



The Devil's Mercy (A Devil to Die for #2)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Calix Valimir doesn't know what's going on anymore.

He thought he understood this dark attraction between him and the doctor, but it turns out he didn't understand a thing. Not only is Aodhan not who he thought he was, with every torturous touch and forced embrace, Cal is starting to realize he might not have known himself very well either.

Aodhan Solace is done playing nice.

He hates that game anyway. There's a different one he'd much rather be playing, and once he's enticed the detective enough to ensnare him, he wastes no more time on pretend. Aodhan has a devilish nature and all of the appetites that come along with it, but he's certain Calix can handle all that he and Mercy. Even if the detective believes otherwise.

Titus Mercer controls the board.

He always has, always will. His brief past with Calix set him on a path of yearning that first led him to Aodhan before circling back to the one who started it all. As a Connect, a being that must collect life partners and complete a pod before their hundredth birthday, Titus is rather single-minded when it comes to getting what he wants.

And what he wants is Aodhan and Calix.

Forever.

No matter what it takes or how depraved he has to become to have them.

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Everything felt...fuzzy. Calix groaned, blinking as he dragged himself from a deep sleep that had left him with a headache.

Wait.

No, it hadn't been a sleep at all, had it?

He jolted, cursing when something rough tugged at his wrists, keeping them bound behind him. His ankles had been secured as well, and he frowned at them, lost for a moment. How had he ended up chained to a chair?

And where the hell were his clothes?

Calix stared down at his chest and thighs, unable to process exactly what he was seeing and why.

He was covered in love bites. Hickies and full-on bite marks, some still wet with saliva, decorated his bare flesh. When he shifted in his seat, he felt tiny stings and burns from some of the worst injuries.

Like the outline of teeth that had broken skin on his inner left thigh. A few droplets of blood had rolled from the wound.

"You'll have to forgive Aodhan," a calm voice cut through his jumbled thoughts. "He's brilliant, but he often struggles to see the forest for the trees, so to speak."

Titus Mercer, the director of Hopeful Heart Hospital, and the man Cal had once had a

sort of crush on, stood in the center of the room, seemingly putting something together. His focus remained on the task at hand, never once sparing Cal a glance, despite obviously being aware he'd woken up.

It felt dismissive in the worst of ways, which only added fuel to the fire, helping to shove some of that confusion down.

Did it really matter how he'd ended up here? All that counted was why .

“He’s too reactive. I’ve warned him countless times that his sporadic nature was going to get him in trouble someday, but he never listens,” Titus continued, moving to attach what appeared to be a metal pulley to the opposite wall.

They were in a small white room with a cot and the chair Calix was currently stuck on.

There weren’t any windows, so he couldn’t gauge what time of day it was or how long he’d been unconscious.

The single entrance had been left ajar, but he was only able to catch a glimpse of a hallway and nothing else.

Were they still in Aodhan’s house, or had they brought him somewhere else? Somewhere off the beaten path, where they could murder him and cut him into pieces uninterrupted?

A cop had been shot and Aodhan was the one behind what had happened to him the night of the reunion. Neither of those things were good signs. Added to the fact it’d been the doctor who’d brought him to that party where the merman had been cut in half and...Well.

Cal wasn't stupid.

Or maybe he was, because despite knowing all of that and realizing he'd gotten himself tied up in a shitshow, he still felt a tug of annoyance and jealousy toward Titus.

"I don't need you to tell me about Aodhan Solace," Calix growled, trying to test the cuffs at his wrists more carefully now that he was aware of them. The metal seemed thick and didn't offer much give. He could lean forward a few inches, but that was all.

He wasn't going to be able to get out of them on his own.

Fuck.

In actuality, he did need the director to tell him about Aodhan, because obviously everything Cal thought he knew about the man was false. Granted, they hadn't known each other for long, but still. They'd been close...intimate, even.

Images of the video he'd been played in their kitchen before Titus knocked him out caused him to still as bile rose in the back of his throat. It wasn't because he was disgusted by the doctor who'd raped him the night of the reunion and pinned it on someone else though.

All of that disgust was aimed directly at himself, because Calix also recalled his initial reaction to discovering the trick.

Relief.

He'd been relieved that the person who'd witnessed him blubbering and begging for it like an idiot had been Aodhan and not Heathe.

That relief was gone now, however, replaced with a deeply rooted mortification that instantly had him wanting to cave into his own skin and disappear.

