







# Magical Beast (Hellhound Collar #6)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** “Boom.” The word was the barest whisper, and if it hadn’t been for Giorgio’s hound, he never would’ve heard it.

Hellhound Giorgio was the first to admit that the warehouse he and his colleague had been sent to looked like something found in a horror movie set. Remote, looking deserted, it was easy to think there would be nothing to find inside but rats. Unfortunately, his assessment was deeply flawed and what was worse, he found a living survivor under a pile of dead bodies. A man who would prove to be his fated mate.

“How did you and your friend end up in that warehouse last night? I doubt you got a message from the Fates saying, ‘get there quick or you’ll lose your chance for a mate until they get reborn again’.”

Enda Cochrane believed he was minutes away from dying when he heard a voice that sent his bird spirit fluttering. But while being saved by a man who was his fated mate should’ve been cause for celebration, Enda knew their path together wouldn’t be easy. His life never had been, and he had no reason to think anything had changed. Someone still wanted him dead and having a mate wasn’t going to change that.

I just want one day when I can pretend that my life is normal, that no one is out to kill me, and that I can be safe and happy with you.

As if Enda and Giorgio’s life wasn’t already complicated enough, the gods decided to get involved. The issue had a lot to do with Enda’s past, but the problem with that was there was so much he didn’t know. When the plan is put in place to flush out the person who wanted Enda dead, that should’ve worked but did I mention godly interference?

Magical Beast is an MM Paranormal Fated Mates story. While it is part of a series it can be read as a standalone. HEA is guaranteed, but the characters really had to work for this one.

**Total Pages (Source):** 31

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

A remote farm in England

Giorgio stiffened as his hound suddenly erupted in a huge celebratory howl in his mind. He closed his eyes just for a second, sending warm congratulations to his packmate Kolton, who had just witnessed the hatching of his son with his fated mate, Simon. You deserve every happiness, Kolton. With Hades' blessing, I hope that's me one day.

“Hey. You falling asleep on the job?”

Giorgio was jolted back into his current reality by a sharp jab on his shoulder. He shifted his rifle from one hand to the other, shaking his head. “Just random thoughts, man. You know how it is. Is it just me, or are you thinking there's something not right about this place?”

Mitchell, his partner for the mission, shrugged and casually puffed on his cigarette, although Giorgio knew he was watching for any signs of movement. Crouched among foliage in a remote forest was all perfectly normal in Giorgio's line of work. It was the building they were watching that didn't fit with his normal cases - a giant concrete monstrosity in the middle of nowhere.

Giorgio could see one dirt track – basically two wheel ruts cut into sparse gravel leading to one side of the building - but there were no other signs the place was even being used.

The position of the windows indicated the building had at least three floors, but all of the glass had been broken out, and the gaps were boarded up. He and Mitchell were

situated as close to the one solitary door they'd found – a battered solid wooden door that used to be red if the remnants of paint left were any indication. There were no lights on, no sounds coming from anywhere in or around the building, and yet there was a vibe in the air Giorgio couldn't ignore.

“We were told to go in at zero two hundred.” Mitchell stubbed out his cigarette on the sole of his boot. Both men were dressed in camouflage gear, including heavy footwear. “It's coming up on that now. You having second thoughts about this?”

“I'd feel better if I knew what we were going in for,” Giorgio muttered. “We're in retrievals, we deal with active hostage situations. I'm not sure there's anyone here to retrieve, and I'm not seeing anyone we can negotiate with.”

“We've been in deceptive buildings before,” Mitchell reminded him.

“True that. But shit, look at this place. If someone set this place up to look like a creepy deserted building in the middle of nowhere for a movie set, they succeeded. In the meantime, our backup is a half hour hike away, and we get sent in with nothing more than coordinates that weren't that accurate, either. This whole situation feels wrong.”

“I've got as much respect for gut feelings as the next man,” Mitchell said, straightening up from the crouch he'd been in, hefting the door rammer he'd carried in. “Especially in this business. But a job's a job and you know damn well Duncan's not going to give a damn about your gut instincts. He'll have our asses for breakfast if we don't at least go into the damn place.”

Giorgio grimaced at their handler's name. Duncan's only claim to fame was that he could down an entire family-sized pizza in the time it took most people to eat a slice. He'd never worked in the field and would probably faint if someone stuck a gun in his face.

“Quiet could be a good thing, right?” Mitchell nudged him again, and Giorgio stood up as well. “We bang down the door, make some noise, check all the floors and give the rats a damn good fright. Then, we can say we’re done and head back to the support team. It’ll be an early night for a change.”

You hope. Giorgio wasn’t so sure. “You bang down the door, I’ll go in first. Make sure you stay behind me this time,” Giorgio warned. “Your sweet Sarah almost had my balls in a sling the last time I had to drag you back home with a bullet in your arm.”

“Ah, happy days.” Mitchell’s teeth showed through his beard. “Her nagging is her love language.”

“You keep telling yourself that. She made me feel as though I needed to wear a bulletproof vest just to come to dinner.” He was procrastinating. Giorgio knew it. Inhaling sharply, he tried to center himself and his hound. I’ll go and visit Kolton tomorrow, he decided. Take them a gift for their son and get a look at the little fella. Remind myself it’s not the whole world that’s gone to shit. Just parts of it.

“On three...two...one...” Like clockwork, Mitchell ran forward, pounding on the door with his rammer, splintering the old wood into a dozen pieces. As he stepped back and to the side, Giorgio ran forward, glad they were going in at night – it meant his eyes didn’t have to adjust to the gloom.

He didn’t have to run far. The whole first floor was a wide open space – even the lining had been pulled off the walls. It was the smell that hit him first. Dead bodies. A whole lot of dead bodies. Stacked in a heap, they looked as if someone was planning to put a match to them. Giorgio lowered his weapon, his nose wrinkling at the stench as Mitchell came up beside him.

“There’s no one left alive...” Mitchell started to say, but Giorgio held up his finger.

“I’m going to check this lot. You do a quick check of the other floors. Be careful and mind your back,” he said urgently as his hound alerted him to the faintest of whimpers around the far side of the stack.

“Oh, shit, no,” Giorgio growled, dropping his rifle with a clatter on the concrete floor, as he ran around the side of the body mound, searching for any sign of movement.

One blink in the gloom. A tiny flash of the whites of someone’s eyes. Giorgio only saw it for a split second, but that was all he needed.

“I’ll get you out,” he promised as he started moving the bodies nearest where he’d seen the eyes with as much care as he could. “I swear, I’m not leaving you here. Just hang on. For fuck’s sake, hang on.”

Giorgio had seen and smelled a lot of horrible shit in his time on Earth, but as he worked as fast as he dared, his heart ached at the carnage left for them to find. He had no doubt he and Mitchell had been set up, although for what, he had no idea. But there was no way this was a regular retrieval job.

“Hey, there. You still breathing?” Giorgio tried to keep his growl out of his voice, but his hound was getting more agitated with every passing moment. Eyes blinked open, and as he went to move the body closest to the living being, a hand reached out, gripping the sleeve of his jacket.

“Boom.” The word was the barest whisper, and if it hadn’t been for Giorgio’s hound, he never would’ve heard it.

“Boom?” Giorgio went to reach for the hand that moved off his arm, but then he saw the young man was pointing downward... underneath him...at the wires.

“Oh shit. All right. Don’t move.” Taking the hand, Giorgio put it back on his arm.

“Do. Not. Let. Go.” Inhaling sharply, he looked over his shoulder and yelled, “Mitchell, get down here. Fucking run, you fat-assed bastard!”

“Who are you calling fat, you over-muscled hunk?” Mitchell was panting as he hurried down a concrete set of stairs and crossed the room. “What have you found? Fuck, a live one?”

“Grab my jacket.”

“What the fuck? Why.”

“If you want to see Sarah again, grab my jacket and don’t let go.”

“You are some freaky dude, G.”

“I’m going to pull you out now,” Giorgio said to the eyes that hadn’t left his face. “Don’t let go.”

He got a tiny nod, and that was going to have to do. “Mitchell, you’d better swear on your mother that what you’re about to see you’ll never repeat to another soul.”

“My mother’s been dead for the last ten years.”

“Then swear on her grave.” Bracing his feet firmly on the floor, Giorgio mentally counted. One...two...three! Holding tight to the arm he was now gripping, Giorgio translocated with his two passengers. As their cells broke down, he heard and then felt the blast of the explosives, waiting for whoever had the misfortune to be the one sent on a retrieval mission.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

“What the fuckity, fuck, fuck was that?” They landed in Giorgio’s living room, Mitchell angrily slapping at a few embers on his pants and boots. “A fucking bomb? Someone was trying to kill us? And now... now we’re here in your damn apartment a hundred miles away? What the fuck, G? Seriously, what the fuck?”

“That’s six pounds you owe Sarah for the swear jar so far. Give her a call. I’ll bet you a tenner she’s going to get a call in the next thirty minutes from the team who were half an hour hike away from our location, telling her you’re dead. Don’t tell her anything else, just tell her to text you when she gets that call and for her to say nothing. Not a damn word.”

Giorgio blew out a long breath. “Then help yourself to a drink. You know where the bar is. You have my word, I’ll explain in a minute. Just...you know...” Giorgio looked down at the young man he’d saved. “I promise I’m one of the good guys,” he said softly. “What can I get you? What do you need?”

“Enda.”

Giorgio frowned, and then he remembered that people said he looked intimidating when he did that. “Your name is Enda? Little bird?”

The man could barely nod, but he managed. Giorgio noticed that his eyes, which had been so bright before, were now drooping. “Are you hurt? Any injuries?”

“Injure?”

“Not English?” Giorgio was guessing. Enda had an elfin face and large almond eyes.

He was so pale it was difficult to assume what his typical skin tone would be. Even his lips were almost white. “Just speak.”

“You can’t force a guy to speak if he can’t understand what you’re saying.” Mitchell came over carrying a large glass full of brandy.

“Hellhounds can understand any language,” Giorgio said, still distracted by wondering what Enda’s first language was.

There was a thud on the floor, followed by a clink of glass as it emptied all over Giorgio’s rug and rolled onto the wooden floor. Mitchell had fainted. Giorgio sighed. “And that is why we’re not supposed to tell anyone. But you’re special, too, aren’t you, Enda?”

“Bird.” Enda put his hands together and waved them like wings. For some reason, it put Giorgio in mind of a Japanese crane, and he quickly said in Japanese, “Do you need anything?”

Enda’s eyes, which were almost closed before, flew open. “Water please. Clean, please. So tired. Not hurt.” His phrasing was disjointed, but Giorgio put that down to Enda being totally overwhelmed. He had so many questions and so many things they needed to talk about, but making Enda comfortable was the first and highest priority.

“I’m going to clean you,” he said as gently as he could, clicking up a bottle of water, opening it, and handing it over. “My magic can put you in clean clothes, and then you can sleep.”

“You have a magical beast,” Enda said in Japanese. “Don’t let them get me again.”

“I’ll keep you safe, little bird. You have my promise. Let me get you comfortable.”

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Giorgio thought he was better than most of his packmates at understanding human emotion – he spent most of his time dealing with very hairy situations. But as Mitchell hadn't said anything in the past five minutes except "I can't believe it," he was struggling to know what Mitchell was having issues believing.

"You did faint. You dropped your booze on my floor. There's still a wet spot on the rug."

"Delayed reaction." Mitchell pouted. "I can't believe it."

"I'm a hellhound, paranormals are real, they live and work among the human population and no one knows about it – it's life, get over it."

That got him a glare. "I don't care if you get furry, so long as you don't take a chunk out of my ass. Someone tried to kill us. Does your furry brain understand that? You and me. Both of us."

Ah, now Giorgio understood. He'd been around long enough to know that humans feared death. Although he couldn't be killed, he imagined Lord Hades wouldn't be happy if he turned up in the Underworld looking messed up, though, so, there was that. But Mitchell hadn't finished.

"I just can't believe they wanted to kill us. They would've succeeded, too, if it hadn't been for you. Dead! There's no coming back from that. Sarah just sent me the text." He held up his phone. "She's worried sick, not knowing what to believe. The bastards told her there was nobody left to retrieve and that she'd be notified when they have arranged a memorial service for us. She wants to know why they think we're dead when we're not. What the fuck!"

Giorgio rubbed his chin. The lack of sleep wasn't a worry, but he was really concerned about Enda, who was sleeping on the couch. Giorgio's hound hadn't wanted to let the man out of their sight, and without knowing what was going on, Giorgio agreed. He'd made the man as comfortable as possible, finding him a pillow, covering him in a blanket, but there was still that nagging worry about who, what, and why there were so many bodies for him and Mitchell to find.

"Our sole survivor isn't human, either." He nodded in Enda's direction. "That's possibly why he survived when all those other victims didn't. Until he wakes up and we can talk to him..."

"Yes, yes, find out why there was a pile of dead bodies for us to find, I agree. We need to find out who those poor souls were, what they had in common - apart from being piled into a heap for us to find - and who the hell is responsible. I know that's important, but can we focus on our more pressing problem for a moment? Why were we chosen for this job? Who did you piss off? Why were we meant to be blown to bits along with all the others?"

"I don't know." Think, damn it, think. Giorgio tore his eyes off Enda's sleeping form and looked at his friend. They'd done a lot of jobs together. "Excusing the fact we found someone alive, what would we normally do if we're confronted with a mass of bodies?"

"It's not something that's happened very often, thank fuck." But Mitchell was thinking, too. "Typical procedure would be to contact the team, and while we were waiting for them to arrive, we would normally take photographs and then lay the bodies out to make them easier to identify, and..."

"Right, so, we would've moved them before the team arrived. I think that's a key part of this."

Mitchell slammed the arm of his chair with his fist, and Giorgio immediately checked on Enda, something Mitchell noted. “Sorry. I am battling a truckload of fucking emotions about this and it’s not easy to think straight. But yes, we would have moved them, the whole place blows up and the guys sitting safely a half an hour’s hike away would just add our body bits to a jar along with everyone else’s, because that’s all that would be fucking left. Why us?”

“I have no idea. I mean, you and I have both had our run-ins with Duncan before, but so has everyone else. It could just be bad luck, and it was our turn to do the job...”

“You don’t believe that any more than I do.”

Mitchell was right, but Giorgio had a bigger concern. “I need to send you back to the scene,” he said slowly, knowing Mitchell wouldn’t be happy about it. “Think logically about this,” he added quickly as Mitchell opened his mouth to protest. “One, we need someone on the inside to work out what the hell is going on, and you absolutely can’t tell anyone about how we got out, so going back makes sense.

“Two, I have our survivor to look after – they won’t miss him among the bodies because, as you pointed out, there will only be body parts left. And I...” He hesitated not sure how much more about his true life he should tell his friend, but shit – in for a penny in for a pound. “I can disappear. I’ve done it before. I’m...very, very old and incapable of dying – it’s just part of how I was made. But you have a life with Sarah, a home and a mortgage, things like that. You can’t be dead and then just turn up home one day unscathed – imagine what that would do to Sarah.”

“All right...all right, I hear what you’re saying.” Mitchell nodded. “But I’m not sure how safe that would be for me or Sarah. If we were targeted deliberately...”

Giorgio blew out a long breath. That was a good point. If someone deliberately wanted him and Mitchell dead for whatever reason, then Mitchell wouldn’t be safe

the next time he went out on a job, whether Giorgio was there or not.

“Okay, all right. We’ll both have to play dead for a while. I think the best thing to do, considering how badly she’s freaking out, is to tell Sarah to pack a couple of changes of clothes and then come here. Then tell her to double delete her phone messages, or better yet, completely get rid of her phone. I have an extra one here she can use.”

“We should probably get rid of our own as well.” Mitchell winced at his phone that was still in his hand. “I’m still paying this thing off.”

“If you’re dead, no one will be coming after you for payments.” Giorgio huffed. His phone was part of the Zeus network, and he knew it couldn’t be tracked. “Text Sarah, keep it brief. Hopefully whoever’s responsible for this is still busy with the scene, making sure their asses are covered. In the meantime, our bosses will expect Sarah to be grieving, so, her leaving to visit family or friends wouldn’t be unusual. This address isn’t on their radar, so, they won’t know who she’s actually visiting, and frankly, it’s none of their business.”

“Are you going to tell her how you saved me?” Mitchell’s eyes widened. “Furry ass, magical powers, and all that?”

“I’d rather not. Secrecy is vitally important in the paranormal world, but I don’t think I have any choice. At least this way, I’ll be the hero for a change, and she’ll stop shooting daggers at me every time I see her, thanks to that last shooting incident.”

Giorgio had a sudden thought. That incident was only two months before. Looking up and meeting Mitchell’s eyes, he realized his friend had been thinking the same thing. “We might have been targets for a while,” Mitchell murmured. “The question is, why?”

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“You can’t just keep him. There are authorities who handle situations like this!”

Raised voices. Not the way Enda preferred to wake up, but it wouldn’t be the first time. It was the anger and concern in the female tone that had him clutching at the blanket covering him – the one that smelled so strongly of the man who saved him. His instincts were warring between looking for that man and staying as still as possible until the danger was past.

“It’s not safe for anyone else to know he’s alive right now. The same goes for me and Mitchell.” Keeping his eyes closed, Enda let the warmth and confidence from his savior’s deep tones wash over him.

“He’s barely more than a child.” The woman’s voice got closer. “Can’t you see the impropriety in having someone like him, in his circumstances, remaining in your care? You saved his life, admittedly, but he’s going to feel obligated to you because of that. He’s isolated, cut off, likely suffering from immeasurable trauma after what he went through – at least from what you described to me. He needs counseling, family, and people who know him to support him in this time.”

“Sarah, I understand your concern more than you can know.” The man had gotten closer, too, and he’d lowered his voice. “More than anyone in this room, I know how shitty people can be to other people, and sometimes the only thing that keeps me going is that I know where they’ll end up. Enda asked me to protect him. I vowed to him I would. I am not going to let him go into a system that doesn’t understand how unique he is.”

“The best way to help him is to contact the authorities. Giorgio, I’m not saying your

heart's not in the right place because it is. But think about how this is going to look. I can understand how someone small and cute like this is going to spark protective instincts. Hell, I want to hug him and protect him from the world's meanies just as much as you do.

“But he's been traumatized. He almost died. Can you imagine how he felt laying on those wires and explosives, knowing any movement would kill him? He's going to need years of therapy, and that's without knowing how or why he got taken in the first place, or from where. The best way you can help him is to let professionals handle this. Giorgio, don't you understand? He's a kid.”

Enda had heard enough. The woman Giorgio had called Sarah – he had no idea why she was in the room, or who she was – but she was trying to separate him from Giorgio, and that frightened Enda more than any killer or explosive. “I'm not a kid!” Enda flew out from under the blanket, wrapping his arms around the big man – Giorgio's – waist. “Full adult. Twenty-five. I got my wings. This magical beast is my mate. You can't make me leave.”

“Mate? Fated mate? Enda, are you sure?” Giorgio touched his shoulder, causing Enda to look up. He was speaking in Japanese.

“Yes. Didn't you know?” Enda understood English and could speak it, although when he was tired or stressed his brain struggled with the translation process, and it was easier for him to talk in the language he learned from his grandmother. “That's fine. I know that happens sometimes, but yes, I knew when you saved me. My bird told me you were safe for us and that you were mine.” Enda checked the light in the room, sniffed, and then added, “Is it breakfast time? I haven't eaten in days. If that's not an imposition.”

“I cooked a fry-up earlier when we got up, and I saved you a plate. But if there's something specific you want, I can get it for you.” Giorgio was looking at him as if



seeing him for the first time.

“Bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast with butter?” Enda grinned as his stomach grumbled.

“Soft toast or crispy toast with butter?” Giorgio’s lips twitched.

“Soft toast, dripping with melted butter. It’s the only way to eat toast,” Enda said firmly. “It’s the bacon that has to be crispy.”

His big savior actually chuckled. “It’s good to hear you’re clear about what you want. Hellhounds like me aren’t good at picking up cues, we prefer straight talking.” Then his face turned serious. “Our mating – there is a process we have to go through that I’ll explain to you later, but I do believe you, and I’m very happy about it. I... my hound is already so protective. But this business from last night affects my friends as well and we do need to talk about it.”

Enda swallowed the lump that had suddenly appeared in his throat. “Can I eat first?”

“Definitely. Come on through to the kitchen.”

Sarah followed them into the kitchen. Enda couldn’t help but keep an eye on her. Non-paras had trouble understanding mating and the bonds that formed so quickly between those who were fated, but Enda knew what he said was true, and Giorgio would know in time. He definitely didn’t seem averse to it, although Enda wondered what the “process” was that he’d alluded to.

“Have a seat, Enda. This is Mitchell,” Giorgio indicated to the man pouring over a shiny phone at the kitchen table. “He and Sarah are long time partners. You might remember seeing Mitchell last night when we...removed you from the situation you were in.”

“Thank you.” Enda nodded in Mitchell’s direction and then quickly sat down. Seconds later, Giorgio brought him over a plate full of steaming food. “I’ve made some fresh toast, and the butter is on the table,” he said, putting the plate in front of him and then handing him a knife and fork. “Did you want water, juice, coffee, or tea?”

“Just water, thank you. Please excuse my eating.” Not waiting for a reply, Enda quickly started into the meal – he couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten something substantial, and it was beautifully cooked. Picking up a slice of bacon, he grinned at Giorgio, who had sat opposite him, tapping the crispy edge with his fingernail before crunching it between his teeth.

“There is something seriously wrong with this scenario.” Sarah had sat next to Mitchell, and Enda could feel her eyes watching his every move. “You’re telling me this boy was buried under a pile of bodies just a matter of hours ago, and here he is, hoeing into bacon and eggs like nothing happened?”

“Sarah, let Enda eat, please. We can answer questions afterward,” Giorgio said firmly.

“No. This is not right.” Sarah was pointing at him. Enda took another mouthful of scrambled eggs. They were never nice when they got cold. “If this was any other kid in existence, and the scenario you described is true, then he’d be in a sniveling heap under the blankets, crying for his mom.”

Enda lowered his fork and asked slowly. “Are you upset because I’m not upset? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes!”

“Aha. Thank you, but there’s no need.” Enda nodded and put the eggs in his mouth.

“No need? No need to what? Get upset? Because nothing has gone normal at all since last night, and now for some reason we’re supposed to be hiding out because someone tried to kill you all last night, and here you are...”

“Sarah, that’s enough. Please.” Giorgio did firm so well. “Let Enda finish his meal. He doesn’t need your aggression on top of everything else.”

“It’s all right, Giorgio.” Enda swallowed his mouthful. “It’s understandable that Ms. Sarah is upset. She has suffered hearing very bad news. Her partner is more concerned with his phone than he is with her. I bet she hasn’t even had a hug since she arrived, and I am sure that’s what she needs, but she doesn’t mean any harm to me. She’s just trying to make sense of a difficult situation. For future reference, my mom is dead. No point in me crying for her.”

He picked up a slice of toast and bit into it. There was something so decadent about the soft bread and the ooze of melted butter coating his tongue. Then, as he was swallowing it down, he noticed the other three at the table had gone silent. “Did I say something wrong? My English is not that good.”

“No, you said everything right.” Giorgio rapped on the table. “Mitchell, put your darn phone down.”

“Me?” Mitchell looked up and then put his phone on the table. “It’s different to mine, and I can’t work out all the settings. What’s wrong?”

“How about you take Sarah into the living room and spend five minutes with her while Enda finishes his breakfast,” Giorgio suggested. “Without your phone.”

“Sure.” Mitchell looked at Sarah and then did a double take. “Hey, are you all right?”

“No, I’m fucking not.” Sarah burst into tears.

“Oh, shit, babe. You never cry. Come on.” Mitchell put his arms around his partner, helping her from the chair. “Let’s go through into the living room for a few minutes.”

Enda hummed quietly as he finished his eggs and bacon, pushing his plate aside when he got to the last piece of toast. “Thank you,” he said to Giorgio, who was watching him. “Ms. Sarah is clearly a strong woman, but everyone needs a hug at times. So I’ve heard. The breakfast was delicious. I am very appreciative. Thank you.”

“If you ever feel you need a hug from me, you should always know the answer is yes. You don’t have to ask.” Giorgio was being so impossibly grave. “It is told, among other members of my pack, that hellhounds are not very good at knowing the nuances of romantic or affectionate behavior. Some of my packmates have completely changed their thinking since finding their fated one, which is a very positive thing. But we could all do with lessons.”

“I have never met a hellhound,” Enda said, biting into his toast. Speaking around his mouthful, he added, “I have so much to learn, too. That will be exciting, don’t you think?”

“We can learn together.” Giorgio smiled, and when he did, Enda felt safe in a way he never had before.

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Giorgio hated that it was Sarah sitting next to Enda when they all adjourned to the living room. They were sitting on the couch, while Giorgio and Mitchell were on chairs brought in from the kitchen. The last thing Giorgio wanted to do was dig into the details of how his little bird had ended up under a pile of bodies. If it had simply impacted him, then he would've just left London and set up in another country with a new identity, taking Enda with him.

But whoever had tried to kill him – and Enda – had also targeted Mitchell. Giorgio had worked with Mitchell for years, and Sarah had accepted him into their lives as though he was family. He could not and would not abandon them now, especially when they had no idea where the threat was coming from.

“Enda, I need to ask you some serious questions,” he said firmly, pulling on all of the training he'd had as a negotiator. “If you need to take a break at any time, then please just say so. I have to ask you these questions in English so that Mitchell, as a witness, can understand the question and answers, so, if I say something you don't understand, please say so.”

Enda nodded. “If you don't talk too fast, it should be fine.”

“All right. Let's start with some basics. Where were you born, and where were you living before you were taken?”

“I was born in Japan. My mother was Japanese, my father was American. Until my mother's death, I used to travel between Japan and America, but when she died, my grandmother looked after me – she lived in Japan – and I haven't seen my father since. I don't know why. I was ten when that happened.”

“How did a boy from Japan end up in rural England?” Mitchell was already scratching his head. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“Is that where I am?” Enda smiled, although Giorgio could see the tension behind it. “I did wonder. You all talk differently than American people. I was working on a boat when I got taken. I was put on a plane, so, that must have been when we came to England.”

“What sort of boat were you working on?” Giorgio asked, although he was already getting a bad feeling about what he was hearing. “Was it a fishing boat or a trawler?”

“No.” Enda shook his head. He indicated with his hands. “It was a big...” - his hands spread apart and then raised up - “Sails...engine...yacht. That’s what it was. A super yacht.”

“Did your grandmother know you were going on the yacht? Did she know the people who owned it?”

“I’m not sure. I guess she must’ve done. I came home from running errands for her one day, and there were two men there. She told me I was going with them, and I was going to work on the yacht. So I did.”

“What did you do on the yacht, Enda?” Mitchell asked. “Did you have experience in boating? Or marine engines, perhaps?”

“No.” Enda shook his head. “I was studying graphic design at an online college back then. When I got on the boat, I was told I was eye candy. Is that the right word? Wear brief-briefs, serve drinks, smile nicely.”

Yep. Giorgio didn’t like where the conversation was going at all. “Who paid you, Enda?” he asked as gently as he could. “What was the name on your pay slip, do you

remember?”

“I didn’t get paid. I got food to eat and a bunk bed.” Enda frowned. “The men I went with said they would send the money to my grandmother for my work. I was sure she would save it for me.”

“Sounds like we need to get in touch with the grandmother,” Sarah said darkly, and Giorgio knew what she was thinking. But Enda was already shaking his head.

“She’s gone. I don’t know where. I tried calling her one time when we...were...parked? Is that the word? In port. But a strange man answered and said my grandmother left just after I was taken to the boat.”

Another mystery inside of a mystery. Giorgio made a mental note to ask one of his packmates, who had a house in Japan, to see if they could find out where the grandmother had gone. He was sure one of his packmates had a house there.

“All right,” he said gently. “So, how did you go from working on a boat to being on a plane? Was it a commercial flight or a private plane?”

“A big plane with no seats. Just a bench along the wall. It was very noisy and very crowded.” Enda wrinkled his nose. “I had been working on the boat, and then a man came and said someone else was going to have my job, and I was being offered...” he tapped his fingers on his knee, “offered an opportunity, that’s it. I asked if I could go back to Japan to see my grandmother, and the man said I could go when I’d done this other job first. They gave me some clothes, and I went in a big black car that took me to the airport, and I was told to get on the plane. My bird did not like that.”

“Were the other people on the plane the same ones that were in the warehouse last night?” Giorgio swallowed a sudden rush of bile hitting his throat.

Enda nodded and then looked down at his hands. “While we were on the plane, they gave us all a drink. They told us it was a protein drink and that we could have a meal when we landed. It tasted horrible, but they made us drink it. People started falling off the bench, and at first, I thought they were asleep, but then I saw that they weren’t breathing, so, I fell on the floor, too. I tried hard to make sure no one could see me breathing.”

Sarah gasped, quickly covering her mouth with her hand.

“Killing them all midflight – probably in international airspace. Really difficult to prove legal jurisdiction if anyone is found responsible for this,” Mitchell murmured. “It would be a logistical legal nightmare.”

Resting his elbows on his knees, Giorgio inhaled slowly. “Do you remember how you were moved from the plane to the warehouse we found you in?”

“Truck. Covered truck.” Enda was looking at his hands and then out the window. “I thought about shifting. If I shifted while the truck was moving, I thought I could fly out the door the moment they opened them.”

“What’s this business about shifting?” Sarah asked.

“Enda shares his body with an animal spirit. In his case, it’s a bird,” Giorgio said quietly. “I’ll explain more about that shortly. Enda, what happened? You couldn’t shift? Was this because of the drink they gave you?”

Enda shook his head slightly. Giorgio winced as he saw how closed off his mate was being. “They thought the people they were moving were dead.” Enda spoke in monotone. “When they picked me up off the floor of the plane, I let my body go limp so they wouldn’t guess I was still breathing. Because they thought...that...they weren’t being careful how they were moving people.” Enda touched his head. “They



smacked my head against the doorframe on the plane. I passed out and didn't wake up until they put a big body on top of mine in that pile."

Sarah let out a sob, and Mitchell cleared his throat. Giorgio focused on Enda. "I don't know how long you were trapped under there, but couldn't you shift anyway? Once the danger was gone?"

"I didn't dare." Enda's breath was shaky, and he had his arms wrapped around his slender frame. "As I woke up, I could hear people talking. Male voices. Deep. One man said something about what if any of us were still alive. He said that some of the bodies he'd moved were still warm. This other man – he was loud and had an American accent. He said that if any of us..."

Enda looked over at Sarah and said, "He called us a bad word, which I won't repeat." Then he looked back at Giorgio, looking into his eyes. "But he said that if any one of us moved so much as a finger, then the whole place would blow sky high. He was laughing and said something about there being enough explosives under the bodies to level half a city. I believed him."

"Well, shit." Mitchell got up, walking around, taking deep breaths. "That is fucking shit!"

"He doesn't mean you," Giorgio said to Enda quickly. "He's upset about the situation you were in. Do you have any idea how long you were there before we arrived? Same day, next day?" Please don't be longer than that.

"I'm not sure, but it was dark when we arrived, so, it couldn't be more than a couple of hours." Enda bit his bottom lip. "I need a break now. Can you tell me where the bathroom is, please?"

"Sure. It's just through that door," Giorgio indicated the hallway. "Go left down the

hall, and it's the second door on the right."

"Thank you." Enda jumped up from the couch and ran in the direction Giorgio indicated. Seconds later, he heard a door closing. Giorgio's hound immediately started to worry. There was something very wrong with their young mate, and Giorgio imagined he'd only heard the bare bones of the events leading up to Enda's rescue.

"We need more details," Mitchell said grimly, still pacing the floor. "At the risk of getting my head punched off, Enda hasn't told us anything that can help right now. Who owned the boat he was on? Knowing the name of the boat would be a good start. What is his family name? His grandmother's name? He said he stayed in the States as a kid. Where and what's his father's family name? Did he recognize any of the people on the plane with him? Where did the plane take off from? Where did the boat stop? They couldn't have been at sea all the time. We need leads, something to investigate for fuck's sake, or we'll just be spinning in circles."

"Not now." Giorgio glared at his friend. "I know we need the answers, but just not now, all right? Why don't you and Sarah go into the office and use the computer in there? See if you can find out what's been said in news outlets about the explosion and if anyone has mentioned our deaths. Check to see if anyone has been trying to reach out to us – other members of the team – via email or something. Just stay off our team chat. Enda is only one part of the story, don't forget that, all right? We need to find out why we were sent on that job in the first place."

/~/~/~/~/

Enda hoped the sound of the toilet flushing drowned out the sound of his crying. Going over to the small sink, he ran the cold water, washed his hands, and then splashed water on his face. His reflection stared back at him, his eyes haunted, his mouth pinched.

You have to tell him.

Enda shook his head. I didn't lie. I gave him the facts as I know them. Any speculation won't make any difference to the answers he seeks.

He's our mate, he deserves to know. His bird was an insistent one.

But Enda still shook his head. We could be wrong, he insisted. What if we tell him the wrong details and then the real people responsible get away with a horrific crime?

We know that voice! You told our mate about hearing the talking. Why didn't you tell him you knew who was saying the words?

Because I desperately want to be wrong. Enda could never hide the truth from the other side of his existence. If that person speaking was who I'm afraid it was, then what does that say about the rest of our life so far? I'm not ready for that – not right now. Not with our unclaimed mate waiting for us in the other room.

When he claims us, you'll tell him?

If he claims us, I promise I'll tell him.

His bird fell silent. Enda found a towel and dried his face before flicking his fingers through his straight black hair. I look like an emo character, he thought glumly, letting out a long breath. As much as he'd really like to spend some time on his own, preferably with a smartphone or a computer, Enda focused on his breathing until he was confident he wouldn't break down and then left the bathroom.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

It was after lunch on the same day. After spending the remainder of the morning in the office, Mitchell and Sarah had gone to the guest bedroom to have a nap, taking a laptop with them. Giorgio had suggested he and Enda watch a movie, sit on the couch, and relax.

Enda agreed, purely and simply because he wasn't sure what else he could do. He couldn't think of an excuse he could use – one that wasn't a lie – that would give him access to a computer or smartphone, and if he did explain the reason why he needed one, that would mean divulging more information than he was ready to.

It wasn't that Enda didn't trust Giorgio – he did. Giorgio was his mate and would never hurt him. Enda wasn't as sure about Mitchell and Sarah, although Sarah seemed nice enough once she'd been hugged. But in Enda's head, he needed to find proof of any link between the person who had tried to kill him – and he knew who that was – and who was trying to kill Mitchell because that was what Giorgio was focused on. For that he needed access to the internet. He might not know how to track people online, but there was a time when he had friends who could do it.

“I'm sorry we haven't had a chance to talk about our mating,” Giorgio said quietly in Japanese as the movie played in the background. “I know it's a truly important part of a paranormal's life, and as I said earlier today, I do believe you when you tell me we're fated. I feel a strong bond with you already. It's just...” - he flicked his hand in the direction of the bedrooms - “I never thought I'd have to explain how hellhounds mate with other people in the house. I feel it should be a private matter between you and me.”

Enda agreed, although probably not for the reasons Giorgio was thinking. “Why don't

you tell me a bit about you?” he suggested instead. He even managed a laugh. “When most shifters find their mates, they dash straight to the bedroom side of things and save the talking for after. We’ve got a chance to change things up a bit.”

Giorgio groaned, and Enda realized he probably shouldn’t have alluded to anything sexual. He wasn’t comfortable doing anything like that with someone else in the house. “Tell me something about you,” he said quickly. “Did I hear you mention you have packmates? Do they live near you?”

“No, hellhounds aren’t allowed to live near to each other on Earth.” Giorgio seemed equally glad for the change in topic. “We’re too powerful as paranormals, and a group of us, even living peacefully, could be seen as a threat to other packs, covens, prides, or flocks.”

Twisting around in his seat, Enda rested his arm on the back of the couch as he faced his mate. “But didn’t you grow up together? Wasn’t that really hard, having to be separated after all that time spent living in a pack?”

“More time than you probably realize,” Giorgio said gently. “I come from the first pack. There are twelve of us. We didn’t grow up as such - we were created fully formed by the ancient Greek god Hades to guard the gates of the Underworld. We did that for thousands of years.”

Enda blew out a long breath. “That’s a true example of job dedication.”

“It’s all we knew, and for the longest time, it was enough for us. But the Underworld is filled with demons and spirits, of course, and we used to hear stories about life on Earth. A couple of my pack wanted the chance to experience life outside of the Underworld, so, my Master created the second pack, gave us the ability to shift, and sent us off to Earth. I’ve been living in England since before the Roman roads were the only way to get anywhere.”

“You’ve actually lived history. That’s fascinating, thinking of all the changes you’ve seen through the years.” Enda hesitated and then asked, “How did you and your friend end up in that warehouse last night? I doubt you got a message from the Fates saying, ‘get there quick or you’ll lose your chance for a mate until they get reborn again.’”

