



Saint (Demons of Foxglove Grove #3)

Author: *Chani Lynn Feener*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Nix Monroe has had it with playing things safe.

Where exactly has that gotten him anyway? In the bed of three of the Demons of Foxglove Grove, in over his head. Since he arrived at the prestigious university, nothing has gone his way, and nothing has been what it seemed. Now that hes finally discovered the truth behind what his cousin was up to, hes reevaluating his next moves. Starting with what to do with the Demons and all of the lies and secrecy between them.

Lake is still as desperate as ever for the crown, but does that desperation now rival the one he feels toward Nix?

West has positioned himself as a friend and confidant, but can Nix really allow himself to trust in that, or is this another carefully constructed ruse put on by the Demon to keep him in line?

Yejun is supposedly remorseful, but Nix isnt sure he can forgive, especially when a part of him still seeks vengeance for his cousin and the part the Demon played in her demise.

One thing is clear: Night of the Nightshade heralds the start of either the end or beginning for all of them. After giving the Order what they want isnt enough to stop the threats, will Nix band with the Demons and wrestle for control over Club Essential, or will he seize the first real chance he gets at escape with both hands and flee?

Does he really have a choice?

Did he ever?

Total Pages (Source): 24

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

There'd been a plan, a way the day was meant to play out. He'd spent a lot of time going over and over it again in his head, correcting the script, running all the possible scenarios that could happen so he'd be prepared to confront them and keep everything on track.

By now, he was meant to be at his studio, painting Nix's lithe body with his lips and his tongue.

Instead, he was here.

"June."

A paper cup filled with black coffee was held out before his face and after a moment, Yejun accepted it.

He hated black coffee.

He also hated when anyone other than West or Lake called him by a nickname, but he wasn't in the mood to correct the man who'd accompanied him all the way to the hospital morgue.

Beck Bardin settled down in the empty seat to his right, lightly sipping on his own cup of stale, bitter brew. They were waiting in the hallway for news on the body that had been brought in several hours ago, the Bardin name allowed for a speedier process than what would typically be applied to an obvious case.

The police were convinced it was a suicide, open and closed, but Yejun and the

others had to be certain. He hadn't been there to witness Dew's fall from the dorm building, but he'd gotten the cliff notes from Lake.

Lake, who was no doubt back at the Rook comforting Nix.

Something Yejun should be doing.

His grip on the cup tightened, the paper warping and spilling the hot contents over his hand. With a curse, he shot to his feet.

"Are you all right?" Beck took the cup and chucked it into a nearby wastebasket. "Wait here."

Yejun barely heard him as he rushed down the hallway toward the bathrooms, blindly staring at the bright red flesh on his slightly burned hand. He only had himself to blame. For this, and for not being the one Nix was currently relying on.

Damn it.

Was that even what he wanted? Only last week, Yejun had sworn to himself he'd never fall for Nix or his lies again, and yet here he was, concerned for him.

West and Lake believed that Nix hadn't known about his cousin's connection to them, and while some stupid part of him wanted to drink the Kool-Aid and believe it right along with them, Yejun had to be more cautious than that. He couldn't fall for the same trick twice, and buying that Nix didn't mean them any harm? That all of this was mere coincidence?

Wouldn't that be the epitome of foolishness?

"Fuck," he growled the word and then dropped back down onto the edge of the seat,

burying his hands in his dark hair to pull at the roots. Why was everything so messed up?

Why couldn't he just pick an emotion and stick with it?

Pick a damn truth and stick with it?

Yejun couldn't recall if he'd always been this flighty or if it was a byproduct of Iris's betrayal. She'd changed him; there was no arguing that fact, but to what extent and how deeply was left to be decided.

He could still picture the first time he saw her when he closed his eyes. See her bright smile, hear her voice greet him and tell him that his work was amazing. Even then, he'd heard it a million times before, and yet something about the sincerity in her gaze had snared him. He'd been caught, hook, line, and sinker, too stupid to realize she was merely the bait and he was the catch of the day. She'd been so convincing though. So perfect.

Too perfect, he could see that clearly now. But hindsight was twenty-twenty, and at the time, he'd lapped at her companionship like the love-starved freak that he was.

It was like someone had given her a blueprint to his inner soul. She'd known just the right thing to say, to do, to get him to confide in her. Trust her. When he'd learned that was all a lie...He'd snapped much the same way he had when he'd discovered Nix's secret.

Their approach was very different—not only due to the fact Lake was technically the one to do the approaching—but that didn't mean they weren't in on it together. Didn't mean that Iris hadn't sent her cousin here to torment Yejun further and exact revenge for getting her expelled from the university.

All of the worst-case scenarios he could muster had run through his mind while he'd taken Nix brutally on the coffee table in the living room. He'd fucked him like a madman, uncaring whether or not he made it good for the other guy, hell, actually doing everything in his power to ensure he wasn't, in fact. With Lake sitting there watching, it'd been a bit more difficult, but Yejun had managed. He'd had Nix a weeping, torn mess beneath him, practically begging for mercy by the time West had shown up.

And thrown yet another wrench into things.

Learning Iris had died had been...confusing. A part of him had actually mourned the loss of the person he'd once considered a friend. Another part had snidely turned his nose up and thought she'd had it coming. The other...

Yejun felt bad for Nix. Plain and simple.

In the end, that sympathy had taken control over the past week, morphing into something stronger—something dangerous and all-consuming. That, coupled with everything he knew about Phoenix Monroe and West's comments about how he wouldn't hold him responsible for his father's actions had wormed their way inside of Yejun. He'd snapped out of his anger. Only, it'd been too late.

Nix could barely look at him now. Flinched when he got too close. Any of the closeness they'd developed over the past couple of months had been obliterated, and now Yejun was left scrambling to collect the pieces. Even after he had them all, was it even possible to put them back together?

Would Yejun forgive someone else if they'd abused his body and fucked him into unconsciousness? If they'd forced him to lose his breath, over and over again, virtually suffocating him on and off for hours on end?

No.

No, he wouldn't.

But Nix wasn't him, and more importantly, Yejun couldn't allow that to be their outcome. Whether either of them liked it or not, they were bound together for eternity thanks to Lake's claiming mark and West's affection toward Nix. It was good he'd realized his error, but even if he hadn't, even if all he still felt for Nix was hatred, there was nothing Yejun could do about it. He couldn't punish him further, certainly couldn't kill him...

There was only one path forward.

Forgiveness.

Understanding.

Supplication.

The first for Nix, the second for them both, and the last done by Yejun.

"You're making it worse." Beck reappeared and untangled Yejun's fingers from his hair, pulling away his left hand to cover it with a cool compress made of shitty bathroom paper towels. "Does it hurt?"

"Yes." Pretty much everywhere.

Beck frowned down at him and pulled the towel away to peek underneath. "It doesn't look that bad. Hang on. I'll go get a nurse."

Yejun grabbed onto Beck's wrist before he could take more than a single step away

and shook his head. “No, it’s fine. It doesn’t hurt.”

“But you just said—”

“I wasn’t talking about my hand. It’s all good. Look.” He twisted his hand around so Beck could see it from all angles. “The redness is already subsiding. Thank you.”

“There’s no need to be so polite.” It seemed like he wanted to argue, but Beck ended up sighing and returning to the spot next to him.

“That’s my line,” Yejun teased, trying to change the mood to prevent being asked about anything personal. “You don’t have to be so attentive with me. It’s not like I’m West.”

The tips of Beck’s ears brightened and he turned his face away, but not before Yejun caught sight of the light blush. Usually, Beck was good at keeping his cool, but whenever his crush was mentioned, he always seemed to slip up.

Which was why Yejun always found it so strange that no one else had noticed. West spent more time around Beck than he did, and yet he’d never once brought up Beck’s feelings for him. Could he really be that obtuse?

“When are you going to do something about that, huh?” He shouldn’t be encouraging this, but he felt badly for Beck. At least if the other guy finally tried to make a move, he could be properly shut down and finally move on. And he would be shut down, there was no question there.

West cared for Nix, more than he’d ever cared for any past lover or fling that Yejun was aware of. So much so, he’d made a point of telling Yejun he needed to fix things between them in order to make Nix feel comfortable around them again. His best friend was trying to patch things up, but not for his benefit. It was all for their

Firebird.

Theirs, because despite what had taken place between them, Yejun still had a claim to Nix.

He just needed to figure out a way to get Nix to acknowledge him once more.

“Groveling, perhaps,” he muttered, but not quiet enough because Beck overheard, and misunderstood.

“I don’t think begging for his love and attention is the right way to go,” Beck said. “West isn’t the type to succumb to those sorts of manipulations.”

“You’re right, you may as well try the straightforward approach. So, why haven’t you?”

“It isn’t that easy, Yejun.”

“Sure it is. He’s dense. He’ll never figure it out on his own.” Proof of that was the fact Yejun had known about Beck’s crush for years now, ever since West’s dad had beat him in a parking lot and hospitalized him. At this very hospital, in fact. If after all this time, West still didn’t know how Beck felt, he never would. “Tell him yourself, that way—”

“He can let me down gently?” Beck smiled sadly and glanced away, embarrassed all over again when Yejun’s brow winged up in mild surprise. “You insult me. I’m not naïve. I’ve seen what’s been going on with you three since the semester started, and I didn’t need Lake’s teeth marks in Nix’s neck to confirm my suspicions either.” He wrung his hands. “It’s too late for me. West has already found someone else.”

“Sorry,” Yejun said weakly. He lifted a hand and lightly patted him on the back,

unsure how to proceed. He wasn't the best at comforting anyone outside of his inner circle. He could fake it, but something told him Beck would be able to see right through his bullshit. They'd known each other too long, even if they weren't all that close.

"It's my own fault," Beck said. "You're right. I should have confessed sooner while I still had the chance. At least Nix seems nice. He seems good for West, for all of you, really."

"He is." This was getting a bit too personal for his liking. He wasn't comfortable discussing Nix with anyone other than West and Lake. Hell, at this point in their personal relationship, Yejun didn't even have the right to. Nix probably hated him at the moment.

What could he do to win him back? There had to be something. Judging by how Nix and Lake had been acting earlier, clearly they'd made up already. That meant there was hope for him yet, didn't it? Of course, he'd taken things a lot further than Lake had...had a lot more to make up for but...Nix would understand where he'd been coming from, wouldn't he?

"Are you all right?" Beck frowned at him. "You've gone pale."

"Just thinking about why we're here," he lied and motioned toward the closed doors directly across from them. "How much longer do you think they're going to take?"

"Worried about your fourth?"

"Yes." Yejun leaned back in his seat.

"At least you've caught the culprit in time."

“Have we?”

“You’ve got doubts?” Beck asked. “I don’t know the full story since I’m not technically a part of this investigation, but from what I witnessed at the dorms, West seemed pretty certain that Dew is the guy you’ve been after. Lake appeared convinced as well.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Yejun reminded, “for confirmation. If there were any foreign substances in Dew’s system during the time of his fall, that could indicate that he was pushed.”

“No one else was up on that rooftop. We went over the security footage less than twenty minutes ago.”

That was true. West had sent it over after viewing it himself with the others. The footage was of the stairwell in the dorms leading up to the roof, and clearly showed Dew making his way up there shortly after West and the others had arrived to interrogate him. No one else was seen following or leaving, and they’d since inspected the roof to ensure no one was secretly hiding up there still.

“It just seems too easy,” Yejun admitted. Although, none of it had actually been, if he were being honest. He snorted. “Maybe I just don’t want to admit it’s been solved.”

“Why not?”

“Who knows.”

Beck considered things and then suggested, “Perhaps you’re just not satisfied with how things were discovered? I bet you feel guilty over the fact your work was used as a means to wound him, don’t you?”

It wasn't guilt, because Yejun didn't have any part in what had happened with his painting. It wasn't like he'd switched it, and if he'd known about it, he would have stopped it before anyone—let alone Nix—had gotten the chance to so much as glimpse it hanging on the gallery wall.

But he definitely felt...something.

There was a dash of anger at himself for getting upset in the first place. For feeling wronged for being accused when it was his own damn fault that the others were so quick to believe it. Of course, they'd think him capable of such a thing; it wasn't like he was known for being kind when he considered someone his enemy, and he'd made it clear in no uncertain terms for the better part of a week that he'd shoved Nix into that category.

"You reap what you sow," he whispered, shutting his eyes against the harsh overhead hospital lighting. "Nix and I have been...at odds."

"How so?"

"I wronged him." There was no way he was about to go into details about it. Hadn't he just been thinking how he didn't want to discuss this topic anyway? He was letting his emotions get the best of him again. Seeking...He didn't know what he was trying to find. Absolution? From Beck? If so, he was talking to the wrong person and he knew it.

"Have you tried apologizing?" Beck asked, tipping his head when that earned him another snort. "I mean it. A sincere apology can go a long way."

"Is that all it takes for you to forgive? All someone has to do is say they're sorry?"

"No," Beck waited for Yejun to meet his gaze once more and then added, "they also

have to mean it.”

Would that really be enough? It sounded ridiculously lacking to Yejun.

“Let’s focus on what you can do here and now,” Beck suggested. “We’re here to prove it was Dew who broke into the clubhouse, correct? How else can I help?”

“You’re already doing more than enough. Why are you even here anyway? The Order tasked us with doing this, not you.”

“I can’t exactly walk away, not when I witnessed so much today already. Besides, you know I’ve always been on your side. I want the three of you to succeed.” Beck leaned in conspiratorially and lowered his voice. “I don’t know if you’ve heard or not, but I sort of hate my father.”

“Ah,” Yejun opted to play along, if for nothing more than to lighten the mood, “so you’re not really out to help us, you’re out to screw over your dad.”

Beck laughed. “That’s one way of putting it.”

“But you aren’t denying it.”

“Do I really need to?” He sobered some. “In our world, very few things are believable. The fact that a person would side with even their sworn enemy in the name of revenge? That’s the most comprehensible thing any of us have ever heard.”

True. Lake had spent the better part of a decade doubting his cousin, testing Beck any chance he got in the hopes of slipping him up and revealing his true colors. West had stood up for him, but even Yejun had been convinced that Beck was lying in wait and the nice guy was all an act. As the years had passed and they’d grown, however, his suspicions had been proven wrong.

Beck had stepped in to shield Lake against one of his father's schemes more times than Yejun could count on both hands. On the surface, he kept the peace with his father, but they all knew better.

"Here," Beck held out his multi-slate, "check the messages Dew sent me. Maybe they could be useful."

"I'm not sure how hitting on a professor will help prove Dew tried to infiltrate Club Essential." It wouldn't even help prove that he was the one who put Iris up to betray them, which was the real problem.

The whole hacker breaking into the club thing? They'd made that up to protect themselves.

"Still, it could—" Beck stopped talking when they heard the sound of the metal doors finally opening.

One of the doctors who was on the Bardin payroll stepped out and bowed in greeting. "We'll have to wait a little longer for all of the tests, but we've gotten a few of the results back, as well as an official cause of death."

That seemed pretty obvious to Yejun—the guy had smashed his skull against the pavement, after all—but he stood and waved the doctor closer. "Tell me everything."

The sooner he finished here, the sooner he could get back to the Roost, and ideally begin making things right with Nix and the others.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

Nix kept his head under the harsh spray, letting the hot water cascade down his body. If only the shower could help wash away the thoughts tumbling in his head as well, then everything would be great.

Nothing was great.

Everything sucked.

It was bad enough that the image he'd registered of Dew falling outside the window kept replaying on repeat, but now that he was alone, it'd also unlocked old thoughts he'd wrongly believed had been dealt with.

Like what Branwen must have looked like when she'd taken her own life in a similar fashion.

How she must have seemed when she was finally discovered, broken and bleeding out on the street. By the time the medics had arrived, she'd been declared dead at the scene, but Nix had always wondered if she'd suffered. If she'd been forced to lay there, slowly dying, knowing the end was near.

The rage he'd felt over that possibility had spurred him into concocting this asinine plan. If he'd just stopped for a second, breathed and grieved like a normal person should, maybe he would have seen reason.

Maybe he wouldn't have fallen so easily for her note.

The one she'd left him, and only him.

He'd always been a pushover when it'd come to her, he'd just been too devoted to see it. Now that he was aware, it was painfully obvious what Branwen intended when she'd written him that letter. There was little comfort in having discovered her true motive, if anything, it left his heart feeling heavy.

Had she ever really cared for him? Clearly not in the same ways he had her, because the idea of sending her into a place like Foxglove Grove would have sent shivers down his spine. Even if she'd believed he wouldn't get involved with the Demons, she'd always known she was sending him into danger by having him hunt for the person who'd pushed her over the edge.

Or...

Was that fair to assume?

Was he being ridiculous still? Acting on emotion?

Nix turned the knob for the hot water, wincing at the immediate burn as the temperature went up.

Before now, he would have sworn that Dew wasn't her type, but...How well did he truly know her at the end of the day? Dew fit the description, in any case. He was a King on the Enigma app, and clearly had it out for the Demons. He'd set Juri up by sending him to retrieve the wrong painting, and had been the one to switch it out with the piece Yejun had intended to display.

Yejun had hung back and gotten everyone in attendance to spill. A couple of them had recalled seeing Dew there earlier. He must have had Juri bring the painting and then arrived at the gallery himself after he'd messed with the security cameras.

Nix had thought they were friends, but it made sense that Dew would have it out for

him to protect himself. West's plan had obviously worked the way they'd hoped, even if the outcome was confusing and more upsetting than they'd figured it would be. Juri was probably hurting right now too.

And Grady...

They'd been close friends with Dew for a long time, and word was already spreading around campus about his death. Rumors he'd tried to take down the Demons were circulating as well. Nix had even caught wind of a couple of them on their way back from the police station where they'd given their statements. He had no clue how long ago that had been, but he'd shut his multi-slate off the second he'd heard the first whisper and had entered the Roost with no intention of leaving any time soon.

Ironic, considering this place used to feel like a prison to him, yet here he was, taking sanctuary from it.

How desperate must Dew have felt to jump off the roof? Even when Nix had been at his lowest, his thoughts had always turned to fleeing for his life, not ending it. Something had scared Dew and Branwen so badly, they'd both decided death was the only option left to them.

But who?

And...did he really even want to keep looking?

He was too exhausted for guilt, cleaning off the rest of himself mindlessly before finally stepping out of the shower stall. Things like vengeance and revenge seemed too far out of reach at this point, like a pipe dream. A waste of time. Besides, it wasn't like either his cousin or Dew were around to see him avenge them even if he did manage to identify the other accomplice.

Because what he'd concluded with West the other week still held true, maybe even more so after today's events. There were two people involved in this plot against the Demons. Dew was undoubtedly one of them, but the other remained a mystery.

Maybe that was it. Maybe he'd taken his own life to protect this person.

Did he love him, the same way Branwen believed she'd loved the person who'd used her? Were they one and the same?

West would find out. He should be doing a deep dive into Dew and his electronic footprint already, while Yejun was at the hospital waiting for the medical report, and Lake made calls to all of the Essentials who could be beneficial to them in their search.

Nix was the only one who had nothing better to do than wallow alone in a bathroom. The only one who seemed affected by witnessing a gruesome suicide. It made him wonder if things like this were more common for members of the club than they let on to the public. If death, destruction, and mayhem were truly things he'd signed up for.

For life.

He dried himself halfheartedly and then stepped from the bathroom, a waft of steam exiting it along with him. The second he stepped into the attached chamber, his skin prickled from the chill.

"How careless." Lake's gaze landed on him from the window where he'd been standing, expression morphing into one of obvious displeasure. He was crossing the length of the room almost instantly, pulling Nix over to the bed as his eyes scanned over every bare inch of his flesh. "You're bright red. Did you try to boil yourself alive in there? I knew I shouldn't have allowed you to bathe alone."

“But you did,” Nix’s voice sounded weak and distant even to his own ears, and when he tipped his head back so he could see the other man’s face, he noted the way Lake seemed to falter in his annoyance.

When they’d arrived back, Nix had warned Lake not to disturb him. He’d wanted to shower in peace and have a moment alone, a rarity now that he lived in this house with three other pushy men. It was obvious Lake had wanted to refuse, but in the end, he’d agreed. Nix didn’t want it to, but the fact that he’d respected that and had actually stayed out foolishly meant a lot to him.

Because accepting the bare minimum was now his forte, it seemed.

The next emperor of Tulniri cleared his throat and then removed the sweatshirt he was wearing. He tossed it over Nix’s shoulders and went to the closet, returning a moment later with a familiar set of sweatpants and a pullover.

“Déjà vu,” Nix mumbled.

Lake scowled but didn’t say anything, carefully dressing him. The silence stretched around them, disrupted only by the soft pattering of rain against the window and the skylight above. Another typical backdrop to their interactions. It was almost as though this moment had been captured and suspended, forcing them both to relive it over and over again.

“I don’t think it would be the worst outcome,” Nix whispered, not realizing he was speaking out loud until it was too late.

Lake pulled on Nix’s last sock and then quirked a brow at him, remaining kneeling on the floor as he waited for an elaboration. They’d stay like that forever too, until he got his answer. The other guy was stubborn like that. Pushy and fierce and overbearing.

Hell, just to get his way, he'd stuck his teeth into the side of Nix's neck and torn a mating mark into his flesh. A permanent decision he'd made all on his own, one that bound them for the rest of their lives, whether they liked it or not.

"Why do you like me?" he found himself asking. His left hand lifted, and before he knew it, he was lightly tracing the sharp curve of Lake's right eyebrow, the blond hairs tickling the pad of his finger. "What would you do if I told you I didn't like you back?"

"I think it's a bit too late for that, Songbird," Lake replied in a far too gentle tone, clearly meant to calm Nix's nerves.

They'd gotten into a huge fight and had sort of made up—or, at least had come to an understanding. Trying to get along was the best option for the both of them, but Nix couldn't lie to himself that Lake's actions were an act. Somehow, during their time together, the man, who was kneeling at his feet, had actually developed feelings for him.

"You like me," Nix stated matter-of-factly.

"I do."

"Tell me why?"

"Why does it matter?"

Nix dropped his hand. "It just does."

"Are you trying to use me to distract yourself?"

He didn't deny it.

Lake hummed and then stood, hovering over Nix, demanding all of his attention with his mere presence alone. He had that effect on everyone. He was electric and domineering by nature, something that would no doubt come in handy once he took the throne and became emperor.

Something that, if Nix were being honest with himself, had always made him feel safe. Even when they'd been at their worst.

"Our date was interrupted," Lake said. "Should we attempt another?"

"I wouldn't really call that a date." Nix had agreed to attend the gallery showing with him as a sort of step in the right direction. It'd all gone to shit the moment Yejun's painting had been revealed, but it wasn't like it'd been an amazing first date prior to that. "More like an obligation."

"Are you suggesting dating me is—"

Nix rolled his eyes, cutting Lake off. "I'm saying we can't count that."

He was quiet a moment and then reminded, "I did ask you to guide me in this department."

"It's not like I have a lot of dating experience either." Not wanting to rehash their entire conversation, Nix dropped back so that he was lying on the bed and stared up at the darkening sky through the window above him. "In any case, this day is clearly cursed."

Lake hesitated and then eased down onto the bed at his side, turned toward him so he could rest his head on his hand and gaze down at Nix.

The position was far too intimate, and Nix felt himself growing self-conscious.

“Quit squirming,” Lake ordered, the corner of his mouth turning up ever so slightly.

“I’m not.”

Lake rested a hand over Nix’s center to still him.

The touch brought a rush of heat throughout his entire body, but Nix inwardly fought against the sensation. He wasn’t kidding. Today had gone so horribly wrong. Even if they’d somehow completed the task handed down to them by the Order, someone had lost their life in the process. That couldn’t be considered a win, could it?

“I don’t want to.” Nix looked away, unsure how his refusal would be taken, but Lake merely frowned before he seemed to catch on.

“Relax, Songbird. I’m not going to fuck you tonight. You’ve been through enough.”

The deal the three of them had made—behind Nix’s back—was Lake would wait to sleep with him until the others already had. They’d crossed that bridge, but Lake had found out at the worst time, and Nix had been on the defensive with him ever since. Now, while he was exhausted and, admittedly, in serious need of comfort, would be the best timing for Lake to take advantage.

But he was telling him he wasn’t going to?

Nix didn’t know how to feel about that.

“Then...” He motioned with his chin down at where his hand still sat. “What’s this?”

“My attempt to get you to confide in me,” Lake said. “That’s what you wanted, isn’t it? A mate you could rely on and talk to. So, talk to me.”

...Talking had never been their strong suit, unless of course it was banter in the bedroom. That's how all of this had started in the first place, how Nix had found himself ensnared by the Demon lying next to him and his two best friends. His attempts to discover the truth for Branwan had led him down the rabbit hole that was the Enigma app. That was where he met Maestro, who he later found out was Lake.

Maestro had a way about him, a way of distracting Nix and making things...more simple. He gave instructions and Nix automatically wanted to follow them. Weirdly, he'd always made him feel a bit safe.

But Maestro wasn't Lake, not really. Maestro was a mask, a version of the other guy that he sometimes slipped into, but not the whole person in the slightest. Nix might not be able to have one without the other, but he needed to constantly remind himself that Lake wasn't as straightforward as the man he'd met on the app.

Lake could be every bit as tricky as West. As selfish as Yejun.

And cold. He could be so cold.

Nix shivered and then wet his lips. "About what?"

"Anything," he suggested, "but we could start with your cousin. I'm sure what you witnessed today brought back painful memories. Do you want to share them? West says sometimes talking about the bad stuff can help make it better."

"Taking pointers from West now?"

Lake grimaced and then rolled onto his back, settling more comfortably at Nix's side so that their arms were pressed together. "He's pointed out more than once that you like him more than me."

“Ah, so it’s a competition?”

“Nix.”

“What? If you’re waiting for me to stroke your ego, don’t hold your breath. We’re nowhere near good enough for that yet.”

“Yet,” Lake rolled the word off his tongue, and the tension in his body seemed to ease. “That means you think we can get there. Okay. I can wait. Now, back to the topic at hand. Talk to me. Tell me how you’re feeling.”

“Numb, mostly.” He wanted to cry and scream and rant, but couldn’t seem to find it in him. Ever since he saw Dew fall, everything inside of him seemed to lock into place. It felt like he was being dragged into a deep, dark ocean and held underwater. Like he was screaming, but there was no sound. “Like I’ve completely lost control and none of this is real.”

“Because of your cousin?”

“Because of the things she did when she was still alive,” he said. “Because of the way she chose to spend her final days.” He grew silent for a moment and then rolled onto his side so he could face Lake. “She wouldn’t have dated Dew. He can’t be the person she wrote me about.”

“I agree.”

“Which means he’s still out there.”

“Yes.” Lake reached out and brushed a strand of Nix’s blond hair off his forehead, hand wrapping around to the base of his skull afterward. The touch was warm and comforting, lacking any sort of threat or sexual tension.

If anything, that only made Nix's confusion grow.

"Why aren't you trying to sleep with me?" This was the first time the two of them were alone in a room together since the incident with Yejun. They'd kissed once, but that was as far as things had gone.

"Do you think I only want you for sex, Songbird?"

"I think that's a big part of it, yeah."

Lake's nose scrunched in displeasure. "I could fuck anyone I want whenever I feel like it."

"No," Nix warned, "you can't."

He chuckled. "That's not what I meant. Though, I can't say I don't find your jealousy comforting."

"I'm not..." Shit. He glanced away, but Lake's hand tightened until he looked back.

"I don't want anyone else. I meant it before. Before I made you my mate, it's not like I didn't have options. I could have chosen anyone."

"Then why me?"

"Because you're the one I want."

"Even after...everything?"

Lake shrugged. "Relationships aren't easy."

“You don’t know anything about romantic relationships,” he snorted.

“That’s true. But everything I’ve heard about them indicates they take work to strengthen and grow. That’s what I want for us, Nix. I want this to work. I don’t want either of us to feel trapped by that mark on your neck.”

It was a bit hypocritical, considering he’d been the one to put it there, without asking for Nix’s consent beforehand, but they’d been through that more than once already, and Nix was tired.

“I don’t want to fight anymore,” he confessed. “I want to try and make this work too.”

“Tell me about your cousin,” Lake said. “Tell me what she was like. What you were like after she was gone.”

“Why?”

“It could help.”

“I don’t want to.” He pursed his lips. “Tell me about you instead.”

Lake frowned. “What about me?”

“Anything,” he said, then corrected, “Everything.”

“We could be here all day.”

“Good. I don’t think I can face anyone else right now.”

Lake searched his expression and then pulled him in close, settling his chin on the top

of Nix's head. "Where should I start?"

"What were you like as a child?"

He grunted. "Incorrigible."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

West set the metal tray with the single cup of steaming tea on the ground by the door and retreated a step so that the voices inside faded. It was tempting to eavesdrop further, due to both curiosity and worry, but he could execute more self-control than that.

Nix seemed to bring out the best in him.

Go figure.

He'd always been opposed to long-term relationships. He'd never really had a great example growing up, after all. His parents had hated each other. Yejun's were in constant competition to see who could bring in more fame and prestige. Lake's had died too soon, but West had always secretly been convinced eventually they would have fought and resented one another too.

For him, there was just Lake and Yejun and that was enough. Then his best friend had brought Nix into their circle and things had slowly but surely changed. A part of him was still uncomfortable about that fact, about this new existence, but for the most part, he was adjusting, and in ways he didn't even realize until much later.

Forget what Lake wanted, he wanted to keep Nix. Which meant his friends needed to make good with Nixie so they could get back on track toward the perfect life.

"What are you doing?" Yejun appeared at the end of the hall, snapping West out of his thoughts. He started to approach, pausing when West waved him off and joined him instead.

“Let’s go to the kitchen,” he suggested.

“But I have to report.”

“Not now.” He turned Yejun around and forced him to retreat back the way he’d come. “Let them have some space.”

Yejun glanced over his shoulder at Lake’s bedroom door. “Are they making up?”

“They apparently already have.” West was aware that Yejun knew that much already, but he didn’t call him out on it. June had always prided himself on his connection with his emotions, but the reality was, he was always the first to lose it when it came to matters of the heart. “They need more time alone to work things out between them. You’re going to have to wait your turn.”

They descended the wooden stairwell, entering the living space of the Roost, Yejun allowing West to lead him all the while.

“He doesn’t want me near him,” Yejun pointed out solemnly.

“Do you blame him?”

“No.”

“Everyone is high-strung at the moment,” West said. “We all just need a minute to breathe. Give it time. He’ll come around.”

Yejun propped his elbows on the kitchen island, watching as West rounded it and reached for the center cabinet over the stove. “And if he doesn’t?”

“Then we’re going to have a shitty next sixty or so years?” He snorted when that

earned him a dark look and brought two empty glasses over, along with a full bottle of June's favorite liquor. "I'm joking."

"What if you aren't?"

"What if Mount Pia erupts tomorrow and we all die?" West poured the maroon liquid into both glasses and slid one over to his friend. "Cut the shit. This is no different than any other obstacle we've faced. You just keep going until you get through it, man."

"Easy for you to say." Yejun gulped down half the contents. "You're not the one he hates."

"And whose fault is that?"

"Mine." He slammed the glass down and then groaned, dropping his head into his hands. "I fucked up. I get that."

"You weren't thinking clearly." Understatement, but kicking the guy when he was down wasn't beneficial for any of them. "Suffocating our fourth was taking things too far though. If you ever pull a stunt like that again—"

"I won't." He exhaled slowly. "I don't want to hurt him. I was just so angry. I'm still so angry."

"He didn't know about Iris."

Yejun glanced up at him. "You believe that?"

"Yes."

“One hundred percent?”

“Yes,” he repeated more firmly. “You didn’t see how messed up he’s been over that discovery. He feels guilty and betrayed, probably more so than you even.”

Yejun snorted, clearly not believing him.

“No, seriously. Think about it. Nix has told us time and time again he’s only ever been close to one person his entire life. Then he comes all the way here in order to seek out justice for that person, only to discover their final act alive was figuring out a way to use him? Iris didn’t just manipulate you, June. She knew exactly what to say, how to phrase things, to get Nix to drop everything and enroll in Foxglove.”

Yejun’s brow furrowed. “Are you certain? Why would she do that?”

“Revenge?” West shrugged and sipped his drink. “Because the bitch was crazy? Who knows.”

“Don’t you want to?”

“Not especially.” It didn’t matter to him why she’d done any of it. All West cared about was that her actions had harmed Nix, possibly beyond repair. “He’s hurting. It’s our job to make it better, not worse.”

Yejun nodded and then something seemed to occur to him. “Since when did you become such a romantic?”

West winked and blew him a kiss over the rim of his glass before downing the rest of its contents. He refilled his and then did the same to Yejun’s. “It turns out taking care of people isn’t so hard. I actually seem to be fairly good at it.”

“Bragging because Nix likes you the most right now?”

“Obviously.”

“Have you said any of this to Lake?”

“Obviously.” He wanted to mend things between the four of them, sure, but that didn’t mean his competitive streak with the future emperor needed to take the backseat. “You both need to understand the severity of what you’ve done.”

“Coming from the guy who loses his cool more than any of us, that’s rather ironic.” Yejun took a few sips from his glass, going slower this time. A good sign. “Since Lake is busy mending fences, I guess we’ll just have to go over what I found out at the hospital ourselves.”

“Did Beck stay with you?” West couldn’t help but ask.

“Yeah.” Yejun gave him a funny look. “You should find time to talk to him.”

He quirked a brow. “About what?”

Yejun shrugged cryptically.

Great, had Beck finally confessed to him? If Yejun had broken the poor guy's heart, was he now trying to use West to smooth things over? They needed Lake’s cousin to continue being on their side, like he’d always been. It was useful having a family member in their corner, especially when Beck’s father was constantly trying to get in their way.

“Whatever.” He’d deal with that potential shit show later. “What did the doctor say? Was it a suicide or not?”

“No foul play suspected,” Yejun said. “He didn’t have anything in his system, and the location of his injuries lines up with someone who’d have jumped from those heights. Dew killed himself. The only question is, did he do it to escape us or someone else?”

“Both would be my guess.” It was certainly Nix’s, and West trusted their fourth’s opinion. “We found those emails between him and Hendrix, but there’s nothing we can do about them.” They were written in code to seem innocent, and even though someone of Hendrix’s status talking about baked goods with a student would seem strange, it wasn’t enough to have the Order turn against him. “If we tip our hand and try something too early, we risk this blowing up in our faces. I’m going to keep seeking out the truth, but it can’t be our main focus at the moment.”

“Because of Nightshade?” Yejun shook his head. “We were given until Demons Passing to find the hacker.”

“We both know there is no hacker,” West pointed out. “Which means the deeper into this we get publicly, the more risky it becomes. The last thing we need is the Order discovering what really went down that weekend and who was actually responsible for planting those devices in Hendrix’s office.”

Forget about all that. If it was discovered someone had used the same poison that had murdered the emperor on West, and they’d kept that a secret, they’d all be tried for treason. Didn’t matter who Lake or the rest of them were.

“The whole reason we hid it in the first place was to protect us,” West reminded. “We can’t drop the ball now. We’re close, but close isn’t the finish line.”

“Stop talking like we’re discussing sports,” Yejun grunted. “I get it. We hand over the information collected on Dew and pin him as the hacker. If he’s the only one responsible, no one else will bother looking further into things.”

“Exactly. And while they’re busy preparing for Lake’s ascension, we can focus on tracking the real threat down. He’s been quiet since his failed attempt with Iris, but that doesn’t mean he’s given up. It’s safer for us to assume he’s lying low and licking his wounds. His next appearance might be just as bad as the last time.”

“We should start checking all consumables for poison,” Yejun suggested.

They’d been more careful, not allowing anyone to enter the Roost, checking to make sure all of their products were sealed before they ate or drank it. If the goal of this person was to mess with the line of ascension, passing the Order’s test and ensuring Lake’s place on that line would no doubt draw their attacker out once more.

“He’ll show himself soon,” West said. “Probably before Demons Passing. He’ll want to stop Lake at all costs.” Hell, this person had already killed the emperor to get her out of the way. They were committed. “Hendrix has to be behind this.”

“He’s the only puppet master I can think of,” Yejun agreed solemnly. “There’s no one else who would benefit from Lake’s removal. But we’ve been saying that since the beginning, and it hasn’t brought us any closer to finding any evidence. When was the last time you even saw him?”

West thought it over, frowning when he realized it’d actually been a while. “He hasn’t been at the Club House when I’ve been. The last meeting they called us to, he was absent as well.”

“Maybe Lake has heard from him.”

“Or you could always just ask Beck.”

Yejun smirked. “Or you could.”

West's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why do I get the feeling you're trying to foist me onto Beck all of a sudden? Don't tell me you're hoping to get rid of me so you'll have time with Nix?"

Nix wasn't ready to be alone with Yejun, but West kept himself from saying as much. There was enough going on to keep them all fairly busy, so if Nix wanted to avoid June, he'd find a way to do it with or without West's help.

"Whatever," Yejun rolled his eyes. "I'll text him, happy? But you've got to do me a favor."

"I'm not helping—"

"It doesn't have to do with the Firebird," Yejun cut him off. "I know I'm on my own with that. But what I want won't exactly please him so...if we could keep it between us for now, that would be great."

That didn't sound good.

"What is it?" West asked.

"Look into Briant."

He swore and pulled away, setting his glass down on the counter with more force than necessary. "Seriously?"

"I just want to be sure."

"Sure of what? That the guy didn't have a hand in his own sister's destruction? Come on, man. Besides, he's with Juri—"

“I still don’t trust Juri.”

“He’s done nothing to make us think he’s out to get us,” West stated. “If anything, he’s gone out of his way for Nix. That should mean something to you. It does to me. Anyone who has our fourth’s back is okay in my book. We’ve already proven that Dew set him up with the painting swap. Dew was also the one who pushed Nix into the waif stall that day. There’s nothing to pin onto Juri even if you want to.”

“What has Nix told you about Iris—” Yejun grimaced and licked his lips, then corrected himself, “Branwen and the letter she wrote him?”

This was all information that needed to be shared between the four of them anyway, so West didn’t feel bad talking about it. There wasn’t much, though. It’d been a one-page letter written by a girl who knew she was about to die. Most of the things she’d written had been clear coercions meant to guilt and enrage Nix enough to throw himself into the fire on her behalf.

The more he thought about that, the angrier he became. The idea that someone Nix had trusted so much could use him like that, and as her final act as well...It was deplorable. He’d never even dream of betraying Lake or Yejun that way. If there was danger, he’d want them far away from it, not throwing themselves into the thick of it. Especially not without the full story.

She’d strung him along and left him only half an instruction manual. If she’d truly wanted him to avenge her, she would have written out the guy's full name and included his social media handle.

“Branwen knew this guy,” West divulged. “She thought she was in a relationship with him even.”

“So she lied to me, even at the end,” Yejun didn’t sound all that surprised about that.

“We should take a look at the people around Dew.”

“You don’t think he’s the one Branwen was seeing?”

Yejun made a face. “Absolutely not. She was a bitch, but she had taste.”

“Wow.” West would pretend to care about speaking ill of the dead—twice over, in this case—but he didn’t have it in him. He was worried about Nix and honestly a bit cranky. The last thing he wanted to do was research. He’d much rather take a warm bath with Nixie and then hit the hay. “Dew’s group is the same one Nix hangs around with.”

“That could be on purpose.”

It wasn’t entirely out of the realm of possibility. Could be whoever the mastermind behind all of this was, they were lying low to collect intel on Nix. Maybe this person already knew about his connection to Branwen.

“I’ll talk to him about it,” West said.

“Or—”

He gave a single curt shake of his head. “Don’t push your luck, June. Suspecting his friends is already going to upset him, it’ll only be worse if the accusation comes from you. We’re already using Juri as the sacrifice.”

“Nix agreed to that,” Yejun reminded.

West drank the remaining contents of his glass and then sighed. “I’ve got to get to work if I have a hope of finishing anything in time for Lake’s birthday dinner tomorrow.”