“Should I tell you about myself then?” Titus asked, casual tone such a juxtaposition to their situation and the way Cal was feeling it was insane.

Then again, all of this was.

Insanity.

“You like long walks on the beach, pretending to be nice, and murdering people?” Cal shrugged when that finally earned him a glance from the director. “What? I took a shot in the dark. Can’t blame me if I was accurate.”

Being alone in his presence made Calix uncomfortable in a unique way he could never quite put his finger on.

It always had. Underneath that ardent gaze, Calix wanted to squirm.

It was worse this time, because it didn’t seem like the director was holding anything back now.

Before, there’d always been a mysterious edge to him, a cold aloofness that helped create this false sense of distance and, therefore, safety.

It was gone now.

Titus turned to face him and then tilted his head. “What exactly do you think is going on here, Calix?”

“It’s kind of obvious.” He used his chin to motion at the blank room. “You’re going

to kill me.”

“For?”

“What?” Cal frowned.

“Exactly my point. What’s the reason I would want to kill you?”

“Because I found out what you are?” Why did he sound unsure of himself? “I witnessed you shoot Amory.”

“Kind of hypocritical,” Titus said. “Just a few days ago, you were the one holding a gun on me. Tell me, honestly, you were strongly considering shooting me that day, weren’t you?”

He was referring to the incident at the hospital when Rhett, their main suspect in the serial murders, threatened Titus with a stolen blaster. The weapon had later been linked back to Amory.

“Is that why you did it?” Calix ignored his question, offering one of his own instead. Mostly because it probably wasn’t wise to confess to the man currently holding him against his will that yes, yes he had considered shooting him.

Cal didn’t like acknowledging that truth either, for what it was worth.

Had hoped to bury the whole ordeal as deep as possible and never have to bring it up again.

If he’d made it off the planet as intended, he would have been successful.

Instead, he’d made the stupid decision to visit Aodhan one last time.

To say goodbye.

Like a sentimental fool.

Or, perhaps, a hopeful one.

“It would have been a great cover,” Titus mused. “If you’d shot, you could have pinned the blame on Rhett. Almost everyone would have believed you.”

Calix frowned. “Almost?”

“Our doctor would know the truth. He wouldn’t let you off easily if you’d gone through with it. Let’s just say, you wouldn’t be here, under these pleasant circumstances, that’s for certain.”

“Pleasant.” He tugged at his bound wrists pointedly and glared.

“You did try to kill me, Detective.”

“You—” Calix had almost slipped and played into the director’s hand, but he caught himself, changing his sentence and pretending like it was what he’d intended to say all along. “You’re still breathing, aren’t you?”

“Only because your partner walked in on us.”

Cal scowled. “I wouldn’t have actually gone through with it.”

Titus eyed him closely. “You truly believe that.”

“Because it’s the truth. I’m an I.P.F. agent. Not a murderer.”

“Only because Nero Quinten didn’t die and I helped you get away with hitting him with your car.”

“Stop.” Calix shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about the past.”

“That’s your problem,” he stated. “You’re always running away. It’s not cute anymore. Or perhaps it never was. I’ll get a confession out of you eventually, you have my word on that, but since you aren’t ready, let’s continue our other chat. Amory. Do you feel bad for her?”

“I don’t have to feel bad that she’s dead to know what you did was wrong.” Truthfully, no, he didn’t feel bad for the now deceased cop. She’d been nice to him when she’d been alive, but that was before he’d discovered her involvement with the case he’d been working.

Before she’d helped murder Police Chief Bruce, whom Cal actually had cared for.

Some dark, inner voice whispered he probably wouldn’t feel bad even if none of that were true, asked him if he even really believed that it was, but he silenced it and focused on the director.

“What’s right and wrong, really?” Titus slipped his hands into the front pockets of the form-fitting black slacks he was wearing, drawing attention to his impeccable style of dress.

It was as though he hadn’t just killed one cop and kidnapped another. He’d removed the dark brown blazer he’d been in when Calix had arrived, but the cashmere black turtleneck was still on, making it seem like he was ready to head to a cocktail party.

It was off-putting because it gave the impression that this wasn’t unusual for him. That shooting something at point-blank range wasn’t unusual.

“Yeah,” Cal backtracked, “actually. Tell me about yourself.” If they had to talk about something, he’d much rather be in charge of the topic. The fact he didn’t give a shit about Amory wasn’t exactly making him feel good about himself.