“No. Nothing like that.” Giorgio winced, and Enda realized he might have been a touch insensitive with the way he’d phrased the question. “Mitchell and I work for one of those underground agencies that are like an open secret worldwide, but everyone pretends they don’t know we exist. Specifically, I’m trained as a negotiator. It’s my job to negotiate with terrorists and people like that to get them to release hostages.”

“Negotiate?” Enda tilted his head, looking at his mate. “Were you late? Did you get held up somehow? The men who dropped us off had been gone at least an hour before you arrived.”

“Mitchell and I had been outside for twenty minutes waiting for the specific time we’d been told we were allowed to go in.”

“Ooooh.” Enda looked away, his brain was working fast. “So, whoever gave you those orders was giving time for the people responsible to get away. That’s not good.”

“I doubt it was anything like that.” Giorgio chuckled. “It’s normal procedure. We’re usually given specific times so that our support people are in place, ready to render assistance where necessary.”

“Oh, no.” Enda looked up in alarm. “There were support people there with you? More than Mitchell? Did they die, too?”

“No. They were a couple of miles away at the edge of the farm the building was on. They were fine.” Giorgio’s hand was hot on Enda’s shoulder. “I promise, they were fine.”

A couple of miles away? “Why were they so far away if they’re meant to be supporting you and Mitchell?” That didn’t make sense. “Is that normal?”

“Nooo, but different situations are organized in different ways.”

“But...but...” Enda gripped Giorgio’s arm. “Someone in your secret agency knew we were being taken there, otherwise you wouldn’t have gotten the job. Someone knew what time those poor people were dropped off, otherwise you wouldn’t have been given the time you had been given. You’d have gone in there earlier and not waited twenty minutes. We have to go.” He looked around wildly. “We have to go now.”

“Enda. Little bird. No one knows where we are. You’re safe here.”

“No one was supposed to know that me and those other poor people from the plane were meant to be in that warehouse, either. You can’t tell me that one of your secret people just stumbled across the building and knew it was going to be used as a mass graveyard on a specific date and time. No, no, no. That means that someone who knows your people is connected to someone who knows my people...” Enda was ready to cry. His heart was beating so fast that he was getting black spots in front of his eyes. “We have to go.”

“Go where?”

Enda could see Giorgio’s confusion, but in his head he had every reason to panic. “Anywhere but here. Giorgio...”

“G! G!” Mitchell came running into the living room, Sarah close behind him. “Fraser

sent a message through our chat. The agency knows we're alive. He wants to know what the fuck is going on and where we are."



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

There were times in their partnership when Giorgio wanted to throttle Mitchell, and this was one of those times. Enda had mentioned “his people,” and Giorgio needed to know what he was talking about. Mitchell’s timing couldn’t have been worse.

“Our team chat?” He scowled at Mitchell. “What the hell were you doing on there? I told you to stay off that.”

“I wanted to see, didn’t I?” Mitchell looked at Sarah and took her hand. “I mean, face it. How many chances does a person get to know what their friends and colleagues think about them after they’ve died? I just wanted to see what they were saying.”

Enda was fluttering – that was the only way Giorgio could describe it. It was as if he could feel his mate’s inner bird’s agitation and while he could understand the feeling, he desperately needed to know what shit Mitchell had thrown at them as well.

“You said Fraser sent you a message through our chat. Didn’t you even disguise the fact you were on there?”

“I made out I was Sarah. I mean, what grieving partner wouldn’t go through their dead man’s laptop? It made sense at the time.”

Giorgio held his temper with difficulty. “So, Sarah responded to Fraser, I assume. What did she say?”

“Nothing.” Mitchell’s face was bright red. “We left the message unread and got out of there. But the message was clear – the agency knows we’re alive.”

“No, they don’t. They have no way of knowing that. With the explosion, they wouldn’t have found enough of us to identify. They’re fishing, didn’t you get that?”

“Of course, they’d know,” Sarah yelled. “You’re still wearing your trackers. If the trackers aren’t at the scene, then they know you’re not, either.”

“Trackers? You’re wearing trackers, and you didn’t tell me?” Now Enda looked terrified, and Giorgio put his hand on his mate’s shoulder, stroking it gently.

“What trackers?” Giorgio focused his gaze on Mitchell. “This is the first I’ve heard about trackers. I know I’m not wearing one. Are you?”

“Don’t go holding back secrets now, Giorgio.” Sarah was still yelling. “This is a matter of life and death. At least if Mitchell is known as dead, I’d stand to gain a pension for the rest of my days, but if they find out he’s still alive, after being presumed dead, then all he’ll get is jail time and me, too, most likely, for being an accessory.”

“I don’t see what any of that has got to do with trackers.” Giorgio focused on Sarah.

“Mitchell told me about them. When we first got together and I told him how scared I was about you guys going to remote and dangerous locations, he said that all of you guys have trackers implanted under your skin, so you can never be lost. He even showed me the damn lump on his arm. Show him, Mitchell. Show him your tracker – the one you showed me. That will be why your agency knows you’re still alive.”

“They’d also know where we were, despite this address being completely off grid.” Patting Enda’s arm, Giorgio got up from the couch. “Show me, Mitchell. Show me the tracker that’s just put us all in danger.”

“There isn’t one,” Mitchell mumbled. “I’m sorry, Sarah, but honestly, you were

going on and on about it, so I was just trying to make you feel better and it worked.”

“But...but...the lump?” All the color drained from Sarah’s flushed face. “You promised me you were tracked all the time.”

“I’ve always had that lump. My brother Brian hit me with a spade when we were kids. The lump never went away.” Mitchell shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. I didn’t know we were going to be going through all this bullshit.”

“The message from Fraser is true? He left you a private message saying the agency knows we’re both alive?” Giorgio wasn’t sure which way was up, he was so turned around.

Mitchell nodded.

“Okay, well, I still stand by what I said. He was fishing and waiting to see what or who he could flush out. Regardless, that certainly fucks things up, doesn’t it?” Giorgio gestured to his mate, who had wrapped his arms around himself, still looking terrified. “My little bird was right to want to fly. The only four people in existence who know for a fact we’re still alive are in this room. I know I didn’t tell the agency. Enda doesn’t even know anyone in the agency and hasn’t had access to a computer or smartphone since we arrived here, so, that only leaves one of you two. Which one of you betrayed us to the point you believe Fraser’s words are true?”

“How could you say that?” Mitchell’s face crumpled in disbelief. “I owe you my fucking life man, not just for what happened the other night, but at least four other times I can think of just off the top of my head. I would never...on my life, I would never betray you, especially now. You’re right. I just got caught up in the freaking drama of everything.”

His laughter carried an embarrassed tinge. “You’ve got to admit, it’s not every day

you learn paranormals are real, and damn, am I thankful for that. But I'd never betray you – not after all we've been through together. I feel like a dick for even going on that chat now. That was a stupid thing to do.”

“What about you, Sarah?”

The woman was silent, her arms folded across her chest, and she wasn't looking at any of them. Oh, shit no.

“One of the interesting facts about most paranormals is that they can always tell when someone is lying to them. Shifters can smell a lie, so can a vampire. Magic users can see a lie in how it impacts a person's aura. Hellhounds can see into a person's soul. It stems from us having to deal with some of the worst dregs that society comes up with. So, are you going to tell us what you did, Sarah?”

“I don't know where you come up with this paranormal garbage. I think you hit your head in the explosion. I'm not going to say anything to you if you keep being ridiculous.” Sarah had completely turned her back on him as if it would make a difference.

“What I think happened,” Giorgio said gently, “is that when Mitchell texted you and said he was still alive, despite knowing you'd get a call telling you he was dead, you were worried the agency would go after you if you didn't tell them everything you knew. It wasn't a lot at the time, thank goodness – just that we were still alive.

“You couldn't tell the agency how that happened, but they likely left you a number to call when you've got five minutes to yourself. I imagine if I go through your purse, I'll find it. You thought we wouldn't know it was you because Mitchell lied to you about us being fitted with trackers.

“In fact, you might've told the truth to the agency when they called you, because you

were scared they would know we weren't dead, because our trackers weren't at the bomb site. In your head, you probably imagined that the agency would turn up here at any minute, to take Mitchell and me into custody, all because of those trackers you got told we were wearing. The trackers that never existed."

"Sarah!" Mitchell reached for his longtime partner, but she whirled around, slapping his hand away.

"You lied to me. All this time, you lied to me about those trackers. You had no right."

"You've not only put my life in jeopardy but Giorgio and Enda's as well. Don't you understand, you stupid woman? If the agency finds out Enda's alive, someone who could possibly identify the people behind all those murders, then he'll be running for the rest of his life. We were sent there to be killed. That means the agency will be after us, too, and why? All because you didn't want to lose the pension you get when I die? I looked after you, I love you, and this is how you repay me? Fuck. For all I know, you knew about the plot to kill us, and you're pissed off that Giorgio saved my life – again."

Sarah clearly didn't expect Mitchell to yell at her. She moved up behind him, putting her hands on his shoulders. "It'll be all right," she murmured, probably not realizing shifters had excellent hearing as well. "Once we tell them about Giorgio and the bird, they will be so distracted, they'll just let us go. Our lives can go back to normal..."

"We have to go." Enda got off the couch. "People are coming."

Giorgio's hound let him know his mate was right. "Take my hand and hold on tight."

"What about them?" Enda pointed to Mitchell and Sarah.

"Don't worry, they're coming with us, and where we're going, no one will find us,"

Giorgio said grimly. He had a feeling he was going to get in the shit with his boss, but he really didn't have any other options left.

"We're not going anywhere with you!" Sarah planted her feet firmly on the floor, gripping Mitchell like a life preserver. "You can discuss your paranormal shit with the agency and see if they believe you."

"And that would be a no." Pulling on his powers, Giorgio translocated his precious mate and the two mortals to Hades' waiting room. "I've got a situation. Is the master free?" he asked Folsom, who was waiting by the door with a clipboard.

"The mate I can understand, but mortals? Live ones?" The purple and green demon shook his head. "You're just lucky the master is in a good mood. You're just in time. He's just about finished his last batch of sentences for the day."

"Oh, my gods, what the hell is that?" Sarah shrieked, collapsing in Mitchell's arms as she pointed in Folsom's direction.

"Meet Folsom, Lord Hades' personal assistant. And please, this isn't hell, although you might wish it was," Giorgio said with a grin. "Welcome to the Underworld."

"Am I dead?" Enda whispered.

"No, precious. You're allowed here as my mate and will always be perfectly safe here. These two, however – well, that's up to Lord Hades. He's not going to be happy with me sharing the paranormal secret with people who can't be trusted, but the one good thing about dealing with an ancient god is that there's likely nothing that happens in life that they haven't seen before. Did you fancy a coffee?"

"Hot chocolate might be nice." Enda clung to his arm, taking in the black walls and Folsom who was listening against the throne room door. "The décor makes a

simplistic but very powerful statement, doesn't it?"

"Lord Hades likes to keep things simple." Giorgio clicked himself up a chair and sat down, encouraging Enda onto his lap. "Try this and let me know if you need more sugar." He handed a large travel mug filled with hot chocolate to his mate. "So, Sarah. How are you handling the paranormal rubbish so far?"

"My phone won't work." Sarah was stabbing frantically at her screen. "Mitchell, try yours. I can't get mine to work. Call the agency. Call the damn agency."

"Good luck with that." Giorgio smiled at his mate. "How's the chocolate?"

"Not bad for all the paranormal rubbish that went into making it." Enda's smile was ringed with chocolate froth, and Giorgio had a sudden urge to lick it off. Like everything else related to his mating, that was going to have to wait.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

Enda was doing a good job of keeping his nerves under control. The Underworld wasn't a bad place if a person didn't mind black walls that seemed to pulsate and a light source he couldn't see. He didn't imagine the room he was in was all the Underworld had to offer, but it was enough for Enda.

He'd just finished his hot chocolate when Folsom announced that Lord Hades and Consort Ali were ready to see them. Giorgio helped him up, zapped away his mug, and hand-in-hand, they followed Folsom through the doors, which had to be twenty feet high. Apparently, Sarah and Mitchell weren't as keen to meet an actual god, but a couple of demons persuaded them, insisting that they be respectful.

The throne room was an extension of the waiting room – more black walls, although the light this time came from a huge fire pit that was set against one wall. "Don't go near that," Giorgio whispered as he led them to the stage at the far end of the room that housed two large thrones.

Imposing. Very grand. Enda squinted his eyes and noticed the thrones were made out of bones. If Lord Hades was going for the intimidating effect, he would win the gold medal.

Overall, the decor was very black, very dire, and one would assume terrifying for souls waiting to be sentenced, but Enda didn't feel that way. Maybe it was because of Sarah and Mitchell and the fact that they couldn't use their phones in the Underworld. That gave Enda a sense of security he hadn't felt since he'd been rescued.

It could be because Giorgio was by his side, keeping a firm hand around his, or the comfort of the hot chocolate still resting in Enda's belly. It could have been the



consort himself, who was a small man, a shifter if Enda's senses were working right in the unusual realm, who was perched on his throne in a kilt, boots, and a bright pink muscle shirt that had been bedazzled. An unusually colorful note to find in the court of the Underworld.

Reaching the stage, Giorgio immediately bowed low, and Enda quickly did the same. As Giorgio straightened, he said, "My Lord, I would like to introduce my mate..."

Lord Hades held up his hand. "Introductions aren't necessary. We're aware of who you've brought before us today, and I must confess, despite what you thought, this is an issue we've not dealt with before."

"It's cute, though, isn't it?" Consort Ali smiled, showing perfect teeth. "Another one of our hellhound's has found their mate, even if they're not claimed yet." Enda would call the look the consort gave Giorgio accusatory, and he could feel Giorgio's discomfort.

Enda quickly spoke up, ducking his head and nodding again. "Honored persons, we both acknowledge the connection between us, however we only met last night in extreme circumstances, and we've just not had the opportunity to take things further between us.

"However, my bird tells me that Giorgio is mine, and he has promised to explain the hellhound process for mating as soon as our troubles are resolved. We both hope that will be soon. With your respect and blessings."

He quickly bowed again. Enda hadn't met a god before, so he wasn't sure of the protocol, but Consort Ali smiled at him, so that had to be positive.

Lord Hades looked strained and tired, although when he said, "I have children that require attending, let's make this quick," Enda understood.

“My mate is a machine,” Consort Ali said brightly. “You’d never believe he had twins again last week. Just a few days before Kolton and Simon had their baby boy, isn’t that a wonderful coincidence?”

“Congratulations,” Enda said quickly, bowing again.

Giorgio nodded again and then explained the situation quickly, and, at least in Enda’s opinion, very efficiently. “There was a situation at my last job. A lot of innocent souls were killed, left dead for Mitchell and me to find.

“I heard Enda make a noise, he was the only one who survived the concoction the victims were given in their plane trip to their destination. When I went to pull him out from under the bodies piled on top of him, he indicated there was a bomb underneath his body.

“My Lord, I admit I acted impulsively in the moment, and I confess I did not think things through as quickly as I should have done. My only focus in that moment was to protect Enda. However, Mitchell had come there with me, and I could not, in good conscience, allow him to die simply so I could rescue my mate. So, I pulled him out with me, and we translocated to my home in London as the explosion went off. We fully expected, both Mitchell and I, that the agency that we had been working for would believe we were deceased.”

“A reasonable assumption,” Lord Hades said gravely. “What were your plans for going forward, seeing as you had apparently died? I presume you had a future plan to relocate, both for you and for your colleague?”

“I hadn’t thought that far ahead in that moment,” Giorgio admitted. “However, I did feel that as I have relocated numerous times and set up different identities for myself that it would be possible to do the same for myself and Enda. I believed that it would be the safest for Mitchell and his partner Sarah to also relocate, and I didn’t see the

harm in providing them with identification that would help them lead a totally new life, either.”

“That’s not your issue, though, is it?” Lord Hades looked at Mitchell and Sarah, who were being held between two demons.

Giorgio shook his head. “I’m sorry, my lord, but clearly my paranormal origins were impossible to hide due to the translocation. In my defense, I did believe Mitchell and his partner to be completely trustworthy. However, Sarah was apparently concerned about getting into trouble with the agency that we work for and told them we were still alive. When I got concerned, she threatened to out myself and Enda to the agency as paranormals, in the hopes the agency would disregard the fact that Mitchell wasn’t actually dead.”

“And in the meantime, you haven’t claimed your mate, either,” Consort Ali said.

“Enda and I both agreed we’d prefer to do that when this matter was resolved.” Enda looked up to see Giorgio looking at him, the affection evident in his expression. “However, I was wrong to trust my non-paranormal friends, and because of that lapse of judgment, I will take whatever punishment is due to me for that. I will not apologize for saving my mate.”

Stunned, Enda looked between his mate and the god and his consort. “Wait a minute. You can’t be punished for doing the right thing. You’re my mate. You were just trying to keep me alive.”

“My hellhound is right, Enda,” Lord Hades said. “While saving your life was clearly what the Fates intended, he has revealed the existence of paranormals to people who could not be trusted. And that is a very serious issue. I’m sure you can imagine and know for yourself how important it is that paranormals be allowed to live in secret. The world is not ready for that revelation yet.”

“But punishment?” Enda’s stomach threatened to evict that hot chocolate he’d enjoyed, and his bird was fluttering madly.

“This is a serious matter,” Lord Hades said. “Mitchell and Sarah stand before me.”

“We’re not here,” Sarah said staunchly. Her eyes closed, and she was still grimly clutching on to Mitchell’s arm. “This is just some form of a fever dream. We’re not in the Underworld, there’re no demons hanging onto my arm. This is just not happening. I don’t know what was in that omelet, but something’s going on, and this is just a fever dream, and we’re not here. Paranormal rubbish, that’s all this is. My brain suffered a shock, thinking Mitchell had died and for some reason, concocted this shit show. I do not believe it, and I will not believe it. You do not exist!”

“Did you think we were all going to disappear just because you don’t want to accept the consequences of your actions?” Lord Hades sounded amused, and Consort Ali was almost doubled over laughing.

Although his next words were chilling. “You explicitly threatened both my hellhound and his mate with revealing the existence of their paranormal identity to the agency in exchange for them letting you free of any crime that you feel that Mitchell might be charged for.”

“This isn’t true. It’s just not true. None of this is real. La-la-la-la. See, I’m not listening to you.” Clearly, Sarah was determined, if she hung onto her version of the truth, she could make it happen, but Mitchell was looking more and more uncomfortable. Enda wondered what happened to people who used their knowledge of the paranormal world to harm others. Do they just disappear?

Lord Hades sighed. “It’s already been a long day, and frankly, this is getting ridiculous. Giorgio, I am not saying that you didn’t act with the best of intentions. You acted in the best way you knew how in an extremely stressful moment, and I can

understand your lapse of judgment. You have always been one of the hellhounds who has shown the most heart when it comes to matters dealing with humans, but you are bound by the same non-interference laws that gods are. We absolutely cannot interfere in human lives.”

“I genuinely believed I couldn’t let Mitchell die, sire,” Giorgio said strongly. “I agree with the non-interference laws and realize how important they are. But you sent us to live life on Earth. To interact, to live as human. I chose to use my time to help people. That’s why I have worked for the agency for so long. This situation was so random. It was so unusual. It’s not like this is the sort of situation I face every week. My actions might have been reckless, but my intent was pure. All I’ve ever wanted was to help people, and I could not let Mitchell die if I could prevent it.”

Mitchell made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a groan, and Enda remembered that Mitchell had said Giorgio had saved his life more than once.

“I am aware,” Lord Hades said. But then Enda felt the weight of Lord Hades’ gaze on him. “But you have not been strictly honest with my hellhound, have you, Enda Cochrane?”

Enda was stunned to hear his full name, a name that he hadn’t used or heard in years. He mutely shook his head. “I didn’t lie. That is impossible to do to a mate. However, I was unsure of Mitchell and Sarah’s motivations and frankly, did not trust them even before this latest issue came out, so, there were parts of my story that I left out. My intention was to tell Giorgio about those details when we’d had a chance to claim each other.”

“Your distrust was well-founded,” Consort Ali said brightly, although he was glaring at Sarah and Mitchell. “But you are among friends here, and it could be prudent to share those details now before my mate makes his judgment.”

Enda really didn't want to say anything, but with Lord Hades being an actual god, there was a good chance he already knew what Enda had been trying to hide. "I overheard some of the conversations the men had – the men who created the body pile in the warehouse. I told Giorgio that. What I didn't tell him is that I believed I recognized one of the voices – one of the men who wanted me dead. But none of this has anything to do with Sarah and Mitchell's betraying us to the agency and letting them know that Mitchell and Giorgio were still alive. They are two separate matters."

"I understand that you didn't feel you could tell me everything at the time," Giorgio said quietly, resting his hand on Enda's shoulder. "It's been a rough twenty-four hours. I find it hard to believe it's barely been a day since I saw you for the first time, and yet I feel as if I've known you forever. I'm confident that you would have told me in time."

"I promise I intended on telling you after we'd claimed each other." His stomach still quaking, Enda faced the Lord Hades, lifting his chin and taking a deep breath. "I did not disclose that information because I did not want to believe it was true. I do not know the link between that person and the agency that Giorgio worked for or how they could be connected."

"Once again, the ways the Fates weave their threads are a mystery to all of us," Lord Hades said. "However, I believe the Fates intended for you two to be together, although it would appear they were cutting things close in this instance, given you were literally a sneeze away from death."

"It's also my belief that if Giorgio had simply saved you and left Mitchell behind when the bomb went off, you would have found the space and the confidence in Giorgio to tell him the truth of what you've heard. That would have been something that you two investigated together."

"However, because Giorgio has a caring heart, and he did care deeply enough for

Mitchell to save his life, we are now in a difficult situation. Giorgio's revelation of his paranormal status was a huge gift to two mortals who have since shown they didn't deserve it. Unfortunately, that is a fact of life."

There was something chillingly final in what Lord Hades had said.

"But what will this mean? How can this be fixed? What can we do? That person...if anybody finds out I'm still alive...the person who tried to kill me..."

"You will be safe with my hellhound," Lord Hades interrupted firmly. "I need to talk to Giorgio. I also have to deal with the two mortals that you have brought into my presence, who would not be here unless they had committed evil deeds and then died. Believe me, this is one of those times I wish I was a figment of Sarah's imagination, however that is not the truth of this reality."

Leaning over and patting his consort's arm, Lord Hades said warmly, "Ali, my love, perhaps you should take Enda out of here. There are some things his fragile soul does not need to see or hear. I promise you, Enda," Lord Hades added, "Giorgio is one of my favored hellhounds. No harm will come to him, and he will be returned to you shortly. But I suppose in the words that mortals use, this is above your pay grade, little bird, and I think it would be more pleasant for you to spend some time with my consort."

Ali jumped up from his throne, rubbing his behind. "Those cushions are definitely not protecting my butt the way they used to," he said to Lord Hades, as he skipped over and grabbed Enda by the hand.

"Come on. I'll show you around the mansion. We have family dinners here every Sunday, and once you and Giorgio are claimed, then you'll be invited, too. You'll be the seventh hellhound mate. Won't it be fun meeting the others? It's so exciting that our hellhounds are all finding their mates in such a short period of time. Makes my

little heart glad to see it.”

“Giorgio?” Enda reached for his hellhound, but Giorgio shook his head.

“Everything will be fine, Enda. I’ll be there with you shortly, but in this case, I have to tend to my Master. Go with the consort. I promise you’ll be safe.”

But Enda’s bird started to panic the moment an overly excited consort led him away...and his bird wasn’t the only one who was upset about the separation.



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“Mitchell,” Lord Hades said the moment the door closed on the consort and Enda. “You have said little since your arrival. Did you have something to say, in defense of your partner, or your own actions in this matter?”

“Sir, I find I’m torn.” Giorgio watched as Mitchell looked between him and Sarah, who was still refusing to look at anyone. “I have loved Sarah for more than half of my life. Our time together hasn’t always been easy – my work has always been difficult for Sarah to deal with, and I respect that. But now...I feel really bad, sir. Giorgio has been my close friend for years. I had been thinking of the number of times he’s pulled my ass out of the fire. Five times in the past six months. Sarah would’ve been a widow last summer if it hadn’t been for Giorgio – I literally owe him my life, five times over.

“But Sarah’s fears are real as well, sir, and I can’t discount them. The agency... Well, it’s nothing like the setup you have here, sir, but it is a powerful organization on Earth. I could see why Sarah would have concerns about them finding out we were alive, especially because of a lie I told her about Giorgio and I wearing trackers. I don’t think not wanting to be in trouble is a crime.”

“Hmm. Fair comment.” Lord Hades nodded. “Giorgio, I didn’t realize your job was so dangerous. For you to have saved your friend’s life so often – that doesn’t sound like a job with much long-term security. The risk of being exposed as paranormal is higher in high stress situations.”

“It hasn’t always been that way, Sire.” Giorgio indicated Mitchell. “We have talked about it often, as the level of danger and the lessening of support have become more apparent since we were given a new handler – someone who allocates the jobs to us

and provides the support services we need – about six months ago. Mitchell doesn't have the same senses my hound lends me, so he was more prone to getting into tough spots than I was."

"You never considered that someone was actively targeting Mitchell, and therefore you, after so many incidents."

Giorgio frowned. "I hadn't considered it before last night, Sire. But with what happened there, it was clear that if we'd followed protocol, and Enda hadn't warned us, we would have both been caught in a very large explosion. Mitchell would not have survived."

Lord Hades got up, stepping down from the stage and quietly pacing the floor. "As I mentioned earlier, this is not a situation I've dealt with before. In normal circumstances, I would instruct you to take both Mitchell and his partner to the Paranormal Council. They are the ones who typically deal with threats to paranormal existence.

"However, there are two things that make me feel that is not the best way to handle this situation. For one thing, I prefer my hellhounds to stay away from the Paranormal Council as much as possible. Some stigmas against my hounds are still prevalent despite none of you causing problems since your arrival on Earth."

Giorgio nodded. He'd come across that before in the past, and so had some of his other pack members.

"My other issue concerns you, Mitchell." Lord Hades stopped in front of the man, who immediately stood to attention. "Are you familiar with the name Duncan Rodin?"

Giorgio stiffened, and Mitchell flicked him a quick look before focusing on Lord

Hades.

“Duncan Rodin is our new handler, sir. The one who took over our team six months ago,” Mitchell said quickly.

“Is that the only connection he has with you and Sarah?”

“Yes, sir. Handlers don’t associate with team members outside of working hours due to the confidential nature of our assignments.”

“So, you weren’t aware that Duncan Rodin has been having an affair with Sarah since before he was made your handler.”

The words fell like a copper pan being dropped on the black marble floor. Giorgio noticed a couple of the demons raising their eyebrows at each other. Sarah moaned and wrapped her arms around herself, her eyes squeezed shut.

If Giorgio hadn’t known Mitchell as well as he did, he would’ve missed the flinch before the man’s face became expressionless again. “I was not aware, sir, no.”

“I do not tell you this to cause you any pain. However, gods see the bigger picture in most matters, and this was significant and pertinent information relevant to this issue. While Sarah was not complicit in the threats to your life, Duncan Rodin was determined that you would die in the field. Sarah would gain your pension, and she would be well provided for. It is likely that Duncan Rodin felt his relationship with Sarah could only improve once you were dead. However, that is only speculation on my part, as she wasn’t his only dalliance. What is factual is that those attempts on your life were not coincidental or bad luck. They were planned. If it hadn’t been for my hellhound, you and I would never have met.”

“No disrespect, sir, but I wish that had been the case.” Mitchell’s spine straightened

even farther. “May I be so bold to ask what happens to Sarah and me now?”

“If it had been in my power, I would’ve rewound the clock twenty-four hours for you, and none of this mess would’ve happened. You would’ve gone into that warehouse with another member of your team and likely would be dead. However, gods are strongly bound by a non-interference law. In this case, though, the need to protect the numerous paranormals that live and work in peaceful co-existence with their non-para neighbors does give me some latitude here.”

“Regardless of what Sarah might have said in her panicked state, sir, I would never divulge Giorgio and Enda’s secret. That is not who I am.”

“I believe you, which is why you are being given a choice.” Lord Hades’ power filled the room. “When you wake up, you will have no memory of this place, the team, the agency, Giorgio, or anything else related to your life on Earth thus far. Your memories will be replaced, you will have new identities, new jobs, and a different home in a different state including new memories, friends, and past experiences. Consider it a form of paranormal witness protection scheme. Your choice is simply whether you spend that new life with Sarah, or if you prefer that I relocate you both separately.”

“Can you make her love me again?” For the first time, Giorgio heard a break in Mitchell’s voice.

“There’s not a god in existence who can force a love that isn’t there,” Lord Hades said softly. “That power is bigger than all of us.”

Mitchell nodded. “I always fancied being a plumber – you know, being knee-deep in poop for positive reasons this time. If that has any bearing on your decision, sir. I would prefer to relocate alone, if that is acceptable. Somehow, even with my memories erased, I believe I would still know I’d been betrayed on a cellular or soul

level and I do not believe that would be healthy for me and Sarah to be together with that possibility.”

Lord Hades nodded. “Sarah, do you have anything to say?”

“You do not exist. This is just a horrible nightmare. You. Do. Not. Exist.”

“That makes things easier.” Lord Hades raised his arms, but Mitchell’s voice stopped him.

“Just one moment more, please, sir. I just have one more thing to say.” He turned, and Giorgio saw the pain in his eyes. They had been through a lot together. “Giorgio, I’m sorry, man. You were the best friend a bloke could hope for. Take care of that little bird and have a good life. There will be a part of my soul I know will miss you. And thanks for keeping me alive.”

“Anytime.” Giorgio nodded, a lump forming in his throat as Sarah and Mitchell disappeared.

“Phew.” Lord Hades let out a long breath. “That was a mess I didn’t need today. Giorgio, remain here. Demons, you are dismissed. Your service is appreciated. Remember to let Folsom know when you want to take your bonus days on Earth.”

“Thank you, sire.” Six demons bowed and left, and Giorgio knew his slip up would be all over the Underworld in a matter of hours, not that he could blame his friends – many a beer could be bought with gossip.

“You did right to come to me,” Lord Hades said. “I wish you hadn’t had to, but finding your mate is a celebration, one I fully support. You may have wondered why I did this .” He waved his hand at the empty space where Mitchell and Sarah had been. “The Paranormal Council would’ve been the most effective way of dealing

with their mess, for future reference.”

“However” - Giorgio found himself the focus of Lord Hades’ eyes - “the shadows surrounding your sweet mate are complex and many layered. That’s why it was better that I handle your paranormal revelation swiftly and completely. Your focus needs to be on your very special mate and the situation he finds himself in through no fault of his own. You must take care going forward.”

“Is there a connection between someone at the agency and Enda’s killer?”

Tilting his head to one side Lord Hades thought for a moment. “Yes. The way the situation stands at the moment, you still work for the agency, and you are currently listed as missing, presumed dead. You had no next of kin for them to notify, and all speculation on the team group chat about you still being alive has been removed.”

“What about my partner, sir?” Giorgio frowned. “I would never have been assigned that job alone.”

“And yet this time you were. Your concerns about Duncan Rodin are well-founded, although his lack of concentration on the job has more to do with his extracurricular activities than any malice toward you. As I said, Sarah was not his only fancy. In this instance, your teammate called in sick, and Duncan Rodin said there was no time to assign anyone else. So, you would’ve gone in alone. And no, I can’t tell you anymore,” Lord Hades added when Giorgio went to ask another question. “I have already said more than some might think I should’ve done. For you and Enda to have the happy future you both so richly deserve, he needs to trace and find his truths if he is to have any resolution going forward. You will be the strength he needs to do this.”

“Yes, sir.” Giorgio bowed. “I still haven’t had the chance to tell Enda about the collar business.”

Lord Hades smiled. “I think you’ll find my mate has already done that. My beloved Ali has far too much fascination with those collars. I’d suggest taking your mate to dinner somewhere that isn’t in London, treat yourselves to a decent hotel and a fancy meal – take some time to pamper your mate as I believe it’s something he deserves and would appreciate. Once your claim is made, and you’ve had a chance to connect with each other properly, I also have no doubt Enda will tell you all that he knows about those who want him dead, and you can handle those issues together.”

“That’s not ominous at all, sir,” Giorgio said as he followed his Master out of the throne room.

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“You really didn’t have to do all this,” Enda said, looking around at the wonderful view from the private room in the restaurant Giorgio had taken him to. Far off in the distance, he could see the Eiffel Tower, and down below, the sound of people going about their evening was emphasized by the fact that Enda didn’t understand the language. It was beautiful, unexpected, and a tiny bit overwhelming, especially as Enda still had Consort Ali’s well-meaning advice ringing in his ears.

Get that collar on that hound’s neck as quickly as you can, and don’t forget to use a shit ton of lube. Those guys are built, so I’ve been told.

Giorgio reached over, taking his hand, which Enda thought was a comforting gesture. “You’ve probably had the roughest twenty-four hours known to any man. Lord Hades said, and I agree, that if anyone deserves a bit of pampering, it’s you. Now that the business with Mitchell and Sarah has been dealt with, we can finally focus on our mating.”

Enda glanced around, but their waiter had already left with their order, and they were alone. “I do find it mind-boggling that Lord Hades has that sort of power. You’re telling me he gave Mitchell and Sarah totally new lives, and they won’t remember anything about anything at all, and nor will anyone else who might have known them?”

Giorgio nodded. “If you think about it, it was the only fair thing to do. Sarah’s fears, while understandable, caused her to be a risk to paranormals anywhere – particularly you and me. Mitchell will be better off not remembering any of this. I have to believe that. I feel so bad for them both. They had been my friends a long time and if it hadn’t been for last night, they still would be.”



Enda swallowed hard, looking at where their hands were joined. “Is this my fault?”

“None of this is your fault, little bird. Don’t ever think that,” Giorgio said softly. “I am only thankful that we met when you needed me most. It will take a long time for me to forget the other poor souls, all killed for reasons unknown, but that is a mystery for another day. For now, my only question is, have you ever been to France before? Is there anything specific you’d like to see while we’re here? Speak freely, little bird. The world is ours to explore. You can pick any part of it and enjoy it however you wish.”

Looking up, Enda could see the depth of sincerity in Giorgio’s eyes. He thought about the rollercoaster of emotions that he’d been on, not just in the last twenty-four hours but in the past week.

He remembered the weight of those bodies pressing him against wires that were meant to kill him.

He would never forget the despair he felt at seeing everybody around him die and believing that he would suffer the same fate.

Men and women who were no relation to him, and whom he hadn’t seen or heard about before, were all brought together for the same reason – they had to die. Enda had no idea why, only that he was one of many.

It was thanks to the Fates that Enda was the one who was saved. He needed to celebrate that before all else. Tapping into the strength of his bird, praying for the courage to make himself understood, Enda said shakily, “I don’t expect you to understand what the last five years or more of my life have been like, let alone the last twenty-four hours. I’m not sure I can process it myself. The only certainty I’ve been holding onto is that my bird knows you’re our mate, that you are ours, I am yours, and we’re both still alive.

“I have had to listen to Consort Ali go on about the mating experience. I’m sure he thinks I am untried, and I regret that’s not strictly true. I’ve played around some, not a lot, but that’s life. What I want more than anything isn’t something that can be found outside these walls. I want to stand on the balcony of the gorgeous room that you rented for us and be able to yell that ‘I am free’ because that’s how you make me feel. I want to see your hound. You asked me what I wanted to see specifically, and what I want more than anything is to see your hound.”

Enda shook his head. “I want to take the collar box test. Gods, I want to take that test so badly. Consort Ali made it sound so magical and special, but I’m worried, too. If I fail that now, can you imagine how embarrassing that would be? Especially when I want to experience life in your arms. I want to feel what it means to be hugged, and held close, and cherished. I want to feel special for the first time in my life, and I believe my mate can do that for me. I don’t think visiting the Eiffel Tower could even compare, do you?”

He could see the heat in Giorgio’s eyes, and he became aware of the magical beast sitting behind them, curious about him, wanting to come out. Giorgio was smiling. “We will have those things because they are the things I crave with you as well. Incidentally, I already know you are my mate because Lord Hades acknowledged your position in my life. He would’ve told me if somehow we’d made a mistake.”

“I still want to see that fancy collar of yours and meet your hound.”

“That will happen straight after we’ve eaten the meal we’ve ordered.” Giorgio was looking at their joined hands. “I know it doesn’t compare to what you’ve been through, but one thing Lord Hades said really hit me in the gut. When he said you were a sneeze away from...”

“Yep. Yep. Yep.” Enda needed Giorgio to stop talking about that. “Let’s just be thankful I’m not allergic to the smell of death because, believe me, that’s all I had in

my nostrils at the time. No sneezing, that's awesome. Yay!"

Thankfully, Giorgio seemed to understand. "Exactly, and I found you, and now we're having a wonderful dinner, and then we're going to go back to our room, I'll summon my box, and you will make me the happiest hound in existence when you put that collar around my hound's neck.

"I just don't want to rush you," Giorgio added. "I don't want you to feel that you're pressured in any way. It would mean a lot to me to know that anything that happens between us is because you want it, too. I feel, although I don't know for sure, but I feel that you've not had the chance to make a lot of decisions for yourself in your life so far."

