and frowning as if trying to remember something.

Timo interrupted getting dressed to watch him, leaning on the bathroom doorframe, meaning to keep his distance, simply drink Noah in from relatively far.

It had gradually dawned on Timo that Noah hadn't any idea what he looked like or how he came across: smart but reserved, aloof by American standards, always near a door, always a safe distance from the crowd, while his beauty was equally unassuming.

Anyone could be forgiven for overlooking Noah because overlooked was what Noah wanted to be.

His posture left something to be desired and he was letting his hair get too long, as if hoping it would soon be enough to fall in his face and hide behind, or he simply couldn't be bothered to find a barber when he felt his time in London was so temporary.

Of course, Timo had a meeting next week to make sure that wasn't the case. He'd get

that work visa sorted and, as the Brits said, Bob's your uncle.

You could walk past Noah in a crowd without noticing him while he lurked and dodged eye contact with strangers.

You had to turn back, look him full in the face, or study that luscious, streamlined profile that now spoke to Timo while Noah gazed out the window, before you realised you'd just walked past a god.

Even Timo had missed him in July. He wasn't the first pretty young man to pass through the prop shop as a junior. Timo would give anyone who seemed clever and quick enough a chance if he saw potential and they tested well. He'd not looked twice.

Now he leaned in and watched Noah with the unwavering attention he'd seldom shown anything beyond his trading terminal, and he regretted how blind he'd been.

Timo wasn't accustomed to feelings of regret.

He got things done. Getting things done and coming out on top were what mattered.

The odd failure meant he had to try harder, learn from it and win next time.

Regrets only got in the way. Like regretting letting Rhys go.

Now that he was with Noah he could see how it was all for the best, how everything had led him here.

No regrets. Only another leg of the race.

Noah drained the water glass. Timo watched how the glass caught the light, how his

lips held the rim, and his throat worked with his swallows.

Timo had thought even he was ready to call it a morning and step out. He should be famished, should be aching to stretch his legs and get to the gym or run. Instead, he was famished only for this unconsciously sublime man who ruled his life.

Noah set the empty glass on the desk, started to turn, but Timo intercepted him: crossed quickly to him, snaked a hand around Noah's waist. Noah met him with a kiss, hands going to Timo's chest.

Timo had just decided what they needed was to try sixty-nining when Noah said, "Do you know where we're going for lunch?"

"Lunch?"

"We've not eaten since Friday morning."

"Haven't we?" Timo smiled indulgently. It was wasted on Noah, who brushed past him. "What would you like?"

"Uh..." Noah frowned as he pulled on his shirt. "French food?"

"Right."

Noah rolled his eyes, which was not his style and made Timo's heart quicken. Must be irritable from lack of nourishment. He'd be tapping his toe by the door next.

Timo rushed to finish dressing, making sure to have a couple condoms returned to his wallet and the extra lubricant, the tiny travel tube, in his jacket pocket. He'd better buy more condoms since Noah was such a fan of them.

Stepping out into the brilliant sunshine and bustle and noise and life of the street was momentarily overwhelming.

It wasn't as busy as stepping out at home or office every day of his life.

London didn't overwhelm. London was simply the world turning, the great human stew, always on.

Paris, though, was in his way, setting up a divide between him and Noah.

While they ate, Noah found a walking tour he wanted on his phone, then dithered because he might not have time to get to the museums he hoped to see if they joined.

"We should have gotten up this morning," he said, still testy, as he started checking closing times on places like the Louvre and Sainte-Chappelle.

"We were up," Timo told him absently, hardly tasting what he ate.

"Some things won't even be open on Sunday." Noah fretted, also not enjoying his meal, which was a shame since Timo knew how much he'd wanted to try the food. Timo had to make it better, make him happy because Noah being happy and enjoying Timo's company were the most important things in the world.

"Let's do the tour in the morning. I'm sure they're on all weekend."

"That's a good idea." Noah bit his lip, making Timo imagine biting his lip. "Yeah, there's another at ten in the morning. Okay, straight to the Louvre from here. I'll book the tickets now. Can we walk?"

"I'll get you there, don't worry about it. If we need to stay an extra day or two, we can."

“No you can’t.” Noah turned his frown on Timo. “You have to be at your terminal when the market opens on Monday. Golden rule.”

“Noah —” Timo leaned forwards, taking Noah’s hand that was above the phone. “I’ve told you. What must I do to prove that you’re my priority?”

Instead of bashful or embarrassed, Noah seemed only more annoyed by him. “It’s hard to take that seriously when it’s only happening because of a spell.”

“I thought we agreed to put that aside? Do you really feel absolutely nothing for me? This is all a waste and I’m only bothering you? Making you uncomfortable? Keeping you from spending a full day out in Paris?”

“Of course not.” Noah looked away, reclaiming his hand, finally rather flushed. “I do want to be with you. I wanted last night. It’s just ... it’s ... more complicated than that.”

“I don’t see why.”

Noah glanced at him. “You really think you can get me a work visa? When’s your appointment with the attorney?”

“Friday. And yes. Is that what you’re worried about? Don’t be. You have a place with me: a home and we’ll get your legal status in the country sorted. I’ll take care of it. I’ll take care of you. You don’t have to be scared.”

For some reason, Noah caught his breath. He stared at his plate, out the window, then quickly stood. “Bathroom — too much water.”

Bewildered, Timo watched him flee for the back. Timo had only meant that he shouldn’t worry, shouldn’t be scared of deportation when they could surely work

things out with the help of Timo's immigration attorney. What was it that Noah thought he'd meant?

* * *

Timo padded indulgently after Noah for the museum, the crowds and selfie sticks, Notre Dame, and too much sun — Timo burned easily. Then Noah decided what he really needed wasn't a bridge or river stroll for sunset tonight, but a visit to the top of the Eiffel Tower.

Since these tickets sold out on the weekends and high seasons as much as 60 days in advance, and since even the lower level and stair access options were also sold out until Monday, Noah turned away from the ground-floor ticket office in despair.

That would never do.

Timo sent Noah off to walk the grounds before he sweetly asked at the ticket office to speak to a supervisor, who answered his questions about how much it cost to light the tower for a year, then rang up a proper manager who worked for the city, who appeared in short order, shaking his hand, asking Timo into the office, and would he care for a private tour?

Why not?

So Noah had a private tour in charmingly accented English, plus a voucher for his sunset time slot that included the lift and champagne at the top, with the manager asking was there anything else Noah needed or would like to see?

There. That was how everyone should treat Noah. As long as they didn't upstage Timo.

What, after all, was a million pounds at the end of the day? Timo could earn it back next week. Besides, Noah had suggested Timo give more to charity and the tower was close enough.

“How did you do that?” Noah asked, beaming as he clutched the tickets like a child with an ice cream cone.

Timo refrained from telling Noah that he got whatever he wanted because the world didn't run on fairness and love for all humankind, that the way to a city's tower was through a bank transfer. Noah might take it the wrong way under the circumstances.

Instead, he said, “How much time do we have? Enough for dinner first? We can't rush a French dinner.”

Revived with his tourist afternoon and the thrill of the impending sunset scene, Noah was transformed from his tense lunch companion.

They talked about the food and Paris, travel and work, as if they'd been going on dinner dates for years.

They were both still a bit dehydrated and gulped water along with wine.

Naturally, the food was exquisite, though Timo still didn't feel that hungry for food.

It was more fun to sit and watch Noah, remembering more of the 36 love questions to ask and gaze into his hazel eyes that looked like different colours in different light, sometimes green, sometimes more brown or grey.

He imagined the night ahead, would have been happy to strip Noah right here at the table, but last night had taken the edge off his obsession with physical matters and he found himself better able to stay in the moment and simply enjoy Noah's company

like savouring a fine wine.

By French standards, they cut the meal short, but nearly everyone besides the Italians cut meals short by French standards.

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They reached the tower in good time and Noah was again wide-eyed with his own delight at every aspect of the tower, the city, the view, phone in hand for piles of photos.

Would he post Paris on his disused Instagram account?

The one that went all black and white and impersonal many years ago?

Would Timo ever ask him about it? Admit to hunting for Noah online?

Didn't everyone do that these days? If Noah didn't want his collection of old photos seen, he didn't have to leave the account public.

When they got their champagne, Timo toasted, looking into Noah's eyes, "To immigrants." And Noah grinned in return.

Later, with twilight settling, time to go, Timo stood with his arms around Noah, both facing the glass while the crowd thinned, everyone melting back to the lift with the last hint of sunlight.

Again, Timo longed for more, imagining fucking Noah at the top of the tower while the iconic lights blazed outside. He only kissed Noah's neck and stood still until Noah was ready to go.

Holding his hand quite naturally, Timo led him across the bridge, pausing many times while Noah wanted more pictures of the tower lit up at night, then through the park, Jardin des Tuileries.

People remained here, dog walkers and tourists admiring the lights and waterfront on a Saturday night, though it would soon close. It was proper dark by then, Noah's hot hand in his growing more distracting while Timo wondered if he dared push Noah, then wondered when he'd become such a doormat.

It wasn't that he was afraid of Noah rejecting him.

He was quite used to that and, like Timo's hopeful advances on the train, one never knew until trying.

It was always worth trying. No, it was that he didn't want to upset Noah.

Increasingly it was dawning on Timo that Noah didn't find Timo's public advances charming or beguiling and that when Noah acted as if he was angry with Timo, he was, in fact, angry with Timo.

Unused to having to consider another's feelings before deciding his own actions, much less placing those feelings above his own desires, Timo found the sensation disorienting. He couldn't not be himself. If Noah didn't like that, he could just — But no. If Noah didn't like that, it was a problem.

Why was he doubting himself? The train was entirely different and Noah was in a great mood and it was dark and they'd both had a few drinks.

It was always worth a shot. If Noah said no, fine.

Timo was being ridiculous to think he had to change his whole personality just because Noah occasionally couldn't understand where Timo was coming from and occasionally found Timo frustrating.

Without conflict, where was the spice in the relationship?

What if Noah didn't like spice?

Then Timo must expand his palate. Nothing wrong with trying something new, for both of them.

Timo stopped Noah on the dark trail between lampposts to kiss him. Noah returned it and Timo's heartbeat quickened with the unexpected rush. Noah's mouth still tasted of champagne and he leaned into Timo with no trace of the self-consciousness he'd shown on the train.

"Let's do a river cruise along with a walking tour," Noah said.

"I don't think they run this late."

"Tomorrow." Noah laughed.

Timo touched his face, looking into his eyes, studying his features. Noah shied away, then seemed to catch himself, or the alcohol calmed him. Either way, he turned back, let Timo stroke his jaw with the backs of fingers, turned his own head to kiss Timo's hand.

"Let's get back to the room," Noah murmured and started away.

Timo almost counter-offered with, "Why wait?" But also stopped himself. Don't make this a negotiation.

They wove through wide, gritty paths and trees, stopping often for another kiss, then more, leaning in tight, Noah responding to him but meaning to keep walking.

Three times Timo let him go on, Timo whispering that he'd had the most marvellous day of his life with Noah, Noah flushed, pulling back.

The park was emptying. Still very much exposed with its neat rows of trees and paths as wide as roads, with few nooks where lamplight didn't reach. They were running out of time, nearing the far side of the park, when Timo spotted the hedges between the main boulevard and the école du Louvre.

He pulled Noah through, finding himself in something of a hedge maze, and this time didn't hold back.

They explored a kiss to its fullest depths and Noah didn't say no.

They felt over one another's bodies with inquisitive fingers and Noah didn't say no.

Timo opened his own trousers, guided Noah's hand down the front, and still Noah didn't say no.

So it wasn't Timo changing: it was Noah. Hugely relieved in more ways than one, Timo got Noah's trousers down before shoving him to the grass, staying with him while Noah also didn't let go.

"We don't have —"

"Pockets. I'm always prepared."

"What about —?"

"In my pocket."

"Really?"

Noah found the tiny tube and again started laughing, not apparently concerned by the noise they were making.

“That is the cutest thing.”

“Care to use it?” Timo was already rolling the rubber down his eagerly waiting cock.

“This is the champagne talking, but yeah, I wouldn’t mind.”

Timo didn’t care who it was talking, as long as it was Noah pressed up against him.

Entering Noah again after last night, now with him more than buzzed and more than ready, was a whole new bliss. He’d never had a man on the streets of Paris, and the hedges counted just as much.

Noah must be as tantalised by the idea because he responded in a way he hadn’t last night; actively wanting more, loose enough to say Timo’s name when he should have kept quiet under the circumstances.

Timo likewise didn’t care if they were found or seen or bloody well arrested.

Having Noah outside, all but begging for more, Timo fucking him with the taste of Noah’s tongue still in his mouth, was his fantasy manifest and nothing else mattered.

He clenched his teeth as he started to come, still aware that he should keep quiet, then gave way to narrating his pleasure to Noah, who answered him just as breathlessly.

“Finish me, Timo, please,” Noah panted, fumbling for Timo’s hand to guide. “While you’re still in me.”

Timo thrust and stroked Noah to climax while still riding the aftershocks of his own release, making both that much sharper. Even after, they lingered when they shouldn’t have, when voices passed them feet away on the other side of the hedge and the park gates would be closing any minute.

It took them much longer than it should have to find the hotel, leaning on one another, stopping often to kiss, then another spot of trouble when neither could locate the door into their room.

It was Noah who concluded that they were on the wrong floor and Timo who ultimately found the door, which both found hilarious.

Timo had underestimated the strength of those drinks, plus the delayed effect, used to spirits and not thinking of wine or bubbly as especially hard-hitting.

To his chagrin, they quickly fell asleep twined naked together.

It was only waking in the night, after lots of water and a little aspirin, that the party resumed.

Noah held his own head, saying he'd never have thought he'd be okay with kissing a man in public in a million years, and now he'd had sex with one in a public park in the middle of one of the largest cities in the world.

Timo couldn't tell if he was horrified by the revelation with much of the drink worn off, or only marvelling that he'd done such a thing. Either way, Timo took it upon himself to make everything better, soothing Noah with kisses until Noah forgot his troubles, whatever they were.

"Not you." Noah's tone sharpened, commanding, and Timo shivered. "You've had the last three. Put it on me."

He rolled the condom lovingly down Noah's length while Noah reclaimed his own focus.

"Are we going to be hungover in the morning? I feel halfway in between the party

and the aftermath right now.”