Titus was right. He was always running.

And he didn’t plan on stopping any time soon.

The corner of the director’s mouth curved upward ever so slightly, but that was the only indication he gave that he found Calix’s change of heart amusing. “Let’s see...You already covered the long walks on the beach part.” He hummed, clearly pretending to think it over.

“You’re always like this,” Cal blurted before he could help himself. “Coy and unattainable.”

“I’d make an offhanded remark about how we haven’t known each other long enough for you to make that observation, but I’ll save us both the bother. As much as you loathe discussing the past, you’re the one who brought us back to it this time.”

Calix opened his mouth to disagree, but Titus wasn’t finished.

“Your trial went on for over three months, and I was there almost every step of the way.”

“You shouldn’t have been,” Cal said, recalling how confused he’d been by the then-surgeon’s constant presence. “Why’d they even let you?”

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Originally, he'd been Nero's doctor, and later brought on to conduct a medical examination to present to the court.

As a naïve eighteen-year-old kid, Calix hadn't realized just how strange that was, but he'd started to wonder more and more about it when he'd attended the Academy.

The only reason he'd never been able to ask Bruce about it had been the slight fear the chief would also realize how overly involved Titus had been.

It wasn't like he could reopen the case, and Cal didn't think Bruce would have done that to him anyway, but still.

Sometimes it was better to count your blessings and move on, even if you didn't fully understand the whole process. That's how Calix had chosen to view that entire period of his life, and he didn't appreciate how often the director tried to ruin that for him.

"I have no interest in facing my demons," he plainly stated.

"Unfortunately, Detective, that isn't going to work for me. I let you get away long enough, don't you think? You've had your fun and your freedoms. It's time to come back."

"To what?" Cal shook his head. He was trying to distract him with nonsense.

"They needed you to explain Nero's current state and how it'd happened, how the impact from my hovercar bruised his front, but that his spine broke from hitting the pavement.

How the force with which he fell after you viewed the video proved I'd slammed on the brakes as soon as I realized what I was doing.

But...None of that makes any logical sense.

None of that is viable proof in a court of law on any planet. ”

Why hadn't he noticed sooner?

Why hadn't anyone?

“Don't try so hard,” Titus suggested. “Some things don't make sense.”

“Did you have something on the judge?” His brow furrowed. “On Bruce?”

“Nothing like that.”

“Then...?”

“I made them feel like they needed me there. I made them feel like they needed me in general.”

If anyone else had said that, Calix would have laughed in their face and called their bluff. But the director wasn't bluffing, and what's more, Cal believed him. More than one person had discussed feeling odd in the director's presence, himself included.

“Does that have something to do with you being a Connect?” Calix wished he'd paid more attention to Troya, his partner, when the guy had started talking about what Titus was.

“‘Coy and Unattainable’,” Titus repeated, ignoring his question. He quirked a thin

black brow. “Is that how you see me, little monster?”

He straightened in his seat. “Don’t. You said that before. I don’t like it.”

“Oh? And I suppose the rest of this is to your liking?” The director laughed. “I’m sorry I come off that way to you. For the record, I never wanted you to think of me as unattainable. That would defeat the purpose of all this effort I’ve put into having you, after all.”

“I won’t fall for any more of your tricks.

You or Aodhan’s.” He’d bought into the doctor’s act, had believed there was something between them.

Maybe it wasn’t anything that could be lasting, but all those times the other man had comforted Cal and made him feel less than a freak? They’d meant something to him.

“Did you go through all of that just to get me to drop my guard and come here? Why?” Why not kidnap him elsewhere?

What was so important about having them at their home?

Or... “Was I just unlucky? Did I stumble on you and Amory and that’s why you’re doing this?

What was she even doing here? Why’d she come after you? ”

As far as he knew, Amory wouldn’t have had any reason to target Titus or Aodhan.

They’d wrapped the case just before Bruce’s funeral, and while they still didn’t have a clear motive for Amory, messages and the search history of Rhett’s devices gave

clear signs he'd killed people in a twisted sense of retribution for their ill loved ones.

"That's a good place to start actually," Titus said, ignoring his comment. "Something about me. I've been with my boyfriend for around two years now. He'll say it's closer to three, but I don't count the...courting period the way he does."

After their exchange in the kitchen, Cal sort of had an inkling, but hearing it confirmed like this...

"Do you think that's going to somehow make me jealous?" he forced himself to grunt. "Now? No way. You two psychos can have each other."