“Right,” Yejun groaned, “that. Any chance your dad will cancel?”

None of them were in the mood for a celebration, but considering this was the first birthday in a couple of years that Lake would be present on planet for... “No chance in hell.”

Which meant the four of them were going to have to play happy family and put their grievances aside for a night.

Fantastic.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

Nix wasn't exactly nervous...but he wasn't exactly not nervous either.

He wrung his hands as he peered out the window of the hovercar, trying not to breathe too deeply. West had opted to drive to his father's house for the birthday celebration, forcing both Lake and Yejun into the back seat and Nix in the passenger one. Honestly, he was grateful for it because the tiny car already felt cramped enough, and that was with them behind him.

Whatever cologne they'd put on, it'd almost immediately filled the car, a mixture of woodiness and lemon tickling at Nix's nose. He'd catch a whiff of one, and then the other a second later, almost as though the scents were battling it out for dominance.

Any other occasion and he would have laughed at that thought, but now...

West reached over and dropped an open palm over Nix's left thigh, but when Nix glanced over, the Demon had his gaze straight ahead on the road.

It was still difficult for him to comprehend how they'd gotten to this place. When they'd first met, West was the one Nix had feared the most. Now he was an odd comfort in a house that felt equal parts like a prison and a psych ward.

If he listed all the horrible things that had been done to him since his arrival at Foxglove University, he was certain he'd have enough for a lawsuit. Of course, that would be the case on most other planets, but since this was Telniri, and he was dealing with the Demons, he'd be laughed straight back into one of their beds before finishing up the paperwork if he tried.

But that wasn't the problem.

The problem was that Nix didn't even want to try. He hadn't considered ways to work against them or escape in...a while—much longer than he should have. Hell, running should have been his first matter of business, especially now that he knew who Branwen really was, and yet he was doing the exact opposite. He was settling.

Was he settling for the abuse, though?

Or giving into his feelings for the three men currently responsible for making the drive to the Corleone residence stifling and practically unbearable?

Feelings he most definitely shouldn't have, but ones even Briant couldn't convince him to shake. His cousin was going to be released from the hospital soon, and Nix was already preparing himself for the argument, knowing that the older guy was going to want him to return home with him. That wasn't going to happen, but Nix needed to come up with a way to explain why without admitting he'd fallen for his captors.

Something told him Briant wouldn't settle for Stockholm syndrome being a good enough reason to leave Nix behind. Despite where he currently was and the state his sister had been in before she'd ended things, Briant actually took mental health rather seriously. That was why he'd taken it so hard when Branwen had died. He'd blamed himself for missing signs there was no possible way he could have seen.

The two of them might not have been close, at least, in the sense they'd never really been friends, but Nix cared for and respected his older cousin, and he hated seeing him so torn up.

Hated it even more now, knowing why Branwen had done what she'd done, and how she'd chosen to spend her last moments.

Hated thinking about how she'd almost murdered West and framed Yejun for the death of his best friend, all because some asshole who'd never really loved her had asked it of her.

Nix placed his hand over West's and squeezed once, back to staring out the window as the Demon drove the car deeper into a forested area and further from the city. He'd been a bit surprised when he'd found out where the Corleone residence was located since he'd anticipated a huge mansion in the very center of the hustle and bustle. But no. Apparently, Demitrious had a penchant for nature, and so he'd built the family home on the outskirts of Ripley forest. The forest itself spanned close to one hundred and fifty acres and was said to be entirely owned by the Corleone's.

He supposed the location didn't really matter anyway. The reason he was nervous was because this was the first time he was going to be meeting West's father, and after all of the shitty things he'd heard about the man, he wasn't exactly looking forward to it.

At least he was doing it now at a small gathering meant to celebrate Lake's birthday. Since his only other surviving family was Hendrix and Beck—and there was no way Lake was going to be wished a happy birthday from the first—Demitrious had been hosting a dinner since he'd taken Lake in. They'd all reassured Nix that it would be a quiet evening, and that they'd shield him from the worst of Demitrious's scrutiny.

Nix was trying to look at it like a sort of trial run. Even though Juri had agreed to be the Demon's sacrifice for the Night of the Nightshade, Nix had been informed his presence was still required at the ceremony. Better to meet West's imposing dad now and get it out of the way so he could focus more tomorrow when—

West swore next to him, hand tightening on Nix's thigh reflexively before he pulled away and replaced it on the steering wheel.

Someone poked their head between the seats, and when Nix realized it was Yejun, he practically recoiled, pressing his shoulder tightly to the passenger door as he tried not to pay that particular Demon any mind. Instead, he stared ahead at what had caught West's attention.

And then blanched.

“What the actual fuck,” Yejun growled, dropping back into his seat.

That renewed the slight distance between them, and Nix exhaled in mild relief, even though his heart was still thumping wildly in his chest as he took in the sight of over three dozen cars.

They lined the long driveway that led from the road into the forest, and no doubt to the Corleone manor. There were far too many to trick himself into believing the vehicles belonged to the cooking or cleaning staff, which meant...

“That absolute bastard,” West cursed. “What the hell is he trying to pull?”

“It's a statement,” Lake didn't sound any more pleased than the other two.

“To us,” Yejun asked, pointing forward as a large fountain settled in the center of the driveway, which circled around it, “or them?”

People were getting out of their cars and heading toward the steps that led up to the towering white and gold building set before them. There appeared to be at least four levels to the monstrous home, all with shuttered windows that were open and had glowing orbs dancing behind the panes of glass.

Lights had also been left out to decorate the lawn, creating pathways that led to the entrance, like little beacons in the darkening evening. The place was clearly set up for

a party, and from what he could see, everyone was dressed for one as well.

Nix stared down at his black dress pants and the maroon button-up he was in. He'd forgone a tie because West had assured him this dinner was always semi-formal. At least he'd had the good sense to put on dress shoes instead of sneakers, but still...he felt incredibly out of place now that he was spotting full ball gowns and three-piece suits everywhere.

"Relax, babe," West reassured him, gentling his voice as he pulled the car onto the circular driveway. "I have clothes you can change into if you really want."

"I do." He didn't bother asking how West had items that would fit him, considering their sizes were vastly different. It didn't really matter since he'd pretty much put on anything at this point.

"Good thing I left one of my suits in your closet," Yejun said from the back. "Can't believe your dad pulled this on us. Bastard."

"We should sneak in through the back entrance," Lake suggested.

"Yeah," West agreed. "Let's not give these assholes the satisfaction of seeing us underdressed for your own damn party. Fuck Demitrious. What a prick."

"Why do you think he did this?" Nix asked as West drove off the pavement and onto the grass, heading straight for a cropping of trees. Before he could become worried they'd hit one, the car pivoted and slipped between the front line, suddenly shielded from view by thick tree trunks and bushy branches. "Secret path?"

"Even all the way out here, it's good to have some extra privacy." West winked at him. "This leads to the pool house. We can park there and use the tunnel to get to the mud room on the main level. The servants' entrance won't be visible to the party."

“Of course you have a servants’ entrance.”

“Hey, my dad built the place. I only lived there.”

“Demitrious either wanted to throw us off guard and remind us who’s in charge,” Lake answered Nix’s earlier question, “or he’s trying to remind the rest of the club. We won’t know which it is until we’re inside and speak with him. How he approaches us will tell us everything we need to know.”

West nodded. “We can evaluate how to act from there.”

“Act?” Nix frowned.

“Do we need to go on the offensive,” he elaborated, “or defensive.”

“I would rather just go home,” Yejun said. “Pop some popcorn, put on a movie, snuggle under a thick blanket...”

“You’d be snuggling alone,” Nix muttered before he could help it, freezing almost as soon as the words left his mouth.

Everyone went quiet, the mood in the car tensing even more than it’d already been. He held his breath, waiting for a rebuttal, but it never came. Instead, Yejun remained silent in the backseat, and neither West nor Lake came to his defense.

It felt...

Weird.

The dynamics between the four of them felt off. Had felt that way ever since Yejun had splayed Nix over the coffee table and punished him for being related to Branwen.

Since he'd choked him repeatedly by crushing him beneath his weight, even as he continued to pound his hard cock deep into Nix's sensitive hole.

"Pull over." He was going to be sick. It hit him suddenly and without explanation—much like everything else he'd experienced in this city—and Nix grappled with the door handle, unable to open it due to the automatic locks.

"We're almost there," West replied, but Nix wasn't having it.

"Stop the damn car now!" He almost never raised his voice at West. In the beginning, that was because of fear, but lately it'd been more because there hadn't been a reason to. Even when they argued, neither of them ever yelled.

It was enough to shock the Demon into complying. He slammed onto the brakes and almost as soon as he had, Nix managed to force the door open.

He forgot his seat belt at first, and was yanked back in before he could exit. He slammed a finger against it and freed himself, then sprang out of the car, making it only a few steps before he fell to his knees at the side of a tree and hurled his guts out.

Nerves had kept him from eating much all day, but that only meant that a good portion of what came out of him was stomach bile that burned on its way up. He hacked and spat it all out, heaving as he tried to shake the image of Yejun's furious face hovering above him, winking in and out of existence as Nix gained and lost consciousness.

Everything had been moving so quickly, he hadn't realized how bad it was. West had ushered him to safety and he'd woken being cared for. Then he'd discovered Branwen's true treachery, and what that meant for not only him but the Demons. Why they all hated the girl they called Iris so much.

Nix had started hating her as well, both for them and himself, and that had taken up a lot of mental energy. He'd also been able to throw himself into solving the mystery of the faux hacker and his and West's plan to draw the perpetrators out of hiding.

But that was done now.

Dew was dead, and they were no closer to unmasking the mastermind behind it all. If anything, his death set them back, since now there was no one they could even interrogate for answers. A thought that Nix had instantly felt guilty for having. Maybe their friendship hadn't been real, but he'd liked Dew, and despite it all, he didn't believe the guy deserved the ending he'd gotten.

The point was, he'd managed to find any and all excuses on why not to think about what had happened between him and Yejun, at least, not in great detail. Only now...

Someone touched his shoulder, and Nix yelped and twisted around, sliding backward in the dirt to escape. As soon as he processed it was West, he stilled, but the thrumming panic coursing throughout his entire body didn't abate.

It wasn't even really panic, per se. Nix wasn't afraid of Yejun, at least, not the Yejun he'd gotten to know over the past couple of months. That guy he'd met that day? He was terrified of him, but logically, Nix knew nothing like that would ever happen again, if only because there was no way West or Lake would ever allow it to.

He wasn't even necessarily worried about being alone with Yejun without the other guys there to protect him. Just knowing they wouldn't approve should be enough to keep Yejun from doing anything. That and the fact he wanted to try and make amends.

If he was to be believed, of course.

Nix was honestly still a bit on the fence.

The two of them had yet to speak, really, aside from a few passing comments made around the others that typically Nix pretended not to hear or just outright ignored. Either he wasn't ready, he was feeling spiteful, or both.

"What's wrong?" West crouched before him but didn't make any attempts to touch him again. "Why'd you get sick all of a sudden?"

He shook his head and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Maybe something I ate."

"I made you breakfast and lunch," West reminded, "and you picked at both so I ended up eating yours and mine. I'm fine."

"Your stomach must be better."

"Nixie."

"It's nothing." He pushed himself onto his feet and brushed off his pants. "Let's just go."

Lake was standing outside of the car watching, but Yejun had remained inside. Nix avoided eye contact as he trudged back to the vehicle, going through the motions as West helped him inside and then shut his door.

"I'm sorry," Yejun said in the brief moment the two of them were alone, almost too quiet for Nix to even hear.

Then Lake and West got in and the silence from earlier proceeded.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

“He invited the whole godsdamn club.” Yejun held the champagne flute in his hand and scowled at the crowded first level of the manor. He was standing at the balcony railing that overlooked the stairwell, dressed in the tuxedo he hadn’t worn since their high school graduation. It was a little tight, but not the worst.

Unlike this party.

Lake was at his side, his usual icy mask in place. It’d be hard for others to tell, but Yejun knew the guy was every bit as pissed off right now as he was.

This was meant to be a small get together, a way for them to introduce Nix with the least amount of drama and pomp and circumstance. Instead, they were greeted by a bacchanalian affair.

All of the light orbs had been set to their dimmest setting, casting the entire place in a golden hue with shadows lurking in every possible crevice. Round tables were laid out with burgundy tablecloths and towers of alcoholic beverages, some already partially emptied. Servants moved about with golden trays of fancy hors d’oeuvres, all morsels Yejun had known the names of since he was five.

The dress code was black tie affair, yet many had also come wearing masquerade masks, as if that would do anything to help conceal their identities. Still, traditions hardly ever contained any real logic. It was all just pomp and circumstance.

“This is the Night of the Nightshade,” Yejun decided.

“Yes,” Lake agreed. “I’ve already sent a message to Juri. He’s on his way now.”

Right, because if this was the ceremony, they needed their sacrifice. Of course Lake had already concluded what was going on and planned accordingly.

Yejun thought he caught sight of his mother drifting between the dining room and the drawing-room, and he spun around to avoid being seen.

Only to come face to face with Demitrious.

“Boys,” he beamed at them like he was truly the loving father figure he liked to pretend he was, “you made it!”

“It’s not exactly the event we thought we were attending,” Lake stated, voice devoid of emotion as he turned, settling his hands in his front pockets in a mockery of casualness no one was buying. He gave a pointed glance at their surroundings. “Night of the Nightshade isn’t supposed to be for another two days.”

“Yes, well, when I found out you’d completed your mission and uprooted the hacker, the Order and I agreed it was only right to fast track things. The longer the throne sits cold, the worse it is for us all, wouldn’t you say?”

“Considering one has nothing to do with the other,” Yejun chimed in, unable to help himself, “not really.”

Demitrious frowned at him, no doubt caught off guard by the haughty disposition. He had a right to be. Especially this close to achieving everything they’d all been working for. Yejun should be on his best behavior in front of an Order member, but he couldn’t control his irritation.

They hadn’t been ready for this.

Nix hadn’t been ready.

“In another one of your moods, I see,” Demitrious ended up giving him an out, probably not wanting to fight with such a large audience around them. He turned to Lake and winked. “Artists. I was trying to have a conversation with his father earlier and I swear he spaced out several times.”

Yejun would stand up for his dad except...that sounded about right. He couldn't even recall the last time he'd had a talk with his dad that had lasted longer than five minutes. Unless, of course, the lectures about how he's wasting his potential and embarrassing the family counted. Those could drag on for near an hour if he wasn't rescued by either West or Lake early enough.

“We've contacted our sacrifice,” Lake said, getting them back on track. “He'll be here as soon as he's able. Since we didn't have any notice, it didn't occur to us to bring them along.”

“Pardon?” Demitrious's brow furrowed. “I thought you said Phoenix Monroe would be accompanying you?”

“He did. But he isn't our sacrifice.”

He blinked at them, completely caught off guard.

Yejun almost smirked. See how he liked it. Prick. Instead, he sipped at his beverage to hide his partial smile, catching sight of a group of three younger teens eyeing him from the entranceway to the library a little over thirty feet away.

“What are they doing here?” he blurted, giving them a once over to be sure he'd clocked their age accurately. The Night of the Nightshade was not the type of event to bring minors to. It was early, and people hadn't drunk nearly enough yet, but after the initiation ceremony, the orgy portion would no doubt begin and... “They look like high schoolers.”

“They’re of age,” Demetrious corrected. “They’re attending Foxglove this year as freshmen. You haven’t seen any of them around campus? What about at the Club House?”

“We don’t pay attention to people who don’t matter,” Lake replied coolly before Yejun could think of something more tactful to say. “Which is why this isn’t exactly how I’d hoped to spend my birthday, surrounded by people I couldn’t care less about.”

“I apologize, son.” Demetrious slapped a hand on Lake’s shoulder and left it there. “This seemed like the best gift, speeding up the process so you could become a full-fledged member. I was thinking the sooner it was done, the less of a chance there would be for those who are still speaking against you to have their way.”

“Oh?” Lake feigned indifference, but this was actually a topic they were all invested in.

“It’s nothing to concern yourself with,” Demitrious pulled away, “especially not now that you’ve completed your mission and we’re about to name your sacrifice. But I would be lying if I didn’t inform you that Hendrix has continued causing a stir amongst the Order. He still insists you’re too young for the throne. Fortunately, everyone is smart enough to see his true intentions, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have followers.”

Hendrix had enough coin that even filthy rich bastards like some of the Order members could be swayed if offered the right amount.

Speeding up the Night of the Nightshade wouldn’t change the date for Demon’s Passing, so, again, it didn’t really matter and wouldn’t magically stop Hendrix from being a threat. However, Yejun supposed it could help slow down his progress if he was still attempting to recruit, which he must be, considering they hadn’t been called

to the Club House and told Lake had been voted out of the line of succession.

Legally, Club Essential didn't have the authority to make that call.

But since they owned all authority on planet...

Becoming Emperor was the only way out from under their thumb. The only way the three of them could be free from their fucking families and their even more fucked up expectations.

Four of them, Yejun mentally corrected. Nix was a part of this too, even if his relationship to his parents seemed to be healthier than his and West's.

"What's this about a change in sacrifice," Demitrious didn't sound pleased. "I thought you had it all planned out."

"That was before he became my mate," Lake said.

"Yes, about that—"

Lake held up a palm, clearly not interested in whatever argument West's father was about to start. His multi-slate happened to ding right after, and he checked the message. "Our sacrifice has arrived. I'll go retrieve him." He turned to Yejun. "Wait here for the others."

"Yes, where is my son?" Demitrious asked, still with that same disdainful tone. It was obvious he didn't like being shut out by Lake, but he knew better than to argue openly.

"Getting Nix a change of clothes," Yejun replied as Lake slipped away. "We were underdressed thanks to your surprise."

His eyes narrowed. “Is there something going on with you? You know you can always talk to me, don’t you? I think of you as one of my own, just like I do Lake and West.”

Yejun swallowed the retort, forcing an easygoing smile onto his face instead.

Demitrious wasn’t the only one who understood causing a scene in present company wasn’t wise. If he misbehaved, that would reflect poorly on the Demons as a whole, and he wouldn’t jeopardize Lake’s claim to the crown that way.

“Ah,” the older man added before Yejun could settle on what he could say. “I heard about what happened at the gallery showing. No wonder you’re in a bad mood.” He reached over and patted him on the back in a similar fashion to how he’d just touched Lake. “Cheer up. At least the bastard was caught and, from the sounds of it, he’s paid the price for messing with one of the Demons. Your parents and I are very proud of you boys for handling this case so quickly.”

He was calculating how quickly he could make it to his studio on campus after this when an even more unpleasant figure than the one before him came into view.

Great.

“Uncle Bardin.” Uncle his ass. Yejun greeted him with a saccharine sweetness, the same as he always did, ever since the old man had told him and West they should call him uncle along with Lake.

Not that he was even Lake’s uncle either. The guy was technically a cousin, through marriage, but because of his age and standing in the Order, Lake had grown up calling him uncle to be respectful. If there was one thing Hendrix had never been able to tolerate, it was disrespect.

Lake hated the fact the two of them were related, even considering there was no blood between them. The last thing any of them wanted was to go around speaking to him familiarly. And yet, here they were, doing as they were told and falling in line because disobeying the Order was social suicide.

That had him thinking about Dew and Iris, and Yejun's mood soured even more.

"Hendrix," Demitrious didn't pretend to be fond of the man joining him nearly as much as Yejun had bothered to. "I wasn't aware you'd already arrived. And your son?"

"Beck is making his rounds," Hendrix informed, turning to Yejun with a partial smirk devoid of any sort of friendliness.

Hendrix Bardin was in his mid-sixties, with salt and pepper hair, fuchsia eyes, and alabaster skin—that was no doubt as icy to the touch. He held himself rigidly poised at all times, constantly looking down his nose at those around him, and spoke in an elegant, if underhanded, matter. On the surface, he appeared to be just another old money jackass who believed himself too good for everyone else.

On the inside, he was like that too, but a little more insidious.

Yejun was convinced Hendrix was the culprit behind the poisonings; they just needed to find proof, a task that was next to impossible given their relationship with the older man. They didn't trust him, but he didn't trust them any more or less either.

The hope had been that West could work his magic and discover a link between the two online, but he'd been unable to find any sort of digital trail, and then Nix had come along and complicated things...Not that that was a bad thing, since he'd also helped them root out Hendrix's accomplice. Though, admittedly, Yejun wasn't entirely sure how Hendrix had managed to get a hold of Dew...

Then there was also the issue of Iris supposedly having been in love with the puppet master pulling her strings...

Yejun discretely gave Hendrix a once over. Sure, he was posh in his charcoal, form-fitting suit and still in perfect shape for a man his age, but he definitely seemed far too old for someone like Iris to fall for.

Everything he'd thought he knew about her had been false, he silently reminded himself. What did he know about her tastes? Perhaps she had a daddy kink. Or maybe Hendrix had promised her something—her and Dew—to get them to side with him and be his minions. There were infinite possibilities, really, and while he needed to find answers, now, at this party, wasn't the time or the place.

Unfortunately.

They were running out of time, even if they'd checked one obstacle off the list and "found" the "hacker".

"I'm curious," Hendrix said then, "how did you three manage to discover the hacker? It seems rather convenient that a dead boy ended up being the criminal you were tasked with finding."

"What exactly are you implying?" Demitrious came to their defense before Yejun had a chance to reply. "Don't be a sore loser, Hendrix. The rest of us on the Order didn't even agree with your asinine test in the first place, yet now that they've passed it you still want to cause a stink?"

Yejun covered his chuckle by turning toward one of the waiters as they passed, setting down his empty flute and selecting a new one. West's father was doing nothing to hide his disdain, even going so far as to raise his voice so that those around him undoubtedly overhead.

Best to leave the old geezers to it.

“Gentlemen,” Yejun lifted his glass, “if you’ll excuse me. I’m going to go check on the others.” He didn’t wait to be dismissed, taking his chance to escape by quickly slipping between a small group of members passing by.

He passed through them and then kept going, turning to head for the archway leading into the library, mostly to escape the gazes of Demitrious and Hendrix as soon as possible.

There were few people milling about the library, mostly members who didn’t want to wait until after the sacrifice ceremony to...get to the good stuff, so to speak. Yejun passed by a couple older than the men he’d just left making out in a corner, and then turned to encounter a young couple sprawled out on the thin red carpet between two stacks of dark wooden bookshelves.

He didn’t disturb them, moving further, heading to the back where there was a large window seat he used to escape to whenever he’d been forced to attend a formal event here as a child. Even then, Yejun had never gone anywhere without his sketchbook and a few tools, so he’d slip away at his earliest convenience and escape here to the quiet and comforting smell of faded paper and burned ashes from the fireplace. Typically, he’d sketch until West or Lake—or both—came for him.

Irritation was coiling in his gut, and he was already planning all the ways he could remove someone if he found they were in his seat once he got there, beginning with the polite approach and ending in violence. Fortunately, when he turned the final corner, he found the window seat empty.

The seat was grand, set into the wall with built-in shelves on either side. The top was curved, though the window within it didn’t follow the same pattern and was rectangular. Yejun settled onto the thick crimson cushion and debated whether or not

he wanted to lie down, opting instead to stretch out his legs and lean back. The cool touch of the glass against the width of his shoulders had him sighing, eyes drifting shut.

He could hear the soft crackling of the fireplace even though it was four rows away to the far left. Mixed with it was the occasional moan and gasp, but that didn't bother him much. Soon, they'd slip into their winter season, and he could already feel the chill from outside seep through. It surrounded him almost tenderly, coaxing all of those tumultuous emotions out.

Typically, Yejun poured his feelings into his art. That was how he processed things, expelled his issues, and kept his carefree disposition in front of the rest of society. If this were the party they'd thought they were attending, he could at least breathe easy knowing he'd have to remain for an hour, two at most, before they finished dinner and could go.

Getting away from the Night of the Nightshade wasn't as simple.

Unlike Demon's Passing, which was also coming up, the Night of the Nightshade was an event exclusive to the Essentials but teased to the members of Enigma. Taking place once every year, it was meant as a recruitment of sorts and an excuse for public displays of debauchery.

Members on the Enigma app were told about the event and offered a chance to attend. It was pitched as the grandest Enigma party, a celebration no one wanted to miss out on, but that most usually did. Only those who'd made it to the King tier were sent an actual invitation, a job usually West took care of personally. Yejun made a mental note to ask him about whether or not he'd been contacted about the King's list in advance.

No one could access West's files without his permission, so either Demitrious had

bypassed the King tier this year—which wouldn’t go over well for any of the Bishops who’d managed to make it in—or he’d gotten names from an unsuspecting West.

Either way, West was no doubt fuming himself right now. He hated when his things were messed with in general, but more so when his father was the one behind it.

Demons Passing and Night of the Nightshade were typically intertwined. It was the event that kicked off the official season. The beginning of the end, so to speak. For them, that was a good thing. The end they were after included Lake on the throne and the four of them freed from having to look over their shoulders or bow their heads to pricks like Demitrious and Hendrix.

But it also meant painting targets on their backs, maybe even bigger ones than they had now if they weren’t careful.

They had to handle the real issue beforehand. Find the poisoner and stop them before they had the chance to try their luck a second time. Or, third time, as it were, since they’d been successful with the late Emperor and her Royal Consort.

“Can we join you?” a soft feminine voice broke through Yejun’s peaceful state and he scowled before opening his eyes on the interruption. Two of the girls from earlier, the ones he’d deemed too young to be there, were standing less than a foot away from him, their shins practically pressed to his knees.

“No.” He wasn’t in the mood. In the past, he would have flirted a bit, maybe doublechecked they really were of age and then made a move or two. Perhaps he’d even fool around with one or both of them—he wouldn’t sleep with them, not here, and definitely not on the Night of the Nightshade though.

Everyone else partook on this night, but Lake, West, and he had long since agreed they would never. It would leave them too vulnerable. Too open to blackmail and

attack. Photography and filming were strictly forbidden at this event, and the repercussions if caught were banishment from the Club and removal of all assets given or gained from its membership. Hefty punishment, but there was a keyword that they hadn't missed.

Caught.

A person could only be punished if they were caught, and with a friend like West, they all knew better. They knew how easy it could be for someone to upload a video of them partaking in sexual acts and hide their identity. Or even for someone else—like Hendrix, for example—to convince a lower-level member to take the fall in his place.

Not worth the risk.

Sex was power here. Everyone knew that.

That was why these girls were in front of him now, breathing in his personal space, hoping they could go around bragging they'd bagged a Demon.

"Why not?" the one who'd spoken already asked, pouting out her lips. She was around five-four, petite, with pink hair. Her friend was a bit chubbier, cute, with freckles and sharp golden eyes that clearly held some intellect behind them. Their masks dangled from their fingers, making it obvious they'd removed them in the hopes he'd fall for their faces.

They were attractive.

But they were no Nix Monroe.

"We're good listeners," the golden-eyed one chimed in, boldly reaching out to place a

delicate hand on his left knee. “You seem troubled. We can keep you company.”

Had Yejun just thought she was smart?

Yeah. No.

“You can confide in us,” the pink-haired one jumped in and nodded.

Yejun opened his mouth to tell them both to get lost before he broke their fingers, but then movement behind them caught his attention and he ended up sucking in a breath instead. He straightened, lifting off the window and shoving both girls to the side quickly.

Only to realize too late how that made it look.

Like he was guilty of something he wasn't.

“Nix.” Yejun wet his lips, explanation dying on his tongue when the Firebird's expression remained enigmatic. Like he didn't care at all that he might have walked in on Yejun fooling around with other people.

When he'd made statements like that before, Yejun had admittedly been hurt by them. At first, he didn't understand why. Sleeping around and not being tied down had been what he'd wanted—or, what he'd thought he'd wanted. Hearing straight from the source that there was no jealousy, that Nix didn't feel even the slightest bit possessive of him, had sucked.

He'd spent weeks tormented, not understanding his own feelings, only to then discover Nix's betrayal. Pinning him down, hurting him...it hadn't just been about Iris or Nix's relationship to her.

Yejun had been punishing him for making him feel confusion and need. For making him want the attention of a single person badly enough he considered giving up sexual relations with others.

Had given up, actually.

“It’s not what it looks like,” he finally managed to blurt, getting to his feet, though he didn’t dare approach.

Nix was dressed in one of West’s old suits, a rose gold tux with a crisp white shirt. Flowers done in the same pink shade decorated the jacket. They might have looked ridiculous on someone else—had the one and only time West had tried the garment on and refused to wear it—but Nix pulled it off.

Especially when he tucked his hands into his front pockets, lifted his chin ever so slightly, and said in an emotionless tone, “We’ve discussed this before. Fuck whoever you want. I don’t care.”

The two girls gasped and shied away when Nix set that icy look their way.

Was he taking pointers from Lake?

Damn. Yejun would be impressed if not for the fact the whole chameleon act was being used against him .

“Are you dumb?” West, who was standing directly behind Nix, said to the girls. “Get lost.”

Yejun didn’t glance at them as they practically ran off, hoping that might earn him points and prove he’d never been interested in the first place.

Judging by the still unwavering expression on Nix's face, it didn't.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

“Juri has arrived,” Nix kept his tone even and his spine straight, not wanting to give away how unconflicted he currently was.

On the one hand, he didn’t give a shit who Yejun hooked up with, even more so now that they were on the outs.

But on the other...

Everyone kept telling him Yejun was sorry. That he felt horrible for what transpired between them and wanted to make amends. Maybe a secret part of Nix had really bought into that, had even been hoping there’d be real, tangible change. Something he could see with his own eyes that would help him get rid of this discomfort and mild fear he felt whenever in the Demon’s presence.

Yet here they were. Less than half an hour into the party, Yejun was already acting on his old playboy ways.

Maybe it was time for Nix to admit to himself that the Yejun he’d thought he knew, the one who’d treated him tenderly in his studio and helped ease him into things in the beginning, wasn’t real.

Whatever.

He didn’t want to forgive him anyway. Not really.

...Not much.

The panic attack he'd had in the car earlier came to mind and hardened his stance on the matter. Yeah, this was actually a good thing. Let Yejun clear any misunderstandings that Nix might have about how sorry he supposedly felt. The sooner those hopes were dashed, the better. He didn't want to be tricked into trusting the other man again.

Why was he so fucking conflicted?

Why didn't he know his own heart anymore?

West rested a hand on his shoulder, offering silent comfort, and then said to Yejun, "Let's go. The ceremony has already begun. There was only one person who managed to make it into the King tier this year, and that's Nix."

"So the ceremony will be relatively short," Yejun caught on. "At least there's that."

"Curb your excitement. It's unclear if my father still intends for us to stay for dinner. But my guess is he won't let us get off that easily."

"We're going to have to sit through a boring meal while everyone else scurries off and gets laid, that's what you're implying?" Yejun glanced at Nix and then cleared his throat. "That's not what I meant..."

"Dude, it's not like he isn't already aware if you're awake you're most likely horny." West rolled his eyes and then took Nix's hand, linking their fingers loosely. "Come on. The ceremony has technically already begun, Lake sent us here to get you before it's our turn."

West had explained what was going to happen as soon as they'd run into Lake and found out what was really going on, though Nix was still somewhat confused by it all.

He'd always believed the Night of the Nightshade was exclusively an Enigma event, but apparently, that wasn't true. He'd been warned to avert his gaze or pretend not to notice altogether if he caught someone in a sexual act—that the reason many of the Club members even bothered attending the ceremony at all was so they could take part in the festivities that happened after.

According to West, some years there were even multiple orgies.

Not high on Nix's list. He already mentioned that if any of them tried anything funny with him in front of anyone he wouldn't stand still. West had assured him none of them planned that and they'd respect him.

Respect him.

He'd almost laughed in the Demon's face.

Nix spun on his heels and headed back the way they'd come, not wanting to give anyone a chance to keep the conversation going. Mostly, he was over how uncomfortable and uncertain Yejun made him. While there was a comfort with West, and he trusted that West would come to his defense even against Yejun, that didn't help assuage his discomfort any more or less.

It wasn't hard to figure out where to go. Pretty much everyone else was already congregating in the main living area at the center of the home, their backs turned toward Nix when he arrived on the edge.

West stepped up to his side when he slowed, taking his hand and tugging him through, pushing people out of the way before they seemed to realize who he was. The crowd started shifting on their own shortly after, moving aside for them. Some even went as far as bowing their heads slightly.

The living area had a high ceiling and a skylight, the clear night sky shining down upon them as dozens of light orbs drifted above. It created a mixed ambiance, one with a twinge of mystery and a dash of romance, as odd as that was. There was a hush in the room, and the closer they got to the front of the horde, the quieter it became, as though everyone was holding their breath in anticipation.

Nix frowned slightly when they finally pushed to the head of the crowd and he spotted Lake standing at the side of another stairwell, this one narrow and leading straight up. He briefly met Nix's gaze, but gave nothing away with his stoic expression.

At the other side, a man Nix didn't recognize stood, holding a halo-pad resting on both of his splayed palms. He was older than them, probably even older than West's father, with silver hair and eyes that gleamed like tumbled onyx stones. His suit was the same dark shade, but he had on a blood red sash as well, something that made him stand out from the rest.

A bell chimed somewhere as Yejun and West settled at either side of Nix, and as Nix shifted closer to the latter, the single door at the top of the steps opened.

A young man stepped out and slowly made his way down the stairs, the gold of his mask glittering in the orb light. It wasn't until he was halfway there that Nix registered his gaze on him and placed his identity.

Juri Ferd.

The Demons sacrifice.

When they'd first met, Juri had been quiet and Nix hadn't been able to get a good read on him. He'd seemed nice, the kind of dependable person he didn't know he needed in his life. Back then, Nix had still foolishly believed he could go it alone.

Now he knew better. It was crazy what a few months could do. How they could change you.

He knew the Demons still didn't fully trust Juri's loyalty, and he couldn't blame them. After what they'd gone through recently with Branwen, Nix couldn't fault them for their trust issues. But Juri had proven himself to Nix in more ways than one, had been there for him when he'd felt all alone. Hell, he'd even volunteered to be here tonight, to take on the role of sacrifice just so Nix wouldn't have to enter Club Essential without any allies.

Yejun thought that was too good to be true, that no one would self-sacrifice for a person they hardly knew. Nix would have agreed if not for the fact he'd heard Juri's story. Juri had lost people to this club too, a club he'd been born into and had once been a part of.

If things had gone the way of tradition, Juri would be living in the Roost right now as well. He'd be another Demon, though Nix doubted the two of them would have shared anything more than a friendly relationship even with that altered status. The only reason Lake and the others were all right sharing him was because it was solely between the three of them. Their friendship was unlike any other Nix had heard of or witnessed.

They'd sooner murder Juri than allow him to touch Nix.

That knowledge would have scared him before.

Now it sent a thrill shooting down his spine all the way to his toes, a reaction he tried to hide as Juri made it the bottom of the landing and bowed first to Lake before turning to face the older man.

"He needs to swear a new oath," West leaned in then and whispered into Nix's ear, so

quietly he almost couldn't make the words out even with his lips pressed against his lobe. "When he refused to be a Demon, he turned his back on the club and was stricken from the records. He returns as a new member, which means he has to go through all of the steps a new member would need to."

Nix twisted his head and asked in the same low tone, "Will I need to?"

They'd already discussed how he couldn't escape becoming a member of the club. Being an Essential meant an extra layer of protection, and it meant the Demons could keep him close even when they entered the Club House. As things were, they were forced to leave him at the Roost unattended every time there was an official event, summons, or meeting, and none of them were comfortable with that.

Not even Nix. Not after everything.

Grady had placed a fake dead animal in his bag to try and scare him.

Dew had shoved him into a waif stall and left him there locked up. Then he'd switched Yejun's paintings at the gallery showing in order to humiliate him.

Both of these people were his friends, but they'd managed to scare him. At least he knew Grady's antics came from a good place. He'd never get the chance to learn Dew's reasoning. Clearly, Nix had done something close to the gallery showing that had pissed the other man off. But what? What had he done to earn such a harsh punishment?

"Yes," West answered his question, pulling Nix back to the present. "But don't worry. We've already made a deal with the Order. Your initiation will be handled by the three of us and no one else. We won't parade you in front of an audience like this."

That was why he wasn't up there as well. He'd heard that all of the students who'd managed to make it into the King tier were meant to attend the Night of the Nightshade and be read into the Club, yet no one had asked Nix to do anything other than accompany West. Sure, he'd been getting looks all night, people obviously knew who he was, but not a single person had dared to approach and ask if he was going to participate.

Had West and Lake taken care of that was well? When had they found the opportunity to talk to the Order about all of this?

Admittedly, Nix didn't really get it. Sure, the thought of everyone's eyes on him like they currently were on Juri made him uncomfortable, but that discomfort was pretty low on the list at this point. They'd been through worse, after all. Had put him through worse. Why go through the trouble of talking to the Order about doing it privately?

Juri made it to the landing and bowed to Lake before turning to face the older man. He clasped his hands in front of him and kept his gaze lowered to the ground, only moving once he was ordered to place his left hand flat on the holo-pad.

The older man started to talk about the history of Club Essential, rattling off dates and important founding members. Nix was interested—mostly just because he wanted to be prepared—but he only caught the first couple of sentences before it became a struggle to process the words coming out of the man's mouth.

Yejun had shifted closer to him, angled his body ever so slightly. It was a move meant to keep the person next to him, a woman, from taking peeks at Nix, which she'd been doing for a while now.

The problem was, Nix felt a rush of panic not dissimilar from the one he'd felt in the car, and this so wasn't the place for vomiting or losing his cool. They needed to

provide a united front. Even if there were cracks in their relationship, no one outside of their circle could know that. It would put them all at risk.

Something told Nix, if he puked because of Yejun's nearness, it would give things away.

He tried to focus on West's arm pressed against his on the other side, of the heat wafting off him and the comfort of his familiar scent.

And he tried to recall how things had been with Yejun before. The Demon had been careful with him, caring. While Nix now understood there were two very different versions of him, he needed to remember the "good" one. Not because he wanted to forgive Yejun because he deserved it—he didn't, even though Nix understood his reaction—but because they all needed to survive.

If Nix was going to spend the rest of his life with these three, he couldn't fixate on the negative. But he also couldn't allow anything like that to ever happen again. West had asked him once if he wanted a relationship with turmoil and animosity. He did not.

He'd never thought very much about his future mate, but Nix had always imagined they'd get along if nothing else.

Digging his nails into his palms, he slowly inhaled through his nose and exhaled through his mouth, concentrating on leveling his breathing and calming his anxious nerves. Logically, he knew Yejun wouldn't hurt him—especially not here—he just needed to convince his subconscious to chill and take that information in.

"I won't touch you," Yejun's voice in Nix's ear came then.

Nix felt his warm breath waft against the side of his neck and he shivered

involuntarily.

“I’m sorry,” he sounded every bit as wounded as Nix felt. “Forgive me, Firebird. I’ll never put you through anything like that again, I swear it.”

Nix risked a glance at him, gaze darkening as a swirl of anger spun through him. “Don’t make me promises you can’t keep. You lost yourself, Yejun. Who’s to say that won’t happen again in the heat of the moment?”

“It won’t,” he insisted. “Please, Nix. I’ll do anything. Anything to make this right. To bring you back to me. I...” he licked his lips and confessed, “I miss you. I’ve never missed anyone before.”

“Lucky me.” It was cruel, but Nix turned away just as Yejun flinched.

Okay, so maybe he didn’t want to be petty and spiteful, but giving back a little bit of what he’d been given was his right, right?

West placed a hand at the back of Nix’s neck, a silent reassurance that he was there. It also meant that he’d most likely heard everything that was just said between him and Yejun, despite the whispers.

And a reminder of where they were. If West could hear, there was always the chance someone else could as well. Nix wasn’t naïve enough to believe that there wasn’t a single person around them curious about the Demons and their fourth. They’d suck this information up and spin it into something it wasn’t, the same way that rumor had started that Nix had cheated on them when his cousin had shown up unannounced.