Timo kissed him. “Let’s stay another night.”

“You’d really be fine with staying into Monday?”

“If that’s what you want. But I’m popping into a pharmacy tomorrow.”

“Do they have Boots over here?”

“Not that I know of. We’ll make do. You never answered my question.” Another kiss.

“Would you rather be the one wearing the handcuffs or putting them on someone else?”

“I’m still thinking about it.”

Timo chuckled, shoving Noah onto his back and following.

“Can we go back to the Eiffel Tower tomorrow?” Noah asked happily.

Timo sat up, straddling him, smiling down at Noah’s blissful expression, visible in the dark with their curtains still open to the city lights. “If that’s what you want.”

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They got home on Monday evening, bleary-eyed with exhaustion.

After a nosebleed on the train that reached one of his shirts, greatly annoying Timo, and Noah's blinding headache after too much drinking and wakeful nights, they'd gone to bed early for actual sleep.

Noah didn't feel much revived when he woke for the first time in Timo's king-sized bed with the white duvet and elegant low-profile frame.

He swore as he turned over after killing the alarm.

"What's wrong?" Timo tried to nibble his neck but Noah shoved him away.

"Where'd you get your mattress? A prison-supply store?"

"I almost forgot you're from the country that invented eating a cheeseburger between two doughnuts."

"Comfortable mattresses have nothing to do with decadence."

"Alexa, open the curtains."

There was a soft ding and a razor-blade of a light stabbed into Noah's retinas.

"Alexa! Close the curtains! Are you a fucking sadist?"

"Calm down. It's not even early. I'd normally have been out running an hour ago."

“Then go run. I don’t care.” Lying on his searing back, Noah draped both forearms over his eyes. “I only care that you don’t cripple my back by night and blind me next morning. It’s like the start of a crime thriller, luring the victim into this room ...”

“Firm mattresses happen to agree with me. But send me a link and I’ll order a new one today. Whichever one you like.”

“You have to test mattresses, not choose online.”

“Then test some at lunch. I’ll go with you.”

“Stop being so agreeable. You’re making me feel guilty for complaining about your bedroom the first time I’m in it.”

“That’s an easy fix.”

“Don’t complain?”

Timo dragged one of Noah’s arms off his face to kiss his hand and Noah squinted at him through the gloom of closed curtains.

“Accept this bedroom as your own,” Timo said. “You live here now. I’m not sleeping on a marshmallow, but you should get a say in your own bed and surroundings. That’s how moving in together works.”

“I’m only here for a few more weeks.” Noah turned painfully to face him.

“Until you’re here long term, you mean. I keep telling you not to worry.” Timo kissed his lips, then pushed himself back, hopping out of bed with an energy that suggested he was still wondering if he could fit in a run despite the late alarm.

Noah was just stewing about Timo being all sweet and mild-mannered again, feeling bad that he'd snapped at Timo first thing in the morning, when Timo cheerfully said as he reached the doorway, "Alexa, open the curtains," and Noah's guilt evaporated.

* * *

At work, Noah tried to get caught up, stewing about how everyone smiled rather nastily when they saw him and said nothing. He couldn't do anything, couldn't say anything. After all, they only smiled. Yet they were smiles that spoke a thousand words.

He'd forgotten all about the mattress by 1:00 p.m. when Timo arrived at his desk.

"Ready?"

"For what?"

"To go shopping. I'm looking forward to it. Everything closed? Let's go."

Noah protested. He apologised for bitching and moaning earlier. He said they both had a lot of work to do. He told Timo not to worry about it. He suggested one of those nice latex mattress-toppers instead of dealing with a whole new bed.

Twenty minutes later, they were in a mattress shop in Bermondsey.

Again, Timo was cheerful while Noah squirmed but gave in.

If Timo was actually happy about this, then what was the harm?

Yet Noah didn't want stuff pushed at him.

He didn't want Timo to be constantly showing off or one-upping his own last gesture for a bigger or grander or soppier one.

It wasn't even Noah's bed. Noah should have kept his mouth shut, even if it was like sleeping on the floor.

On their way back to work on the Tube, Timo teased him about his "fluffy" favourites and Noah had to relent, finally won over by the infectious good mood. It was, after all, a really nice thing to do. Noah had no reason to be uncomfortable when Timo was the one who'd wanted to go shopping.

They were across the street from the office when they stopped for a quick sushi lunch and Noah talked Timo into letting him fix dinner tonight.

"My mom's spaghetti and meatballs." He curtailed objections with, "Heavy on the meatballs and sauce, with a salad, not garlic bread."

"Only if you'll come to the gym with me first."

"I don't do gyms. Ride a bike, swim, even jog a bit — maybe. Not gyms."

"Please?" Timo actually wheedled. "Just walk on a treadmill if you like."

"I thought you meet your trading buddies at the gym?"

"My schedule is in chaos. Only for now? I'm sure we can find something you enjoy there."

"It's the whole atmosphere, the vibes, the other guys either checking you out or mentally sneering or competing with you. I just hate gyms."

Timo paused over that, his last sushi roll poised. Naturally, he must think that the whole purpose of a gym was competition. If he didn't want that aspect he'd go on his own. He even enjoyed running partners. After a slightly derailed pause, Timo rallied.

“Our building gym then. It'll be fun. We have one downstairs and it's always either empty or nearly so.”

“Our” building. Ugh . So fast. Yet ... so sweet? It kind of was.

Turned out, Timo was right. The place was empty besides a group of three women on the bikes, talking about work. Timo taught him a bit about lifting and cardio breathing and, to Noah's slight embarrassment, it was fun.

Later, while Noah cooked, a kitchen make-out session turned into kitchen sex as the meatballs baked and sauce simmered.

The meatballs ended up overdone, saved by the sauce and fresh basil and a beautiful aged Parmigiano Reggiano from Italy so it was all good.

Like everything with Timo, even when it wasn't all good, things somehow worked out.

The next days at the office and home were like that, too: unpredictable, overwhelming, sometimes stressful, mostly euphoric, leaving Noah reeling to discover that yes, it could happen this fast.

Was he really in love with Timo? Was he stupid for thinking there was any chance he might not be in love when his brain seemed to have given itself over to Timo and he struggled to focus on his work or remember his Tube stop or care about doing anything that wasn't with Timo?

Or was it stupid to think this was real love so fast when Timo was anyone's fantasy and Noah was simply swept along on all the hormones and gifts and sex and his primitive brain begging for more? So much begging that Noah found himself pretending otherwise just to save his own pride.

He put up a show of insisting to Timo that he, Noah, had work to do when Timo showed up at his desk; or Noah said they were going to be late in the morning when Timo thought that once wasn't enough and Noah didn't want to admit to feeling the same.

Where was the line drawn between this fast, lustful infatuation, almost strong-armed into a relationship, and real, intimate, romantic love?

Noah also hadn't forgotten that spell. All the time it hung in the back of his mind that none of this was even authentic for Timo, that without outside interference Timo would have gone on looking past Noah.

What if some of those same influences had seeped into Noah?

What if he'd annoyed Julian that day and Julian slapped a spell on Noah also?

How could Noah ever be sure there was no outside force in play?

No matter how much he fretted, all those worries remained at the back, while his front mind thought about Timo for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, Timo at work, Timo at home, Timo going out and staying in, and didn't care why or how, only knowing he wanted to be with this man as much as possible and he could never get enough.

Noah found himself wanting to become a runner, wishing Timo wouldn't resume his life of constantly socialising with trading friends and insiders, wishing that Timo was right, that Noah could stay, not because of the work or the money or his future, but

just to be with Timo.

Surely that had to indicate there was something mentally off with him.

On Friday morning, he lost track of trades, made stupid mistakes, finally closed everything to pull himself together.

He paced in a tight circle, shaking out his hands and rolling his neck.

Another coffee, get his head in the game, ignore anyone else who might be in the kitchen.

Which made him think of Timo coming up behind him on Wednesday when Noah was in there alone slicing an apple at the counter, Timo reaching around to Noah's groin.

Noah had snapped at him. Timo had responded with his hooded smile, saying he only missed Noah.

"Is that a crime now? How about getting out for some hills with the bikes soon?"

"Sure, but what about the other guys?"

"Invite anyone you wish." Timo had still smiled at him and Noah was briefly furious, but, again, what had Timo even done wrong?

The Wolf Pack used to do stuff together.

If it wasn't a biking day it was an evening of drinks.

If it wasn't a company dinner it was a weekend retreat.

Now Timo couldn't be bothered anymore, yet when Noah mentioned the rest of them, Timo turned it on him, made Noah the bad guy because Noah didn't want the others along and Timo knew it.

It was hard not to end every conversation with Timo without feeling like you were being just a bit played — if not a lot. Maybe that was why Noah was so annoyed for wanting more and still more of the pack leader all to himself.

Coffee in hand, Noah sat again, staring at his screens.

Was it mostly about the sex? But he wanted to hit the trails with Timo, see Rome with him, go on that grand tour of Europe.

He wanted to wake each morning looking into Timo's eyes.

He wanted to fall asleep every night hearing that delicious voice with the perfect English but Russian accent which grew sexier the longer Noah listened to it.

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He wanted to convert Timo into loving the classics from his own country and he wanted Timo to teach him Russian and make him a better trader and ride that zip line in Thailand together. If all the sex stopped now and they worked out and cooked and traded together, he still wanted Timo in his life.

Noah jumped back on with his trades, paying attention as he should, only to remember ten minutes later that Timo had his appointment with the immigration attorney today.

Damn. Should Noah be there? It had come up a couple of times but Noah still wasn't sure.

It was so easy to get distracted when talking to Timo.

Again, Noah scrambled to finish what he was doing. He took another gulp of coffee and left the mug, hurrying down the hallway to Timo's office.

"Timo?" Noah leaned around the doorframe. "Are you leaving for that appointment?"

"Hmm?" Attention fixed on one of his screens, Timo was tossing a lump of magnetic beads into the air over and over and catching them. "Shut the door."

Noah did, with himself on the inside, as he assumed Timo meant.

"How's your morning been?" Timo asked, still watching the screen.

"A bit shoddy, actually. Sorry, I've not been doing my best work this week. I hope

last Friday wasn't my one-hit-wonder."

Timo smiled, still never glancing at him. "Don't worry about it. It takes time to be the best player on the team."

Which raised all kinds of questions for Noah, chief of which was wondering if Timo expected Noah to one day be the MVP, but mostly if Noah wanted that. He'd been learning a lot, growing a new skill set, but he didn't see this being his whole life. Did Timo?

"Yeah," Noah said. "That appointment —?"

With the speed of a striking rattlesnake, Timo pounced on his keyboard. His fingers were already flying by the time the beads thunked to the floor by his foot.

While he worked, he talked under his breath. "Didn't think I'd see that, did you, motherfuckers? See how you like this."

Timo often talked to his trading terminal.

Many of the guys did. Noah wasn't sure if it was imagined trading competition, the whales, the underlying, the market, or who all these comments were aimed at, but these men, like slot-machine addicts, anthropomorphized their screens and assigned feelings and motives to the market that were, in fact, sheer chance and convergence.

Noah found their dedication unsettling, not the least of the reasons he wasn't sure this was a good fit for him long-term.

Not because he didn't see the appeal of their profound knowledge and skill at handling the market like an expert fisherman handles a wild salmon, but because he could see the appeal of that level of fanaticism.

Noah had too many alcoholics in his family tree not to worry about the branches he sat on.

Grinning, pupils dilated, Timo pushed back his office chair as he swivelled to face Noah.

“I’ve been wanting you. Perfect timing.”

“Your meeting —”

“Not until this afternoon. Drink?” Timo stood and drifted across the room to him.

Noah let Timo kiss him but tried to stay on track. “Should I be there? Join you for the attorney?”

Timo stroked back the hair about his temples, pressing in more with his kisses.

“No reason, unless you want to. I have your paperwork. She’ll tell me what I need to do to get things moving, then probably we should all meet again when more needs doing.

It’s not a fast process, but if you have to stop working for a bit and go back and forth, that’s fine. I’ll look after you.”

“If you’re sure — no, we’re not undressing. I just wanted to ask —”

“You didn’t enjoy yesterday?”

Physical matters had escalated in Timo’s office yesterday.

“Of course I did. But it’s off-putting, all those screens staring at us and your whole

team just the other side of the door.”

“You mean exciting.”

“I suppose a sensation can be both.” Noah disentangled, holding Timo’s hands away.
“I’m going for lunch.”

Noah kept thinking about the meeting all day, but refrained from going since there didn’t seem to be anything he could do yet.

Timo left work early for the appointment and Noah, who should have stayed through the market’s closing, found himself reading about work visa timelines instead, feeling more and more discouraged.

No matter what Timo said, it wasn’t easy to get into Britain and work long-term.

He wasn’t uniquely qualified. Timo hadn’t made every attempt to find a British citizen to fill the role.

He didn’t even have recent English ancestors like grandparents or anything else good going for him besides having lived legally in England for a year as a student.

Thoroughly discouraged, Noah went home early to make dinner. His numbers were going to be crap this week, which certainly wouldn’t prove Timo’s point arguing for a visa about how indispensable he was, but it was Friday and that ship had sailed.

He fixed cashew vegetables with beef and brown rice, still brooding by the time Timo arrived.

Noah resisted the impulse to clutch at him and beg for the bad news to put him out of his misery.

He was, however, finally distracted. Timo carried an autumnal flower arrangement in oranges and yellows, plus a huge gift bag.

Ever the counterpoint, he was also beaming at Noah.

“Good news?” Heart soaring, Noah gripped the edge of the kitchen island. His attorney must be a genius if she could pull off this work visa.

But Timo was saying at the same time, “Happy birthday.”

“What?”

“Happy birthday, Noah.” Timo brought the bag and vase to him at the island and kissed him while Noah sputtered.

“My birthday’s not until ... uh?”

“Monday. But who wants to wait for a Monday to celebrate? It’s October; it’s the weekend; it’s close enough. I was going to take you to dinner but this place already smells better than anywhere on the list. I’d no idea you were such a good cook. Man of many talents.”

“You didn’t have to bring gifts. And I can’t cook. I have two standbys: this and spaghetti and meatballs.”

“And omelettes.”

“Oh, yeah. I can make omelettes. But I learned that on YouTube.”