"Careful," Titus chided. "Aodhan could return at any moment. We wouldn't want him hearing you say something like that. I was able to calm him down, for now, but it won't last. He's too impatient, too eager to get things started."

"There are marks all over me!"

"I made him take it easy on you," he insisted.

"If Aodhan had his way, you'd be waking sitting on his cock, not in that chair.

I thought we should perhaps try to reason with you first, but I'm starting to see that might have been a mistake.

He's spent more time with you than I have.

Maybe he really does know you better than I do. "

"Is that what this is really about?" Calix asked. "Are you doing this because I messed around with your man?"

“It’s cute that you think I’m the type of person who wouldn’t be aware of his lover's every move,” Titus replied. “Cute, but misguided.”

So he’d known the whole time that Cal and Aodhan were getting close. That only bolstered the theory that the two of them had been in on this together.

But why?

“Why didn’t you stop us?”

“Why would I want to stop something I helped start?” Titus took a single step closer, stilling when Calix tensed, as though he cared about making him uncomfortable.

“There. That’s something else about me. You might have figured this out already, but then again, maybe not.

The night of the reunion? Aodhan planned to do a lot more. ”

“You say that as though what he did do wasn’t a big deal,” Calix repeated incredulously. “Easy for the guy who wasn’t shredded on someone else’s dick to say.”

“Please. We both know how much you enjoyed it, Detective. Or should I replay the video again for you so you can take a closer look?”

Cal dropped his gaze, inwardly cursing himself and his cowardice.

“Don’t be ashamed, your reaction wasn’t that uncommon. We’ve talked about this before. Think.” When Calix clearly didn’t follow, Titus sighed and continued. “Misattribution of arousal.”

Oh right. That conversation they'd had in his office again. They were circling back, only Cal found himself less eager to change the subject this time around.

"I'm fairly certain you called it a misattribution of desire that day," he stated dryly.

"Only because I felt the word 'arousal' wasn't very fitting of the overall situation."

"As in, you thought there was a higher chance of me shooting you if you said it like that?" Calix rolled his eyes.

"I was hoping you'd take my words to heart," Titus disclosed, seemingly disappointed. "That you'd be smart enough to apply it to your reaction that night with Aodhan at the reunion all on your own."

"Looks like you've given me too much credit. Why don't you unchain me and let me go, since I'm not who you thought I was?"

"Aodhan likes to do that as well, hide behind witty remarks and deflection. The only difference is that yours is self-deprecating."

Yeah, Calix couldn't picture the doctor thinking poorly of himself.

"We'll start from the beginning, so listen carefully, all right?"

"Titus said in a tone that left no room for argument.

"You were drugged and out of it, your heart was racing, there was a sense of fear and danger spiking your adrenaline levels, and you were getting physical stimulation to your sexual organs."

Cal grimaced.

“You became aroused because of all of those factors. Your body mistook the heightened sensations you were feeling and turned them into something it understood. Attraction.”

“Some people just like pain in the bedroom. You don’t—” Calix clamped his mouth shut, realizing his mistake. He had felt guilty and gross all this while because of how he’d reacted that night, but not for the reasons Titus seemed to believe.

Should he set him straight? That seemed risky with no real payoff...

But...

“I didn’t report it to the police, who I’ve been working with these past few months, because I didn’t care enough to bother,” Cal told him.

“You thought you deserved to have bad things happen to you because of Nero.”

Bad things like the events at the reunion had always happened to him. Nero had nothing to do with it.

Cal grunted. “The only thing I considered bad about that night was the fact it’d been Heathe who’d gotten the better of me.”

He was definitely being too honest, but the admission poured off his lips almost haughtily.

Titus seemed to think so too, because he chuckled, the sound rich and dark, instantly sending a shiver down Calix’s spine that wasn’t entirely unpleasant.

“Are you trying to one-up me by proving how much I don’t understand you, little monster?”

I'm almost tempted to allow you to believe it's working, but that would defeat the purpose of why we're here. ”

“Right, that whole having me bullshit,” Cal refused to backdown.

“The way I see it, you two are just psychos who happened to catch me while I was vulnerable. Aodhan planned on doing more that night? So, what? He was going to kill me? Can't really blame him since, as you put things earlier, it would have been a great cover.