“Will you be completing the initiation?” the old man asked Lake, drawing Nix’s attention back to the ceremony.

Was it almost over? Had he really just missed the whole thing?

“No,” Lake motioned toward Nix. “I’m mated.”

The old man leading things nodded. “Yes, yes. One of the other Demons then? This is your sacrifice.”

“They’ve also taken to our fourth,” Lake said without skipping a beat. “Juri Ferd is our sacrifice, but that’s where our responsibility ends. We won’t be taking part in the final test.”

“The final test?” Nix frowned up at West. “What’s that?”

“Is there a member you have in mind then, new recruit?” the man asked Juri before West had a chance to answer Nix’s question.

Juri looked at the crowd, but it was obvious he was only pretending to be thinking. When his eyes locked with Nix’s they lingered, but West’s hand shifted on Nix’s neck, pulling him closer to his side. Ultimately, Juri ended up shaking his head.

“There isn’t,” he replied.

“A volunteer then,” the man’s voice rose up so that everyone packed into the room could hear.

“It’ll be more difficult for him to find someone,” Yejun said to Nix in a hushed tone, even though Nix still didn’t entirely understand what was going on. “Since he grew up in the Club and was Essential up until a couple years ago, not many will risk pissing off his parents or involving themselves in this.”

“What happens if he can’t find someone?” Nix asked, because even if he didn’t get it,

it was obvious whatever was happening was important.

“He’ll be rejected as the sacrifice,” West jumped into the conversation,” and denied membership.”

Nix didn’t know much about Juri’s family aside from what he’d been told about Juri and his brother wanting nothing to do with the Club. His brother Joal had apparently been a Demon at the Roost when Lake and the others were Freshman, and the experience had been less than stellar for him. That’s what kicked off Juri denying his rights as a Legacy and, ultimately, being booted from the club in the first place.

He’d told Nix he was relieved to be free of it, yet here he was, throwing himself back to the wolves all to help Nix.

“Stop.” West gripped his neck when Nix made to take a step forward, the warning low but firm.

There was no way Nix was going to leave Juri hanging after his friend willingly put himself through this, and he opened his mouth to say as much, but then a deep voice came from the crowd.

“I’ll do it.” There were mild gasps and whispers when Hendrix stepped forward. The man was old enough to be Juri’s father, and from the smug expression he aimed Lake’s way, it was clear he was only doing this in an attempt to irritate his nephew.

Unfortunately for him—and Juri—Lake didn’t give two shits about the sacrifice he’d just presented.

Juri seemed uncomfortable though, shifting on his feet, some of the bravado he’d been displaying up until now slipping. He paled some, though he held his ground and didn’t speak out against Hendrix’s offer.

Whatever this final test was, it had to be more complicated than placing your hand on a holo-pad and swearing allegiance in front of a crowd. Nix rattled his brain, collecting all the information he had on Essential and the things they stood for, but he couldn't for the life of him guess what Hendrix and Juri were meant to do.

"Shit," West swore.

"Doesn't look like anyone is going to save him," Yejun whispered, agreeing with West's sentiment. "Poor bastard."

West stared down at Nix, waiting until Nix tipped his head in silent question, and then swore again. His hand dropped from the back of his neck and he squared his shoulders.

"Dude," Yejun's tone was warning, but West was already stepping forward.

"Wait," Beck's voice rang from the crowd and everyone turned his way as he pushed past the throngs to the front, passing West's other side. He stopped a few feet away from Juri. "I'll do it."

"I spoke first, son," Hendrix said, but it was hard to tell if he was annoyed or ambivalent.

"Two offers," the man running the ceremony announced. "Which will you choose, new recruit?"

Juri didn't appear happy with either option, but he didn't hesitate to point out Beck. "Him."

Hendrix laughed and moved over to Beck, patting him on the back before leaning in. He whispered something that Nix couldn't make out, something that had Beck

bristling. The reaction only caused Hendrix to chuckle a second time, then he pulled away and winked at his son.

“The final test will take place now,” the older man stated, flinging an arm toward the stairwell Juri had descended earlier. “The test must be submitted by no later than noon tomorrow.”

“Understood,” Beck said, bowing his head once before he walked to Juri’s side and cautiously settled a hand on his elbow. “Are you ready?”

Juri’s lips pressed into a thin line and he didn’t say anything, instead heading for the steps. He took them with the same grace he had on the way down, Beck right behind him. No one spoke as they walked up, the silence deafening until the door at the top landing shut behind them, apparently putting an end to the ceremony.

There was a round of applause which left Nix feeling perplexed. He looked around at the cheering faces hidden behind their glittering masks and wondered what the actual fuck he’d gotten himself into.

This was more like the chaotic nonsense he’d always imagined the upper elite to take part in. The mindless excess and pointless gatherings. Members stopped clapping in waves, turning to each other to start making out right then and there.

“Let’s go.” Suddenly Lake was at his side, stepping between him and Yejun. He placed a hand to Nix’s narrow back and guided him off to the side toward a small opening in the room. It led to a narrow hallway that looped around and deposited them into a small dining area.

The table was already set and just as Nix realized he hadn’t asked any of the questions he had, Demitrious entered from an opposite doorway and grinned at them.

“Welcome,” he waved his arms and stopped at the head of the table. “Phoenix Monroe. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Nix was ashamed to admit it, but his worry for Juri was quickly overshadowed by worry for himself.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

Awkward was an understatement.

Nix tried to recall the last time he felt like he was walking on this many eggshells and couldn't. Even all the shit that'd gone down with the Demons hadn't made him as uncomfortable as this horrendous dinner. And it wasn't just because he'd somehow been seated next to Yejun.

He was getting firsthand experience of the neglect West had mentioned.

And he wasn't a fan.

"I knew you could do it." Demitrious toasted Lake for what had to be the sixth time in less than twenty minutes. He was at the head of the table, with Lake on his left and West next to Lake.

Nix was directly across from Lake with Yejun at his side, a seating arrangement made by Demitrious absently as they waited for the appetizer course to be brought out.

That was two courses ago now, and all West's father had done was praise Lake and ignore the rest of them. So much for being interested in meeting Nix.

Guy wasn't even interested in his own son less than five feet away.

"You really must tell me all about how you managed it." Demitrious ignored the waitstaff as they came around the table to collect course number two, some weird gelatinous thing that no one at the table aside from him had really touched.

“It wasn’t that difficult,” Lake said. “We wouldn’t want to bore you with the details.”

“No, no, I insist.”

The corner of Lake’s mouth turned up ever so slightly. “It was West, really. He was able to trace everything back to Dew’s computer.”

“Was that before, or after that little mix up at the gallery?” Hendrix appeared in the doorway, letting himself in without an invite. He smiled when it became apparent that he wasn’t welcome and no one greeted him, undeterred. “Set another place at the table,” he ordered one of the waitstaff as he passed toward the chair opposite Demitrious.

The poor girl turned to Demitrious wide-eyed, waiting for him to either confirm or deny the order, heaving a noticeable sigh of relief when he eventually nodded his head for her to do it.

“This is a celebration,” he reminded Hendrix as the other man settled into his chair. “There’s no reason to bring up unpleasant topics.”

“From the sounds of it, it wasn’t all that bad. Handled rather quickly, is the buzz I’ve heard,” Hendrix disagreed, eyes landing on Nix’s. “You have to have thick skin to be a part of this family. I was impressed to hear you got past being publicly ridiculed.”

“He wasn’t ridiculed,” Yejun said.

“I know you’re talented, you’re a Sang after all, but that doesn’t mean everyone’s tastes are as...” he gave Nix a rather mocking once over, “unique as yours. Seeing your boyfriend naked? Well, that’s the type of thing we use to threaten members with, isn’t that right, Demi?”

Nix didn't know exactly what he meant by that but he recalled Yejun telling him about how sex was used as a weapon in the club. The Essentials used it to trade and boost their statuses. He'd only partially understood at the time of that conversation, and now his curiosity was piqued.

Still, he bit his tongue and shelved any questions he had for later. He'd ask the Demons once they were home at the Roost where there was no chance of him saying the wrong thing or them being overheard.

"There was something else though, wasn't there?" Hendrix—very obviously—pretended to recall something, even going so far as to snap his fingers. "Yes! There was a rumor about an affair. Seeing the four of you together here, I suppose it's safe to assume the rumor was false."

"A misunderstanding, uncle," Lake replied icily.

"I should hope so. If it's discovered later on that the soon-to-be emperor's mate is unfaithful?" He clicked his tongue. "What a scandal that would be. It would look terrible on us all. That's why I've always told you to make careful decisions and look at the bigger picture. Of course," he gave another distasteful look toward Nix, "I wish you all the best, even if I must point out, as your elder and only surviving relative, that choosing a mate was a hasty decision. One that there is still time to reverse."

He didn't mean to, but Nix stiffened at that, and even though Hendrix had been turned toward Lake, the bastard noticed immediately.

"Is that appealing?" Hendrix pounced on him like bleeding prey. "The paperwork has yet to be filed, and since another was used as the sacrifice, there's still time to remove yourself from this whole messy business before—"

"Whatever are you going on about?" Demitrious interrupted, barking out a laugh.

“The boy has a claiming mark on his neck already, not to mention, there’s not a single reason to be seen for Lake to discard the person he’s selected as his life partner.” He leaned toward Nix, giving him attention for the first time since the start of the meal, and patted his hand on the table. “This isn’t something the Order involves themselves in, fret not.”

Yejun suddenly rested his arm over the back of Nix’s chair. Did he think Nix was listening to this and interested in taking Hendrix up on the offer?

Did the others?

Nix swept his gaze across the table, taking in Lake and West quickly so as not to give away what he was doing. Whatever they were thinking, however, was carefully concealed behind steely blank masks. Even West, who was typically easier to get a read on, was stoic.

“All I’m saying is it’s scary times,” Hendrix continued. “Everyone knows about the tragedy that befell the last emperor and her consort. Phoenix isn’t even a member, hasn’t lived anywhere near this side of the planet. This is all probably a culture shock to him.”

That was the first legitimate thing he’d said all night.

“My nephew is calculated, and I trust his judgment, however, when it comes to matters of the heart...” Hendrix made a face. “Well. The Zyairs aren’t exactly known for using the head on their shoulders, let’s put it that way.”

“Excuse me?” Lake’s tone took a sharp edge to it.

“Watch your tongue while in my home,” Demitrious chided.

“What’s with this reaction?” Hendrix twirled the cutlery on the table. “It’s not like it’s some big secret that multiple partners are new to the Zyair line. None of us were surprised when word got out that Lake intended to share his mate with West and Yejun for that very reason.”

“Explain,” Lake demanded, but Demitrious shook his head.

“Ignore him.” His gaze hardened on Hendrix. “If you’re only here to stir up trouble, I will politely ask you to leave. And if you do not, I will stop being polite and have you removed. Remember how many club members are currently roaming the halls.”

He was threatening to embarrass him in front of everyone.

Hedrix’s mood soured, but West grunted.

“From what I saw, they’re all too busy fornicating to notice much of anything,” West stated, downing the contents from his glass and ignoring the furious gaze his father sent his way.

Nix caught the Demon’s eye and gave a slight shake of his head. He understood—he wanted to stick it to West’s dad as well—but not if it meant siding with Hendrix. If they started a bonafide fight here, they’d be trapped even longer.

He just wanted to go home and get answers.

“We should just be grateful there were no births out of wedlock,” Hendrix said. “Then there’d be someone to contend with Lake for the throne.”

Was he talking about Lake’s parents having an affair?

Lake was trying his best to keep his composure, but Nix could tell the subject was

doing exactly what Hendrix had hoped. It was getting to him. Which meant there must be some truth to this story.

Strike his thought about not fighting.

“Someone else, you mean,” the second Nix spoke up, everyone turned to him almost comically. He continued to cut into the steak on his plate, delicately taking a bite and chewing slowly, as though he hadn’t just jumped into the taboo. Once he was finished, he pretended to be surprised to find them staring. “What? I thought uncomfortable conversation topics were allowed, all things considered. Was I mistaken?”

Yejun was the first to react, grinning broadly. “Not at all.”

“You’re just saying what we were all thinking,” West agreed.

“There shouldn’t be any secrets between family,” Lake nodded, setting his sights back on Hendrix. “You should be pleased my father didn’t have any bastard children. My being the only child is the reason you’re placed as high as you are in the line of succession.”

“One would think that,” Demitrious joined in. “But he searched far and wide for any child that shared your bloodline, Lake.”

Hendrix eyes narrowed, but he didn’t deny it.

“If there was someone out there, he certainly would have discovered them,” Demitrious continued. “Alas.” He shrugged.

Nix figured Hendrix’s hope was to find someone else he could mold and manipulate, turn into a puppet figure that followed his command. That was something Lake would

never be, and not just because Demitrious had gotten to him first. Whatever had happened between them, Lake's parents had clearly raised their son to be strong-willed and independent.

They'd raised him to be an emperor.

He'd always known it was dangerous, that there were people out to stop Lake's rise, and he'd heard that his uncle was one of them but...It was different seeing it up close and personal. The glint in Hendrix's eye was nothing short of malicious, made all the more noticeable by his false smile.

Everything here was fake. This wasn't a family dinner, it was a warzone. When he thought about how these were only two members of the Order and there were others supposedly out there who sided with Hendrix, the picture got a bit clearer.

Nothing that had been done to him was excusable, but Nix could maybe understand a bit better where Lake's urgency had truly come from. Here they were, already bound, and yet his uncle felt the need to comment about Nix breaking the bond. There was little doubt in his mind, if he didn't bear the mark, Hendrix would have cornered him separately and tried to sway him to his side.

Was he potentially overthinking things?

Yes.

Did that mean that theory was impossible?

No.

Demons Passing was only five days away, not very much time at all. If they could make it until then, Lake would be named the official next in line. They wouldn't have

to enter the palace right away due to the mourning period, but with the throne secured, that'd be one less burden on their chests.

Because Nix felt the weight of it now as well. He'd been dragged into this and had been enduring, but now, seated at this table, watching how hard the three Demon's struggled to keep their chins up as veiled insult after veiled insult was lobbed their way...

It was crazy, but Nix wanted to be a part of that. A real part of it. He wanted that kind of loyalty and connection.

He wanted to belong.

The others were still talking, but he'd tuned them out, only snapping out of it when he realized Lake was watching him closely from the other side of the table.

Lake's expression barely wavered, but Nix could tell he was silently asking him if he was okay.

He nodded his head, only half meaning it, and considered his options.

He'd already decided he was all in. That meant patching things up with both Lake and Yejun, even if the latter man was proving to be more difficult to handle. Nix was still averse to intimacy with him—to talking with him, even, honestly—but he'd solve that problem once he'd handled the first.

Which was his supposed mate.

Who he hadn't slept with yet.

Lake had poured a lot of his energy into trying to make things up to him, as he

should. But Nix was realizing that energy was better spent elsewhere at the moment. They were too close to Demons Passing to let their guards down, especially since the poisoner who'd taken out the Emperor and Royal Consort was still out there. There was no telling when they'd try again, and with Dew gone, they were out of leads.

Nix couldn't pretend not to still be upset about what Lake had done, but that didn't mean he couldn't help them both by setting aside the petty hold he'd been keeping on their sex life. Even though he'd wanted Lake since the second he saw him, he'd been withholding as a sort of punishment, and they both knew it.

He knew it, and yet Lake let him get away with it. If nothing else, that should prove he really was trying to be better and less controlling.

They needed to be a united front to get through this, which meant no distractions.

Nix was going to have to sleep with him.

A thrill raced down his spine straight to his groin, and he picked up his glass to hide the way his cheeks heated.

He was going to fuck the Demon, and despite all of his former resistance, he was excited.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

“About last night...” Nix cupped the steaming mug of coffee in both hands and leaned back against the counter.

“What about it?” Lake asked from where he was perched on the edge of one of the stools, eating breakfast with the same level of poise he’d displayed at Demitrious’s dinner table.

“I have questions.”

By the time they’d managed to leave, it’d been well into the night. The four of them had walked past dozens of writhing bodies and Nix had actually gotten embarrassed for them. Seeing people have sex so openly had made him uncomfortable, and he’d asked about Juri, not wanting to go without him.

Only to be told Juri would be occupied until morning.

After what he’d witnessed, Nix thought he had a good idea what that meant now, but he hadn’t had the chance to actually ask. As soon as they’d pulled into the driveway, Yejun had headed to his studio. Lake had gone straight to bed, and West had mentioned wanting to search for the hacker—who they were referring to as the poisoner amongst themselves now since the secret was out—and had gotten to work the second they’d entered his room.

Nix had showered and gone to bed, not wanting to interrupt, and honestly so overwhelmed by everything he’d learned.

Now that it was morning he felt he had a clearer head about him.

“You always have questions, Nixie,” West teased, adding another piece of toast with lava jam to Nix’s half-eaten plate. “Sit.”

Nix shook his head in the negative and stayed where he was, sipping the coffee.

“You can’t be full yet.” West frowned. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Don’t pressure him,” Lake said, only for his best friend to snort.

“Breakfast is his favorite meal of the day, asshole, but of course you didn’t notice how I always have to make him twice as much food than for the rest of us.”

Lake frowned but didn’t give a rebuttal to that.

Nix was tempted to do as he was told and sit and eat more just to keep the peace, but he’d promised himself he was done bending when he didn’t have to. So instead he explained, “I have a lot on my mind.”

“Okay.” West dropped down onto the stool next to Nix’s spot at the table and propped an elbow on the surface. “Shoot.”

“The final test,” he asked, “is it sexual in nature?”

“Everything is sexual in nature on this planet.”

“West.”

“All right.” He held up a hand in surrender. “Yes. It is.”

“Explain.”

“It’s an old practice,” Lake began. “Most likely going all the way back to the beginning of the club. Of course, back then technology wasn’t nearly as advanced, so things were done a little differently, but thanks to things like cameras, we’re able to conserve some of our dignity.”

“He says we,” West cut in, “but he really means everyone else. Legacies don’t have to prove themselves the same way. No final test for us.”

“You’re still being too cryptic,” Nix said. “Lay it out for me plainly.”

“New members have to prove themselves by providing a sex tape that can be used against them as blackmail,” Lake stated, and when Nix blinked at him, he grunted. “That’s why we were trying to ease into it. It sounds—”

“Disgusting.”

“Yes,” Lake shrugged a single shoulder, “well.”

Wait...

“So last night, Juri and Beck...” He slammed his cup down on the counter, fuming. “That’s so fucked up!”

“That’s the club,” West replied. “It’s not a moral place, Nixie, everyone knows that already.”

“If it helps, there’s no rule that intercourse has to happen,” Lake told him. “They just had to film Juri submitting to a member of the club. Since it was Beck who went with him to complete the task, he probably didn’t do all that much.”

“A blowjob most likely,” West elaborated. “Maybe they filmed him kneeling and

Beck coming on his face. Or he fingered Juri to completion. Stuff like that.”

“And,” Nix felt a little sick, “who watches these tapes?”

“That’s the kicker. No one.”

He frowned. “What?”

“In the olden days, you used to have to do it right there, in front of the whole audience. But now it just gets recorded in privacy and the tape gets added to the collection that’s sitting on the fifth level of the Club House collecting dust. No one is allowed to view the tapes unless a member has broken a rule and is being exiled. Then the tape can be used to effectively ruin any chance they have at building a normal life on planet outside the club.”

“So then...How do they know it’s not faked?”

“If it is, that’s a death sentence,” Lake said. “And not just for them.”

“If a member of the club submits a blank or falsified tape and it’s later discovered, they and their entire bloodline is wiped out. It hasn’t happened in...what?” West turned to Lake. “Two hundred years?”

“Something like that.”

“Of course, no one will know so long as the member never breaks the rules, but this is a dangerous place to be. Piss off the wrong person, someone with enough power, and they can easily frame you for something you didn’t do. They kick you out and view your tape and see that you never followed through...”

Death sentence.

For everyone.

Nix scowled. “That’s—”

“Fucked up,” Lake filled in for him. “Yes, we know. But that’s how things are done.”

A thought occurred to him and his eyes narrowed. “You were going to make me do that.”

“It wouldn’t have been any different than what we did as Maestro and Songbird. It would have just been the two of us and a camera.”

“Did you record any of those times?”

Lake dropped his gaze. “No.”

“And there’s the difference.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Shit. I can’t believe I let Juri put himself through that. What kind of friend am I.”

“You didn’t know,” West reassured. “But he did. He wouldn’t have offered if that was a dealbreaker for him. Which is why I think June needs to stop being so suspicious of him and get a grip.”

“Yejun still doesn’t trust Juri?” Nix asked. “Even after last night?”

“Actually, not sure. Haven’t seen him.”

“I don’t think he came back to the Roost,” Lake said.

“He’s still at his studio?” Nix glanced at the clock on his multi-slate. It’d been ten hours since they’d returned from the Corleone residence. “I thought he was supposed

to get a break after the gallery showing?”

Lake and West silently watched him.

“What?” Nix rolled his eyes. “I’m not made of glass. Did it suck having all those people stare at my bare ass? Yeah. But it happened. Crying about it now won’t solve anything.”

“But you’re still pissed at June?” West surmised.

“I’m not mad at Yejun because of the painting,” Nix reminded. Would he rather that particular piece of work had never been created? Yes. But it was Dew’s fault it’d been displayed publicly instead of privately like the artist had intended. “I believe him when he says it was meant to be a gift for Lake’s birthday. Speaking of,” he turned to Lake, “what do you want?”

Lake quirked a brow. “My birthday has passed, Songbird.”

“Not the point.”

“There’s nothing I want.”

He blew out a breath. “Can’t ever make anything easy for me, can you?” He knew exactly what he was going to give the Demon, but he’d wanted to ask anyway. “When’s a good time to give it to you?”

Lake cocked his head. “You’re serious?”

“I never joke about birthdays.”

“Gift-giving is going to have to wait,” West told them, checking his multi-slate.

“Yejun is at the office. Apparently, he got the paperwork all set up.”

“Paperwork?” Recalling the last time he was at their office building and there was paperwork involved gave him a rush of different emotions. On the one hand, it’d been one of the scariest experiences of his life, because it was one of his first encounters with Lake outside of the app, and he hadn’t known what to expect.

On the other, he dreamed about being lifted onto that rubber toy, filled with fake cock as Lake stroked him...He swallowed and tried to clear his mind, hoping neither of the Demons noticed how distracted he’d momentarily gotten.

“We convinced the Order to let us read you into the club,” Lake said, only for West to stop him.

“Already filled him in there. But not about the other part.” West shoveled the remaining food on his plate into his mouth, clueing Nix into the fact they were about to leave right now.

“What other part?” he asked.

Lake looked uncomfortable for a second before he cleared his throat and told him, “For our mating. We need to officially file our mating.”

Once they did that, it would be recognizable by the government. No one would be able to comment about Nix changing his mind or getting the mark surgically removed from his neck. Even though it was a big deal, they didn’t require much to make it legally binding. From what he understood, they needed to sign some documents, have a witness there to support their claims, and...that was about it.

Sometimes people had grand ceremonies or weddings and did it there, but Nix had never expected anything like that. Although, he had sort of always pictured his

parents at all of his major life events and was a little bummed that he hadn't even thought to get around to telling them about this.

He sort of just hadn't figured out how.

"Hi mom, dad. Just wanted to let you know I was forcefully bitten and am now the future Emperor's claimed mate" didn't really have a positive ring to it.

Some of his thought process must have crossed his expression because Lake's darkened.

"Chill out," Nix stopped him before he could overreact. "I'm not going to refuse to sign the paperwork. Do you want to leave right this second? Because I'm ready if you are. Afterward, I have to swing by the hospital and check up on Briant."

Juri had texted him about an hour ago letting him know he was on his way there. Now that he understood exactly what the other guy had done for him by taking his position last night, Nix really needed to meet and give him a proper thank you as well. He wasn't really sure how though, so taking some time between to think about it couldn't hurt.

There was also the matter of the other thing that'd been bugging him...

Last night, Nix had come face to face with the full reality of their situation. The Demons needed to come off as a united front now more than ever, and they weren't able to do that in part because of Nix and the unsolved issues he had with Lake and Yejun.

"You're being surprisingly amicable," Lake said suspiciously.

"I've got my own terms and conditions I want to be met," he replied, not bothering to

conceal his true motive.

“Oh?”

Nix set his empty mug in the sink. “We can talk about it at the office, with Yejun.” He turned to West. “He’s meeting us there?”

“Yeah.” West stared at him for a moment, seemingly searching for something before giving up with a shrug. “All three of us need to be present when you sign the club paperwork. It needs to be filmed too.”

Nix bristled.

“Relax, Nixie.” West came over and brushed the bangs off his forehead tenderly. “We won’t do anything you’re not comfortable with. You believe me, don’t you?”

He considered every angle possible, trying to think the way West would. “No one actually watches the final test.”

“Exactly.” West grinned at him and then winked.

“Okay, but what about the death sentence?” Nix glanced between the two of them, but neither seemed all that concerned. “Hendrix is already out to get us, if he succeeds for any reason and that video is brought out to be used as blackmail...”

“Like I would ever let that happen.”

“West is right,” Lake agreed rising from his seat. “Once I’m emperor, none of this will matter anyway.”

“There’s only a few more days,” West reassured. “We just have to make it until

then.”

“All the more reason to exercise extreme caution,” Nix said. Despite his protests, he was already reevaluating his plans in his head. This could work in his favor.

“What?” West quirked a brow. “Suddenly you’re not camera shy?”

“Not at all what I mean.”

“Then let us handle this,” Lake told him. “It’ll be just like with Juri. Nothing has to be shown on camera at all.”

Nix opened his mouth to argue but then snapped it shut again. He had a better idea. If they were going to take the risk anyway, may as well benefit from it fully.

Yeah. Yeah, this could really work.

But he couldn’t tell them about it just yet.

“Let’s go.” He brushed past West, intent on getting the ball rolling. “The sooner this is done, the faster we can get back to searching for the poisoner, right?”

“You really think he’ll strike before Demons Passing?” West asked as the Demons trailed behind Nix. “He’s lain pretty low up until this point. We still don’t even know if he was behind Dew’s actions or not.”

West hadn’t been able to link Dew to anyone else through any of his devices, but they knew there was another person involved in all of this. Dew wasn’t smart enough to create the poison himself, and neither he nor Branwen had the computer skills necessary to hack into the system and erase all traces of themselves. If they had, they would have done so, but now that they were aware of Branwen and Dew’s

involvement, it'd been easier for West to locate traces of them.

He'd used the school's security footage and was in the process of viewing all of the tapes of Branwen and Dew moving about. Most of it was them going to and from class, but there were obvious missing pieces, a deleted chunk of time when Branwen had entered the library or Dew had stepped into the bathroom. Stuff like that. Someone had to be responsible for the doctored footage.

Someone didn't want to be seen.

But who?

And were they willing to give up on whatever their end goal may be now that Demons Passing was so close?

"I think," Nix shoved the front door open and stepped out onto the porch, "we need to be way more cautious than you three have been. No eating any outside food, even from the school cafeteria. And let's stick together from now on, yeah? At least until Lake's secured his position. That way—"

One of them grabbed his wrist and spun him around, and when he bumped into Lake's solid chest, he realized it'd been the Imperial.

"What?" Nix snapped, not bothering to try and free himself from Lake's hold.

"You know our schedules don't line up that way," Lake said. "There are some days when—"

"I'll have to be alone with Yejun." He'd already figured that out. "Yeah, I know." On Tuesdays, West and Lake were in the same general vicinity on campus, but he and Yejun were on the opposite side for at least an hour. "If I had to guess, I'd say you

and I are the two most likely targets. We shouldn't travel alone."

"How do you figure?" Lake asked.

"Because they failed with me and June once before," West answered for him. "Since he's short on time, he'll go straight to the source and skip over the bullshit this go around. That's if this guy tries anything at all."

West thought the poisoner had already learned their lesson and backed off, but Nix wasn't convinced. Or, maybe he just wasn't willing to let his guard down, even a little.

He'd already learned the hard way what that got him, and something told him if this poisoner went for his jugular, he wouldn't walk away after like he had with Lake. No, they needed to adapt to survive, at least for a little while.

"Come on." Nix tugged lightly on his wrist. "We have to secure my position before we spend any more time worrying about yours."

Lake's brow winged up, but after a moment of hesitation, he shifted his hold, slipping his palm against Nix's. When he pulled him toward the steps and kept their hands tightly clasped, Nix didn't protest.

He planned on making the Imperial do far more with those hands before the day was through anyway. Nix would let him do as he pleased for now.

But later.

Later it was his turn.

And he had no intentions of showing any mercy.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

“Are you sure there’s nothing else you’ll need help with?” Beck’s voice came through the earbud in Yejun’s left ear as the Demon stepped into the elevator.

He was the first to arrive at the office building downtown, an envelope stuffed with paper documents under his arm. They’d need Nix to sign digital copies as well, but the club liked to kick it old school from time to time, and having hard copies meant having a backup in case there was a technical issue.

“I’ve got it all,” Yejun replied, hitting the button that would take him up to the fourth level. He’d lost track of time at his studio and had texted the older guy asking if he was anywhere near the Club House. Beck had come through and picked up all of the documents they needed, handing them off to him on campus since he was scheduled for an afternoon class anyway. “Thanks again.”

Beck had called him because he’d realized he’d forgotten to hand over one of the copies, but it wasn’t important enough for Yejun to turn around and get it, or tell the others to make a stop themselves.

Since they’d claimed Nix as their fourth, they each needed to sign a specific form. He still had three with him, so he’d just wait on signing his and submit it later. No big deal.

“Actually,” Beck said as the elevator came to a stop and Yejun stepped out into the hallway, “I’m planning on being at West’s match tomorrow night. How about I hand it off to him then?”

Yejun shook his head. “You really have to get over this crush, man. I wasn’t going to

say anything since our talk at the hospital but—”

“I know.” Seeing as how Beck had grown up the same way Lake had, he was also good at masking his emotions when he wanted to, so it was hard to tell if the guy felt sad or not. “I missed my chance. If I hadn’t known before, last night would have opened my eyes to the truth.”

Last night, when West had stuck to Nix’s side like a protective bodyguard. Any chance he’d had to touch the Firebird, he’d taken, smirking at anyone who dared allow their gaze to linger on their fourth a little too long.

Not the reaction Yejun would have had in his place, but then, the two of them were very different.

Yejun was realizing that he was far more possessive than he’d ever considered himself to be.

West, however, seemed to have enjoyed the attention. He clearly got off on flaunting Nix, waving in the members’ faces that he was claimed and untouchable. He’d figured out what Lake and June already knew.

Nix was special. Worth protecting.

And Yejun had royally fucked up.

He entered the office and shut the door behind him with a bit more force than necessary, going straight for the desk to the far left, where he dropped the paperwork. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Beck replied. “Especially since you only partially mean that.”

Yejun grinned and shrugged even though the other guy couldn't see, spinning around to perch on the edge of the desk as he waited. "What can I say, Nix is a good guy."

"Yes, he is."

"I'm glad that he's ours." Even if that meant Beck had his heart broken in the process. He liked the older man and all, but it wasn't like it was Yejun's fault Beck had never grown a pair and confessed to West. "Since you've already come to terms with it being over—"

"It never really started," Beck reminded, but Yejun grunted.

"Yeah, yeah. Can I ask you something?"

He sighed. "You're wondering why I never told West how I felt."

"It just doesn't seem very like you, to back off when you want something." Although, now that Yejun was thinking about it... "Actually. When was the last time you actually even wanted something?"

What Yejun meant was it didn't seem like a former Demon to give up on something they wanted, but when he stopped to really consider it, Beck was different from the rest of them.

"Can I tell you truthfully?" Beck surprised him by saying.

"That'd be preferable."

"Getting turned down by one of the current Demons would only get a laugh out of my father. That is the opposite of what I want."

Beck was always thinking up ways he could screw Hendrix over, Yejun knew that, but still...

“Take it from someone who also has controlling parents,” he said, “don’t base every decision you make off of how they’ll react. Sometimes it’s worth just taking your own happiness into consideration.”

“Have you spoken to yours about Nix yet?”

He clicked his tongue. “Just my sister. Briefly.”

Yerin was the original owner of this building and several years his senior. She was currently running the Starlight Museum of Modern Art on the other side of the planet, and only made a few trips back home, usually for major Essential events. Due to the age gap, they were never extremely close growing up, but as they got older, they’d developed somewhat of a friendship.

His sister had heard about their fourth and called him to ask about it just last week, and Yejun had confirmed he’d fallen for Nix. She’d congratulated him, but warned him about their parents plans. He’d ended the call shortly after to avoid discussing it further.

Yerin had accepted the match organized by their mother with another prominent family in the art scene.

Yejun had no intentions of doing so, especially not now.

He was mostly trying not to overthink it, since as soon as Lake took the throne, it would no longer be a concern. His parents might be able to speak up against them now, but they wouldn’t be able to say shit to the Emperor.

The door clicked a second before Lake appeared, and Yejun nodded at him in greeting.

“Gotta go, Beck.” He ended the call and pulled the earbud out, remaining by the desk as everyone poured into the room, paying extra care to Nix when he entered.

Nix was dressed casually, in dark gray jeans and a red polo at least a size too big for him.

Yejun was pretty sure it belonged to West, but he wasn’t all that interested in Nix’s clothing choices. He was trying to decide if the others had told Nix what they were all doing here, and how Nix felt about that.

The Firebird must have been taking pointers from Lake and Beck though, because it was impossible to tell based on his expression alone.

Didn’t help that Nix was also refusing to make eye contact with him.

“Is this it?” Lake picked up the envelope from the desk, then placed it back down and keyed in the code for the top right drawer of the desk. He pulled out a holo-pad and started setting up.

“Yeah, minus one page. No big. I’ve got it figured.” Yejun turned to Nix. “Are you ready for this?”

“Not like he has a choice,” Lake clipped, motioning for Yejun to move out of the way before he placed the holo-pad on the surface of the desk and pulled the paperwork out. He shifted through it, separating the documents so the pages they needed to sign weren’t mixed in with Nix’s, and then set that down as well. “Come here, Songbird.”

Nix didn’t hesitate, moving over and taking the pen Lake offered him. “This is it?” he

asked as he bent and dutifully signed his name to all the places Lake pointed, not even bothering to read the contract himself. “I was expecting something...more.”

“You watched it last night,” West reminded. “Juri signed a bunch of bullshit, swore an oath, and that was it.”

“Club Essential likes to think of themselves as god-like, but really they’re just another elite business club. The paperwork is legally binding, and the final test...” Lake paused.

“Oh, I already know what I want to film,” Nix said, moving on from the physical copies to the holo-pad.

“You do?” Yejun frowned and looked at West, but his friend didn’t seem to have any clue either. “You don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with. I’m sure I speak for us all when I say we aren’t afraid to submit a blank tape.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Nix scrawled his name one final time and then held it out for Lake. But when the Imperial reached for it, he snatched it back, gaze hardening. “Not so fast.”

Lake’s spine straightened, pursing his lips when Nix waved him to the side, urging him to step out from behind the desk and swap places with him. “What are you doing, Songbird?”

“I told you.” He took the empty spot just vacated so he was facing them all. “I know what I want.”

“And what is that, exactly?” West drawled, crossing his arms as they all waited for the answer.

“You,” Nix pointed a finger at Lake, and then moved his arm until he was aimed at Yejun’s heart, “and you.” He removed his multi-slate and held it up, the camera facing them. “I’m going to film you fooling around.”

Yejun blinked, certain he’d misheard, although, judging from the way the others looked every bit as shocked as he felt, he probably hadn’t.

“What?” West broke the silence first.

“You heard me,” Nix said. “I want them to touch each other.”

“Nixie.”

“Don’t play dumb,” he stopped him. “You’re smart, West. If you give it a minute’s thought, you’ll figure out exactly why I want this.”

West might be able to, but Yejun knew he had no chance and wasn’t even going to try.

“Why?” he asked, feeling an electric current race through his body when Nix finally set those brown eyes on him.

“Nixie wants the upper hand,” West sounded both impressed and wary.

“I want you to prove yourselves,” Nix reaffirmed. “I’ve been saying that all along. You both claim you’re sorry and that I can trust you? Prove it. Put yourselves in my position. Take a risk the same way I’ve been risking everything since the day I bumped into you on campus.”

If they did this, allowed him to film the two of them, and the tape was ever revealed for any reason...Yejun and Lake would not only have to answer for why Nix’s final

test was of them, they would also become laughingstocks. It'd be irrefutable proof that Nix had them wrapped around his finger.

That he was in control.

"All right," Lake agreed. "Are you filming already? How would you like us to start?"

"That's it?" Yejun couldn't hide his surprise. "You're just going to go along with this?"

"Aren't you?"

He opened his mouth and then immediately clamped it shut again.

"Stop wasting our time by pretending, June," West chided. "It's not like this will be the first time you see each other naked, and it certainly won't be the first time you touch each other's dicks."

"That's interesting." Nix waved his phone. "I caught that on camera, by the way. So, how far have the two of you gone?"

"Hand jobs," Yejun admitted. "And you're...really okay with this?"

Nix snorted. "If I can stand by while you fuck other people, I'm sure I can handle it when you fuck each other."

"Songbird." Apparently, that's where Lake drew his line in the sand.

Nix rolled his eyes. "Whatever. No penetration, happy?"

West let out a bark of laughter he tried, and failed, to conceal. "You're really going to

make them do this, aren't you."

It was a rhetorical question, but Nix nodded anyway.

In a way, Yejun got it. This blackmail video was meant to be of Nix so the club had something to hang over his head, but their smart-ass Firebird had ripped a page from their playbook and opted to make it his blackmail video against them instead. But it wasn't just about proving they meant it when they swore they'd protect him.

Nix wanted them to experience what he had. To feel even a modicum of the embarrassment and humiliation that they'd inflicted upon him time and time again.

This was revenge.

And Yejun couldn't even blame him for it.

"We do this, and you'll forgive us?" Yejun held his breath, hope seemingly dangling from a thread like a carrot on a string. "You'll forgive me?"

Nix looked like he wanted to say no, but he held June's gaze and promised, "Yes."

His hands dropped to the top button on his pants. "Tell me what to do."

If it meant getting the Firebird to like him again, Yejun could do anything.

Even come on his best friend's tongue if it came to that.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

He'd thought they'd put up more of a fight. After witnessing their bond all these months, no one understood the dynamic between the Demons better than Nix did. It wasn't sexual in nature, came more from a place of feeling like family than anything.

Yet there was Lake and Yejun, less than ten feet in front of him, making out like they were old lovers separated for years.

Nix took pity on them at the last second and started them off simply with kissing. He hadn't anticipated them taking it this seriously, even if the start had been awkward. As soon as they'd found their bearings...

"Is it weird of me to say this is sort of turning me on?" West's voice cut through Nix's thoughts and he glanced over to find the other Demon's head tilted to the side, his eyes locked on the show.

Yejun lifted a hand from Lake's hip and flipped West the bird, but he didn't pull away from the kiss. His tongue drove forward, chasing after Lake's as the two of them dueled for dominance. That was the only thing that made this sloppy. The obvious bid for control and the hesitancy whenever a part other than their lips met.

But West wasn't wrong. It was...hot. Exciting, even. Nix felt a rush unlike anything else and it sort of scared him.

Was this why the club used sex as a weapon? Why they insisted on keeping films as blackmail, and why dominating someone else in the bedroom was seen as a testament to the level of power they held?

When he'd first arrived here, all of that had sounded like something out of a bad pornography, yet here he was, getting hard as he watched two men he'd also been intimate with swap saliva.

Mostly against their will.

Nix was fucked up, but that revelation wasn't going to cause him to back down. He hadn't started this to lose his conviction at just a kiss.

"June," the nickname felt foreign and strange coming from him, but Nix forced himself to keep his cool, "put your hand in Lake's pants."

They both froze, and Lake pulled away first, turning to Nix who merely shrugged. When it became apparent he meant it, Lake reached to undo his dress pants.

"No," Nix shook his head, "Yejun can do it."