“That doesn’t make them any less delicious.” Timo pushed him against the counter.

“Is it ready now or do we have a spare minute?”

“No, it’s ready. I’ll just test the rice.” He had to speak around Timo’s mouth, then squeeze away to get the rice spoon. “How do you know my birthday?”

“I happen to have a scan of your passport.”

“Oh yeah ... How did it go?”

Timo shrugged. “Mixed. I’ll tell you about it. Dinner first.”

“No, tell me. Wash your hands. We can eat right now. What’d she say?”

Timo was laughing at him. “I love you when you’re impatient. Why don’t you open your gift? I’ll dish this up.”

“Hot sauce and limes still in the fridge.” Noah lifted the bag down to a barstool to pluck out tissue paper. “You basically just bought me a mattress. And that was after a weekend getaway.”

“This is practical.” Timo dried his hands, still grinning.

It was a backpack: a robust grey pack for trail or travel, far nicer than any piece of luggage Noah had ever owned.

“Because you found out I’ll be leaving for the States before the month’s out?” Noah said wryly, though he couldn’t help admiring the pack.

“Because you’ll need it on the grand tour. If you will insist on wearing a backpack, you can at least wear one that didn’t come from a school jumble sale and will actually fit and be kind to your back.”

“I’ve never been that ambitious about my travel gear.”

“Good travel gear turns travel from an ordeal to a pleasure.” Timo gave him a pointed look. “Sit.”

Noah sat with his bag and the vase moved to the table while Timo brought lime wedges and hot sauce, then their two heaped plates.

“Thank you. I love it, but I wish you wouldn’t keep getting me stuff. It’s too much.”

“It’s your birthday.” Timo seemed surprised.

Noah didn’t know how to explain that was a moot point, that it was the whole dynamic that was making him increasingly uneasy. But it was a great bag, and Timo was happy about it, so it shouldn’t be a problem for Noah either.

Timo asked about the weekend as they started to eat, what about biking? But Noah stopped him.

“You’ve got to tell me what the attorney said. I’ve been waiting all day. Can we get the work visa?”

“Ah.” Timo made a production of finishing chewing his bite of beef and snow pea. “Turns out, no, that’s rather unlikely under current circumstances.”

“Rather unlikely? As in ...?”

“As in no.” Timo looked up from his plate to meet Noah’s eyes across the table. “As in, we’re not getting you a work visa anytime soon. Your time really is up.”

Feeling kicked, Noah simply stared at him, his own fork on the table, deflated and stung that Timo didn’t seem in the least bothered by the news.

“There’s nothing she can do?” Noah’s voice came out breathless.

“For that? Probably not. But don’t panic.” He smiled. “You get worked up over the least little things.”

“ I get worked up —?”

“What’d I tell you? That I’d look after you. We have a solution that’s so elegant, I should have thought of it myself before going in today.”

“You do?”

“We do.” His smile had gone supernova again. “It’s called a fiancé visa.”

“Come again?”

“We can get you a fiancé visa.”

Noah blinked several times. “But I’m not — we’re not — no one’s —”

“What do you say?”

“Say to what? Wait, are you asking me to marry you?”

“I suppose I am.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No way am I marrying you. Timo, we’ve been involved for a week. This is insane.”

“Ah, if you have concerns at such an early stage, and I must point out that I have none at all, my offer is sincere, but if you have concerns, keep in mind that what you’re agreeing to is being engaged.”

“What?”

“It is called a fiancé visa . Not married. Not living together. Not shared bank accounts, investment portfolios, or driving the kids to school. Fiancé visa.”

“You mean ... you can say that one day you’re going to marry someone ... and get a visa to stay in the country based around that?”

“That’s right. It’s not a long-term solution.” Timo arched a brow. “But, as they say, enough to be getting on with? Get another foot in the door?”

Slowly, Noah let out a breath. “That does sound kind of perfect when you put it that way, but isn’t it dishonest?”

“How so?”

“Well, being ...” Noah shrugged. “A lie.”

“I don’t know what you mean. Why shouldn’t we be engaged?”

“I just ...I don’t ...” Noah helplessly shook his head.

“Do you want me to go down on one knee? I did stop for an engagement ring on the way home but they were closed.”

“You what? ”

“We can sort that this weekend. Choose them together? It doesn’t have to be anything elaborate. What about white gold?”

“Wait a minute —” Noah pushed his chair back. “Timo —”

“I know men don’t always wear them, but obviously this does need to be convincing.”

“You’re not listening to me! I don’t want to do it! It would be fake, so it’s illegal! I’m not doing that!” Noah stormed to the door, stuffed his feet into his shoes, grabbed his keys, and ran out.

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Was this what Rhys had meant when he'd said Timo was never satisfied, impossible to please, endlessly seeking more?

Since there was nothing wrong with wanting more and better out of life, Timo had always known that Rhys being irritated with him was a simple character flaw, frustrating but forgivable.

Yet Rhys and Noah did not have similar characters, so why would they have similar flaws? No matter how much more Timo tried to give him and how much better Timo tried to make his life, Noah was still running away.

At least Rhys hadn't been a runner; he'd stay and fight, which resolved things and kept things moving.

Fights had action, momentum, winners and losers — nothing wrong with a fight.

But this? Here he was, not satisfied because Noah would soon have to leave the country, seeking more in the form of a long-term relationship, and no, that wasn't acceptable.

Somehow, he'd done something wrong and Noah wouldn't even tell him what.

Beyond the obvious, it was an extra shame since everything had been going so well all week.

Ever since last Friday, Timo had felt revitalised.

It wasn't just constantly being with Noah and their weekend away.

He'd physically felt better — more awake, more decisive, nightmares vanished and sleep finding him easily when he was ready for it.

He'd stepped into a new life a week ago and somehow, without stopping to plan or actively think through the matter, he'd embraced it as such. September and before had been Timo alone. October and after would be Timo and Noah.

Then Noah had walked out. Because Timo wanted more and better for him?

He knew he mustn't chase, but he found himself unable to sit still.

Noah couldn't have gone anywhere in particular since he'd left without his phone or wallet.

He didn't even have a jacket and he couldn't have got a bus to Hyde Park, which was his favourite place to walk and watch people.

Why would he walk around the building with sunset closing in and no escape?

After half an hour, frustrated with Noah but also confused, wondering what Noah thought Timo had done wrong and how Timo was supposed to fix it as long as he didn't know, he finally also pulled on shoes and went out.

His first hunch proved correct. Noah was walking at a regular pace on a treadmill in the empty gym, simply staring into space.

Timo offered a smile from the door as he let it close behind him and pocketed his key fob. Noah glanced at him and looked away, but he didn't tell Timo to fuck off.

Timo joined him on the neighbouring machine, matching Noah's pace.

Noah stared down at the control panel on his treadmill.

Timo considered options before recalling his former lover's pet complaint about Timo: that he never apologised. The reason for that had been simple. Timo didn't need to since he didn't often make mistakes. Rhys saw matters differently and perhaps Noah did too.

"I'm sorry I upset you," Timo offered after they'd walked for a minute in silence.

Noah shook his head, speaking under his breath. "You didn't do anything wrong."

Hah. Timo had known it. So what the hell was the problem?

"Then what can I do?" Timo tried. If he could fix this, mend a break he hadn't caused, he'd still come out ahead.

"Everything with you is so ... fast. It's like your frequencies are tuned to emergency pitch all the time."

"You're about to have to leave the country. Do you want me to step back and wave goodbye?"

"It's not that. Of course there's a time crunch right now. I just mean in general. Asking me to marry you ... It's ..."

"What is it?" Incredible, amazing, awesome — or whatever else Americans said?

Again, Noah shook his head. "I don't want to be your charity case."

Timo stared at him while Noah kept looking ahead. “Do you really think I’m the kind of man who takes on charity cases?”

For the first time, Noah glanced at him. There was even a hint of a smile. “I guess not.”

“I love you.”

Noah sighed. “I don’t know what I feel. I probably love you, but everything’s so ... and it’s just ... argh. ”

“Come home. We’ll warm up your dinner.”

“I don’t have a home.”

“You have a home with me. What? Do you need more space? We can move. Two-bedroom? Your own home office?”

“No!” Noah flinched at his own volume and hugged himself, still walking. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “That’s the problem.”

Timo pounced. “What’s the problem?”

“Stop giving me stuff. Stop trying to do everything — to buy me the world and gift wrap it.”

“Okay.” No gifts? That was all? Should be easy. What counted as a gift, though? Obviously the mountain bike was out. What about restaurant dinners and a shared mattress? Some of these things were tricky to call.

When Noah said nothing, Timo tried again. “Come upstairs. Eat, have ginger tea, try

on your backpack. It's the only birthday gift you're getting."

Noah choked on a laugh. "Promise?"

Timo pressed a hand to his heart. "I promise."

By the time they were back to the penthouse, Noah was still rather pathetic, not saying anything.

Timo warmed his dinner and plied him with a glass of wine.

He sliced a mango, dusted it in seasoning salt and red pepper flakes, and joined Noah to share this delicacy. Noah tried a wedge but pulled a face.

The food and drink broke the ice until Timo felt he could try again.

What would the people advise who came up with those 36 love questions? What used to earn him points with Rhys? Noah was so sensitive, overreacting when Timo didn't even know why, Timo must tread lightly to meet Noah at his level, e.g. cautious and unhurried.

"If you don't want the fiancé visa, we don't have to do it.

But isn't it worth thinking about? Take the weekend and consider it?

Go in together for another appointment next week and get all the information?

If we do want to go ahead, we can start the application process.

If not, at least we both understand our options.

” There. He sounded like a bloody mediator on the telly.

He didn’t bother to tell Noah that he’d already made the next appointment for Monday, Noah’s birthday. No, he was too good at this for mentioning such details right now.

He could have been a psychologist if only he’d had any interest in people and their problems. And if people weren’t mostly stupid and boring.

And if it had been a profession that brought in at least a few million a year.

Too bad the troubled, anxious, and insecure masses would never know what they were missing.

The troubled, anxious, and insecure individual before him did finally pause to appreciate Timo.

Noah nodded. “I know you’re right. I’m sorry I walked out on you. All you’re trying to do is help and figure out solutions while I sit on my hands.”

Timo preened, so chuffed with himself he felt an unaccustomed urge to give Noah a hug and say something like, “There, there.” Timo wasn’t a hugger, but it was a nice thought that affirmed what a delightful, selfless, doting lover he really was.

They still had ice cream to further improve Noah’s mood and, since Noah had the metabolism of a sixteen-year-old, he didn’t hold back.

Noah wondered about a movie, Timo proposed a cinema visit since that seemed the best way to get Noah further out of his head. So they went out, Timo a bit unsure if it was okay to get both tickets but Noah didn’t object. Gift: backpack. Not a gift: cinema ticket.

Timo put his arm around Noah's shoulders after the trailers and, a bit to his surprise, Noah leaned against him.

Nice. Home and dry. There was no way Noah wasn't going to that Monday appointment, no way the engagement wasn't happening.

In bed that night, Timo was even more solicitous.

Lights on or off? What did Noah think of the new mattress?

What did he want? Timo tried to remember some of those love questions he'd not yet asked.

He couldn't be sure, though. Perhaps he'd asked and forgot so asking the same one would look bad. Better come up with his own.

"Talk to me." Inside Noah, face to face, Timo kissed him. "What's your favourite thing about Alaska?" He soon followed up with, "What about London?" Although disappointed when Noah didn't at once say, "You." Timo tried not to take it personally.

Talking their way through sex, mostly on unrelated topics, was both intimate and oddly exciting, perhaps because of the juxtaposition.

Later, Noah was properly relaxed, even laughing with Timo by the time they were approaching their second orgasm, meaning this one to be synced, helped by plenty of communication.

"Ever worn a cock ring?" Timo asked.

"You can't put that on now."

“For future reference.”

“Do you have a favourite sex toy?”

“You.”

Noah chuckled, which was a relief since it took Timo a few seconds of hindsight to discover such a comment could be taken the wrong way.

“You will let me buy them if we get engagement rings?” Timo asked. “No gifts, I know, but think of that as part of the legal process. Of course I’ll cover anything like that.”

“Oh ... uh... yeah. I guess so. If we get anything like that.”

“If, of course. Let’s get another appointment for Monday. Until then, just think about it.”

“I will.”

“Stop, Noah. I’m ready.”

“I’m not.”

“That’s why I’m telling you to stop.”

“Who knew you’d ever say that to me?”

“‘Mysterious ways’ and all that ...”

Again, Noah laughed.

“What do you want to do for your birthday weekend?” Timo asked, needing to distract himself for another minute, again hoping for Noah to say, “You.” Noah still failed to read his lines, but he didn’t totally disappoint.

“You mentioned bike trails?”

“North Downs? Surrey Hills?”

“Sure. But let’s invite the team to hang out.

Especially Haoyu and Arthur — anyone who’d want to bike or get out for a hike.

We don’t all have to spend every minute together, just go together and have a good time.

” He caught his breath before adding quietly, “And not draw so much attention to the fact that you’ve socially dumped the entire Wolf Pack in favour of me. ”

That was stupid. Of course Timo was spending time with Noah over anyone else right now. He just couldn’t figure out why Noah had a problem with that or why anyone wouldn’t be flattered by his undivided attention. Noah wouldn’t, but whatever.

Timo said only, “Of course. I’ll send a message on the group chat tonight.”

“Thank you.”

Just as quickly, Timo banished those hangers-on from his mind.

Yes, Timo would have to keep saying “if” for the next 24 to 48 hours, and remember to use hypothetical rather than concrete language. Keep that in mind, though, handle with care, and he had this visa thing in the bag.

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Saturday passed with an afternoon in the hills of the North Downs, in company this time and actually fun to get out with some of the guys again with no one going silent the moment they saw Noah.

He still hadn't said yes, but that was starting to seem silly because how else was he going to stay here?

Sunday passed lounging at home, a slow start with coffee and omelettes, Timo later beginning to train him to run, with basic exercises and breathing work at Hyde Park, then a West End play that Noah grabbed last-minute tickets for since it was his birthday and Timo had no interest in such things.

He still hadn't said yes, but now he was just being stubborn. Obviously they should go ahead.

Monday passed with a lunchtime appointment with Anjali Mahal, who steepled her fingers above her desk, listened patiently to Noah's concerns, then went over all the timelines and process with him in great detail.