Giorgio was closer to the truth than he realized, but Enda was working on his future, not his past. "Sometimes we just have to focus on moving forward. For me, that means celebrating this moment in this place right now. I want to focus on you and us. I want to bathe in the view, enjoy every mouthful of the meal to come, and feel good about your company and what's to come. I want to stay in this moment for as long as I can. That's not unfair or selfish, is it?"

"Not at all." But then Giorgio grimaced. "Although Lord Hades told me that we do have to deal with the threat to your life if we're ever to be completely free and safe going forward."

Enda knew Giorgio and Lord Hades were right. That didn't mean he had to like it. "It's a shame that gods can't just pluck people out of the weave when they cause their shit, but I know, I know," he said quickly when he saw Giorgio was going to object. "Gods are not dictators, everyone living has free will, and gods are not allowed to interfere no matter what an individual or group might do to harm others. I'm just asking for a fair deal between you and me."

“I’m listening.” Giorgio nodded.

“I’m asking for twenty-four hours,” Enda said with a sigh. “You and I have had twenty-four hours of hell. I promised I would tell you all the stuff I know about the people after me once we were claimed, but I’m asking for twenty-four hours’ grace. Just a day where all I have to focus on is you and me, our mating, our claiming, and your lovely hound.

“I just want one day when I can pretend that my life is normal, that no one is out to kill me, and that I can be safe and happy with you. Let’s just insert a bit of balance in this right now, all right? The guy responsible is still going to be doing shit in two days’ time. If it’s who I think it is, he’s been doing it for years, even though I don’t know why.”

Enda could see Giorgio was bursting to ask questions, and he understood. But for him, he needed a break for his own sanity in that moment. He didn’t realize he’d been holding his breath until Giorgio nodded again. “You can have whatever you want,” Giorgio said softly. “If that’s how you want to spend your time, then that’s how I want to spend my time with you, in exactly the same way. We don’t even have to leave our room after dinner if you don’t want to.”

There was a noise from the door, and as Enda looked up, the waiter came in, carrying their steaming plates of food. “We’d probably better eat all this then,” he said, chuckling. “I’m figuring we’re going to need a lot of energy. I may not be completely innocent, but I’ve still got a lot to learn, and that could be an interesting way to spend twenty-four hours.”

Giorgio laughed as he sat back in his chair. “They do have room service here,” he said, although he didn’t release Enda’s hand. Just that simple act of showing affection in front of others warmed Enda’s heart. It was a heady feeling.

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Enda had been teasing Giorgio all through their meal. Giorgio didn't think that Enda knew he was doing it, but as he walked with his mate to their room – their private room where they could be alone for the first time since he'd plucked his mate from the warehouse – his mind had been conjuring lists of all the ways he could bring Enda pleasure.

The thing is, most of the time, Enda looked like a waif – his straight black hair hung over his finely crafted face. Combine that with large eyes and full lips, and he was a gorgeous waif. But when he smiled, his whole face lit up, and when he laughed, he was like a ray of sunshine. And yes, I'm thinking these thoughts because I want to strip my mate down and lick him from head to toe. Those cheeky teasing glances, the way Enda ate his food...Giorgio shook his head as he unlocked the door to their hotel suite and ushered Enda inside.

First things first. "Er...where did you want to do this?" Giorgio asked as he closed and locked the door behind them.

"The collar side of things?" Enda looked around. "This living space is bigger than the bedroom, but then I don't know how big your hound gets."

"Did Consort Ali explain what will happen?"

"He did admit he hadn't seen a collar ceremony himself, but I got the impression it wasn't really a ceremony, but more that if I open the box, then your hound will come through and I'll put the collar that is in the box around your hound's neck." Enda tilted his head to one side, looking shy. "Apparently, it's as big of a deal as if I were to shift and bite you through my bird spirit."

“We can do that afterward if you want to,” Giorgio said, loosening his shirt. “But you’ll need fingers to open the box and get the collar around my neck. My hound isn’t going to be a lot of help. He tends to be a goofy beast a lot of the time. He doesn’t get out much.”

“My bird knows that feeling. Shifting is...difficult. But let’s do this, and I can worry about that later.” Enda perched on a chair, resting his hands on his knees. “This is a big deal though, isn’t it?”

“It is.” Giorgio called his box to him. It had been in a safe in his London house. Holding the big, black velvet box, he could feel the magic start to glow. His hound was seeing it, too, and could feel the vibrations from the box. “I feel I should make a speech,” Giorgio said quickly as his hound started getting pushy. “About how glad I am I found you when I did, and how honored I am you’re my mate, and...and...I’m glad it’s you. Have a box.”

He dropped it. His hound was so keen to come out and meet their mate, Giorgio dropped his collar box. Enda burst out laughing, clapping his hands as his hound pushed the box with his nose over to Enda’s feet.

“You are so clever, and look at how big you are.” With Enda sitting down, their heads were at the same height. “Do you like pets and scratches?”

Only about as much as steak. The hound pushed his head forward, nudging at Enda’s knee.

“I’m guessing that’s yes.”

You jammy bastard. Giorgio could only huff, caught inside his hound’s form. How come Enda has his hands on you first?

Although it felt a-maze-ing. Enda's hands were surprisingly strong, and he was using both of them, scratching behind the hound's ears, the top of his head, and under his chin. The hound sat himself down and closed his eyes, happy to be manhandled by his mate.

What about the collar, you doofus? Remember? The collar?

The hound's ears went up, and he froze, his cheeks held firm in Enda's hands. "Did you just remember the box?" Enda was laughing so hard, he had a tear in his eye. "You are such an adorable hound, and with me in your life, there will be plenty of time for scritches. But I guess we'd better make sure it is me that box was intended for."

The hound already knew Enda was the one. The box had reacted just with Enda being in the room. He had to move back because the box was still on the floor, and Enda had to bend over to pick it up.

"It's such a beautiful box, and it's heavy." Enda's eyes were wide. He ran his hand over it and the lid started to open. The hound could see the glow of his master's gems as they began to appear. Curling his fingers over the edge of the lid, Enda opened it fully and gasped. "No wonder the walls in the Underworld are black. Your Master put all the color in these collars. I've never seen anything so beautiful. Let me get this out."

Thick, wide, and encrusted in gems, the hound could feel his Master's love and power beaming from the collar. It signified approval, his Master's wishes for a happy life for his hounds. The hound was trembling with excitement.

"It's quite heavy," Enda said, taking it carefully out of the box. "But then you have such a wide neck, I guess it was meant to be sturdy." He frowned as he looked at the ends. "How does it close? Oh, I remember. Consort Ali said that was magic. Lean

forward, my lovely hound.” The hound shoved his nose in Enda’s lap, feeling the collar tighten around his neck. “Now, I just wrap this around here and put the two ends together and...oh, wow.”

There was a click. Giorgio’s hound felt it. In that instant, he could feel his bond with his mate, see his mate’s bird spirit – that’s a weird looking crane if that’s what you are, my mate - and their happiness, and from Enda, an overwhelming sense of relief. “I’m so glad I’m the one,” Enda said with a sob. “I can feel you right here.” He patted his chest. “Go on. Bounce and jump around. I know you want to.”

Oh, well, now that you mention it. Just a little bit. Giorgio’s hound bounced around the room, running into the bedroom and jumping on the bed, before he raced back to his mate again, howling in his mind. Congratulations poured in from his packmates, and he felt so proud.

“Is that your pack?” Enda had his head up, tilting it one way and then the other. “It’s like I can hear them. They are all so happy for you.”

“They’re happy for us,” Giorgio said gruffly as he shifted, immediately reaching up and tapping the chain now around his neck, checking it was there as he knelt in front of his mate. “They’re your pack now, too. Can I hold you, please?”

“Oh, yes.” Enda fell off his chair in his hurry, but that was all right. Giorgio caught him and pulled his mate to his chest, settling Enda on his lap.

“Did you know you aren’t wearing any clothes?” Enda asked, as his arms wrapped around Giorgio’s neck. “You’re very naked.”

“That was intentional.” Giorgio looked down at Enda’s happy face. “Fancy getting naked with me?”



“You know I do.” Enda tilted his face up, his lips twitching, and Giorgio met him halfway.

He had to close his eyes. As much as Giorgio wanted to watch every expression on his mate’s face, Giorgio was caught in a kiss he never wanted to end. He just had to savor it. He’d noticed how strong his mate’s fingers were when Enda was petting his hound, but everything about his slender mate had a strength to it.

Enda tasted of sugar and spices, like a spicy muffin covered in ice cream and toasted marshmallows. It wasn’t a flavor Giorgio had ever tried or even considered, but supping on Enda’s lips was his new obsession.

His arms tightened around Enda’s back, their chests pressed together without leaving room for an ant. The eager way Enda was kissing him, the way he was actively pressed against Giorgio’s torso – no hesitation. In fact, as their kiss deepened, Giorgio could feel his little bird’s desperate need to get closer through their bond.

He’s a shifter, his hound growled through his head. As if that explained everything, but Giorgio realized it did. As he pulled out of their kiss, because even immortal beings needed to breathe at times, he peppered kisses up and down Enda’s neck, feeling the racing pulse beneath the skin.

“Hold on tight, little bird,” he whispered in Enda’s ear as he translocated them. Enda’s clothes got lost between the living area and the bed, but Enda’s excited whimper let Giorgio know he didn’t mind.

Moving in for another kiss, Giorgio ran his hand down Enda’s back. The knobs of his spine were too prominent, but Giorgio was confident with a few meals Enda would be back to a more optimum weight. Cupping his hand around Enda’s butt, he gently tapped against Enda’s crack. “Have you ever?” he murmured against his mate’s lips.

Enda leaned his head back and Giorgio opened his eyes to see the concern in Enda's. "Once," Enda said softly as he winced. "A long time ago. It was not...pleasant."

Okay, so, we can work up to that over time, which Giorgio was fine with. It was enough for him that Enda was so open with his kisses and his body.

But his face was gripped in Enda's hands, and Giorgio realized Enda's bird was peering through his mate's eyes. "I need you to do it," he insisted. "My bird needs this claim."

Searching his mate's eyes, Giorgio warred with his instincts – to give his shifter mate the claim he needed against the "do no harm" to his mate. "I can use magic to prep," he said slowly. "It will help, but if you're in any pain..."

"I will tell you," Enda said fiercely. "I'm not a martyr or a victim. But you have to be in me, and I need to bite you. I don't know why, but there are some instincts I can't and won't ignore."

Giorgio could argue against the words – he was sure a couple of his packmates had bonded with their fated ones without penetrative sex - but he promised Enda he would have what he wanted, and truth be told, he desperately wanted that too.

"You are so precious," he said instead, kissing under Enda's chin and sucking up a mark. Enda relaxed against him, and as he moved his lips back to Enda's mouth, their kisses quickly became heated again.

Grazing his fingers over Enda's hole, Giorgio used his magic, determined the experience would be pleasurable for his mate. Enda's cock was hard on his abs, and once Enda started rubbing against him, Giorgio slowly inserted a finger, testing that his magic was doing its job.

Enda moaned, his cock leaving streaks of precome on Giorgio's torso. Rolling them over, Giorgio sat up, taking Enda with him. "Spread your legs across mine," he said, helping Enda get into position. "I'm going to support your weight, and I want you to control the entry."

A look of confusion crossed Enda's face, but then his eyes widened as Giorgio reached behind him, finding his dick, holding that up, and then nudging Enda until his butt and Giorgio's cock were kissing.

"Ah." Enda braced his hands on Giorgio's shoulders. "Ooooooh."

"Breathe out, little bird. Long and slow. It helps those muscles relax." Giorgio clenched his jaw as the head of his cock was caught in Enda's heat. It felt...incredible.

"Just keep breathing, long and slow, that's right." Giorgio curled his toes, his butt clenching and his teeth clamped shut. The pressure...the heat...the added sauce that Enda was his mate and that meant forever... "You're doing good, my mate."

His voice didn't squeak. Giorgio would deny that till the end of time. Enda was so focused, looking down as if he could see what was going on behind him, his fingernails leaving gouges in Giorgio's shoulders.

Time lost all meaning. The only thing in Giorgio's world in that moment was his precious mate easing his body down Giorgio's cock. When Enda's butt finally grazed across the top of Giorgio's thighs, they both let out a whoosh.

"You doing okay?" Giorgio swallowed hard. If Enda twitched, his balls were unloading. "Take your time. You can move when you're ready."

"I did it." Enda's face was lit by a huge smile. "You're in me."

I don't need a reminder. Trying to focus on something else, Giorgio kept one hand on Enda's hip as he cupped his mate's cock with the other. Enda's cock wasn't as hard as before, but with a few strokes of Giorgio's hand, it quickly hardened.

Unfortunately for Giorgio, when Enda's arousal increased, he started to move. Giorgio's orgasm was already lurking, and with Enda moving his body up and down Giorgio's shaft, his balls thought it was party time.

Giorgio tightened his hold on Enda's cock. He was determined that Enda would climax first. But Giorgio's senses were being bombarded with a level of sexiness he'd never experienced before. The smell of Enda's arousal, the feel of Enda's cock in his hand, his deep moans as he moved his body, reminding Giorgio of the world's most sensual lap dancer.

In desperation, Giorgio tilted his neck. Enda let out a low growl, lurching forward and sinking his teeth into the ridge where neck and shoulder met. Spunk coated Giorgio's fingers as his release pulsed into Enda's body. Enda didn't linger at his neck for long, licking over the bite and then tilting his own neck.

But we don't... Giorgio did it anyway. His body rocked into back to back orgasms as Enda's blood coated his tongue. Enda moaned long and low, a sound of pure pleasure as Giorgio followed his mate's lead, licking over the wound that was already healing.

Thank you, my mate. Giorgio jolted as he heard his mate's voice in his head. Then he chuckled as Enda slumped in his arms, brushing his hair from his sweaty face, a wide grin on his face, as his eyes half-closed. Giorgio understood the feeling. A double orgasm would do that to a person.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

The room was dark. Enda saw the tattered outlines of the torn blind across the window. He whimpered, knowing his dream state had thrown him into a scene he was all too familiar with. He looked to the left. He didn't want to. He already knew what he would see – the shape of a woman, his mother, tied to a chair, her mouth gagged with a dirty rag, the whites of her eyes the only bright spot in the room.

She wasn't the only occupant. The man who stood in front of her was carrying what looked like a rifle, but Enda knew it was far more destructive.

“You deceived me.” The man's words rang through Enda's brain. “You seek to destroy everything I've worked for. You do not deserve to walk this Earth.”

Enda whimpered, trying to get free, trying to do anything to wake up from what he knew would happen.

The image of the man's cruel face was engraved in his brain - the angular jaw, the jet black hair, the eyes that bored into a person that showed no sign of a soul behind them.

Wriggling, whimpering, Enda was desperate to wake up. Nausea filled his belly as he watched the man raise his weapon. “I told you to get rid of that baggage. I warned you what would happen if you let that life grow. Did you listen? No. You never fucking do. And now you will pay the price of your deceit. You will die by the flame, which is only fitting given the sinful flames you created.”

The trigger was pulled, and just as every time Enda had replayed that dream in his mind, he screamed. He screamed and screamed for as long as the man pulled that

trigger. But it wasn't bullets that flew out of that gun but a stream of fire. "Your deception lives no more." The man's laughter rang over Enda's screams. "Enjoy your eternity in hell, bitch."

Enda cried out, begging, pleading, "Stop, no, no," as the form of his mother was reduced to charred ash, a twisted grimace around the burned rag on her face, the only indication she had felt anything at all.

"I love the smell of burned meat for breakfast." There it was again – that smug look when the man turned off his weapon and looked as if he knew that Enda was watching him. "I'll be back for your offspring later."

Sobbing, Enda crawled through the ash and soot, reaching for the chair that his mother had been tied to. But as he reached it and touched the chair leg, the whole thing crumbled, and what was left of his mother's body fell to the floor.

Enda woke with a gasp as someone was shaking his shoulders.

"Enda. Enda. For fuck's sake, wake up!"

"Giorgio?" Enda reached up, rubbing his head, before reaching for the mattress and patting it. I'm back. It's gone. I'm awake.

"I'm here, little bird. What happened? You were screaming loud enough to raise the dead. Are you all right?"

Enda tried to control his breathing, getting himself under control. "Bad dream," he managed to say. "Don't ask...I've had it before...just...can't talk about it right now."

"Then let me hold you. Your whole body is shaking."

“Yeah.” Enda managed a shaky laugh as he crawled into Giorgio’s arms. His mate’s skin was warm and so very real, allowing the bad dream to recede. “I sometimes think my imagination gets the best of me. Some things seem very real in my head, you know. Er...but I’m fine, it’s all right, I’ll be fine.”

“Did you want to try and sleep again, or I could get you something to eat or drink?” Giorgio reached over and turned on the bedside lamp, casting a soft glow over the bed.

“I didn’t mean to disturb your sleep, and I don’t want to be any trouble. I’m so sorry. I...this hasn’t happened for a while.”

“With all that you’ve been through lately, I’m not surprised. Our brains help us process difficult times in a variety of ways,” Giorgio said softly. “But you’re awake now and you definitely don’t have to talk about it. We can just cuddle for a bit, and I’ll tell you funny stories about my packmates if you’d like to hear them?”

Enda breathed out slowly. His heart was still racing so fast. I’ve just got to keep control. “I’d like to hear something like that, although I don’t know what your packmates might consider funny?”

“Believe me, little bird, there are countless examples.”

He listened with half an ear as Giorgio explained a story about a disagreement between two of his packmates who had been worried about the size of a gift basket for a child one of them was having.

“I thought your mated packmates all had male mates. How did they have children? Did they have a surrogate?”

“No, Blue gave birth to his and Beau’s child, and Cain gave birth to the daughter he

had with Ollie,” Giorgio grinned. “Don’t panic. Yes. Male pregnancy is possible. It’s part of us being descended from Lord Hades and, therefore, part of his god line. Mother Nature, when she saw that so many of the gods were finding mates who were the same sex as themselves, allowed for anyone in a same-sex relationship to get pregnant and have children of their own.”

Enda reached behind himself, patting his ass. It still ached from their wonderful claiming. “But we....”

“I did say you didn’t have to worry, little bird.” Giorgio chuckled softly. “I wouldn’t drop something like that on you without talking to you first. Because contraception doesn’t work on shifter types in particular, Mother Nature determined that any same-sex couple had to have sex with the intent of having children to get pregnant. It won’t just happen randomly.”

“Okay, so no thinking about little ones before sexy times. Got it.” Enda had far too many other things he needed to deal with before thinking about children. “Not that I’m likely to. There’s so much about you I don’t know yet, like what your favorite color is, when’s your birthday, or what sort of music you like to listen to. What’s your favorite meal?”

Giorgio chuckled, stroking up Enda’s arm. “I can answer those things now. My favorite color is green because I enjoy seeing the green fields which are so different from the wastelands of the Underworld.

“I can’t really tell you what my favorite music is because I don’t follow any particular artist or genre. Some days, I like head banging music, and other times, I can spend an hour just listening to a piano concerto, but even then, I won’t listen to everything a person has put out just because it has their name on it. Some stuff I like, and some stuff I don’t. I imagine you’re just the same with what you listen to.”



Enda nodded, reminding himself he was safe, touching Giorgio's hand, feeling his strength underneath those muscles. "I'm much the same. Most people look at me and think that I'm an emo kid, or an anime, or a manga character, but you know, I don't know much about that stuff at all.

"Between the boat thing and even before that, my grandmother was really strict about the things I could learn about or watch on my computer, there's so much I don't know."

"You said you were studying when you were taken to the boat. Didn't you go to college or university?"

"I studied online," Enda said quickly. "What's your favorite meal? Should we have a meal or a snack, do you think?" Enda looked around. Outside of the light from the lamp, the room was dark. "It's probably too late to call for room service."

"It is about three in the morning, babe, but that's fine. I can zap us up something."

Enda rubbed his belly. He was still feeling slightly queasy and wasn't sure what he wanted to eat. He'd only asked so he could change the subject. "You didn't tell me your favorite meal. What do you like to eat in the middle of the night?"

Leaning closer, Giorgio said, "I'm going to tell you a secret. When I'm on my own, and I'm not trying to impress anybody or anything, I am rather partial to a cup of tea and biscuits."

"That's a secret?" Enda looked up at his mate's amused face.

"It's in the way this process is done. You see," Giorgio honestly looked around as though he was worried about being overheard. "When I'm on my own, I dunk my biscuits in my tea."

“Dunk?” That wasn’t a word Enda had heard before.

“Dunk, submerge, dip. I soak my biscuits in my tea.”

That sounded really strange. “Wouldn’t they get soggy and fall into the tea?”

“They can do sometimes, but that’s what makes this snack so much fun. Over a period of time, you get to learn how much tea a biscuit can handle and still stay in one piece. It’s different for every type of biscuit.

“See, if you put a chocolate biscuit, like a Chocolate Finger, for example...”

“You put a chocolate biscuit in a cup of tea?” Enda had never heard anything like it.

“You’re not letting it swim in there, you’re just dunking it.” Giorgio laughed. “A quick dunk softens the chocolate on the outside, and then you pop it in your mouth. It’s delicious.”

“If you say so.” Enda wasn’t so sure.

“But then if you’ve got something like a Gingernut, for example... a Gingernut biscuit is really hard. So, if you dunk that in the cup of tea, you can dunk it for a little bit longer. That helps soften up the biscuit when you take it out. And all the spices and the ginger in the Gingernut are that much more accentuated because they’ve been heated by the cup of tea.”

“It’s not something I’ve ever done,” Enda said. “My grandmother performed the formal tea ceremony a few times for special visitors when I was very young, but I wasn’t a part of that. We lived in a small apartment complex, so we didn’t have a dedicated space for the ritual that the process entails. Some people in houses have beautiful rooms just for tea ceremonies, but that wasn’t us. You probably think it’s

weird, but I've never drunk tea. But we could give it a try, and you can show me. I just think you're going to end up with a lot of crumbs in the bottom of your cup. Isn't that a bit icky?"

"No, not really. If your biscuit does break and drop into the cup, then you don't drink to the bottom of the cup." Giorgio laughed again. "If you want to try it, we can, although I can zap you something else if you like."

"We'll try the tea and biscuits." Enda could sit through soggy biscuits and crumb-filled tea if Giorgio kept smiling the way he was.

That was clearly the right thing to say. "Sit up for a minute, and I'll get us a tray, including the tea and a range of biscuits. I'm not sure if the hotel here would understand if I asked for something like this, but one day soon I'll take you to a place I know in London that does the best afternoon tea. You have to try a Devonshire tea."

Enda didn't have a clue what Giorgio was talking about, but tea and biscuits were probably the most unusual diversion tactic he'd ever tried after a nightmare.

Seconds later, a large wooden tray appeared on the mattress in front of them. On it was a very ornate china pot, a bowl of sugar cubes, a milk jug, and two cups – all with a matching pattern that looked very pretty. There was also a cake display with three tiers, all stacked with different biscuits.

"How do you like your tea?" Giorgio asked as he reached for the pot.

"As I haven't drunk it before, I'm not sure. Is it sweet or savory?"

"Lean over and sniff it," Giorgio suggested. Enda leaned over and sniffed at the pot. It had a strangely earthy smell, not unpleasant, but it wasn't spicy or and it didn't have that warm scent like coffee.

“Tea is a bit like coffee, in that you can have it straight, or you can put sugar in it, or if you’re like me, you have both milk and sugar.” Giorgio poured some of the brown liquid into both of the cups. “By the way, if you ever get asked in Britain how do you like your tea, just say first out of the pot. Brits are known to leave the tea bags in the pot so that they stew. If you end up with the last poured cup, it can get really strong. Personally, I am a fan of weak tea, although I keep that to myself.”

“Is this tea strong?” It just looked like a brown liquid to Enda. Nowhere near as dark as black coffee or even hot chocolate, but it was quite a nice golden color and quite translucent.

“Grab a cup and try it. See what you think.”

Enda took a little sip and said, “I’m not really tasting anything.”

“No, I don’t either when I drink it like this. But hang on...”

Enda put his cup back down and Giorgio put in two cubes of sugar and a splash of milk and then stirred it with a spoon. “Try this one.”

Picking it back up and taking another sip, Enda nodded. “It’s definitely sweeter. I can taste the sugar. It’s nice.”

“That’s how I have my tea,” Giorgio said with a chuckle. “I have a bit of a sweet tooth. Now, let’s check out the biscuits. We have shortbread and Jammie Dodgers on the top tier, and Gingernuts in the middle, which are in a class of their own, and then at the bottom we have Custard Creams, pink wafer biscuits, and Chocolate Fingers. What do you want to try first?”

“Just a plain one to start? Not the jam one.”

“Shortbread it is, then. These biscuits are made with a lot of butter, so the moment they get warm, they are going to crumble quicker than some of the others, although the taste is amazing.” Giorgio took one, dipped it in his tea, and then pulled it straight back out again, popping it in his mouth. “Hmm,” he said around a mouthful of crumbs as he reached for another one. “The perfect late night snack. You try.”

Taking the biscuit offered, Enda turned it around in his fingers. It felt very crumbly.

“Just a quick in and out,” Giorgio said. “And remember, only get about half of the biscuit wet as the tea is hot and will burn your fingers.”

Enda tried to do the same thing. He dunked the biscuit in, and as he pulled it out, the half that had gotten wet fell into his tea.

“Clearly, mine had a fault in it,” Enda said, holding up the remains of his biscuit. “Look at that.” He pointed at his cup. “It’s trying to float. I can’t drink that.”

“Hang on a minute.” Giorgio snapped his fingers, and Enda’s cup was refreshed, completely biscuit free. “Let’s try a Gingernut instead.” His laughter was contagious, and Enda found himself joining in. Although, no matter what his mate said, he was not putting a jam or a chocolate biscuit into a cup of tea. That just didn’t sound right.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

You deserve a freaking Oscar for that performance, Giorgio thought grimly as he watched Enda sleep. Filled with tea and soggy biscuits, his mate's face was relaxed, although even in sleep, Giorgio could see his body twitch and tremble, despite being safe in Giorgio's arms.

Giorgio wasn't embarrassed to admit when Enda started screaming, he'd been scared shitless. He had been in a deep sleep, worn out from the sex, the joy at claiming his mate and being claimed – and Enda had been happy, too. That hadn't been fake, Giorgio knew it wasn't. So, don't go thinking you sent our mate into nightmares just by having sex with him, his hound grumbled. His animal side was worried, too.

Considering that thought hadn't even crossed Giorgio's mind, he just silently shook his head. We need to find out what's going on with him, he sent back. Can't you...you know...communicate with his bird and find out something that can help?

There was a moment's silence, and then his hound said, our bird is very special.

Giorgio sighed. He expected his hound to be protective, but that wasn't helpful. Our mate is special, full stop, Giorgio sent back. I'm not disputing that. But someone is after him, maybe more than one person, and there are so many holes in his story so far, it might as well be cheese. We need something to go on, something to track or trace. We have to do something, or our mate will never be safe.

That pause again. Giorgio wasn't sure if his hound was communicating with his mate's bird spirit or scratching his butt. With his hound, either was equally possible. He still wasn't sure when his hound replied, You need to talk to our mate. We're claimed now, and he said he would tell you details then.

I promised him twenty-four hours grace from talking, but that was before his nightmare. Can't you give me anything to go on in the meantime?

No. There was no delay this time. It has to be Enda who does the telling.

Great, now my hound is being secretive as well. But Giorgio kept that thought to himself. It worried him, though, and Giorgio stayed awake as the night sky slowly lightened.

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"I'd swear you're watching the clock more than the television," Enda said. It was late afternoon, and supposedly they were curled up on the couch, watching something mindless on the television. "You keep hovering, you're worried sick, and while you're not allowing me to read you, I can only imagine you think our twenty-four hour break I asked for is up."

Giorgio felt his cheeks heat. His mate was remarkably astute. "I'm sorry," he said. "I realize talking about anything in your past is likely to be unpleasant for you, but until I know what's going on, I have to be on alert because I don't know how I can keep you safe. We're in Paris, supposedly the city of love, and you don't even want to go outside. I understand you have fears, but until I understand what those fears are, I can't help you, and I really want to help you."

Enda nodded. He had been quiet for most of the afternoon, and as the evening had been getting closer, Giorgio was acutely aware of the time passing. Enda, on the other hand, seemed to be withdrawing into himself until Giorgio couldn't handle the tension anymore. "Just speak, my precious little bird, and trust I can keep you safe."

Curling his legs up under him, Enda said, "I really don't know what you want me to say or how much of it might be useful."

“Start with the warehouse,” Giorgio said. “You said that you thought you recognized the voice of one of the killers. The one who wanted you dead and all those other innocents as well.”

“I don’t know who those people were. I’d never seen any of them before.” Enda’s eyes met his, wide and honest, as though he was imploring Giorgio to look into his soul and see the truth. Giorgio already knew his mate wasn’t a bad person, but he held the gaze he was offered.

“I was pushed onto a plane with people I had never met before. I had no idea what they had in common, and it seemed like nobody knew each other either, except for a couple of people who were talking among themselves. Although they were quickly told to stay quiet by the four staff on the plane.

“Everyone was of different ethnicities, ages, and sexes, and I couldn’t pick any one thing that they might have had in common with each other or me. So, I don’t know...I genuinely don’t know why those people were brought together.”

“So, they weren’t all young victims like yourself?” Giorgio struggled to remember details of that night, but at the time, all he’d seen was the mound of bodies – the details were irrelevant, especially after he heard Enda whimper. It was possible that the people who had devised that setup had done it for that very reason.

“No, they were all different people. Some were even in business suits, and they weren’t happy about the lack of facilities on that plane.” Enda chuckled. “Seems like entitled people will act that way even when they’re on the point of death, although, of course, they didn’t know that at the time. The staff just told them they’d be taken care of when they got to their destination, and that seemed to keep them happy.”

Giorgio wondered what was said to businessmen to convince them to get onto what was clearly a carrier plane. They must’ve thought they were getting some kind of



payoff...

“Some of the other people looked like they’d been plucked from the streets. None of it made any sense. The person that I was sitting next to was an older woman, and she didn’t say anything at all for the whole trip. We were on that plane for hours.”

“Okay.” Giorgio was trying to get a timeline in order. “And you were told to get on the plane for a job? So, we could assume some of the other people were told the same thing?”

“I suppose that’s possible, although I doubt those businessmen would’ve got on a plane with no proper seats for a possible job.”

Giorgio agreed. “How about we work from the warehouse backward? Who was the person whose voice you thought you recognized?”

“My father,” Enda said bluntly. “I don’t know who the second speaker was - the one who had suggested some of us weren’t dead - but my father was the one who said it really didn’t matter because the moment that we moved, we would be. I recognized that voice. I’ll never forget that voice.”

Giorgio had to trust that it was true, but it didn’t mean he didn’t want to clarify something. “You said you hadn’t seen your father since you were ten.”

Enda nodded. “There’re just some things that stick with you, you know? And the moment I heard that voice, I knew who it was.”

“All right.” Giorgio didn’t know how much of a lead that would be, but it was a start. “Okay, so, you were on the plane, then you were in the warehouse. Before that, you had been on a boat. Do you know who owned the boat? Do you know the name of the boat?”

“The name of the boat was ‘Chameleon,’” Enda said. “But there’s a good chance it’s not called that anymore. As I said before, it was a large superyacht. It was well-staffed, but there were only three people who stayed longer than three months. The captain who ran the boat was an older man in his fifties. His name was Paul, and he never spoke to anyone other than the two permanent crew members – Ryan and Siegal.

“Siegal was responsible for making sure the rest of the crew were doing their jobs, including the boys who served clients, while Ryan spent most of his time in the communication room. I do know none of them owned the yacht because they referred to a ‘boss’ numerous times, but I never met the owner, either.”

No surnames, Giorgio noticed, but he nodded, encouraging Enda to continue.

“We would cruise into various ports all around the Mediterranean, Europe and the UK, dropping people off and picking people up at different ports. The only time we got a chance to go onshore was if one of the clients wanted company when we had docked for a while.

“Siegal gave permission on some occasions and not on others, but there was always a curfew for when we had to return. We, that is, the staff members, were never allowed to go on shore without a chaperone. I wasn’t allowed to go into port on my own or with one of the other crew members, for example.

“That was another thing” - Enda shifted in his seat - “I don’t know if this is relevant, but the crew was swapped out every three months. You just get used to seeing the same chef, the same boys who used to look after the rooms and clean them and the various other stuff. I mean, I don’t know. I didn’t have a lot to do with that. My only job was to serve drinks and look pretty.

“They were long days, and when I wasn’t working, I was curled up in a blanket in a

bunk bed that wasn't much bigger than a dresser drawer." Enda shivered. "I hated that bunk."

Giorgio hated that he had to ask, but he was still looking for a motive to all the shit Enda had gone through. "Were you expected to do anything else for the guests? Something of a more personal nature?"

"Did you mean sexual stuff?" Enda shook his head. "No. Apparently, I was too old for that."

Frowning, Giorgio said, "Are you sure you got that sentence around the right way? I thought you didn't go on the boat until you were eighteen."

"That's right, I didn't. But I wasn't to the clients' tastes." The words were completely free of emotion, but Giorgio felt every syllable.

"What were the ethnicities of the guests? Were they all Asian, all American, all European?"

But Enda was already shaking his head. "They varied. Mostly men, the occasional male-female couple. Never any women on their own. It was basically a floating party boat. The only thing that kept me going was hoping my grandmother was actually receiving pay for me. At least then I'd be able to pay for college when I was done."

For a moment, Enda looked like any other hopeful young person thinking about the future. "I'd always hoped I could go to a real college in person, not just online classes like my grandmother had insisted on."

I still don't understand why you couldn't go in the first place. There was no way Giorgio could promise Enda he could have that future without knowing why it had been denied him in the first place. Giorgio slotted that little piece of information into

his sparse web of facts accrued so far, but there were still far too many gaps in a story that barely made sense. Enda was right in one point – he had no idea how much of anything Enda was sharing was relevant, but he had to know all he could.

“Think back to when you came home and found the two men in your apartment with your grandmother,” he suggested gently. “Did your grandmother seem scared of them? Was she respectful of them? Was she nervous around them? Or was she friendly? Did she ever introduce them to you?”

“My grandmother was an old and very traditional Japanese woman. She was quiet, respectful, nodded her head when spoken to, and didn’t look the men in the face. My grandmother reacted like that to any male figures she wasn’t familiar with. If she was nervous on my behalf, she wouldn’t have a chance to say so.”

Enda looked out of the window over Giorgio’s shoulder. “I don’t think she wanted me to go, in fact, I’m almost certain of it. But in that moment, especially looking back now, I think she was resigned to it. And then, as I said, I did try and call her that one time, but yeah. All those years hoping she was at least getting money from my work, and chances are she was dead before I got on the boat. Damn it.”

Giorgio had a nasty sinking suspicion in his stomach – people around his mate appeared to be dying. Speaking of which. “All right, so we need to go back even further then. What happened when your mother died?”

Enda’s face completely shut down. It was like he was wearing a mask, and he still wasn’t looking at Giorgio. Giorgio felt like a heartless monster, but he had to keep his mate safe, and that meant he absolutely had to know where the threat to his mate was coming from.

“As I said, up until I was ten, I used to travel every six months - six months in America, six months in Japan. In Japan, I lived with my mother and my grandmother

in a small house. In America, I lived in a big house – many big houses. They were all over the place, and it was never the same city twice. All I knew as a child was that every house was huge.

“I barely saw my father during my time in the States. He would be there when I arrived. He would pat me on the head and tell me to be a good boy, and then he would disappear. There would be a nanny or a governess – the house was well staffed – and they would look after me until the visit was over.

“On average, from what I could remember, he would turn up maybe once or twice during my visit, and he would always be there on the day I left to go back to Japan. He would pat my head again, put money in my pocket, and tell me he couldn’t wait to see me again in six months’ time. That was my life until I was ten years old.”

There were so many red flags in what Enda was describing, Giorgio didn’t know where to start. “Did your father ever say anything derogatory about your mother or your grandmother? Did he ever suggest maybe keeping you full time?” Giorgio didn’t think it was likely, but he’d seen some weird shit in his time.

“No,” Enda said. “He never referred to my life in Japan, never asked about it, and I never heard him speak about my mother or grandmother. He had me for six months, and then he didn’t.” Enda paused for a moment and then added quietly. “I don’t think he cared either way.”

“So, what did you do when you were in your father’s house?” For every answer Enda gave him, Giorgio felt he had more questions. “You were only a child. Did you go to school or anything like that?”

“No. I remember playing on my own when I was little. When I was about five, I had tutors for most of the day, and in my free time, I had a playroom where I used to spend most of my time. I was never on my own, but I never thought anything weird

about that at the time. Oh, and I wasn't allowed outside, either. I remember thinking that was strange because some of the houses had lovely gardens, but I was told I wasn't allowed out there in case I wrecked anything."