Yejun exhaled, the sound coming off more pissed off than anything. "You're really choosing to take out your anger this way, Firebird?"

"I haven't even begun yet."

He made another sound but then quickly unsnapped the button on Lake's pants, dragging the zipper down with the same lack of finesse. Yejun didn't still until he'd cupped Lake through his black boxer briefs and the other man hissed.

"Before either of you think of lying about this not working," Nix said, "I'd like to point out if you were able to give each other hand jobs before, clearly you're not averse to one another's touch. But if you need extra help, feel free to imagine it's me you're touching."

Both Lake and Yejun seemed keen to that suggestion, and the latter started to move his hand, gently at first, massaging Lake through the thin cloth material in an attempt to arouse him.

“Kiss again,” Nix ordered, watching Lake’s cock come alive under Yejun’s persistent hand.

Lake took the initiative, leaning forward to capture Yejun’s lips. He bit at him and then grabbed onto his neck, hauling him forward while grinding against his palm at the same time. There was no denying he was horny now, lust getting the best of him as he used his best friend for pleasure.

Nix had never been more grateful that he wasn’t the jealous type. There were no negative feelings about this. The opposite, in fact. He shifted on his feet, aware that he was in danger of leaking through his pants, but unwilling to set down the multi-slate and stop filming to remove them.

He knew what that felt like, to be held by Lake and forced to take whatever he was willing to give.

To have all of Yejun’s passion aimed his way, those skilled fingers working their magic. Fingers that had slipped beneath the waistband of Lake’s underwear and pulled that needy cock free. They were working him in short pumps, Yejun paying extra care to Lake’s sensitive tip, as though he knew exactly where the Imperial liked to be touched most.

Those hand jobs they’d exchanged in the past must have been epic for him to recall tiny details such as that, and any lingering guilt—though small—Nix may have been feeling for making them do this vanished.

Suddenly, Yejun dropped to his knees, tugging down Lake’s pants and underwear to

expose his entire front and ass.

“What are you doing?” Lake asked, which was good, because Nix had completely forgotten how to talk.

“Giving the Firebird what he really wants,” Yejun explained before he brought his face close to Lake’s leaking cock and licked at a bead of his precome. He turned and caught Nix’s gaze and opened his mouth wide enough to take in Lake’s flushed crown, sucking on it a bit before releasing with a pop that had everyone in the room shuddering.

“Do you like this, Nix?” he asked in a sultry tone that Nix felt all the way down to his toes. “Want us to keep going? You’re in charge here, baby. Tell us what you want and we’ll do it.”

He was performing for the camera. This was his way of showing Nix he was willing to do what it took to make things up to him, willing to prove himself through his actions instead of empty promises. It was what Nix had wanted, but he hesitated, momentarily wondering if this was really a punishment at all if they enjoyed it.

It didn’t take him long to come to the conclusion that he didn’t care.

Nix didn’t want to hurt them. This wasn’t about making them suffer in the same ways they’d made him. What he truly wanted was to be their equal, to make a stance and show them that he wouldn’t spend the rest of his life pushed over or pinned down.

If Yejun and Lake got off on this too, all the better.

At the end of the day, didn’t that still make Nix the winner?

“You’re so hard for him Lake,” Nix almost didn’t recognize the sound of his own

voice as he spoke. “Is it because he smells nice?”

“You think he smells nice?” West’s eyes kept moving between the three of them, as though he couldn’t decide who he wanted to look at more.

“Yeah,” Nix admitted. “Like paint covered in powdered sugar.”

“That’s a very odd combination,” Lake grunted and then threaded his fingers through Yejun’s dark hair, those long digits slipping beneath the loose bun at the back of Yejun’s head. “But yes. I do think he smells good. Not as good as you, but it’s pleasant.”

“Fuck his face then,” Nix stated, his dick twitching between his legs. “He’s got a skilled tongue, don’t you want to feel it? Yejun, suck him off. If he comes for you, maybe I’ll forgive you.”

Lake helped guide his head when he adjusted on his knees and leaned in for it. The second Yejun’s lips wrapped around his cock again, he moaned, eyes slipping shut as he was sucked down all the way in one easy glide.

Yejun buried him deep in his throat and hummed before slowly pulling off, the tip of his tongue lapping at Lake’s slit.

“Damn,” West let out a low whistle, “putting on a whole production, June?”

“Gotta please our fourth,” came the reply a second before he went back to work. Yejun swallowed Lake again, his face changing color as he held his breath and bobbed. His right hand lifted to fondle Lake’s heavy balls, the other slipping behind him to trace the curve of his crack.

Nix anticipated a little resistance when he saw it, but to his surprise, Lake didn’t pull

away or try to stop him. The Imperial even widened his stance to give Yejun easier access to his hole.

When Yejun's middle finger penetrated Lake, Nix felt his own cheeks clench up. Watching the exchange, his body heated and he felt insanely empty. His hips swiveled forward on their own accord, chasing after what little friction his tight clothing provided. If this kept up, even with that small bit of contact, he was going to blow.

The sounds of Yejun suckling at Lake and the Imperial's heavy breathing was really doing it for Nix, and from the looks of it, West was close himself.

They just needed to last until Lake came, that was all. If they could do that, Nix could move on to the final part of his plan and they could get theirs as well. But they had to wait otherwise—

Lake's head dropped back and his hand on Yejun's head shoved him down and held.

Dutifully, Yejun swallowed down the Imperial's orgasm, the movements of his throat causing both Nix and West to groan.

Nix barely even waited for them to finish. The second Yejun pulled off of Lake's softening cock, Nix dropped the multi-slate to the desk and immediately started to undress. "West."

The other Demon didn't need any more prompting than that, tugging his shirt off as he practically stalked toward Nix. Once he'd reached him, he lifted him onto the smooth surface and helped him strip out of the rest of his clothing.

As soon as he had him naked, West yanked his thighs apart and fit himself snugly between them, taking Nix's mouth in a brutal kiss.

Sensation exploded within him and Nix clung to the Demon, his aching dick rubbing against the larger one protruding from West's open pants. He hadn't bothered removing them, but that was all right, so long as his cock was free and Nix had access to it, that was all that mattered. The two of them weren't going to be filmed, and he'd shut the camera off before he'd put the device down.

"You're evil, Nixie," West growled as he tore his mouth away, only to deliver nips down his chest. He captured a nipple between his teeth and rolled it, applying a bit of sting to the bite, until Nix was writhing from that alone. "Using me against my friends."

"You know that's why I approached you from the start," Nix teased. He'd entered West's room alone under the guise of being curious about classical music. Of course West had figured out what was up.

He chuckled proudly. "You fit right in, babe."

"Actually," Nix slid down the desk until his ass bumped against West's cock, "you do."

"Hold on," West began to protest, but Nix shook his head.

"Don't need to. I'm still opened up from when you fucked me this morning."

Both Lake and Yejun made sounds akin to a whimper behind him, and Nix grinned at that reaction.

"Definitively one of us," West said. "Ready for me, Nixie? Let's make them watch and regret ever wronging you, yeah?"

"Man, fuck off," Yejun lost his cool.

“Planning on it.”

Nix arched his back and cried out as West plowed into him so deeply, he felt his cock bump against his lower stomach. That first thrust was brutal and unyielding, forcing his body to stretch too quickly. “Too much! Slow down!”

West chuckled above him, tightening the grip he had on his hips so he could yank Nix’s body across the desk to meet his next brutal thrust.

It sent stars exploding in Nix’s eyes and he squeezed them shut, gasping and writhing, unsure if he was trying to escape or impale himself even further on the savage Demon. There was no embarrassment this time. It didn’t matter that he was being watched by Lake and Yejun, that they were seeing him come completely undone for their best friend.

Nix wanted them to see.

Wanted them to know what they were missing.

When had he become so contemptuous? He was angry, more so than he’d realized, and that anger had manifested itself into this. Into his willingness to undress and debase himself in front of them, all so they could feel badly for mistreating him.

In a way, he supposed he was also using West, similar to how the Demon currently fucking him with a frenzy had accused him of doing. He was not so subtly telling the others, “Look what happens when you treat me right. Look what reward you get”.

The real kicker?

Nix didn’t even feel bad about it.

“Can I let one of them hold your wrists down?” West asked, staring into Nix’s eyes as though he could read his thoughts. He probably had an inkling of what direction they’d taken, was no doubt hoping he could convince Nix to have a little mercy.

“No.” Nix wasn’t ready to give this up just yet. To give up the feeling of power. It was the first time in a long time—maybe even his entire life—that he was feeling it, that he was discovering what it truly meant to have total control, and he was going to cling to it as long as possible.

That didn’t mean he wasn’t willing to take their play to a more aggressive level. That’s when it was the best between them. When West hurt him just a little and Nix could bask in the endorphin high that bit of pain always brought.

He was aware control was a fleeting thing, maybe even a false thing. And not just with West. Each of the Demons was remaking Nix in the image they wanted.

For West, that was a lover who enjoyed rough sex.

For Lake, that was someone who was submissive in the bedroom and liked taking orders.

For Yejun...Actually, Nix wasn’t entirely sure. Probably because the sex between them had always been a mixture of both. He’d physically control Nix by posing his body however he pleased, though he was always careful not to do anything that could cause him discomfort.

At least, not until their last time.

“Yejun’s tie,” Nix said, an image of Lake wrapping that crimson material around his hand coming to mind and causing him to instinctively arch his back as he took West’s next thrust. “You can use that.”

“You’re taking this very far, Songbird,” Lake growled darkly, but that was the only complaint he made. A moment later, the sound of rustling fabric could be heard, followed by the Imperial’s hand appearing over Nix’s head, the silk tie in hand.

Nix presented his wrists. “Make it tight.”

“Pretty sure that’s my line,” West chided, but his heart wasn’t in it. He even smiled down at him and reached to pluck at one of Nix’s nipples.

Lake silently took Nix’s wrists and secured the tie around them, making sure it was tight, but not enough to cut off circulation. Once he was finished, he hesitated, peering down at Nix with a hungry gaze that did nothing to hide what he really wanted to do.

Maintaining eye contact, Nix lifted his arms and then draped them over West’s head, so the binding was pressed against the Demon’s neck. Then, he used that as leverage to lift himself, mouth finding West’s. The kiss was eager and all-consuming, and Nix poured himself into it, cinching his thighs around his waist to cling to him as his hole continued to be pounded through the exchange.

West’s tongue tangled with his, licking fire throughout his entire body. He was just as passionate, the consideration he’d clearly been holding onto for his friends dashed away as quickly as Nix’s dignity had been. There was only this. Only them and all the ways they could become connected.

Nix held on even tighter when West suddenly shifted them, cupping his ass in his palms to lift him off the desk entirely. The new position had Nix’s body sinking down onto West’s cock, gravity helping as he was brought into an upright position.

They both groaned, West easily finding his rhythm again, cock driving into Nix with the same wild urgency. When he pulled away from the kiss and lapped at the side of

Nix's neck, Nix tipped his head to allow him better access.

And then a thought occurred to him.

Nix's fingers clawed lightly over the base of West's skull and as soon as the Demon pulled away, he caught his eye and pointedly presented the unmarred side of his neck.

Everything in the room seemed to freeze at once.

Even with his back to them, Nix could sense that both Lake and Yejun had gone on high alert. It was no different from the man holding him, his cock buried to the hilt, though he'd stopped thrusting and gone just as still as the others.

A range of emotions played across West's face before he managed to say, "Nixie."

Nix wasn't going to take no for an answer though.

This time, he was going to be the one to choose.

He cupped the back of West's head and pulled him a little closer, scowling when West resisted. "You promised, remember? You said when you bite me, you'll give me fair warning."

"I wasn't planning on biting you today."

"No," Nix agreed, because he'd known that, "but isn't this better? I'm asking you to. My willingness should be preferable. Unless," he lowered his voice to a teasing tone, "you want me to pretend to struggle and resist? I could play, if that's what you need. Either way, this happens now."

West's uncertainty didn't diminish.

“It’s a test.” Lake understood before anyone else, and West’s eyes lifted over Nix to meet his gaze with a partial frown. “He made June and I prove ourselves by filming the video. He’s making you do this for the same reason. Prove yourself.”

Nix almost caved and took the order back, not liking the way Lake sounded. He was clearly upset, holding himself back from putting a stop to this even though it had to have been obvious from the start this was where they were eventually headed.

Lake shared everything with his best friends. Even Nix. He didn’t get to draw a line in the sand to determine how far that went.

Nix did.

“This is my body,” Nix insisted, speaking not only for them to hear, but to regain the confidence he’d been feeling as well. “This is my life. You three may have stolen the course of it, but it’s still mine. The way I see it, we have two options. You either lock me up somewhere I can’t escape, or you convince me you’re going to keep your promise to take care of me. Let’s think of this as till death do us part. You want to keep me? Give me a reason to want to stay. Show me you’ll do what I ask, even if it’s difficult. Show me you’ll put me first.”

He didn’t mean to pit them against each other in the long run. The three of them had gotten this far because of their tight bond, and Nix wasn’t trying to ruin that. But he needed confirmation that he wasn’t going to the one tossed aside if ever there was an argument between them. That even though the Demons had been with each other longer, their feelings for Nix were every bit as strong as the ones they held for each other.

West had already done the most to prove that, but Nix wasn’t satisfied with half-measures anymore. It was as Lake had said. This was a test, and he refused to feel guilty for needing it.

At the end of the day, whose fault was it that he didn't fully trust them?

It wasn't his, that was for damn sure.

"Do it," Lake said, but that only irritated Nix for some reason.

"Shut up," he snapped. He crossed his ankles behind the small of West's back, forcing his cock to prod at his insides from the motion. A moan almost slipped past his lips, but he caught himself, unwilling to give in to desire now that he was so close to proving the point that should have been made months ago at the start of this insanity.

"West," he waited until he had the man's full, undivided attention once more, "bite me. I need you to."

"...You aren't thinking clearly. It's the lust—"

"You can't honestly believe I'd put myself through the agony of a claiming mark just because of good dick, can you?" Nix pointed out a bit crassly. "I'm going to get it anyway. I don't need to beg you to bite me to be fucked."

"Is that what you're doing?" West asked. "Are you begging me?"

Nix considered his next words carefully. "I'm begging you to save us."

Because if West refused to do this now, that was it. Nix didn't see how he could muster the courage to challenge them ever again, to trust their words when they all claimed to want him and care for him. If West didn't do this and show him this really was forever, something inside of Nix would shatter for sure.

It was already close to irreparable after what Yejun and Lake had done. So far, West

had been the one thing holding them together despite all of that. But if he couldn't show Nix he could set aside his worry about making Lake and Yejun feel bad and do what Nix wanted even if it made those two uncomfortable then—

West pulled out and set Nix down on the edge of the desk. He retreated a step, and it was all Nix could do to stop himself from reaching out to grab onto him. Though he held himself in check, something must have crossed over his expression, because West covered that bit of space between them and planted a soft kiss to his forehead.

“Relax, babe. I'll do it. I just have to grab something from my bag first, that's all. Okay?”

He hesitated but then nodded his head, watching as West ambled over to the door where he'd dropped his backpack earlier. His muscles flexed and he gave Nix a great view of his ass and the hard member still erect between his thighs when he bent down and unzipped it, uncaring about his nude form or the fact everyone in the room was looking.

“What is that?” Nix asked when West returned with a tube of something in his hand. “Sun cream?”

“Better,” he replied, twisting off the cap and tossing it to the side. He settled between Nix's spread thighs, his wet cockhead bumping against Nix's lower abs. When that had his breath hitching, West chuckled at him. “You're the one who put a pause on things, Nixie.”

“Yeah, well, you're the one taking forever and a day to pick it back up.” He motioned at the tube. “Pick up the pace. Whatever you're planning on doing with that, get it over with already so you can—”

“Fuck you?”

Nix narrowed his eyes, but his heart leaped in his chest when West brought the tip of the tube to the space between his neck and shoulder. He flinched when the cold goop made contact, then furrowed his brow when he started to feel a weird numbing sensation spread throughout the entire area.

“What is that?” he tried to turn his head to see, but West’s fingers captured his chin, keeping him in place as he continued to apply a generous amount to Nix’s body. Once he was satisfied, he dropped the tube and used his other hand to rub the cream into Nix’s skin.

“You’ve just been carrying that shit in your bag this whole time?” Yejun said, an edge of annoyance in his tone that had Nix’s spine noticeably stiffening.

“I mean this in the most loving way possible,” West replied, “shut the fuck up, June.”

Yejun went quiet, but Nix was caught up on that word.

Loving.

Was this loving?

Was asking to be claimed in an office after signing away his freedom loving?

Was the cream West just used on him loving?

What was loving?

“Hey.” West’s fingers on his chin pulled him back to the present. “We protect each other, yeah?”

Nix licked his lips. “Yeah.”

“After this, I promise no one will be allowed to hurt you ever again.” He looked over at the others. “Right?”

“Yes,” Lake and Yejun both said, just the single word and nothing else.

“How’s it feel?” West rubbed a few more circles into Nix’s skin.

“Numb,” he replied. The entire area didn’t feel like anything anymore.

“Good.”

“Did you prepare this...?”

“For you?” West finished for him with a smirk. “Yeah, babe. I’ll make this as pleasant of an experience as possible. Hold onto me, okay?”

Nix nodded and lifted his arms, looping them over West’s head a second time, and took a shaky breath. Despite all that bravado, he was afraid. When Lake had bitten him, the pain had been excruciating. It wasn’t at all something he wanted to experience a second time.

West widened his legs and slipped in closer, tipping Nix’s hips so that he could line his cock up with his entrance. “Ready?”

Not even a little.

He nodded anyway.

And the Demon sunk his teeth and his cock into his body at the same time.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

“Did you come here for that?” Briant scowled at the fresh mark on the other side of Nix’s neck.

“No. I came here for you, like I said.” Nix gave him a reassuring smile and finished with the paperwork. They were in the process of checking him out of the hospital. “Are you heading home after this?”

“I have the bus ticket you bought for me,” his cousin said, not sounding pleased by that notion. He shoved some folded clothing into his leather bag and sighed. “Nix. I don’t like this. Come back with me. We can talk to auntie and—”

“My parents can’t help me,” he cut him off. “Mostly because I don’t need their help. I swear. I’m good here. I’m maintaining my stellar GPA and—”

“You both always do that, you know?”

Nix frowned, but Briant wasn’t done.

“You and Branwen. Even when you were little. If something was uncomfortable, you two would cover it up with humor. Here’s the thing though, Nix, you’re no longer a kid, and this isn’t a laughing matter. Getting into bed with Club Essential is serious. Look what happened the second one of them thought you’d betrayed them?”

Briant had witnessed Yejun lose his shit and was understandably worried for him. Truthfully, Nix was somewhat worried for himself too, but not for the same reasons.

“I...care about them.” Admitting it out loud felt like a shortcoming, and he had to

glance away, unable to maintain eye contact as he continued. “They aren’t as bad as they seem, at least, not to me. Sometimes they’re even really kind.”

“That sounds like Stockholm syndrome. A good cousin would get you out, no matter how much you protest.” Briant sighed again and pinched the bridge of his nose. “But we both know I’m a coward. I’d never have the stomach to go up against the Demons. I’ve never been brave, not like you and Branwen. You can look down on me for it all you want—”

“I don’t,” Nix said. “I’ve actually always looked up to you. You’ve always known exactly what you want. Now I know what I want. It’s this. Them.”

“Your parents are going to hate this.”

“Yeah, well.” He shrugged. “Tough.”

Sometimes people had to accept things they didn’t like, he knew that better than anyone.

“And that?” Briant motioned to his neck. “That doesn’t hurt?”

“West patched me up right after. I can’t feel a thing.” The second skin coating ensured nothing could get into irritate or infect him, and aside from some mild discomfort if he moved his head too quickly, he hardly even noticed it was there.

It was a major difference from the time Lake had bitten him, that was for sure, something that hadn’t gone unnoticed by the Imperial either.

Lake had been acting distant ever since. If he were more insecure, Nix might have believed that was due to the fact he’d been forced to share his mate with West. But he knew better. After all this time together, he had a pretty good grasp on the Demons

and their inner workings.

Lake wasn't avoiding him because of anger. He was doing it because he felt guilty. What Nix had shown him wasn't how good intercourse could be. It was how good a mating could go. How different things were when consent was on the table and one actually took the time to care for their partner.

At least he'd gotten the message. That meant what Nix had gone through hadn't been in vain.

He could proceed with the next part of his elaborate—over the top—plan to get the four of them on track. A united front, that's what they needed. His cousin was definitely right about the Stockholm syndrome, but putting a label on it didn't change Nix's circumstances.

Especially now that he had two claiming marks instead of just the one.

"Are you sure you don't want me to take you to the bus station?" Nix had bought the ticket as a way to ensure his cousin actually went, knowing Briant was the type who hated wasting money and wouldn't toss a paid for ticket. But he'd been a bit taken a back when he'd been told Juri would see him off.

"I know how busy you are," Briant said. "Not only is it your first year at Foxglove, but you're also trying to assimilate into a completely different world from the one we're used to. It was too much for my sister. The last thing I want is to get a call saying you'd made the same choice that she did. Which is why," he rested a hand on Nix's shoulder, "you have to promise me something."

"Okay."

"If things start to get too tough to handle, you call me, all right? I'll come get you. I

might be a coward, but if push really comes to shove, I'll come through for you. I don't want to lose anyone else I care about. Deal?"

"Yeah, I promise."

The sound of the door to the hospital room opening drew his attention, but Nix found himself caught up in a strong hug from Briant before he could properly greet an entering Juri.

"Put yourself first, cousin," Briant whispered, as though not wanting Juri to overhear. "None of the Essential can be trusted. They'll always look after themselves. You do the same. Be selfish. Be conniving. Be whatever it is you need to be. Since you've decided to play this game, you have to play it by their rules."

He pulled away and took a step back. "You've always been a good kid, Nix."

But good kids got eaten by bad demons all the time.

He didn't have to say that last part out loud, Nix could read it loud and clear in his eyes. Their family had always avoided club members and anything directly linked to them. It'd sort of been an unspoken rule when they'd grown up. Briant and Branwen's parents hadn't been pleased when she'd chosen Foxglove Grove, the university known best for being at the heart of it all, but they hadn't been able to convince her to choose somewhere else.

"I'll tell my parents when I'm ready," he told Briant, hoping his older cousin kept his word and Nix's secret. The paperwork was signed and submitted, which meant he and Lake were officially mated in the eyes of the law. It wasn't like his parent's disapproval could change that, but it would be a nuisance to deal with in a time where they were already drowning in issues.

He hadn't confessed that last part to Briant though, had only confessed that he was now an official member of Club Essential.

"What happened to your neck?" Juri must have only just noticed since he'd been trying to give them space, but now that he had, he moved toward them, boldly pinching Nix's chin between two fingers to tip his head to the side and expose his throat. "What the hell. Did Lake do this?"

"No." Nix brushed his friend's hand away. "What reason would he have to bite me again?"

"Because he's a sadistic asshole," Juri stated, "that's why?"

"Calm down." Nix smiled to try and lighten the mood. "It wasn't like that. West did this, and before you get angry again, I asked him to."

"You asked him to bite you?" Briant and Juri spoke at the same time.

Nix glanced between them. "Weird. You guys have been spending too much time together."

"Don't change the subject." Briant frowned. "Light. What were you thinking? Why would you let another one of them literally sink their teeth into you? Wasn't one bad enough?"

"Briant." He blew out a breath. "Come on, man. I already told you how I feel about them." He pointed to his neck. "This was my choice."

"This time maybe," Juri mumbled, but they both heard him.

"Guys."

“Juri made a big sacrifice for you, and this—” Briant cut his tirade short when Juri bumped his arm and shook his head.

Nix set his hands on his hips. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you actually. About the Night of the Nightshade.”

Juri and Briant shared a look and then the older guy moved for the bathroom, leaving the two of them on their own wordlessly.

“Guess you’ve talked already.” Nix put two and two together. “You’ve gotten pretty close, huh?”

“Your cousin is nice,” Juri said. “He cares a lot about you.”

“I care about him too.”

“Who’d you make the official mate?” Juri asked then. “Since they both marked you?”

“Lake.” It was always going to be Lake. Everyone knew that. West hadn’t even bat an eyelash when the paperwork for that had come out after they’d finished up. He and Yejun had stood witness while Lake and Nix had pricked their fingers and placed bloodied thumbprints next to their signatures on the document even, neither of them complaining.

“Right. Those guys are used to sharing everything anyway.” When he noticed Nix flinch at that, he held up a hand. “I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant. I’m just in a bad mood and taking it out on you. Ignore me.”

“Is it because of what happened...between you and Beck?” It was awkward, but Nix needed to know. “I should be the one apologizing.”

“Why? You had no idea what the final test entailed. Hell, I bet you didn’t even know there’d be one, did you?” He smiled when Nix’s expression confirmed his assumption. “Guys like us have to stick together.”

“Guys like us?”

“The ones who get pushed around and controlled by the Demons. Briant and I talked a lot these past few days. He told me about your dream to create video games and how dedicated to that future you’ve always been. You can’t tell me some part of you isn’t mad at Lake and the others for taking that away from you.”

“There seems to be a misunderstanding,” Nix said. “They haven’t done that.”

Juri didn’t appear to be convinced. “Lake is going to let you work after he takes the throne? Won’t he be making you his Royal Consort? There are responsibilities that come with that title.”

“He’ll have West and Yejun to help him with things.” It’d been a while since the last time the subject had been brought up, and Nix made a mental note to do so as soon as possible. There’d be time for it after he gave Lake his birthday present—so long as there were no complications with that.

A part of Nix was still nervous Lake would reject the gift out of some misguided attempt at playing the knight in shining armor.

There was only one thing Nix needed the Imperial to be, and a prince on a steed wasn’t it.

Not that he’d hate seeing Lake dressed in uniform on top of a waif...

He shook his head and ordered himself to focus.

“It sounds like you have it all worked out,” Juri sounded conflicted. “So it’s true then? I knew you had feelings for them but...It’s more than that now, isn’t it.”

“This is my life,” Nix replied. “I’m their fourth.”

“They made you that without your consent, Nix.”

Maybe in the beginning that was true, but it hadn’t been for a while. The second he’d created an account on the Enigma app and drew Lake’s attention, it was already game over. He just hadn’t realized.

But it’d never been completely one-sided. Nix had always wanted Maestro, had felt a connection with him from the very first meeting. The Imperial had gone about this all wrong, for sure, but there was no telling if Nix wouldn’t have fallen for him naturally if given the chance.

If Lake had approached him like a normal love interest, introduced his two best friends, let them get to know one another organically...Would Nix still be fucking the three of them?

He didn’t know. What he did know, was now that he’d experienced what it was like to be with all three of them, he wouldn’t have it any other way. Even Yejun. Though he’d scared the crap out of Nix, some of the worst symptoms had already begun to subside. He hadn’t puked again, which was a total plus.

The other day, watching him blow Lake, had helped realign something inside of Nix that had been shaken loose the day Yejun had crushed him on the coffee table. It was almost as though a massive weight—no pun intended—had been lifted off of Nix’s shoulders and he could finally look at the artist again without breaking out in a cold sweat.

He was starting to miss Yejun, the kind version of him he'd come to know. The one who liked to tease him in the quiet and dimly lit art studio. Those moments, when it'd been just the two of them, had felt...safe.

Which was why it'd been so earth-shattering when that safety had been ripped away. Nix couldn't afford for something like that to happen again, but thanks to their willingness to be filmed, he finally felt secure enough in their relationship with him to trust it wouldn't.

"I trust them," he said just as Briant came out of the bathroom. His cousin probably thought he'd given them enough time to talk. Nix looked at the both of them and smiled once more. "I don't mean to disappoint you, either of you, but there you have it."

Briant pursed his lips. "You really think they'll protect you? That they'll take your side, no matter what?"

Nix considered the question before nodding. "Yeah, I do."

Yejun had learned his lesson, and West had always shown more faith than the other two. Lake...Lake had discovered Nix's secret first and had kept it to himself to protect him. They weren't perfect, far from it, but...

"I don't know how we'll feel in five years, or even ten," he declared. "But I know how we feel right now and, frankly, that's all I have the energy to focus on at the moment. We care about each other. You said it yourself, Juri. The Demons take care of one another."

"You aren't one of them, Nix," Briant tried to argue, but Nix wasn't hearing it anymore.

“Actually, I am.” He held his cousin’s gaze, his eyes hardening some to get his point across. He’d tried the nice approach and that hadn’t worked. “I’m a member of Club Essential now, Briant, and I’m the official mate of the next in line for the throne.”

“He’s right,” Juri added with a sigh. “Technically, he’s a Demon now. He’s their fourth.”

“Auntie is going to kill me,” Briant groaned and covered his face.

“Just pretend like you had no idea,” Nix suggested. “I won’t tell them if you don’t.”

“I’m a terrible liar, you know that.”

“It’ll be fine.” Juri wrapped an arm around Briant’s shoulders. “And so will Nix. He’s the strongest person I’ve ever met. Most people would have gone insane after everything Nix has been through, but not him.”

“Thanks.” Nix was grateful that out of all of this, at least he’d found a few real friends, Juri being one of them. “I really appreciate you helping out and keeping an eye on Briant.”

“Is the threat really gone?” Briant asked.

“Dew is dead,” Juri said, dropping his eyes to the floor and clearing his throat. “I keep meaning to find the right time, but there doesn’t seem to be one for this. Nix, I can’t believe it was Dew doing all of those things. I just...It’s hard to believe. If I’d known—”

“You couldn’t have. Grady and the others are just as surprised.” No one had suspected Dew of any of it. He’d been the clown of the group, after all, and he’d leaned heavily into that.

Nix wondered how much of it was an act and how much of it was the real Dew.

“No one blames you,” Briant joined in. “You lost a friend. No matter the circumstances, that’s never easy.”

“He’s right,” Nix agreed. “Have you talked to anyone about it yet? If you need a shoulder—”

“Briant has lent me his ear,” Juri stated. “But thank you.”

Oh.

Nix must have been really distracted with his own shit, because it finally occurred to him why Briant might prefer Juri drop him off at the bus stop over his cousin. He licked his lips and took a step toward the door.

“Well, if we’re all set, then I suppose it’s time to go. Briant, text me when you’re home.”

“I’m the older one here.” Briant ruffled his hair as though to prove it. “But you got it. Remember, if anything comes up, or you just want to talk, call me.”

“Will do.” Nix nodded at Juri as he lifted Briant’s bag off the bed. “Take care of my cousin.”

It worked out actually. West had an important match outside of town. He and Yejun would have left for it already on the team bus. Nix and Lake were both staying behind since Lake had a waif practice he couldn’t miss. Now that he didn’t have to worry about taking Briant to the bus stop either, Nix had plenty of time to make it back to the Roost before the Imperial and get ready.

One way or another, tonight wasn't going to end without Nix getting fucked.

“Are you listening?”

Not really.

Yejun smiled and nodded his head like the good son he’d been trained to be. “Of course, mother. You were saying the submissions this year are dreadful compared to last.”

She wasn’t wrong, but like hell was he going to agree with her. It would only drag the conversation on and he was already late. By this point, he was meant to be on the bus with West and the rest of the boxing team, but she’d called him here at the last minute claiming it was an emergency and their family reputation was on the line.

Blah.

Blah.

Blah.

Their reputation was always on the line in her mind. If it was up to his parents, their children would sit in glass cases and paint nonstop. They’d invite spectators to come see what “real artists” looked like in their natural habitat or some crazy shit like that. His sister had been smart to leave.

And all she’d had to do was marry the man their mother had chosen for her first.

“The hospital relies on this event,” Sayda Sang went on. “The funding it brings in

helps a great deal. It's important that everything goes off without a hitch.”

Harkens Hospital, which was owned and run by members of the club, was not lacking funding in the least, but he didn't argue with her. His mother had always had an inflated sense of self-importance, perhaps brought on from her match with his father, who was of royal blood.

Technically, Sayda was now considered Royal as well, since she'd married Royal Insu, but that never seemed to be enough for her. Yejun understood and tried to humor her as best he could.

To be truthful, he didn't hate his parents. It was just they were overbearing and smothered him. He wanted the freedom of choice. To choose his own path and his own future life partner, both things Insu and Sayda were highly against. Being able to put the title Royal before their names meant a certain level of responsibility—or so they believed.

“I brought the pieces you asked for,” Yejun said, the smile only partially slipping. He kept his hands clasped in front of him in a stance of respect, hoping to placate her to the point she'd let him leave. “Marget is taking care of them as we speak, so the gaps should be filled. Why don't you take a break?”

“There's no time for that,” she stated. “I've over a dozen things to do. I still can't believe you and your father are both skipping out on this. At least he has a good enough reason with his concert happening an hour later, but you? A boxing match? Seriously, Yejun? When are you going to stop wasting your talents? If you'd just commit to your art you'd be—”

“Mother,” he stopped her, “I don't want to fight. Can't we just end things amicably for once?”

She tutted at him. “You make that sound like all I ever do is nag you!”

Sayda was a full two heads shorter than him, and wore her black hair in a tight bun, different from his slightly loose one. The mauve pencil dress she wore fit her like a second skin, and her jewelry was carefully curated so that it would both impress, yet appear elegant and worn casually.

When they’d still been alive, she and Lake’s parents had been close. His mother especially. The three of them had attended Foxglove together, and their mothers had been roommates their freshman year.

Yejun could still recall being younger and overhearing Lake’s mom tell his she should go easier on her children. He often wondered what life would have been like if they were still here. Would their influence eventually have gotten to Sayda?

“If that were the case,” she began, and it was clear he made a misstep and accidentally ended up on a landmine, “I would have brought up that humiliation of a showing you ruined last week.”

“That wasn’t my fault. Someone was messing with us. Besides, thanks to that, we were able to catch the hacker. Shouldn’t you be happy about that at least?”

“Happy?” she grunted. “Why should I be happy? Lake is the one in line for the throne, not you. Just because you and West like to pretend to be his family, that doesn’t make it true. I am your family. If you focused more on your responsibilities to the Sang name and less on Lake Zyair, something like the other day would never have happened. How did they manage to break into your studio and swap out the paintings anyway? Hmm? And what were you thinking, wasting your talents creating something so vulgar in the first place?”

“Mother.”

“It’s got to be that Monroe person. He’s clearly a bad influence. If Lake has decided to take him as a life partner, that’s his decision. Poor boy doesn’t have parents to help steer him in the right direction. But like hell will I sit back and allow some nobody from the backwoods part of the planet come in—”

“That is enough,” Yejun’s anger slipped past his defenses, causing his mom to sputter to a stop and stare at him. “You can shit-talk me all you like—even West and Lake are used to your judgmental nature—but I won’t allow you to speak ill about Nix. That’s where I draw the line, Mother.”

When she didn’t immediately respond, he continued.

“None of this is even his fault,” he said. “We dragged him into this and he was the one who ended up humiliated, not me. The Sang name?” He snorted. “No one cares that I painted my boyfriend in an indecent position except for Nix himself.”

Sayda’s palm struck him across the cheek, and Yejun clenched his fists tightly but didn’t react otherwise. She’d hit him before, and aside from a slight sting, the hit wouldn’t even leave a mark.

“I see we’ve given you far too much leeway,” her voice was like ice. “He’s your boyfriend now?”

“He’s been my boyfriend for months, Mom,” he corrected. “You’ve just been too self-absorbed to notice. But then again, what’s new?” Yejun took a single step back and bowed to her. “I’ll take my leave now.”

“Yejun Sang don’t you dare walk away from me.”

“It’s either that or we cause a scene,” he replied. “I doubt you want that?”

She seemed to recall they were standing in one of the open areas of the hospital in broad daylight. “This discussion isn’t over.”

“I’ll see you at Demons Passing.” Yejun turned on his heels, coming up short when his eyes immediately landed on Nix standing at the end of a hallway only twenty or so feet away. He looked over his shoulder, but his mother was fortunately already storming off in the opposite direction and hadn’t noticed their audience.

“That seemed...intense.” Nix was standing in front of him when he spun back around, though he was careful to keep some distance.

That cut Yejun to the core. He’d hoped there’d been progress after what he’d done with Lake, but apparently it hadn’t been enough. Logically, he’d known it wouldn’t be, but a guy could foolishly hope, right?

“My mother is a personality, that’s for sure.” Yejun glanced past Nix, noting he was alone. “I thought you were seeing your cousin off?”

The cousin Yejun had terrified and beaten to the point he’d ended up in the hospital.

“I didn’t follow you here,” he added, worried Nix would get the wrong idea. “My mother insisted I bring some of my work after one of the volunteer artists dropped out of the event she’s hosting.”

“Juri is taking my cousin to the bus station,” Nix replied. “Weren’t you supposed to be with West? Did you skip out on the match because your mom’s request?”

He chuckled humorlessly. “Request. Right. I wouldn’t call it that, personally. I’m still going to the match, I’ll just have to drive myself. Figured so long as I leave within an hour, I’ll make it in time. What about you? Decide you want to come after all?”

“No. I have other plans.” Nix didn’t offer what those plans were, and Yejun didn’t ask.

Even though he really, really wanted to.

It wasn’t hard to guess it had something to do with Lake though.

“Do you want to grab a coffee quick?” Yejun pointed toward the elevator that headed down to the first level. “The cafeteria here is actually pretty good.”

Nix hesitated but then nodded. However, he motioned toward the stairs instead. “Let’s go this way.”

Yejun fell into step at his side, quiet for a moment before he couldn’t keep it in any longer. “How are you? Has...what happened in the car on the way to Demitrious’s happened again?”

Nix shook his head.

“That was because of me, wasn’t it?”

“We don’t have to talk about this.”

“Yes, I think we do.” Yejun reached out and gently touched Nix’s arm, pulling back and holding up both hands when Nix jerked away as though electrocuted. “Sorry. Sorry, I...Firebird, I meant what I said the other day at the office. I’ll do whatever you want me to do. Whatever you need. I just...want to make this right between us.”

“I told you I’d forgive you that day.”

“We both know that’s not how forgiveness works.” Yejun started walking again,

figuring it would be better if they had this conversation sitting down. “Let me buy you coffee first. Then let’s talk. Okay?”

He still kept his distance, but at least Nix agreed and followed after him.

* * *

“Is your mom always that fierce?” Nix asked ten minutes later once they’d gotten their coffees and a single slice of cake. He sipped at his hot drink, seeming pleased with it, but ignored the food Yejun had bought specifically for him.

“So you saw her slap me?” Yejun laughed it off. “It’s no big deal. Sometimes she gets like that, that’s all.”

“Is that where your anger issues come from?”

“I don’t—” He blew out a breath. “Probably.”

“What made her so mad?” Nix sipped his coffee and stared at Yejun across the table, giving him his full attention.

For the first time in weeks.

He cleared his throat. “Lots of things. It mostly just boils down to her thinking I’m abusing my talent as an artist. If she had her way, I’d be locked in the studio twenty-four-seven, constantly creating with no breaks in between.”

Nix’s brow furrowed slightly. “I thought Lake said you and your parents get along?”

“We do.” He started picking at the black plastic lid of his cup absently. “At least, better than West does with his dad. I don’t hate my parents. They’re just a lot, that’s

all.”

“I heard...” Nix hesitated, clearly unsure if he should admit what he wanted to say or not, but then ended up doing so. “I heard my name mentioned. I swear I wasn’t eavesdropping, and I couldn’t make out anything else that was said.”

He was afraid Yejun was going to get angry at him for listening.

June’s shoulders caved in. “Firebird, look at me.”

Nix did.

“Nothing like that will ever happen again, you have my word. I will never take my emotions out on you like that in the future. I get it’ll take time for me to prove it, and I will.”

The younger guy didn’t respond, but he didn’t drop his gaze again either, so that was progress.

Yejun sighed. “As for my mother, she has this idea of what my future is going to look like, and nothing I say to her can get her to alter that perception. You don’t have to worry though. I’m in this, with you. It doesn’t matter what she thinks.”