To judge by the office location and her firm, at which she was a senior partner, Noah suspected such handholding was costing Timo at least several hundred pounds before any work started, but Timo was all smiles and Anjali was all business, setting out every detail without needing to reference the written laws.

He still hadn't said yes, but she sat back, asked if she should start the paperwork, and Noah nodded.

“I guess we ...” Biting his own lip, Noah looked to Timo. “You really want to do this?” Silly question, but he had to ask, had to look Timo in the eye and decide for himself based on what he saw there.

“More than anything I’ve ever wanted in my life.” Timo beamed back at him and Noah looked away.

Timo took his hand, kissed it, and even Anjali unbent so far as to smile and say, “Let me be the first to congratulate you on your engagement.”

For some reason Noah wished she hadn’t said that, wished he’d not even nodded, wished they’d never come here, but decided that was all just due to the butterflies in his stomach. Such feelings likely happened to everyone.

* * *

Timo was allowed to take Noah out to a celebratory birthday dinner on Monday that was now also an engagement celebration.

Noah was weird about it, pensive and distracted, like he’d rather be somewhere else, but Timo was getting used to this.

If Noah wasn’t temperamental, he wouldn’t be as interesting.

Timo’s own outlook was so jubilant at the moment, he could hardly sit still. He wanted to shout his news to the world, to party all night, take the team out, blast news broadcasts, accept dozens of handshakes and congratulations while preening at the jealousy of the masses for his good fortune.

He felt more on fire, more alive, more like he’d really made it in the world than ever before.

No other success, no victory, from immigration to setting up his own prop shop to the first time he'd made a million pounds in an hour, could compare to this moment.

Indeed, he'd have traded any of it, probably all of it, for Noah.

But he didn't have to. He had all of the above.

The fact that Noah didn't seem especially happy about this win, or that no one rushed up to shake Timo's hand, was off-putting.

Still, Timo had long since learned to tolerate humanity's many shortcomings.

He had to let certain things roll off or they would bog him down.

He could either be part of the problem or could overcome the problem.

Firstly, Noah needed cheering up. The rest of the world could wait until morning.

Noah did blush and smile over the cake with candles that Timo had arranged to be brought out after dinner.

It was the book, though, that got him. Timo didn't have to buy it, being public domain online.

They settled on the couch at home, Noah looking like he thought something might jump out at him, but he often looked like that, while Timo assured him the gift was not material.

"Ready?" Timo turned his upper body to face Noah, holding his tablet to read so Noah couldn't see it.

“For what?” Noah, cross-legged, gripping his tea mug after their champagne dinner and his refusal to carry on with the drinks at home, seemed almost to crouch against the sofa arm.

Timo read to him.

It took Noah a while to begin to relax, confused and frowning. Timo was a few paragraphs in when Noah’s eyes widened.

“Wait, is that —?” Noah shoved his mug to the coffee table and scrambled over to Timo. He pulled the tablet around to see, Timo still holding on, grinning while he tried to read and Noah nearly climbed into his lap. “Oh, my God, wait — start over.”

Timo started over while Noah pressed against him, gazing at the screen as if at a beguiling painting, lips parted.

Timo read the whole first chapter, then Noah ran for his own tablet and opened his English version of the book.

“I need to reread the first chapter. It’s been a couple years since the last time I read the whole thing.” He piled back onto the couch, close against Timo, tucking up his knees to the side, and Timo put an arm around him. “Then you have to say how the translation differs.”

“Okay.” Timo buried his nose in Noah’s hair.

He didn’t ask what kind of time-waster reread books.

Timo had never read a book more than once in his life and he didn’t mean to start.

He had scant time for reading and there were too many books.

What could be a reason for finding out what happened, or gaining information in the case of nonfiction, when you already knew after the first go?

“Read,” Noah prompted him and Timo turned his head to see the screen.

They read the English version silently, then Timo indulged with observations on how this latest English translation differed from the original Russian.

This book was a good case in point: marries, falls in love, tragic end — Anna Karenina wasn’t exactly a shocker even the first time around, was it?

When they again wrapped up the first chapter, Noah hugged him. “I’m sorry I don’t want to marry you, Timo.”

“You mean ‘didn’t’ —?”

“That’s just stupid. You’re incredible.”

“I know.” Timo was offended. How could Noah say that like some big shock?

Had he just noticed? Was the free home not a clue?

The proposal? The Eiffel Tower? What did it take to spell out incredible to this man?

Reading out a bit of Russian, apparently.

Timo should have tried this a month ago. No accounting for taste.

Of course, Timo forgave him, as always. Noah required so much patience. He was lucky to have someone as forbearing as Timo.

They got as far as half undressing one another before Timo pulled Noah to the bedroom to finally introduce handcuffs and blindfold. Nothing extreme, just a bit of fun and make sure Noah saw them the same way.

Noah kept breaking kisses to talk about that silly book.

Did adulterous novels from the 1800s have sex scenes? Timo asked and Noah had to consider the question.

“You’d be surprised. But I think it’s mostly a case of walking in on the aftermath in this, if I remember rightly. Another reason I have to reread it.”

They were on their knees on the sheet, facing each other, entirely stripped now. Timo proffered the toys.

“Hmm...” Noah eyed them with suspicion. “I’ll wear the handcuffs if you’ll wear the blindfold.”

“It doesn’t work like that. They’re both for one person.”

“Why?”

Timo opened his mouth but paused. Hmm indeed. “Okay. Happy birthday.”

“Happy engagement.” Noah smiled, catching Timo right in the dopamine and making him grin stupidly back.

“Engagement rings this week?”

“Maybe.”

As close to jumping for joy and shouting from the rooftops as he was going to get from Noah. Timo would take it.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:45 am

“Congratulations.” Chandler met Noah with a leer on Tuesday morning. “Allow me to be the first to shake your hand?” He did so, while Noah simply blinked at him.

Chandler went past to his own terminal.

How did he know? Shaken, Noah hurried to the kitchen, where Spencer was setting out initialled coffees, a couple of the guys already in there collecting theirs.

“Good morning.” Even Haoyu looked supercilious, which wasn’t like him. “You had a busy birthday.”

“Congratulations, Noah,” Spencer said happily, sounding like he meant it.

Maksim took his coffee and walked right past Noah, as usual. Maksim ignored everyone unless he had a good reason. Congratulations on impending nuptials would not be considered a good reason by someone like Maksim.

Noah stared after them and accepted his own drink from Spencer.

“How does everyone know?” he asked under his breath. “This is brand new.”

Spencer was clearly startled. “The business page.”

“What?”

“Our page? The feed was updated last night.” Now confused, Spencer took a step back. “Was it not supposed to be? You are engaged?”

“That just happened. I didn’t know it was common knowledge in real time.”

“Oh, well ... sorry about that.”

Timo didn’t need a website for the prop shop but he had a public Facebook page and group chat for the Wolf Pack.

All the big news, market shifts, conferences, trading gossip, and more went onto both.

It had never crossed Noah’s mind that his engagement to his boss, which was, after all, for legal reasons, and not something he was comfortable with, and only just happened, would appear on that page overnight — to use Spencer’s delicately passive-voice phrasing.

A wave of fury rose in Noah’s chest the like of which he’d not felt since the morning he’d kicked Dave.

Noah whipped around to follow Spencer and find Timo, who’d also just arrived but would be in his office checking emails and industry gossip for the day before the market opened.

Voices were rapidly approaching; not Spencer returning, but Dave and Arthur.

“I thought I was on the wrong page.”

“It’s a bloody soap around here, isn’t it?”

Noah half wanted to confront them, but none of this was their doing. He’d rather avoid everyone, punch Timo, and get the hell out of here than face one more leer. They would only be popping in here for their coffee.

He could avoid them if he dodged into the cupboard that contained the office cleaning supplies and vacuum cleaner — Hoover as they called it over here, even though it wasn't a Hoover.

Classic dumb move, being caught in the broom closet, but there was no chance either of them would have a look in there and it was the work of seconds for Noah to vanish inside.

He'd just silently pulled the door shut, closing himself in darkness, when they walked in, still talking.

They kept their voices so low, Noah could hardly hear and resorted to cracking open the door.

Not enough to see out, but enough to put his ear to.

He could also detect the sweet, greasy scent of pastries.

Dave was a fan of doughnuts and occasionally brought a box.

“So they must have been up to something all along, you reckon?” Dave asked.

They moved to the counter to set down the box and take up their coffees.

“You think it was a plot?” Arthur murmured. “Make it look like a real romance when all they wanted was a legit way to get Red to stay here?”

Red? Noah's surname meant red, but why would they call him that? This was a new one — or new to Noah since he'd been unable to overhear any gossip lately with all the dropped conversations and fake smiles.

“What else could it be?” Dave asked. “No one gets engaged that fast.”

“Then why didn’t they do a better job?”

“Eh?”

“That bike ride on Saturday was the first time I’ve even seen Red act as if he likes Timmy’s company. Usually looks scared — hey.”

“Morning,” Chandler answered, his voice also drifting closer. “I suppose you’ve seen the news?” He, too, spoke in an undertone.

“Seen it, don’t believe it,” Arthur said.

“Why not? Marriages of convenience go back millennia.”

“So you think the whole thing was rigged?” Dave asked. “That’s all this is about?”

“All?” Chandler drawled. “I don’t see how it could be. Why would Timo humour some American toddler? It can’t have started that way. That just explains the rush.”

“But why did Timo give him the time of day in the first place?” Arthur asked.

Dave gasped dramatically. “What if Red’s got something on Timmy?”

“Huh?”

“Well, Timmy just got his own citizenship, didn’t he? Worked like a bloody ant for it. And we know he’s got black marks in his past that could have jeopardised that. The drugs and shit? What if it’s blackmail?”

Chandler snorted a laugh. “You think Timo’s that easy a mark? Give him some credit.”

“Alright, alright. You know him so well? What do you think’s going on?”

“I think the wolf really did fall for Red,” Chandler said and Noah understood in a fresh flash of rage: Volkov equalled Wolf; Cervený equalled Little Red.

“No accounting for taste, right? You think you’re a cat person and next thing you know you’ve gone for the Bambi eyes of some mud-smart spaniel puppy. It happens.”

“Bloody hell ...”

“Noah’s figured out how to play the game. That’s all.”

“The pup grows up and starts climbing on the furniture,” Arthur said.

“You think he’s twisted Timmy’s arm?” Dave asked.

“Not that he had to very much. ‘If you want a piece of this, you get it by room, board, and a free pass into the country.’ What could be simpler? It’s work for hire.”

“I once paid a whore two hundred pounds and thought that was highway robbery,” Dave scoffed.

“It is since you’re going by the minute.” Chandler’s voice was silky.

“Shut up.”

“And it’s sex worker, Dave,” Arthur said.

“Eh?”

“Sex worker,” Arthur repeated. “Not whore.”

“What’s the difference?”

“One is a job title. One is offensive slang.”

“And a job title.”

Chandler chipped in, “What he’s trying to say is the difference between calling me a gay man and calling me a twinkle-toed poofster.”

“Everything’s so fucking difficult to get right these days,” Dave huffed. “It’s like having a bloody muzzle on. Can’t open your mouth without someone taking offence and calling you racist or homophobic or ... or ...”

“Womanising?” Arthur suggested.

“You got it. Can’t even give a lady a compliment without ‘crossing a line.’ It’s fucked up is what it is.”

“Where’s Spencer?” Timo burst into the kitchen, his tone making it unclear if he was angry or only excited.

“Front desk?” Arthur said.

“I checked. Did anyone send him out for anything?”

“He’s around,” Chandler said coolly. “Check the terminals.”

“What the fuck are you eating?” Timo demanded.

“They were on sale, two for one deal.” Dave was defensive. “And the sprinkles are the best ones. Makes a crispy —”

“Are you five years old?” But Timo again shifted attention. “Chandler, why the hell are you backing out of the conference? It’s too late for that.”

“I explained in my note, something came up —”

“You will be at that fucking conference like everyone else. We’ve known about this for months. It’s paid for.”

“I told you, I can’t —”

Timo was already gone, steps gliding down the hall to find the PA.

“Back to work,” Arthur muttered and Dave followed, sounding like he snatched up the paper doughnut box to take with him.

Noah waited a minute, only to find Chandler still there when he stole a glance out. Chandler’s back was to Noah, rolling his neck on his shoulders and flexing his bony fingers. It took him another minute before he strode out.

* * *

Hands shaking, abandoning his coffee cup, Noah stalked to Timo’s office while Timo was down the hall talking to Spencer in someone else’s office.

The UK market was opening. Timo should be at his trading terminal. So should Noah. Obviously, whatever Timo had to discuss with Spencer was important. What

Noah had to discuss with Timo was more important.

Those extra minutes gave Noah a chance to see through the anger haze to what he was going to say.

The market was already open, Noah sitting in the office chair below a dozen glowing screens of rapidly shifting numbers and flickering red and green lights, when Timo burst in. His rush to get to his terminal collapsed into smiles on sight of his visitor.

“Noah, I’m glad you’re —”

“We’re calling it off,” Noah said calmly and clearly, fighting with his own tongue while his heart pounded as if he’d run across London.

“ — here.” Talking through him, Timo crossed the office. “No question of our authenticity now.”

“Timo, listen to me.” His voice quavered and Noah had to bite down on his tongue after catching at the S and T sounds, trying to trip him up. He was handling this very well. He wasn’t yelling. He wasn’t making a scene. He would clearly state his position and that would be that.

“I thought after hours, but she said she can come right now.” Timo rested his hands momentarily on Noah’s shoulders before being distracted by one of his screens and glancing up.

“Spencer will look after her and we just need to put in a quick word. It won’t take long.

Did you see that?” He pointed out something on the screen.

Noah didn't shift his gaze from Timo's eyes. "I'm getting a hotel room."

"Where?" Timo grinned, attention darting to another screen. "We've the conference this weekend. Can Rome wait until November?" He turned his glowing expression on Noah. "Ever been to European Christmas markets? Austria, Germany, France, Belgium, Netherlands — you'll love them."

Noah tried again but this time the S and T for a stop choked him, the sound coming out as "Sssst" risking a lock, which hadn't happened to him since his teen years, Noah clamped his teeth before the stutter took over.

"Shouldn't you be working?" He looked past Noah to his main screen. "Let me get in a few numbers before Spencer needs us."