A fucking prisoner from birth. The phrase flickered through Giorgio's mind and disappeared just as quickly. But the more Enda said, the more Giorgio was coming to that conclusion. "Something must have changed. You said you were ten years old when you stopped going to your father's. Did something unusual happen?"

Enda looked down at his hands, his mask dropping to the point Giorgio could feel the despair through their bond. "I thought everything was normal, sort of. My father had been home for a week, which was unusual in itself, but he still didn't spend any time with me. I remember I was due to fly back the next day. My tutor, who was charged with looking after me for that visit, was ill. He kept running off to the bathroom and wouldn't come out for ages. I got bored and went looking to see if Father was free.

"I was in his wing of the house when I heard yelling. He wasn't yelling at me, but he was really loud and sounded so angry. I was almost at the door of the room where he was when he stormed out, pointing at me, and yelled, 'Your mother's going to pay for this' as he went storming past. I had never seen anyone so angry – he was trembling with it, shaking his fists and still muttering to himself. I almost wet myself, I was so scared."

Giorgio reached over, encouraging Enda into his arms and holding him close – his mate was trembling. "That must have been really scary as a kid."

Enda's nod was short and quick. "It was. But then the next day, when I was due to leave, my father came on the plane with me, which he'd never done, going with me back to Japan. The next day, my mother was dead."

Shit. "How did your mother die?"

“Don’t. I just can’t right now. I never saw my father again. My grandmother packed our stuff, and we moved. I still wasn’t allowed to go to school, but she did help me all she could. She encouraged me to enroll in online classes when I was sixteen. I was learning graphic design.

“That was fun. The school was entirely online, and we were encouraged to use group chats with other students. I made online friends, like a little club, and we’d chat every day about all sorts of things, not just our schoolwork. And then...then it all got ruined.” Enda’s voice caught on a sob.

“I haven’t been in touch with any of them for years. The men came, and then the boat came, and I wasn’t able to get on a computer or a phone or anything else. And then you came, and I still haven’t been allowed to be on a computer or a phone or anything else.

“I do understand. My father thought I had died in that warehouse. And somebody in your organization knew that we were in that warehouse. So, you tell me, who in your agency has connections with somebody from America? Because doesn’t your agency operate out of Britain? Where’s the missing link? How does this all add up? Because it’s not all because of me – it can’t be.”

Enda was right, to a point. He might not have been the missing link, but Giorgio was sure he was a damned important one. Giorgio still couldn’t work out if Enda’s father was responsible for the deaths in the warehouse, why Enda’s body had been included. What did the father have against the son?

“Enda, what type of paranormal was your mother?”

“She was a bird shifter.” Enda’s head was down, and his shoulder tensed against Giorgio’s chest.

“And your father?” The tension in that shoulder increased.

“I think he was a mage, but I can’t be sure. He wasn’t a shifter, though. He had an unusual scent. I’ve not smelled anything like it before or since.”

“That’s an unusual combination.” Giorgio smiled to show that wasn’t a bad thing. “So, what type of bird does that make you? I know your name means little bird, but is your animal spirit really that small?”

To Giorgio’s surprise, Enda covered his face with his hands as he shook his head. “I can’t tell you. I just can’t. If I tell you, my father will kill you, too.”

What the fuck? Giorgio tuned into his hound. What type of shifter is our mate?

But his hound was standing like a concrete wall in his mind. Our precious mate has to tell us himself. You cannot take that away from him.

Focusing back on his mate whose face was still covered, Giorgio said softly, “Mate, beautiful Enda, I can’t die, and neither can you now we’re claimed. Fearing the actions of a random psycho is not a reason to hide the other half of yourself with me. Please tell me.”

“I can’t, don’t you understand. You’ll protect me, you’ll always want to protect me, you and your beautiful hound both. Then you’ll get hurt, and you can’t tell me you won’t die because all of us die in the end. My father will find a way to kill you!”

Pushing Giorgio’s arms away, Enda scrambled off his lap, running for the bathroom. The door slammed shut, and Giorgio heard the door lock turning. But that wasn’t what broke Giorgio’s heart – it was the crying he could hear coming through the door.



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I can't tell him, I can't. What if he's wrong? Enda flipped down the lid of the toilet and sat on it, burying his face in his hands. He could understand Giorgio's need to ask question after question – his mate was trying to understand where Enda had come from so he could keep him safe.

But the fear that had been ingrained in him, first by his mother and then his grandmother, and the need to hide his true inner self was steeped into every pore and cell he had, in every drop of blood. The way his mother had died - Enda quickly shied away from the memory – the dream he'd had was bad enough. But it reinforced the idea that if anyone could find a way to take down a hellhound, his father was the sort of sadistic bastard who would make that happen.

Enda couldn't let that happen. He had already met the hellhound in the flesh – that gorgeous huge animal who loved scratches and being petted all around his furry cheeks. Enda knew how protective the hound was. It was in his nature. Even now as Giorgio was struggling with his confusion at Enda's words, Enda felt through his bird spirit how the hound was protecting his bird against his human side and how fucked up was that.

Everything's so fucked up. Maybe it would've been best if I had set that bomb off before Giorgio and Mitchell arrived. Giorgio would've never known how close he'd come to finding me, so he would never have missed me. I would just have been a piece of splatter among a host of others...Giorgio would never have known...

Enda couldn't stop crying. It was as if when he started, someone had jammed his tear-tap in the on position and he couldn't turn it off. He tried desperately to keep his sobs to himself because he knew how acute the hellhound's hearing was, and he had

no doubt that every tear he shed was causing Giorgio grief as well.

But there was so much Enda had never had a chance to grieve – his mother and grandmother obviously. But there was so much more – the visits he'd been forced to endure in the States when he'd never seen any of the country at all outside of the airport.

The lack of friends. Enda thought about his two favorite friends online – Jackie and Cosmo. They'd been so much fun, and they never cared that they'd never seen Enda's face – not even on a screen. They just treated him as if he was any other regular teenager moaning about parents, assignments, and test results. I miss them so much.

Now, there was a new thing to cry over – how he was causing his mate harm because he didn't dare be honest with him.

It is time. You have to tell him. His bird's soft voice sounded through his head, and it was so unusual, Enda had lifted his head from his hands, looking around as if he could almost see his bird spirit in front of him. His bird rarely spoke to him when he was upset – perhaps because he'd been equally so.

Through their years of captivity and everything else Enda went through, there really wasn't any point or need. They would grieve together, yet separately at the same time. But Enda had always felt that spirit there, that comforting presence of the animal spirit that he had been blessed with, helping him not feel quite so alone.

What do you fear most? his bird insisted. You're damaging your mating by not sharing the core part of who we are.

I know it's selfish. I know I'm being mean , Enda sobbed, but I can't risk anything happening to Giorgio. He has been saving us and protecting us from the moment we met, and I know it's only been a few days, but if my father knew that somebody else

knew...

What could that man do? his bird insisted. I think this is where our grandmother was wrong, our mother, too.

Enda stilled. His bird had never spoken a word against the two women who loved him and did what they could for him. I don't understand. They were trying to keep us safe.

They were doing their best with the information they had at the time, but our father's behavior is escalating, and keeping secrets and hiding is making us vulnerable. If nobody knows that we need help, then how can we access that help when we need it? Surely it makes sense to tell the one man that the Fates put in our path.

But our father could... Enda's bird was making sense, but Enda's fear was a big part of who he was.

We were seconds away from dying. I shared those thoughts with you when you despaired, knowing that the slightest move you made could be your last. Don't you see it would be far better to let somebody stronger take the burden of this for a while?

But what if he doesn't understand? It was so tempting. By nature, Enda was an honest person, and having to hide anything from his mate, when Giorgio had been so caring, wasn't easy. But Enda's fear had to ask, What if he hates us, too?

I don't think that's possible . The bird seemed to sigh. We don't know a lot about mates. We weren't raised in a typical shifter family, but from what the hound has been telling me, the Fates bring us the mate that we need, the mate that will complement us perfectly.

And you heard what Giorgio said. He's immortal. He was crafted by hand, by a God.

He can't die.

But how can we believe that? We all die, Enda insisted. Every living being, from the tallest tree to the smallest ant, we all die. It's just the length of time it takes that makes the difference.

Gods don't die the bird reasoned. We know that gods don't die so why can't we trust that Giorgio won't die either. Mates don't lie to each other. Don't you see? This is the strongest position we've ever been in, to be able to go against the man that killed our mother. We could do this. With Giorgio's help, we could do this.

How can you be so sure? Enda sat up, brushing away the tears from his cheeks. He was sure he looked an absolute mess, but he stayed focused on his bird, inside his mind.

This is one situation where I genuinely think we have to trust. I know it's hard, but Giorgio didn't lie. Can you just think of the implications if what our mate has said is true? That we can't die?

I'm not sure how the not dying works if our body is blown to shit.

But Enda thought about it. His head ached, his eyes felt as though someone had thrown sand into them, and his stomach was churning, probably feeling the upset from Giorgio. He recognized that even in the brief few days they'd been together, their bond was already strong. The hound cared for his bird spirit, and Giorgio cared for Enda already. Enda hadn't had that, not since his grandmother.

Father has taken away everything and everybody in our life, and there really weren't that many people. How can we be sure he won't take Giorgio?

Remember the voices in your head, the bird said softly. Remember when you put the

collar around Giorgio's neck, how you heard the sound of all the other hounds. Giorgio comes from a pack of twelve. He's got a pack, and he has experience in these things.

What things? Enda smiled. We don't know what Giorgio was doing before we came along. Face it, our knowledge of 'things' is virtually non-existent. All we've ever had is the shit that we've been fed since we landed on that boat.

That's right. But while we were on that boat, the bird said , Giorgio was out there saving people, negotiating, strategizing. He's the perfect person to take down your father once and for all, but you have to trust him. If you don't tell him what we are, that will drive a wedge between us that we might never be able to heal. We can't do that. Not now, not when our future is just out of reach.

Swallowing hard, Enda rubbed at his face again and then stood up. If you're wrong... he warned his other half.

I truly don't think I am. But the only way you're going to find out is to tell him – all of it.

Letting himself out of the bathroom, Enda looked over to the couch where Giorgio was still sitting, his eyes clearly fixated on the door.

Before he had a chance to say anything, Giorgio asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Apparently, I'm a phoenix – a defunct one," Enda said, spreading his arms wide. "As far as I know, the reason my father wants to kill me is because he knows I saw him kill my mother. I don't know why he did that. I don't know why he hates me so badly. But even though I've never shifted, my father sees my phoenix as a threat to him, and I'm fairly sure that's why he wants me dead. Is that what you wanted to

know?”

Giorgio was across the room in seconds. Enda found himself clasped in strong arms and lifted off his feet as Giorgio hugged him tight. “I promise you’ll be safe, little bird. I absolutely promise you. You will be safe.”

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Giorgio knew he needed help – his issue was more about which of his packmates he should call. The fifteen minutes Enda had been in the bathroom had been the longest moments in his life. He thought about knocking on the door a dozen times, but his hound told him he needed to wait. Once again, Giorgio felt like his hound was siding with his mate's animal spirit when his loyalty was usually something Giorgio could count on.

But the moment Enda came out with his rather shocking revelation, his hound was happy again, and Giorgio even got the impression of the bird spirit flitting around his head.

"I never lied to you," Enda said, wiping more tears from his red-rimmed eyes, but Giorgio could feel they were more relief this time than anything else. "I have tried to shift so many times, and when we were laying on that bomb...my bird was trying soooo hard, he was frantic with it. We both thought for sure he could shift then, but nothing happened! I don't know what's wrong with me, but nothing happened."

"Hey, hey." Giorgio wiped a stray tear from his mate's face. He carried Enda back to the couch, getting them both settled. "What do you know about phoenixes?"

"Apart from the fact my father wants to kill me?" Giorgio had to blink a few times himself, reacting to the deep sadness in Enda's eyes. "No one I know has ever come across one before. It was my grandmother who told me. I got upset when I didn't shift as a teenager, and she explained I wasn't exactly like my mother, but she said I could never tell anyone."

"Babe." Giorgio swallowed hard. "Er...a phoenix is like a dragon. They never shift

until they've claimed and been claimed by their mate."

"We're claimed! Does that mean I can shift now?" Enda tilted his head to one side. "I don't feel any different, and neither does my bird, but then I haven't tried since we met. Do you think I should try now?"

Giorgio felt his hound actually chuckling in his head. "We have claimed each other, yes. I wear the collar, you've bitten me, and... and... there's more. We need to be double claimed."

"What do you mean by double?" Enda looked around the room. "Do we have to claim someone else?"

"No! Sorry." Giorgio quickly lowered his voice. "Sorry. I didn't mean to yell, but no, we definitely won't be claiming someone else. What I mean by double claiming is that..." Damn he could barely get the words out. "You have to have your cock inside of me when you bite me."

Enda's eyes went impossibly wide, and Giorgio saw his Adam's apple bob up and down. "You're not talking about you giving me a blowjob, are you?" Enda quickly covered his mouth as a giggle escaped. "And, er...I don't suppose we're talking about me sticking my dick in your ear either? I don't think I could do that and bite you all at the same time."

His lips pressed together, Giorgio shook his head. "Nope, there's only one place for your dick to go that will make this work."

"Ah. I understand." Enda patted his chest. "You've never done things that way before, have you? I can sense that through our bond. It's okay. We don't have to. Do you think if we try getting a message to my father somehow and tell him I can't shift at all and never will, that he might leave me alone? We could even lie and say that I



can't even remember what happened the night my mother died. That might work, mightn't it? He's probably more scared of my phoenix than me."

Enda would do that, too. Giorgio could hear his sincerity, and it was humbling, knowing Enda would give up his chance to ever let his bird spirit free just so Giorgio wouldn't feel uncomfortable during a sexual act. Suck it up, he told himself fiercely. Lord Hades has been pregnant twice, and Cain got pregnant, too, and we all know how that happened.

"We're not giving up on your phoenix." Giorgio bent his head, kissing Enda's hair. "How about we call room service, enjoy a meal, and then we'll get an early night. See if we can make this thing happen. What do you think?"

"But you don't want to do things that way," Enda protested. "I would never force you to do something you didn't want to do."

"I've never let anyone else do something like that, but mates are special. I...I..." Giorgio couldn't say he wanted to do it. That would be a lie. "We can at least give it a try. Who knows. I might like it?" And my hound might turn purple and start sporting yellow spots. But Giorgio kept that to himself and smiled at his worried mate. "What do you fancy for dinner?"

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While Enda was enjoying his meal, Giorgio was running a self-help/motivational seminar through his head. At least, that's what it sounded like to him.

Sex is as natural as breathing.

If Enda can give up his ass for me, then it's only right I do the same for him at least once.

It's not like his dick is going to be in there long.

That thought had Giorgio spiraling down a sidetrack trying to work out how long he'd had his dick inside of anyone's ass at any one time. Enda was an exception. Giorgio knew he'd been quick that one time, but between the new claim and Enda's passion and excitement – no guy could last long under those circumstances.

But what about with other people? Ten minutes...five minutes...two? No more than three minutes, surely, and three minutes wouldn't be so bad. Giorgio was sure he could handle anything for two to three minutes, even someone trying to pull out his fingernails. He'd had that happen to him once, so Giorgio did know how painful that could be. Anal sex couldn't be that bad or no one would do it.

You're doing this for Enda, Giorgio told himself firmly. As soon as the double claim is made, I can take him to the wastelands so he can shift without anyone seeing him and...and... Giorgio couldn't think that far ahead. Not with what was to come. We've just got to get over this bit first.

It was in that frame of mind that Giorgio escorted Enda into the bedroom, as soon as Enda had finished the hot chocolate he'd asked for. If Enda was nervous, Giorgio wouldn't know anything about it. He had enough nerves for both of them.

"Right," he said, standing by the door as Enda went and sat on the bed. "I thought the best way to do this was we'll get naked, and then I can prep myself with magic, which will make things easier for both of us. As far as positions go, I factored in that you need to bite me again, so, I think we'll do it the same as when I claimed you, but this time I'll straddle your legs and have your cock inside me that way.

"When you're ready to bite, I can bend down and then you can reach my neck with your teeth, while your cock is still inside. That way, we should both orgasm thanks to the bite, and that will be a double claim, right? So did you want to take your own

clothes off, or I can zap them if you like.”

Enda folded his arms across his chest, making no move to do anything, including taking his clothes off. “This must’ve been what Consort Ali meant when he said that hellhounds weren’t good with dating techniques.”

Consort Ali? Dating techniques? Where did that come from? “What do you mean?” Now he’d decided to do the deed, Giorgio just wanted to get it done.

“You’re standing there, looking as if you’re one move away from pissing your pants, dictating how things are going to go. But you forgot two fundamental facts when you were planning this all out when you should’ve been eating.”

“I didn’t forget anything, did I?” Giorgio was sure he had all the bases covered. And what did Enda mean about him pissing his pants? He never did that, even if he was drunk, which was never.

“Well, for a start, if you think I am just going to stick my dick in you without any foreplay or efforts to help you relax, then you must have a really bad opinion of me. That’s a horrible thing to do to anybody. And second, and this follows on from point one, nothing you’ve said or done since we came into this room is arousing to me. As far as I’m aware, I can hardly stick a soft dick up your ass without an act of god. But hey, you know one of them, maybe you can call him and get some advice. As for me, I’m going to relax in a bath and try and forget my mate basically insulted my character.”

“Wait, please,” Giorgio added quickly as Enda stood up. “I didn’t mean to insult you, honest I didn’t. I just...I was thinking about the best way to do this over dinner so that we can...” he trailed off, the words “get it over and done with as soon as possible” left unsaid. He didn’t think that would help his cause.

But clearly, the thought leaked through their bond. “You just want to get it over and done with,” Enda said flatly. “If you can’t be assed to give me the chance to show you the same level of care and affection you showed me when you claimed me, instead of planning our sex like a freaking secret-service operation to be executed as quickly and efficiently as possible...” He shook his head. “That’s a hard no from me. I care for you too much to treat you like that, even if you don’t think that I do.”

Giorgio could only watch as Enda walked, with a ramrod straight back, into the bathroom, gently closing the door. Moments later, he heard the bath water running.

You certainly fucked that up.

Giorgio hated that his hound was right, but he wasn’t sure where he fucked up. I thought he’d be so keen, Giorgio protested. Surely, he’s desperate to shift for the first time in his life. It would’ve only taken five minutes. We could’ve been one and done and in the Underworld by now – his bird spirit free to be who he was born to be.

It might have helped if you didn’t look like you were facing a firing squad while you were outlining your plan.

Giorgio frowned. You can’t see my face, so how would you know my expression?

I could see your reflection in the mirror.

Glancing sideways, Giorgio could see his face. His hound was right again. All right, smart ass, but what am I meant to do now? Enda thinks I hate him. I was only doing this for him. I would never have done it for anyone else.

Yeah, I can’t understand what Enda was thinking, either. That sacrificial lamb aspect you’ve got going on is really sexy. You looked like a martyr being led to the funeral pyre. I bet he got horny just staring at your face and that was without all the

instructions you were giving like you were organizing a military event. I'm surprised he could keep it in his pants. He should've just thrown you to the floor and plowed your ass until you couldn't remember your name and to hell with the bed and all your instructions.

Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit. Giorgio could feel his cheeks heating. That doesn't help me know what to do now. I don't like thinking Enda doesn't like me. Straining his ears, he could hear the water had stopped running and then a soft splash as Enda got into the bath.

Maybe you should go and get in the bath with him. Show him the affection he clearly feels he's missing. And stop overthinking things. It really doesn't do you any good.

Giorgio wasn't sure about the overthinking side of things, but getting in the bath with a naked, warm Enda and showing him affection wasn't a hardship at all. He quickly tugged his shirt over his head and shoved his pants down his thighs.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

Just focus on the water , Enda told himself, as he relaxed against the side of the bath, letting his limbs float through the water as they wanted to. It was a huge tub, it held a lot of water, and whoever had designed it had clearly planned it for two people to use in comfort instead of one. Enda tried not to think about his missing mate and focused on having a moment's quiet as he struggled to work out the mess of emotions in his head. There were so many things going on.

Finding out that he wasn't truly claimed – or rather he was claimed but not double claimed. What did that mean? Was that not claimed in a shifter way? Was that because he was a phoenix? Or because Giorgio was a hellhound? Enda had always believed a claim came with a bite, and apparently for hellhounds, it was when the collar clicked around Giorgio's neck. How much more claiming did a person need?

Enda didn't feel unclaimed, but then the only difference he felt after being claimed was the constant presence of another person in the back of his head. He felt safe with Giorgio. Well, he had, before the big galoot opened his mouth and shit came out. Enda had his own nerves to deal with, and Giorgio hadn't seemed to factor that in at all when he was making his grand plan for “operation double claim.”

That hurt. Enda didn't consider himself a wimp by any stretch of the imagination. He had survived too much for that. He didn't think he was a complainer by nature, either. Again, he had gone through too much and realized quite early on in his life that there was no point in complaining about things he couldn't change.

And it wasn't as though he was desperate for his phoenix to be free, either. After having his father try to kill him for the last fifteen years, his phoenix was safest tucked away and hidden in his body.

Although Enda also knew that that was incredibly sad for his bird spirit, who did deserve to spread their wings, even if it was just the once. But, when it seemed the impossible was right there in his grasp, it had been snatched away like so much else in his life.

Life happens, he told himself. Focus on the water. Focus on the fact that in this moment, you are safe, you are comfortable, you have a full belly, and you have the chance to relax.

Unfortunately, the soothing mantra wasn't working as well as it normally did. Part of that was because of his mating bond. Enda was aware that Giorgio seemed to be having a running conversation with his hound, although Enda couldn't hear what was actually being said. It was like listening to a neighbor having a conversation on the phone, in the house next door.

Swishing the water around him, Enda smiled. One of the best things about being a shifter was having another spirit inside of them. Even when a shifter was all alone in the world, there was always someone there to speak to, even if it was an extension of themselves.

Enda's bird had been a source of comfort through the years, even after they'd both accepted that they would never shift. They had accepted it, they'd played life with the hand they had been dealt. It wasn't like we could do anything else.

And now...

It was clear from the way Giorgio had laid out his instructions on how he saw their double-claiming process, that he believed Enda was all hard cock and damp trousers, eagerly anticipating the chance to stick his dick in his mate's ass. The joke's on him, then. Enda hadn't been sure he would've been able to do his part, even if he was given the chance.

Enda hadn't felt any of the excitement or eagerness Giorgio was clearly anticipating. He'd tried to pass it off as a joke because, quite frankly, the thought of doing that terrified him.

It wasn't something Enda had done before, it wasn't something he'd ever thought he'd wanted to do. The most he'd ever done prior to one horrible experience and then meeting Giorgio was a few hand and blow jobs with fellow servers on the party boat, usually younger people like himself who didn't want to be the dominant party, either. Enda preferred things that way. When he met Giorgio, part of the appeal was that his mate was a huge alpha-type with a protective instinct a mile wide, and strong arms to shelter him in.

Had Giorgio considered that Enda might be nervous about being the penetrative party? That maybe Enda might have to go against his nature to complete the deed?

No. Giorgio's tension had increased from the moment he'd mentioned it, and that was something Enda didn't understand. Why bring something up if Giorgio had never wanted to do it in the first place?

There's still so much I don't know about my mate, he thought, swishing the water softly, enjoying the opportunity to relax after what had been some rather tense days. With his eyes closed, Enda dreamed of what a perfect life would look like.

Travel – Enda loved seeing new places, and there were so many cities he'd only dreamed about from the deck of the boat as they moved from port to port. What would it be like to walk the streets, peer into the shops, and visit the markets and historic buildings? Giorgio's been alive since before they were built, he thought with a chuckle. I bet he could tell me some stories about them.

Building a home together. Enda longed for a permanent home. He'd been traveling and moved about pretty much his whole life, and Enda really wanted to feel like he



could walk through a door, close it behind him, and know that he was safe.

None of that is going to happen until my father leaves me alone. A sobering thought. Enda considered it was rather sad that the one person who wanted to kill him was also likely his only living relative. Not the most relaxing of thoughts.

There was a noise by the door, and then it opened. Enda kept his eyes closed. It could only be Giorgio. Giorgio would give his life to prevent anyone else from getting near Enda, especially when he was naked and vulnerable. Enda just didn't think he could face seeing Giorgio's stoic expression again so soon.

That was one of the things that had hurt him the most, the way there was no affection included in Giorgio's plan for the double claiming – not even a kiss. It was as if Giorgio believed that all Enda had to do was sit down and prop his cock up, Giorgio would sit on it, and the deed would be done. Enda mentally shuddered. Letting anyone close to him without any level of affection was the stuff of nightmares.

Enda wasn't that fond of sex. It wasn't like he spent his teenage years with a permanent hard-on. In fact, he barely got one at all. He was aroused by Giorgio, definitely. But Enda saw sex as so much more than where someone stuck their dick. Enda was more aroused by the slide of skin on skin, of touches – hard or soft, but with affectionate intent – and kisses. Lots and lots of kisses.

Is it too much to ask that my mate agreed with the affection side of things? I thought we were meant to be perfect for each other.

Giorgio and he had gone through so much in such a short time, but when all that tension and stress was stripped away, they still had so much more to learn about each other.

He felt rather than heard Giorgio stepping into the water, and he moved his legs to

one side so there'd be plenty of room, still keeping his eyes closed.

Giorgio's hands were warm and firm on his ankles before moving down to stroke his feet. "Am I forgiven for being a douchebag?" Giorgio asked quietly. "I let my nerves get away from me, and as my hound told me, I definitely overthought things. I never once considered your feelings in what I was processing, and for that I am truly sorry."

Eyes still closed, Enda smiled. "I appreciate that. Thank you." Of course, now Giorgio was near him, his cock thought it was a good idea to get in on the action. But Enda ignored it, the way he tried to ignore all the other worries that never truly went away.

He appreciated the feel of Giorgio's strong hands on his feet, gently stroking the top of his feet and stretching out his toes. Enda had had so little experience with positive touching, it was like his skin was a sponge just soaking it all up.

"Affection is a strange concept for hellhounds," Giorgio said, and Enda loved that he kept his voice low as well. It helped create the illusion they were in some kind of a bubble and could enjoy being cut off from the entire world, just two people together.

"We're affectionate within our pack – especially in our hound form. It was never anything sexual, but we would sleep in puppy piles, and we had no problem showing support in a dog-like form. We didn't consider those actions affection because we were hounds, and it was just what we did. When we were given a human form and moved to Earth, the whole idea of being affectionate with non-pack members was difficult.

"I guess, although we walked on two legs, a lot of the habits that we had ingrained in us came from the thousands of years we lived in the Underworld first, in our hound form. Any of my mated packmates would tell you they didn't understand the importance of showing affection, having date nights, or doing things like breakfast in

bed when they were first with their mates. They'd never had to do anything like that before."

"We had our little tea ceremony," Enda said. "That was a lot of fun, and I bet none of the other hellhounds have thought to do something like that."

"I'm almost certain your guess is right," Giorgio agreed. "They probably haven't, but then I'm not sure they appreciate a cup of tea. They're more coffee and toast people. I do need you to know that when I look at you, I want to surround you with fluffy pillows and soft affection. I want to treat you the way you deserve to be treated."

"And it's very hard sometimes because of the threat that you have against you. I also need to protect you as well. And then sometimes my logical brain just gets caught up, and the affection, which is not natural to me, is something that I forget completely. And that's why I fucked up what should've been a very beautiful and wonderful first for both of us."

"When you meet the other mates of the packmates, they will tell you funny stories about how they had to quite literally train their hellhound to treat them the way they deserve to be treated. And don't ever think that just because I am bigger or older or stronger or anything else, I wouldn't listen to you. I will sit there at your feet or cradle you in my arms and listen to every word when you explain how you want to be treated if you'll just tell me."

Giorgio gave an embarrassed laugh. "Which is what I should have done with this double-claiming business. You're quite right. I tried to run it like a military operation, and none of what I laid out sounded fun for either one of us. There was no insult implied at all, please believe me on that. But yeah, I just figured if I could pin down the details, then the actual sensations involved in the act could be something I wouldn't have to think about."

That had Enda's eyes flying open. "What on Earth? If you don't want to have anal sex, then you don't have to. Nobody should ever force you to do that if you don't like it. I don't even understand why you felt that you had to do something that is so against who you are and what makes you comfortable. That's just not right."

"Normally, I would agree with you." Giorgio's hands were moving softly up to Enda's knees. "But first, I don't know for sure that I don't like it because I've never done it, so, that was just unfair of me – definitely overthinking on my part. And second, the Fates put you in my path for a reason. We are meant to be helping each other. You have no idea how glad I am that I was there to save your life – the relief of knowing if I hadn't been there, if I hadn't heard you..."

"That's no excuse to participate in a sexual act you're not comfortable with, though. I was nervous enough about the whole idea for both of us."

"That helps." Giorgio chuckled. "Believe me, that helps. I thought... yeah, we already know too much about what I was thinking, but I will admit I let my fears overtake my common sense. If I had just taken you to bed, kissed you and held you, enjoyed being with you, without all the stupid planning and processes, then it would likely already be done by now. Although, I am enjoying this bath with you. This is relaxation at its finest."

"It is and at least I don't have that soft dick problem anymore. But the thing is" - Enda made sure he caught his mate's eyes and held them fast with his own - "I need to know that you trust me never to do anything that would cause you pain or concern. The way you outlined everything screamed of distrust to me – that you didn't believe that I could make you feel good."

Giorgio winced. "Again, not intentional, I promise."

"I am not a fan of being the penetrating party," Enda enunciated clearly. "I can't

explain why, it's just never been something I've wanted to do or dreamed about doing before you and I met. Don't you see? In that respect I'm the perfect mate for you. So, this would have only been the once to cement the claim and do that one thing that would allow my phoenix to fly free – I wouldn't do it for any other reason, and again, we don't have to do it all if you don't want to.”

“You were given your animal spirit for a reason, and I fear as we get closer to your father and we work out what's going on and why it is that he's trying to kill you in the first place, I do believe your phoenix is the key to this. If it wasn't, then your father wouldn't be so scared of it. So, yes, this is something that needs to be done. Something I do want to do for you. I just went about it the wrong way. Can you forgive me for before?”

“You already know I have.” Enda sighed as he smiled. “I'm not the best at telling you what it is I like, but I'll try. I know I found a safe harbor in your arms. You're the rock between me and a world that really doesn't make sense to me. My skin longs for your touch, and your kisses set my body on fire. Is that clear enough for you?”

Half the water disappeared from the bath as Giorgio surged forward, covering Enda's body with his own, his lips scorching Enda's mouth as they joined in a kiss. All the worries Enda had disappeared in a sigh. This is what I wanted, he thought as he gripped Giorgio's shoulders so he didn't sink.

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Before Enda, Giorgio barely used his magic. He lived and worked among humans, so there really hadn't been any need. But it certainly had its uses, especially transporting Enda and himself to the bed when he really didn't want to stop kissing his mate long enough to climb out of the bath and dry them both off.

Taking care to land so he wasn't squashing his mate, Giorgio lost himself in the taste and affection pouring from Enda's body. His hands were firm as they stroked Giorgio's skin, and Giorgio wanted to press into those hands because of the sensations they sent zinging through his body.

His cock was hard. That was a given being around a naked mate, but Giorgio found himself pressing harder against Enda's body, looking for friction, and Enda was doing the same.

Kisses are like a magic sauce. Because that's what it felt like. Just a taste of Enda's lips and any sensible thought vanished from Giorgio's brain. He wanted to feel Enda all over his body, he wanted the man's cock pressing against his, so Giorgio made it happen, pleased to hear Enda's low moan.

Moans gave way to panting as the kisses got more frantic. Knowing Enda needed to breathe, Giorgio pulled away from his mate's lips, but his mouth was still busy, sucking up marks on Enda's neck and chin, sucking on Enda's earlobes that caused Enda to yell and grip at him even harder.

Giorgio wanted more and he moved down, putting Enda on his back and holding his torso down as he kissed his way down to Enda's nipples – sucking on one before moving to the other – pressing his torso down so Enda's cock was getting some

friction while he was humping the covers.

The air was filled with the scent of their joint arousal. Enda's moans caressed his ears, and Giorgio didn't even think as he used his magic to prepare himself. There was no second guessing, no overthinking. Giorgio reached behind himself to see if his finger would go into his ass. It did. Still not thinking about it, Giorgio sat up, straddling Enda's hips.

His mate's cock was slim and long, its tip bright red and leaking already. Holding it in his hand, Giorgio might have gone a little bit overboard with the lube he conjured in his fingers, but Enda's top half was thrashing against the covers, his mate's face flushed, and his eyes closed as Giorgio quickly made sure his mate's cock was thoroughly slicked up.

We can do this. And in that moment Giorgio wanted to. It wasn't just the double claim aspect, it was sharing something special, something he'd saved for his mate. While that might have been an old-fashioned idea, Giorgio was running with it. A double first for a double claim.

It wasn't quite as easy as porn suggested, or as simple as when Giorgio was shoving his dick into someone else. For one thing, he couldn't actually see what he was doing, so it took a moment to get the angle right. For some reason asses weren't directly under the balls, which would've been easier with the position Giorgio was going for.

He needed to tilt his butt up. The only way he could do that, with his bulk and given he didn't want to squash his mate, was to plant one foot firmly on the mattress, his leg bent at the knee as he got Enda's cockhead into the right position.

Enda wasn't moving at all anymore. His cock was still firm, but he was staring at Giorgio, his eyes wide. "This'll be great, you'll see," Giorgio said with a lot more cheer than he was feeling. His cock was ready to go down as Enda's went up, but

Enda must've noticed and a moment later Giorgio was groaning as Enda's hands were wrapped around his cock, giving him something else to think about.

It wasn't awful. Giorgio knew he was clean inside thanks to his magic – although he kept feeling as though he wanted to fart. Guessing it was his body's natural reaction to having something shoved into an out hole, Giorgio breathed through it and in sooner time than he thought possible, Enda's cock couldn't go any farther.

I'll just stay still for a moment, he thought, eyes closed, savoring the delicious movements Enda was making up and down his cock and around his balls, rather than what was going on behind. Enda was fueling his horny levels, and Giorgio wriggled his hips, seeking more of the sensations.

Of course, his front and back bits were connected by his hips. So, as Giorgio thrust forward, wanting more of Enda's hands, the cock in his butt was being moved, too. Giorgio leaned back slightly, wanting to focus on his front half, but when he did that, he got a jolt from his back end that ran right up his cock. That's why men do this, he thought as he wiggled, trying to feel that sensation again.

He could feel his orgasm building, even though he was barely moving at all. Enda had just the right amount of pressure on his dick, paying close attention to that place just beneath Giorgio's cockhead. Between that and a gentle brush of fingers against his balls with every down stroke, Giorgio knew he was close.

"Babe, you need to bite," he said between pants, trying to catch Enda's eyes. His balls were already tight, and there was a pull in his lower abdomen, letting him know his orgasm was sitting right there.

Enda's entire focus was on Giorgio's dick. "Babe, now." Leaning forward, Giorgio caught Enda's body up with one arm, smashing him into Giorgio's chest. He didn't know if Enda could reach his mating mark or not – Giorgio just knew his mate



needed to bite him. There was a quick sharp pain over his heart, and Giorgio groaned as his cock pulsed and he was making a mess between them. From the splodge and sudden tension in Enda's body, he was sure Enda had climaxed, too.

One breath, and then a second one, and then Enda's body tensed again. "Giorgio, it's coming, my bird is coming. What do I do?"

"It's just like an orgasm, babe. Relax and let it come." Giorgio pulled on his magic yet again and translocated them between realms. Hopefully Enda's cock would come free before they hit the wastelands. Otherwise, that could be awkward.

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For twenty-five years the phoenix had been waiting for this moment. As his wings flared wide across the strange landscape, the phoenix knew he was safe because of his hellhound, who was watching him from the ground.

Taking a well-overdue stretch, the phoenix reveled in the flames that flared where feathers would be, their bright orange, red, and yellow colors blending and shifting seamlessly as the phoenix shot up into the sky. Turning, he flew in a large circle, the flames trailing behind him, before he swooped low, taking care not to singe his hound's fur as he flew over him, darting across the barren lands.

The hound was barking, sounding his encouragement as the phoenix flew, keeping pace with him effortlessly as they streaked across the land. His whole life, the phoenix had been confined, all through no fault of his human. But as he flew, the phoenix knew he had finally come into his power, and it was all thanks to his wonderful mate.

A peahen no more. That is what the hound spirit had said he looked like when they first met. The hound hadn't been unhappy about it, and when the phoenix explained

his need for secrecy, the hellhound had done his best to keep them safe.

Now, I can stand by his side. I'm not a victim anymore, either. I am a survivor! Letting out a loud screech, the phoenix flew up the side of a large black pile of rocks, perching on a ledge at the top, his head turning one way and then the other so he could get a better look at himself.

"You look incredible." The human version of Giorgio, now fully dressed, joined him on the ledge, wearing a proud smile. The phoenix drew back, unwilling to let his flames hurt his mate. "Your flames can't hurt me, I promise. Hellhounds are immune to magical attacks and fire. Let me get closer and show you."