“Ah,” he hummed in understanding. “She doesn’t like me.”

“She doesn’t really like anyone. I could sleep around as much as I wanted because it was nothing serious, but being in a relationship with someone makes her uncomfortable. I think she’s finally realizing I’m not a kid anymore and I won’t blindly follow her orders.”

He used to talk about this stuff with Iris. After her betrayal, he’d sworn to himself

he'd never trust anyone outside of West and Lake again. Putting himself in a vulnerable position was bad for all of them, but Nix wasn't just anyone, and in reality...Yejun had wronged him more.

"Your cousin saw my mom hit me once too," he confessed, and this time he was the one who couldn't make eye contact. "She was pretty upset by it. I remember thinking it was sweet, how bent out of shape she got on my behalf. We bonded over our strict parents. Hers never wanted her to enroll at Foxglove."

"Our families stay out of club business as much as possible," Nix said softly.

"She mentioned that. Even joked how much they'd hate it if they found out we were friends. I really believed it, you know? That we were friends. She had me convinced..." He pursed his lips. "Someone had to have given her pointers beforehand, that's the only explanation I can think of. She always said all the right things, would appear in all the right places..." Like that day she'd walked in on him arguing with his mom.

Now that he could look at it from a different perspective, it made no sense for Iris to have been there when she was. He'd been fighting with Sayda by the gym, a part of campus Iris was typically never even near.

"I really liked her." It was hard to say, but he forced himself to admit it. "I haven't been able to make any real friends, not since I was a child. Everyone who approaches me either wants to fuck me or use me for my name. Iris acted like she was different. She never asked me for anything, even rejected a couple of offers when she needed expensive new art supplies for class she couldn't afford. That's why when I found out the two of you were related and that you'd lied to me about it..."

He'd lost his mind. It'd felt like the rug was being ripped out from underneath him all over again, only this time, he could do something about it. The whole time he'd

interrogated Iris, he'd been unable to bring himself to physically harm her, despite how she'd almost killed West.

A part of him had always felt guilty about that. Like he'd failed his best friend somehow. Like he hadn't been loyal enough to hurt the person who'd tried to murder him.

"I was terrified it was happening again," he told Nix. "That you were using me, us, and you were going to try and—"

Nix reached across the table and rested a hand over Yejun's, instantly silencing him. "I won't hurt you, June. I'm not my cousin. I care about you, for real. Even after what you did to me, I haven't stopped caring. I just...needed some time and some space."

"I scared you," he repeated.

"Yeah."

"You don't have to force yourself to forgive me all at once," Yejun said. "Knowing you're willing to try at all already means a lot to me. I'm trying not to be greedy. I don't want to force you, not again. Not like that day."

Thank gods Lake was there because if he hadn't been, there was no telling how far Yejun would have actually gone. He'd been so caught up in his own emotions, he'd ignored all of the signs that Nix was telling the truth. That Nix hadn't used or tricked him like Iris had.

"Understanding why you acted the way you did is one thing," Nix replied tentatively, easing his hand away and settling back into his seat. "But that doesn't erase the damage you've done. It doesn't magically make the way you made me feel vanish. Sometimes, it's hard being around you, Yejun."

“Will you come back to the studio?” It was probably too soon to ask, but he wanted Nix to know how he was feeling. Didn’t want to hide behind bravado anymore. “I’ll leave the door open, you don’t have to be sealed in alone with me. I miss those quiet moments. I miss you keeping me company while I work.”

Nix quirked a brow. “And the sex?”

“I miss that too,” he said without skipping a beat. “But I know better than to ask for that. I just want to be with you again—in a nonsexual way, I mean. Will you come?”

He thought about it, and just when Yejun felt for sure his heart was going to explode from his chest from the wait, Nix picked up the small gold fork and took a bite of the cake. “Maybe. I mean, a deal is a deal, and you did make Lake.”

Yejun frowned.

“Come, I mean,” Nix added with a grin.

“At least you’re joking with me again.” That was a good sign. “Do you want anything else aside from the cake?”

“A burger and fries.”

“You got it.” Yejun stood but before he could take more than one step away, Nix’s voice stopped him.

“If your mom ever hits you like that again,” he said quietly. “Call me.”

He cocked his head. “Why, Firebird? What are you going to do, light her on fire?”

The corner of Nix’s mouth tipped up, but the look in his eyes was steely. “Something

like that.”

West had been right the other day.

Nix fit right in.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

The house was quiet when Nix got there. He took his time removing his shoes at the door before heading up to Lake's bedroom. Nerves ate away at him, but there was also anticipation, and this strong sense that something important was about to happen.

As much as he hated admitting it, mostly because it was barbaric and controlling, the Night of the Nightshade had turned him on. Really, he couldn't be blamed, could he? He was the intended sacrifice, after all. If not for Juri stepping forward, it would have been Nix led up that spiral staircase earlier.

Would Lake have been the one to take him there?

Or would it have had to be all three?

That thought doused some of the fire licking at his lower region, but not enough to get him to change his mind. Birthdays were meant to be special, that was how Nix had been raised, and this was the only thing he could think of that the Imperial might actually want.

It didn't hurt that he was thinking ahead. If he treated Lake well for his special day, there was a good chance that consideration would be returned once Nix's birthday came around. Getting the upper hand, no matter the means, was never a bad idea.

He carefully took off and folded his clothes, setting them off to the side before climbing onto the bed. The skylight above showed a darkening sky, and he vaguely wondered if Yejun had made it to the match yet.

Nix hadn't expected to see the Demon at the hospital, but he'd been more surprised

when he'd realized the older woman Yejun was with was mostly likely his mother. Curiosity had gotten the better of him and he'd stuck around, though he'd been telling the truth when he'd said he couldn't hear much of their conversation.

Yejun had seemed like he was barely holding himself together during the entire exchange though. It'd been odd, watching him contain himself, seeing his pinched expression and the way he held himself stiff as his mother talked down to him.

He hadn't just been putting up with it. He'd been enduring.

It made Nix wonder how much June had endured throughout his life.

Their talk afterward had been...necessary. Though they'd left things a little better than when they'd started, Nix still wasn't sure how comfortable around the Demon he could be. He wanted to get back to how they were, not only because that would be the simplest and safest thing for them all, but because he missed Yejun too.

His hope was that if he said it enough times, it would actually stick. Healing worked in mysterious ways, after all. While it was true he couldn't force it, he could make the conscious decision to work toward it. He'd tested the waters by having coffee, and then a late lunch, with June. His body hadn't reacted negatively by his closeness, so that was good.

Nix had spent the past few nights in West's bed, but he knew he couldn't stay there forever. If they were all in this together, they had to be together. Which meant he needed to create safe spaces with all three of them.

That was half the reason he was here now, lying naked in Lake's room.

Nix had originally planned on going with the others to West's match, which was being held at a different school out of town, but he'd changed his mind at the last

minute.

West hadn't seemed too disappointed by that, probably sensing that there was a reason for it. It was odd that out of the three of them, it was West who was able to understand Nix's thought process the best.

Nix lay back and planted his feet on the mattress, allowing his thighs to drop open. He was already semi-hard, anticipation bubbling beneath his skin as his hand trailed down. When he grabbed himself, his skin was hot, and his eyes shut as he began to slowly stroke himself to life. His dick grew in his hold, thickening and flushing. In no time at all, he felt his balls drawing up and he had to stop to keep himself from coming too soon.

He'd timed it well enough he thought, knowing Lake was always prompt. The Imperial had told him he'd be home by eight o'clock, and the neon numbers projected onto the wall across the room showed there was only one minute to.

Sure enough, the sound of footsteps in the hallway reached his ears and Nix sighed in relief.

He had one hand squeezing his balls and the other stroking his dick when the door finally opened.

Lake froze just beneath the threshold, eyes landing on Nix in obvious surprise.

"It's cold," Nix whined. "Shut the door."

For a moment, it seemed like he wasn't sure what to do, but then Lake entered and closed the door behind him, hovering at the side of the bed with a slight frown.

"What are you playing at, Songbird?" his voice was throaty, doing nothing to hide his

lust. “Why are you wearing that?”

“Don’t you like it?” Nix was naked aside from the mask, the one Maestro had ordered him to bring along. Up until now, it’d sat in Nix’s suitcase unused, but he thought this was the perfect occasion to dust it off.

Giving one last pump of his dick, mostly just to draw Lake’s attention back down to it, Nix sat up and crawled closer, resting on his haunches when he could reach out and touch the Imperial. His hand roamed down Lake’s chest, stopping at the top of his belt suggestively.

“Nix.”

“Happy birthday.”

Lake’s frown deepened. “What?”

“Don’t you like it?”

“Like...what?”

“Your present, obviously.” He spun around, positioning himself on his hands and knees and bumped back so his ass came into contact with the space between Lake’s legs. He smirked at himself when something hard greeted him, and then glanced over his shoulder and met the other guy’s gaze. “Aren’t you going to open it?”

Lake swallowed, the movement of his throat catching Nix’s notice. “This is a dangerous game.”

“It isn’t a game,” he said.

“You’re telling me you’re going to fuck me as my birthday gift?”

“What’s with the sarcasm? I thought that was pretty apparent.” He wiggled his bare ass. “Can’t you see I’m already ready for you? Or do you want to watch me touch myself some more first?”

Nix moved again, dropping down onto his back, this time facing Lake so he had the perfect view of everything when he spread his thighs and bucked his hips into the air. His hand started for his cock, but before he could make contact, Lake snatched his wrist.

“Enough,” the Imperial stated, but Nix merely rolled his eyes.

“It’s time, Lake. We’ve put this off long enough.”

“How romantic.”

He snorted, recalling he’d once said something similar to West. “We don’t need romance. Not right now. Not for this. There’s always been chemistry between us. Even when I couldn’t stand you, that was undeniable. But there’s also always been a reason we shouldn’t take things all the way. We couldn’t fuck because that dumb deal you made with the others. Then we couldn’t because I was too pissed at you to want to make you feel good. There’s nothing holding us back here, Lake.”

“I’m not a gentle lover,” he warned.

“None of you are.”

“Songbird. If we start this, I won’t be denied. You can cry and scream and beg all you like, but if you give me a taste, I’m going to take it all.”

A small thread of fear rippled through him, but it was met with an even stronger emotion.

Excitement.

The Demons must have really messed him up, rewired his brain to long for the thrill of being controlled and possessed. The mere thought of Lake holding him down and forcing him to take that huge cock of his...

Precome gushed from Nix's rosy tip and Lake's eyes instantly locked onto that spot of his body.

"You're really going to let me fuck you," he still sounded like he didn't fully believe it.

"Think you'll be any good at it?" Nix taunted, mostly because he knew that was the way to spur things on.

It worked.

"Roll over," Lake commanded, and Nix did as he was told, listening as the Imperial got onto the bed. "Did you touch yourself back here too?"

Nix shook his head. "I hadn't gotten to it yet."

"Ah, so when you said I needed to open my present, you really meant it."

"Aren't I funny?"

"Hilarious." Lake's palm came down on his left cheek, shocking Nix. "No more teasing me. You do as I instruct from here on out, understand?"

Nix nodded.

This was it, the thing he'd been longing for ever since Maestro had popped up on his computer screen back home. Since the first time he'd put on this mask and awkwardly presented himself to the camera, much like he was presenting himself to the Imperial now. It was similar in that sense as well, with Lake behind him, Nix couldn't see him, just like he hadn't been able to through the computer.

But he wanted to. He was about to break the rules and act alone, but he'd barely made it an inch up before he was forced back.

Lake draped an arm over Nix's narrow back, keeping him down on the mattress. In the next instant, his tongue shot out, tentatively circling Nix's hole.

"Are you—" he couldn't even bring himself to ask the question, covering his mouth with a hand as a moan rumbled out of him when that tongue grew bolder and passed his tight entrance.

The reaction spurred Lake on, and he shifted closer, driving his tongue more forcefully inside of Nix before pulling out to lick him. "West said you like this." He nipped at his left cheek. "I see he wasn't lying."

"Lake." Nix struggled to control his breathing.

"Already, Songbird?" he laughed. "I've barely even started."

"Lake."

"No," he stated, even though Nix hadn't even asked for anything specific. "I'm taking my time with you tonight. I've waited so long for this moment, for you to open up for me. I won't be rushed." He licked him again. "I'm going to savor you."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

Lake almost couldn't believe this was really happening, had to keep mentally pausing to take in the moment and reassure himself it was. That this wasn't just another wet dream he was going to wake from, tangled in messy sheets, completely unsatisfied.

And empty.

In more ways than one.

At some point, Nix had crawled beneath his skin and snuck into his veins. Lake could feel him there with every breath, every beat of his heart.

"You're mine," he whispered the words against the curve of Nix's spine between nips and licks, one hand kneading Nix's plump ass cheek. If he could touch him everywhere all at once, Lake would. If he could bury himself as deeply inside of Nix as his Songbird had managed to bury himself within him, he would without hesitation.

Despite his promise to go slow, there was an urgency coursing through him, spurring him on as he traveled up Nix's body. When he made it to the side of Nix's throat, he mimicked the bite, lightly setting his teeth against those marks. The scar he'd left behind, a branding to show the universe who Phoenix Monroe belonged to.

A warning not to cross any lines with what was his.

Nix let out a soft mewl and arched into the touch, his ass lifting and rubbing against the bulge caught behind Lake's pants.

“Take off your clothes,” Nix ordered in a breathy tone, his eyes closed. He didn’t push Lake away or resist his touches, even when he continued to trace the claiming mark with the tip of his tongue.

“Have you forgiven me, Songbird?” Lake shouldn’t have asked it, he knew that, yet the question burst out of him anyway, and they both went still as soon as it was out there.

Slowly, Nix’s eyes opened, though he didn’t turn his head, staring at the window instead. Whether he was assessing his own feelings or merely trying to come up with the best way to turn Lake down, it was unclear, but eventually he broke his own silence.

“No.” Nix’s hand shot back, grabbing onto Lake’s forearm before he could pull away. “Don’t stop.”

“Nix...”

“I don’t have to forgive you to want you,” he insisted. “I meant everything I said. We need this.” He hesitated and then in a quieter voice added, “I need this.”

The sexual chemistry between them had always been off the charts. Lake had been obsessed from the moment he’d first laid eyes on him, and Nix had responded in kind, whether he’d realized at the time or not. In many ways, sex was the easiest thing between them, the thing that kept them bound even when Nix wanted to resist.

Even if Lake had failed at claiming Nix’s mind and heart, he’d known for a long time that he had his body.

But...

“It isn’t enough,” he found himself saying, rising to his knees. “This isn’t enough.”

Frowning, Nix also sat up, twisting around to stare at him in obvious confusion. “You don’t want to fuck me?”

“Of course I want to fuck you, Songbird.”

“Then?” He shook his head. “I don’t see the problem here.”

“That,” he sighed, “in and of itself is the problem.”

Nix paused, considering things, and Lake should have realized he’d figure it out. He was clever, enough to rival West even, and his best friend was the smartest guy Lake knew.

“You aren’t forcing me, Lake,” Nix said.

“Aren’t I? You’re doing this because of the other night. Dinner with Hendrix and Demitrious. Isn’t that the case?”

“That’s part of it,” he didn’t bother denying it, and Lake wasn’t sure if that was progress or not.

“Every time I think I’m getting closer to you, I realize I’m still too far away.”

“It’s not my fault you approached this whole thing wrong from the start,” Nix replied. “You chose to force me before. These are the consequences of your actions. And, what? Now that I’m willing to sleep with you, now that I’m sitting here naked and hard, you suddenly don’t want to?”

“I already said I—”

Nix shook his head, stopping him. “You’re being selfish, Lake. Still. You keep telling me you’re sorry and you’ll make it up to me, but then you go and do things like this all over again.”

“Like what?”

“Stop making all of the decisions for me!” In a burst of energy, Nix shoved Lake onto his back and crawled on top of him. He pressed one hand to the center of Lake’s chest, the other settling over his throat. “Fuck me, mate,” he practically sneered, “or I’ll go to West right now and have him do what you couldn’t.”

At first, Lake was too shocked to react. His Songbird had gotten angry before, had gotten physical when pushed too far, but he’d never displayed this level of dominance.

Then his threat really registered, and Lake realized with a burst of his own anger that Nix meant it.

His eyes narrowed and he settled his hands on Nix’s hips. “Lift.”

Nix stared down at him for a second, clearly trying to figure out if he meant to go through with it. Once he was satisfied with the answer, he did as he was told, planting his knees more firmly on the mattress at either side of Lake before straightening and repositioning his ass directly over Lake’s concealed cock.

“Well?” Lake quirked a brow, feeling a bit like he was regaining control when Nix’s brow furrowed ever so slightly.

“Dry humping? Really?”

“Do you want it or not, Songbird?”

“I want it,” he grumbled.

Lake almost lost his composure when Nix started moving over him, grinding down on his hard-on. He twirled his hips, the glint in his eyes making it clear he knew exactly what he was doing, and Lake recalled how frisky Nix could be when he was in the mood for it.

The image of him tugging West’s face toward the now bandaged side of his neck flashed in Lake’s mind and a growl escaped him before he could help it. In the next instant, he’d flipped their positions, pinning Nix beneath him once more, this time on his back.

Nix laughed, splaying his thighs wide and resting his hands at either side of his head on the pillow. A show of submission that would have been convincing if not for the way he was still smirking at Lake.

“You used to have more self-control,” he teased, and Lake rubbed against him with more force, pleased when Nix’s eyes rolled back and he moaned.

“Keep taunting me, Songbird,” Lake said. “I dare you.”

“If it gets me what I want?” Nix shrugged.

Lake snorted. “You’ve been hanging out with West too long.”

“Whose fault is that?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He reared up so he could unsnap his pants and free his aching cock.

“Everything is my fault. I get it.”

“So long as we’re on the same page.”

“We are,” Lake assured him. “Finally.”

He gave himself a few strokes, mostly because he knew how much Nix liked to watch. Sure enough, the tip of Nix’s tongue swept out across his bottom lip, his gaze landing on Lake’s flushed crown.

“Scared?” He was bigger than West and Yejun. The first time Nix had seen him naked, he’d been unable to hide his doubt.

There wasn’t so much as a hint of that on his face now, however. If anything, Nix appeared...eager.

Lake had never lied to himself about the physical need between them. But he was greedy now. He wanted more. Wouldn’t settle for anything less, even if that meant dragging this out when it was obvious the both of them were ready to skip to the good stuff.

“Tell me you don’t hate me,” he urged. “Give me that at least.”

“I don’t hate you,” Nix replied.

But it wasn’t enough.

“I’m talking about me. Not Maestro.” Lake was also aware that Nix sometimes separated them in his head. In the beginning, it’d no doubt been an attempt to keep himself sane after being forced into this life that he’d never wanted. He’d gotten his footing now, however. Surely something had changed for the better... “I need to know there’s something here between us, Nix. Something more than just—”

“You’re getting selfish again,” Nix cut him off, but he didn’t get upset like earlier. Instead, he sighed. “I’ve been telling you that this entire time. It isn’t my fault you’re

too dumb to listen. I've said it with words and I've said it other ways as well. It's not my job to make you feel less insecure, not after everything you've put me through without caring how it made me feel."

Nix sat up and planted an almost chaste kiss on Lake's mouth before settling back down against the mattress. "I like you, Lake. Not all the time, and not always the same amount. There are days when I've hated you, and I'm sure there will be days in the future when I want to punch your aristocratic chin. I didn't come here tonight to stroke your ego or wax poetic. I came for something else. So, if you're not going to stick your cock in me then—"

Lake lined himself up to Nix's entrance and gave one solid thrust.

Nix hissed in mild pain, having not been stretched enough to take Lake's full girth so roughly, but that was the only sound of complaint he made. His hands lifted and he dug his nails into Lake's hips, breathing through it as his cock bottomed out.

Lake stilled, partially to give the man beneath him a moment to adjust, but mostly so he could take it all in.

"You're beautiful," he said.

He was. Nix's skin was flushed and rosy, his eyes lidded and his full lips parted. They'd only just begun, yet he already looked blissed out. Sultry and every bit as eager as Lake felt.

"If you're so hellbent on speaking," Nix stated, "speak to me with your cock."

Lake didn't have to be told twice.

He started moving frantically, his thrusts shoving Nix down into the mattress hard

enough the breath whooshed out of him each and every time. The Songbird's body squeezed him, those inner walls clinging to Lake's cock every time he pulled out.

"You're so warm," Lake said, dropping over Nix to bury his face in the crook of his neck. He ended up on the side that West had bitten, the bruised and broken skin sealed beneath a protective layer. But he didn't even care that the mark wasn't his. "So tight. Moan for me, Songbird. I want to hear you sing for your emperor."

He grabbed Nix by the thighs and reared up, pulling his legs straight in the process, settling one at either side of his head as Nix grappled with the sheets. Lake's cock drove forward again, the new angle making his entrance even tighter than before, that electric sensation causing him to lose his mind.

Lake pounded into him, the sound of his balls slapping against Nix's ass mixing with the heavy thumps of the bed banging into the wall.

"Lake!" Nix gasped and arched his back. "Wait! Please! It's too rough!"

"You like it when it hurts." He bet he never tried to stop West. The thought had Lake seeing red and he pulled out long enough to flip Nix onto his stomach. He tugged his ass into the air and held him tightly, lining up his cock for the third time.

Watching his cock sink into Nix's body, seeing that ring of muscle give way for him...it was the hottest thing he'd ever seen.

"What a waste," he murmured, entranced by the view as he worked his cock in and out of his Songbird. Whenever he pulled out to the tip, Nix's gaping hole would start to instantly close. Forcing it back open became his sole mission. "I should have taken you sooner. Shouldn't have wasted all that time. Could have had you like this every night. Every hour."

“Lake.” Nix had his face turned, a cheek pressed to the mattress. His hands held on tightly to the comforter beneath them, and there was a glimmer of tears in his eyes. “Slow down. I can’t—” he hiccupped, and then swallowed and tried again. “It’s too much. You’re so big.”

“Not really the thing you want to be saying to get me to stop, Songbird.” He wasn’t going to stop. He might never stop. But saying as much would only serve to scare the smaller man writhing beneath him, and Lake didn’t want that.

He filled him up and ground against his ass, hitting different places within that had Nix mewling like a kitten and mindlessly clawing at anything he could get his hands on.

Lake gathered Nix up, forcing him onto his knees, gravity helping to pull him down and impale him on his cock. They both let out a cry of pleasure, and before Nix could struggle to free himself too much, Lake wrapped a hand around his neck. He pinned them together, Nix’s back to his front, and rocked his hips upward, spearing through Nix’s hole in shallow, yet brutal thrusts that kept them both on the edge of release.

“You’re mine now, Phoenix Monroe,” he swore, lips pressed to the curve of Nix’s ear. He breathed in the scent of him, nails digging lightly into the sides of his throat. When that caused Nix to whimper, he eased up just a little. “West’s mark is healing nicely.”

He looked it over, not losing his rhythm in the process, his other arm banding around Nix’s small waist to bounce him up and down on his cock so he could drive deeper even in their current position.

Nix howled, his head pressed to Lake’s shoulder as his back arched and his ass clenched around Lake.

“You’ve signed the paperwork,” Lake rambled, “and now you’re being fucked by me. In my room. In my bed. Go ahead and soil the sheets. I’m going to make you sleep in them. That’s if I decide to let you sleep at all.”

“Lake.”

“Do you remember the promises I made you when I was Maestro?” He’d said a lot of things, many of which even he couldn’t recall. “You thought you could get back at me by letting West mark you? By having Yejun suck me off? Baby. All of that only made me more determined.”

“For,” Nix’s breath caught in his throat, “what?”

“I’m going to pump this tight ass full of my come and make you walk around all day with it dripping down your thighs. You won’t be getting any clothes, not for the foreseeable future. West might like eliciting pain, but I like it rough. I’m going to fuck you over every surface in the Roost. Have you squirting all over the furniture and across the floors. I’ll leave it there for the boys to see when they return from West’s match. How’s that sound, Songbird?”

“That...” He tried to shake his head, but Lake’s hold around his throat prevented him from doing so. “No.”

Lake laughed. “No? Touch yourself, see what you find, then try and tell me no again.”

Nix hesitated, but he did what he was told, his left hand moving to cup his balls. The second he made contact he hissed, his dick jerking.

“There you go,” Lake praised. “You’ve already started making a mess. There’s precome splattered on your stomach and the tops of my thighs just from riding me.

I've decided. No sleep for you tonight." He nipped at the rise of Nix's cheek, just beneath the mask. "Should we take this to West's bedroom next? I'll fuck you at his desk and we can ruin one of those fancy keyboards he's so fond of. Imagine his face when he comes back and finds the keys all sticky."

Nix's hole squeezed around him again.

"Oh? Do you like that idea?" Lake slammed Nix forward when he tried to deny it, flattening his body over Nix's. The move trapped the smaller man's hand beneath them as well, still cupping his balls. Lake could feel the tips of his fingers graze his own sack with every inward thrust.

"We can do Yejun's next," he continued, using his knees to spread Nix's legs wider beneath him. "Maybe find a blank canvas and create a masterpiece of our own."

"I am not," Nix struggled to speak, losing his voice whenever Lake's cock plunged deep, "coming on a canvas. That's twisted."

"June will like it, I promise." The sick thing was, Yejun probably would.

West too.

"Ready to come for the first time?" Lake didn't give Nix time to answer, his cock battering his insides. He bit down on Nix's shoulder, careful not to break the skin, and then grinned in self-satisfaction when that seemed to do the trick and push the other man overboard.

Nix sobbed as he twitched beneath Lake, his cock emptying out on the bed, release soaking into the sheets. The orgasm took its time rocking through him, his body jerking for a full minute, Lake's thrusts slowing but never stopping.

“Please.” Nix slumped, his eyes closed, breathing ragged. “Please.”

Deciding to take pity on him, Lake sat up, planning on flipping him over and taking the next round more gently. He didn’t anticipate the Songbird’s quick reaction.

Nix shoved him away and then shot off the bed. He’d only made it three steps before Lake was there though, pushing him onto the ground roughly. As soon as he hit the floor, he rolled onto his back, gasping when Lake dropped over him.

“Was that really necessary?” Lake asked once he’d secured him.

“Get off of me.”

“You said this was my birthday present,” he reminded. “Are you going back on your word, Phoenix?”

Nix stilled, mind clearly racing.

But Lake could tell he had him.

Turning his voice husky the way he knew Nix liked best, he kissed his brow and then ordered, “Submit, Songbird. Let me show you what we’ve been missing.”

After a moment, Nix spread his legs.

Lake’s cock found his entrance with ease, tearing through him all over again.

Though he’d originally planned on taking things to other parts of the house right away, Lake claimed Nix another four times in his bedroom, fucking him until he was raw and too out of it to formulate full sentences.

Then and only then, did he pick Nix up and carry him down the hallway to make good on his word.

He wrung Nix dry over West's keyboard and made him squirt all over West's pillow for good measure.

There weren't any blank canvases in Yejun's room, but he made do. Nix came over a set of his paints and a pile of dirty clothes the guy had left lying around.

When they were done there, Nix tried to put a stop to things again, but his resistance was only halfhearted, and he gave in rather quickly, not struggling when Lake hauled him to the library.

And the stairwell.

And the downstairs bathroom.

The dining room.

They were in the kitchen when the others finally returned home, which was the only way Lake realized what time of day it was.

He considered putting an end to things then, since they'd been at it for over twelve hours, but the sound of West and Yejun's footsteps approaching quickly changed his mind. Instead, he plowed into Nix's abused ass with all the force he would muster, greeting his best friends with the sound of their fourth combusting on his cock.

“Songbird.”

Nix swatted away at the annoying sound buzzing in his ears. There was background noise too, cursing and thumps. He grumbled and tried to fall back asleep, his entire body feeling like it was caught beneath quicksand. “Who let the waif in?”

“What was that?” there was a chuckle and the person speaking to him twisted a lock of his hair around a finger and tugged hard enough Nix felt the sting. “That’s just West and June. They’re pissed off.”

West and June?

He shoved at the heavy body draped over him, only managing to wiggle free a few inches before that persistent form settled back over him, pinning him onto the cool surface beneath his upper body and his cheek—

Nix’s eyes popped open.

It took him a moment to adjust, processing slowly that he was in the kitchen at the Roost, bent over the counter with—He hissed when that large cock buried inside of him moved and it all came back to him.

He and Lake had slept together.

No, there was no way that could be called something as basic as mere sleeping. It couldn’t even really be called sex.

The Imperial had fucked him ragged, to the point he'd passed out.

Again.

“The next person who knocks me out on their cock is getting it bitten off,” he growled, but that only earned him a laugh from Lake, who was wrapped around him from behind, and a playful nip at the lobe of his right ear. “Cut it out. And stop moving. It hurts.”

“I made sure to apply more lube,” Lake reassured him. “You’ve only been out for twenty minutes or so.”

“Have you been...” He couldn’t even bring himself to say it. Nix closed his eyes again and inhaled. “What is all that noise?”

“I told you. West and Yejun got home a little while ago and found all the presents we left. They’re understandably not as happy about it as we were creating them.”

“Presents?” Good Light. “Shit.”

He meant the come.

Everywhere.

All over everything.

“Seriously?!” a yell came from the floor above them, loud enough to rumble down the stairs despite West’s room being far from the stairwell. “My keyboards?! Is nothing sacred in this house?!”

Nix tried to straighten again only for Lake to stand his ground.

“What are you doing?” the Imperial asked.

“Going to clean.”

“No, you aren’t.” He kissed the back of Nix’s shoulder and flicked his hips. “Leave it. I already contacted a cleaning crew. They’ll be here in five hours and will take care of everything.”

“We are so not making other people clean up all of that .”

“I suppose you could tell West and Yejun to do it, but I’m not sure they’ll be pleased.”

Nix was fairly certain they’d both tell him to go screw himself—or, better yet, they’d probably take that as an invitation to add to the punishment Lake started and go a couple of rounds themselves. Judging by the way Nix’s body ached all over, there was no way he’d last that.

“If you’re going to come again, do it quick and get out of me.” He needed a shower. Or several. Better yet, he needed to soak in one of the fancy baths West ran for him. The ones with several bath bombs and silky bath liquids or whatever they were called. “I’m tired.”

“I’m not.”

“Lake.”

“Don’t act like you didn’t see this coming, Songbird. I warned you. I was always upfront about my intentions once I got you into bed.”

“This,” he slapped the surface of the counter, “is not a bed.”

“We could return to one,” Lake offered. “We’ve done it in every single bed available in the Roost. Was there one you preferred?”

“I’m rephrasing my earlier threat,” Nix stated. “If you don’t let me off your cock right now, the next time it’s brought anywhere near my mouth, I’m biting it off.”

“You wouldn’t. You enjoy it too much.”

“I have two others I can ride whenever I feel like it, if you recall.” Nix felt Lake go still behind him, and for a second he feared he’d taken things too far. Angering the man currently pinning him to a table wasn’t exactly a smart move.

But then Lake sighed and actually listened, easing himself out of Nix’s body. “All right, Songbird. Have it your way.”

A gush of fluid instantly ran out of him, painting his thighs in sticky spunk that had Nix cringing. Some of it plopped to the floor, splattering on his feet and ankles and his cheeks flushed at the embarrassment. He forgot all about it, however, when he tried to straighten and ended up swaying and almost losing his balance.

Lake caught him up and lifted him into his arms, the smug look he gave him making Nix bristle.

“Don’t look so pleased with yourself,” he grumbled. “Just take me to the bathroom before this gets all over the place.”

“Too late for that.” Lake winked at him but turned for the stairs.

“Wait, let’s just use the bathroom down here.”

“No chance.”

“Seriously, it’s leaking everywhere!” Nix could feel it and he wasn’t a fan.

“I know. I want it to.”

He blew out a breath. “I hate you.”

“That’s not what you were saying an hour ago. Or two hours ago. Or—”

“Shut up, I get it.”

“It’s a good thing I can make you scream. You shouldn’t sound so put out by it.”

“Say that to me when it’s your throat that feels like someone’s rubbed sandpaper down it.”

Lake paused in the middle of the stairs. “Does it hurt that much?”

“Yes,” he said. “Can’t you hear how I sound right now? And that’s not the only thing. My ass is sore. Also, it feels like someone was fishing around my insides. My back—”

“Understood.” Lake started climbing the steps once more. “What will help?”

Nix settled more comfortably in his hold. “A bath and some hot tea.”

“I’ll take care of the first and I’ll text West about the latter.”

As if on cue, West’s cursing reached their ears the moment they turned down the hall.

“He must have spotted what we left for him on the bathroom mirror,” Lake smirked while Nix covered his face with a hand and groaned.

“Has anyone ever told you you’re royally sadistic? Or even just deranged? That one. Definitely that one.” Nix wondered how he’d even come up with something like that, let alone how Lake had actually found the stamina to follow through with it. They literally had done it at least once in every room in the Roost.

The only place they’d avoided had been the area with the couches and the coffee table. Lake had fucked him against the wall instead, facing away from the wooden monstrosity that was now considered Nix’s most hated piece in the entire house.

He hated that coffee table with a passion. Could barely even bring himself to look at it when he walked by.

“I’m not a royal, Songbird. I’m an Imperial,” Lake replied cockily.

Nix rolled his eyes.

The bedroom was every bit a mess as outside, but Lake shut the door behind them and went straight for the bathroom. He set Nix down on the closed toilet seat and turned to start the large clawfoot tub in the corner.

Doing so gave Nix a good view of his naked form, and his brow winged up when he caught sight of Lake’s back.

And the nail marks that trailed down it.

There were mild cuts on the backs of his thighs and over the curve of his muscular ass as well. Even a few hickies and love bites, some worse than others. Nix only recalled creating some of them, a bit shocked to see how aggressive he’d gotten in the throes of passion.

“You didn’t bite the right spot.” At some point, Lake had finished adjusting the bath

and had turned and caught Nix staring. “Or hard enough.” He tilted his head, exposing the side of his neck. “Want to give it another try?”

Nix gulped and looked away.

“Don’t be so timid.” He moved back over to where Nix sat. “I’m offering my throat to you. You could make me bleed a thousand times over, and I’d welcome it every time.”

Nix scowled. “What’s gotten into you?”

Lake chuckled. “Actually, I’m the one who’s gotten into you. It’s greatly improved my mood. Don’t tell me I’m the only one who feels it?”

Okay. He’d bite. “Feels what?”

“Our connection.” Lake pressed a palm over Nix’s heart, the corner of his mouth tipping up. “I can feel how excited having me near makes you, even though we’ve done it dozens of times today.”

“That’s called nervousness.” He pushed his hand away, but the Imperial remained undeterred.

Lake pressed his lips to the top of Nix’s head gently. “Call it whatever you wish. It doesn’t matter. The only thing I care about is you and the fact that you’re finally mine.” His touch turned more demanding when he captured Nix’s chin and forced his gaze up so their eyes met. “You are mine, Phoenix Monroe. Say it.”

He licked his dry lips, but any resistance he may have summoned prior to last night had drained from him, much like his energy. If Lake needed to hear it so badly, what did it matter anyway? Nix could do that for him.

It wasn't like it was a lie.

"Yeah," he drawled, somehow managing to put a little bit of attitude in his words despite his thoughts, "I am. You have me."

"And I can do with you as I please."

His eyes narrowed slightly but when those fingers tightened on him he gave in. "Yeah. You can do whatever you want with me. I belong to you."

Lake grinned, but Nix wasn't done.

"But," he continued, "if you want your things to last, you have to take care of them."

The tub clicked behind him, indicating it was full, and Lake gave him a sardonic smile.

"Hey!" Nix found himself tossed over the Imperial's shoulder faster than he could blink, carried over to the tub, and submerged in the hot water in a flash. "Good Light!" His body stung at the sudden contact and he swore, trying to climb back out.

Lake, he'd sat before him, pulled him back in, securing him in his lap. The asshole laughed as Nix's struggles splashed water over the edge, catching Nix's arms at his sides before he placed his mouth against the healed mark on Nix's neck.

Nix stilled instantly.

"You were being a brat just now," Lake whispered against that spot, causing Nix to shiver.

"It stings." The water was too hot and his bruised and rubbed raw parts were too

sensitive. “Did you put anything in it?”

“In it?” Lake frowned.

“In the bath. West always adds healing...stuff.”

“Healing stuff,” Lake repeated.

“I don’t know what it’s called,” he snapped.

Lake picked up his multi-slate from the bathroom floor where he must have set it and typed a message out to West. “There. I told him to bring some of that magic healing stuff and tea. Better?”

He settled back against Lake’s chest, refusing to answer.

“Don’t be stubborn, Songbird.”

“You like it when I’m stubborn.”

He laughed. “True. Mostly because I like the thought of being able to reprimand you for it later.”

“Later,” Nix emphasized, “being the most important word in that sentence.”

“Yes.” Lake’s hand dipped between his thighs, and he clicked his tongue when Nix made a sound of protest. “Relax. I’ll keep my word. No more fucking for now.”

He turned his head to look at him. “For now is a very broad statement. Narrow it down.”

“I don’t think I will.” Lake’s palm stroked lightly against the soft inner flesh of Nix’s thighs before trailing higher. He brushed against the underside of Nix’s balls, down his taint, and then settled at his abused entrance. “I’m going to insert my fingers and clean you out.”

Nix scrunched up his nose. “So that we’re soaking in your spunk? Pass.”

“It’s dripping out anyway,” he reminded. “Tell you what, I’ll let you shower after as well. Deal?”

“What’s with you and making deals every two seconds all of sudden?” Nix lifted his ass slightly despite his protests, wincing when one of those thick fingers prodded his rim. “Careful.”

“I got you, baby.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Why? Does Yejun own the term or something? West calls you Nixie or babe. June calls you Firebird or baby. I—”

“Songbird,” Nix filled in. “I’m your Songbird.”

Lake considered it. “How about mate then? Can I call you that?”

He thought about it and ended up nodding once.

That single finger slipped in deeper. “You’re drawing lines between us in that head of yours, is there a reason for it?”

“The three of you aren’t the same person,” Nix reminded. “Even if you grew up

together and it sometimes might feel that way to you. You aren't. You didn't exactly give me a lot of time to adjust here, either. It's easier for me this way. Easier to learn your similarities and differences."

"Give me an example." Lake added another finger and Nix realized what he was doing. Trying to keep him distracted to help ease the discomfort.

"An example would be West always thinks about how to heal any injuries he gives me ahead of time." Nix sighed, decided to go easy on the Imperial since he was so obviously trying his best. "But that's because he's used to inflicting pain on his bed partners. He's had practice with aftercare. You...not so much."

Lake hummed in agreement. "I had a tendency to take my pleasure and go, that's true. And June? What sets him from the rest?"

"Yejun..." Nix arched into the touch when Lake inserted a third finger and started to curl them within him.

"Focus, Songbird," Lake suggested. "Unless you want me to change my mind and take you again after all."

"Yejun is protective."

"I'm protective."

"You're possessive," he corrected. "They aren't the same. Yejun has no thoughts for himself when he sees someone he cares for get hurt. That's why he's so reactive and acts without thinking of the consequences. He lacks foresight because he gets overwhelmed by the need to defend and protect what's his."

"June doesn't have very much that he can call his own," Lake said. "His family is

controlling, overbearing even. It's good that he ended up loving art, because his path was chosen for him even before his birth. There are already half a dozen people lined up to become his potential husband or wife."

"What?"

"Don't worry. Yejun never intended to marry someone his parents picked for him. That's part of the reason he wants me to become emperor so badly. We can tell them to fuck off without fear of repercussions."

"Why can't he just do that now?" As a Demon, his schooling was already taken care of, so it wasn't like he needed them financially. Even if that wasn't the case, Yejun made money selling his art. He'd shown Nix a receipt for a piece once and it was more than Nix's parents made in six months combined. "What's holding him back?"

"Me."

Nix frowned.