Heathe was spotted leading me upstairs. Aodhan happened to pass by and take advantage—”

Titus made a sound of frustration that instantly had Cal quieting. “You're smarter than this. You can't honestly still believe Heathe was the mastermind behind that night, can you? That moron was just doing as he was told. Aodhan paid him to bring you there.”

“Okay. But why? What'd I ever do to him?”

“I may have,” he took another step closer, but Cal was too engrossed in his words to notice, “ accidentally left an old newspaper clipping of the trial out on my desk for him to find.”

If the way he'd said accidentally hadn't given him away, the fact he was talking about printed newspaper articles would have.

Even eight years ago, finding a printed newspaper was nearly impossible.

People still enjoyed physical magazines and books, but news was consumed through delivery directly to everyone's devices.

Forget about why the doctor had targeted him.

“Why would you do that?” Calix didn’t get it. He tried, but no matter how many times he spun it around in his brain, he couldn’t fathom why, after eight years, a man like Titus Mercer would go through that sort of trouble.

“So the two of you would meet, of course.”

He shook his head. “We were going to meet anyway. Aodhan was the hospital's contact for the case. You’re the one who assigned him.”

“That would have been different. He would have viewed you as a work assignment and nothing more. I needed him to be interested in you, Calix.”

He blinked at him. “And if he hadn’t grown interested and really had killed me that night?”

Titus’s expression never altered. “Then you wouldn’t have been the one.”

“Wow.”

“It’s all right. I knew you were. I’ve known you were a good match since that day eight years ago when I saw what you’d done to your classmate.”

“It was an accident .”

“Was it?”

“You testified as much!” Cal tugged on his bindings, stilling when Titus rested a hand on his right shoulder.

The touch was gentle, yet he felt as though the weight of the entire universe was suddenly pinning him down to the chair, keeping him immobile while the terrifying man in front of him bent to make them eye level.

“Want to know a not-so-secret secret?” Titus asked in a quiet voice. He smiled. “I lied on the stand. I’m rather good at it. You and I have that in common.”

“What do you have in common?” a new voice called from the doorway, and when Titus pulled away, Calix saw Aodhan enter the room.

He was using a cloth to wipe blood stains from his hands.

“How much we both want you,” Titus replied without skipping a beat, slipping his hands back into his pockets, “of course.”

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Cal fought, but it was two against one, and they easily overpowered him, even once the handcuffs were unlocked.

He was dragged over to the setup Titus had been working on in the center of the room.

His bound wrists were forced up and attached to one of the chains that dangled from the ceiling, and he struggled, despite knowing there wasn't a chance he was going to get out of this.

Until Aodhan stepped behind him and Calix felt something bulbous rub between his cheeks.

He went still.

"You can keep fighting," Titus told him. He was positioned in front of him and captured his chin between two fingers, tilting his face up so their eyes could meet. There was a sparkle in his emerald eyes that hadn't been there before, an excitement that knocked the air right out of Cal's lungs.

He knew that look. He'd seen it on the faces of some of the worst criminals he'd ever dealt with.

"It might make you feel better," the director kept talking, as though unaware just how much he was suddenly spooking Calix. "Or are you giving in, little monster? Have you decided to hear us out?"

He nodded his head without really meaning to, instincts screaming about the danger loud enough to overshadow his need for resistance. “Yes.”

Aodhan chuckled behind him, still trailing the tip of whatever he was holding up and down Cal’s crack teasingly.

Whatever it was, it was too cold to be the man’s cock.

Too wide as well. He pressed it a little closer, but didn’t try to insert it.

“Is that right, Detective? Are you giving in already?”

“Why are you doing this?” he meant the question for the doctor, since asking Titus had gotten him nowhere, but quickly learned it didn’t make a difference.

“Because I want you, baby. Haven’t you picked up on that by now?”

“You’re lying. All of this, pretending to like me—”

“I didn’t pretend,” Aodan disagreed firmly. “You’re insulting us both by saying that. Are you listening to us or not?”

Calix pursed his lips and frowned. It was easier to tap into that anger and fight when it was the doctor doing the talking.

“That’s a no,” Titus answered for him, since Aodhan couldn’t see his face.

“There’s no need to pout.” He ran the pad of his thumb over Cal’s full bottom lip, quirking a brow when some of his good sense returned and Calix tried to jerk his head away.

“I’m getting bored with your hot and cold act though. Fair warning.”