Noah shut his eyes, braced for another attempt, but why? He had, in fact, said absolutely everything that needed to be said.

He stood abruptly, surrendering the seat to Timo, who kissed him and dropped into it. Beside the desk, he watched Timo open trades.

His key was in his pocket. He'd been spending next to nothing for the past two weeks. He even had Anjali Mahal's card. He could call her, say never mind, book his flight, and look after himself. No one else was going to do it for him.

Even when you stumbled into someone who would gift-wrap the world for you, at the end of the day, people were self-serving. Timo wanted what Timo wanted. Just because Noah made that list didn't turn Timo into a genuinely caring person or healthy partner.

Noah shouldn't blame him. He, Noah, was the one who'd made a mistake.

Timo had been put under a spell, then acted out his obsession in the only way that fit his personality.

Noah was the one who'd allowed himself to be swept along in the heat of the moment and should have known better when their styles and ambitions were so impossible to square.

Noah had momentarily fallen for the fantasy, not the reality. The only trouble with that was waking up the morning after.

Heart still pounding, breathing hard, Noah walked out.

In the doorway he ran into Spencer.

"Hi, Noah. This is Jeong Nari." He hesitated on the name, glancing apologetically around at his companion.

"It's Nari." Smiling, the Korean-English woman in slacks and a forest-green jacket reached past to shake Noah's hand, which he did while realising dully that he couldn't feel his hands. She had a messenger bag on one shoulder.

"Noah," he mumbled automatically. "Excuse me."

"Noah?" Spencer turned with him as Noah walked past. "Nari is here to see you and Timo."

"For what?"

"Uh..." Spencer and Nari glanced at one another. "Timo didn't tell you she was coming by?"

“My fault,” Nari said quickly. “I messaged him this morning and he said come over. It was all so sudden I’m not surprised he hasn’t had a chance to tell you. Congratulations on your engagement, by the way.”

“Tell me what?”

“I’m a journalist from Global Voices . We’re an online publication and podcast — you might have seen us on social media?

I’ve been writing a series focusing on the positive impact immigration has on adopted countries — growing economy and infrastructure, building community, increasing diversity in the lives of our children with greater cultural exposure, and so on.

As an immigrant millionaire who founded his own company in his adopted country, boosting the British economy, you can see why news of Mr Volkov’s engagement to another expat caught my interest.”

Noah simply stared throughout her explanation, looked at Spencer, looked back through the office doorway where Timo was working, oblivious of them, looked at Nari.

“You’re ssss-” Noah bit his tongue, shut his eyes for two seconds. “You are writing a press release about our engagement?”

“Well ...” She laughed a little. “I wouldn’t call it that. But I would love to interview you about your experiences. Anything you’d like to share. It won’t take any time.”

“Sure. I can s-sum up the whole st-t-ory for you: It’s over. We’re not get-t — going to be married.” Noah marched to his desk, put everything he wanted, including his lucky cactus and laptop, into a discarded box, and left.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:45 am

“Timo? Nari is still waiting.” Spencer again.

“I told you to have her talk to Noah first. I’ll be right there.” Timo didn’t take his eyes from his screens, fingers ever working on keys and mouse.

“Noah left. Remember? That was fifteen minutes ago.”

“Left? Give me a minute, Spencer.”

It couldn’t have been fifteen minutes. Spencer was prone to exaggeration.

Timo just quickly checked in on his trades. By the time he emerged from his office, he was more interested in finding out what Spencer meant about Noah than about meeting the journalist.

He had to put up with the latter while calling for Spencer, who came running.

“Where’s Noah?”

“I keep telling you.” Spencer, most uncharacteristically, had a tone. “He left.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Timo snapped back. “Left for what? For where? Breakfast? Haircut? Dentist appointment? What do you mean he left?”

“He packed his things from his desk and walked out right after Nari got here. That was when I first told you.”

“What?”

The journalist answered him, clearly interested in the exchange. “Noah said the engagement is off. How do you feel about that?”

Timo looked between them. Someone wasn’t making sense. He’d got in a few morning trades for five minutes and now everyone was talking like the sky was falling? What had he missed? Why was everyone confused?

He strode past open offices to where the juniors sat. Noah’s screens were black, the computer off. The desk also was cleared, Noah’s personal laptop, notebooks, and potted cactus no bigger than a duck egg all gone.

Timo simply stood there, staring for so long Spencer arrived at his elbow, rather breathless.

“I kept trying to tell you —”

“What the fuck happened?”

“I have no idea! He met Nari, said the engagement was off, and he left.”

“What did she say to him?” Timo rounded on Spencer, who shrank back.

“It wasn’t her, Timo. We didn’t do anything. He was already on his way when she walked in, I think. Didn’t he say anything to you?”

“No.” Wait ... had he? He’d said they needed to talk, but the market had been opening. Noah would have known Timo couldn’t pay attention just then.

Spencer was chewing on his own lip, having taken two steps back as if Timo might

lunge at him. “He was really upset. I don’t know why. But he was stammering a bit, too. I’ve never heard him do that.”

“I have.” Timo only remembered the fact as he said it. Shit.

He ran past Spencer, back to his office, grabbed keys and wallet, dashed past the still attentive reporter, and raced for the Tube.

By the time he got there and had to pace up and down the underground platform after narrowly missing his train, he was furious.

If Noah had anything so important to say to Timo that he would tell a reporter that their engagement was off and clear his desk then why the fuck didn’t he make a proper effort?

He’d been in Timo’s office and mumbled a few words and left.

That was it. Did he not think that Timo would be more interested in Noah’s spontaneous choice to cancel everything mere hours after it was settled than in the market opening? Did he really not give a damn?

He should have called for a car. No ... a car would be slower. Unless the train never got here.

What he should have done was simply run home. It was only two stops plus a short walk away. Why hadn’t he run? Not too late. No, there was the train.

What if Noah wasn’t even home? What if he was home, but he really meant it? Told Spencer and Nari that it was over, not bothered to tell Timo, and already out the door? But he needed time to pack, and where the hell was he going to go?

He'd mentioned a hotel. Timo had said something about Christmas markets. He couldn't remember how they got from A to B but he did remember it had come up.

All Noah had to do was communicate. All he had to do was make himself clear. No. That was too much to ask. Noah couldn't be bothered, but he could be bothered to talk to everyone else and storm out for no reason. No fucking reason in the world. Just make Timo look like an idiot and slam the door.

Timo ran all the way from his stop, then pounded the button through another infuriating wait for a lift. He had to still be here. No one could vanish that fast. Yet Timo was stunned when a glance at his watch revealed the market had opened nearly two hours ago. How had that time slipped by?

Timo wasn't accustomed to being embarrassed in front of others. He didn't embarrass easily and, like regrets, rarely found anything to be embarrassed about. Perhaps this unaccustomed feeling was partly to blame for the fury that mixed with fear.

He'd announced to the world that he was giving his heart to someone who took that information and just as publicly gave it the finger. For no reason, no discussion, no explanation. Just "Fuck you, Timo," and walk out in front of everyone.

Timo burst in at home to find no one, the place silent and empty, Noah's books and tablet gone from the coffee table, his stainless-steel water bottle gone from the kitchen counter.

Timo couldn't breathe. Something more than panic cut off his lungs, tingling his skin like a dunk in ice water. He gripped the doorway, needing to call out while unable even to swallow.

He somehow made it to the kitchen island, telling himself to calm down.

Nothing had happened to Noah. He'd simply gone to get a hotel room; he was fine and Timo only had to ring him to find out what was happening.

It was probably a misunderstanding. These things always were.

At least, they were in the movies. The woman saw the man in another woman's embrace at the coffee shop and she turned out to be his sister or whatever.

That was all it would be. Some kind of misunderstanding and Noah was perfectly fine. Timo didn't need to panic, didn't need to — whatever this pain was.

He fumbled his phone onto the kitchen island, caught movement out of the corner of his eye, and looked up.

Noah stepped around the corner, emerging from the hallway that led to the bedroom, zipping up his toiletry bag, having heard Timo come in.

Shoulders hunched, he did not look pleased to see Timo.

For his own part, Timo didn't know what this pain feeling was, and he certainly wasn't going to express the panic or flood of relief at the sight of Noah that made him hold the island for support.

That left him with one feeling right now that he did understand and knew how to express.

* * *

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Clearing out your things and leaving work in the middle of the morning without a word of explanation?”

Any shred of hope for being able to salvage the situation or allowing Timo to apologise and talk him round, vanished from Noah's mind the instant he heard Timo's tone.

"Of course it's my problem," Noah ground out. "Plus all about work. Never Timo's problem — no, Timo can do no wrong."

"What's that supposed to mean? I haven't done anything!"

Noah's bag was packed — his old bag, leaving the new gift — and he should have turned right then, stuffed in the last bundle, gone to a hotel in person to get a room, and sorted out his flight from there since he'd run out of time here.

He should have left and he knew it. He knew Timo was really angry this time, that Noah had never been on the receiving end of Timo's anger and he didn't need to start.

He knew it was pointless to stay. But he'd been pushed around by this man since the moment he'd been hired and he had nothing left to lose.

"You'd say that if you drove over s-someone in your car!" Noah shouted back. "Couldn't possibly be your fault."

"If you're upset about something, just tell me!"

"I'm upset about everything you've done in the past t-twelve hours! Did it even cross your mind to ask how I felt about you announcing our engagement?"

"Ask about what? That's what people do. They tell the people they see every day when something noteworthy is happening in their lives."

“No. First , they discuss s-such an announcement with their partner. If we went to look at a house together and decided to make an offer, would you t-tell the world that night that we were buying a house?”

“Yes! Why the hell would we be secretive about it?”

“It’s not about secrets! It’s about both being on the same page and ready to discuss something publicly!”

“We went to the attorney together! You said yes! If I’d needed written permission to share that with friends and colleagues, that was the time to mention it. Not the next day.”

“I never said yes.” Noah’s voice dropped. He was also holding the cold marble counter edge, physical barrier of the island between them.

“You told Anjali to go ahead!”

“Because you b-b-backed me into a corner, as you always, always do! You should have asked me before sharing with other people! We should have t-talked about it!”

“This can’t be a secret! We’re not members of rival factions. People can know. People should know —”

“And then you had a reporter ambush me!”

“Especially when part of the reason for this is legal —”

“A damn reporter the next morning!”

“The more people who know, more obvious and on record, the better. Of course I

jumped at the chance when Nari messaged me. And I did tell you about her. I tried to in my office but the market was opening and you weren't listening."

"You weren't listening! You're not lis-ss-tenting now! I do not want people to know!"

"Why?"

Silence blanketed the kitchen beyond their rapid breaths as they stared at one another across the island, chests rising and falling.

Noah looked away first, panting.

"Noah?" Timo finally lowered his voice. "Why don't you want people to know we're engaged?"

Another pause, Noah's mind racing, before he said, "I should go."

He snatched up the toiletry bag and rushed for the bedroom to stuff his last things into his rolling bag, the backpack ready on the bed. He shouldered the pack, only to run into Timo blocking him at the bedroom doorway.

"Why?" Timo asked again, glaring at Noah, his voice forceful but not raised.

"What did I do? It's not just about this morning.

Have you never been comfortable with me?

No matter what, I can't win? I don't have to be your boss anymore.

If you want out of the prop shop, that's fine.

In fact, we don't have any choice but for you not to work in Britain at first."

"No." Noah focused on the doorframe.

"Do you think I'm too old for you? Because I get that there's an age difference but I don't see why it has to be a big deal."

"No. Get out of my way," Noah said softly, intent on every syllable.

To his surprise, Timo stepped aside.

Noah rolled his bag over the hardwood for the front door, Timo with him.

"Then what did I do?" Timo asked. "Are you embarrassed by me? Are you taking something out on me? Why don't you want people to know I love you and want to marry you?"

"It's not you." Noah dropped his key and fob on the entry table.

"Then what is it?" Timo caught his arm. "Noah, tell me why you don't want people to know we're engaged. I don't feel like that's too much to ask."

Noah wrenched his arm away. "I have t-t-to go."

"No, talk to me!" Again, Timo stepped into the door in his way. "Just tell me why."

"I'm not a prisoner here!" Noah yanked at the door, which hit Timo.

"What is it? Is it about your family? About your mom and how she was treated?"

Noah stopped, face downturned, jaw working, chest feeling stepped on by an

elephant.

“They’re not here. You don’t ever have to go back there. They don’t have to be involved. And if you want them to, I’ll be with you.”

Noah’s knuckles were white on the door handle, the cold metal painful with the force of his grip. His other hand clutched the handle of his rolling bag with equal force, as if dragging a tree. Still, he couldn’t entirely keep them from trembling.

Just go. Just go and get to a hotel and sort things out. Sort what out? Going home? You have no home.

Noah shook his head. “It’s not them. I lied about that, about my family being the reason I’m not out.”

“And the reason you’re not out is also the reason you don’t want anyone to know you’re engaged?” Timo was almost touching him, right in his face but maintaining a gap. “Engaged to a man?”

Noah gulped, still looking at Timo’s shoes, and nodded.

“Tell me.”

“No.”

“Come back, sit down, and tell me.”

Blinking fast, Noah pulled at the door but Timo didn’t move.

“Please.” Timo started to lift a hand but again refrained from touching Noah. “Tell me what’s really happening. Then, if you still want to go, go. But please tell me.”

“I’ve never told anyone,” Noah whispered.

“That’s a perfect reason to start.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:45 am

Caleb's father was also an oil engineer.

Unlike Noah, Caleb had grown up in Texas and moved at fifteen to Alaska when his father took the job.

He could have stayed with his mother in Austin, but Caleb was the kind of teen who thought a couple years in Alaska before college prep would be the adventure of a lifetime.

Despite Caleb's skill at negotiating the ignorant or openly racist world that faced his mixed-race family, small-town Alaska still managed to shock.

Noah had never been bullied because of his skin colour, but he'd been bullied because of his stutter, then mercilessly since his mother had come out, the guilt-by-association label of "faggot" shouted after him so often since he was thirteen it had become something of a nickname.

He couldn't pretend to know what Caleb's life was like, but, at the same age, he knew something of bigotry. Regardless of why, both boys needed a friend the year Caleb arrived. Very soon, he and Noah were spending nearly every waking moment together.