"West and Yejun know that if they do anything to piss off the Order, of which Yejun's mother is a member, it'll reflect poorly on me as a candidate for the throne. The three of us have always attempted to keep the peace because of that. It's why we still go to those stupid birthday dinners Demitrious throws, despite West and the rest of us hating the old man's guts."

Speaking of the party...

Nix had been trying to find the right time to ask about the topic at dinner, but the time hadn't come. Now, he cleared his throat and pretended to find interest in playing with the bathwater, causally asking, "What did Hendrix mean when he said all that stuff about your parents?"

Lake's fingers stilled inside of him, but he recovered quickly. "They enjoyed the Night of the Nightshade same as every other member, that's all."

"Really?" If that was it, Hendrix would surely have chosen a different topic to try poking at Lake. "It sounded like more than that."

He was quiet for a while, seemingly giving all his attention to cleaning Nix out. When his silence was met with patience, he eventually gave in. "The Night of the Nightshade is traditionally a day meant for taboos. Nothing is off the table. My parents, like many other couples, used the night to...explore."

"You mean, they slept with other people?" That's basically what he'd gathered from Hendrix's words, anyway.

"Yes."

"Does that upset you?" Nix wasn't sure why he'd been so hesitant to admit it.

"Doesn't it upset you?" Lake countered.

"No? Why should it?"

"You aren't worried that we might eventually try to do the same to you?"

Nix quirked a brow and turned in Lake's lap as much as the space in the tub would allow. "Have I ever given the impression something like that would bother me?" He held up a hand before Lake could reply. "Let me reiterate. What makes you think I would ever stand by and allow that to happen in the first place? Yejun is one thing, because he's always been a playboy and I've always known that. But you and West? I catch either of you fucking anyone aside from each other and I'll make your life a living hell, got it?"

The truth was, Nix knew that would never happen. Lake was many things, but a cheater wasn't one of them. Ever since they'd met, he'd been nothing but dedicated, even when that was something Nix hadn't wanted.

"Fucking each other." Lake clearly found that amusing. "You mean like the other day when you made Yejun and I fool around?"

"Whose mouth was better?" Nix asked, mostly joking. "I mean, I've been blown by him before, so I know he's phenomenal, but I'm not too shabby, am I?"

He couldn't hold a candle to June's skills and he knew it.

"Just ask me what you actually want to ask me," Lake said.

"Does it upset you that your parents slept around?" His reaction at the dinner made it seem like that was the case, but Nix wanted to know how deeply that ran. Having come from a family dynamic where something like that would never be tolerated, he could understand if it bugged Lake. Then again, on the other hand... "Isn't that pretty normal for Essentials? Sex is a huge motivator, isn't it?"

"People use it to make deals and barter, yes," Lake began, "but my parents were a mated couple. It's...different. Even some of the other members gossiped about them when it got out they sometimes slept with other partners. My mother especially had one in particular that she was rather fond of. There were rumors she was planning on leaving my father for him, in fact."

"But she never did."

"No."

"So they were just shitty rumors."

“...Maybe.” Lake rested his chin on Nix’s shoulder. “I saw her with him once, her other lover? She seemed...happy with him. It was strange and I was too young to really understand the implications. My parents died less than a year after that. They were still together at the time, but that doesn’t mean anything. Perhaps they wanted to part ways but couldn’t because of the mating mark.”

“Kind of weird that you gave me one then, don’t you think?” Nix couldn’t help but say, but Lake shook his head.

“Not at all. That’s the very reason I bit you. If my mother did fall for someone else but still couldn’t leave my father because of the mating rules, that meant even they were bound. They were the most powerful people on planet at the time of their deaths, only second to the Emperor herself. If they couldn’t break the bond, nothing you could ever try or do would allow you to escape from me.”

“That’s...” Nix searched for the right word to describe what he was feeling but came up short.

“I frightened you,” Lake surmised.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “You just have this tendency to come on really strong. Just when I think I’ve come to terms with my role here, you always seem to trip me up. No one has ever wanted me before, let alone this much.”

“Get used to it, Songbird.”

It wasn’t bad advice.

“I promise I’ll do my best to make you want to stay with me,” Lake told him then. “Once I’m emperor, anything you want, it’s yours.”

His conversation with Juri and Briant came to mind.

“Star Eye Holding,” Nix stated. “I want to work at Star Eye Holding. I want my own life, Lake. Don’t force me to give up any more than I already have.” He took a shaky breath and forced out, “Please.”

Lake held him closer. “That’s it?”

“I would hardly call freedom a small thing,” he scoffed.

“You’ll be my Royal Consort. I’ll have to assign a bodyguard and a personal driver.”

“That’s okay.” Nix had already prepared himself for that much. “I don’t want to risk my life. I just want to live it.”

“Do you want me to get you the job or—”

“No,” he said. “I want to graduate and apply like everyone else. Swear you won’t interfere, that you’ll let me work for as long as I want and wherever I want, and I promise I’ll never try to run away or try and break the mating contract.” Nix had no intentions of doing that anyway, but Lake didn’t have to know that. West had suggested using everything he could to get his way, even against the Demons. “Deal?”

“All right, Songbird,” Lake agreed. “You have a deal.”

Nix probably shouldn’t be starting anything, considering how sore his ass still was, but he couldn’t help it. Before he knew what he was doing, he’d shifted around in Lake’s lap and kissed the guy.

When he felt the tip of Lake’s cock bump against his entrance, he adjusted and sunk

down on that hard member, moaning against the Imperial's tongue.

Star Eye Holding and this for the rest of his life?

Yeah. He could do that.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

The vibe was depressing with Nix's friends even a full week after the revelation about Dew. Classes hadn't been halted and no memorial had been given. Everything just continued on as though Dew had never existed, and even though he'd turned out to be an asshole, that bothered Nix.

It bothered Grady and Khloe as well, though they tried not to show it around him, probably out of respect for what he'd been through. The last thing Nix wanted was for them to feel like they had to walk on eggshells around him though.

Part of him even felt responsible for their pain.

He must have done something to push Dew over the edge, but he'd gone over their interactions and nothing had come to mind. The only thing he could think of was the lie he'd told about them knowing the name of the hacker. The problem was, Dew wasn't the hacker. He was involved, sure, but as a mere sidekick, what reason could he have had to take his own life?

Or even expose Nix at the art gallery? That had seemed personal. Malicious. Had Dew secretly hated him? He couldn't stop asking himself that.

The three of them stepped out of the library and lumbered down the steps with little energy, the mood sour. They'd stuck to their study group after class, but it'd been awkward and quiet. Khloe's eyes were puffy and red, and Grady had tried too hard not to notice, quietly offering her tissues.

They'd welcomed him into their friend group at the start of the semester, and now everything was a mess. Nix was actually surprised they hadn't told him to get lost.

“Where did Juri say he was again?” Grady asked, holding onto the strap of his backpack tightly, as though he feared someone would run by and try to snatch it. It was the grief and anxiety, no doubt, and how he was trying to conceal it to not upset Nix.

Nix really wished he wouldn’t.

“He texted saying he had a meeting with a professor,” Khloe answered, giving Nix a fake smile when he looked at her. “He didn’t mention which one.”

“Guys,” Nix exhaled, “I’m sorry. You don’t have to keep pretending like everything is okay. I know Dew meant a lot to you. You were all friends for a long time.”

“We don’t blame you,” Khloe said. “Dew’s actions were his own, it’s just...hard.”

“It feels like we never really knew him,” Grady added. “You know what I mean?”

Yes, he did, because that’s exactly how he’d felt when he’d first discovered Branwen was Iris. Since he still hadn’t managed to overcome those feelings, Nix wasn’t a good person to give advice in this situation.

“I just don’t get it,” Khloe nibbled on her bottom lip. “Why’d he do it? Why lock you in a waif pen or swap those paintings at all? What possible reason could he have? And hacking into the Club House? Dew?”

“He got a C in computer sciences our freshman year.” Grady ran a hand through his hair. “Just goes to show you can never really know a person.”

Her eyes landed on him. “You’re not hiding anything important from us, are you?”

He held up a hand. “What? No! Are you?”

“No.”

They turned to Nix.

“I’m not either,” he assured them.

Grady sighed. “Well, it’s not like you could tell us if you were. Not if it had anything to do with the club, anyway.”

Everyone on campus had heard the Night of the Nightshade had been moved up, and that Nix and Juri were both now members. Aside from a few glances and whispers when he passed, his life on campus hadn’t changed much though.

“I’m glad to hear you understand the rules, Mr. Monroe.” Hendrix appeared suddenly, two men dressed in suits with him.

Nix eyed them but didn’t give any other reaction. Even the Demons had to be polite, the least he could do was keep his cool in the Order member’s presence. He had a bad feeling about this though.

“Mr. Bardin,” Nix greeted him. “Are you here to see Beck?”

“No, nothing like that. I try not to bother him while he’s at work.”

“Right.” He glanced pointedly at the two men with him.

“Oh, these are my security detail, don’t be alarmed,” Hendrix said. “They follow me everywhere after what happened with the Emperor. I’ve tried to convince Lake and my son to hire them as well, but young folk. They never listen. Are these your friends?”

Grady and Khloe seemed every bit as uncomfortable as Nix felt. Knowing how much Grady despised the club, Nix found himself stepping in front of them.

“You guys can head to lunch without me,” he suggested.

“We can wait,” Grady told him.

“I’ll catch up.” Nix gave him a pointed look. He didn’t want to involve the two of them in his mess any more and whatever reason Hendrix had for being here, it couldn’t be good.

“Let’s go.” Khloe tugged on Grady’s sleeve until the guy gave in.

“It’s your favorite dish on the menu today,” Grady said as they walked off. “It always goes fast, so you better hurry up.”

“Will do,” Nix called back, grateful that he was trying to give him an excuse to cut whatever bullshit Hendrix was about to start short. Once they were alone, he turned back to the older man. “Is there something I can help you with, Mr. Bardin?”

“I was hoping to continue our talk from the other night,” Hendrix said, taking a step closer. They were at the bottom of the stairs, with students moving to and from the library. They’d attracted some attention, but not a lot, probably because most of the student body didn’t know who Hendrix was. Aside from his son being a professor there, he had nothing to do with Foxglove Grove.

“I’m sorry, but I was actually on my way to lunch,” Nix began, only to have the older man wave him off.

“Forget the gross cafeteria food. I know a place. Why don’t we go grab a bite, my treat, and we can talk over a hot meal.” Hendrix glanced up at the darkening sky.

“Looks like it’s about to rain.”

“It does that often.” Nix couldn’t recall the last time it was this difficult for him to grasp patience. He should be freaked out and worried about upsetting Hendrix. The smart thing to do would be to roll with the punches and accept his offer for lunch.

But Nix didn’t want to.

He didn’t want to stomach being around the man that had potentially tried to kill West and frame Yejun for it. Not to mention he’d have to be a total idiot to take a risk like that just to keep the peace. What peace? If the guy was already targeting them, what did it matter if Nix told him to fuck off?

Actually...Now that he was thinking about it...

“I’m going to have to decline, Mr. Bardin, but thank you for the invitation.” Nix went to move away, stiffening when one of the goons with Hendrix blocked his path.

“Please, call me uncle, that’s what all the Demons call me.” Hendrix was all fake smiles despite the obvious threat his man had just posed. “And, really, I must insist. If this is because you’re afraid of my nephew—”

“Cousin,” Nix corrected, holding his ground when that caused Hendrix to falter. “My understanding is that you and Lake are first cousins. If you’ll excuse me, I really must be going.”

“You’re on the wrong side of things here, kid. If you’re sticking to Lake for power, you’re going to be disappointed. That boy will never sit on the throne. I won’t allow it.”

“It’s a good thing it’s not up to you then, isn’t it.”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do since your unpleasant arrival.” Nix wasn’t sure where the confidence came from, knew somewhere in his subconscious he was most definitely going to regret it, but the words poured out of him seemingly of their own accord. “I have nothing more to talk to you about, and certainly not on my own. Cornering me like this isn’t winning you any favors.”

“You won’t be saying that once you realize you’re being treated like property,” Hendrix sneered. “It runs in that family. His father controlled his mother that very same way. This is merely history repeating itself. What I’m offering you is a way out from underneath that psychotic boy's thumb.”

“Psychotic?”

“Surely, you’ve noticed. You’ve been with him long enough to have picked up on the signs. Something's not right with Lake. That’s why I keep insisting he be removed from the line of succession. No one wants a psychopath on the throne. I heard you were smart, Mr. Monroe. Surely you understand where I’m coming from.”

He thought Lake was the psychopath here?

Better question, did he truly believe Nix was so gullible he’d fall for this empty spiel?

“Don’t you think it’s kind of pathetic?” his voice dropped low as all that pent-up anger he’d been bottling up for weeks trickled to the surface.

Nix was pissed that Hendrix thought he could come here and talk to him.

He was pissed that he thought Nix would buy into his crap.

And he was furious that the bastard kept trying to weaponize Lake's dead parents.

"What?" Hendrix's face began to turn a bright shade of red. "How dare you—"

"You're a grown man picking on a bunch of college students," Nix continued, completely ignoring all of the warning signs because, apparently, he'd lost his gods' damn mind. "You barely have a claim to the throne, yet you're clinging so desperately you're willing to harm a bunch of kids to do it."

"How disrespectful—"

"You want respect?" Nix snorted. "Try doing something respectable first."

In hindsight, he really should have seen the slap coming.

Hendrix didn't hold back, his hand whipping out so quickly Nix didn't have time to even consider evading. In the next instant, he found himself on the ground, his hand cupping his burning cheek protectively.

He didn't have the chance to react either—not that he had any idea what he would have done after being hit by Hendrix, an Order member.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?!" Yejun's voice cut across the path and the Demon came racing over. Even if he hadn't yelled, his fury was palpable, to the point even the protective detail with Hendrix hesitated and glanced at one another before moving to do their jobs.

They threw themselves between the raging Demon and Hendrix, but that only gave June an outlet for his anger.

Nix actually winced when the bodyguard on the right took the first hit and there was a

loud cracking sound as his nose was broken. Blood spurted out, spraying across Yejun's face, but if he noticed, it didn't slow him down.

Yejun stabbed the second bodyguard in the side with a pen—Nix hadn't even seen him holding one a second ago, had it been in his pocket?!—and then again in the upper thigh when the man curled in on himself protectively.

The first guard recovered and landed a blow to June's solar plexus, doubling him over, and before Nix realized what he intended, he was on his feet.

“Hey!” He caught the guard by surprise and punched him, then kicked him for good measure before the man could catch his bearings. Nix swore when he was forcefully spun around, the second guard now focused on him. The hit irritated the already sore spot from where Hendrix had slapped him and he hissed at the burst of pain.

And then West was there, pulling the guy off of Nix by the scruff of the neck like he weighed no more than an empty backpack. He actually tossed him to the side like one as well, before going for the first guard who was fighting with Yejun a few feet away.

Neither June or the guard seemed to have noticed West's arrival, and it cost the guard.

West twisted his left arm behind his back hard enough there came a pop, followed by the man wailing in agony. He continued to contort the appendage anyway, turning with the man until he was facing Hendrix.

Hendrix yelped and sidestepped to avoid the guard crashing into him when West threw him forward, but collected himself with a huff.

“He slapped Nix,” Yejun said, out of breath and every bit as pissed off as the moment he'd gotten there.

“Who did?” West demanded, glaring daggers at Hendrix. He pointed at him. “He did? I’ll fucking kill you.”

It was probably pretty scary to have a man who was all set to become a professional fighter charge at you, even for someone with as high a social status as Hendrix. If he’d used logic, he most likely would have realized West couldn’t make good on his threats without risking repercussions, but apparently logic was completely out the window today for all of them because Hendrix panicked instead.

“West!” Nix noticed the blaster before the others, but he wasn’t fast enough to do anything to stop the gun from going off.

West jerked and then went still, clearly shocked.

He wasn’t the only one.

Hendrix’s eyes widened and he stared at the weapon he still held in his hand, aimed at West. After a second, he started to shake, dropping the gun to the ground as though burned by it. “I didn’t…”

West groaned and then dropped to one knee, pressing a hand to his right side.

“Call an ambulance!” Nix ordered Yejun and rushed West. He covered his hand with his own, applying more pressure to the injury. “Hold on, you’re going to be fine.”

“This?” West grunted. “This is nothing. If you’d been at the match the other day, you would have seen when I got kicked in the balls. Now that hurt.”

“This isn’t the time for jokes,” Nix reprimanded, turning to Yejun to make sure he was calling for help. “How did you even know to find me here?”

“Grady came looking. Said he got to Yejun first, but just in case I should head over too. Glad I did.” He chuckled his chin over his shoulder toward his best friend. “June can hold his own, but he’s got nothing on me.”

“Dad?” Beck stepped out of the library and frowned at his father. “What—” Then he spotted the rest of them. The books he’d been holding ended up on the stairs as he sprinted down them. “West?! What happened?!”

Nix almost ended up on his ass, Beck practically shoving him out of the way when he landed at West’s other side.

Beck eyed the blood pooling through Nix and West’s fingers and then looked back at his father. “Did you...Did you shoot him?!”

Hendrix shook his head and then retreated, the two bodyguards stumbling in their attempts to follow behind. No one tried to stop them as they ran off, too focused on West. It also didn’t matter, since students who’d witnessed the commotion had started filming as soon as Nix had been slapped.

Footage of Hendrix shooting one of the Demons would be making the rounds shortly if it wasn’t already.

Knowing there was solid evidence to ensure Hendrix couldn’t get away with this should have given Nix some sense of relief, but he was too concerned about West to let that feeling settle. He slipped an arm beneath West’s and helped get him to his feet, grimacing when the Demon elicited another pained sound.

“Careful,” Beck snapped, ignoring the shocked look Nix sent his way. “Let’s go to my car, it’s nearby. I can drive you to the hospital,” he said to West in a gentler tone.

West shook his head. “June already called an ambulance.”

“That’ll take too long!”

“They’re already pulling into the school,” Yejun disagreed, moving to ease Beck out of the way so he could take over. “If you want, you can follow us, but we can handle this.”

The sound of sirens came then and Yejun and Nix urged West to start walking toward the lot on the other side of the library. He was still bleeding, but he was able to move, albeit slowly, and he grinned at Nix when he caught him staring.

“Relax, Nixie,” West said. “I’m fine.”

“Hendrix isn’t going to be,” Yejun growled. “That prick—”

“Don’t lose your cool, June,” West warned. “There’s no need to get us into any more trouble.”

“Didn’t you notice all the cameras?” Nix said. “Hendrix won’t be getting away with this.”

“He’s right,” West nodded. “We don’t have to do shit. Just sit back and—” He hissed, the pain cutting him off.

“Stop acting tough and keep your mouth shut.” Nix spotted the ambulance as it pulled up. Somehow, seeing it made it seem more real, and the fear managed to slip through the adrenaline rush that had been getting him through this up until now. “And don’t die.”

“I’m not gonna die,” he promised as two paramedics got out of the ambulance and ran toward them. “I haven’t fucked you all week.”

Nix and Yejun handed him off to the professionals, trailing after as they loaded West into the back of the vehicle.

“Who’s going with him?” one of the medics asked, securing West.

“You go,” Yejun suggested, pushing Nix lightly toward the opening. “I’ll catch a ride with Beck.”

“June...”

“Go,” he insisted. “I’m right behind you, Firebird. Don’t worry.”

Nix took a deep breath and climbed in, his only option right now to trust them.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

By the time Yejun and Beck arrived at the hospital, West was already in surgery.

“I’ve called Lake,” Nix said, wringing his hands as he paced outside the closed doors leading to the operating rooms. “He’s on his way.”

“What did the doctors say?” Beck moved toward the doors but Nix pulled him back.

“You can’t go in there. They’re working on him now. He passed out just before we got here and they say he lost a lot of blood.”

“He’s going to be all right though, right?” Yejun came up to Nix’s side.

“The paramedics who looked him over in the ambulance are pretty sure it missed anything vital, but they couldn’t give me definitive answers.” Nix was pale despite his best efforts to remain calm.

“Hey,” he rested a hand on his shoulder, careful not to touch the healing bite mark on his neck, “it’s okay. This is nothing. He’s been through worse and came out of it fine.”

“I don’t know how you managed to keep it together that time.” Nix grabbed onto his wrist and held. “I’ve only just started liking the guy and I’m freaking out I might lose him. No wonder you took all this fear and anger out on Iris. I want to run Hendrix over with a hovercar right now.”

“What is he talking about?” Beck frowned at the two of them. “Did Iris do something to West in the past?”

Nix flinched, realizing his mistake but Yejun didn't blame him for losing his cool. As much as he wished otherwise, out of the three of them, West was the one Nix was currently the closest to. The one he felt safest with.

West was more skilled at toeing the line than either June or Lake. At finding that sweat spot between pleasure and pain, and pushing Nix there. He got what he wanted out of their Firebird, but always ensured Nix didn't leave the encounter feeling like it was one sided.

He used Nix, but never left him feeling used.

Having that, having someone who could take what had to be a terrifying mess of a situation and give Nix something to look forward to must be part of what was keeping Nix going.

He'd been through so much already, the fear of having that security blanket pulled away from him was probably sending him tail spinning. The only reason he was able to keep such a collected outward appearance was due to his impeccable survival instincts. Nix rarely showed his weaknesses to others.

"Yejun," Beck's tone hardened. "Tell me."

"It's nothing," he lied, only for the professor to swear—which was very unlike Beck. "Whoa. Calm down. Even if something did happen between them, clearly he was fine afterward. And he'll be fine now. What we should be focused on is what to do about Hendrix in the meantime. West will want to know we have a plan as soon as he's fixed up."

June understood that Beck had a crush, and he felt bad about keeping secrets, but there was no way he could speak about the poisoning. That was a secret the four of them would be taking to the grave.

Beck was nice and he liked him a lot.

But he wasn't one of them.

Maybe if he'd opened his big mouth up months ago and confessed his feelings to West, he could have been, but the second Lake brought Nix into the mix, it was game over for everyone else. It'd taken Yejun and West a bit longer to reach that conclusion, the one Lake had obviously had from the start, but they'd gotten there eventually, and now there was no turning back.

Nix was it for them. All three of them.

"Did Iris try to hurt West?" Beck wouldn't drop it, getting angrier than June had ever seen him before.

"What does it matter?" Nix cut in between them. "She's dead now anyway."

Beck stared at him for a long, tense moment, and then without another word, he spun on his heels and took off. He practically walked straight into Lake and Demitrious on his way, not stopping to apologize or acknowledge them at all. He was acting like a man with a mission, but Yejun couldn't imagine anywhere else he could possibly be other than here, waiting for news about West.

"Is he off to find his father?" Demitrious asked as soon as he and Lake were within earshot, and Yejun had to admit that wasn't a bad guess. "He'll have to find him. Lots of people are already looking, including the Order."

Yejun and Nix both frowned, that last part catching their attention.

"Video of him shooting West has circulated all over the internet," Lake explained. His brow was pinched, the only indicator that he was worried for their best friend.

Still, he looked a hell of a lot more concerned than West's dad.

"People are cherry-picking that scene specifically and leaving out the fight that took place beforehand," Lake continued. "It's making it look even worse for Hendrix. Like he attacked West unprompted."

"Although, the part where you boys race into his defense is great stuff," Demitrious grinned, glancing at the closed doors leading to the operating rooms before turning back to them.

Nix stiffened at Yejun's side, and he latched onto his hand to silently coax him into relaxing. They'd already fought with one Order member today, and look where that'd gotten them.

"It's helped to solidify your social standing," Demitrious, completely oblivious to the seething Nix at Yejun's side, kept spewing his nonsense. "They're calling you the four Demons of Foxglove now. Congratulations, Phoenix."

"Maybe we should go sit down," Yejun suggested, risking crossing Nix's boundaries by settling a palm against his lower back. They'd only just agreed to try and work through their issues, but the Firebird had made it very clear he wasn't ready to be intimate with him in any sense of the word. Still, he needed to defuse this situation before—

"I can't tell you how relieved I was to hear you weren't there, Lake," Demitrious said dramatically. "Can you imagine the uproar there would be if an Order member had shot the future emperor?"

"You are," Nix's voice shook with barely controlled rage, "quite literally, the worst."

Demitrious tilted his head, staring at Nix as though seeing him for the first time.

“Pardon?”

“I thought it was Hendrix, but nope. It’s you. The worst part is you’re too stupid to even realize it, but one day you’re going to wake up alone and wonder how the hell you got to be a sad, bitter old man in a big empty house, and I sincerely hope you think of me and this conversation then.”

Yejun blew out a breath and set his hands on his hips. Well. He’d tried.

“Your son was just shot,” Nix wasn’t finished, “but all you care about is kissing Lake’s ass. Is that a requirement or something? You have to be a creepy, self-centered loser in order to win a seat on the Order?”

Demitrious definitely wasn’t confused any longer, his eyes narrowed into slits as he stared down his nose at Nix. “I can see why Hendrix hit him.”

Of all the things to choose to say...

“Repeat that,” Lake growled, “I fucking dare you.”

Demitrious blinked at him.

“Do it,” he insisted, “so I can let June break your kneecaps.”

“Yes,” Yejun cracked his knuckles, “I’ve been dreaming about that for years.”

Since they were doing this, might as well go all in.

West’s father sputtered at them and actually took a step back. “What on Tulniri has gotten into you boys?” His gaze turned, homing in on Nix once more. “You. It’s you, isn’t it. You’re why—”

“Slap me.” Nix advanced closer and turned his head, presenting his cheek. “Go for it. Worked out real well for the last guy.”

The smirk he gave Demitrious was positively evil.

Yejun felt his cock twitch at the sight.

“You should run along and warn the Order,” Lake stated, “that if you don’t find Hendrix and ensure he’s properly punished for what he’s done, we will, and we won’t just stop with him. It’s time the Imperial family regains control and teaches the club members who truly owns this planet.”

“Spoiler alert,” Yejun chimed in, “it’s not you.”

“Are you threatening me right now? Me ?” Demitrious sputtered. “After all that I’ve done for you? You ungrateful—”

“You insult my mate,” Lake forced the older man back until he hit the wall, “and I can do a hell of a lot worse than simply threaten you. Spread the word about that as well. My future Royal Consort is off limits.”

“You aren’t emperor yet.”

Lake snorted. “What? Going to try and side with Hendrix now that your pride has been dented? Go ahead. Try it. I’d say it’s fairly safe to assume the entire planet is on my side after they’ve witnessed him shoot a college student in cold blood. West was unarmed.”

“He’s a professional fighter! That makes him a weapon!”

“Aw, so you are aware of how talented your son is,” Nix drawled, heavy on the

sarcasm. “Never would have guessed it.”

Lake slapped a hand down onto Demitrious’s shoulder, the corner of his mouth curving in a mocking partial grin as he pretended to wipe lint off of the older man’s jacket. “Despite this unpleasant talk, nothing has to change between us. You help ensure I get the throne, and once I do, I approve your company’s requested trade routes. The Speck Belt, correct?”

Demitrious swallowed and then gave a curt nod, clearly trying to regain some composure to save face. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Consider it a done deal.” Lake patted him and then took a pointed step backward. “But only if Hendrix is found. He hurt one of us. He doesn’t get to walk away from that.”

“He doesn’t get to walk at all,” Yejun added, settling his gaze on Demitrious’s knees for a lengthy pause that had the older man stiffening all over again. “For every pint of blood West spilled, I’ll make sure Hendrix gives two.”

“Taking the hand that fired the gun should suffice,” Nix surprised them all by suggesting instead.

“You hear that?” Lake nodded toward Nix. “My mate wants Hendrix’s hand on a platter. What’s your response to that, Demitrious?”

He adjusted his dress shirt and cleared his throat. “When it comes to Hendrix needing to be punished, we’re on the same page. I’ll go now and ensure all of the club’s resources are being utilized in the hunt. It’s only been forty or so minutes since the shooting. He couldn’t have gotten far.”

It wasn’t lost on them that Demitrious didn’t plan on sticking around to ensure West

was safe, but none of them stopped him as he started for the other end of the hall with clipped steps and his head held far too high.

“Are you all right?” Lake reached for Nix, taking his chin to tip his head to the side. The red mark across his cheek where Hendrix had slapped him had long since faded, but the black eye from where his goon of a guard had gotten in a cheap shot was glaringly obvious. “I’ll kill them all.”

“It’s fine.” Nix pushed his arm away.

“What happened?” Yejun asked. “Grady found me at Café Soul and yelled something about needing to find you at the library due to some emergency before running out.”

“That must have been when he went to get West,” Nix supposed.

So Grady must know that things between Nix and him were strained, and for the comfort of his friend, kept searching until he found another Demon he could send to Nix for help. Yejun was going to have to reevaluate the way he viewed the Firebird’s friends. Clearly, there were some good ones worth noting.

“We came out of the library and Hendrix was waiting for me with two of his guards,” Nix began, launching into a recount of the events leading up to when Yejun had arrived swinging.

“Basically, you’re telling us you managed to insult not one, but two high-standing members of the club,” Lake stated.

“Who also happen to be on the Order,” Yejun added, letting out a low whistle. “Gotta say, I’m impressed, baby. I’ve been wanting to tell those two off forever, and you actually did it.”

“He put himself at risk by doing so,” Lake reminded tersely.

“Scold me later,” Nix waved his surly mood off. “It’d not like I can turn back time and do it differently anyway.”

“Songbird.”

“What?” He ran a hand through his hair. “Don’t you think I feel bad enough about it as it is? If it weren’t for me losing my temper, West would never have—”

“Hey,” Yejun stopped him. “No. No part of this is your fault.”

“He’s right,” Lake agreed. “This is all on Hendrix.” Something seemed to occur to him and he turned to Yejun with a frown. “Since when did he carry around a blaster?”

“I don’t know.” But it was a good question. “If he was packing, why bother with the security detail? Actually,” he crossed his arms, “I can’t really think of a reason he’d need those guys. Has there been a recent threat made against him?”

“I’ll have someone look into it,” Lake said.

“Yeah, who?” Yejun pointed toward the doors. “Our hacker is currently out of commission, and it’s not like we can trust just anyone with this.”

Lake gave him a look like he thought he was the biggest dumbass on the planet, and then set his sights on Nix.

Which, okay, yeah.

Yejun was the biggest dumbass on the planet.

Sue him.

“I can try and do it using West’s setup at the Roost,” Nix said, easily understanding what they wanted from him. “But I’m not leaving until we’ve heard from the doctors that West is going to be fine and I’ve seen him for myself.”

“None of us are going anywhere,” Lake confirmed.

Hendrix and the rest could wait.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

“Is this okay?” Yejun asked for what had to be the third time since leaving the hospital less than an hour ago.

Nix might have found it endearing if not for the fact that he was a bundle of misfiring nerves trying to concentrate on the task at hand. He hadn’t wanted to leave the hospital, but they’d been assured West was out of the woods, and Lake had stayed behind so...

None of the others could do this, meaning Nix had to be the one at the Roost searching for information on Hendrix via West’s phenomenal setup. The guy had access to all of the CCTV cameras in the city, all major and minor gateways leading in and out of the city, and even a few private ones in popular hotels and businesses.

“It’s not like either of us had a choice,” Nix replied, clicking away at the keyboard as his eyes darted between the three screens. The hospital staff were only allowing family into the ICU at the moment, and since Lake had technically been adopted by Demitrious, he was able to convince them to give him entrance.

Nix and Yejun weren’t so lucky.

“I couldn’t exactly come here on my own,” he continued. And not just because he didn’t have a car. He wasn’t an idiot. Having pissed off multiple Order members, it’d be suicide to walk around alone. “We agreed we’d try to get back to how we were, remember?”

They were alone together, really alone, for the first time in a while. The rest of the Roost was quiet, the weather being suspiciously clear so not even the background

music of rain could help cut through the awkwardness.

“How’s your face?” Nix asked then, not wanting to give off the impression he was uncomfortable around the Demon. It wasn’t that precisely, it was more like he didn’t know how to react. A part of his subconscious was still afraid and on edge around Yejun, while the other part recalled how good it’d been before that horrible day.

Yejun pressed a thumb against the corner of his split bottom lip and winced. “It’ll heal.”

“Thanks for jumping in like that.”

“No one gets to hurt you, Firebird. My only regret is I didn’t get there sooner.”

“I don’t know what I would have done if he’d shot you both...”

“Hendrix is a coward. The only reason he shot West is because he knew West could snap his bones and contort him into a pretzel without breaking a sweat. He let fear get the best of him. Now he’ll suffer the consequences.”

And there would be consequences.

The club was hunting Hendrix down with their own resources, but considering how little they all trusted the Order, Lake and Yejun had asked that Nix still give it a shot.

“What exactly is it you’re doing?” June crossed his arms and leaned in, careful not to get too close to Nix.

“Running a facial recognition search,” Nix explained. “If he’s left the city, he should have been caught on camera somewhere. I’m also checking through social media platforms for mention of him. People like to gossip.”

“Have you found anything yet?”

“Unfortunately,” he sighed, “no. It’s true people like to talk, but Hendrix isn’t as well known to the younger generations. Now, if I was running a search on you, for example, the hits would be astronomical.”

“But an old man who runs a company no one can even pronounce the name of?” Yejun grunted in understanding. “Yeah, okay. At least if he was attractive, we’d get something, right? I have no idea where Beck gets his good looks from.”

“Was his mother not pretty?”

“She was all right.”

“Ouch. Don’t hold back on my account.”

“I’m not,” Yejun said. “Beck’s just fortunate to end up with the features he did. Speaking of...” He trailed off for a moment and then cleared his throat. “Don’t take anything he said or did to heart. Beck cares a lot about West. He was worried and panicking, that’s all.”

“Of course,” Nix nodded. “I like Beck. He’s been nothing but nice to me and, from what I’ve seen, he legitimately cares about making Lake emperor despite his potential claim to the throne.”

“He’d have to go through his father and convince the Order first,” Yejun replied. “Too much trouble. Beck is actually fairly simple once you get to know him. He can be secretive, sure, he was a Demon and is an Essential, after all, but he’s got his own issues and traumas to deal with.”

“Secretive how?” Nix was only partially curious. Mostly, he wanted to keep the

conversation going to fill the silence.

“If he’d confessed to West, his reaction out there wouldn’t have caught you so off guard. I thought for a moment you were going to tear his hair out,” Yejun chuckled.

Admittedly, when Beck had pushed Nix out of the way after West had been shot, his first instinct had been to react physically. But he’d held himself back, reminding himself that Beck had known them a lot longer, and Nix still didn’t fully understand how deeply their bonds went.

Hearing Yejun’s explanation though had him frowning and twirling in the chair to better face him. “What are you talking about?”

“You haven’t noticed either?” June rested a hip against the edge of the desk. “Beck has the hots for West.”

“No,” Nix blurted before he could help it, “he has a crush on you .”

Yejun’s expression turned perplexed. “Huh? Where’d you hear that from?”

“West told me. He sounded pretty sure.”

“No way,” he shook his head. “Beck and I have discussed his feelings for West in detail. I’m positive he has a thing for him, not me.”

That was...confusing.

“Could he...like you both?” It wasn’t completely out of the question. Didn’t Nix feel that way about the Demons? Judging solely from Beck’s reactions earlier, it did seem like Yejun had a point, but that didn’t change what Nix had been told. West was many things, but a gossip wasn’t one of them. He wouldn’t have mentioned it at all if

he hadn't been certain.

"No, I definitely would have noticed if he liked me," Yejun began, only to falter when Nix gave him a meaningful look. "...Wouldn't I have?"

Nix heaved a sigh and shook his head at him mockingly. "I can't answer that. This is clearly something the three of you are going to have to figure out once West is back on his feet."

Which shouldn't be too long from now. The medical staff at the hospital were top in the galaxy, and knowing they were working on one of the Demons, they'd apparently pulled out all of the latest tech and gone above and beyond with patching West up. Seeing both Lake and Yejun calm after they'd been given the report had helped alleviate Nix's worries.

"There's nothing to figure out, Firebird," Yejun disagreed. "We're both already taken. Poor Beck, no matter which of us he likes, is going to have to come to terms with that on his own."

"Since you're friends," Nix said, "you should help him."

Yejun's shoulders stiffened noticeably. "I've been meaning to bring something similar up to you, but there was never a good time for it."

"No time like the present."

"I'm done sleeping around. For good. And—" he held up a hand when Nix opened his mouth, "please don't tell me that you're fine with me fucking other people. I really, really hate that. Every time you said it, it was like you were sticking a knife in my gut and twisting the handle."

“That’s...odd.” Nix leaned back in the seat and inspected him. “Who are you, and what have you done with Yejun Sang?”

“Funny.”

“I’m serious. You’re the one who kept telling me you wouldn’t stop being a playboy, remember? I simply accepted your terms, June.”

“I was wrong. I don’t want you to be okay with it. I want you to want me back as badly as I want you.”

Nix’s traitorous heart leaped at that. “How...badly do you want me?”

“I can’t even get it up for anyone else,” Yejun confessed.

“Seemed to manage that just fine with Lake the other day.”

“Yeah,” he snorted, “because it was Lake and you were watching. I went back to the Roost after that and jerked off five times to the mental image of you blowing your load all over West’s chest.”

“I should have let you come.” Nix could have ordered Lake to return the favor after Yejun had blown him, but he hadn’t. As soon as he and West had gotten off, the two of them had rushed to take care of the fresh bite mark, leaving Lake and Yejun to their own devices. It hadn’t been a conscious decision...but it hadn’t exactly been an unconscious one either. “Part of me wanted to keep punishing you.”

“You’ll never have to use that video against me,” he swore. “If you want me to do something, all you have to do is say it and it’ll be done.”

“And if I mess up and the Order decides to share the video in an attempt to hurt me?”

Nix asked. “They’ll see it’s you and Lake that were filmed. You’ll be the one put on blast. Sure, they’ll come for me, but—”

“No one will hurt you,” Yejun cut him off, voice turning deadly in an instant. “I’ll kill anyone who tries.”

Nix shivered and Yejun’s face fell. “That’s not...I didn’t have that reaction because I’m scared of you, June.”

“I know that you are.”

“Yes, but, on some level I’m beginning to understand you won’t hurt me.”

“Again.”

Nix hummed. “Yeah. Again. But if you do, I’ll rent the largest projection billboard in the city and broadcast that video of you sucking Lake off to the entire planet on repeat. Try being a respectable artist with everyone whispering that you’re the emperor’s bitch behind your back.”

“I doubt the public will be so considerate as to only name call from afar,” Yejun drawled. “What about you? Has the gossip died down about the painting?”

“You guys took care of that from the beginning.” He’d only heard a few whispered rumors and caught a couple of glances as of late. The room at the gallery showing had been packed, but there’d been less than thirty people there in total. Their multi-slates had been confiscated and all photos taken of the painting had been deleted. “You threatened to expel and ruin the lives of anyone found talking about it, remember?”

Say what you wanted about the Demon, but he was protective.

Not just of other people, but also of himself.

“About what I said at the hospital,” Nix began tentatively, unsure how to proceed.

“What did you say?”

“How I understand better where you were coming from after you caught Branwen hurting West. I meant that. I can’t imagine...If it were me, I would have done worse than merely lock her up and interrogate her. Honestly, now that the shoe is on the other foot, I’m actually grateful you held yourself back so much.”

Yejun looked uncomfortable. “Nix, I kept her up for days with loud music, made her piss in a tiny bucket in the corner that I never changed out, and withheld food and water. As badly as I want you to keep thinking I wasn’t horrible, I don’t want to lie to you. I wasn’t kind to her. In fact,” he wrung his hands in his lap, “the more I think about it, the more I’m certain I had something to do with her death. Maybe not directly, but I was definitely part of the reason.”

Nix had known that. Branwen had felt abandoned and hopeless when she’d chosen to take her own life. She must have been humiliated and truly believed there was no one left she could turn to for help.