“Detective.” Aodhan’s arms came around his waist, pulling him back against his chest. He nuzzled the top of Cal’s head. “Let’s think of this rationally. You remember how good it feels, being with me, don’t you? Now times that by two. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

He kept his eyes on Titus as he gave a slight shake of his head.

“No. No, being used by the two of you does not sound like fun, actually. I’m not some toy you can toss into the mix to bolster your relationship.

And,” he pulled away from Aodhan as much as he could, getting into Titus’s space to sneer, “I don’t fuck murderers. ”

“Hate to break it to you, baby,” Aodhan let out a low whistle, “but that’s what you’ve been doing this entire time.” His shifting backwards was the only warning he gave before suddenly, the object from before was thrust forward.

Calix gasped and then cursed as the thick, rounded end of something metal was forced into his entrance.

Instinctively, he moved away in a misguided attempt to escape it, but Titus was there to shove him back into place.

The object scraped against his insides, curving before coming to a stop fully seated within him.

“Relax. This is the anal hook I promised I’d use on you. It’s safe, can’t you tell?” the doctor asked.

“Get it the fuck out of me!”

“You shouldn’t curse.” Aodhan gave the object a little shake, causing Cal to hiss.
“Mercy doesn’t like it.”

“What. The. Hell?” Cal growled, ignoring him.

The doctor tutted, but that was all the reaction he was given time for before Titus made his displeasure known.

The director’s left hand shot out, pinching Calix’s right nipple and twisting hard enough to wring another howl out of him.

Without letting up, he spoke, voice still calm and collected despite the way Cal was writhing and panting.

“I wouldn’t bother taking the time to train you if you were a mere plaything. That isn’t your purpose.”

He gritted his jaw, gathered his courage, and glared at Titus. “Kind of hard to believe that with a thing shoved up my ass and the two of you prodding me with your hard-ons.”

“At least mine is still in my pants,” he leaned in and whispered, a second before the sound of a zipper coming undone came from behind Cal. “You were ready to listen earlier, have you decided to be obedient?”

Calix should take the out being offered. Should nod again like he had before when asked if he’d hear them out. If nothing else, keeping them talking would buy him time.

But time for what?

Troya would already be halfway off the planet by now, and the only other person who may have checked in on him would have been Bruce.

Even though he'd missed his ship off planet, he imagined he couldn't have been unconscious for too long.

Which meant even if his commanding officer did try to get in touch with him, no one would worry for at least another twenty-four hours.

Even though he'd been a high-standing agent, he'd also just wrapped up his final case and put in his resignation...

Why bother stalling if there was no one left who'd care enough to rescue him anyway?

"Go to hell." He braced for the worst when Titus grinned.

"Poor little monster," the director cooed. "That was the wrong answer."

Calix couldn't hold in his surprise when instead of moving for him, the director turned on Aodhan, yanking him around Cal so he could touch him.

He had Aodhan stripped down to nothing, his clothes flung about the room, and positioned with a knee on the seat of the chair in under two minutes. The sound of his palm whacking against one of the doctor's round ass cheeks had Cal jumping just as much as the doctor.

"We had a plan for a reason. You're always so impatient," Titus scolded.

“It’s not my fault,” Aodhan disagreed. “He was going to leave.”

“He’s being punished for that already. Now it’s your turn. Bend over and brace yourself with the chairback.”

Calix swallowed the sudden lump in his throat, unable to tear his gaze away as he watched the doctor scramble to do as he was told. He’d always enjoyed looking at Aodhan’s naked form, at how long his legs and his torso were, how broad his shoulders...

His cock hung heavy between his thighs, full and dripping, but Cal had never seen him from this angle before. Had certainly never seen his cheeks spread or the way his hole looked.

Titus licked his pointer finger and then drove it into Aodhan’s body without any sort of warning aside from his grip on the man’s ass.

His expression never altered, even when Aodhan cried out in pleasure.

He finger fucked him for a bit, first with one digit, then two, then three, seemingly lost in the task for a while.

Calix refused to feel jilted. How ridiculous would he have to be to feel that way? Just because they’d made it seem like they wanted him... Clearly he was nothing more than a plaything, otherwise, why string him up like this?

Not that Titus was being particularly loving or soft to Aodhan at the moment...

The director undid his fly with his free hand and pulled himself out, ignoring the gasp that Cal made at the sight of the massive cock in his hold. He stroked himself a couple of times, slicking his shaft with precome before tugging his fingers free and

lining himself up with Aodhan's entrance.