When not in school or working summer jobs on the pipeline, they hiked, camped, played video games, and dreamed of seeing the world. Neither meant to stay in Alaska, but Caleb's enthusiasm for seeing the great wilderness opened Noah's own eyes to the adventure he'd been missing.

Almost exactly the same age, Caleb having a late November birthday to Noah's early October of the same year, they had a combination of matching and opposite interests.

Noah was into reading, Caleb into taking apart anything with an engine or clockwork or battery to see how it worked. Both into swimming and boating.

In summer they went whitewater rafting and lay awake terrified all through the sunny night while grizzlies prowled outside.

In winter they ate junk food by the fire and watched movies while Noah complained about how much better the book was and Caleb neatly laid out 10,000 individual parts on a sheet on the cabin's floor for the electric heater he was trying to fix.

By the time they were sixteen, they were kissing and making out on their movie nights or game nights. Caleb had initiated, Noah being far too terrified, still living down his mother moving in with Sarah, but also terrified of losing Caleb.

Noah had already been in remote speech therapy for years by then.

He almost never stuttered when it was just him and Caleb.

Nor did he focus endlessly on his tongue placement and enunciation and remembering strategies every moment of the day when he was with Caleb.

Caleb was safety, easier to be around than being alone.

Succeeding around Caleb was as easy as loving him.

By the time they were seventeen, they were more than making out.

Noah's mom had moved back to Fairbanks with Sarah, expecting Noah to leap at the

chance to join them for his final years of high school.

Noah stayed on the pipeline because the pipeline meant Caleb, largely unsupervised with their two single fathers at work.

Caleb's mother also wanted him to come home to Austin for a "real" school so he would be better placed for college applications.

Instead, Caleb and Noah spent the summer and autumn on their own besides intrusive work and school demands.

Their fathers ate microwave dinners or hit the bars after work.

Their jobs were part-time, school boring, and they had no other friends.

Aside from the painful but also thrilling necessity of keeping the true nature of their relationship secret from everyone in the world, the year of seventeen was perfection.

Noah knew even then he wanted to time-capsule that year, to stay there in Caleb's embrace forever, to bottle the laughter, bask in the midnight sun, submerge in the sex that was not only an endlessly new discovery but became at times as essential as water or warmth.

Thinking about Caleb meant forgetting the future, or remembering that even a couple of years ago, Noah had been desperate to escape towns with triple-digit populations and pipelines and his own family.

None of that mattered anymore. Caleb mattered and, it turned out, Alaska could be a lot of fun if you had the right person to join you there.

When the breeze was strong enough to drive away mosquitoes, they could lie naked

on reindeer lichen in the summer, several miles from the nearest human being, watching distant herds on the tundra, or a fox pouncing for lemmings. Caleb always hoped to see wolves, but that was a rarity.

“They’re the best parents in the world,” Caleb told Noah one day after they’d seen three adults with bloody muzzles and bulging bellies trot silently over a ridge less than 100 yards away.

“The whole pack feeds and protects the pups, related or not. Those three will be carrying meat back to the den in their stomachs for the litter this time of year. They’ll do anything for their pups and there’s always an adult on watch, even if mom and dad can’t be. ”

“Probably why we domesticated them,” Noah said.

“We’re always trying to take over anything that shows us a glimpse of the ideal, aren’t we?

As a species, I mean. Then we turned on them, villainised wild wolves, the ones who couldn’t be tamed, and made myths about werewolves and Little Red Riding Hood — which are only manifestations of human evils projected onto animals as metaphors.

People are so petty and stupid and hateful. ”

“You know what I love about talking with you?” Caleb crawled on top of him, pressing Noah back into the sunbaked bed of lichen and not so welcoming permafrost below.

“Hmm?” Noah had to shut his eyes against sunlight as he faced up and Caleb kissed him.

“Your optimism. You’re a real inspiration.”

“Yeah.” Noah grinned. “I know. I’ve kept you coming back for more. I should charge for motivational speeches.”

“A dollar a head. I’ll be your manager.”

“Not with rates like that, you won’t.”

“Shhh — listen.”

They turned their heads, Caleb still stretched on top of Noah, to watch in breathless silence while a fuzzy lemming popped out of a tunnel not two feet from their faces.

“They’re everywhere this season,” Caleb whispered.

“They breed in cycles.” Noah again turned his face up and shut his eyes to kiss Caleb. “We’ll get many owls, wolverines, and foxes with the lemmings thriving, then they’ll die out again and we’ll hardly see any for a few years.”

“Do they really throw themselves off cliffs?”

“No. Disney started that myth for a film stunt. They just have cycles of abundance and scarcity — like nearly everything.”

“It’s fitting, isn’t it?”

“What?” Noah squinted at him, holding Caleb’s grinning face.

“This is a year of abundance.”

“This is a perfect year.”

“Now you’re talking.” Laughing, Caleb leaned into the kiss.

They got away with it by sheer scarcity, staying clear of town or hiding inside, never forgetting to be careful at school, where they were buddies like any other teenage buddies. The bullying aimed at both was suspicious but mostly generalised.

They got away with it, at least, until that winter.

Until the night that the only three senior boys at the local school saw them through the snow on the trail to Noah’s tin house.

The Shack, as Noah and his father referred to it, the latter with affection.

Smoke drifted from the chimney, lights on, Noah’s father home from the bar early.

So they’d not been able to go in. They’d slunk off along the trail for a final good night, kissing and giggling at their own eagerness yet unwillingness to undress even to the point of removing gloves.

“We could still go in,” Caleb whispered. “Your dad doesn’t care if we’re in your room. I’m over all the time.”

“If he’s already home, it means he’s not drunk. We don’t need him hanging around. Go home.” A long kiss, holding onto each other. “But I’ll see you at the junction in the morning.”

They were going out on the snowmobiles, assuming Caleb’s was in working order. Sometimes it was, sometimes it had bits detached for improvements.

“Come over to my place first,” Caleb said. “Breakfast.”

“Only if you’ll make pancakes.”

“I promise.”

Their final goodbye was prolonged and silent, Noah having to stop Caleb from opening their parkas.

Caleb, despite struggling every winter to cope with the cold, also wouldn’t take it seriously.

It was only -28°F that night, dangerous for exposed skin, but nothing too bad.

Once it got to -50°F your spit would freeze before it hit the ground.

Caleb had yet to live through a winter like that, though he eagerly claimed to want to perform this trick.

Laughing, Noah had to shove him away from zippers. “Keep your gloves on, you goof. Run home. You’re shivering.”

Caleb saluted and set off, Noah, still laughing after him, turned up the path where the outside light reached him through new-falling snow.

Noah had no more time to watch Caleb off or take in the dance of light as a noise to his left made him spin around, thinking a moose was charging from the trees.

This was almost too far north for moose, but they did stray this far and they were terrifying, far more dangerous and unpredictable than bears or anything else that roamed the Alaskan wilderness besides humans.

A bull moose could weigh almost as much as a small car and move seemingly as fast.

In the next second, Noah smelled beer fumes and felt the blow to his knees blast out of nowhere. He hit the snow with a stifled yelp, instinct from so much secrecy keeping him quiet when he should have been yelling for his dad, fifty yards away in the warm shack.

“Who the fuck was that?” Trevor Feldman loomed over Noah in the dark.

Noah scrambled to get up, bogged down by layers, panting with the pain in his knee. He only had to reach the door — not engage.

“Brant, get the other one,” Trevor barked. “And we’ll have caught two fags for the price of one tonight.”

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Noah tackled Brant around the shins, slamming him face-first into a drift at the side of the walkway.

“Hey!”

“You son of a bitch!”

“You’ll pay for that, asshole!”

Everything started happening so fast, Noah had no idea who was who among the three, or how far they dragged him away.

Still, it never crossed his mind to shout while he was within shouting range.

If he’d yelled, his father may or may not have heard, may or may not have come out, but Caleb would have heard and he’d have turned around.

Noah kept his teeth clenched while they dragged him through the stunted forest and snow, out of all sight of town lights, trying to land a few blows of his own in the dark while they pinned his arms.

“You like seeing other guys naked, faggot?”

Even as they kicked him over and over, Noah trying to protect his head while his ribs broke and his nose fountained blood, he was more scared for the loss of his parka and gloves and hat and boots than for his bones.

They didn't really strip him. They didn't need to.

Losing just a parka could be enough to kill a person out here if he was disoriented or blind or too slow on the uptake at reaching a heat source.

Noah was all three by the time they left, laughing and throwing snow at him, their jeering voices slurring with the pickled jubilation of their own accomplishment.

He couldn't think through the pain, couldn't catch a breath, like being trapped in lava, the broken bones crushing in at him, from eye socket to hand to ribs folded like a smashed egg, to the ankle that they'd violently twisted while forcing his boot off.

That ankle might or might not be broken, but he certainly couldn't walk on it.

Even if he could walk, he had nowhere to walk to.

Not when his eyes were swollen shut, one bashed back into its socket with the broken bone.

He was gagging and suffocating, every movement a new scream that he couldn't scream, a new death that he couldn't die, while he longed to die, prayed to die, begged for the cold to numb him so he didn't have to feel this kind of pain that he'd not known could be real.

He thought people blacked out on pain like this.

What if they found Caleb?

No, they were too drunk and happy by the time they stumbled away.

They'd go for him tomorrow, though. Noah had to find him, to tell him.

Caleb had to go home to Austin. He had to go now.

How would Noah tell him that if Noah died in the snow in the night and no one found him for days because it was snowing and it would cover him by morning and the ravens and foxes would scavenge him before he'd finally be spotted days later?

He might have wept or screamed or vomited, but he couldn't move or breathe through the pain and he only lay there, colder and colder, until the numbness did start to take him and he began to feel that hint of winter's relief. He'd always thought freezing to death would be a good way to go.

It was when he stopped shivering that he knew he'd gone too far. Stop shivering and you needed emergency help. Stop shivering and you'd moved from cold to critical.

But he had to get back because of Caleb. If he didn't get back, Caleb would be next.

Which way had they brought him? It didn't matter since he no longer had a sense of direction and was totally blind.

Follow the trail. But they'd all run off. He could follow the wrong trail.

No, they'd been dragging him for half the time. There'd be a massive drag trail in the snow like a dog sled. It was snowing, but if he moved now he would still easily be able to feel the trail his own body had made until it returned to the shack's trenched path.

His legs, arms, and face were completely numb. He couldn't feel his broken hand anymore, although his cheekbone or eye socket or whatever was broken in his face kept throbbing from the inside like a furnace.

He had on two thick wool socks and glove liners. His snow pants were still on over

fleece ones and long underwear, plus a base layer and second wool layer. Not enough to survive in this, but it was enough to keep from freezing and get to his shack if he went about it the right way.

He had to feel around with his arms and elbows, blundering for enough sensation to tell if he was at a drag-path while sharp gasps of pain, tiny screams, escaped his lips from pain of his flexing ribs.

Incredibly, he found the trail, then reached his parka.

He couldn't get it around himself, but got it under him, his hands in the sleeves, his good hand supporting him as he crawled along, broken hand reaching ahead in its sleeve to feel where there was no snow resistance.

That parka saved him from losing his fingers that night.

Noah never knew how long it took him to crawl home, crawl until he started calling out for his father, calling for help, crawl more, call out, gasping and shuddering against the pain, certain all the time that he'd gone in the wrong direction, that he'd imagined the trail.

Then he heard the banging of the door and his father's voice and he tried to wave, still blind, and heard the running boots crunch new snow. He would be able to warn Caleb.

"Noah? Noah! What happened?" Warm hands, worry and panic, but strong, solid help from a man who often seemed to forget he had a son. Not right then. Right then he was all care and comfort, all worry and love.

Noah said, "Moose."

“Oh Christ — out at night? You should have had the Winchester with you. Christ — come on. I’ve got you, Noah. I’ll get the doctor here.”

The next day, Caleb came to find him since Noah didn’t show up for his pancakes.

Noah had told the doctor and told the police and told the neighbour bringing chicken soup that it had been a moose, all tracks having been wiped out to smudges and trails that could have been anything by overnight’s snowfall.

Only with Caleb did he cry while saying it had been a moose.

Caleb bent over him, sitting on the edge of Noah’s bed, clutching Noah’s good hand to his face, also crying.

“You have to go home to Austin. Go home and finish high school and get into a good college that you actually care about.”

“You can’t stay here either. Come with me.”

“To live off your mom? I’m going to Fairbanks. I’ll stay with my mom and Sarah until I’m ready for school in Seattle or New York or somewhere. Maybe I’ll take a gap year or two. It doesn’t matter. You will leave?”

“Not when you’re like this. You’ll take months to recover.”

“I can’t recover if I have you to worry about,” Noah gasped against the pain, clutching Caleb’s hand, able to see only through a slit in his relatively good eye.

“The doctor wants me in the hospital in Fairbanks anyway. They’re flying me out.

I’ll be fine if I know you’re leaving. I promise.

But I'm not going anywhere until I know you're on a plane for the lower forty-eight. You promise me that."

Caleb didn't ask. He didn't make Noah insist that it was a moose, didn't make him keep lying or challenge him.

He only gripped Noah's hand and said, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm sorry," over and over until Noah extracted a promise from him that he would call his mom today and leave on the first available bush flight out.

They both flew to Fairbanks, Noah for days of hospitalisation before going home to the care of his mom and Sarah, who loved having him there, and Caleb to catch a flight to Anchorage, then Dallas.

Noah never saw Caleb again. Nor did he ever try to.

Just like he never told. Never came out.

He avoided people, avoided making friends, got into black-and-white photography as a hobby, finding something to do that calmed, that he could control and escape into without another human involved.

Eventually, Noah got a job in Seattle, where he bought a thumb-sized cactus to look after and remind himself how much bigger the world was than stunted pines and reindeer moss.

He took a self-defence class and still lived his life jumping at every shadow, his pulse racing at the sight of two men so much as holding hands in Belltown, terrified for them.

He'd never even kissed another man besides Caleb by the time he started school in

New York.

It was another year replete with panic attacks before he even set foot in a gay bar, gradually allowing a small circle of friends in his life, then what might have been called one or two very short-term boyfriends.

Noah always managed to find a way to run before long.

Even New York wasn't far enough away to escape the memories and nightmares.

After another between-year working and applying for overseas universities, Noah made his way to London.