Trust our mate, Enda implored his phoenix, and the phoenix agreed. It would be a sad life if every time he shifted, his mate had to keep his distance. He stood tall and proud, his head stretched up, almost reaching Giorgio's shoulder, and his tail flaming out behind him as the man got closer.

"You do realize that as a phoenix, you can't die, even if you weren't made immortal through mating with me." Giorgio stood beside him, and the phoenix watched as Giorgio's hands passed through the flames around his head. Mesmerizing. "You could be shot a million times, blown to smithereens by a bomb, poisoned, or dead by any number of other horrible acts, and every time your attacker thought you had died, you would be reborn again in moments, thanks to your flames. You are the flame that never dies."

The phoenix tilted his head, giving his mate the side-eye. Giorgio laughed. "And yes, you look totally gorgeous." He caught the phoenix's eye. "Strong. Stunning. Invincible."

Bobbing his head, the phoenix agreed, although all that flying for the first time had tired him out. He was just about to ask for help in shifting back when another voice

could be heard.

“Oh, my goodness, you were right, Hades. Giorgio’s little bird is special. He’s a gorgeous phoenix. How incredible. I’ve never seen one before.”

“We’ve got company,” Giorgio said in a low voice. “It’s Consort Ali. I should’ve guessed he’d come out to see what was going on. Did you want to go down and say hello? You won’t hurt them if that’s what you’re worrying about.”

Meh. Fine. I guess I can show off for ten minutes more. With a loud screech, the phoenix took to the skies again as Giorgio translocated down the rocks to stand beside Lord Hades and Consort Ali, sitting in their carriage. A few loop-di-loops, and Enda would be ready for something else to eat.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

“I think you should go public,” Lord Hades said. It was just after dinner. Giorgio had felt it would be rude to refuse the invitation after Consort Ali was so excited about seeing his first phoenix. Enda had shifted back to his human form, and his only focus was food. No one had ever told him how draining a shift and flying for the first time could be. But at Lord Hades’ words, that lovely dinner provided was threatening to make a reappearance.

“We can’t tell people we’re paranormal, sir.” Enda felt his cheeks heat up just speaking directly with the god. He wasn’t sure it was ever something he’d get used to. “If we keep the paranormal aspect quiet, then how do we explain why I didn’t die and how Giorgio escaped the explosion that has him listed as ‘presumed dead’?”

Enda hated that part of their situation, although at least it had stopped people from looking for either one of them so far. Now Lord Hades wanted them to go public?

“You’re new to our little family,” Consort Ali said, reaching over the table and patting his hand. “Gods have networks and processes all over the place to ensure that our paranormal friends can live without having their secret exposed and yet still stay safe.”

“My adorable mate is right,” Lord Hades said with a smile. “In this case, I think a strategic use of Zeus’s network could be useful in bringing Enda’s father out of hiding.”

“I was going to try tracking him down,” Giorgio said. “If I called in a couple of my packmates, and we actively went looking for him...”

I didn't know you were going to do that.

“Why bother when you can make him come to you? That helps you control the situation.” Lord Hades leaned his elbows on the table. “Your issue isn't only with Enda's father. Someone in your agency was working with that man, and while I am in two minds about if they wanted you dead specifically, whoever it was didn't care that people you worked with were going to end up dead because of what was left for them to find.”

“If you think about it,” Consort Ali said brightly, “Enda's father, whoever he is, was quite clever in doing that. Not that I condone what he did at all. But a secretive agency was never going to publish reasons why an explosion in a remote farm in England took place. They'll blame gas lines or even World War II debris if anyone asks. Because of the agency involvement, no one will ever investigate or likely even know so many people's remains were at that warehouse.”

“When you factor in that it was likely none or very few of the victims were British, it could take decades to work out via DNA who any of the victims were,” Giorgio said, his expression grim. “It would be so easy to miss one or even a dozen of them in the mess left by such a large explosion.”

Excuse me? Can we have a bit of compassion here? I was there! Enda understood, to a point. The men were trying to ensure Enda would be safe going forward. But no matter how he looked at it, he didn't see how going public, presumably about him and Giorgio being alive, was the best way of solving the problem.

“I'm sorry if this is distressing to hear, Enda,” Lord Hades said, as if he was reading Enda's mind. “It did cross my mind that I should talk to Giorgio about this privately. But you are an adult, and this involves your safety as well as my hound's. It is your right to hear any discussions that concern you.”

Which means I can't get angry about the way things are phrased. Enda nodded respectfully and managed to say, "Thank you."

"The way I see it," Lord Hades continued, "is that if news articles start to appear showing photos of the pair of you, with some sensationalized headline..."

"Oh, oh." Consort Ali waved his hand at his mate. "I've got one. I've got it. You could say something like 'Love among the ashes. How an explosion brought us together.' No. No. 'How a massive explosion brought us together.' That would work."

"I am presumed dead," Giorgio said slowly. "How am I going to explain that not only am I still alive, but that I didn't contact the agency immediately telling them I was safe?"

"You don't have to explain anything," Lord Hades started to say, but Consort Ali interrupted him.

"That will be the heart-wrenching hook of the article. About how Enda was obviously unsafe. Some nefarious person had tried to kill him for no reason at all. And our gallant agency operative knew he had to go into hiding to keep his new partner safe, and of course, all details have to be kept confidential because of Enda's safety. I can see it now."

Ali had his hands clasped over his heart. "Our rugged and definitely handsome hero, sitting with a protective arm around his mate, but he'd be called a partner, or better yet fiancé. Enda looking at him adoringly and shyly quoted as saying something like 'I didn't expect to find love at the scariest point of my life.' The tabloids would eat something like that up."

"My mate is a true romantic, but yes, something like that. Obviously, the photos will

be cropped so no identifying information about where you are is evident. There's no point in making things easy for our criminal element," Lord Hades said. "But the positive thing about using the Zeus network will be that if anyone tries to trace the investigative reporter or where you are, then we will be able to track anyone showing an overabundance of interest in where you two are."

Enda wasn't so sure, but then he didn't know anything about Zeus or his network. Giorgio didn't look too sure either, though. "I'm concerned about my agency, sir. Failing to disclose vital information to them, including Enda's whereabouts, could land me in a hidden jail somewhere with no trial or chance to get out. Technically, they are my employer."

"That would just lead to more articles." Consort Ali seemed positively animated. "The conspiracy theorists will love it. Shadow agency seeks to pressure gallant agent – someone who had laid his life on the line for his country – to disclose the whereabouts of his new love. Secret government agency shows no compassion for agent in his bid to save the love of his life. The headlines write themselves, and all the while, pictures of you and Enda will be plastered from one side of the globe to the other."

"I always thought you told us to lay low, sir," Giorgio said. "This sounds like the opposite. There's also the worry of where we'd live while all this is happening. I'm not sure my London house will be secure enough."

"Sometimes, hiding can be a huge part of the problem," Lord Hades said softly. "You have another house in Tuscany, so, you could go there. I would also suggest you contact one or two of your unmated packmates – perhaps Lamont and Damon, as I don't think they have too many commitments right now – and ask them to join you for more security. That way, if you are seen out and about, and you will have to be for this to work, it will just look like you've employed bodyguards. Another logical decision anyone would make if they were in the position your article story is going to

suggest.”

“What do you think, Enda?” Giorgio was watching him closely.

A big part of Enda wanted to tell them all to go fuck the nearest tree, then find somewhere to run and hide and just never show his face in public again.

But then he remembered his phoenix – proud, strong, and finally free.

He thought about how Giorgio and his precious magical beast just wanted him to be safe.

He thought of the things he dreamed of in the bath and how none of that was possible while his father was still after him.

“I think,” he said slowly, running his fingers through his hair, “that if we’re talking about photos, then someone with magical powers should give me bright blue tips in my hair. What do you think? I haven’t had any highlights for years, but if my face is going to be plastered all over publications around the world, then I’m determined to look good in the pictures.”

From Consort Ali’s excited squeal and smiles from Giorgio and Lord Hades, clearly, he’d said the right thing.



“What made you decide to work for the agency?”

Enda’s question broke Giorgio out of his thoughts. It was late – very late that evening, technically, although with the change in time zones, Giorgio was losing track of what day of the week it was. They were in Giorgio’s big and remote estate in Tuscany. Giorgio always loved to get away to his estate when he’d been working in London, and he was confident that it was the best place to use as a base until they dealt with Enda’s father.

But for now, Giorgio’s mind had been consumed with things closer to home. Like the smell of sex in the air, the sight of his mate sprawled out across the sheets. Giorgio had been running his fingers through Enda’s hair. He loved the blue highlights provided by Consort Ali.

“The short answer is that I’ve always liked helping people,” Giorgio said softly. “Although we didn’t often have as many positive outcomes as I would have liked to have seen in the course of doing my job, I know I have saved a lot of genuinely innocent victims over the years, and that meant a lot to me. I suppose that’s why I kept doing it. It’s a bit sobering now, thinking that I was so focused on my own goals, I had inadvertently turned a blind eye to any signs of corruption that might have been in the agency, who I believed was backed by the government.”

“I’m not so much thinking about the politics of the situation,” Enda said. “I don’t know who world leaders are – if you asked me who was the leader of England, I couldn’t tell you, and it’s the same with anywhere else. So, I can honestly say that I don’t understand a lot of it.

“My issue is my father. I can only assume that my father is behind the mess you found when we met. But doesn’t that mean that his empire, his network, or whatever you want to call it, surely must stretch across the globe? It’s easy to imagine that there hasn’t been anywhere that I’ve been that he hasn’t been aware of, except probably here and London, because with luck, he’ll still think I’m dead until the articles come out.”

Giorgio chuckled. “If he does believe you’re dead, then he’ll get one hell of a shock when he has his morning Wheaties and checks the news sites. Incidentally, you look absolutely incredible in those photos.”

Enda ducked his head as if embarrassed. “Thank you. So did you. Very imposing, very agent-like with your dark glasses, your dark suit, and everything else. You looked like you were someone important in a movie.”

Brushing his hand through Enda’s hair again, Giorgio marveled at how confident his mate was in some ways and so shy in others. “When we met, you called me the magical beast, and yet you’re the beauty on my arm.” He sighed. “I can’t wait until you’re completely safe, and we can go anywhere you want to go. You’d be able to learn about the world at your own pace and in your own way.”

“I’m looking forward to that, too.”

“We’ll make it happen. But still, with regard to the agency, I suppose it stems back to when we were created. The sole original purpose of me and my packmates’ creation, our job if you will, was to chase down bad spirits. We were meant to keep the demons and our Master in the Underworld safe, to basically keep the spirits where they were meant to be.

“You know it, you’ve seen for yourself, not everybody is bad in the Underworld. The demons that live and work there, who grow up, who have their families, they’re all

amazing people. But for the longest time as hounds, we got our orders directly from Hades or from Cerberus.”

“Isn’t that the three-headed dog?” Enda asked. “I thought Consort Ali said something about him when we were there.”

“Yes, he is. He was a pup when Lord Hades got him, and Lord Hades kept him for eons. His prime focus now is to guard the large gates of the Underworld. But, some time ago, Lord Hades gave him the chance to shift into human form. I know it was after we’d been allowed on Earth, but I can’t tell you when. Anyhow, before Lord Hades met Consort Ali, Cerberus got it in his head that he should be Lord Hades’ mate.”

“Ooh.” Enda wrinkled his nose. “It doesn’t sound like that went well.”

“I’m embarrassed to say it, but it was a case of the wonderful loyalty known in dogs going completely amuck. It was around the same time Lord Hades met Consort Ali, and Cerberus couldn’t handle that at all. He caused issues on Earth and in the Underworld, and in the end, it was Consort Ali who suggested the confusion Cerberus was feeling came from not being able to handle a shifter nature. He’s back to being happy, guarding the gate in his three-headed dog form.”

“But none of you hellhounds have ever done anything like that, have you?”

“No, of course not. I remember thinking when we heard about it, I think I was visiting Cain at the time, one of my other packmates, and we both agreed that was a bit of a horror story, you know, if we ever did anything wrong, we could have our human status taken away as well.”

“But none of the hellhounds cause any trouble.” Enda raised his head in alarm. “And seven of you now have mates, including you. Consort Ali told me how you all lead

really productive and decent lives and never cause any trouble.”

“Don’t worry, the Master wouldn’t do that, especially to those of us with mates.” Watch what you’re saying, you numbnuts. Enda didn’t need any more stress. Giorgio slowly stroked through Enda’s hair again until Enda laid his head back on the pillow again.

“I’m sorry about that. I was getting a bit off point. I raised the issue of Cerberus, because me and my packmates and I, are also canines...that just happen to only exist in the Underworld. But our loyalty to our master – and then our mates - is just the same as any other cherished dog.

“Well trained?” Enda raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

“Probably, although we were encouraged to show initiative. It’s not like we sat around all day waiting for our master to tell us what to do.” Giorgio grinned. “No lazing in the sun for us.”

“There is no sun in the Underworld.” But Enda was grinning as well, so that was a plus.

“Exactly. But in all that time, all we ever really dealt with, you know, day in, day out, were the spirits of the worst mortals that ever lived. You know, for all that they might protest their innocence and goodness, you should hear them when they face Lord Hades in the courtroom, but there’re no mortals down there - somebody who has died and his spirit has gone to the Underworld - who shouldn’t be there. They all have black marks on their souls, which is what sends them to the Underworld at the point of death.”

“Black marks?” Enda’s head was up again, and he was looking at his arms. “How do we know if we have any?”

“You don’t, you really don’t. You have to do really bad things to end up marking your soul – murder, sexual crimes, financial crimes – real crimes that leave innocent victims in their wake. The point I’m trying to make is that no spirit down there is good or decent, and my packmates and I had to deal with them for thousands of years.”

Clearly, the hair stroking wasn’t as soothing as Giorgio had hoped, so he snuggled down farther on the bed, draping his arm over Enda’s back.

“I’m not saying sometimes it wasn’t fun. Chasing a couple of spirits across the wastelands because they think there’s some road somewhere that’s going to take them back to Earth is a great way to stretch your legs. But when we got to Earth, and you’ve got to remember, too, this was a long time ago, I wanted to do something more for the victims of those people I’d spent thousands of years dealing with.

“There weren’t organizations like the agency then, but there were always small groups of people who tried to maintain order or help those hurt by others. What I will say” - Giorgio leaned closer, brushing a kiss against Enda’s cheek - “is I will never know for sure why I started trying to help people, but I am so glad I did, because two thousand years later I found you, and I’m happy to say that will probably be my last job. Well worth it, in my opinion.”

“You would give up working completely? Is that allowed?” Enda was smiling, though.

“We have free will to do what we like on Earth.” Giorgio let out a contented sigh. “An endless holiday with my lovely mate – I doubt I’ll get bored.”

“It sounds like it might be the safest thing to do.” Enda’s sudden uneasiness twiggled Giorgio through their bond. “Do you really have no idea what the connection might be between my father and your agency?”

“No, although that’s another good reason for not going back, regardless of what happens. An example of me being focused on the good I thought I was doing, without seeing corruption in the very agency I was working for. Not my finest moment.”

“I’m sure my father would’ve come up with something else.”

Unfortunately, there was a good chance Enda’s suspicions were correct. “You’d think I would’ve worked out something was going on while I was there.” Giorgio thought back over the past six months he’d been working. There had been a higher than usual number of jobs and a lot of mistakes... or were they?

“When I look at it,” Giorgio said, just speaking his thoughts out loud. “The issue with Mitchell wasn’t only to do with Mitchell. He was being targeted, yes. Lord Hades confirmed that. There were other signs, though, that I’m only seeing now in hindsight. There were times when the support staff wasn’t there or when only half the support team turned up. I remember there was a case and yes, that was with Mitchell, too, but this was a time when he wasn’t being targeted.”

Giorgio shuddered at the memory. “We’d been sent in. There were twenty or more victims found in a dark, smelly, and very damp basement. It was a sex trafficking ring, and the victims were no more than children. But I got told, as a negotiator, to deal with the people we found in the house above the basement. Idiots sitting around, getting drunk, the room thick with cigar smoke as they played poker.”

“Probably former clients from the boat I was on,” Enda said darkly, but he reached over, caressing Giorgio’s arm. Giorgio wasn’t sure if he was being comforted or if Enda was looking for comfort himself, but either way, it worked.

“I asked Mitchell to let our support team know we had a huge number of victims that needed urgent care. All they were concerned about was secure transport for the men responsible for the crimes. Mitchell sent them pictures, showing the conditions these

victims had been in, and they sent one fucking solitary van.”

Giorgio felt his tension rising, just remembering the state those people had been in and the flagrant disregard for their future shown by the people he and Mitchell had worked for. He inhaled slowly, taking in Enda’s scent, and worked on slowing down his breathing.

“So, yeah, they sent one van to transport twenty-odd people who were scared, injured, and traumatized. According to my superiors, the case was closed. I’d done my job, and that’s what counted, apparently. I complained about it. I got told, ‘Well, you know, resources are tight,’ and ‘We can’t always do what we need to do, so you have to make do with what you’ve got.’ Or the worst thing I got told, and I know that stung at the time, ‘It’s really none of your business. You’ve saved them, leave the rest to us’.

“I remember I walked away from the scene thinking I don’t know if any of those rescued people are going to be safe, and because of the nature of the agency, I’ll never know.”

“I’m sorry, that can’t have been easy for you.”

Enda didn’t say anything else, and Giorgio lay next to his mate, his mind going over countless different cases and seeing them all in a new light. He actually thought Enda had fallen asleep when his mate asked quietly, “You’ve seen a lot of life and death, and...I’m not asking for the secrets of the universe, but do you believe people have a set amount of time to live? Something that is predetermined from when they are born?”

“I’m probably not the right person to ask,” Giorgio said. “I was never born, and I will never die. However, we believe, and there are a lot of people who believe things differently, but we believe that one of the reasons hellhounds were given mates, along

with many of the gods, is because the Fates need more permanent strands in the tapestry of life.

“Part of that belief also states that the Fates are the ones responsible for the length of each person’s thread, so, in that respect, the answer would be yes – that time when a thread is cut is predetermined.”

“Is that all the time? Every person is a specific thread?”

“In my belief, yes.” Giorgio encouraged his mate closer, wrapping his arms around Enda’s back. “What made you ask?”

“Two things, really. I was thinking about what you said about those victims you were worried about and then about the victims at the scene where you found me. If that belief was true, then all of those people who died with me were meant to. Which seems a bit harsh.”

There wasn’t any answer to that, not one that Giorgio could think of anyway. Life, unfortunately, wasn’t always fair, but Enda didn’t need to be reminded of that. From the sounds of it, his whole life had been a classic example. “What’s the other reason” he asked gently.

“If threads are determined at birth” - Enda looked up, watching him from under a wave of blue hair - “then wouldn’t that mean I was already going to live forever from the moment I was born? You said my phoenix meant I wouldn’t die, but I wouldn’t have done anyway because the Fates clearly planned for me to be your mate.”

Shit. Enda was right, but it didn’t seem fair to say so to a man who’d lived under a threat from his father from the moment he saw his mother killed. “You heard Lord Hades say himself that no one knows what the Fates are thinking and why they do what they do. I know I’m really glad you’re in my arms now, and I promise to do



everything in my power to make sure you always will be.”

“Good save.” Enda patted his chest. “What time are your packmates coming tomorrow, or is it today?”

“I have a feeling it will be later today as it’s well after midnight, but don’t worry about them.” Kissing Enda’s forehead, Giorgio yawned and closed his eyes. “My packmates know to make themselves at home. You sleep in as late as you need to. I know I’m going to.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

Enda felt as if he'd suddenly landed on a really slippery slope and was being hurtled down, against his will, with no idea where he would end up and no way of stopping the slide that he was on.

The sensation started when he got up - later than usual as Giorgio had suggested - and found that the two new hellhounds, Lamont and Damon, were already in the kitchen. Giorgio was busy cooking up large piles of scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon.

The two men were a lot like his mate. They were big, nice to look at, and very friendly. Lamont was as tall and broad as Giorgio and had long dark hair caught in a man bun at the base of his neck. He was dressed in a black suit and black shirt. Damon had his hair cut short, shaved on both sides and the back, with just a mop of wavy dark hair on top. He was in jeans and a worn T-shirt, but he promised he was changing before they "went out." A statement that started the butterflies in Enda's stomach fluttering.

Both men happily introduced themselves, and Enda got the sense that their congratulations on the mating were genuine. Although Enda also got the impression that Lamont was harboring some issues of his own, though no one mentioned it or talked about anything heavy as they all caught up with each other. Some of the names mentioned Enda had heard from Giorgio before, others were new, but he focused on picking at his eggs and bacon.

"I suppose we should get down to business," Lamont said when the food was gone and the men were sipping on their coffees. He pulled a sheet of paper out of the inside pocket of his suit jacket. "We have a schedule of events. It seems that Coda has taken to Zeus's idea of using social media as a means to further the spread of targeted

information to a whole new level.”

He laughed, his bright teeth showing against a very tanned skin. Enda had learned that he had been in Egypt when he’d got the call to come and lend a hand to Giorgio, and apparently, as a freelancer, taking some time off wasn’t going to cause him any issues.

“Honestly, I hope like hell they don’t hear me say this, but the gods are about twenty years behind with the idea of social media. It’s like most of them have never heard of it before.”

Damon was chuckling, too. “You know how we’re all meant to keep a low profile. Live a typical life, blending in with everybody else, running our businesses, staying out of trouble, and hope that nobody notices that we can turn furry on a moment’s notice. But no, Coda and Zeus have, well, apparently the orders came from Zeus, but it’s Coda that’s running the operation...but anyhow, they are using this as a test to see whether or not public opinion or information can be sent out through the masses via social media, without any apparent godly interference.”

“Which means, my pretty new packmate,” Lamont said, tapping his piece of paper, “this is a list of places we’re all expected to visit within specified time spans. Giorgio, in his role as the agent protector, and Enda, our sweet and shy victim, whom we all know is a first-class survivor, but we’ve got to go with what the articles were saying about you.

“And then with Damon and myself providing handsome, very picture-perfect security for you so that nobody gets too close to our pretty little one. The only added qualifier to this is we’re meant to provide photo opportunities, which fortunately, in my work as a freelancer, I do know something about.”

Enda realized he couldn’t object. He had agreed to the plan in Lord Hades’ house and

after all the preparation, he could hardly back out. He was pleased with the survivor comment – he didn't want to be pitied by anyone, but he did think that the two new hellhounds were having a little bit too much fun with everything.

“I've not had a lot of experience in being out in crowds and among people recently,” he said. If Lamont and Damon had read the article, then they probably knew that already, but he didn't think it was fair if they weren't warned. “I'm not sure how I'll cope in crowds.”

It annoyed him that he hadn't had a chance to read the article for himself. Giorgio had read it, and apart from rolling his eyes a few times and making a few tutting noises, apparently, it was good enough as far as Giorgio was concerned. Enda would have really liked to have seen what was written about him. He made a mental note to ask Giorgio if he could have access to a phone, a laptop, or something at some stage or other, because he felt like the only mushroom in a crowd full of, well, not daisies, because nobody could call the hellhound daisies, but they were very definitely sturdy trees who kept him in the shade.

“We shouldn't have too much problem with crowds,” Giorgio said. “I've gone over the list, and there's nowhere on there I haven't been before. We're basically going out and about doing what any new couple would do under ideal circumstances. We've got a visit to a couple of museums to make. They want us to be seen sitting out having lunch at an open-air cafe...”

“But the idea” - Lamont broke in - “is that it's not that you are being seen out and about by the right people. Apparently, the idea is that when people realize who you are because of the article being spread by every outlet virtually known to man, then they're going to want to take pictures with you, they're going to want to have those selfies. Selfies get posted to social media accounts, and that's going to make news of where you are spread even faster.”

“But that makes a mockery of anything that was said in the article, doesn’t it?” Enda looked at Giorgio in alarm. “I thought it said we were supposed to be hiding - hiding out because of the agency you were working for and because someone is trying to kill me. This doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s all part of the greater plan,” Damon said, laughing like the whole thing was a joke. Enda was starting to think the hellhound might have been dropped on his head at some point. “The experiment, test, or whatever you want to call it, that Zeus is working on with Lord Hades’ support, and that Coda is implementing, is to see how fast the news of your whereabouts hits the main media, from social media, and how quickly criminal elements and government agencies act on that information.

“Coda is seriously invested in this, which is why instead of enjoying the wonderful tourist spots in Tuscany, we’re starting in Rome. The plan is to draw our marks close, but not too quickly, or it won’t look natural. Criminals and scam artists pride themselves on their contacts, this tactic overwhelms them with information. Coda has given this experiment a week to see how effective it is.”

“What made Coda or Zeus think of social media?” Giorgio asked. “Most of us don’t bother with it.”

“Apparently, it had something to do with Hephaestus.” It was Lamont who answered. “From what we heard, when Hephaestus first met his mate, those fucking cyclops were not happy about it at all. So, they turned to social media, showing pictures of themselves all shirtless - I think people call it a thirst trap or something ridiculous - but they had pictures of themselves and of Hephaestus’ work promoting huge discounts for new clients, and within days, he was swamped with orders.

“The plan, according to the cyclops, was that Hephaestus had such a strong work ethic, he would work all the hours under the sun and more to complete the orders. Landyn would be neglected and probably give up on his mating, probably slinking

away, and life could go back to normal for the cyclops – their end game.”

“That was an absolutely stupid plan,” Damon continued. “Landyn, as a shifter, would never give up on his mate, but when Hephaestus learned about what the cyclops had done, he went through the Paulie app, which in turn got in touch with Coda, asking if all references to his work could be taken off social media.”

“That was hilarious.” Lamont was nodding along. “Coda said yes, because that’s what he does, but he had no idea how many people had shared the posts the cyclops put up. It apparently took ages for all references to those original posts to be removed. So, I think he views this as a bit of an experiment to see how it might work now with deliberately trying to plant information on the social platforms, learning how fast the news get shared and where.”

“So, we’re going to be going out every day for at least a week,” Enda said. A lump of lead started developing in his stomach. “Can we please just remember...?”

“I know, I know,” Damon said. “You’re not used to being out and about, and please believe me. We might sound like we’re making light of this, but while we’re out, nobody is going to get near you except to take those damn selfies, and even then, all of us will be right there with you.”

“It will be all right,” Giorgio said. “Just imagine us as a very visible and very large barrier between you and people who might hound you too much.”

“Hound, huh?” Lamont slapped the table, laughing loudly. “The only person hounding our new packmate is you.”

Giorgio huffed. “Enda, if people ask you questions, just don’t answer them, all right. Nod, smile, make out you don’t understand.”

“I won’t understand.” None of this sounded easy to Enda at all. “I only speak Japanese and English, and maybe three phrases in French and Arabic. We’re in a totally different country.”

“You might be able to understand all languages now you’re mated,” Damon said. “But if you don’t, that’s fine, too. Just do what Giorgio said – smile, nod, or say you don’t speak English.”

“That’s not right.” Lamont couldn’t stop laughing. “It’s don’t speak Italian. But yes, we will hear everything said to you and around you, and if you do need to answer anything, well...you two have a mind link, don’t you?”

Giorgio nodded.

“Well, there you go. It’s all fine. That’s how we’ll all communicate with you. Lamont and I both have a mind link with Giorgio – a pack link, not an intimate one, so, don’t fret about that, little bird. The link you have with Giorgio is different, but between those links we can all talk to each other. If any of us hear something you should respond to, then you’ll hear it through the bond you have with your mate.”

“Hopefully, that won’t even be needed,” Giorgio said. “Face it, we don’t know if this experiment of Coda’s will even work. All you need to do is stick with us, and absolutely under no circumstances do you go off anywhere on your own. Provided we’re with you, I promise you’re going to be safe.”

“Hear, hear,” Damon said, holding up his coffee mug. “We were made to protect, and that’s what we’re here to do. I doubt very much that Giorgio’s going to leave your side anyway. So, let’s get you dressed up in your best duds, have you looking all waif-like with just a hint of sexiness so that you’ll be stunning in the photos - all for Coda’s benefit - and see how fast we can make you a sensation on social media. I’d better get changed, too.”

I'm really not sure this was going to help me at all, Enda thought, as he wondered how quickly he could plead a headache and maybe upset a few of these plans that had apparently been decided for him. He really wasn't keen.

It was only the promise of a life where he and Giorgio could live in peace and relative quiet that was what made Enda decide to do it at all. While his father lurked, doing whatever he was doing, he and Giorgio would never be truly safe, and that wasn't a good foundation to build a future on. It was just as well that Enda was already committed to that hypothetical future because the temptation to go back to bed and bury his head under the covers was really strong.



Giorgio knew that Enda was nervous. That was obvious by the fact that Enda barely spoke at all in the three-and-a-half hours it took to drive from Tuscany to Rome. Lamont and Damon didn't seem to notice anything different. They just chatted among themselves, including Giorgio, as if it hadn't been at least a year since he'd seen them last while in human form. They knew each other that well, they could almost finish each other's sentences. Although they didn't do that too often, which Giorgio was grateful for because he found that annoying, and he was sure Enda would, too.

But Enda sat quietly for the most part, just looking outside, watching out the window at the passing scenery. Although Giorgio had a mind link with him, he had no idea what Enda was thinking. He could only feel the slight tremors of panic that were likely coming from Enda's bird spirit. Being out and about was going to be difficult for him, and Giorgio did understand.

He hoped that when Coda was devising his strategy, his itinerary or whatever else it was that Lamont wanted to call it, that he had taken Enda's shyness and his lack of previous social interaction into account. Running around in skimpy briefs serving drinks to a limited group of entitled assholes on a boat was hardly comparable to coping with the crowds that often populated the tourist spots in Rome.

Enda seemed to brighten up a bit more inside the museum. The Palazzo Colonna, in the center of Rome, had an extensive collection of paintings, art pieces, and even furniture from the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries. The immensely high ceilings and huge rooms probably helped Enda not feel so hemmed in, and with every inch of the building decorated in a baroque style, it was ornate and luxurious and designed to attract the eye.

There was art on every wall and on the ceilings, too. Enda seemed to enjoy the different art styles. Lamont and Damon kept a low running commentary on artists they remembered – apparently, both of them had been in Italy at the time. It helped keep the mood light, and Giorgio was glad that for a couple of hours, Enda could forget everything except the beauty found in every room.

Despite being pleased that Enda seemed to be relaxing, Giorgio had noticed a couple of people giving them more than a second look, and a few of them took out their phones and pointed them in the men's direction. The four men together made a statement and would have done even without the article.

Giorgio wasn't wearing a suit, but his pants and shirt were crisply smart. Lamont and Damon, both in black suits complete with dark sunglasses, walked behind them – playing their part. Enda was the bright bird among the four – his brilliant blue highlights enhanced by the bright lights within the museum.

Enda was the only one wearing jeans, although they were well-fitted – which was a distraction in itself for Giorgio. He'd paired them with a pale pink shirt and a dark blue embroidered waistcoat that Giorgio had zapped up for him. Giorgio got the impression that Enda was buttoning himself up, using his clothes as his form of armor.

"Do you remember that guy?" Lamont gave Damon an elbow to his ribs before pointing at a painting. "Honestly, he was such a fucking self-serving asshole, he seriously thought his shit didn't stink."

"Keep it down, guys," Giorgio warned. "We're in a museum." But he appreciated that his two packmates were doing their best to make the whole situation appear casual and normal.

As for Giorgio, he was struggling with a spot of nerves himself. Every instinct in him,

hound and man alike, wanted to keep Enda safe. Having to parade his mate around like a peacock to reach those ends went against every careful, cautious thing he had done in his life. But Giorgio knew how important the mission was.

Hiding away for the rest of their existence or at least until Enda's father died of natural causes... Giorgio made a mental note to get in touch with Coda and see if he could find out how old that guy actually was. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to just hide away in somewhere like Tuscany for five hundred years until the guy just dropped dead of natural causes – assuming he was paranormal.

And Giorgio would've done that. Enda would've probably accepted those restrictions as well, given how he wanted to keep Giorgio safe. But the problem, in Giorgio's mind, was that Enda's father's behavior was clearly escalating, and that had to be stopped. As much as Giorgio wanted to, he couldn't hide Enda away at the cost of hundreds of other innocent lives being affected by the type of person that Enda's father was. The pile of bodies Giorgio had rescued Enda from wasn't easy to forget, and not knowing why they were all there – all dead – was a nagging mystery Giorgio wanted to solve.

His fear was that so many deaths in one place would suggest there was something else bigger that was about to happen. The weight of the unknown meant the man needed to be found, and Giorgio, in turn, needed Enda to be safe.

The other aspect was closer to home. Enda had been controlled and isolated for most of his life. He deserved the right to play tourist, to go to every country he'd ever wanted to and wander as he pleased. Hiding in Tuscany or any other place was going to render him a prisoner just as he'd been before, and that just wasn't right.

There weren't too many other visitors at the museum, and Lamont and Damon did a really good job of making sure that nobody came near them. At least Enda seemed distracted for the few hours they stayed there.

Giorgio was congratulating himself about that as they finally finished the tour, and Enda mentioned he was hungry. Lamont was looking at his list again, letting them know it was only a five minute walk to where they were meant to get lunch. When all of a sudden Damon yelled, “What the fuck?”

Grabbing Enda and pulling him to his side, Giorgio’s eyes widened as suddenly, at least twenty people all started to converge on them, screaming Enda’s name.

“Oh, my goodness, it’s you.”

“He’s so cute.”

“Please, please can I have a picture?”

“Don’t they make such a cute couple...”

It was like a flock of hungry birds descending on a bag of seeds. But it wasn’t birds, it was a huge crowd of young people with bright, fresh faces and phones all held up, anxious to take a picture. They seemed so excited to see him and Enda. Every instinct was screaming at Giorgio to wrap his arms around his mate and translocate them both to safety. But he couldn’t.

“I think I’m going to faint,” Enda whispered. “This is too much, far too much.”

“It’s all right, we can cope with this,” Lamont said as he and Damon moved forward, but Giorgio already knew Lamont wasn’t so sure they could, and he was having similar doubts.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

“Never again.” Lamont stormed into the hotel suite, tugging out his phone and tapping on the screen angrily. “Coda? Coda, is that you? Did you see that? Were you watching that chaos on his majesty’s big fancy screens? Did you see the mess you just caused? Never again, do you hear me? That was carnage, utter and absolute carnage...”

Damon was yelling just as loudly. “That shit show was an absolute nightmare. You know we can’t hurt anybody, how we have to be careful with people around us. But did you bloody see all that? They were swarming like a flock of blooming locusts wanting pictures, tugging at him, touching him, and trying to get so close it was like they wanted to wear his skin. Enda was supposed to be safe, he was supposed to be seen out and about in a controlled environment designed to keep him safe. There were three fucking hellhounds there and we could not stop those people and why? Why was it?”

Lamont cut in. “I’ll tell you why, because every single one of those people were so freaking sweet. They were excited, being nice, shoving phones in our faces, flashes going off everywhere, people yelling and talking all over each other, we could barely hear ourselves think. How was that a controlled experiment? There was nothing controlled about that at all. There were at least fifty people in that crowd. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking I only organized twenty people.” The calm, measured tones from Coda could clearly be heard in the room. “I arranged for twenty people to attend to Enda, notice him, take pictures with their phones and post them to the social medias. I don’t know where the other ones came from. That was highly irregular and unexpected.”

“The other ones came, you dickhead,” Lamont yelled, “from the fact that as soon as people saw there was a crowd gathering, and people had their phones out, and other people were yelling and getting all excited, they thought, oh, celebrity sighting or whatever it is they do, and more and more people came. We were in the middle of Rome. What did you expect? That place is crawling with tourists.”

“I did ensure that I chose a day in the museum that wasn’t going to be overly busy. I trust Enda had a good time there.”

“How would I know?” Lamont was tugging at his hair. “I haven’t had a chance to ask. The poor guy was petrified, he was ready to faint, and all these people come swarming him, wanting to touch his clothes and stroke his hair, and Damon and I were busy flicking them off, and Giorgio was glowering like crazy, but it wasn’t like he can do anything else. We were in public, everybody was recording absolutely everything that was going on. Yes, yes, yes, I know that was the point of the experiment, but for fuck’s sake, Coda, why couldn’t this have been more controlled?”

“You don’t need to listen to all that,” Giorgio murmured as Enda found himself being led into a large and elegantly furnished bedroom. Enda’s heart was still racing, and he felt as if he’d run a marathon. They did have to run in the end, when the crowd got too big – Giorgio even picked Enda up at one point as they headed for the nearest hotel. Giorgio must have flashed a credit card or done something, or maybe it was the mysterious Coda, but within a minute, they had a suite, and they were able to escape the people who were happily following them.

Enda needed to process. The whole situation was so bizarre. Everybody seemed so happy to see him, and while it was fun, or it would have been if the whole situation wasn’t so life-threatening, it was all completely overwhelming. Maybe if he’d just been able to stop for five seconds and take a breath, it wouldn’t have been so bad. But one thing was clear. The hellhounds totally lost control of the situation. There was one point there that Enda thought he was going to be knocked down.