“I broke her down and stripped away her dignity,” Yejun continued when Nix didn’t immediately speak. “Since I was the one who caught her in the act, I’m also the reason she became useless to the poisoner. Whoever that person is, they—”

“We’re all responsible for our own actions,” Nix stated, “no matter the reasons behind them. Branwen chose to get into bed with the poisoner. She chose to target the three of you, to play along and pretend to be your friend.” He blew out a breath and rubbed at his temples, a headache starting to form. “She chose to write me that letter and get me involved even though being here was what caused her to give up. She was

no saint. None of us are.”

It'd be so easy to put all the blame and anger on Yejun. To take his offer to do so and hate him. To mourn and rage and go on pretending like Nix hadn't discovered who his cousin truly was in life.

But just because it would be easy, didn't mean it would be right.

It didn't mean it would fill this void in Nix's chest, or make going on with the knowledge any more or less easy. At the end of the day, Branwen had opted to leave him and the rest of the world behind. Nix needed to accept that he wasn't as important to her as she'd been to him.

He needed to accept that he wasn't even mad at her anymore for sending him to Foxglove.

That he wouldn't give up the Demons for anything.

That his assimilation into their fold was no longer survival-based. Nix wanted to belong with them. To them.

He wanted Lake, the stoic, overbearing next in line for the throne.

And West, the flirty genius with a penchant for eliciting pleasurable pain in the bedroom.

And Yejun. Nix still wanted Yejun. Flaws and scary tendencies and all. He wanted quiet talks in the art room and sensual touches as he was posed over a platform.

He wanted connection.

“I always thought I was better off alone,” Nix said softly. “That I didn’t need anybody. I had Branwen when something was on my mind, and I had the memories we’d made together as kids. That was always good enough. Before I met you three. She thought she was sending me here to clean up her mess, but what she really did was introduce me to all the things I was stubbornly missing out on.”

Like friendship.

And love.

“I’ve never fully given myself to another person before, June. That wasn’t even something I believed myself capable of. But in a short amount of time, you three have clawed your way past my defenses and slipped into my bloodstream.” He reached for him then, taking one of his hands, the heat from the Demon's body sending electrical currents up Nix’s arm.

“I hate her for hurting you,” he admitted, guilt and regret bubbling to the surface, swallowed back down as he forced the confession out. “If she were still alive, I would take your side, and that both pains and terrifies me because for all my life, Branwen was everything I had.”

Her betrayal tarnished some of those precious memories, true, but not all. He could still choose to remember her as that bright and sunny girl who’d chased after rabbits in the fields with him. Who caught glowing twinkle bugs in glass jars on warm summer evenings at his side. Who cheered him on whenever he was studying or the self-doubts crept in.

“Branwen loved me,” he concluded. “Even if she chose herself in the end, I know she did. And I loved her. But,” he squeezed June’s hand, “now I have you three. What I feel for the three of you outshines anything I have ever felt for another person, even my cousin. I’m sorry that she hurt you, Yejun. I promise that I will only ever give you

one hundred percent of my true self. I promise to only ever be honest with you. And, maybe together, we can both heal the wounds she caused.”

Branwen and the person he’d been with her was his past.

The Demons were Nix’s future.

He’d do whatever it took to keep that future alive.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

“I can’t believe you said that to my dad,” West laughed. “Good looking out, Nixie.”

“I’m glad you’re getting such a kick out of it,” he drawled, not feeling the same. “You guys have clearly been a bad influence.” Up until now, Nix wouldn’t have dreamed about speaking out against authority, especially not in the manner he had.

Risking them all the way that he had...

“You don’t think Lake is pissed, do you?” He wouldn’t blame him if he was.

As much as Lake hated Demitrious, the whole reason the Demons had put up with him this long was because they needed his support. What if Nix had inadvertently cost Lake the throne?

Nix and Yejun had returned from the Roost a few hours ago, just in time to discover West had woken up and was being relocated from the ICU. After checking in with him for a bit, the others had left to take care of business, leaving Nix behind to look after the injured Demon.

Not that anyone would be able to tell from first glance.

West was his usual chipper self and was working on his third hospital pudding. Aside from the gown and the fact he needed to move slowly to and from the bathroom, there were no indicators he’d been shot. They were lucky. The bullet had apparently lodged itself in his side, avoiding two major organs by some miracle.

During surgery, they’d had to repair part of his tional when the doctor had nicked it

removing the bullet, but according to them, it'd been a simple fix. West should be out of the woods and could even return back to the Roost as early as tomorrow, so long as he took it easy and stayed in bed today.

Medical advancements on Tulniri were crazy good, but even Nix was surprised when he was informed about the recovery time.

“Lake is probably bragging to June about it right now.” West tilted his head. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Does it feel...weird?” Nix eyed the spot on West's side where he'd been shot, though he couldn't see anything beneath the loose hospital gown. The doctors had given West a new nanite treatment, and apparently thousands of microscopic robots were working hard to repair his tissues at that very moment.

“Why? Want me to ask them to treat your neck?”

He shook his head. “It's practically healed already.”

“Relax, Nixie. We already beat the Order's stupid task by catching the hacker.” West shrugged and winked when Nix gave him a sharp look at that. “What they don't know can't hurt them. My point is, we passed their little test, and well before Demons Passing. There's nothing they can do to stop Lake now.”

“But he can't even take the throne for another three months at least.” The period of mourning for the late Emperor and Royal Consort would come to an end then. “What if the Order tries something before then?”

“The reason they wanted us to do this before Demons Passing is because it's a celebrated holiday on the entire planet,” West said. “The High Council, those who worked closely with the last emperor, will make an official planetary-wide

announcement naming Lake as the next in line. This official statement will also be sent to the Intergalactic Conference. They'll add his name to the records on Demeter Station and that'll be that."

The Intergalactic Conference was the governing force of many of the galaxies within the universe. Their mission statement was universal peace, and all of the planets that had signed their treaty were offered benefits and protections. The I.P.F.—or, the Intergalactic Police Force—was also run by them.

The I.C. had strict rules about interfering with the way planets were individually governed, but they required data on current and predetermined leaders to be submitted so they could add that information to their database, known as Demeter Station. This station was accessible to all active agents, which made their jobs easier whenever a crime was committed.

Until the High Council made that official announcement, they were in charge of running the planet, though in a very small capacity. They were allowed to keep things going, but no one person had more power on the board than any of the others. Their real job was to carry on the work the late Emperor had left behind during the period of mourning. Once that period ended, they would submit reports on everything they did to whoever was newly crowned. The new emperor would then decide whether or not to continue with what their predecessor wanted or not.

Nix only had a basic understanding of how all of this worked. He'd never been interested in history or politics and had actually had to brush up on his knowledge once he'd realized he was in bed with the Demons and a man in the line of succession.

That's probably why he hadn't fully comprehended the importance of Demons Passing.

“That’s two days from now,” he pointed out, rolling his eyes when West merely hummed. “You’ve just been shot and I just pissed off not one, but two Order members! If they do plan on retaliating by trying to mess with Lake, they’ll have to act fast.”

“Sure,” West agreed, “but fast is messy. They’ve got nothing, Nixie, and even if they do try, they’ll make mistakes. We’ll be able to handle anything Hendrix throws our way, and my dad is all talk. He’d never give up on Lake. He’s invested too much into him.”

Right, Lake and he had discussed something about trade routes or some shit. But...

“What about the poisoner?” That was another hidden threat they needed to be on their toes for. “If this person is still after you, they’re going to have to act within the next forty-eight hours or they’ll miss their chance.”

“They could always just attempt to assassinate Lake once he’s on the throne,” West corrected, “the same way they took out the last emperor.”

Nix glared at him.

“I’m taking this seriously, babe, I promise, it’s just what do you expect us to do? We still don’t have any clues about who this poisoner is other than maybe Hendrix. And we just made that guy public enemy number one. He’s got bigger things to worry about right now.”

Despite West’s setup at the Roost, Nix hadn’t been able to locate Hendrix, aside from glimpses here and there that he wasn’t able to connect.

“He’s been a member of Club Essential his entire life,” Nix said. “Is he really going to be punished just for shooting you?”

“Hell yeah he will. I’m a Legacy, also a born-in member, and the son of another man at the Order table. I’m also an up-and-coming sports star. Once I’ve graduated and can go pro galactically, I’ll be sent all over the galaxy for events and matches. Basically, the club will use me to help spread the word and attract potential business partners. I’m important and young. Hendrix is old and could die any day.”

Nix snorted. “He’s got at least forty years left.”

“If he lives the average lifespan.” West’s gaze darkened. “Not many do.”

He’d had enough talk of murder for one day, thanks, so he changed the subject. “What are Lake and Yejun on their way to do right now anyway?”

“June is meeting with his parents to ensure they still have our backs and vote to have Hendrix punished to the maximum sentence. Lake is at waif practice.”

Nix blinked at him. “He’s what?”

West chuckled. “While I appreciate that you’re upset on my behalf, don’t be. Lake has the same deal as I do. He’s a famous athlete. Sure, as the emperor, he won’t be able to take his career pro, but he’ll be invited all over for private and pro matches as a celebrity guest, so to speak. Also, keeping up appearances by having him go about his daily life looks good for us.”

Nix crossed his arms. “So, you were all thinking about the poisoner already.”

“Of course, babe.”

He blew out a breath. “I feel so useless.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” West’s expression turned wolfish. “You should be

hard on me instead.”

“Seriously?” Nix pinched the bridge of his nose. “Even with a hole in your side?”

“They sealed the hole shut,” West said. “Which is good, because I prefer yours—”

He held up a hand, instantly silencing him. “Stop.”

“Come on, Nixie. I’m a patient and your job is to take care of me so...” He pulled the blanket off his lap, exposing the tent in his pants, “take care of me.”

“Sorry, but your hospital wear doesn’t do it for me.” When it became clear a joke wasn’t going to be enough to deter West, Nix sighed. “I was really scared, okay? I thought...I don’t know what I would do if you got seriously hurt because of me.”

Not that a gunshot wound wasn’t serious.

“I should have kept my shit together no matter what Hendrix said. You’ve all managed to do that, and you’re supposed to be the ones with the short fuse,” Nix finished.

“Any idea why you couldn’t?” West asked. “It’s true that was unlike you.”

“He just pissed me off, that’s all.”

“Why? What’d he say?”

Nix lifted a single shoulder in a partial shrug. “Just crap about Lake’s parents and about Lake, that’s all.”

“Oh, well, that makes sense then.”

He frowned.

“Nixie, you literally enrolled in a new university just to avenge your cousin. Most people? They wouldn’t even consider doing that. You can do anything when it comes to protecting the people you love.”

“Did you just insinuate—”

“Maybe love is a strong word,” West grinned. “But you’ve got to admit, you’re at least heading in that direction.”

“Shut up.”

“I will if you help me.”

“With?”

West flicked his hips, laughing when Nix scowled at him. “Babe, for real. You don’t want the nurse walking in on me hard for you, do you? I’ll tell her all about how it’s your fault.”

“Go right ahead.”

“You’re blushing,” he teased. “I promise it doesn’t have to be anything major. Just give me a hand job, yeah?”

Nix really shouldn’t but...He gave a resigned sigh and moved closer, his right hand going for the elastic band of the white and blue hospital pants West was dressed in. “You get five minutes, if you don’t come by then, you’ll have to finish yourself off.”

“Wow, that’s so mean.” West’s cock jerked against Nix’s palm the second he made

contact. “Good Light. Never mind. Five minutes. Sure thing, babe, just keep touching me like—” his sentence ended on a strangled sound as Nix gripped him tight at the base and then gave a solid stroke down to the tip.

His fingers were instantly lubed in precome, and he clucked his tongue, watching as West dropped his head back against the wall, his eyes slipping shut as he moaned. Nix pumped him with quick motions, reaching down with his free hand to tug the material of his pants away. The second West’s cock popped into view, he licked his lips, his ass clenching automatically.

“Sure you don’t want to—”

“Not a chance, West.”

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

Nix hissed and slowed when West reached out and palmed him through his jeans. “Stop that.”

“You’re so hard for me though, Nixie. Don’t you want it?”

“You’re injured!”

“Keep stroking me, babe,” he urged, his hand pressing and sliding downward to cup him more firmly through the denim. His middle finger dug at the spot where Nix’s taint should be and he laughed when that had Nix springing onto his toes.

“If you don’t stop,” Nix set his determined gaze on West, “I will.”

He tutted and dropped his hand. “Fine. Be that way. But you best believe the second these nanites are done sealing me up, that plump ass of yours is mine. Don’t think I’ll

let you get away with what you did to my stuff.”

The first thing Nix had noticed when he’d stepped into West’s room with Yejun was that he’d gotten all new keyboards.

He grinned and the Demon narrowed his eyes.

“Oh? Pleased with yourself are you?”

“Pretty much.” Nix emphasized that statement with an aggressive pump of his fist that had West’s hips lifting off the mattress.

“Just wait until I’m out of this bed,” West warned, voice turning reedy as he was brought closer and closer to the edge. “I’ve got a list of things I’ll do to you to get back at you and Lake.”

“That so?”

“Yes. I—” West made a strangled sound when suddenly Nix dropped down, swallowing his cock in one skilled motion. “Good Light!”

Nix took him all the way in, teeth lightly grazing against his sensitive skin the way he knew West actually liked. His tongue lapped against the underside of his hard member, pressing on the nerves and then trailing as he pulled back to suckle on his swollen crown. The burst of salty precome on his tongue had him groaning in pleasure, his own neglected dick weeping in his pants.

West came after only a few bobs of Nix’s head, and Nix made sure to swallow every last drop of the orgasm, teasing him throughout. He didn’t release him until the Demon went limp and started to push his head away.

Laughing, Nix pulled off, but before West could get a word in, he bent and captured his mouth, pushing his tongue, still coated in the man's juices into his mouth in a mirror of the sexual act they both wished they were doing. By the time he pulled away, West was flushed and his eyes were glazed over.

"Good Light," West repeated, staring at Nix as he licked his lips. "That was so hot."

"Hold up," he pretended to wipe something off the corner of West's mouth, "you've got a little spit and come on you."

West whimpered and caught his wrist, pressing a kiss against his pulse point before resting his cheek in Nix's palm. "Babe, why are you being such a tease? Are you trying to kill me."

"Not funny." Nix yanked his hand away.

"Too soon?"

"West."

He blew out a breath. "Fine, sorry. My bad."

"Put that away," Nix motioned to his exposed cock. "The nurses could walk in at any moment."

"Don't want them seeing the goods?" West asked, but he did as he was told and slipped himself back into his pants. "Don't worry, Nixie, this is all yours. No one else gets a taste."

"Ever."

West chuckled. “Yeah, babe. Ever.”

He hummed in satisfaction and then decided to change the subject before West could convince him to fool around again. “I sort of made up with Yejun.”

“That’s good. How do you feel?”

“Better. It’s better if we’re all united, don’t you think?”

West nodded. “What about Unknown? Any more weird texts?”

“Not since Dew died, no.”

“So either he was sending them or the poisoner is lying even lower than before.”

Their conversation from earlier had Nix frowning and West chided him for it.

“There’s nothing more we can do right now,” he reminded. “Just relax, Nixie. It’s only two days. We’ve made it this far already, we can make it another forty-eight hours.”

“That’s the problem,” Nix said. “We aren’t the only ones on a time limit.”

And he had a really bad feeling that he couldn’t seem to shake, no matter how confident the Demon seemed to be.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

“Come straight home afterward,” Lake’s firm voice came through the earbud in Nix’s right ear. “No exceptions, Songbird.”

He rolled his eyes as he headed up the steps to the dorm building where Juri stayed whenever he didn’t feel like going back to his apartment. The fact the guy had asked to meet there was the only reason the overprotective Imperial currently talking Nix’s ear off had allowed him to go.

With only a day left until Demons Passing, everyone was busy preparing for the holiday, including the Club Essential and everyone at Foxglove Grove University. Classes were still in session today, and since he was already on campus and close by Juri’s, he’d been able to convince Lake to let him meet up with his friend.

“I’m about to head into practice,” Lake continued, “but I’m keeping my multi-slate on me. The stadium is only six minutes from Juri’s dorm. I can make it in three.”

“It’ll be fine,” Nix reassured him, stopping to close his wet umbrella when he made it to the entrance of the building. “We aren’t going anywhere. He asked me to stop by to talk about my cousin, that’s all.”

“Why?”

“I told you. There’s something going on between him and Briant.”

“You said you think there might be something,” he corrected. “Text Yejun when you’re done. He’ll come pick you up.”

“Who’s checking in on West?”

“Beck is getting him,” Lake said. “They should be on their way from the hospital now. He’ll be there waiting for us, so don’t spend too long with Ferd.”

“Got it. We’re just going to talk a bit and then I’ll head out.”

“Nix.”

“I’ll call Yejun, wait for him, and then head out. Jeez. I got it.”

“You’re the one who keeps mentioning the poisoner,” Lake reminded. “If it’s true he hasn’t given up yet, you’re the most likely target. He gets to you and he has something to use against us.”

Nix entered the lobby of the dorm and turned toward the far left corner. A black security camera with a blinking red light was tucked high up and he waved at it. “Which is why I agreed to allow West to spy on me, didn’t I?”

West had hacked into the school's system and was using his multi-slate to keep tabs on Nix as he moved about campus. He’d been doing it all day, insisting on it when Nix decided he wouldn’t skip any classes. The wound in his side was practically healed already, but he’d asked Beck to pick him up and help check him out so he could pay closer attention to Nix on his device.

Nix thought about his conversation with Yejun as he headed up the stairs, feeling a little bad for the professor. If Beck really did have a crush on West, wasn’t it rubbing salt in the wound making him witness his love interest obsessively stalk his boyfriend on camera?

His multi-slate dinged and he turned his wrist to check the screen, seeing there was a

new message from West.

Hellhound: Looking hot, babe. Keep it up.

Nightingale: That's my line. Didn't you promise me something once you were better?

Hellhound: Tonight. That ass of yours is mine. We can make the others watch again. This time, I'll make you come all over Lake as payback for the mess the two of you made, how's that sound?

Nightingale: We'll see. Maybe you're all talk.

Hellhound: Challenge accepted.

"Who are you texting?" Lake sounded annoyed. He must have heard the clicking as Nix had typed.

"West." He stopped outside of Juri's room and knocked. "I'm here. I'll talk to you later."

"Remember—"

"Yeah, yeah," Nix made a big show of pointing to his earbud and rolling his eyes when Juri opened the door and saw him, "I got it. Don't go anywhere. Don't gossip with Juri about how big your dick is."

"I'm coming to get you right now."

"Wait," he laughed. "I'm joking, I'm joking. And I'm hanging up."

"Nix."

“Yeah?”

“Be careful.”

“You too.” He ended the call and slipped the earbud out, clicking it back into place in the device at his wrist as he stepped into the room. “Sorry about that.”

“One of them?” Juri asked, shutting the door behind him before moving toward the bed. He motioned for Nix to make himself comfortable, and then sat on his desk chair nearby.

“Yeah.” He glanced around the small space. “This a single?”

“Decided I wanted privacy.” Juri shrugged. “Grady has asked me to move into your dorm though, since you’re no longer using it.”

He wouldn’t be returning either, not with Demons Passing right around the corner. Nix should really make a point of collecting his things and filing his move with the school, that way Grady could apply for a new roommate.

“I can—”

Juri shook his head. “I don’t plan on taking him up on the offer, I was only saying.”

“Oh.”

They settled into an uncomfortable silence for a moment that honestly threw Nix off. Conversation had always been easy with the other guy in the past. The only reason he could see for this awkwardness was...

“Is there something you wanted to talk to me about?” Nix asked. “Did something

happen?”

Nervously, Juri rubbed the palms of his hands on his thighs. “I thought I had this all planned out in my head, but now that it’s actually happening, I’m finding it more difficult. I don’t know where to start.”

This seemed serious, way more so than the lighthearted conversation he’d thought they’d be having about a potential crush on Briant.

“Is everything okay?” Nix’s brow furrowed. “Is it about the club? Do you regret rejoining?” Maybe he could talk to Lake about getting Juri let off the hook if that were the case. Surely as the emperor, he’d be able to do something like that. “If that’s it—”

“It’s not,” Juri said. “But thank you. You’re always putting other people first, Nix, which is why this is so difficult to do. It’s too late to turn back though, I really need you to understand that. I did try. I went over every other possible scenario in my head a dozen times, but there’s just no way around this I’m afraid.”

“Going to be honest here, you’re starting to freak me out. What is it?”

“I’ve never told anyone this before.”

Oh, was this about a personal secret? He understood what carrying those felt like. In fact, it’d been Juri who had helped unburden Nix in the beginning when he’d been trying to piece together who Iris and Branwen were. As soon as he’d made that discovery, he’d run into the other guy on campus, and he’d sat with Nix, a relative stranger at the time, and listened to him talk in riddles.

The idea of getting to return that favor and be a shoulder for Juri swept away any discomfort he’d been feeling. Nix resituated himself on the edge of the bed so he

could be a bit closer. “You can confide in me, Juri. We’re friends.”

“It happened a couple of months before you enrolled here,” Juri began, clearly struggling with formulating his thoughts. “It was an accidental discovery, really, not something I went looking for or even had a clue about. My brother—you remember I’ve mentioned him before?”

Nix nodded, but quietly waited for Juri to continue.

“Well, at the beginning of the summer I was contacted by Greta police.” That was on the other side of the planet. “They’d found a body in a marsh and there was some indication that the body might be my brother, Joel.”

“Oh gods, I’m so sorry!”

“It wasn’t him,” Juri said. “But before we knew that, they asked for a DNA sample to be sent over. I was going to fly, but the sample could reach them quicker, so I went down to the local station and had it done. Turns out, the body wasn’t my brother after all, but a friend of his. Joel went in for questioning and offered up a sample of his own to test against the body.”

“He was a suspect?”

“Very briefly. My brother couldn’t hurt a fly. That’s why he made for such a terrible Demon. Anyway. I thought that was the last of it, until I received the reports in the mail. I think they meant to send them to Joel, like maybe he’d requested it for some reason, but I ended up with copies as well.”

Nix wasn’t following, and it must have shown on his face.

“I’ll get to the point,” Juri stated. “Turns out, my brother isn’t my full brother. The

guy I grew up with, looked up to, thought I knew...He's only a half-sibling."

"Your parents didn't tell you?"

"I don't even know if my dad is aware honestly." He ran a hand through his hair and smiled bitterly. "He probably does though and they just kept it from me."

"Why would they do that?"

"To protect me, most likely."

He started to see where this could be going. "You found out who your biological dad is and he sucks, doesn't he."

Juri grunted. "Pretty much. I wish that was all of it, but it isn't."

"There's more?" Nix dropped a hand to Juri's knee and patted. "Sorry, man. It must really suck to discover you've been lied to all your life."

"It changed how I saw my family," he admitted. "And how I view myself. That's been the hardest part, I think. Having to reevaluate who I am as a person, the lengths I'll go to for justice, stuff like that."

"Justice?" Against his parents? "You haven't tried talking to your mom yet?"

"No, but I went through her things. That's how I discovered who my real dad is."

"Have you reached out to him?"

"He's dead. He's been dead for a while."

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to keep saying that,” Juri told him. “It’s not like any of this is your fault, and you’re not going to be feeling much pity for me once I’m done explaining things.”

He pulled back, confused all over again. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

What did Juri’s revelation have to do with Nix?

“I’ve harbored a lot of resentment because of my brother and the way he was treated. How he chose to run away instead of face his problems and maybe make a difference. I felt like dropping out of the club was the only way I could help keep the peace at home, since my parents were so desperate to get Joel back, they decided they were going to pull back with club duties. It didn’t work. Joel doesn’t care what they do with their lives. He wants nothing to do with us, and me even less than before.”

So, his brother had discovered they were only half-siblings and took that fact out on Juri? Used it as an excuse to put more distance between them?

“I know what it’s like to think you know a relative, only to discover you never really knew them at all,” Nix said. “If your brother is going to act like you aren’t good enough for him, that’s his loss.”

“He’s the one not good enough for me,” Juri stated, a bit of venom slipping into his tone, surprising Nix. “I have no use for a coward who won’t take the chance to change things for the better when they’re presented with the opportunity. If he’d stuck around and fought back, maybe things would be different here. Maybe Lake and his people wouldn’t be ruling the school through fear mongering.”

How had they gotten on the topic of Lake?

“Maybe you wouldn’t have been forced into accepting a life you never wanted.” Juri’s gaze landed on Nix’s neck and he scowled. “Those monsters. I can’t believe they did that to you. You’re an innocent person who had nothing to do with the club before now, and they had to pull you into this nightmare out of pure selfishness.”

A month or two ago, Nix might have agreed, but now...

“It’s not exactly like that, Juri,” he began, only for Juri to speak over him.

“Briant and I are in agreement that you’ve been brainwashed. You’re not thinking clearly because they’ve subjected you to all sorts of heinous things and programmed your body into wanting them. No one should have to live a life where they’re passed around between three spoiled brats who are incapable of understanding the word no.”

“Briant?” Nix stiffened. “What does my cousin have to do with this? Were you talking about me behind my back?” He understood the need to vent, but this sounded like it’d been more than that...Like they’d come to conclusions about him and his life with only the small amount of information they’d been able to glean on their own.

“I just want you to know, I really do care about you, Nix. I’ve never lied about that. I genuinely want to be your friend and, I hope, once this is all settled and done, and you get the help that you need, you’ll want that again too.”

He stood, not liking where this was going, and took a single step toward the door. “I think that’s enough for today. I don’t know what I did to upset you, Juri, but you’re making me really uncomfortable. I’m going to—”

Juri slapped his wrist away when Nix lifted it, about to contact Yejun.

“Hey! What the fuck is your problem?!”

“The Demons are,” Juri said. “The fact that you’re so willing to bounce on their dicks is. Wake up, Nix! They don’t love you! And I’m going to prove it.”

He froze. “If you touch them I’ll—”

“It’s not them you should be worrying about.” Juri turned and tugged open one of the desk drawers, spinning back before Nix could even consider bolting. “Here.”

It took him longer than it should have to process what he was looking at, but once he recognized the tiny cloud sticker in the corner of the multi-slate Juri was holding out, he felt a wave of cold wash over him.

“Why do you have Briant’s multi-slate?” His cousin had texted him letting him know he’d made it home last week. There’d been nothing strange about the message, it’d sounded one hundred percent like Briant, even had his favorite emoji added at the end.

Nix had Juri by the collar, shoved up against the desk in a flash, the device on the ground at their feet. “What the fuck did you do to my cousin?!”

“Calm—”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” He swung, connecting with the side of Juri’s face, the impact loud enough to echo in the tiny room.

Juri touched his cheek protectively. “See? You’re only proving my point. Briant talked a lot about you, Nix. About who you are. The guy he knows is reserved and kind. He’d never hit someone. The Demons have done this to you, turned you into this explosive thing that reacts without thinking.”

Nix was so done listening to this crap. “Tell me what you did to Briant, or I won’t

stop at a single hit.”

“He’s fine,” Juri said. “I won’t hurt him.”

“Unless?” Nix filled in the blanks. He shoved Juri away and started pacing. “You’re such an asshole. Pretending to be my friend! Betraying my trust all this time! Using my cousin?!”

Gods, what if Briant was in on it?

No.

No, he would never.

But...Branwen...

No.

Nix growled. Now he was making him second guess himself!

“Just tell me what you want already,” he snapped. He needed to know that Briant was safe and then he needed to get the hell out of here before he did something he’d regret.

Something Yejun level bad.

“I wasn’t lying,” Juri insisted. “I am your friend. I just want what’s best for you.”

“Bullshit!”

“I knew it was going to be hard for you to see reason. Eventually, once you’ve gotten

the help that you need, you will, I promise. But for now, I'm just going to have to take control of the situation."

"What situation?! You haven't told me a damn thing! Forget this." Nix lifted his wrist a second time, stepping out of reach.

"If you tell one of the Demons," Juri's cold tone stopped him short, "I'll kill Briant."

He stared at him, trying to connect the person standing in front of him with the one he'd thought he'd known all this time.

"I need your help, Nix."

"Yeah, that's so not going to happen."

"I think it is. You want Briant to stay alive, right? So do I. I wish I didn't have to involve him, I really do, but Demons Passing is tomorrow, and sadly that means we're all out of time."

"Where is Briant?"

"I'll tell you, once you've helped me."

"With?"

"Taking down the Demons."

Nix snorted. "I'm not doing that."

"You think you care about them, sure. But we both know you legitimately care for your cousin. Are you really going to sacrifice him for their sake?"

“You won’t hurt Briant,” he was bluffing, but he had to try something. “You’re not that type of person, Juri. You said it yourself. My cousin and I had nothing to do with this world. Briant is innocent. If you do something to him, you’re no better than the people you’re claiming to want to stop.”

Juri nodded solemnly. “Sometimes we have to do the wrong things to get the right results. I’m not proud of it, and I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to both of you, but this is what needs to happen, Nix. It’s what’s best for everyone.”

“You’re insane.”

“I’d argue with you over that, but who knows? I wouldn’t exactly refer to Lake as sane.”

The room was suddenly way too small and it was getting hard to breathe, but Nix forced himself to remain focused. “What?”

“You’re smart,” Juri reminded. “You can put the pieces together on your own.”

“No.”

“Afraid so.” He snorted. “Trust me. I’m not happy about it either.”

Hendrix wouldn’t shut up about Lake’s parents and their affairs.

Lake had confirmed himself those actually happened. That both of his parents had other lovers, but...

“You said it was your mom who cheated,” he pointed out.

“It was.”

“Lake said his mother is the one who fell for someone else.”

“Maybe he just never noticed his dad had as well.” Juri shrugged, clearly not caring about the details. “All I know is—”

“You and Lake have the same father.”

It was crazy, but it wasn't the most important part here. Not the driving force behind Juri's actions. He'd never stoop so low as to kidnap Briant and use him as blackmail against Nix simply because he found out he was Lake's brother.

“You're after the throne.”

Juri really was insane.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

“Here.” Juri held out his holo-pad. “So you know I’m not lying to you.”

Nix snatched the device and peered down at the screen, watching a live feed of his cousin moving about a room that looked like it belonged in a rundown hotel somewhere. It certainly wasn’t a location nearby campus, or on campus for that matter. It didn’t look anything like Juri’s apartment either, which made sense.

That would be the first place Nix went looking, after all. Juri wasn’t stupid. He would have thought this through. He’d had plenty of time to plot against them, and right up close and personal thanks to Nix and his blind trust in the guy.

His own cousin had betrayed him.

Clearly he hadn’t learned his lesson.

Knowing Juri wasn’t going to tell him where this was, Nix didn’t bother asking. Instead, he tossed the device onto the bed and met his gaze head-on. “How exactly do you see this going down?”

“You mean how do I intend to take the throne?”

“Steal the throne,” he corrected.

“I suppose that’s a fair assessment. Lake is older than me, and therefore would be first in the line of succession.”

“You need to get him out of the way to stand a chance.” As long as he could prove he

shared the same father with Lake, he'd have a blood claim. That was much stronger than any claim Hendrix or Beck had. Juri would skip right over them and be next in line.

But how?

"I won't hurt them." Nix wasn't sure how he'd pull it off, since he obviously wouldn't let anything happen to Briant either, but he wouldn't do it. "If your plan involves me getting close to them and sticking a knife in Lake's back or something, that's never going to happen." He paused and then cocked his head. "And if you're hoping I'll slip something into their drinks—"

"I don't need you to harm them physically," Juri stated. "But you will need to do a few things for me. Think of Briant. He's your cousin."

"And they're mine ," Nix growled. "Lake, West, and Yejun. The three of them. They're mine. You're going to regret this." He was going to make sure he regretted it if it was the last thing he did.

"I know." Juri sighed. "I didn't mean for it to go this way. I was counting on Hendrix to stop Lake for me, but then he had to go and shoot West like an idiot. Now that Demons Passing is here, and the only one who stood a chance at stalling Lake's claim is missing...I have no choice."

"You're working with Hendrix?"

"Gods no. Everyone knows he's been trying to kick Lake out, that's no big secret. Why would I get my hands dirty if I didn't have to? Why would I risk our friendship unless it was absolutely necessary? Friendship like yours is rare, Nix. Most people aren't as genuine as you are. Sincerity is hard to come by."

“Tell me about it,” he stated pointedly.

“I swear, at the start of all this, I only meant to get back at them for what they did to Joel and my family. I just wanted to give the Demons a taste of their own medicine.”

He claimed he wasn't in cahoots with Hendrix but...

“Did you do it?” Nix asked. “Did you try and poison West? Did you use Branwen as a pawn?”

“Yes and no,” he divulged. “I never meant for things to end up with her the way they did.”

Nix dropped down onto the bed and hung his head, processing that information. This whole time, had he been befriending his cousin's tormenter after all? Was Juri the King he'd been after this whole time?

“Why'd you do it?” he whispered, needing to know but also wishing he could pretend not to.

“You know why. The same reason I'm doing this.”

If West died and Yejun was framed for it, Lake would lose his backing and become an easier target. Juri wanted him weakened.

“You were willing to commit murder to get what you want.” That was scary because it didn't align at all with the person he'd believed Juri to be. It was one thing to learn he'd been lied to and manipulated by a guy with a chip on his shoulder.

But another entirely to discover that guy was also prepared to become a killer to achieve his goals.

To say he was conflicted would be an understatement. Nix knew he should turn on his heels and get the hell out of there, no matter what types of threats Juri spewed. He wanted to believe he wouldn't really hurt Briant, even though it was clear from the video on the holo-pad that his cousin was agitated.

That, paired with the fact his multi-slate was here, it was seeming a lot like Briant was being held somewhere against his will.

By a man both he and Nix had trusted.

By a man confessing that he'd tried to take a life before and had simply failed.

"You only need to do two things for me," Juri told him. "Do them, and I'll set both you and Briant free. You can return to the safe life you had before all of this began. As soon as I'm set to be emperor, I'll order the best plastic surgeons to reverse the damage done to your neck. You can erase all traces of them from your body, Nix. As for your mind, I already have a doctor on standby. She's a fantastic psychiatrist. She'll be able to help you readjust, I swear."

He was super fixated on this idea that Nix was being controlled against his will. It was becoming more and more clear that nothing Nix could do or say would be able to break Juri from this notion. He'd already painted Nix as someone in distress who needed saving. It didn't matter to him how many times Nix argued that wasn't the case.

Juri wasn't listening.

That was the most dangerous part of all this.

That, and the fact that he'd just confessed to using Branwen. The urge to snap the guy's neck was strong, but Nix banked it down for Briant's sake.

“My cousin killed herself because of you,” he accused darkly, but if that deterred Juri at all, he gave no indication. “How can you expect me not to hate you and want revenge?”

“If I could turn back time and do things differently, do things in a way that wouldn’t end in you hating me, I would. Unfortunately, I didn’t know you back then, and I worked with what I had. I’ll make it up to you.”

“You can’t.” He felt like he was going to be sick. “You can’t bring someone back from the dead.”

“No,” he agreed, “but I can ensure you don’t lose another cousin any time soon. You’ve never wanted any of this. I’m offering you everything you have wanted. I’ll liberate you from the Demons and their control. All of this can just be a bad dream a year from now. Think about it.” Juri sounded like he one hundred percent believed every word coming out of his mouth. “They can’t give you what you need, Nix. I can.”

“And,” Nix summoned a calm he did not feel, “what is it that you need?”

He wasn’t going to make it out of this unscathed, but he could do his very best to ensure everyone else took the least amount of hits possible. Which meant playing along and convincing Juri he had him where he wanted him.

There were still too many gaps, too many questions, but if Nix took the time to focus on Branwen, he’d never get out of here, and then Briant would be the one who suffered.

Juri had been so nice to his cousin, tricking them into thinking he cared. Had he pulled that exact same trick on Branwen? He had to have, right? In her letter and in the messages she’d written through the Enigma app, she’d clearly been in love. Had

Juri always planned on using Briant?

On using Nix? If so, where'd he get the foresight? When they first met, Nix wasn't as publicly involved with Lake and the others. He came off more like a plaything for them than a real love interest. There'd been nothing to make Juri believe Nix would end up a good tool to use against them.

Their first heart-to-heart about Branwen had also happened before Lake had given Nix the mating mark. If Juri had really wanted to help him, he would have told him the truth then. Instead, he'd lied and pretended not to know anything.

Fool him once, shame on him.

Fool him twice...

Nix couldn't trust a single thing Juri was saying. Hell, he still didn't fully believe the guy was actually capable of harming Briant. But then again, if Juri was behind the poisoning, that meant he was far more vicious than Nix gave him credit for.

He couldn't risk being wrong.

"Two things," Juri repeated. "That's all. You have my word I won't ask for anything more."

"And those things are?"

"You aren't going to like them."

"I didn't think I would."

Juri held up his multi-slate. "I'm going to take a photo of the two of us and send it to

the Order.”

His eyes narrowed and he felt himself physically go on the defensive again despite his thoughts to pretend to cooperate.

“This is the language the club knows best,” Juri continued after seeing his reaction. “I need to weaponize you against Lake. This is the fastest and most efficient way to do that.”

“Fuck off.”

“I know what you’re thinking, but that’s not what I mean. We don’t have to take things too far. A simple kiss should suffice.”

There was literally nothing simple about any of this, and the fact he was downplaying a kiss knowing Nix was with the Demons was further proof that Juri had fully gone off his rocker. Simple?

“That simple act could get us both killed,” he sneered. “Take your pick by who.”

“By the time the Demons know about it, it’ll be too late for them to do anything. We’ll have the protection of the Order. We’re both still members of the club, remember. They’ll keep us safe from Lake and the rest.”

“And why would they do that?”

“Because we’re going to follow up that photo by lodging a petition to remove Lake from the line of succession. The picture will get us through the door, your testimony against him will be the final blow needed to ensure he’s taken down and I’m installed in his place.”

“You want me to meet with the Order and tell them lies about Lake?”

“Not lies,” Juri insisted. “The truth. That he forced the mating bite on you against your will.”

Yeah, that was sort of what the word forced meant, but okay.

“And that he made you sleep with his best friends even when you didn’t want to. That he had you engage in sexual acts in front of me.”

Nix had done that one hundred percent of his own volition, and Juri was well aware of that fact. But again. Okay.

“Finally, that he plans on overthrowing Demitrious and the many other members of the Order once he’s crowned. The second they hear they can’t trust his false promises, they’ll turn against him. They’d rather that than risk we’re telling the truth. It’s a foolproof plan, Nix.”

“Right.” Bitch was crazy. “And you just expect the Demons to stay away long enough for us to go to the Club House and call this meeting without them?” Little did he know, Nix couldn’t even step foot outside this room without West detecting his movement and following him with the security cameras.

They wouldn’t even make it to the lobby without the Demons knowing, let alone all the way to the Club House.

“The photo will help us with that as well,” Juri said.

“How?”

“I think I’ve explained enough. Are you going to willingly do this with me or not?”

“It’s not willing if you’re blackmailing someone into it, Juri. Taking away my choice like this? You’re no better than the rest of them.”

“I will be,” he said. “Once this is done.”

“You mean once you’ve achieved your goals and have no further use for me?” He clicked his tongue. “Justifying how and when you take advantage of people doesn’t make you right.”

Juri had lost his patience, it was clear in the way his spine straightened. When he moved closer to Nix, some of his irritation slipped from behind the mask of friendship he’d been desperately clinging to. “Are you going to do it or not, Nix?”

“If I do, you’ll tell me where you’re keeping Briant?”

He nodded. “He can’t get out himself, so he’ll need you to go and get him. If everything goes to plan, we’ll be done with this by midnight at the latest.”

So he wanted to do all of this within a handful of hours.

“If we draw this out, we risk the Demons catching on. I’m sure they’re already sitting by their multi-slates waiting to hear from you, the possessive fuckers that they are. Did they give you a time limit? Tell you to check in with them if you spent too long with me?”

“No,” Nix said, but then added to avoid looking suspicious, “I’m just not allowed to leave the building.”

“How would they know?”

“I’m supposed to call Yejun when I’m ready.”

“That’s it?”

He made a face. “Are you asking if I’ve got a tracker on my person or something?”