By then he was in his mid-twenties. He was starting over, had to be the master of his own life, not mastered by three young men in a blur of blood and snow and darkness, still laughing at him.

He had new cultural clashes in London and enjoyed simply exploring and talking about history, watching people from a safe distance and working more in IT part time while he studied.

He didn't have time for a boyfriend and, since he didn't have a boyfriend, he didn't need to be out.

At least he could daydream about a future with a romantic partner. One day. Not yet.

If he ever was out, if that day arrived, it would be because Noah met the right person to walk hand in hand with him at the back of the parade with sunglasses on.

It would be a careful thawing, a careful partner, a slow decompression for the sake of, and with the gentle reassurance of, someone he loved.

If that person never happened, “one day” would also become never.

Never might be a painful prison, but at least no one but Noah got hurt, and at least that hurt wasn't as bad as the alternative.

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Timo didn't know what to say, didn't know what to do, trapped in an emotional stalemate with no chance of winning, unsure even how to score.

He'd never done well with tears, though now he wished for them, for the clear social cues they would provide, instead of simply sitting here with Noah on the sofa through Noah's robotic delivery of his story.

He couldn't "There, there" and hug someone who sat numbly, staring at the coffee table, an arm's reach away, hunched and tense as an injured wild animal. Yet Timo's own impotence was a mockery, his inability to do anything or say anything to help appalling.

He couldn't say he understood because he didn't.

Hate crimes were something Timo had taken for granted in Russia.

When he'd been attacked, he'd attacked back.

He'd almost killed a man by kicking his feet out from under him at the top of a flight of concrete stairs into the underground one night when the man pulled a knife on Timo and the man Timo was flirting with.

Either you kicked faster than they swung, or you got knifed. Simple as that.

Timo hadn't hidden because of oppression and violence; he'd fought back, he'd bought rainbow lapel pins and donated to human rights causes long before he could technically afford to do so.

Then again, he'd also left Russia — “escaped” being more what it felt like.

Was that really fighting? Or was it just an angrier form of hiding?

He couldn't say it was all over now and Noah was safe and he didn't have to live in the past, because of course Noah had to live in the past. Everyone did.

If Noah didn't have a past, he wouldn't be Noah.

If Timo hadn't come from Russia he wouldn't be Timo.

Love or hate it, they were their pasts and saying it didn't matter now or not to dwell on it would be even more insensitive than saying he understood.

He couldn't say he was sorry, even though he was; sorry for what happened to Noah, sorry for how Noah had handled it, sorry there was never any justice done and those three men were still walking around in the world, probably working on the pipeline and drinking their wages.

But he couldn't say sorry because Noah didn't need sorry.

He needed help and protecting and encouragement and strength to live his own life with someone he loved without being scared, and, helplessly watching him talk himself out, rigid, dry-eyed, Timo had no clue how to offer any of that, how to be any of the things Noah needed.

So they sat in silence after Noah talked. Sat in the bright, open-plan living room, the glass streaked with autumn rain, too high up to hear the London traffic, hushed as a tomb.

Finally, Timo admitted the truth by saying, “What can I do to help? What do you

need?”

Then, for some reason, Noah did cry, clenching his jaw and squeezing his eyes shut, chin on his chest. Which was a little better because Timo could wrap his arms around Noah, who leaned into him, but mostly it was a whole lot worse.

* * *

Noah lay on his back staring at the ceiling in his hotel room that night.

He thought about the upcoming flight. About how much it and the hotel were costing him, but he'd be fine.

He could get a room in Brooklyn, find work he enjoyed, live on what he now had in savings for several months without needing to panic about rushing into anything out of desperation.

Should he visit his mom and Sarah for the holidays?

Flight to Fairbanks in December? Never. What about Thanksgiving?

He might manage Thanksgiving, but it would be another big expense right now.

He'd not seen them in three ... no ... was it four years?

Screw it, he'd go at Thanksgiving. They'd be over the moon and suddenly, for the first time in a long time, he wanted to see them.

A mental image of Timo arriving in Fairbanks with Noah flickered through his thoughts before he could jerk them in another direction. That was senseless. It was over with Timo.

Timo had actually apologised about the public announcement. He'd really meant it and Noah didn't take that lightly. Timo had even listened. He'd wanted to help, wanted to make everything right. The trouble was that Noah knew better by now.

They were wildly opposite characters and, while opposites may attract, there had to be some common ground, some sense behind the connection.

What he had with Timo was a witch's spell and a burning desire to start a new life in a new country that had momentarily blinded Noah into following along with that spell, to getting swept up in the fantasy that was Timo and forgetting that what they were talking about was not a weekend in Paris and a temporary place to live but a serious legal and life contract.

How many more major clashes and upsets would they battle through in the next months before finally falling apart?

How long before the spell wore off, before Timo woke up one day and wondered what the hell he was doing with Noah?

Or Noah woke up and asked himself how much staying overseas was really worth?

No, of course he had to leave. His time was up anyway. This was for the best. He just had to keep telling himself that to believe it. Until then? While he still felt like this? Like he had to keep making himself think of New York and Thanksgiving and his trip back in order to stop thinking of Timo?

How could he know on one hand that he and Timo were wrong for each other and Noah had no choice but to leave, while on the other regretting being alone more than anything that had happened lately? What was wrong with him?

* * *

It had been years since Timo drank to get drunk. For that matter, it had been years since he'd been really drunk. Not snickering about finding himself on the wrong floor of a hotel searching for his room drunk, but so drunk he couldn't remember having ended up in a hotel at all.

He thought he'd done well with Noah. He'd not said anything insensitive, as far as he was aware. He'd been a good listener. He'd apologised for the morning. All good, right? Start over fresh. No press interviews, no more public announcements, whatever pace Noah was comfortable with was golden.

Yet it hadn't been enough. Turned out, Noah wasn't sharing his story so they could start over and try again with better understanding.

He told his story as an explanation for why he was done with Timo, why he'd already rung the attorney to tell her to forget about the paperwork, why he was flying back to the States this week even though he had two weeks left.

Timo wasn't used to people breaking up with him. Mutual split, or Timo leaving for better things, restless, always striving, always seeking, always straining for the next mile marker and finish line. But had anyone ever simply broken up with him and left?

No one would do that. Yet someone had.

Someone who had every reason to leave.

Timo could see the reasons reflected at the bottom of the bottle, one after another presenting themselves with each swallow.

He'd started at a pub. He didn't drink alone. But the noise and faceless company was irritating when Timo wasn't a part of it. Timo loved noise as long as he was involved, preferably at the centre. Other people having a good time while he sat at the bar was

simply galling.

He'd thought about calling Ranveer since Ranveer was the smartest person he knew and might offer advice. He'd thought about calling Rhys since Rhys probably wouldn't hang up on him and would at least pretend to care.

He'd thought most about calling his mother, but he would need a medium for that.

Which made him think about Noah and Noah's interest in astrology and belief in that whole magic spell nonsense — but everything made him think of Noah.

Noah probably believed in mediums. Noah was probably the kind of person who would go to a psychic and change careers or move based on what they said.

Well, he was changing careers and moving now. Perhaps Timo was magical.

It had all started with that bloody spell.

No, of course not. But what if it had?

Timo went home, even though he knew better, even though he'd quit a long time ago and he knew his limits. He still went home and drank alone. Exactly like the opposite of a winner.

Why had he gone in there in the first place? He hated pub culture, which focused on sedentary behaviour revolving around beer and watching other people play sports.

Get out and do something, goddammit.

If you really had nothing better to do than scream at a TV and slosh beer down a stranger's back, then go home and slosh your own sofa.

Those guys wouldn't know what hit them if they tried this shit. They'd probably never tasted neat vodka in their lives. If it didn't have foam on the top they didn't know it was drinkable.

Every problem, every bump, every argument, it was all on Timo, wasn't it?

He could see it in the scenes skittering between liquid and glass at the bottom.

Noah had nearly broken his nose one night in response to Timo's actions. If that wasn't a warning that Timo needed to stop and take a long hard look at his own actions, what was?

Yet, had he?

Hell no.

Considering what Noah had been through, Timo was shocked by his level of restraint. Perhaps if he had broken Timo's nose Timo would have taken being rejected a bit more seriously rather than considering the whole thing a game to win from the start.

If it was all a game, Noah was another token to push around the board.

Noah was right to escape Timo. So bloody right.

Just what that asshole had said, wasn't it? Noah was the most unsuitable person possible for Timo. Noah had figured this out a long time ago.

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There didn't seem to be anything left in the bottle.

But there were lots of city lights that skipped around and blurred and danced so he looked at them from his vantage on the couch.

Did Noah like to dance? Timo had never asked.

Timo had never danced in his life but he would learn if Noah wanted him to.

And he would be the best. He wouldn't mind learning the tango.

No, he was getting distracted by the lights.

Then Chandler had called. Back before the pub.

Shit, he'd forgot about that. They'd been waiting for him to come back to work.

Couple of calls and messages from Spencer, then others.

What was going on? He'd just vanished and people wanted him at work.

Finally Chandler had called a few hours ago — could be several hours ago now.

Said he'd been waiting for Timo to get back to work.

"I'm not coming back today," Timo snapped. Could no one take a hint in this country?

“I thought you’d want to know sooner rather than later that I’m quitting,” Chandler said.

“Fine. Is that all?”

“All? I’m nearly your top earner.”

“Well, call out the fucking brass band. I’m not clinging to your coattails. I don’t even like you, Chandler.”

“Turns out, some people do.” Chandler sounded smug. “I thought you should have the chance to make a counter-offer —”

“I don’t give a shit that other prop shops are courting you. If you care about the Wolf Pack, you stay. If you don’t, you don’t. Knock yourself out.” Timo hung up on him.

Now Chandler and the whole pack swirled in those blurring city lights as well, but they didn’t matter. None of them mattered. Nothing mattered.

One thing mattered. One thing that he never should have loved. One thing that he’d done nothing but hurt for the past weeks. One thing that had proved to Timo for the first time in his life that he, Timo, was the problem.

Which meant he had to let Noah go.

Getting Noah back would make Timo happy. Not Noah.

His phone rang.

It was late. Early-morning late. Timo never put his phone on Do Not Disturb. Then he might miss something.

He answered.

“Yes?” He needed three tries to get the silly thing to pick up and not just keep buzzing in his hand. “Yes?”

It was a recorded junk call from ... Japan?

Timo told it exactly what he thought of it in ripe language before wondering how it could have been programmed to think UK numbers at this hour were a viable target?

“You know, never mind,” he told the chattering message.

“Get me through to manager in — place. I must talk to supervisor and explain clocks. World clocks. Greenwich Mean Time. It’s called ...

Do you know who I mean? Uh... what I mean?

No, make me a call. Find Noah’s hotel. No ...

phones are no more ... uh...? Hotel rooms? Private now?

Used to. Hotels used to have room phones, you know?

You won’t remember that, being modern — what’s it?

Technology. Still phone operator? No, no ...

Is there still phone operator? Shit. Missing words.

‘Is phone ...?’ ‘Are there still ...?’ Fuck, your English is better than mine and you’re speaking Japanese.

I struggled with articles, you know. Sentence ...

what's it? Structure. And ... you know. Remember all extra stupid, pointless words they add.

The English, I mean. English speakers. They use many tiny, tiny, tiny words instead of saying what they mean with few clear, informal — I mean ... information ... informative words.”

Suddenly, Timo laughed. The recording had gone dead. Perhaps he was being transferred to a real person, or the call was over, or someone was already listening.

“You know what? It's an ironic ... No. It's an irony. Or ironic with no article. Why? Because I broke Noah's speech, bringing back his stammer. So stressed by me, he couldn't talk smoothly. Guess who gets last laugh? If only he knew. If only ...”

Timo hung up. He stood up. That was his first mistake, but he'd never gone in for dinky glass tables or delicate little fixtures. The solid oak coffee table could have been used as a miniature battering ram and it never even flinched when he reached it.

Probably should try to make himself be sick.

How did he end up on his back on the floor?

It was that damn coffee table. Couldn't trust them.

Knocked the wind out of him and he better not stay on his back.

That was how one ended up drowning in one's own vomit.

He'd been to school with a boy who'd done that.

At fourteen. Never liked that kid anyway.

Timo rolled onto his elbows before he remembered that he'd been going to ring Noah.

He couldn't find his phone. By the time he found it, also on the floor, having bounced off the aggressive coffee table, he remembered that he was hurting Noah.

Timo was the problem. How was he ever going to remember something like that?

How was he going to make it stick when it went against all the laws of nature?

The fact remained, if he went after Noah, if he called, followed, chased, wooed, wheedled, insinuated, charmed, bribed, blackmailed, or begged, he was hurting Noah.

Timo dropped the phone with a clunk on the wood floor and curled into a foetal position.

Now his damn nose was bleeding. Whatever. He was on the hardwood. He just lay there and let it bleed. Perhaps he'd get lucky and bleed out.

Why was he still awake? Why was he still screaming inside?

What the fuck did it take to drown his sorrows when a night at the pub and a bottle of vodka hadn't made a dent? He'd drunk enough to drop dead from alcohol poisoning, but not enough to make him stop thinking about Noah.

The important part was that he'd figured out what he needed to do. The last thing he could offer Noah, the last way he could help, the best thing he could ever do for Noah and what he should have done all along.

If only he could remember the answer by morning.

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Julian's office was in an ancient vestry attached to a former church, now converted to residential, which seemed an odd choice given the nature of his work, but Timo was used to all manner of eccentric old buildings being repurposed around London.

The most important thing was that the light level inside was low and that Julian had been willing to see him first thing this morning.

Okay, so it wasn't "first thing" depending on your standards. It was the middle of the morning and Timo was once more skipping work. But this was when Julian could meet and Timo hadn't exactly been up and coherent for hours already.

Julian did not offer a smile or a "good morning" or anything like that. He opened the door to Timo's knock after leaving him waiting for long enough that Timo wondered if he was at the right place, then simply stepped back for Timo to come in.

"What do you want?" was Julian's greeting.

Timo hadn't explained himself on the phone, only pleading for a meeting anytime today, as soon as possible.

"Just to talk. I won't take much of your time." Timo eased the sunglasses from his nose and crept across the ancient rug as if it might crumble below his feet.

"I already know that much," Julian said too loudly, closing the door with unnecessary force while the noise rattled through Timo's eyeballs and down his spine like shattering chandeliers.