“Are you all right?” Giorgio was cupping his face with his hands, staring down into his eyes, and Enda was sure some of his agitation must have been going through their bond. “Tell me, are you all right? Do you feel okay? Can I get you anything at all? A drink? Something to eat? Do you just need to sit down for a moment, peace and quiet? What do you need?”

Enda rubbed the top of his head as it started to ache. “I need you to stop trying to act like a one-man crowd bombarding me with questions,” he said calmly. “That was far more chaotic than either of us expected, but I need you to calm down.” He could still hear Lamont and Damon yelling in the other room and assumed that Coda was getting an earful. “It would help to just have a moment to stop and breathe.”

“I’ve got you,” Giorgio said, wrapping him up in his arms, and Enda leaned against his chest gratefully. Giorgio’s heart was racing faster than normal, but the longer they hugged, Enda could feel it slowing down, and that, in turn, helped him.

The whole thing had been bedlam. Enda had no idea how long they’d been trapped by all those people, but it felt like a lifetime – a frenzy of noise, flashing lights, and people yelling at him.

For Enda, who had spent his whole life completely ignored or just treated like a servant, to have people around him who were so excited to see him was hard to accept. Most of the people there were so lovely, and it was easy for Enda to believe they were truly thrilled to see him, get a selfie with him, and just be near him for a moment. How much of it was real, Enda had no idea, but it was a heady feeling.

Enda had only heard snatches of the conversation and probably understood even less. Although some people spoke English, other people were speaking Italian. A sprinkling of French and German could be heard in the crowd as well. Enda could pick out the different tones and accents, but it was really, really difficult to make sense of anything that had gone on.

“I’m sure nobody there wanted to hurt me,” he said, his breath rippling across Giorgio’s shirt. “Although I did think a couple of times there I was going to fall over as people got excited and started shoving each other.”

“Yes, well, that’s...I’ve got no excuse,” Giorgio said. “I’m just so sorry. You’d think we’d be able to handle something like that. It was just a few people, for goodness’ sake, but then more and more people kept coming. I bet they were attracted by your hair.” Giorgio stroked down his hair as Enda sighed.

“So, it was my hair.” Enda touched his blue locks. “I really love it but if you want to change it back to its normal color...”

“No, no,” Giorgio said. “I was just teasing – badly, I might add. It’s got nothing to do with your hair, although I’m sure it’s definitely got something to do with how cute you are. Even if those people didn’t recognize you from the article, and I could tell some of them didn’t, they still thought that you were some form of anime star or something like that. Maybe they thought you were in a boy band.”

“Do I even want to know what that is?” Enda asked.

Giorgio shook his head and chuckled softly. “No, probably not, unless you can sing and were planning a career as a pop star. But yeah, I am sorry. I’m truly sorry. I thought we would have a better control over the situation than that. Look, let me order some room service. We’ll have our lunch here, and then maybe Coda, or Lamont and Damon, can come up with another plan.”

Somehow Enda didn’t think that involved going home and locking the doors. Nodding, he said with more cheer than he felt, “I’ll just pop into the bathroom and take a moment. I’ll be fine, honest. Go on back out to your friends. It’ll be all right. I’m not going anywhere. I’m just in the bathroom. I just need five minutes.”



Giorgio seemed reluctant to leave him, but in that moment, Enda needed space. A space where there were no people, no emotions, no expectations, no anything else. Just the space to breathe. If that's my first time having anything to do with social media, he thought as he made his way to the bathroom, I don't think I'll be setting up any accounts of my own any time soon.

The bathroom was beautifully laid out, with everything a person might need. Enda looked longingly at the shower. So many people had clutched at his clothes, stroking them and even putting their arms around him - he didn't like it. But Enda was still feeling antsy, and he didn't want to be naked in a strange place. Besides, he knew that Giorgio was worried about him.

Enda quickly did what he had to do and then washed his face and flicked at his hair. This was probably the cutest I've ever looked , he thought glumly, turning to one side and making faces at his reflection. Photo-cute perhaps, but yeah, fame's not for me . His heart beat faster, just thinking about it.

Sitting down on the toilet lid, Enda focused on his breathing.

Inhale and hold for the count of three.

Exhale, hold, and count to three again.

Inhale. Hold. Count.

Exhale. Hold. Count.

As his breathing slowed, Enda let the tensions ease from his shoulders, from his stomach, keeping his breathing steady as he systematically relaxed his whole body until his legs stopped shaking.

This is only day one , he thought. How on Earth am I going to get through a week like this? Maybe we should just send my father our address and let him come. To hell with all this subterfuge , which really didn't feel like subterfuge to Enda at all.

It's not for much longer , he tried to console himself. Enda always believed he could get through anything if he knew there was an end date – real or imagined.

It's just for a week. I can handle a week. Enda didn't want to let down his mate or his mate's friends, but he could see a lot of self-talk in his future. It didn't help that Lamont and Damon were as shaken as Giorgio had been.

Enda wandered back through the bedroom and stopped for a moment, opening the bedroom door quietly. He could hear the other three men. Their voices weren't as raised, but they were still upset about what had happened.

"I can't believe it. I genuinely can't believe we got put in that mess." Damon didn't sound any happier than he had before. "For goodness' sake, I've raced cars for a living and none of the paparazzi ever acts like that lot. What on Earth is going on? What did Coda say?"

"I've been trying to find the post that Coda said he put on social media," Lamont said. Enda could see him fiddling with his phone. "I can't see anything, I can't find anything at all. For all I know, Coda just sent subliminal messages to these people to suddenly be in the vicinity of Rome today. I've got no idea."

"The thing is, we can't keep doing this," Giorgio said. "Enda's strong, and he's doing so well, but he's still in a fragile state. He doesn't need to be swamped by people every time we go anywhere. Isn't there any way we can change Coda or Zeus's mind?"

"Apparently not," Lamont said grimly. "I feel what you're saying. I'm worried about

our new packmate, too. But the experiment's already underway, and Coda is determined to see this through. I mean, I can understand why. You heard him going on about how much of a benefit this might be to every other paranormal there is, but for fuck's sake, who knew a bunch of teenage girls could be so freaking lethal."

"Yeah, and they were very fond of squeezing our biceps and things like that, too," Damon grumbled, rotating his shoulder. "I'm sure I'm going to get bruises. Some of those girls had really long fingernails."

"It wasn't just the girls," Lamont said. "Some of those guys were freaking very handsy as well, wanting to know if I carried a gun and you know, did I have handcuffs? I mean, what is wrong with these people?"

There was something about the scene that tickled Enda's funny bone. The men were all big, competent, and more than twice the size of anyone in the crowd who'd mobbed them. Hearing them grumbling about long fingernails and having their biceps squeezed put everything in perspective for Enda in that moment. He'd been scared, overwhelmed, and yes, terrified at times, but he had good reason. To know the others were just as rattled settled something deep inside of him.

He was still chuckling as he wandered into the living space, heading for a chair.

"Did you think of something funny?" Giorgio asked, although Enda could see that he was pleased that Enda was no longer visibly upset.

"You can't see how funny this all is?" That just made Enda laugh even harder. "All three of you are hellhounds. That name alone has been feared by all across the ages. You have spent thousands of years chasing spirits and protecting the good people of the Underworld. Then you came to Earth, where you've all been very competently building your businesses and living your lives and doing what you needed to do. The strongest of your kind – the strongest shifter anywhere, likely the strongest

paranormals, and you got run off by a bunch of teenagers.

“Can you imagine what it’s going to be like when they find out at one of Consort Ali’s Sunday dinners? How three hellhounds couldn’t control the enthusiasm and excitement of a group of young teenagers, men and women, who all just wanted to take a selfie? I think that’s hilarious, and I bet Consort Ali and the others will too.”

He sank into a chair, covering his face with his hands. He couldn’t stop laughing. There might have been a bit of hysteria in there as well, but it was mostly laughter.

After a moment, he heard Lamont groan, and then he and Damon were laughing, too. And while Giorgio didn’t join in, Enda could feel through their bond that he was very proud of the way Enda was handling himself. That was going to have to do for now. The hug Giorgio gave him and the arrival of food helped, too.

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One day morphed into the next and then into the next. By the third day Giorgio was starting to feel more comfortable with the routine, although what they were doing and why was still troubling. Enda had his nightmare – the details of which he still wouldn't share – the previous two nights and his lack of sleep was starting to show.

In accordance with Coda's wishes, they were seen out having lunch at open-air cafes and having supposedly romantic dinners at various restaurants. In between meals, they visited more museums, art galleries, markets, and historic places. In other words, for all intents and purposes, they were seen to be enjoying a honeymoon experience all the while shadowed by two large bodyguards.

Lamont and Damon were learning to cope with the crowds of youngsters that clamored to take their pictures. Giorgio could see how plastic Enda's smile was getting, and it broke Giorgio's heart. But despite the circles getting blacker and darker under Enda's eyes, he kept going, and Giorgio had to respect that.

It still wasn't easy, constantly being recognized, constantly being photographed, and the constant questions were hugely frustrating. Enda coped with it as best he could, and Giorgio was glad of the crowds in a way because it meant that anyone's more persistent forms of questioning could be ignored in the noise made by everyone else.

There was one disconcerting incident, but that involved Giorgio rather than Enda. They had just taken a load of selfies on the second day, and then Lamont and Damon asked the crowd to please give them time to eat. Some of the more curious ones were across the road, probably videoing Giorgio's and Enda's interactions, but at least they weren't crowding the table.

Lunch was almost finished when Damon growled. It was a low sound that only Giorgio and Lamont could hear. Two men, human, dressed in black suits that looked as out of place as Lamont's and Damon's did, blocked the sun, casting a long shadow over the table. Enda immediately froze, putting down his knife and fork, and Giorgio bristled.

"George Canin?" One of the men flipped up a badge and then just as quickly pocketed it before Giorgio could even see what agency it related to. "We'd like you to come with us."

Enda whimpered, the tiniest of sounds that the two men likely didn't hear, but Giorgio did, and it infuriated him. "I have no reason to go with you," he said firmly. "Me, my partner, and friends are enjoying lunch, if you don't mind."

"We're trying to do this without incident." The second man glanced around, likely noticing the number of phones pointed in their direction. "You're being arrested for going AWOL. I'm afraid we have to insist."

Giorgio deliberately laughed – which wasn't easy when Enda's hand was digging into his leg as if he was petrified the men would take him. "I'm not in the military, so, I can hardly be AWOL. And in fact, given I was left to die during my last job with my previous employer, I have more than enough reasons to have quit without notice, don't you agree? Which again is not going AWOL and is not illegal. I suggest you leave before my partner finishes his coffee."

"His coffee? What the hell? What happens then?" the first man asked.

"There're at least twenty social media influencers over by the fountain," Lamont drawled, his accent completely fake as he leaned back in his chair and lifted his sunglasses to rest on his head, showing his teeth. "They're just waiting for their chance to take a selfie with the man who escaped death and is even now being

hounded by the men in black.” His look up and down at the men’s suits was deliberate. “Those who seek to spirit him away for some random conspiracy reason.”

“We’re here for George Canin,” the second man protested, his cheeks flushed. Lamont was a good looking guy, and it was unlikely the man had been so openly ogled before. “That has nothing to do with anyone else at this table.”

Giorgio stood up, keeping hold of Enda’s hand as he stood up, too. He noticed the sudden Adam’s apple bobs as the two men realized how big he was. Their anxiety increased as Lamont and Damon stood up, too.

“Check your records,” Giorgio said with a growl. “The last time George Canin was seen by anyone connected to the agency he worked for, he was heading into an abandoned warehouse. Two minutes after entering, the warehouse exploded. George Canin died that day. The last time I checked employment law, dying was a perfectly valid reason for quitting a job without notice. It’s not like I’m suing them for my last month’s salary and holiday pay. Now, if you’ll excuse us.”

“But you’re not dead, and people in high places have got questions for you. For fuck’s sake, you’re standing right here, and your face has been plastered all over social media. Those are not the actions of a dead man.” The first man’s face had gone bright red.

“You must be thinking of someone else.” Moving Enda around so Giorgio was between him and the agents, he grinned. “I suggest you move out of the way.”

“If you touch us, we have reason to take you in.” The second man might have thought he was being clever.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” It was time to put those crowds who kept wanting their social media content to good use. Putting his thumb and forefinger against his

lips, Giorgio blew a loud whistle. “Enda’s just finished lunch, and we’re leaving shortly,” he called out as people all around the area looked up. “If anyone else wanted selfies, you’d better get them now.”

“Yes!” Screams and excited yells filled the air as people started running in their direction. Within twenty seconds, Giorgio and his friends were completely surrounded. The two men hovered, trying to stay close, until one of the influencers shoved a camera in the first man’s face and asked, “Are you trying to save Enda, too? Isn’t it exciting? Can I get your picture?”

“You’ll have to answer questions sooner or later,” the first man yelled at Giorgio as he and his companion quickly backed away. “No pictures. I didn’t agree to any pictures. Put those damn phones away.” Within a minute, they were in a black town car and were driven away at speed.

“I’m sorry,” Giorgio whispered to his mate, as their friendly crowd jostled each other trying to get the best shot.

Enda looked up and smiled, relief flowing through their bond. And more than one person went, “Aww, so cute together.” So, Giorgio smiled, too.

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Coda was in raptures over the data that he was getting. Enda’s and Giorgio’s images – mostly Enda’s –were being spread far and wide at an extremely rapid pace. By the end of day three there was no way anyone who had access to social media or news outlets in any way, shape, or form, was going to miss the tragic story of Enda and how somebody was trying to kill him and how the agency man who saved him was now in danger of losing his freedom, all because he was trying to save an innocent victim. Giorgio knew how much Enda hated that word, but when it came to news outlets, apparently that was a word that sold.



He tried to protect Enda from it all as best he could. He and the other two hellhounds both agreed not to have the television on anywhere they were staying, and Giorgio refused to look at social media at all. His only focus was his mate's safety, and that included his mental health. Enda's nightmares were signal enough that his mate was struggling.

Lamont was getting updates from Coda every day. The man was positively bubbling with excitement. He couldn't believe how fast information was spreading. But when Lamont asked him, as he did every day, if there'd been any news about the people who were trying to track them down, Coda would start talking about social media statistics instead of the actual crux of why they were doing what they were doing.

Which was why, when they were having lunch on the fourth day, Giorgio said to Lamont and Damon, "I think we'll make this the last stop, eh? It's time to head home."

Lamont pulled out his list. The piece of paper was now looking decidedly ragged and torn from all the folding and stuffing in pockets it had gone through. "We've still got two more events this afternoon, and then you've got another three tomorrow," he said. "Are you sure you want to knock this on the head now?"

Giorgio looked at Enda, who was picking at his food, not even paying attention to the conversation. His shoulders were slumped, the area under his eyes looked as though he'd been punched, and even his bright blue highlights looked limp and sad. "Yep, yes, I do."

Giorgio leaned his elbows on the table, keeping his voice low. "In all of this, all Coda had to do was give us the information on Enda's father, everything that the Zeus network had. Then we could have tracked him, we could have found him ourselves, and we could have dealt with this privately."

“But Coda...” Damon started to say.

Giorgio cut him off. “I understand what Coda’s doing, I understand why Lord Zeus is on board with this, and I understand why Lord Hades suggested it. But they are thinking about all paranormals. My only focus is my mate’s safety. This isn’t doing any of us any good, and all we are doing is wasting time and giving that man more time to cook up whatever scheme he’s got planned next.”

“Have you thought about trying to get information about this from the other direction?” Lamont asked. “Surely if you can find out who in that shadow agency of yours approved you going into that job in the first place...”

“That was my handler, Duncan Rodin.” Giorgio frowned. “I got the impression from Lord Hades that he wasn’t responsible. He was just bad at his job because he couldn’t keep his pants zipped up.”

“That could be a ruse,” Damon pointed out. “We know someone there must be connected in some way to Enda’s father. Is there anyone in the agency you can trust? Perhaps get them to do some digging for us?”

“Not really – just the nature of the job meant we didn’t have contact with each other very often. It wouldn’t be easy anyway, given that my face is plastered all over the internet showing I’m in Italy. It’s not like I can translocate back and have a quick chat with anybody. That would just raise more questions.”

“Email. Message apps?” Lamont suggested.

Giorgio shook his head. “If I open up any form of communication, they are going to be trying to track me through them. If they try that and fail thanks to our network provider, then that raises more red flags.”

“Oh, yeah, that could be awkward.” Lamont nodded. “I’ve done a lot of investigative stories over the years, and I’ll tell you, man, when agencies and people in power don’t know what’s going on, or they think there’s something the slightest bit hinky about whatever’s going on, they’ll just bury you in a cell so deep and they’ll keep you there until the world makes sense to them again. At the moment none of this and what we’re doing is making sense. Agreed?”

“That’s one thing I can agree with you on,” Giorgio said. “In the meantime, we’re all running ourselves ragged. We’re all tired. We’ve all had enough. I’m sure you have, haven’t you, Enda?”

Enda looked up. His face was pale. Damon had actually suggested he wear makeup that morning, and Enda refused. “I’m sure the tragic look will suit the photos,” he’d said at the time, but there was no spark there. There was no life. While Giorgio knew that Enda knew why they were all doing what they were doing, he also knew it was Enda who was suffering the most.

“Everything in my body is telling me we need to get back home,” he said, catching Enda’s eyes. “What do you think?”

“What about finding my father?” Enda’s voice was barely louder than a whisper.

“If he’s that damn clever,” Giorgio said firmly, “then he’ll find us. That’s the whole point of this freaking shit show. If he can’t track us down now, after three days of you being paraded around like an offering, then he’s hardly the criminal mastermind we’re making him out to be.”

Enda nodded just the once, but that was enough for Giorgio to pull out his phone.

“Text me Coda’s number will you? I’m letting him know that the afternoon is canceled,” he said to Lamont.

“Better you than me,” Lamont said. “Any time I try to talk to him, I can barely get a word in edgeways.” Seconds later, Giorgio heard the ping on his phone letting him know he had received the number from Lamont. “As I said, Coda is really invested in this social media experiment.”

“It could be a good time to remind him that there’s something a bit more important at play here, and maybe it was about time he started helping us with that instead. It’s not like I’m asking for much, maybe just some basic information on who the hell Enda’s father is – paranormal type, age, where he typically lives, and what he does. The sort of information that Coda probably has at his fingertips.”

Just thinking about the hoops they’d been jumping through over the past few days was infuriating when Giorgio realized how simple Coda could’ve made things for them. “This whole thing could’ve been over and sorted by now.”

“You did agree to do all this,” Damon pointed out. “When Lord Hades suggested it, you agreed.”

Giorgio looked over at his pack mate. “When was the last time you told our Lord and Master no?” He shook his head. “I agreed to this because Coda was meant to be back-tracing people who were trying to track us.”

“And the only information we get instead is how many likes various influencers got and clothing suggestions for Enda so he could fit the image Coda is trying to project.” Lamont let out a long huff. “It’s definitely a shit show.”

“Yep, and one thing I have learned since working among humans is…”

Giorgio heard a high pitched whine just before he felt the impact. His eyes widened as his shirt sleeve had a rip in it, and blood was seeping from the long scratch left on his arm. All around him people were screaming, and diving for cover, having heard

the shot.

“Holy shit.” Damon grabbed Giorgio and pulled him under the table while Lamont did the same to Enda. “Where the hell did that come from?”

But it was Enda’s face that held Giorgio’s attention. It was as if he could see the flames of Enda’s phoenix. “Call Coda immediately,” he snapped at Lamont. “Now. Tell him we need a containment ward so we can translocate.”

“It’s barely a scratch,” Lamont grumbled as he pulled out the phone he had just put away.

“It’s not my arm I’m worried about.” Giorgio could see the tension in his mate reach a nuclear level. “My mate’s about to shift and I don’t think there’s a damn thing I can do to stop it. Enda, you need to calm down, you need to keep control.”

Flinging his head back, Enda screamed. To the uninitiated, someone would imagine it was a very human Enda wailing with grief over their mate being shot. But Giorgio knew better, and so did his packmates. The phoenix was pissed off.

“Go,” Lamont said. “You’re cleared to go now.”

“See what you can find. I’ll catch up with you in the wastelands.” Giorgio could feel the phoenix’s flames as he translocated them both back to the Underworld.

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“Hey, are you doing okay? You’re not upset about what Lord Hades said, are you?”

Enda glanced up at his mate. He was feeling a lot of things, but Lord Hades’ lecture was way down the bottom of the list of things he was thinking about. The god had been right. Enda should’ve been able to control his shift better, despite it being only the second time his phoenix had ever been free. Personally, Enda thought seeing his mate get shot was justification enough, but he knew that was a weak excuse.

They were back in Giorgio’s house in Tuscany. Lamont and Damon had been hoping to track down the shooter, but there was no need. The man had already been detained by police. “We’d been keeping an eye on your party because your client seems to attract large crowds,” one of the officers had told Lamont. “Just as well we were here, right?”

“Definitely. Thank you.” Lamont had agreed because he couldn’t do much else. “Did he give any indication what his motives were, or if he was paid...?”

“That guy won’t be saying anything,” the officer confided. “He’s completely mute.”

“He’s refusing to talk?” Damon had asked.

But the officer shook his head. “He can’t talk. Somewhere along the line, your shooter lost more than two-thirds of his tongue.”

Enda had told Giorgio he was going to go and have a nap after he heard that, reassuring his mate he’d be fine on his own and leaving the three men to talk among themselves. He had thinking to do.

It was a lot easier in a way that Giorgio was being distracted by his packmates because it gave Enda a chance to think about their situation from a totally different angle.

He was relieved that because of the shooting, Coda had agreed to shut his social media experiment down, not that Enda was inclined to go out anytime soon anyway – not for crowds to take photos of him.

Coda had also been severely reprimanded by both Lord Hades and Lord Zeus, including a stern missive from Lord Hades personally that told him to stop focusing on social media numbers and provide the information that the experiment was supposed to gain in the first place - namely the name and contact details of anyone who might be trying to gain their contact information.

Apparently, Coda hadn't done anything about that, so caught up with the experiment and its apparent success. But the entire team of Zeus's godly network was apparently working on it now. Unfortunately, because of the success of the social media experiment, they had absolutely reams of information to go through. They'd have to check every comment, they had to check back on people's social media accounts, and while Enda didn't have much of a working knowledge on how those accounts worked, he could imagine it was something that was going to take a lot of time, even with godly resources.

Which means we need to think of something else , Enda decided. Giorgio and his friends could laugh off getting shot like it was just another day, but Enda didn't think his heart could take it, seeing his protector hurt again and knowing it was partially his fault.

Enda hadn't just been quiet because he was being anti-social. He had already spent numerous hours trying to remember anything he could about his father from back when he was a child.

Unfortunately, the more Enda thought about it, the more he realized – in hindsight, which was never much good – that it was as if his father deliberately made it really difficult for Enda to get to know him.

In the first ten years, his father had barely spent more than ten minutes with him at any one time. When Enda was young, there was also a language barrier, as his father only spoke English and Enda's first language was Japanese. Enda's understanding of English had improved drastically in his teenage years, but that was after his father had killed his mother. My grandmother insisted on me learning, and Enda never knew why.

Then there were the various houses Enda visited in America as a kid. Again, it was as if his father had deliberately made sure Enda would never learn anything about the man who'd contributed half his genetics. New house every visit, new staff, not even the furniture was the same. Curled up on a bed in Tuscany, Enda realized his father had been deliberately trying to keep who he was and where he truly lived hidden.

Thinking back on it, Enda figured there was a good chance that the moment he'd been put on the plane to go back to Japan, the house that he'd been staying in was probably emptied out, sold off, or whatever it was his father did. I wonder if I'd ever been in one of his true homes at all.

The only people who could've possibly told him more about the man were his mother and grandmother. Hour after hour, Enda racked his brain trying to remember if there was anything his mother or grandmother said about him in the years when he was growing up.

When he was in America, his father never talked about his mother except for that one incident that led to her death. When he was in Japan, it was as if his mother was determined not to talk about his father, either. She was always glad to see Enda when he got home, greeting him with hugs and chatting about how much he'd grown. But



she never asked what he did or where he'd been while he was away. Life would go on as it normally had in Japan.

After his mother died, Enda had been completely heartbroken, and his grandmother was terrified. He still remembered the frantic packing, the hurried move, and how she started making it almost impossible for him to go out anywhere alone.

It's almost as if she was scared that I'd be taken, Enda thought. But then, that didn't make sense, because when two men did appear at the doorstep just after he turned eighteen, she didn't warn him about anything and just let him go. But why? What did those men say to her?

It was frustrating, the not knowing. It was easy for Enda to think now of all the opportunities he'd lost during his childhood to learn more about his father. But given the way his life had gone, Enda had never thought that the identity of his father was important until he realized his father was the man responsible for the pile of bodies he'd been buried in.

"I'm not sure I can sleep," Enda said to Giorgio, who was still waiting for him to answer. "I've got a lot on my mind and Lord Hades was perfectly right in what he said. I should have been more careful."

"My scratch has completely healed," Giorgio said, stripping off his shirt and climbing up on the bed, wrapping his arm around Enda's waist. "Hellhounds will heal from things really quickly, and there is nothing that can kill me. I just might hurt for a while, but I barely felt that piddly bullet at all."

He laughed as if he was joking, and Enda glared at him. "I don't find that funny," he said firmly.

"No, you're right." Giorgio's face immediately turned serious. "It's not a joke, and

I'm sorry. It's just, I'm trying to lighten the mood and not doing a very good job. You seem shut off, even through our bond. Talk to me, Enda, maybe I can help."

Sighing, Enda said, "I'm trying to remember anything I can about my father. Knowing what he looks or sounds like doesn't help us find him or if there was anyone who might have information about him and the night my mother died. She was murdered. It was my father, as you already know."

"Can you tell me about it?"

Enda closed his eyes. He'd never planned to say anything to anyone. He hadn't even talked to his grandmother about it, although she had to have known. But considering that his nightmares had awoken Giorgio two nights in a row, it was probably only fair to tell him.

"I see it in my nightmares," he said in a low voice. "My mother was tied to a chair. She had a dirty rag stuffed in her mouth and she couldn't move. It was at night. My father used a flamethrower and killed her that way. All I can remember" - Enda's voice caught on a sob - "was the smell of burnt flesh and the way the wooden chair that she was sitting on crumbled once the flame stopped. He couldn't see me. There was no way he could've seen me. I was hiding in the closet. But after he'd cursed my mother to hell, he said he would come back for her offspring. He can't have seen me, but he must've done. I still don't know why he did it. The words he said didn't make sense. I don't know. I just don't know!"

"It's all right," Giorgio soothed. "I promise, it's all right. You don't have to know. The workers up in Zeus's godly network will find something soon. I mean, what's the point of being related to gods if we can't use them for something?"

But Enda was already shaking his head. "I don't know that they can. Do you remember what I told you about the name of the boat?"

Giorgio nodded. “The Chameleon.”

“Exactly, and what does a chameleon do? A chameleon blends in. It changes to suit its surroundings. That’s what my father’s been doing all these years. I don’t think he can be found unless he wants to be.”

“It would help if we had a surname for him,” Giorgio said. “I’m assuming that Cochrane isn’t his name. Was it your mother’s?”

“Yes, no, I’m not sure. It was just the name my grandmother used to enroll me in school. It’s not a Japanese name, but I’m sure my mother never married. She lived with her mother when I was born. That’s how I was raised. My mother and grandmother were in one house in Japan, and my father was in many houses all over North America. I don’t think any of them were his home, but to me, that was my normal. It was years before I realized that wasn’t how families worked.

“When I was in school in Japan, I would hear comments from an occasional kid, rude things about my mother having a child with a foreigner...I’m not explaining this very well. They treated it like it was a slur on me, but for me, it was normal.”

“It’s fine, you’re doing great,” Giorgio said. Then he chuckled. “It’s a shame your mother was a good person, otherwise we could’ve talked to her in the Underworld. But I’m sure her spirit isn’t there, or Lord Hades would’ve said something.”

Enda didn’t have the bandwidth to contemplate talking to people after they died. “My mother was a very good person,” he said firmly. “All she ever did was try and keep me safe, and when she couldn’t, my grandmother did her best after that.”

Giorgio brushed a kiss on Enda’s shoulder. “Can you think back to what happened just after your mother was killed? I know it was a tragic time for you, but she would’ve had papers, wouldn’t she? A passport, birth certificate, things like that. Do

you know what happened to them? Did you have any other family?"

Enda shook his head. "This is where my brain is so confused. My mother was burned in a sleep-out, out the back of the house where we lived. There were flames...but the closet didn't burn...did the house burn down? Why did I think that it did?"

It was like his brain was covered in fog, offering only teasing glimpses of a past Enda struggled to remember. "The house couldn't have burned down because I remember my grandmother packing our things. She wouldn't do that if the house was burning. I remember she was frantic, throwing things into boxes, determined we had to leave the house that night. Father wasn't there... Where did he go? Why didn't he kill me and my grandmother, too? It doesn't make sense. There're so many gaps in my memory. Why can't I remember?"

Giorgio's arms were like a wall around him, holding him tight against his chest, but his tone was low and kind. "Enda, you were a kid, just ten years old. You'd just witnessed your father commit the most heinous act a person could do. It's totally understandable that you would have forgotten specific details from that time."

"But those details could be the important ones now." Enda's mind was working overtime trying to remember every aspect of his childhood and, in particular, what happened when his mother was killed.

"I distinctly remember my grandmother packing. Did Father talk to her first? I don't know. I remember my mother's body burning – the heat of the flames and the way the chair collapsed. The floor was wooden. Why didn't the building burn down? And it was right by the house, and that was wood, too, so, why didn't the house burn down? Why was it only my mother and that chair that burned?"

"You said you thought your father was at least part mage. He could've used magic to stop the wood from burning," Giorgio suggested. "If the houses where you lived were

all close together, then he might have given himself more time to get away by confining the flames to...one area.”

“Maybe.” Enda didn’t even remember seeing his father... Did I watch him leave the room, or do I only think he did? He was talking about her giving life to...to me. Why did he see me every year for ten years if he hated me or didn’t want me?

“Something might have happened when you were ten years old – something you weren’t aware of or have forgotten. You’re projecting through our bond.” Giorgio added with a smile. “I’m not sure what the developmental phases of a phoenix are, but I could probably ask the Paulie App or Coda...”

“No.” Enda shook his head wildly. “I don’t want anything to do with any of the godly network unless they’re prepared to give us useful answers.” He wasn’t going to forget seeing Giorgio getting shot at in a hurry.

“All right, think about your grandmother packing for a moment.” Giorgio stroked down Enda’s back. “I know it was a frantic time, and you were still processing the horror that you’d seen, but if you think back now, can you think of any specific box, bag, envelope, or something that keepsakes would be kept in that she insisted on taking with you?”

“Keepsakes?” Enda wasn’t sure what that word meant in English or Japanese.

Giorgio winced, although Enda didn’t know why. “Keepsakes are things that people keep because they have significance to them, or because they are important. They don’t have to be valuable, they are just important to the person who keeps them. They might also keep papers – important documents like birth records, marriage records, passports, banking information, or even cash sometimes – in a special box or a safe that would keep those things safe from fire or flooding and things like that.”

“A special box...a cash box...” Enda realized Giorgio was uncomfortable mentioning something like that when it was obvious Enda had nothing. Focusing on the idea of a box, Enda strained his memories, his mind flickering, flashing on one scene in his life after another. “There, there.” Enda prodded Giorgio’s chest. “In my head. My grandmother had a box like that. I was never allowed to see in it, but I know that’s where she kept things safe.”

“Did you see her pack that up when you moved? What would’ve happened to it once she was gone?”

“She didn’t pack it.” Enda finally had something to get excited about. “That’s what I mean.” He tapped his head. “You have to take me to the place in my head. It was a hidden box. My grandmother only took me to it once, not long after we moved. When I asked her what was in it, she said not to talk about it, and I wasn’t allowed to mention it again. But there was a box in a different place than the house. That would be a keepsake box, wouldn’t it?”

“Was it well hidden?”

Enda nodded eagerly. “No one would find it unless they knew it was there. We need to go. We have to find it.”

“Shall I get Damon and Lamont to go with us?”

“No.” Looking around the room, Enda noticed how dark it was outside of the lamp he’d put on when he had gone for his nap. “They’ll be sleeping. It won’t take long. Zap there and zap back. We don’t have to open it there, we just need to grab it. We can do that, can’t we?”

“I’d better put my shirt and boots back on.” Giorgio’s kiss on his hair felt like acceptance. “Quick zap there and quick zap back. Think hard, little bird. Focus on

that place and nowhere else. We do not want to get lost.”

Closing his eyes tight, Enda trusted his mate to get him there. His hands reached out as they translocated. He could already imagine having the box in his hands.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

“What is this place?” Giorgio asked the moment their cells had reformed in a totally different environment. Instead of the night sky of Tuscany, wherever it was they’d landed in Japan, it appeared to be early afternoon. Giorgio immediately searched the area, his hound seeking out any form of threat. But there wasn’t anything. It was as if they had landed in the middle of nowhere.

There were natural bush and trees all around, all overgrown and fighting each other for dominance. Giorgio could hear the sound of water in the distance but there were no sounds of people, cars or anything else. “Did you used to live near here?” he asked.

“I remember the one time I came here, it took about an hour, I think, maybe longer to get here. I know it was a long walk. But I’d only come here the once. Damn, the trees and all the undergrowth have all got so much thicker than I remember.”

“It’s been fifteen years, babe, that’s probably why. That’s a lot of time for trees and undergrowth to grow.”

Giorgio kept scanning the immediate area. He couldn’t feel any threat, but he felt threatened – a strange feeling when there was absolutely nothing around except the trees, vines, and some beautiful flowers, and his hound confirmed there was nothing else.

There were a couple of rocks, partially buried by decomposing leaves and twigs. They were large and flat, and Giorgio imagined they had probably been left from a time when the river he could hear was a lot wider. He didn’t know for sure. He wasn’t a geologist, but that was the impression he’d gotten. He couldn’t get past the



idea there was something decidedly “off” about the place.

It took a few minutes, but Giorgio finally worked out what it was. The only thing he could hear, aside from Enda moving around, was the water. There was no breeze in the leaves, no animals, no birds in the trees, no sounds of insects. There was nothing at all except the sound of that water. That can’t be natural.

“Babe, have you found the box? We need to get going.”

Giorgio had a sudden need to go back to Tuscany. He couldn’t say why, but he just knew the place they were in wasn’t welcoming and he’d trusted his gut a long time.

“I’m just trying to remember. I know the rock was under a big tree, but now they’ve grown, they’re all big trees.” Enda rested his hand on the closest trunk. “There was a big flat slab of rock...”

“As I said, that was fifteen years ago. There’s a rock over there, and another one over that side.”

But Enda was shaking his head. “It was definitely near these trees.”

“Then it could have been covered up by leaves or debris or anything else by now. Are you sure we’re in the right place?”

“We’re close,” Enda insisted. “Really close.” He started kicking at the debris on the ground with his boot. “It’s got to be here somewhere, I know it is. It shouldn’t be difficult to find. The rock was absolutely huge.”

Giorgio was starting to question Enda’s memories. “Little bird, you said your grandmother was an older woman. There’s no way she’d be able to move a huge rock on her own.”

Enda looked up, his eyes flashing. “My grandmother was a shifter. She could move anything. She might have looked like a frail old lady, but you better believe she wasn’t. That’s why I don’t understand... You know what, that’s not important now. I’m going to find that box.” He dropped to his knees and started feeling through the debris within the vicinity of three tall trees.

“Should I let my hound out?” Giorgio suggested. “Maybe he could sniff for it.”

“He could try.” Enda sat back on his heels, wiping his arm across his face to move his hair from his brow. “Can he smell rock? As you keep pointing out, it’s been years since a person had been around here, and I’m not sure anyone’s scent would last that long in a natural environment.”

Enda was probably right, and there was also a large bush of sweet, scented flowers not far from where Enda was still searching through the debris, which would make scenting anything more difficult. Giorgio was still uneasy – there was just something about the place - but if Enda felt he was being proactive about something, then Giorgio wasn’t going to take that away from him either.

Hearing Enda scream when he’d been shot, listening to Lord Hades go on about how Enda wasn’t being responsible by threatening to shift in public. It was only the fact that Lord Hades got diverted when he learned they still had no leads on the people they were looking for that allowed for Giorgio and Enda to leave there when they did. Later, chatting with Lamont and Damon, Giorgio realized they were just as in the dark as he was.

But watching Enda scraping through debris with his bare hands, Giorgio was starting to worry that maybe his little bird’s mind had been fractured. He’s been through so much. Is it possible he’s losing track of what’s an actual memory and what might be random scenes his mind has tried to fill in for him?

What Enda had said about the burning didn't make any sense without the magic. Again, there were still so many holes in Enda's story, just as there had been from day one. Giorgio wasn't blaming his little mate for any of it, but his own frustration was rising without a proper lead to follow. As far as Giorgio was concerned, that was all they needed. Give him a name, give him an address, give him something to track and hold on to, and Giorgio would find that asshole masquerading as Enda's father, and he'd make sure his mate was safe for evermore.