Juri gave him a once over, as though the thought had only just occurred to him. “Do you?”

“Dude, really?”

“Just to be safe...” He held out his hand. “Multi-slate.”

“You want me to give you my—”

“Just do it, Nix. This has already taken so long. We need to get moving if we’re going to get Briant out of that shitty room today. Did I mention there’s no heating system? The weather forecast says it’s supposed to be a cold one.”

Nix gapped at him. “Have you been torturing my cousin?!”

“I’ve only done enough to prove to you I’m serious. I left him with enough packaged food to last a few days, so long as he rationed it. Briant is smart, so he figured that out rather early on and has been limiting himself to one pastry a day. Same with the water bottles.”

Nix snatched the discarded holo-pad off of the bed once more. Briant was seen tucked into a corner of the room, his legs drawn up and his face hidden against his knees. There was a mini fridge nearby, and an empty desk. The floors looked like they were bare, and there were obvious black stains on the walls. In the corner of the footage, Nix could make out the end of a bed, but that was all.

His earlier assumption that this was a hotel room held firm. Maybe an abandoned

one? Were there any such places in the city?

“You’ll never find him on your own,” Juri warned. “And if you’re thinking of leaving and getting the Demons to help, I’ll make it to him before you do.”

“And what? Commit murder?”

“If you turn on me, I’m screwed either way. I may as well get something out of it and prove to you I keep my word.”

If Nix didn’t help him and instead walked out, he’d tell Lake what Juri planned, how he was somehow behind the poisoning. That’s what he meant. There’d be no escaping their fury. He probably also assumed Lake would want to do away with any potential competition he had for the throne.

Juri no doubt believed his life was on the line here. That explained his hasty actions, and why he was so willing to hurt others to get his way. He’d been scared of Lake before discovering they were related and he posed a serious threat to everything Lake considered his. Of course he’d be freaking out now.

“It’s not too late to change your mind,” Nix tried, but he wasn’t able to get very far.

“Save it. I am not my brother. I won’t run from my responsibilities to save myself. I have a real chance here to do some good and spare the planet from tyrannical rule.”

“You’ve been using me this whole time.”

“I haven’t. I tried to convince you to leave them before, don’t you recall? I wanted to help you, but it was already too late. They’d already hooked their claws into you.”

That expression was too close to the one he’d used with Yejun the other day.

Which made him think about how angry June had gotten when he'd mistaken Briant for someone hitting on him.

How mad would he be if he saw a picture of Juri and Nix kissing?

Would he—

No. He shut those traitorous thoughts down. He and Yejun had talked it out and the Demon had promised him he would never react that way again.

Nix was safe with him.

With all of them.

Maybe it was foolish of him to put his faith in a bunch of guys who'd used and abused him in more ways than one, especially so soon after discovering that yet another person he'd trusted had used that trust against him. But Nix had to believe in them.

That was the only way he and Briant were going to make it out of this.

The only way they all were.

Trust.

It was time to test it. His for them.

And theirs for him.

"All right." Nix motioned to the multi-slate in Juri's hand. "Let's get this over with. Kiss me."

Juri lifted the device and switched on the camera feature before bending down so they were at eye level. He hesitated for a moment, seemingly wanting to say something else, maybe give another bullshit apology, but then he sighed and pressed his mouth to Nix's.

It wasn't really a kiss, he held their lips together and took a couple of photos, but the entire time his breath kept fanning against Nix's cheeks intimately, and his body heat radiated out to engulf him in the way a lover's heat was meant to. After a few seconds, Juri grew bolder and tilted his head to change the angle, snapping more pics all the while.

If there'd been any lingering doubts that Juri was right and Nix's body had simply been programmed to react to external stimuli, they were disproven now. This was nothing like the contact he shared with the Demons. There was no electricity, no lust or ache. His dick was practically dead between his legs, and when he grabbed fistfuls of the bedsheets beneath him, it wasn't out of passion.

Even though Juri was keeping his word and making this as PG-rated as he possibly could, all Nix could think of the entire time was one thing.

Cutting out Juri Ferd's tongue and force-feeding it back to him until the guy choked.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

Lake was in a piss poor mood by the time practice came to an end, and the worst part was, he couldn't figure out why.

The weather had held up and they hadn't had to deal with rain, West had called saying he and Beck had made it to the Roost and the two of them were going to hang out a bit—which meant he wasn't sitting home alone. Sure, Lake didn't like having strangers in their house, but Beck could hardly be considered that, and this close to Demons Passing, having allies nearby was smart no matter which way he looked at it.

The only thing he could think of that was bothering him was the fact he hadn't yet heard from Nix or June. But that only meant their Songbird was still hanging out with Juri, which wasn't cause for internal or external alarm.

He'd just come off the field and was in the process of removing his gloves when it all clicked into place for him.

Demitrious was there waiting.

"Lake," he sounded dire. "Something has happened."

"Did you find Hendrix?"

"No." He waved Lake off to the side when other players passed on their way through the stables to the locker rooms, lowering his voice before adding, "It's not about that. It's something else that is equally important. I've already contacted the others and they're on their way here."

“You called West and Yejun?” That was strange. He checked his multi-slate but there weren’t any messages from them saying they were coming to the stadium.

“Yes, well, my son didn’t pick up, but then, he never does when I call. I assume he’ll listen to my voice mail and then head over. As for Yejun, he replied that he was close enough anyway and would pop in.” The sound of approaching footsteps had him turning to glance over his shoulder. “Ah, there he is.”

Yejun appeared, his hands in his front pockets as he carefully approached. The frown on his face indicated he didn’t know any more about why Demitrious was here than Lake did.

“You were supposed to be picking up Nix,” Lake reminded as soon as he was within earshot.

“We’re the same amount of distance,” Yejun pointed out, cautiously sidestepping the older man so he was standing at Lake’s side.

“Your traitorous fourth is fine,” Demitrious said, practically dripping malice. “He’s with Juri Ferd.”

“Traitorous?” Yejun’s eyes narrowed, but Lake was more caught on the second part of that statement.

“How do you know who he’s with?” If he was keeping inappropriate tabs on Nix, Lake was going to—

“Because of this.” Demitrious removed his multi-slate and held it up to them. “I was going to wait until all three of you were here but—”

Yejun snatched the device out of his hand, not caring about being rude, but not before

Lake got a good look at the screen. “What the actual fuck is this?”

A picture.

Of Juri Ferd kissing Nix.

“It was sent to me anonymously,” Demitrious explained before either of them could ask how he’d gotten it.

“It’s fake,” Yejun growled.

“It isn’t.” He turned to Lake sternly. “This is why I warned you about getting involved too quickly. That boy has only been officially your mate for a week, and already he’s blatantly cheating on you. He used you to get into the club, nothing is more apparent than that.”

Except nothing was apparent to Lake at all.

He took the device from Yejun and inspected the photo. There was no denying that it was Nix and Juri, and that their mouths were touching but...

“Nix is unwilling.” He handed the multi-slate back to Demitrious, barely holding his rage together. If he let his emotions slip and exposed how he truly felt, that would be a weakness, one the old man would absolutely grab onto and use against him. So he kept his icy exterior intact and spoke with a flippancy he wasn’t feeling.

Demitrious sputtered at him incredulously. “You can’t be that naïve.”

“He’s right,” Yejun chimed in. “You wouldn’t know since you don’t know him at all, but that’s not the face Nix makes when he’s into someone. Juri is taking advantage. The real question is, why?” He tipped his head and eyed him with obvious suspicion.

“And why’d he choose to send the photo to you, of all people?”

Lake barely listened as the two of them got into it, too caught up in his own tumultuous thoughts.

Nix thought of Juri as a close friend, and all this time, Juri had presented himself as such to all of them. There was no chance in hell the Songbird would be the one to make a move, though, which meant the kiss had to have been initiated by Ferd.

Since it was a photo and not a clip or video, there was no telling how long the kiss had lasted. Had Nix pushed him away?

Had he returned the affection?

Lake clenched his jaw, catching himself and smoothing out the tense muscles before it could be noticed.

No. No, Nix wouldn’t do that. If nothing else, the intimacy between the four of them was real.

Nix wouldn’t cheat, it wouldn’t even be a passing consideration for him.

But then why hadn’t he immediately texted Yejun to pick him up?

“Give that back.” Lake held out a hand, waiting for Demitrious to return the device to him.

“What are you doing?” Yejun asked.

“Checking the time stamp.”

“I came to find you as soon as I received it,” Demitrious said. “That was at two twenty-six.”

“Less than three minutes after the photo was taken.” Lake didn’t like the dangerous turn his thoughts were taking. “The photo was taken with the purpose of sending it to you.”

“Then perhaps this is Phoenix’s way of coming clean,” Demitrious suggested, holding his ground when that earned him glares all over again. “I know you don’t want to hear it, boys, but the proof is undeniable.”

Lake’s device rang then and he immediately picked up the call. “West.”

“Yo, something’s going down with Nixie,” West sounded unsure as he spoke.

“What is it?”

“Is that my son?” Demitrious leaned in and raised his voice to call out, “Pick up the phone when your father calls you!”

There was a pause and then, “What the hell is the old man doing there? I thought you were at practice?”

“I am.” Lake didn’t have time for this. He switched to speaker mode so at least no one was screaming around him. “What’s happening with Nix?”

“He’s making out with other people, that’s what,” Demitrious snorted.

“What the hell did he just say?” West asked.

Fucking A.

“Someone sent a photo to him,” Lake began. “It’s of Nix and Juri kissing.”

West swore. “Is that why the two of them are leaving the dorms together?”

His spine stiffened. “They’re leaving together?”

Demitrious gave him a look that silently screamed I told you so.

“It’s not true, Lake,” Yejun insisted, clapping a hand on his back. “The Firebird would never do us dirty like that.”

“I agree,” West stated.

“Honestly this is pathetic,” Demitrious said. “I didn’t raise you to be this gullible, any of you! Allowing this nobody to lead you by the balls is a disgrace!”

“You’re just mad that Lake chose a Royal Consort without consulting you first,” West accused his father. “I know all about the underhanded promises you’ve been making with Royal Andrej regarding his son and the trade deals. You’ve assured him a dozen times over that he could make his heir the Royal Consort so long as they partnered with you.”

“Did he now?” Lake would have to ask later why West had never brought that up to him before, for now, he fixed his irritated gaze on the elder Corleone. “How did Royal Andrej take it when he found out I’m already spoken for?”

Yejun snorted. “Demitrious probably reassured him that until the title was given, there was still a chance to make his precious Melor consort.” Anger flashed over his face suddenly. “Hold up. How do we know you’re not the one who put Juri up to this in the first place?”

“How dare you!” Demitrious violently took his multi-slate from Lake’s hand. “I will not stand here and be insulted by you three simply because you’re too mesmerized by a tight hole to see reason!”

“Don’t.” Lake tossed out an arm to hold Yejun back when Demitrious had said his piece and spun on his heels. “Let him go. He isn’t important right now.”

“Let me guess, my dad just walked off in a huff,” West drawled through the line. “Good riddance. Now, can we get back to the matter at hand?”

“You said Nix and Juri were leaving together,” Lake said. “Do you know where they’re headed?”

“No. They got into Juri’s car and left campus. I’m on my way up to my room to check the traffic cams, but I’m not there yet.”

West was mostly healed but still moving a little bit slower than usual thanks to the meds the doctor had prescribed. They were necessary to fuel the nanites still hard at work mending his body, and would need to be taken for another three days at least.

“Is my cousin still with you?” Lake asked.

“Yeah, Beck is here helping me get up the stairs. Why?”

“Just checking.” The last thing they needed was for something to happen to West too. Worrying about Nix was already stressful enough.

“Why aren’t you freaking out about the picture?” Yejun seemed to realize how calm their friend was. “Aren’t you concerned?”

“No way,” came the instant reply. “Nixie would never, especially not with Juri Ferd.

Our man has a type, and Juri doesn't fit the bill. But also, Nix signaled to me on his way out of Juri's room. I didn't understand why before, but after talking to you two, it's pretty obvious."

"He signaled you how?" Lake questioned.

"He stepped out of the room first and then turned and ran his right hand through his hair, holding it there for a second longer than necessary."

"...Okay..." What?

West made a sound of exasperation.

"Sorry, we can't all be geniuses," Yejun growled. "Give it to us straight."

"Technically," Lake couldn't help but correct, "I am also a genius."

"Nix knew where the security camera in the hallway was located," West jumped in with an explanation before the two of them could lose sight of the topic, "and he knew I was watching. He did it on purpose so I'd see that his multi-slate was missing."

"There's only one reason he'd leave his device in Juri's room," Lake surmised.

"Yeah," West agreed, "and that's if he was made to."

"You think Juri has something on him?" Yejun swore. "I knew I didn't like that guy! But you two convinced me he was fine. So much for being geniuses."

Lake would be annoyed except...fair.

“Let’s focus. Why would Juri do any of this?” West asked.

“And what could he possibly have to hold over Nix to get him to go along with his plans?” Lake one hundred percent believed there was no chance Nix would have kissed him willingly. “He forced Nix to take that photo with him, and then forced him to leave his multi-slate behind.”

“We need to know where they’re going,” Yejun said, but Lake shook his head.

“No.”

“No?”

“No, what we need is to find out what he’s using against Nix.” At this stage, even if they did figure out where Juri was taking Nix, they wouldn’t be able to do anything once they found him. “Whatever he has, it’s a big enough deal to get Nix to not only kiss him, but break the promise he made to us and leave campus.”

“His signal to me was hella discrete too,” West pointed out. “He obviously didn’t want Juri to figure out what he was doing.”

Yejun pursed his lips as the three of them considered all the options, then he snapped his fingers. “Briant.”

“His cousin?”

“That’s got to be it,” Yejun said. “Think about it. The only things Nix cares about are us and Briant. If it’d been anyone else, he would have told Juri to fuck off and called one of us right away.”

“Can you locate Briant?” Lake asked West.

“Hold on, just made it to my room. Hey,” his voice grew distant, indicating he was speaking with Beck, “can you help me with something? You’re decent with computers. Thanks.” He came back and informed them, “The two of us will focus on locating Briant. You guys are close enough that you might be able to follow Juri and Nix on the roads. They were southbound last I was able to see.”

“Got it.” Yejun tugged on Lake’s arm and the two of them took off for the stables. The parking lot wasn’t far and Lake’s car was parked there. “Whoever gets a hit first contacts the other.”

“Deal,” West said before the call ended, probably so he could focus on tracking Nix’s cousin down.

“You sure about this?” Yejun asked once they reached the car.

“We find Briant,” he yanked open the driver's side door and paused to stare at his best friend over the hood, “and we trust Nix to handle his own until we can reach him.”

Yejun nodded. “Then we kick Ferd’s ass.”

“Agreed.”

Once this was over and they knew what the hell was going on, they were going to do a lot worse to Juri Ferd than that.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

Apparently, the Order didn't consider emergency meetings all that urgent.

Nix and Juri arrived at the Club House and were herded into a room on the fourth level. He'd always meant to come here for the first time with the Demons, but they hadn't actually gotten around to it. It was hard acting like he was familiar with the place, and he tried not to stare at anything for too long and give himself away.

He was already at a disadvantage here as it were, after all.

He wasn't sure how Juri had managed to get them an emergency meeting in the first place, and the guy had stopped answering any of his questions the second they stepped into the building, so asking wasn't getting him anywhere. If he had to guess, it had something to do with the photo he'd taken of the two of them, but Nix couldn't figure out how that would constitute an emergency.

Actually, maybe the members of the Order couldn't either, and that was the real reason they were taking their sweet time getting here.

According to the clock hanging on the wall across from them, they'd been here exactly one hour and eleven minutes. The room they'd been brought to was empty save for a large oval-shaped table made from dark hematite wood, the color as black as night, with a polished surface that reflected the light orbs that floated around the high ceiling. The walls were done in a deep maroon, and the thin carpet beneath their feet was charcoal.

A faint smell lingered in the air, not quite alcohol, but that was the closest he could come to describing it. It tickled at his nose, irritating his senses.

Almost as much as the man sitting at his left.

“How long are we going to wait here?” Nix broke the silence and asked, only for Juri to give a single shake of his head and say nothing in return. He sighed. This was stupid.

Honestly, he’d been hopeful that West or one of the others would have arrived by now to put a stop to this horror show production gone wrong. Nix had purposefully tipped him off when they’d been leaving, but now he worried West had stepped away from the cameras for a bit and had missed it.

Did they even know Nix was gone?

What if they merely thought he was spending a lot of time with Juri in the dorms?

Shit.

He should have come up with a more solid plan but he’d been working with what he had in the short amount of time he’d had to think.

The doors at the end of the room finally opened, and he tensed when several older men and women poured into the room, each and every one of them settling a terse look his way before taking what he assumed were their usual seats at the massive table.

Demitrious walked in last, his head held high. He was the only one who looked at Nix smugly, even scoffing at him quietly before sitting in to a high-backed wooden chair. He crossed his legs and addressed Juri. “We’ve been told you have important information for us.”

“This better be the truth,” a woman Nix recognized from the Night of the Nightshade

stated in a tight voice. Her mask had slipped off her face while she'd been fucked from behind beneath the main stairwell.

The two of them had made eye contact and Nix had been the first to look away.

If she recalled their encounter, she didn't let on, sitting poised and graceful, as though she'd never done an indecent thing her entire life and had nothing to be embarrassed about.

"We're very busy people," another man, this one Nix didn't know, drawled from nearby. "And not just anyone is allowed to call a meeting."

"Yes," another man agreed gruffly. "This best be important."

"It is," Juri said before someone else could speak up. "It's about the line of succession."

"What about it?"

"We're here to prove that Lake Zyair is unfit for the throne," Juri boldly declared.

"Surely you aren't suggesting we recommend Beck Bardin to the High Council in his stead?" the woman asked. "His father is currently on the run from authorities. Even if he promises to be impartial and catch Hendrix, there's no telling what the public—"

"Let's hear them out, Sif," Demitrious suggested. "They must have come here with a fully formed plan, didn't you, boys? By the way, I didn't realize how close the two of you were." He stared Nix down. "I wonder what Lake will think when he discovers you're here speaking against him."

"It is very unbecoming of a mate," one of the other men huffed.

“Not as unbecoming as forcing a claiming bite on someone who doesn’t want it.” Juri held Nix’s hand and brought it up to the table so that everyone could see as he offered false comfort. “Phoenix Monroe was taken advantage of by Lake, his choice was stolen and he was treated no better than a sex slave to be shared around with Lake’s friends. This is not the type of leader Telnirians can look up to.”

“It’s unfortunate if true,” Sif replied, “but that doesn’t solve our problem. Right now, Lake is the only candidate for the throne. We’d be foolish to try and remove him from the running for any sort of reason short of murder of an Order member.”

“She’s right,” another member agreed. “There’s no one else—”

“There’s me.” Juri stared as the room went silent, waiting for his words to process. Then he stood and tapped the center of the table, bringing an imbedded holo-screen to life. Medical records appeared and he flicked his wrist, sending digital copies sliding toward every member. “Here are the documents proving my claim.”

“Good Light,” a man gasped. “He’s of Zyair blood!”

“This means he has a legitimate claim the throne,” another said.

“But he’s a bastard,” Sif argued. “Born out of wedlock. He was never even claimed by his father. This is hardly a good candidate. Demitrious, you must agree with me.”

Demitrious was the only one who hadn’t bothered to so much as glance at the document. Instead, he continued to stare Nix down, making him want to squirm under that intense, mocking scrutiny.

Nix knew what he was going to say before he opened his disloyal mouth.

“Actually,” he pretended to consider it, even though it was obvious to anyone with

eyes he'd already made up his mind on the matter, "if it comes down between a bastard and a rapist, I believe the choice is obvious."

Nix bit down on his tongue to prevent himself from speaking up and correcting him. If he did that, Juri would count that as breaking their agreement and Briant would be in danger.

He'd spent the past hour trying to figure out a way to save his cousin that didn't involve smearing Lake's name in the process, but nothing seemed like it would work. Even if he turned on Juri and the other guy left, Nix would have to keep up in order to follow him to wherever Briant was being held. All Juri had to do was shake him once and get ahead, lose him and drive off. Nix didn't have a vehicle he could use. It was too risky.

"I just came from a meeting with Lake, ironically enough," Demitrious divulged then, and Nix hated it, but he perked up at that before he could stop himself. The old man chuckled. "He had a lot to say after I showed him this photo, Phoenix."

He tapped his multi-slate and the image stored on it was sent to the table screen. It took up the entire center so that everyone could get a good look at Nix and Juri kissing.

"Yejun and my son weren't pleased either," Demitrious continued. "I actually had to talk them down from doing anything rash. They seemed incredibly betrayed. Interesting, since now you're here, claiming that they forced you into a relationship with them that you never wanted."

"Nix wants to be with me," Juri interrupted, speaking for him to salvage the situation. "It was Lake who made the decision to make that impossible. A decision he made on his own."

“Ah,” Demitrious hummed, “that’s the story, is it?”

“That’s the truth,” Juri insisted heatedly.

Nix was only partially listening, too busy drowning in Demitrious’s words. If the Demons had seen that photo, were they angry? Did they believe it? He’d thought the plan was to send it directly to the Order members and no one else, hadn’t it? He distinctly recalled Juri assuring him that by the time Lake and the others saw the photo, it would be too late for them to do anything about it because the deal with the Order would have been completed.

What if West had watched Nix’s tip-off at the dorms but had ignored it?

What if Yejun was raging right now, planning on catching Nix and—

He sucked in a sharp breath before he could help it, the room momentarily spinning as panic took hold.

Someone called his name, probably Juri, but Nix needed to break himself out of this cycle. No one else could do it for him. Certainly no one currently present in this room.

Images of Yejun pinning him down flashed through his mind, but Nix fought against them and the way they made his stomach clamp painfully. His neck stung with phantom pain as he remembered the vicious way Lake had torn through his flesh with little warning. Then he felt his throat close up and it was like being choked on West’s thick cock all over again.

Only...none of that was right.

All of it had happened, sure, but none of it was fresh. The Demons hadn’t mistreated

him recently, not since they'd come to an understanding. Not since real emotions had developed and bonds had been formed.

The soft way Lake held him at night as they listened to the pitter-patter of rain against the glass sunroof...and how West set the table each morning for breakfast, serving Nix first without fail...and Yejun's careful, almost exploratory touches as he waited for Nix to be comfortable near him again...those things were real.

Trust.

Nix had been burned a hundred times before, a thousand, and if he was an idiot for it, so be it, but damn it, he trusted the Demons. They'd made combined and individual promises to him to keep him safe. To have his back. To always be in his corner.

Who was Juri Ferd to them?

Who was Demitrious Corleone?

Who were the fucking Order for that matter?

"Nothing," the word slipped past trembling lips, his surroundings coming back into sharp clarity seemingly all at once. Nix blinked and lifted his head, noting that he'd drawn the attention of everyone in the room all over again, only this time they were staring at him as though concerned.

"What was that, Nix?" Juri asked tenderly, either to further sell the act the two of them were close or out of actual worry, who even knew anymore.

Nix was done guessing either way.

Because all of this meant absolutely...

“Nothing,” he repeated, a bit more firmly. “It was nothing.”

“That didn’t look like nothing,” Sif said.

“Are you okay?” one of the men asked.

Nix nodded and cleared his throat. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Nix?” Juri held his gaze, and Nix shook his head and gave a shaky, fake reassuring smile.

One that was definitely meant to sell the story they were close, if only in a bid to stall for time.

Because Nix had realized an important fact that no one else here seemed to have picked up on yet.

To the Demons of Foxglove Grove, they were all nothing. They didn’t matter.

But Nix did.

“Will you confirm the allegations?” Sif asked him suddenly. “Is what Juri Ferd said about your relationship with Lake, West, and Yejun true?”

Nix dropped his gaze to the table, feigning discomfort.

“Don’t be afraid,” one of the men reassured him. “You’re safe here. If Lake has been abusing his power, we need to know to ensure he doesn’t get away with it.”

“We’ll protect you,” Sif insisted.

No one noticed Demitrious roll his eyes aside from Nix, who pretended not to.

“Tell them,” Juri urged, resting a hand on Nix’s lower back intimately. “Go ahead. Tell them—”

The doors burst open, and Nix, in all his foolishness, sought out Lake’s gaze the second he stepped into the room. He searched his expression for any signs of betrayal or anger, but the Imperial had his mask firmly in place, the icy exterior too tightly on for even Nix to peek behind.

“Yeah,” Yejun stepped in on Lake’s right then, “tell them, Firebird.”

West came in on the left. “Tell them all about how Juri here kidnapped your cousin and tried to blackmail you into making up some bullshit sob story.”

Two things happened at once.

First, Nix felt a rush of relief so potent, he practically saw stars.

Second, he pulled his arm back and elbowed Juri directly in the throat.

There were gasps and the sound of Juri choking as Nix stood, but he didn’t give a shit about anyone else.

“You figured it out?” he almost didn’t dare ask in front of all of these people, but he had to be sure. Had to be positive he wasn’t seeing what he wanted to see, and those words spoken by West right now hadn’t been misinterpreted by him as meaning they believed he was innocent.

“Found Briant locked up at Winchester,” West filled him in as they crowded the room on the side of the table where most of the Order were sitting. “It’s an old hotel

that's been waiting on renovations for over two years now."

"He's safe, Songbird," Lake said. "Beck is watching him at the Roost."

"Is he okay? He wasn't injured or anything, was he?" Nix hadn't seen anything on the camera when he'd been shown, but it'd been black and white and tiny on the screen.

"He's fine." Yejun smirked at him when their eyes met, but then he turned to Juri and lost all sense of humor. "But someone won't be."

"Nix," Juri reached for him but he slapped his hand away and moved out of arm's length.

"Everything Juri told you is a lie," he declared. "I'm legally mated to Lake Zyair by choice . I was given another mating bite by West Corleone by choice . And I'm dating Yejun Sang by choice . The only one in this room who's made me do something I don't want to is Juri Ferd. He abducted my older cousin and has been holding him hostage for several days now."

"Is this true?" Sif sneered. "How unbecoming."

"I am of Imperial blood," Juri snapped. "Legally, I have a claim to the throne. It is my birthright."

Lake faltered for a split second, the confusion there and gone in a flash. The only reason Nix caught it was because he'd been staring at him. They must not have gotten the full story, perhaps because Juri hadn't shared it with Briant?

"He isn't wrong," one of the quieter men at the other end of the table leaned over and said to the woman on his left.

She nodded but didn't verbally reply, not that she needed to.

Nix could see the wheels turning in her head. She was thinking about how Juri might be more pliable than Lake. How the Order might gain a stronger foothold in the empire as a whole if they backed someone other than the icy Imperial.

Discussion took off amongst them, members turning to whisper amongst each other, as though those who were the topic of discussion weren't standing in the room with them.

All at once, they seemed to forget they didn't actually have the final say in who took the throne. The High Council did. This was a talk about who the Order might suggest. Not a done deal.

He didn't bother concealing his disgust as he watched them all turn on the candidate they'd backed all this time, treating Lake as though he didn't exist and wasn't within earshot as they debated whether or not it'd be wise to try someone fresh and new.

"You see?" Juri leaned in and said, ignoring how Nix bristled at his nearness. "This is the corruption I'm fighting to put an end to. This is why it needs to be me, Nix."

"Back off," Lake's low growl from across the room was no louder than any of the whispers, and yet everyone went instantly still, as though a large predator had entered and any sudden movements would result in their violent and bloody end.

Nix took a pointed step away from Juri, showing Lake that he had no intentions of being that close to the other guy.

"He treats you like property." Juri's boldness rose up to meet Lake head-on. Which was stupid of him.

But Nix wasn't going to be the one to tell him that.

"He treats me like I'm his mate," he corrected instead. "Because I am."

"You'll never be happy," he tried again. "I can help you, Nix."

"He doesn't need your help, asshole," Yejun interjected.

"Yeah," West chimed in, "he's got enough guys taking care of him. Isn't that right, Nixie?"

"Yes," he agreed. "I do."

They weren't mad at him about the photo. What a relief.

But also...

He turned to glare at Demitrious. "You said they were pissed at me. They look angry, sure, but it's not directed my way."

"Did he say that?" Lake set that cold stare on Demitrious. "I wonder why. It couldn't be that you were trying to sow animosity between us and my future Royal Consort, could it?"

"My father would never do that," West said, the sarcasm in his tone unmistakable. "He's always been your biggest advocate, Lake." He came over to the table and leaned over Sif, scanning the medical document that was still on the screen in front of her. "No shit. According to this, Juri is your little brother, man. Congrats."

"How tedious," Lake drawled, back in total control of himself, so if the news actually shocked him, no one could tell.

“Is this what the fuss is about?” West let out a low whistle and straightened. “I thought this was going to be interesting, but this is it? A secret bastard baby comes crawling out of the woodwork the day before Demons Passing, and you’re all just going to lap it up like gospel?”

Yejun laughed demeaningly at them. “No way, man. Don’t insult their intelligence like that. They’re not complete idiots. Anyone with two brain cells would see what’s really going on here.”

Nix watched in awe as with a few sentences, the Demons had the older members of the Order collectively squirming in their seats. They shared awkward glances with one another, and the embarrassment that had been lacking on Sif’s face earlier was now there in spades.

“What are you implying?” Juri demanded, only for West to snort.

“I’m saying you made it all up,” he stated. “Give me a computer and five minutes and I can create a dozen false test results that match this one to the T.”

“I didn’t fake it!”

“Sure you didn’t.”

“It’s easy enough to prove,” Demitrious broke his silence. “We’ll have a test run right now. None of us will leave this room until the results are brought back. How does that sound?” He stared at Lake. “Will that satisfy you?”

“You’re taking this too far,” Nix said.

“You have no business being in here,” Demitrious waved dismissively at him. “You can see yourself out.”

“He stays,” Lake ordered, but Demitrious merely smirked.

“This is the Order, and last I checked, you are not a member of the board. You have no say on what goes on here, Lake. I decide. Not you.”

“I vote to finally do away with the pretenses,” Yejun suggested, lifting a hand into the air almost comically.

“Seconded,” Nix stated, hatred for Demitrious getting the best of him.

“By all means,” West shrugged, “don’t let me hold you back. I’m in. Lake?”

“What are you talking about?” Demitrious frowned at them. “Did you not hear me? This is the Order, none of you—”

West’s hand came down on Sif’s right shoulder so suddenly the woman jolted in her seat. “Mrs. Helgi, do you remember three years ago when your stocks suddenly crashed and you lost all that money?” He met Demitrious’s furious gaze and grinned deviously. “Did Mr. Burns forget to tell you my dear old dad here was behind that?”

“Excuse me?” the way she said it, was obvious she believed him. She turned to Demitrious. “How dare you! We had to sell our vacation home on Drax because of those losses!”

“He did it for Mr. Dagur.” West pointed at the man at the end of the table, the first one who’d spoken in subtle favor of Juri. “It was to make up for stealing the Hoj business out from under his nose. Not that Mr. Dagur ever figured out it was my father who outbid him.”

“What?!”

“That is enough.” Demitrious slammed his hands on the table and stood with a flourish, staring daggers at his son.

“I don’t answer to you,” West replied in a matter-of-fact tone. “Although, I do suppose the vote wasn’t yet unanimous. Sorry, Lake. Would you like to put yours in now? Should I stop airing Dad’s dirty laundry or should I keep going?”

The ever so slight curve to Lake’s lips was answer enough, but before West could launch into another attack, Juri loudly coughed.

And kept coughing.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 am

Nix's brow furrowed and he actually took a step closer as though to help, watching in growing confusion as the other man's body jerked with each dry heave.

"What's going on?" one of the members asked.

"Is he choking on something?" Yejun questioned.

"Should we like, get him some water?" West glanced around the room as though a pitcher would magically appear.

Then Juri hacked and sputtered and this time projectile vomited blood across the table.

People screamed and shot out of their seats to get away as crimson splatted the shiny surface, covering almost the entire image of Nix and Juri that was still up on the screen.

Blood dripped down Juri's chin as he straightened and swayed on his feet, losing his balance a second later. He crashed into Nix's arms, both of them going down to the ground. His health deteriorated almost instantly from there, his skin turning sallow so suddenly Nix was almost certain he was imagining it.

He'd caught him out of instinct but now watched in abstract horror as the guy in his arms, the one he'd considered to be a friend only five hours ago, withered away like crumpled paper set alight.

"What's happening?" the question came out of him on a breathy note, his gaze

searching Juri's face as his skin turned wrinkly as though all of the water was being sucked out of him. He held him tighter, unsure of what to do, momentarily forgetting all about how angry he'd been a second ago.

"I have to tell you," Juri didn't sound anything like himself, struggling to get the words out. "It...wasn't me. Branwen and I, we never...wasn't..."

"Nix." Yejun reached down and grabbed onto his arm to pull him away, but Nix refused to budge.

"What's happening to him?" Nix shook his head. "Juri, stop talking. Just hold on, we'll get you to a doctor and—"

"Poison," Juri uttered and Nix froze. "I..." His eyes got glassy and unfocused. "B—"

Juri Ferd made a final wheeze and went limp in Nix's hold.

"What just happened?" This time when Yejun pulled him, Nix went, Juri's body slipping through his grasp to settle on the floor.

He didn't move afterward. Didn't so much as twitch.

"Nix." West was there, easing him away, helping June to carefully maneuver Nix around the table.

"Is he dead?" Nix couldn't make sense of what he was saying.

"Babe."

"He's dead?" But he'd been fine a minute ago. There'd been no signs he was sick, not a single one. Even Juri had seemed shocked when he'd started to cough. Things weren't adding up. "It doesn't make sense."

If he was sick enough to die like that, he had to have known, but if Juri had known, why would he bother fighting so hard for a throne he wouldn't live long enough to sit on?

"It doesn't make sense," he repeated.

"Songbird." Lake captured his face in both hands and forced Nix's gaze away from the body. "Nix, look at me. I need you to calm down, okay? We're still in the Club House and people are watching."

Who gave a shit about people?

"Juri just died," he reminded.

"He's not dead," Yejun corrected. He'd left Nix with Lake and West and had gone back to check. "He's got a pulse but it's very weak."

"You have to help him," Nix said.

"We will." Lake paused and then added, "I'm sorry."

Was he?

Was Nix?

Yes, yes he was. He was livid with Juri, but that didn't mean he wanted the guy dead!

Did it?

Hadn't he been thinking dark thoughts like that all day?

"Hey," Lake shook him a little to regain his attention, "enough. We need you to focus

right now, Nix. You're our fourth and we aren't safe here."

Right. He was one of them, and they had to be careful. Feelings could be viewed as weakness to Essentials. Nix glanced around the room and realized with a start that aside from Demitrious and Sif, everyone else had fled.

"They're afraid it's contagious," West leaned in and whispered. "Cowards."

Coward.

Juri had called his brother that earlier.

"So they can flee from the scene after a guy has passed out, but we can't show a bit of remorse?" Nix hated it here. But it was the slap in the face he needed to pull himself together. He blinked and then straightened, nodding at Lake that he was all right.

Lake hesitated but then released him. "The club doctor is on the way. They'll take Juri straight to the hospital. If there's something they can do for him, they'll do it. If not..." he trailed off, seeming to realize they were going to have to talk about the chance that Juri wouldn't make it.

"Autopsy," Nix filled in for him. "Yeah. I get it."

Juri would need an autopsy if he died.

"There were plenty of witnesses," Sif spoke up then. "If anyone tries to make up any stories," she set her sights on Demitrious when she said that part, "please know you have me in your corner, Imperial Lake."

"Oversee the transfer," Lake ordered, taking control of the situation with ease. "I don't want anyone allowed near the body aside from the chief surgeon or, if it comes to it, the medical examiners."

“Of course, Imperial.” She bowed her head and then turned toward the door just as a team of paramedics dressed in outfits with the club logo on the sleeves instead of the hospital’s came in. “This way.”

Yejun stepped into Nix’s line of sight, blocking them as they presumably lifted Juri’s body onto the stretcher. “Just breathe, Firebird.”

It wasn’t like it was Nix’s first body—he’d seen Dew after the fall—but somehow it was...different.

“I was so angry at him, but now...”

West hushed him. “You don’t have to make sense of it right this second.”

“But you do have to keep yourself together,” Lake reminded. “West, go with Sif. Make sure nothing happens.”

“Will do.” He planted a kiss to the top of Nix’s head and then disappeared without a backward glance, completely ignoring his father.

“June, take Nix home. His cousin is still there with Beck.” Lake took Nix’s hand and squeezed once. “I have to stay here and make sure there are no rumors and no one contaminates the room until the authorities arrive. The Ferds have lost respect due to their sons, but they’re still members of the club. They’ll want an official investigation done.”

And Lake didn’t trust Demitrious or one of the other Order members not to plant evidence trying to pin this on them.

“Okay.” Nix allowed Yejun to walk him toward the doors, but then thought of something and stopped. “What about him?” He motioned toward Demitrious.

“Surely you don’t believe I truly ever meant to work against you?” Demitrious gave a nervous chuckle. “Lake, Yejun, you both know me better than that. Yes, I don’t approve of your choice in life partner, but that’s neither here nor there. I would never mix our personal lives with club business.”

“Of course not,” Lake said. “That’s very professional of you.”

“Yes.” Demitrious smiled. “I’m glad you’ve noticed.”

“I, however, am not as professional. But then, I don’t have to be.” Now that it was just the three of them there, Lake’s mask dropped, the enigmatic expression he was so known for wearing making way for his terrifying true nature. With just a look, he gave the impression he could peel the skin straight down to a man’s bones, and enjoy doing it.

The sight he set on Demitrious was purely demonic, villainous enough it actually had the older man stumbling back until he hit the wall even though Lake never made any moves toward him.

“I am the future Emperor of Tulniri,” Lake announced. “Tell me again, who is in charge here?”

“You,” Demitrious replied quickly. “You, of course. Of course. I’ve always rooted for you. You know I have.”

“What I know,” Lake stated, “is that if you ever threaten or lie to Nix again, I’ll chop off your feet and make you crawl up all one thousand steps of the Club House from top to bottom and then bottom to top. If you bleed out before you make it, I’ll have your body dragged the rest of the way. Club members will be allowed to come and leer at your decaying form, and West can take all of your assets and dismantle what he pleases. Am I making myself clear, Demitrious, or are you struggling to comprehend what I’m saying because I’m mixing business with my personal life?”

“Not at all,” his voice shook. “I understand.”

In a way, Nix could kind of see what Juri had been trying to tell him. The Order was nothing more than a bunch of middle-aged losers playing politics from the safety of their tower and their penthouses. If their planet had a hope of breaking free from the vicious cycle Club Essential enforced on everyone, they were going to need a strong leader who wasn't afraid to tell them no.

But Juri had been wrong about who that needed to be, having witnessed the way all of those arrogant people had cowered in the presence of the Demons, that was apparent.

“Come on.” Yejun offered his hand to Nix. “Let's go home. Lake can handle things here. Trust us.”

Trust.

“What did you really think when you first saw that photo?” He had no clue why he was asking that now, but the question just sort of poured out of him.

Yejun didn't so much as flinch. “I thought you looked upset.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah. Weren't you?”

Nix licked his lips. “Yeah.”

When he placed his palm against Yejun's the warmth he felt radiating off of the Demon felt right. Welcoming, and comforting.

And honest.

“Take me home,” Nix said.

“I’ll be there soon,” Lake promised.

Then Yejun led Nix out of the room, and the two of them kept their heads up as they made their way down the halls and past the Order members who’d fled the scene. They were quiet in the elevator that took them to the main level, didn’t speak even once they were out of earshot from lingering members and had made it to Yejun’s car in the parking lot.

Nix let Yejun open the door for him and he slipped into the vehicle, and when the Demon slid into the driver's seat and reached for his hand again, he allowed him to take it.

They’d just pulled into the driveway of the Roost when they received the news.

Juri Ferd had died on the way to the hospital and the official diagnosis had already been released.

A foreign substance had been found in his bloodstream.

Death by poisoning.