“I don’t suppose I could get a coffee?” Timo murmured, smelling it strongly through the musty stone of the place and hint of incense.

“I don’t suppose so.” But Julian sighed as if prompted by someone else. “Be right back.” He stalked through a connecting door.

Timo didn’t bother looking around the little room, avoiding windows and several lit candles with his eyes squinted almost shut, focusing on his brain not splintering off into shards.

Julian brought a colourfully painted, handmade clay mug of black coffee without offer of add-ins, but that was how Timo preferred it anyway. It was damn good too: smooth, strong but flavourful, not acidic.

Julian dropped into a high-backed cushioned chair facing Timo with the candles on a table between them so Timo couldn’t look at him without seeing flickering flames. Timo looked into his mug.

“Well?” Julian said. “What is it?”

Timo swallowed and carefully addressed his coffee. “I’ve come to ask you to please remove the spell on me.”

“Why? Is the spell that doesn’t exist still inconveniencing you?” He spoke so loudly, kicked back in his chair, one ankle crossed on the other knee, that Timo winced.

“No, it’s not that. That love spell was ...” Timo managed a slow inhale, then exhale. “One of the best things that’s ever happened to me.”

“Are you hungover?”

“I certainly hope so. If I’m not, someone broke into my home this morning and pounded my head with a mallet for several hours, yet I have no memory of the event.”

“Huh. Alright, go on. So I did you a favour. Is that what you said?”

“Is it?” Timo took a drink. “I guess I did.” He squinted into the mug, only vaguely aware of Julian beyond the candlelight. “I’ve never felt like this about anyone. I’ve been in love before, but relationships were always a battle.”

“Sure. Why not?”

“In a good way. Where’s the interest without competition?

Where’s the fun without a challenge? It’s different with Noah.

I’m different. I’ve never been obsessed with anyone like this.

I’ve never lain awake at night trying to come up with new ways to make someone else happy.

I’ve never cared about someone more than ...

more than ... anything. More than my life.

” Timo swished his cup, staring into it.

“The irony is, I’ve also never failed this spectacularly at anything. ”

“Because he left you?”

Timo said nothing.

“That’s now why you want the spell lifted?” Julian asked. “So you can walk away without feeling like you’ve come in second place? Wash your hands of the whole thing with no regrets?”

Timo shut his eyes. “No. It’s not that. I want the spell lifted because it’s hurting him.

It’s been hurting him from the moment it started.

It’s made him miserable, placed him in unfair and harmful situations, and ultimately triggered post-trauma responses and huge amounts of stress for him, all thanks to me.

” Timo clenched and relaxed his jaw a few times before going on.

“I’ve been the problem the whole time. He should be far from me.

He needs someone who’s a better fit, who listens to him, an introvert, a better age match, someone who will respect him without trying to push him to be someone he’s not and show him compassion without judgement for all that he’s been through. ”

He took another breath and looked again into his cup, dimly catching reflected light from window and candles, the surface fractured and jittery.

“Please.” Timo swallowed. “I don’t blame you for holding a grudge.

I was rude and disrespectful when we met at the wedding and I’m sorry.

I’m sorry I offended you and that I criticised your convictions when I don’t even know you.

That was wrong. But it wasn't Noah who did it.

Please remove the spell for his sake. If you don't, I don't know how not to go after him, to beg him to come back, follow him to the States, and that's the last thing he needs. "

"Are you sure about that?"

"Sure?"

"That you're the last thing he needs? Maybe you should ask him."

Timo finally looked up, meeting Julian's eyes across the small wood table and candle flames, only to see an apparition image of Noah standing right beside Julian's chair.

Timo swore and leapt back so violently he threw the coffee mug over his own shoulder and sent his chair crashing to the ground.

The mug smashed on the stone floor. Timo grabbed the back of another chair, narrowly staying on his feet, the blood pounding in his ears as all kinds of supernatural and ghost stories and occult rituals from movies flashed through his mind.

Julian and Noah stared at him, eyebrows raised.

"Timo?" Noah ventured. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"What the fuck?" Timo gasped. "You're here?"

"I think so ..." Noah glanced down at himself.

“Didn’t you know my other trick?” Julian asked Timo and snapped his fingers.
“Summoning.”

“Leave him alone.” Noah frowned at Julian. “He’s having a rough day.”

“Well excuse me for trying to lighten the mood.”

“Timo —” Noah started again.

“What are you doing here?” Timo caught his breath — and heart.

“I came to see Julian. I don’t know why you find that impossible to believe since you’ve done the same thing.”

“Popularity is a heavy burden.” Julian was glaring at Timo. “And I wish you wouldn’t break my things. A member of my coven made that mug.”

“How long have you been here?” Timo asked Noah.

“For half an hour.”

“You were in this room when I got here?”

“Well ... I felt like I should leave but Julian said no, to hear what you had to say, so I was behind the altar —”

“The what?”

“Just there. And you were talking about me so I stepped out here beside Julian but you didn’t look up. I wasn’t meaning to eavesdrop. I thought you’d see me.”

“He put himself on the other side of the candles so I’d have to look right into the light to look at him.” The bastard. Timo bit his tongue.

Julian smirked.

“What did you do to yourself last night?” Noah sounded worried. “You look terrible.”

“I drank to forget. Perfectly normal thing to do. Only it made me remember ... how terrible I’ve been to you. I’m sorry.”

Noah shook his head but Timo shifted his gaze back to Julian, who still sat watching them as if on a throne.

“Will you lift the spell?” Timo asked.

“Don’t —” Noah cut in, stepping forwards.

They both looked at him.

“Don’t change anything,” Noah said quietly.

“Timo, you’re wrong. You haven’t been the problem the whole time.

You’ve made mistakes, but so have I. If I’d been honest with you before we ever set foot in any attorney’s office, this wouldn’t have happened.

We all make mistakes. The truth is, you’ve been changing all along, pushing yourself for my sake, and you’ve just proved that you’re no longer the man I met in July.

I’m the one who’s let my whole life be ruled by fear, too scared even to meet you halfway most of the time.

I can't cast a spell and chase away the fear and change who I am overnight.

But I can work on it. I can try, especially if I know you're by my side. ”

They stood there, watching one another. Timo's head was still splitting and the light still stung, but that didn't seem to matter anymore.

He could think of nothing halfway intelligent to say, so he smiled.

Noah returned it, though he looked shy, uncertain, as if he thought Timo might turn him down.

As if this wasn't the greatest day of Timo's life.

Julian studied his own fingernails, then glanced at his watch, drummed his fingers on his chair arm, looked at the ceiling.

Perhaps Timo should do something?

Could he go back to sleep? With Noah there, of course. No, he wasn't home.

Timo opened his arms.

Noah hurried around the table and leaned into them, hugging Timo in return.

“You'll really give me another chance?” Timo asked.

“Only if you'll give me one.” Noah pulled back just enough to kiss him. “I'm sorry I ran out on you when you didn't mean any harm.”

“I'm sorry I pushed you so fast. Noah —”

“Your nose is bleeding.”

“Shit.” Timo fumbled at his pockets, pinching his nose at the same time.

Julian appeared beside them, wordlessly giving Timo a paper napkin.

Timo pressed it to his nose. “Noah, will you marry me?” His voice was muffled. “And before you answer this time, it’s okay to say no. We can go back and forth, we can take our time, if that’s too much —”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then we’ll figure out how to make it work —”

“No.” Noah rested a hand on Timo’s arm. “I mean, yes, I’ll marry you. I’ll call Anjali back.”

“Oh.”

“But I still have to leave the country for now. I can’t work for you anymore.”

“That’s probably for the best.” Timo rotated the napkin against his nose, his fingers smeared in blood.

“It’s definitely for the best. No way am I marrying my boss. But I can come back as a tourist in November while we wait on paperwork. Or you can visit the States?” Noah cocked his head. “Want to come to Alaska for Thanksgiving with my moms?”

“More than anything.”

Noah laughed and hugged him. Timo held on as tight as he could with one arm, his

eyes newly burning and whole body weightless, never wanting to let go, certain now he never had to.

He didn't think he could get any happier, until he opened his eyes and saw Julian still impatiently there, and Timo smiled at him and said, "Thank you."

Julian folded his arms across his chest, scowling at the altar, his expression adding to Timo's euphoria. Somehow, this love spell had turned into another win.

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Noah bounced on the balls of his feet, looking around dozens of people waiting at JFK's international arrivals. From limo drivers holding signs to parents with small children watching for relatives, all eyes focused on sliding doors that boldly forbade entrance.

Although Thanksgiving was still a week out, the airport churned like a shopping mall in December.

Noah hardly noticed, able to see only those closed doors, or check his phone every ten seconds in case of another text.

No update since landing. That was ages ago.

Customs, baggage claim, long corridors — it all had to be covered before the London passengers walked through that door.

Besides that, US citizens would get through customs much faster than anyone else.

Even when the doors did open, Noah would have to wait.

Noah jammed his restless hands in coat pockets.

No stuttering, no happy tears, nothing embarrassing here in this chattering throng; they would hug and get home to Noah's rented room for a night before their flight to Anchorage in the morning.

He shouldn't be this worked up after being apart for less than a month. Why did it

feel like years?

The doors opened. Noah shifted from foot to foot.

Certain it would be impossible for Timo to be first out, Noah almost didn't register what he saw.

In a long overcoat, pulling his rolling bag that was small enough for a carry-on, shoulders square, blue eyes like searchlights, Timo lacked only a burst of flashbulbs and mics shoved in his face to complete his leading-man image.

Noah meant to hurry forwards. He meant to rush Timo out of here for as much downtime as possible before both needed to be back at the airport. For a moment, as other passengers fountained out and greeters waved, Noah simply stood.

Timo's gaze found him. Never breaking stride, he smiled.

Noah ran into his arms. Timo's embrace was crushing. His kiss sent Noah's heart thudding against his eardrums. Still, even in a crowd, Noah held on just as tight.

He had so much to tell Timo, so much to catch up on. He had only tonight, one flight to Anchorage, and one flight to Fairbanks' worth of time to get in everything before they'd be seeing his family. At sight of Timo, though, he couldn't remember any of it.

* * *

Timo steadily offered chocolates while Noah leaned on him, talking and nibbling his way over Canada. Timo had gathered from the bars Noah had packed when leaving London in October that flying made Noah nervous and chocolate soothed nerves.

Although this was news to Timo, he'd filed it away and brought a luxurious gift box

of Charbonnel et Walker chocolates for his Fairbanks hostesses and a smaller heritage collection for air travel.

He should have given Noah the larger box.

Eight hours, after all, plus the flight to Fairbanks, and Noah was polishing one off every six minutes.

They could have done this all in one go, with a sofa to share instead of leaning over first-class armrests between them, if Noah had let Timo charter a flight.

Noah finally interrupted himself from telling Timo what to expect with his mother and other relations in Fairbanks, as if providing a battle brief.

“You should have a truffle.”

“I’ll take one that you don’t like.”

“I like all of them. They’re delicious.”

“Then they’re all for you.” Timo took the opportunity of a pause to add, “I’m sorry you’re worried about me meeting your family, but don’t be on my account. I’m not worried.”

“It’s not you. It’s ... I haven’t —” He sat up properly, Timo missing him the moment he broke contact.

“I only told my mom yesterday that I was bringing someone, and did it by email so I didn’t have to get into explanations.

It’s the coward’s way out, arriving together so I don’t have to say anything to come out.

Also ... I need to be there in person for this.

I'm sorry to put you in the middle of something I should have sorted out with my family ten years ago. ”

“Why? I'm not. Chocolate?” Timo proffered the box.

Noah only looked at him, studying his face, then, “You're really not, are you? Even though I'm hiding behind you?”

Timo chuckled. “Think I've never met in-laws? There's simply nothing your family can do to scare me. Nothing. If you want me there when you tell your mum the whole truth, about everything that happened before you left Alaska, I'll be there for that also.”

“No, I better do that alone.” He gulped a breath. “Thank you. I have the most incredible fiancé in the world.”

Timo leaned over the armrest to kiss him. “You have the second most incredible fiancé in the world.”

Noah laughed, red-faced, as he tried to return the kiss. “I love you. Timo? Can we invite Julian to the wedding?”

“ No. ”

“If it wasn't for him —”

“Rubbish.”

“Changed your tune again?”

“I never believed any of that magic spell crap.”

“Not what you said when you showed up at Julian’s office that morning.”

“When you eavesdropped, you mean? You never told me what you were doing there. You must have asked for the same thing.”

“I did. For the opposite reason. I begged him to lift the spell because I was going home and I couldn’t stand leaving you like that. I never wanted to hurt you, certainly not to make you miserable after I was gone.”

“He wouldn’t back down even for you? And you want him at our wedding?”

Noah gazed at the chocolates that Timo still held between them.

“Noah?” Timo narrowed his eyes. “What happened before I got there? Did he admit it was a hoax to mess with me?”

“Ah, no. He said ...” Noah took a chocolate and nibbled an edge to test the flavour. “Orange cream — best one.”

“Julian said what?”

Noah finally met his eyes. “He said he’d lifted the spell after I saw him the first time. Before our Paris trip. He said everything you’d done since then was totally on you.”

Timo opened his mouth, glared, shoved the lid on the box. “Everything was on me all along. That’s how free will works.”

“But ...” A smile twitched the corner of Noah’s mouth.

“But nothing.”

“That was when you started sleeping properly again.”

“Only natural since it was when we went away together. Nothing strange about that. How I felt about you didn’t change. How I feel about you has only grown stronger.”

“I know it has. I guess I didn’t want to tell you in case it was like a placebo — like you started to believe a love spell had been lifted, when, really, isn’t falling in love always magical? Don’t we all sometimes feel out of control under its influence?”

Timo started to say not like this love: not like going to bed one night hardly knowing who someone was and waking up the next morning obsessed. No, that wouldn’t help his case.

“Sure,” Timo said. “All part of the fun.”

Noah gave him another chocolatey kiss before returning his head to Timo’s shoulder.

Noah calmed down after that. Having polished off the whole box by the time they reached Fairbanks late that night probably helped. Whatever the reason, he was the one who took Timo’s hand before they disembarked.

Timo kissed his knuckles. He smiled into Noah’s eyes, chest full with the pride he felt for Noah being ready to face the world as who he was, which meant the two of them facing it together.