But even as he thought that, Giorgio's mind went back to when Lord Hades said the Enda was the one who had to find his truth. Much the same as what his hound had been saying when he wanted to know what type of shifter Enda was.

Is this just a ruse? he wondered. No, ruse was the wrong word. Lord Hades wouldn't deliberately deceive him. But Giorgio did wonder if perhaps the issue with Coda, with the Zeus network, and everything else that had gone on, if those obstacles were put up as part of the Fates' plan where Enda would unearth his truth in his own time.

Speaking of which... "Quick, quick, give me a hand, I'm almost certain this is the one. Can you feel the magic on the rock? This has to be the one."

"Where did your grandmother get magic from?"

"I don't know, but it's friendly magic, can't you feel it?"

"Hellhounds aren't affected by magic," Giorgio reminded his mate as he knelt down and curled his fingers under the edge of the large gray slab of stone that Enda had found. "What are we expecting to find underneath this? A tunnel? Is there going to be steps? Or is it just a slab over a box?"

"I'm not sure," Enda said. "I just know it's here. Lift, lift, lift, lift, come on, use your muscles."

Giorgio heaved the stone out of the way, the edge of it hitting a tree as it fell back, making a loud, dull clang in an otherwise silent place. Just the noise alone sent a shiver down Giorgio's spine.

"Is that it?" He pointed to a large, battered tin chest that was resting under where the stone had been.

"That's it, that's it, that's a keepsake box, isn't it?"

It could also be a damn bomb , Giorgio thought. But the hound wasn't sending him any warnings about the contents. So, Giorgio did what any hellhound would do. He grabbed Enda's hand with one of his hands and placed the other one on the trunk. "Let's get back to Tuscany."

Seconds later, they were back in their bedroom, as if they hadn't even left. The only difference was the large trunk that now sat in the middle of the floor and the dust on the bottom of Enda's trousers and coating his knees.

"That is so disconcerting, going from a daylight scene back to the nighttime again." Enda brushed off his knees and the bottoms of his pants and then looked at the trunk. "This has to be it."

"Well, if it isn't, we're probably in trouble for taking somebody else's goods." Bending down in front of the trunk, Giorgio examined the locks. They were rusty and clearly hadn't been opened for a while. There were two of them that were typically opened with a key, securing two latches on the front side of the trunk.

Realizing there was no way that Enda would have a key or even know where there was one, Giorgio sent a little zap of magic through the padlocks, and they both sprung open as though they'd just been freshly oiled. Stepping back, he said to Enda, "As far as we know, this is yours now. Did you want to open it?"

Enda looked at him sideways but then quickly moved in place in front of the trunk, taking the padlocks out of their hooks and flipping open the catches. “Is there any chance there’d be a body in here?” he asked suddenly looking up at Giorgio.

“Hmm, it would have to have been cut up,” Giorgio said with a chuckle. “The box isn’t that big.”

Clearly, Giorgio needed to work on what he considered funny. Scrunching his nose up, Enda gingerly opened the trunk, pushing the lid up until it was at ninety degrees to the trunk itself. The lid fell backward with a loud crash, falling backward until the top of it rested on the floor. The leather straps that might have held it in an upright position in the past had clearly worn through with time.

There wasn’t a lot in the box, from what Giorgio could see. He got a glimpse of some yellowed papers, a stack of cash, and a small book that looked as if it could be a notebook or a journal of some kind. Giorgio’s fingers itched to pick it up, but again, he reminded himself that Enda had nothing beyond what Giorgio had given him so far. Yes, they shared all that Giorgio had because of their mating, but Enda himself had no keepsakes, no treasured items, nothing at all relating to his life before he and Giorgio had claimed each other.

It was a sobering thought. Giorgio knew that the contents of the box might be Enda’s only inheritance. At the very least, it could be that the contents of the box were the only things he might have that connected him to his mother or grandmother. “What did you find, hon?” he asked softly as Enda seemed fixated on the notebook that he’d plucked out of the box. “Are these your family things?”

Enda nodded, a solitary tear falling down his cheek as he clutched the notebook to his chest. “I can smell my grandmother,” he sobbed.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

Embarrassed by his meltdown, Enda was happy enough to curl up in Giorgio's arms when his mate suggested they should get some sleep before they investigated the contents of the box. Enda wasn't worried about anything in the box except the notebook that still carried his grandmother's scent. The random papers, the money, none of that seemed important.

Although Enda did wonder as he fell asleep if that was the money his grandmother had collected for him when he worked on the boat. It was unlikely, considering what happened more recently, but it was a thought.

His jumbled thoughts continued into the next day. He woke early, and after Giorgio kissed him senseless, Enda gently encouraged his mate to spend time with Lamont and Damon going over the other papers in the box while he focused on the notebook.

"I'll be fine," he said, holding up the notebook. "I'm not sure if anything in here will even be important, but I'd like the time to read it."

He could hear Giorgio and his friends in the room next door as he curled up in a large armchair in a smaller sitting room. The sun was shining through large windows, and his view was of immaculate gardens that seemed to stretch as far as he could see. Pretty place, he thought as he rested his hand on the notebook cover, thinking about his grandmother.

I have no idea if she is alive or dead. When Enda had tried to call her – was that two years before or longer – he'd gotten a sinking feeling in his guts when a man answered the phone instead. The man had been abrupt but firm. Thinking back, Enda realized the man didn't seem surprised that someone was calling for her. He'd just

said that she was gone, and it was the finality in that man's voice that had Enda assuming that "gone" didn't mean she was just down the road at the shops.

How often had she visited the box after I was gone? Enda had no way of knowing. He lifted the notebook to his nose and sniffed hard, but the scent was faint.

Not for the first time, Enda wished he hadn't been out running errands for her when the two men arrived. He had no way of knowing what was discussed before he got there or how long they'd been there. It'd been as he'd told Giorgio – his grandmother had been quiet and respectful in their presence and simply told Enda he had to pack a change of clothes as he was leaving with them to start a new job.

It was the men who said that my wages would go to my grandmother to be saved for me. They told me I didn't need to take anything because everything would be taken care of. In the quiet of the room, Enda's eyes widened. That's what I got told before I got on the death plane.

That wasn't encouraging. Maybe my mate and his friends will learn more about that with the papers they're going through.

Enda forced himself to focus back on his grandmother – his brain was in danger of just going around in circles otherwise. Realistically, Enda only had his impressions from the one time he'd tried to call his grandmother, which led him to believe she was dead. It had been seven years since he'd seen her, and he knew she'd been an older crane shifter even then. Surely, if she was still alive, someone from the godly network would've mentioned it. Although, that wasn't a given either. Enda didn't trust them as much as Giorgio clearly did.

Focus on what you have at hand. That was sound advice – another thing his grandmother was fond of saying. As he opened the notebook, Enda saw the Japanese script and smiled. His grandmother had such an elegant hand, and she used to craft

every symbol as though it was something special. He remembered how she used to scoff at his use of the computer, stating that if anything needed to be written down, it should be a work of art that helped convey the message of the words that were written. One of his happier memories.

Unfortunately, the book had not held up well, despite being in a tin trunk. The large rock had not protected the buried tin as well as it should've done, and dampness had seeped through. Some of the pages were stuck together, and in some places, the ink his grandmother had used had run, making it difficult to make out all the symbols.

Enda read what he could. The book had been started as a diary, commentary and descriptions of a life lived long ago. It was clear from the casual mentions of different seasons, that it wasn't a book his grandmother wrote in every day. In fact, from what Enda could piece together, sometimes months would pass between entries.

My grandmother was a lot older than I thought. In an early passage, she wrote about her husband, and yet Enda could never remember her being married.

Ah, that's why. Apparently, her husband had died although the details were sparse. Just a simple passage about the loss of someone who was her safe harbor.

He skimmed through various aspects of daily life. Issues with a neighbor, a problem with the roof. One particularly stark passage mentioned a fire. Enda shivered when he read that.

It was about a third of the way through the notebook that his grandmother wrote of a visitor. She never named him, but Enda could tell from the symbols she had used that the man was special to her. There was something about the way she wrote about him, that got Enda thinking, what about my mother? And then, on the next page, the answer was clear. His grandmother mentioned carrying a child and, in the entry afterward, about delivering a baby girl. That could only have been Enda's mother.



The man was never mentioned again.

Enda sat and pondered that for a while because he had always assumed that his mother was the result of his grandmother and late grandfather, which would have made his mother at least eighty years old when she was murdered. But according to his grandmother, that wasn't the case. His mother was a lot younger than Enda had thought, and by the time that same young baby was sixteen years old, she was pregnant with him.

Used. Abused. Abandoned.

Those symbols were stark on the page, and Enda realized his grandmother was seeing the pattern of her life being repeated in her daughter's.

That was when the tone of the passages started to change. His grandmother started referring to a man she called the devil. Enda had been startled to see that word, but it appeared over and over as he flicked through the months. The devil referred to the man who'd taken her daughter's heart and stamped on it. His grandmother's hatred of the man grew when the man was told about the child – according to his grandmother, Enda's father had laughed in his mother's face and told her to get rid of it.

The next passage was smudged, and part of the page was missing. Even so, Enda quickly flipped the page. I'll get Giorgio to read that one, he thought as another shiver ran down his spine. All he'd caught were symbols for a bird, and for flame, and one that Enda translated as vengeance. If he didn't know better, he would think his grandmother had laid a curse on the man who defiled her daughter.

Two pages later and Enda got another surprise. There was a contract written in English, and on the facing page, a copy of the same contract in Japanese. Bringing the book closer to his nose, Enda tried to understand the legalese.

It appeared his parents had come to a financial agreement. In exchange for a monthly amount paid to Enda's mother, Enda would be sent to the United States for six months of every year until his first shift.

Enda flicked to the page before and then the one after, but there was no explanation of why the contract had been written. On the contract itself, his mother had written her signature, there was a scrawl which Enda assumed was his father's signature, and his grandmother had added her signature as a witness.

But why? The document was dated four months after Enda's birth. I wasn't even a year old, and my mother sent me off to another country.

That hurt more than Enda thought it would. Even as his logical brain reminded him that both his mother and likely his grandmother were dead, and the contract was signed a long time ago, the fact he'd been handed over for what was basically half of his childhood hurt him. There was nothing written about his father wanting to be with him. The document didn't even mention his name. None of that was mentioned, and Enda knew from his own experience, his father barely spent time with him at all.

So, why did they pass me off to a man who didn't even want me to be born in the first place? Did they really need the money?

In the previous passages, his grandmother's disapproval of his father was evident in every line. She didn't agree with her daughter going out with him in the first place. She had tried warning her young daughter that the man was basically a predator – especially given Enda's mother's age. In one of those passages, his grandmother had described her daughter being so merrily in love. His grandmother's dire warnings were inked underneath it. Warnings his mother didn't listen to.

It's all in the past. Enda forced himself to move on. His need to have Giorgio's arms around him increased. Nothing was making sense... I have to keep going. Enda had

been the one who pushed to get the tin in the first place. He really wanted to prove to his mate that their brief excursion had been worth it.

There wasn't much written after Enda's mother died. There was just one last passage that was written in a shaky hand. With no date on it, there was no way of knowing when it was written. Enda read and reread it, trying to make sense of it all.

The price of the magic has been paid.

But as I breathe my last,

the flames grow stronger.

Evil cannot flourish

in the light of the yellows and orange.

Shine bright, Enda,

Shine bright.

I need Giorgio. Enda jumped up, running to the door as Giorgio opened it.

"Babe, what's wrong?"

Unable to answer, Enda dropped his grandmother's notebook on the floor and flung his arms around his mate's waist. Giorgio was the only thing that made sense in his overwhelmed mind.

Meanwhile...

There was a surprising number of papers crammed into the bottom of the tin chest. After making sure that Enda genuinely wanted to go through his grandmother's notebook alone, Giorgio forced himself to respect that and gave his mate some space.

"You're only a wall away," Lamont teased as Giorgio dumped the pile of papers on the table with a scowl on his face. "Enda's only in the next room."

"I worry that he feels he has to carry the burden of his father and all the other shit by himself," Giorgio muttered. "Shouldn't Enda be turning to me for comfort and support?"

"From what I've seen, he does," Damon said. "If you think about it logically, you and Enda met under horrific circumstances, and you two have done nothing but try and solve the mystery of his father ever since. It's not like you've had a lot of bonding, fun times so far."

"Your mating so far is measured in days," Lamont added. "It sounds like Enda's not had anyone he can truly trust his whole life. Just because you're a tall stud with a competent attitude, that doesn't mean Enda's going to fall all over you from day one. You have to work at it."

Pulling out a chair and sitting on it, Giorgio scowled. "I would do all the bonding, fun things with him if I didn't have to worry about his father lurking behind every damn bush if we go out. I can't help being protective. It's in our nature."

Dividing the papers into two piles, he pushed one across to Damon and then nodded at Lamont. “Fire up the laptop. Maybe we can make some sense of this nonsense.”

“Hey, believe it or not, you giving Enda space when he asks for it is a good thing. I know I’ve seen some of the other mates clinging to their hellhounds at every opportunity, and I’m definitely not saying that’s a bad thing. I wouldn’t mind an affectionate mate of my own. But with regards to Enda, I’m sure when he does need someone, you will be the first and only person he calls.” Lamont peered at him over the laptop lid. “You just need to trust that.”

“I wouldn’t mind if Enda would do a bit of clinging in the meantime.” Giorgio huffed out a long breath. “Okay. Let’s do this. Hopefully, we find some answers in this mess.”

The three men worked in silence for a while. There was a mixture of different papers in the piles, and it didn’t look like anyone had ever tried to put them in any order. Anything that looked like a legal document or that had a company name on, Damon and Giorgio passed onto Lamont while they scanned more personal papers, making piles of anything relating to Enda’s mother and grandmother that Enda might want to keep.

“I didn’t realize Enda had an American passport,” Giorgio said as he pulled the document out of the pile. “He said he was born in Japan.”

Flicking it open, he could see it was a child’s passport. A copy of Enda’s birth certificate was folded and tucked inside. Opening it up, Giorgio’s frown deepened. “This birth certificate says my mate was born in Michigan, in the states.”

“While this one, with its matching passport, says he was born in Japan.” Damon held up a Japanese passport. “Someone covering their bases, perhaps?” He tossed the Japanese version across to Giorgio, who studied it closely.

“They both look real. Even the pictures are the same.” Giorgio studied a much younger version of Enda. He had been a cute kid, and the black hair and soulful eyes hadn’t changed. “The name’s the same as well.”

“There’s a good chance both of them are fakes.” Damon yawned. “Money will buy a lot of things, and I think we all agree that Enda’s father must be loaded. They’ve both expired, I imagine, so, it’s not like they were a lot of use to anyone.”

Giorgio checked the dates, and Damon was right. They were both expired. He put them to one side, but Lamont immediately reached over, taking the American passport from the table. “I need to use this to check something. I’m seeing a worrying trend in some of these company searches.”

One advantage of being with packmates is that they all knew each other extremely well. Lamont would share when he’d worked out what was relevant.

Reaching the bottom of his stack of papers, Giorgio took his three piles - one with company documents Lamont had already been through, one with what looked like personal letters and different aspects relating to Enda’s mother and grandmother, and another pile related to expenses that all tied into one address in Japan – and added them to the piles Damon had made, stacking them up. There wasn’t a lot of detail in any of the personal papers or the ones with letterheads showing a Japanese address, but it would be up to Enda what he wanted to do with them.

I hope he’s doing all right. Giorgio looked over at the door separating them. He wasn’t getting much through their bond – more confusion than anything else. But it didn’t feel right going through the papers without his mate.

“I think we’ve got a real problem here,” Lamont said suddenly.

Giorgio felt a fissure of alarm. “What do you mean?”

Lamont tapped the laptop screen. “What was the name of the boat that Enda was on? Was that the Chameleon?”

“Yes.” Giorgio nodded. “Enda mentioned that it was possible that it had since been renamed or that it’s not likely to be found. He felt that name was indicative of the way his father was because a chameleon, of course, can blend and change according to his environment. But he mentioned a few red flags like constant crew changes, for example, which made me think the boat was actively hiding in plain sight.”

Lamont nodded as though that made sense. “You also mentioned that Enda had said that when he was transported from the boat to the warehouse where you found him, he was sent in a transporter or cargo plane?”

Leaning back in his chair, Giorgio rested an elbow on the table. “That’s how it sounded like to me when he described it. I’ve been on a few in my time. He said there was no lining inside the plane, there was just a bench seat, there were no facilities or anything else you’d expect on a passenger plane. To me, that sounded like a transporter that might be used for cargo or for the military, for example, but not what would typically hold passengers.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Lamont said. “Let me backtrack for a moment. From all these company documents that you’ve given me, these are companies that cover a cross-section of global enterprises. Each regular company was owned by a holding company. The holding companies were owned by one of three different shell companies.

“Those three shell companies are all owned by another three shell companies, and finally, we have the one overriding corporation that owns them all. It is essentially a pyramid scheme, with each layer of company ownership designed to send any investigators straight to another shell company.

“What makes it more difficult to trace all of this is that all of the original companies have their offices in different countries. The holding companies are shown as being located in different countries as well. The main, overall company has their corporate office located in Switzerland. Other company offices are listed as being in Thailand, Argentina, Colombia, Australia...you get the picture. Someone would have to have a lot of time or really deep pockets to investigate every single one of these entities.”

Giorgio nodded. “From a shady business perspective, that makes sense. If anyone has anything to hide from tax or law enforcement, then hiding behind shell companies and holding companies in locations that all have differing laws regarding what information might be shared - it’s a classic way to hide in plain sight. We already know that gaining country specific ID doesn’t seem to be a problem for the person we’re looking for.” He pointed at Enda’s American passport.

“What did you find out about the main company?” Damon asked. “That should be our focus, shouldn’t it? That will be where we’ll find the best leads.”

“You’d think that, but I’m not sure. Bear with me another moment.” Lamont tapped the keyboard and then said, “First, we can hypothetically tie some of these different companies to what Enda has gone through. One of the companies in Argentina lists a cargo plane as one of its assets. Another company out of Malta lists a super-yacht as one of its assets, bought to provide exclusive and high class business client experiences.”

Giorgio snorted. “A pleasure barge, in other words.”

“Not according to the listing, but still. The range of companies suggests the person who owned all this made sure they could source whatever they needed without any government oversight. There are two munitions’ companies, one that specializes in high-end catering...”



“Perfect for organizing parties for influential people. You can imagine a situation where the booze flowed freely. You can’t tell me that isn’t part of a blackmail racket,” Damon said with a growl.

“Could be, but it’s not like that sort of information is going to be included in company reports.” Lamont looked back at the laptop screen. “There’s another company, this one is in North America, but it is a high-end property management company, from what I can see, that offers traveling executives exclusive, upmarket homes in various states, for short term leases.”

“That could explain the different houses Enda stayed in as a child.” Giorgio flicked another glance at the closed door.

“That would make sense. That company was founded twenty-five years ago. In fact” - Lamont lifted a finger as he used his other hand to scroll the laptop screen – “most of the companies were all founded twenty to twenty-five years ago.”

Damon whistled. “Someone was playing the long game.”

“And making a shit ton of money at the same time.” Lamont nodded. “Some of these companies are showing profits in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, although how that money is made is sketchy.”

“This is all super interesting if we had the next six months to investigate and take this organization apart,” Giorgio said grimly, “but I’m still not hearing anything about the person who set this all up. Don’t tell me it was another shell company?”

“No. We do have a name.”

Giorgio and Damon looked at each other when Lamont didn’t say anything else. “What’s up, Lamont?” Damon teased at last. “Can’t you pronounce it? Does the

name have too many syllables?”

“No.” Lamont’s reluctance to share the name was evident. “Fine. The person who owns the main corporation, who is then responsible for all the other companies is Enda Cochrane.”

“So, my Enda was named after his father?” Giorgio frowned. “That is possible, I suppose. Enda’s name has Irish origins, and there was a huge influx of Irish immigrants in the USA after the potato famine in the eighteen forties and fifties. That makes the man a lot older than we first thought, but among paranormals that’s not unusual.”

“I can appreciate you thinking that,” Lamont said, “but that’s not what the company records say. That’s why I checked the old passports you found. The owner of all of these companies, the one that rules them all, is the Enda who was born twenty-five years ago, with an address listed in Japan.”

Giorgio quickly flicked through the paper piles he’d made, pulling out a receipt that had something to do with house repairs. “This address?” He held up the page, showing it to Lamont.

Lamont nodded. “For all intents and purposes, the person who owns the companies that inflicted a life of abuse on our new pack member is the abused pack member.”

“Fuck!” Giorgio’s fists clenched, and his hound was growling in his mind.

“Wait. Don’t go getting your furry balls in a knot. That makes sense, don’t you see?” Damon tapped the table. “I couldn’t work it out. Why would a woman who had protected Enda for eighteen years of his life let him just go on some job with two men we can assume she’d never met before?”

“She was probably scared shitless.” Giorgio was still fuming.

“Or,” Damon said quickly, “she was told that because Enda had turned eighteen, it was time for him to learn to take over from his father as the heir of some hugely successful companies. Why else was all this company information in her secret keepsake tin? Perhaps that’s why she and Enda were left alive in the first place, after the mother was killed. What if Enda, our Enda, is this man’s only heir?”

“Which is all fine and dandy if that is the case. But Enda was working as a slave on that yacht for years – seven years, wasn’t it?”

“I doubt the grandmother was told that,” Lamont pointed out.

“No, but now we have a situation where if we, the agency I used to work for, or anyone else actually does investigate those poor people who were killed and then dumped in that warehouse, who’s it all going to come back to?” Giorgio pointed at the closed door. “The person who is the only surviving victim in all of this. There’s a good chance Enda owns the plane that transported him to his grave – or what was meant to be his final resting place. How fucked up is that?”

“The actual asshole behind this is one devious bastard, that’s for sure,” Damon said. “How can we...?”

But Giorgio didn’t hear the rest of that sentence. He got a sudden sensation as though someone had punched him in the gut. Enda was upset and needed him. Jumping up from his chair, Giorgio strode to the door between them, opening it quickly only to see Enda right there.

“Babe, what’s wrong?” Enda crashed against his chest, hugging him tight as his precious notebook from his grandmother tumbled to the floor.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

“Babe. I’m worried about you. Are you sure you’re doing the right thing?”

Enda did his best to keep his frustration buried deep inside. His mate did not deserve being snapped at, especially after the extremely long day they had had.

First, Enda had to get over the shock of what had been written in his grandmother’s notebook. Hugging Giorgio helped ground him and soothe his fears. But instead of being taken to a place where they could spend some time in private and he could share his fears for what his grandmother might have done, Giorgio led him to the table where the men had been going through the other papers in his grandmother’s tin.

“We have to talk to you about a few things we’ve found,” Giorgio had said gravely.

Enda sat stunned as he learned that he was the sole owner of all the companies responsible for all of the shit that he had been through since he was eighteen. Not only that, but almost all of those companies had been established in his name soon after his birth.

Enda was understandably annoyed. “Sell them,” he had said firmly. “Sell it all. You have the godly network that you all believe in. I’m sure that one of the gods has access to legal powers, lawyers, company accountants or whatever else is needed in selling a business. I want every single company in my name sold off immediately.”

Lamont, Damon, and Giorgio clearly hadn’t expected his reaction, but Enda was adamant. Even Giorgio, who should have been on his side, tried to talk him out of it.

“We have no way of knowing what might turn up in company audits,” he said gently as if Enda was a child. “I’m worried that some of the things done by your father, through these companies, could result in criminal charges that you’d legally be responsible for. You need to take some time to think about this a bit more.”

“Is this about the money?” Enda demanded. “Lamont said some of these companies are worth huge amounts of money. Do you think I should be keeping that for myself?”

“No, but...”

“There is no but about this. I’ll get a job if you don’t want to be looking after me financially anymore. I’m damn good at serving drinks.” Enda felt mean as soon as he’d said that, but his mind was made up. “Your godly network friends can make up audit files or anything else. I don’t care. I want absolutely every single company on the market within twenty-four hours.

“Close all the doors and lock them. Freeze the company accounts – all of them. If there are employees, I want them paid out of that money – six months’ severance pay – but that’s it. Close them down and sell what’s left. If there are any proceeds, money from the sales or the company accounts or whatever, I want that all transferred into an account your godly network friends can set up for me. Set up a charitable trust. That is the money I will use to pay restitution to any victim or victim’s family – anyone who has suffered at the hands of my father.”

Enda only had to look around the table to see his mate and friends thought it was a bad idea, but he had never been so determined about anything in his life before. His father had been pulling the strings in his life since he was born for no known reason. If Enda wanted a future – and he did – then it needed to stop.

“I will not be held responsible for my father’s actions, and if there is one thing that is

guaranteed to bring my father out of the woodwork, it is closing down all of his financial accounts. I want it done. I want it done now.”

In Enda’s head, it was simple. He didn’t want any of the companies, but if they were his, then he had the right to sell them. Unfortunately, the process was a lot more involved than that. The companies were all under different jurisdictions in different countries, and there were various employment and business policies that needed adhering to.

“You told me your Lord Zeus was the Father of All. You can’t tell me now that his godly network has geographic limits.”

Two hours into operation sell-off, Coda called Lamont’s phone, worried because news articles had already picked up rumors about what Enda was doing. Financial news outlets this time. That’s when Enda learned that despite all the companies being privately owned by him, selling off such large companies was sending ripples of concern through publicly owned companies, which impacted four different stock markets.

Enda didn’t see how that could be his problem. “If that’s happening, at least my father won’t be able to ignore it, like it seemed he did with the social media experiment,” he told Coda firmly.

“You have numerous requests for comment,” Coda said quickly. “What are we meant to tell them?”

“You have all my photographs that were used for social media. Make something up. Put something out saying that I have recently turned twenty-five and have just learned that I am the heir to my father’s fortune. But in light of what I’ve been through and the trauma I suffered at the hands of others, with my life still under threat, I am setting up a new charitable foundation that is aimed at assisting victims of

abuse, international terrorism, whatever you want, it doesn't matter. I don't want to see a cent of it, and I want to make sure the victims are being helped. A whole heap of people's bodies were discarded in a warehouse, and that was all through my father. I want their families helped – I don't care who they were or why that happened. You are the guys with all the knowledge, systems, and everything else. It's up to you to make sure it all happens. Please, and thank you."

That was that. Enda listened to Giorgio and his packmates talking about dates, company details, and things like that, but all Enda could do as the morning morphed into a long afternoon, and then an equally depressing dinner, was think that his father had set him and his name up since birth.

He could do whatever he wanted because if anyone tracked anything, I was going to be blamed. No wonder he wanted me dead. I would be blamed, I'm dead. He gets away, facing no consequences whatsoever, and comes up with another plan to ruin more lives.

Enda didn't get angry very often. Going through life the way he had, there was really no point. In most cases he was powerless. He didn't have a voice. He didn't have any support. But now he did, and he was going to use it, dammit.

So, when Enda had finally got to where he could have some privacy with his mate in their bedroom, he didn't need Giorgio treating him like a piece of spun glass, always wondering if he was one wrong word away from collapsing into a heap on the floor.

"What I'd really like," Enda said, deliberately unbuttoning his shirt, "is for you to use that beautiful mouth of yours for something else apart from talking. I don't want to talk about anything right now. All we've done is talk all freaking day. You know damn well my father is going to come for me when we do this. And that's what I want to happen. That is what is meant to happen."

Sliding his shirt off his shoulders, Enda dropped it on the floor. “I want a future with you. I don’t know what my grandmother did exactly...”

He trailed off. “We don’t need to worry about that now. All I want to focus on right now is you, me, and the fact the door has a lock and that’s a big bed. Nothing else. I want you to remind me that there is more to life than being scared of my father, than being victimized, than being anything else you and your friends or Coda might think is wrong with me. I want to know that I am cherished, that I am cared for, and more important than anything else, I want to know that you want me. Is that too much to ask?”

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You’re so damn brave and I have never been so proud of you. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with you, little bird.” Giorgio couldn’t help the growl. He reached for his mate, touching his shoulder just enough to translocate them both on the bed, fully naked. “I’ve spent all day wanting you naked and in my arms.” He ran his nose up the side of Enda’s neck, inhaling Enda’s unique scent.

“Your feisty nature calls to me,” he murmured, taking a quick nibble of Enda’s ear. “The way you took Coda to task this afternoon had me wanting to drag you under the table and suck your dick. Hmm, that’s a thought...” He flattened his tongue against Enda’s neck and then licked a deliberate path down his mate’s neck, chest – stopping for a nipple nibble – and down the side of Enda’s belly, making his mate twitch and moan.

You stimulate my senses just by walking into a room, he sent through their bond as he bent his head over Enda’s erect cock. A simple slurp, and it was Giorgio who moaned. Enda’s taste was as unique as his scent – all tinged with a hint of fire. Giorgio bobbed his head up and down, using his fingers to gently massage Enda’s balls.



Enda was already on board, gripping the blanket, the muscles of his legs flinching with the need to thrust that he was clearly trying to control. Grinning around his mouthful, Giorgio pushed his fingers lower, reaching under Enda's butt, searching for his tight hole. A simple thought, a hint of magic, and his lubed finger was rubbing around the tight muscles, encouraging them to loosen and let him in.

Giorgio focused on the moment – all his thoughts revolved around bringing Enda pleasure. Lamont and Damon had been right. Enda had come to him when he needed him, and Giorgio got the impression more than once through the day that he might have missed something important. But Enda had asked for what he wanted, and Giorgio was determined to deliver.

“Giorgio... I'm going to...” Enda was gasping, his breathing harsh, and as Giorgio looked up, he noticed the flushed face and how Enda's hair was stuck to his forehead. Sucking hard, he made sure Enda could feel his mouth over every inch of his cock before pulling off and licking the last of Enda's precome off his lips.

“Roll over, babe.” Giorgio helped Enda roll onto his belly. Enda's ass came up without him asking, as Enda tucked his knees underneath himself. How did I get so lucky?

Making sure Enda's hole could take three of his fingers easily, Giorgio eased them out of his mate's body and moved so he was kneeling behind his mate. “You honor me,” he whispered quietly, running his hands down the length of Enda's back. “Never doubt how much I want you.”

“Get in me.”

Resting the head of his erect cock against Enda's hole, Giorgio's whole body tingled at the lewd picture. His cockhead was angry red against Enda's pale gold skin. As he pressed the head against the loosened hole, there was that moment of resistance

before those muscles relaxed.

Toes curling, butt clenching, Giorgio held Enda's hips steady as his cock slowly sunk into Enda's heat. Enda was moaning, leaning on his elbows, moving back and forth, and Giorgio let him set the pace. His climax was already sending signals to his heavy balls, and Giorgio did his best to control his breathing as his cock slowly disappeared.

Once his cock was fully enclosed in Enda's body, Giorgio held still, sending all the warmth and love he had for his mate through their bond. Enda's body was tense – he still wasn't used to taking Giorgio's length. But Giorgio sensed the moment Enda relaxed, and leaned into the sensations.

Move, mate. Let me feel you.

Giorgio moved. He took things slowly at first. He wanted their joining to last. Too much of their mating so far had been dealing with things all outside of their control. While Giorgio knew how important their quest was, being with Enda in such an intimate way reminded him they were both immortal – their love would endure, and their bond was the one treasure he could rely on.

Yes. Yes. Enda's mouth was half open, but the words came through their bond, pushing Giorgio to thrust a little harder.

Right there. Right there. Enda was resting his forehead on the mattress, and Giorgio noticed his fists were clenched. He kept hitting that spot, feeling the sensations through their bond. It was like an endless loop – Giorgio felt the sensations coming from Enda, and he could feel those same feelings through his own body.

Slowing down or taking his time just wasn't possible. Giorgio was chasing his orgasm even as he could feel through their bond Enda doing the same thing. Their skin slapped together and Giorgio's grip on Enda's hips tightened.

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes! Giorgio's hips moved to Enda's chant in his head, and as the last yes resounded through his brain, Enda froze, and Giorgio slammed home one last time as his orgasm swamped his body.

Going with his instincts, Giorgio let go of Enda's hips and leaned over his mate's back. I love you so much, he sent through their bond, gently dropping kisses on Enda's hair.

He didn't expect a response. It would take time for Enda to trust him fully. But about ten seconds later, Enda moaned softly. I love you, too, my mate.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

Intruder alert! Giorgio was jerked out of his sleep, sitting upright as the yell from Lamont rang through his brain. We have people coming in on three sides of the estate. Lamont seemed panicked. We're under attack, get your ass down here .

Giorgio didn't stop to think. He just jumped out of bed, and with a click of his fingers, he was already dressed. Boots and pants. It's not like he'd need anything else.

"Where are you going?" Enda stirred, his voice heavy with sleep. "Did I just hear Lamont in my head, or was that a dream?"

"We've got intruders, babe. Nothing for you to worry about," Giorgio insisted, his need to get downstairs battling with the knowledge Enda needed reassurance. "Just stay in this room. I'm gonna ward it so no one can get in. You'll be fine. Just stay here."

He dashed from the room, barely stopping at the door to make sure he sent a huge ward that would encompass all four walls of the room. Great. Enda's safe. Now to make sure the rest of his property was.

Giorgio crashed down the stairs, his heavy boots ringing on the steps as he hurried to find his packmates. Lamont was on the left side of the estate. Giorgio could see him through the French doors leading out of from the living area. Damon must be on the other side. He sprinted through the living area, bursting out of the French doors, as he saw Lamont engaged in fighting with three large men who were all dressed in black with balaclavas over their faces so their features couldn't be seen.

"What the hell is going on?" Giorgio demanded as he grabbed the nearest intruder

and smashed his head into the ground. “Who the... where the...where the fuck did this lot come from?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” Lamont sounded puffed. “Move faster. I can’t find Damon, he must’ve gone around the other side.”

Giorgio looked up as he heard shouting coming from the other side of the garden. “For fuck’s sake, what is this? Have they sent a whole fucking platoon to take us out?” He grabbed another man who was about to stick a knife in Lamont’s ribs, throwing him and using the body to take out two more who were getting closer.

This shit is personal. Giorgio kept moving. If there was one thing a hellhound did know how to do, it was to fight, and when it came to protecting a mate, they fought ten times harder. Need to keep Enda safe.

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Back in the bedroom, Enda fumed. He knew what was happening. He had heard Lamont in his head as clearly as Giorgio had, and while he would have appreciated being able to go out and help his mate with the intruders, his presence wasn’t going to make any difference except to agitate Giorgio.

Attacking the estate on only three sides was a diversion. Enda knew that. To him, it made sense. Three hellhounds, three sides of the house. If someone was after a specific goal, they would draw away any guards or people who might come between them and their goal by causing a distraction.

Which means my father is coming, just as I predicted. Enda sighed as he climbed out of bed, hurrying to the bathroom. He still smelled of the sex he and Giorgio had enjoyed, although Giorgio had apparently cleaned the obvious messes. Doubting that his father was going to give him time for a shower, Enda still wanted to pee. He could

hardly have the showdown of his life if his bladder was full.

Giorgio had said he'd ward the bedroom walls, and Enda could feel them. But nothing in Enda's experience suggested his father had ever played by any rules before, and Enda doubted that the man had changed. Pulling on a pair of comfortable sweatpants, Enda reached in the closet to grab a sweater, but he grabbed one of Giorgio's by mistake. It was big on him, but it made Enda feel good in it, so he kept that on and found his boots. Once they were firmly laced, he went and sat in the chair by the window, hooking his feet on the seat and hugging his knees.

He couldn't see much going on outside. He could hear yells, thuds, and screaming, and every now and then, a body appeared to be flung, briefly showing above the bushes hiding most of Enda's view before disappearing. Through their bond, he could feel Giorgio's determination to stop people from coming into the building and his frustration as more people appeared in the distance, running across the wide and immaculate gardens.

It's going to take a bit of work to clean that lot up, he thought grimly, as he sat and waited. Enda was past being scared, over being manipulated, and sick and tired of having his whole life, or even his ability to keep breathing, controlled by someone who'd never given a shit about him. I'm as ready as I'll ever be.

Sure enough, it wasn't five minutes later and Enda felt a surge of magic against the wards Giorgio had set. The door opened, and his father walked into the room as though he owned the place. He was alone, which Enda was secretly relieved about. He was determined to take on his father by himself, but having other people around could've made that more difficult. His phoenix fluttered under his skin, eager to show himself, but Enda held him back – for now.

"You're not surprised to see me, I notice. It fascinates me that you're still alive," his father said with a sneer. He didn't look any different from when Enda had seen him

fifteen years before and he was speaking fluent Japanese. “You must have the luck of the gods on your side.”

Enda shrugged. “I wouldn’t call it luck, but whatever.”

“You’re not scared, either.” His father tilted his head, looking at him quizzically, like he was some curiosity his father didn’t understand. “What the hell made you dye your hair?”

“I like it.” Enda made sure to keep his voice in the same monotone. “I’ve learned life can be rather enjoyable when a grown person can make decisions for themselves. I happen to like blue hair.”

His father’s stare intensified. “What the hell changed? I made sure from when you were ten years old that you would be frightened, beaten down, and too afraid of your own shadow to even speak,” he said with a snarl. “How the hell did this happen?”

Enda shook his head. “My life is no concern of yours anymore,” he said firmly. “Come to think of it, it never was. But seeing as you’re here, maybe you can answer a question that has been plaguing my friends and me.”

His father jolted at the use of the word friends, but Enda didn’t elaborate. “Why didn’t you kill me at the same time as you killed my mother? You knew I was there. It wouldn’t have taken another two seconds to blast the wooden closet I was in with the flamethrower. So, why didn’t you?”

His father frowned. “Death happens for a reason. You were a kid, so insignificant in a lot of ways, but I needed you alive for a while longer.”

“Aha. Business reasons, I’m sure.” Enda nodded. “It makes me wonder why everything changed. I didn’t cause you any problems working on the boat I

apparently owned. I was living my life. I never would have come after you for anything. I was simply trying to survive.

“And yet, one minute I’m serving drinks and the next I’m plucked off a boat, given a drink designed to kill me, and buried under a pile of bodies in an abandoned warehouse in a remote part of England. That all sounds a bit excessive, don’t you think?”

“See, this is why I knew you and I would never get along.” His father pointed his finger at him, talking as casually as if they were meeting over tea and cake. “You really have no concept of the thing known as the bigger picture. You were in that warehouse because you were a loose end, just like everyone else in there. Don’t ask me why... Actually, no. You know what? It doesn’t make any difference anymore because you won’t see morning.

“Yes, I know that you saw me kill your mother. That woman betrayed me by letting you live in the first place. That was never meant to happen, but when it did, and I found out you’d been born, I worked out ways to use that to my advantage. That’s what I do. But know this. The only reason you were still alive to see me take my vengeance against that woman is because she told me you were born with no shifter genetics, and I found out she lied.”

Enda frowned, thinking about the agreement signed between his mother, grandmother, and father. That was meant to remain in force until he shifted for the first time. If he believed I would never shift then why...? But there wasn’t time to ask because his father was on a roll.

“You were then used to keep your grandmother in check. I couldn’t kill her – that woman had some weird-ass magic. I wanted to, gods you have no idea how much I wanted to because she was one hell of a vindictive bitch, and she’d been out for me for years. Ever since I’d dallied with her precious daughter. But, by promising to



leave you alone, she left me alone.”

Enda thought of all the papers that his grandmother had collected over the years, showing his ownership of the companies his father had apparently set up for him. “So, I was just a bargaining chip – believe it or not, that does make sense. But you took me away at eighteen. Why didn’t you just leave me there? I had a life. It wasn’t much of one, but I was happy enough.”

“Who said I ever gave a shit about your happiness? For fuck’s sake, this is what is wrong with people sometimes.” His father started to pace, and Enda watched him closely. He wasn’t that much taller than Enda was, definitely not as big as Giorgio, but he did carry a strength or a sort of power about him, something in his aura that Enda couldn’t place. It swirled around his father like a cloud, invisible, of course, but Enda could feel it, and he could feel that power growing as his father got more agitated. “People don’t understand that they have to have a purpose. There is no reason for them to be in my life if they don’t do the one thing they were retained to do. If they don’t do it, if they don’t work out, or they start to get ideas above the position I’ve assigned them...you know, it’s not like I wanted to kill all those people. I didn’t care one way or the other if I killed you, either. But some people just won’t leave well enough alone, and what else am I meant to do?”

My father’s got a screw loose , Enda thought, but he kept that to himself. “I still don’t understand why you took me away from my grandmother when I was eighteen.”

“Because you were eighteen,” his father said. “A legal adult in most places when it comes to contract signing and running a business. Besides” - the man’s grin was evil - “Your grandmother was absolutely terrified when I had you taken, but she had no choice. My son had the right to grow and learn alongside me to take over his heritage one day. It was so fucking hilarious.”

His father laughed. “I even wrote her a note and told her I’d seen the error of my

ways and that I was going to ensure that you had the future that she could never even dream of for you. A future of wealth and power. That woman's greed was her downfall, and in the end, my magic proved far stronger than hers."

Enda quickly closed his eyes, taking a moment to acknowledge his grandmother's death wouldn't have been an easy one. "Yes, so your vision for my future involved me serving drinks on a boat. Fine. Whatever. Past history. But why didn't you leave me there?"

"I have always kept my eye on the bigger picture. It's the only way to guarantee success and recognize when things need to change. Deals were falling through. Exports and imports were getting held up, loans were harder to come by, and the global political climate was shifting. People don't want the same things they did when my companies were started. That's inevitable. History has shown us that everything works in cycles, and to stay successful, you have to change with it.

"But to affect that change and live off the benefits of everything I've done, I had to get rid of loose ends. Those people in the warehouse that you were buried under? Loose ends! People who tried to blackmail me, people who let me down, people who just knew too much. How the hell was I going to have a safe and happy future if I didn't get rid of those loose ends?"

Enda couldn't believe what his father was saying – well, he did, but what had the man been drinking? It was honestly as though his father believed the entire world was there for his benefit. "And I was a loose end, too?"

"Obviously." His father snorted. "It was sound business sense to put all my companies and money into your name. If there'd been any issues, they couldn't touch me. You'd take the fall for it. But then, see, this is what I mean about changes. There's a Paranormal Council now, did you know that?"

“If you got arrested, and the powers that be realized you could shift into your little bird, then they’d question you, and they can smell lies. I mean, it’s like they have this added advantage that is so unfair, but anyway. If you told them you didn’t know anything, they would know you weren’t lying, and they’d come looking for me. Far too messy. I hope you realize it’s nothing personal. I just couldn’t take the risk, don’t you see, boy? The one rule I have lived by my whole life is that there can absolutely be no loose ends.”

As if by magic, a large, long, rifle-shaped object appeared in his hands. Enda remembered it from when he was ten. “I do realize now that it probably would have been a lot easier if I had just killed you and your grandmother at the same time as I killed your duplicitous mother,” his father said, pointing the flamethrower at him. “But I have learned from that mistake, I won’t do it again. And as for you, well, I hear hell can be nice this time of year.”

“I don’t believe in hell,” Enda said calmly as he let go of his knees and stood up. He remembered his grandmother’s words written at the end of her notebook. It’s time to shine, he told his phoenix who stood ready. Then he remembered how it felt to be claimed by Giorgio, and he’d felt all the congratulations in his head. Praying to whatever god would listen, Enda sent out a mental distress call.

“What the hell are you smiling at?” his father demanded as he prepared to fire his weapon. “You already know what this can do – I incinerated your mother.”

“Yes, you did. Something I will never forgive you for.” Enda’s smile widened. “But while you were busy trying to stop the sale of the companies I owned, some important changes were happening to me. Pull the damn trigger,” he said grimly. “Pull the damn trigger, I dare you.”

Three things happened at once. His father pulled the trigger. The bedroom door was blasted off its hinges, and a dozen hellhounds came through it. And finally, Enda

opened his arms and embraced the flames, knowing they would never hurt him as his phoenix came through. The same phoenix his grandmother had cursed his father with all those years ago.

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It took Giorgio a moment, but he quickly grasped the situation as he burst into the bedroom he had already warded and saw what was happening. Lamont and Damon immediately reached for the man holding the flamethrower, but Giorgio held them back. “No, wait a moment.”

“What the fuck, man? Are you demented?” Lamont yelled. “That’s your mate who’s burning.”

“Watch and learn.” Giorgio grinned as he started to see the signs of panic on the man who could only be Enda’s father. “My mate’s not burning, he’s shifting. Look at who your son became,” he added to Enda’s father as he started to laugh. “Look at how beautiful he is.”

“No!” Enda’s father screamed. “No! It’s absolutely not possible! No! I knew that he could not shift unless he was claimed by a fated mate. Why do you think he had to die?” Enda’s father was raising his flame-flower up and down, trying to make the body burn, but Enda’s phoenix shrieked in victory, which was not easy on a hellhound’s ear, but Giorgio could totally understand why he did it.

“What do you think would have happened?” he said, striding over to the man and knocking the flamethrower out of his hands. He didn’t want his curtains burning. “What did you think would happen when you buried my mate under a mound of bodies and left him there, still alive, panicking that any move would cause his own death because you made sure to mention that so he could hear?”

“It would’ve been a quick death.” Enda’s father was still watching the phoenix as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“You sent your son’s mate in to pick him up. I was working for the agency you sent in to find those bodies and die along with them, guaranteeing the whole mess would be covered up.”

“That wasn’t my intention.” Enda’s father was trembling, perhaps finally noticing there was an awful lot of people in the room, and none of them were there for him. “He was just a loose end. Why is it that nobody understands that? He was just a loose end, and he had to go. Don’t you get it? I worried he might find his mate one day. Sure, it was a long shot, but I had to make sure that he didn’t. Don’t you see? Don’t you see? I had so much I had to protect.”

“Whereas I only had one person to protect, and you’re looking at him,” Giorgio said. “Your son. The man you left for me to find. My fated mate. You’re the one who orchestrated our meeting. You did this.”

Enda’s father’s mouth dropped open. “That damn witch! I will find her in hell, and I will fucking ruin the rest of her eternity. She was the one who did this. She cursed me...”

“Enda’s grandmother didn’t end up in the Underworld,” Giorgio said quietly. “Take it from one who knows these things. Enda’s grandmother never did anything wrong. All she did was try to protect her daughter, and when that failed, she worked hard to keep her grandson safe. Her afterlife will be one that reflects the good things she did. You, on the other hand...when I look at you, all I see is a soul so black it absorbs the light.”

“It won’t matter,” the man said desperately. “You think I’d be scared of the stories you tell? Hell is just a figment of a Christian’s imagination. It doesn’t exist. I will rise. You will see. I will rise, and I will find you and that thing covered in flames. I can’t die because I’m part demon.”

Giorgio looked at Beau who'd wandered closer, being as protective as any packmate would be. Beau nodded. "True that," he said. "He is, he's fucking half demon. No wonder he could get through the wards and do everything else he wanted." Beau came even closer, sniffing hard. "A demon-human mix, I reckon. It looks like one of the boys from downstairs dropped their spunk where he didn't have a right to. This is what turned up. He stinks though, and fuck this one is old. How did this thing slip through Lord Hades' crack?"

"You might want to rephrase that," Damon said, rubbing the side of his nose as he came closer. "Lord Hades' crack is the domain of the consort and no one else." A couple of the other hounds laughed.

"Who the hell is Lord Hades?" Enda's father demanded. "You can't keep me here. That thing" - he pointed a shaky finger in Enda's direction - "that thing hasn't died, so I've done nothing wrong."

"Yep, Enda will be living a long while yet, but there's still the little matter of all the bodies he was found with. How about we go visit Lord Hades, and you can find this out for yourself. "Enda, babe," Giorgio called out to the phoenix who was watching everything, hovering in the air, his flames flicking down and across his body. "Did you fancy another visit to see Consort Ali?"

The phoenix shook his head and shot a plume of flames into the ceiling. It didn't leave a mark or scorch anything, not that Giorgio was worried. He already knew Enda would never damage anything in a destructive way.

I want to go to the wastelands Giorgio heard in his head. I want to see this man run. I want to hear him scream. I want to do to him what he did to my mother and likely my grandmother, too . I want him to suffer.

"I understand that, babe," Giorgio said out loud, "but you're not your father. You

never will be. I think this is another matter that we can let Lord Hades deal with, don't you?"

He grabbed Enda's father's arm as the man leaned back, trying to move away. "I'm not going anywhere with him. I'm not going anywhere with him. He is not natural. I should've known that when his nanny reported the flames on the sheets when he was ten. That is not my son."

"That's probably only the true thing you've said since the moment this all began." Giorgio shook Enda's father again for good measure. The man irritated his last nerve. "Enda is not your son in the true sense of the word. He may carry your genetics, but he was raised by people who loved him. And even when he was despised and used by his father, he survived. I wonder how well you'll survive by the end of this night."

"Well," Faron said, stepping up and slapping Giorgio on the shoulder. "It was lovely to meet your mate. Be sure to bring him to Australia real soon. In the meantime, if you've got things handled here, I left chops on the barbie. Maybe think of the time zone differences next time you need me to do anything."

Giorgio grinned and nodded. Like the rest of his packmates, Faron would come no matter what time it was. He was also thankful, though, because Faron's mention of the words chops was the call to leave a hellhound would understand.

"You've got chops? We're coming, we're coming. I haven't seen that little cutie of yours in ages. Come on, let's go." One by one, the hellhounds left until Lamont and Damon remained.

"Did you need us to stay?" Damon asked.

"No, guys. Thank you so much for all you've done – it's been a hectic week, and we couldn't have gone through this without you. But I think Enda and I have got this



now.” Giorgio shook Enda’s father, making him stumble. He could feel the man trying to use his magic, but of course, that was never going to work on a hellhound.

“We’ll go and visit Lord Hades again, and then, maybe then, my mate and I can finally start living a life together in safety. You’ll be welcome to visit, but give it about another month before you do.”

Lamont and Damon laughed as they shimmered out of sight. Chances were they were on their way to Australia, too. Faron did have an amazing house, and his mate Patrick was also a talented cook.

“Are you going to shift back before we go, Enda?”

Enda’s phoenix shot another plume of flames, stopping short of hitting Enda’s father’s face, and then there was a flutter of flames as Enda’s human side came through.

“Perhaps instead of spending all your time worrying about all the changes in your business and everything else,” Enda said quietly, “you should have kept track of the changes in the being you donated your genetics to.”

Giorgio was gifted with one of his mate’s smiles. “Let’s go and visit Lord Hades. Maybe he’ll be in court again, and I can finally see someone thrown into the fires of Tartarus. Not that I’m a fire-bug or anything you understand, but somehow, I think those were the flames my grandmother described in her curse. Or, you know, they could’ve been mine.”

Enda was still smiling as Giorgio transported them to the Underworld. It was getting to be a habit, and Giorgio was fairly sure Lord Hades was getting tired of being disturbed. With luck, this will be the last visit for a while, Giorgio hoped as they landed in Lord Hades’ waiting room.

“Folsom. Don’t you ever sleep?”

“How can I when you two keep bringing your problems to our master’s door?” Folsom turned up his nose at Enda’s father. “This was one who should’ve been swallowed,” he added with a sneer. “Lord Hades is waiting for you. Honestly, your life lately has been more interesting than a movie. Did you think you’d be taking your mate shopping anytime soon? Only there’s this cute little top...”

“Folsom!” Lord Hades could be heard through the doors. “We’re waiting.”

“I’ll talk to you later,” Folsom whispered as he ran to the doors and opened them. “Hellhound Giorgio, his mate, and a thing that should’ve been swallowed awaits your audience, oh, learned, wise, and fair Master.”

“You have to earn your shopping privileges the same as anyone else, Folsom,” Lord Hades warned. “Don’t make me have to yell again. The consort and my children are sleeping.”

“What the hell is this place?” Enda’s father was staring with wide eyes. The black walls, floors, and ceilings seemed to have that effect on everyone.

“It’s not hell, it’s the Underworld,” Giorgio and Enda said together.

“But if you were worried about my flames,” Enda added quietly. “Check out the ones in that pit.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:58 am*

Two days later, it was late afternoon when Enda finally had a chance to wander through the immaculate gardens in Giorgio's estate in Tuscany. Any damage that might have been caused by the fighting had been removed, and everywhere Enda looked all he could see was the peaceful beauty of nature.

It had been a weird few days. The scene at Lord Hades' court was something that Enda preferred not to dwell on too much. Needless to say, a person's screams could be heard for a long time once they were tossed into the pit. But that was all right, because Consort Ali brought marshmallows and taught Enda how to toast them over the flames on very long sticks.

Both Lord Hades and Giorgio seemed a little uneasy about Consort Ali's suggestion, keeping hold of both of the smaller men as Ali encouraged Enda to enjoy the gooey treat. Enda had been privately glad the consort had worked to make sure Enda could ignore the curses his father yelled in his direction as he was dragged to the pit by two huge demons.

Apparently, there was a lot that Enda's father had been up to – much, much more than just what Enda and the other poor souls in the warehouse had endured. Normally, Lord Hades wouldn't be allowed to deal with anyone living, but because of Enda's father's demon blood, Lord Hades did have jurisdiction over any punishments required. He'd been very firm and final about Enda's father's sentence.

I never did find out what his name was , Enda thought as he wandered along, stopping every now and again to sniff at a bloom, just enjoying being outside in the warm afternoon sun. There were no people ordering him around, no cameras in his face, no fear of worrying about what his father might do next.

I'm at peace, Enda realized. I've finally come into who I am, flames and all, and I have a wonderful mate... Enda sighed happily. He had a lot to be thankful for, and he was.

There had been other issues that gods had apparently been working on behind the scenes. Selling off the companies had apparently caused more of a stir than Lord Zeus was comfortable with, and Lord Hades told Enda that Zeus had set up a company and bought them all. The way Lord Hades explained it, it would give people like Coda and Zeus's other staff more of a chance to go through all of the records for each company, alerting authorities where necessary if there was wrongdoing done, and completing proper audits so the companies could be sold in a slower and more measured approach.

Enda still had refused to take any of the money, but Lord Hades explained that Zeus had bought them on the understanding that the cash price he paid for the companies, which was at a market valuation, would be put into the account that had been set up as a victim fund. There was a team - not connected to Giorgio's old employers who was being investigated, too - working on finding the families of those victims left in the warehouse.

In the meantime, Lord Zeus had apparently determined that any money that was made from the companies legitimately would go into a separate account for Enda himself. The ancient god had told Lord Hades that "the boy was just as much of a victim as anyone left in that warehouse. He's entitled to his share."

Enda didn't argue, there wasn't any point. Gods would do their own thing. His grandmother had told him that since he was little, and Enda was beyond wanting to deal with any of it. Giorgio didn't seem surprised, so that was that. Enda was just glad to put the whole business behind him. It's not like he'd studied finance or how to run a business in any of his limited schooling.

Back in Tuscany, he and Giorgio slept the entire day, waking up just long enough for a meal, before going back to sleep again. Enda was still tired. It was as if now the weight had been taken from his shoulders, his body realized he could relax.

I guess I just have a lot more to process , he thought. Enda wandered into a squared-off courtyard that was flanked by hedges. There was a stone seat, a small water fountain, and a raised garden bed on each side of the stone seat filled with flowers that gave off a light fragrance – one that seemed to lift Enda's mood.

Sitting down, Enda tilted his face up to the sun. He couldn't remember the last time he wasn't carrying fear or responsibilities. All I have to do now, he thought, is make sure I'm a decent mate. Which meant saying goodbye to the past and embracing the future.

Pulling out the book that belonged to his grandmother, Enda didn't open it, not this time. He could feel the essence of his grandmother still, could pick up the faint traces of her scent, but his grandmother, like his mother, was long deceased.

Lord Hades confirmed that the God of Death himself, Thanatos, had collected her soul and taken her to where she could rest. Knowing that for certain, gave Enda another closure he didn't realize he'd needed. As much as he'd guessed his grandmother had been dead for some time, having it confirmed and knowing her soul were safe was important to him.

Enda remembered some of the fun times he had when it was just him and her. Life wasn't easy. There were many times his grandmother went out and came home with barely any food, but she had a very determined way that Enda was proud of and liked to think that he was a bit like her in a way.

Unfortunately, the book wasn't full of comfort from a lady long past. The curse was still there, as well as something else that Lord Hades said he didn't need to have

translated. Pressing the book to his nose, Enda took in the scent of his grandmother one last time. I will always miss you.

Then he held it out with one hand, and thought about his phoenix, tapping into the flames as he gently blew on the old notebook. It turned to ash almost in a flash. Carrying the remains of the book in his hand, Enda went over to the nearest garden and gently smeared the ashes on the soil. His grandmother would have liked that, he was sure of it, and it was time to let that part of his life go.

“Did you fancy some tea?” Enda turned and smiled as he saw Giorgio coming toward him, carrying a large tray filled with a teapot and a cake tier stand like the one they’d shared on the bed. “It’s such a pleasant afternoon, I thought we could take our tea outside.”

“Why are you putting on that funny accent?” Enda chuckled as he went over, wrapping his arm around Giorgio’s waist, taking care not to dislodge the tray.

“I just thought you could imagine I was your snooty British butler or something like that.” Giorgio chuckled.

He looked a lot happier now, too. Lord Hades had explained that the business with Giorgio’s job had been taken care of and now there weren’t new sightings of Enda or Giorgio on social media, things very quickly died down as influencers and other people who followed the social media platforms so avidly quickly moved on to the next scandal and the next big thing.

Lord Hades had suggested that they keep their head low for a week or two until everything had died down completely. As the ancient god pointed out, fame was very fleeting in the modern world, and after five minutes people usually just moved on.

Giorgio had already suggested taking Enda to Australia to stay with Faron and

Patrick for a while. Enda had never been to Australia, and as soon as Giorgio mentioned they occasionally had kangaroos in their backyard, he was very keen to visit. He'd never seen a kangaroo before, either.

"I have made sure that the shortbread is extra firm," Giorgio said, clicking up a table and resting the tray on it. "Let me pour you a cup, and we'll have some fun dunking biscuits, shall we?"

"I don't know why you ask me to do that," Enda said with a laugh. "Mine always seem to break and end up in my tea. Yours don't."

"You've got to pick the right biscuit," Giorgio explained. "You want one that's firmer than the others, and if you turn it over, make sure it doesn't have a crack in it."

"Is that what you were doing last time?" Enda mock growled. "Were you cheating in the tea dunking contest?"

Giorgio laughed. "It's not a contest, it's just a cup of tea and some biscuits."

"Hmm, we'll see," Enda said. "I'll just enjoy the sun and the wonderful company."

Giorgio nodded, and Enda could tell he was pleased. Giorgio poured them both a cup of tea, and for a while, it was nice for the two of them just to sit there, quietly dunking biscuits. Enda found that the Gingernuts were a lot less likely to break into his cup. Once the tea and biscuits were done, Giorgio clicked away the tray and sat with his arm around Enda's waist.

"We've got a whole future ahead of us," Giorgio said, breaking the comfortable silence. "What do you think you'd like to do?"

Enda thought for a moment, so many different ideas flitting through his mind. But he

knew that no matter what he thought, two main concepts rang true. “All I’ve ever wanted was the chance to have a home base and then the chance to actually go and walk in the cities and countries I’ve only seen from afar. I want to be able to visit places like when you took me to that museum in Rome, but without all the cameras in my face. I want to experience history, maybe see it through your eyes.”

“Are you suggesting I’m old?” Giorgio nuzzled Enda’s hair.

“Just saying it how I see it. I want to see what this world has got to offer, and then I want to know when I’ve had enough of all the things, I’m able to go home.”

“I like that idea,” Giorgio said. “We can start with Australia, but there is a whole world out there we can explore, and we can do that for as long as you feel like.” He seemed to pause for a moment, and then he said, “Did you think you wanted to go to Japan any time soon? I know that was your childhood home.”

Enda quickly shook his head. “Not yet, not now. There will come a time when I’ll want to go. That place is in my blood, but for the moment, my memories connected to it...they’re too raw. It’s not something I’m ready for just yet.”

“Well, the good thing about Japan is it will always be there in another year, ten years, a hundred years, or whenever else you wanted to go,” Giorgio said gently.

“Is it selfish of me to not go?” Enda asked. “Both my mother and grandmother never thought of ever going anywhere else.”

But Giorgio was shaking his head. “No, babe, I think that when you’re ready, you will visit. But when we do, well, we can go as tourists, but we don’t have to do that any time soon. The big thing that I want you to remember is that you get to decide where you want to go and what you want to do now.



“I know it’s a bit of a novel thing for you,” Giorgio chuckled to show he was teasing, and Enda felt the warmth of his mate’s affection through their bond. “Honestly, I’ll support you in whatever it is you want to do, take you wherever it is you want to go.”

“I’ll probably never want to get on a boat again,” Enda admitted. “Especially anything described as a superyacht.”

Giorgio leaned closer and whispered in Enda’s ear, “I’ve never been on a boat before. Quite frankly, the idea terrifies me, so it’s not something that we need to do. That’s why hellhounds can translocate. We don’t have to worry about pesky things like airplanes and boats to get anywhere.”

“That makes you the perfect mate for me then,” Enda said.

“What about a home?” Giorgio asked. “Have you given any thought to where you’d like that to be?”

Looking around the private garden, Enda said, “This place is very beautiful, but I’ve got this feeling...” He struggled to put his feelings into words. “I think one day I’m going to go somewhere, and I’m going to know that’s where I want my home to be. Does that make sense?”

“Oh, my precious.” Enda found himself tucked against Giorgio’s broad chest, his mate’s heartbeat steadily thumping under his ear. “You are such a feisty, very rare and incredible bird. You should always be allowed to fly free and roost where you please. That is what I want for you, my precious. For you to fly free.”

“So long as my magical beast comes with me,” Enda said softly. “I never want to fly unless you’re running along underneath me. You’re kinda important to me. I hope you know that.”

A sudden burst of warmth flowed through their bond, and Enda realized that was the first time he'd said anything affectionate to the man who cherished his soul without hearing something equally affectionate first.

"We have so many firsts to share," Giorgio said, probably picking up Enda's thoughts. "It will be fun. I can promise you that."

"Fun in the sun." Enda sighed happily. "Just don't ever ask me to get you a drink."

Their shared chuckles lasted well past dinner and followed them into the bedroom that night.

Two weeks later

“What are you busy looking at?” Giorgio asked Faron as he wandered into the kitchen to find another cup of coffee. Faron’s and Patrick’s house in Australia was the perfect place to bring his little bird. Enda and Patrick had bonded instantly. Patrick was absolutely fascinated that Enda was a phoenix. But more than that, the two smaller men teased the bigger ones about their fear of spiders, and they spent an awful lot of time out in the garden looking for those darn kangaroos.

“They’ve finally found one.” Faron pointed out of the window. “You missed seeing Enda’s face when he saw that kangaroo for the first time. Classic shock, I tell you. I thought his eyes were going to pop out.” Faron frowned. “I’m not so sure that’s a good idea, though. I think they’re trying to coax it toward them.”

“What?” Giorgio hurried across to the window. “Do either of them know how badly those kangaroos can kick if they get upset?”

“You forget, my Patrick’s an empath,” Faron said. “He’ll know if that animal gets upset. Besides, could you imagine a kangaroo’s face if he caught a load of your Enda in fiery fury?”

“Good point.” Giorgio wasn’t sure he could watch that, though. He was doing his best to ensure Enda could explore the world at his own pace, but seeing Enda face off with a kangaroo that was bigger than him could seriously test his resolve. Turning away from the window, he rested his butt on the counter. “Life’s good for you here, I take it?”

Faron nodded. "Yeah. This place is remote enough to soothe my soul, but the township is not that far away, which satisfies Patrick. I had to completely renovate this kitchen, but the food Patrick cooks up makes that worth it. And the guest cabin you and Enda are staying in is new as well. Another plus point is that there are no wolf packs anywhere near here, which is great for times like the other night when most of us were here enjoying a barbecue. No neighborly fur to get ruffled. It's a win-win in my book."

"There's something else, though, isn't there?" Giorgio sensed that through their pack ties. Faron was hiding something. "Are you keeping secrets from your mate?"

"Not something that he won't find out about sooner or later," Faron whispered, looking around as if he was worried he'd be overheard. "Look, keep it to yourself, will you? I'm waiting for Patrick to tell me, but I think he's pregnant."

"Hey, that's freaking great news." Giorgio gave his packmate a huge hug before slapping him on the back because packmates don't tend to get mushy with each other. But Giorgio had known Faron had been hoping for a child since Beau and Blue had theirs.

"Shh! Keep it down," Faron said. "I don't think Patrick's realized it yet. I thought people who got pregnant spent all their time throwing up in the mornings. I know that's what happened to Lord Hades, and Cain had the same problem as well. But Patrick, he's not got any symptoms of anything."

"Are you sure you're right then?" Giorgio asked. "Maybe your hound's got his wires crossed."

"Don't be ridiculous," Faron said quickly. "I know that's what's happening with my little mate. He's getting himself a little potbelly. It's cute."

"Are you sure it's not just because he's eating more of his own cooking?" Enda had

filled out in the few weeks since they'd been together and had started traveling. He was looking healthy and happy and was letting his hair grow, which Giorgio loved.

"No, I know for a fact my Patrick is pregnant. I think he's just waiting for the perfect time to tell me."

"Hey, Enda and I can leave if you think Patrick's going to set up a special romantic celebration or something like that. You know we wouldn't want to get in the way of anything important."

"No, you know my Patrick's not like that," Faron said. "If he wanted to say something, he would. Maybe he's waiting for me to tell him. Oh, shoot, I hadn't thought of that! What if he's waiting for me to tell him – he knows my hound doesn't miss much."

Giorgio laughed. "For goodness' sake, Faron. Are you still second-guessing yourself about what your mate wants after all this time?"

"You'll be doing it yourself the first time you put your foot in it with your mate, and don't go telling me you won't because all of us hounds seem to do something silly at least once," Faron said crossly. "We think we know what's best for our mates. We think we do the right things for our mates, but sometimes..."

Giorgio wasn't going to think about all the ways a hound could fuck up their mating. He and Enda were very happy together, and Giorgio was hopeful he'd bypassed the innate gene that seemed to cause his fellow packmates to do something ridiculous regarding their mates. "Maybe you should make him a 'we're pregnant' cake," he suggested. "Isn't that what people do when they are celebrating something?"

"Patrick's the one that does the cooking," Faron said firmly. "I couldn't frickin make a cake to save myself."

“No, I probably couldn’t either,” Giorgio agreed. “But you could do this.” He clicked up a cake on a cake stand, and then he clicked up a pot of coffee because he was well aware that Faron wouldn’t be caught dead drinking tea, but then he added a plate full of biscuits as well.

“You can learn a lot from the British,” he said. “Admittedly, their teas are all not like this, but there are a number of little traditions they enjoy that I do, too. Why don’t we take this out and we can encourage our mates to come and sit with us before they get a hell of a kick from a kangaroo?”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.” Faron peered at the icing on the cake. “Are you sure that you’re not making that for your own mate?”

“Nope.” Giorgio shook his head. “I’m extremely happy for you, but Enda’s still got a long way to go before that’ll happen. We’ve talked about it, he knows it’s a possibility, but for now...You know, he really didn’t have a childhood of his own, and while I’m not suggesting for a second he behaves like a child now, I do want to show him that life can be fun before we settle down with a little one.”

“That’s what Patrick and I did,” Faron said. “We traveled for over six months before we found this place, and Patrick said he wanted to live here full time.”

“That’s what Enda wants, too,” Giorgio admitted. “He figures that he’ll know when a place feels right and that will be our home. Maybe then, like your Patrick, Enda might consider increasing our family. But it’s not just Enda holding back.” He met his friend’s eyes. “I’m not in a rush, my friend. I saw a hell of a lot of shit when I was working before Enda came along. Having fun is a bit of a novelty, but I think he and I can enjoy it for a while, don’t you?”

“Yeah, you both deserve some fun times in your future.” Faron rubbed his hands together and then picked up the cake stand. “Let’s go and feed our mates, and maybe then he’ll tell us. I’m not sure about the wording on that cake though.”

“What do you mean?” Giorgio said. “That’s a perfectly lovely cake.”

“You’ve written on it, ‘we’re having a boy.’ How do you know the baby’s a boy?”

Giorgio had a look at the cake again. “I don’t know. You just said he was pregnant. Does your hound know?”

Faron shook his head. “Couldn’t the cake say something like ‘we’re having an it’?”

“That doesn’t sound like the sort of thing people put on a cake,” Giorgio said. “It sounds a bit...off-putting? The ‘it’ you’re referring to is a baby.”

“Oh, yes.” Faron mock shuddered. “I can hear Patrick’s lecture over something like that now. He’s learned a lot from Blue.”

They both laughed. Blue was another mate with very definite ideas, but Beau adored him and their child. The feeling was mutual.

“How about we put ‘we’re having a baby’? No gender implied.”

“That’ll work.” Giorgio zapped the cake again. “How’s that?”

“It looks good.” But Faron frowned again. “Are you sure this is the right idea?”

“How would I know? I’ve barely been mated five minutes. You know your Patrick better than I do. Does he like cake?”

“He loves cake.” Faron seemed to dither again for a moment and then said, “We’ll take it out there. Maybe he won’t even read the icing. I’ve never noticed him reading a cake before.”

“Well, there you go. A cake and tea afternoon. No reading required unless Patrick

wants to.” Giorgio was keen to get outside and see his mate. “Are you happy now? Can we go and eat this cake?”

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“Why haven’t you told him yet?” Enda had so much fun with his new friend Patrick, but he could never imagine keeping anything from his mate. They were outside, watching a kangaroo, who Enda thought was a fascinating animal – definitely different from anything he’d seen before. But he was more concerned about Patrick. “Isn’t that what partners do when they’re expecting?”

“Normally, yes.” Patrick nudged him with his shoulder. “I promise you I’m not being mean. Faron is the best mate I could ever hope for, and I love him with all that I am.”

Frowning, Enda asked, “Isn’t that all the more reason to tell him?”

“I would, but you see, when Faron and I first got together, he had this idea in his head about how matings were meant to go and all that sort of thing. It caused us a few problems at the beginning there, but we worked it out. I mean, I told you about the wendigo story, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” Enda said quickly. “I don’t need to hear about that again. My Giorgio was out there helping fight that thing, too. Gives me the shivers just thinking about it.”

“Sorry, you’re right. But see, in that instance, the hounds were all so competent, and confident, and strong. They are really good at what they do, but in some ways...” Patrick trailed off and then added, “Faron already knows I’m having a baby. His hound knew within a few days of me realizing I was pregnant. He’s waiting for me to tell him.”

Tilting his head sideways, Enda looked at his friend. “I don’t understand. Are you saying that you know you’re pregnant, and Faron knows you’re pregnant, but neither



of you has said anything about it to the other one?"

"Yes." Patrick nodded eagerly. "See, you get it. It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But to be honest, at the moment, Faron is so much fun to tease. He's waiting for me to throw up in the morning, or wanting to rest every five minutes. Did you know, the other morning he brought me toast with honey in bed for breakfast?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Well, for one thing, I'm the one who always cooks him breakfast. But here's the thing. When I asked him why he did it, Faron just said that sometimes certain people enjoy toast with honey for breakfast."

"Certain people? Who's certain people?" Sometimes, the English language sounded strange to Enda's ears.

"Exactly." Patrick roared with laughter. "He meant pregnant people, but he couldn't bring himself to say it. That's what I mean, this is just so silly. Why doesn't he say anything? He's the one with the super senses."

"Perhaps he doesn't know how to?" Enda glanced over his shoulder and saw Faron and Giorgio coming out of the back door of the house. "Ooh, maybe Faron's going to tell you now. He's got a cake. Does he usually bring you cake?"

"No." Patrick risked a quick look over his shoulder. "Oh, my goodness. He's going to tell me. I can feel his nervous energy through our bond."

"Tell him first," Enda urged. "Don't put him through that if he's nervous about it."

"You're right." Patrick patted his arm. "Thank you." He turned and yelled across the yard. "Hey, Faron. I think I'm pregnant. Did you know anything about that?"

Enda watched in amazement as the cake stand Faron had been carrying went flying into the air. “Yes! Yes! Yes! I love you so much.” It was like a scene in a movie – Patrick running toward Faron and Faron running toward him. They came together, Faron picking Patrick up and kissing him with enough heat, Enda felt the need to turn his head.

He waited by the fence as Giorgio came over to him, his bulk blocking Enda’s view. “Did you tell Patrick to tell him?” he murmured.

Enda nodded. “I thought they were being silly, and I was worried about them. Patrick already knew that Faron knew, but neither of them said anything.” Looking up into his mate’s dark eyes, he said, “I’d hate it if you and I were like that, especially about something so important.”

“Please don’t ever worry about them, or about you and me.” Giorgio’s hand was warm on his cheek. “Patrick and Faron are already at a point where they can tease each other or act a bit silly and it doesn’t matter in the end. You saw how happy Faron is now Patrick has said something.”

“Was that happy or horny?” Enda giggled.

“Probably both. Just remember, babe, nobody ever gets things right a hundred percent of the time. That’s impossible. But the wonderful thing about having a mate is that you have that certainty deep inside that no matter what happens, the two of you will always be together. I know it’ll take a while for you to trust in that, but it will happen.”

“I trust you.” Enda made sure he was still meeting Giorgio’s eyes. “I trusted you from the first moment I saw you in the warehouse. I know deep in here” - he put his hand on Giorgio’s chest - “that’ll never change.”

“That’s my heart,” Giorgio teased as he rested his hand on Enda’s chest. “This one is

yours.”

“No, they are ours together, just like you and me. Can’t you feel it?”

“Oh, babe, you know I do.” And later, Enda decided that Giorgio was definitely the hotter hellhound when it came to kissing under the Australian sun. Although, he wasn’t sure the kangaroo was impressed. It was difficult to tell with kangaroos.

The End