Calix's hole fluttered as he watched what had to be nine or ten inches push its way into Aodhan's body. The doctor hissed, and that only had Cal reacting more.

Back at the orphanage, he'd once walked in on two of the other teens getting it on in the bathroom. The sounds had ignited something in him, the dirty words spoken between them...the way the girl had resisted.

Later, he'd found out she'd been playing along, and his journey down the rabbit hole that was consensual non consent and rape fantasy began.

But he'd never actually gotten around to experimenting with it with someone he was attracted to.

Introducing pain to the equation had been simple because he could inflict that on his own.

He'd always been too ashamed to seek out a partner willing to try dark kinks with him.

Especially since, deep down, he'd always known it wouldn't really be what he was after anyway.

Cal didn't want pretend.

He wanted to be used and defiled and punished for real. With emphasis on that last one, because it was what he deserved for being such a shitty person.

For being so warped.

But he'd experienced something of the like before, and knew he also wanted to be into the other person. He wanted more than carnal sensation triggered by instinct or misattribution of arousal.

He wanted to want it. Wanted to be able to enjoy it.

The closest he'd come had been the night of the reunion, because even though he hadn't liked that it was Heathe, he'd still been attracted to the man.

Knowing it'd actually been Aodhan...

Those were dangerous thoughts, hitting too close to a truth he'd long since buried and left for dead.

If he admitted to his twisted desires, then he'd have to admit that a messed-up part of him was thrilled about all of this.

Thrilled about finally getting to experience fantasies he'd only ever been able to concoct in his mind.

Fantasies that had only ever been forced upon him as a form of degradation.

That wasn't his particular brand of kink. He didn't want the other person to put him down and make him feel shitty about his lust. He wanted them to understand and take control and make him like it because they liked him.

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No sane person would want that, especially not one with the type of past he had.

But Calix wasn't any saner than the two men aggressively fucking in front of him.

Aodhan gripped the back of the chair, face pinched as Titus drove into him over and over again, the slapping sound of their bodies coming together echoing in the small room.

He was toned, the muscles in his back rippling when he arched into a particularly hard thrust that shook the chair beneath him, scraping it against the hardwood flooring.

"Louder," Titus ordered, his voice still even and clear, as though this was causing him no effort at all and he wasn't pistoning his hips against the doctor like a demon straight from hell.

Calix expected Aodhan to make a witty remark, egg the director on a bit, but instead, he followed the command without any hesitation or pushback.

"Mercy," Aodhan practically moaned his name, fingers flexing around the chair. "Let me—"

"No."

"Please. I want to—"

"I said no, and that's final." Titus didn't say or do anything else. He didn't have to.

Aodhan stopped asking for whatever it was he wanted, groaning and calling out Mercy instead. That was all it took to get him to drop the subject, just a firm statement from Titus and nothing more.

It was a bit terrifying, how in control of it all Titus Mercer was.

If only Calix's dick got the memo.

He wanted to blame the hook, but the sex toy was pressed in too deep to hit any of the spots he really needed. Mostly, he felt stretched and full—and sure, it didn't feel bad, but it wasn't enough stimulation to get him hard and leaking.

And yet...

Cal tore his gaze off the others and stared down at his traitorous dick. He was throbbing and more aroused than he should be. Hell, he shouldn't be aroused at all. There was something so primal about what was happening in front of him, though—what was happening to him.

Monster.

He must be.

He didn't want to be.

They were all insane, but he didn't want to face that yet. Didn't want to face his part in all of this.

Hated that they were making him.

“Spread your legs wider,” Titus commanded, making a sound of approval when

Aodhan shifted into a better position for him to pummel.

When the two of them had slept together, Aodhan had been on top. Not only that, but he'd also been extremely good at it. Experienced. Did they switch positions to keep things interesting?

Almost as soon as he had the thought, Cal discarded it. There was no way someone like Titus would willingly give up control like that. They didn't know each other well, but that truth was far too obvious to be overlooked.

"Do you want it, baby?" Titus purred, and it took Calix longer than it should to realize that Aodhan didn't immediately reply like he'd been doing.

Frowning, he glanced away from where the director's cock was pumping, gasping when he found Titus already staring back at him. He couldn't help the shiver that overcame him when their eyes locked, and it was impossible to ignore the way Titus purposefully slowed, turning his thrusts almost languid.

"I could take care of you next," the director continued, voice low and sultry, doing something strange to Calix's insides.

"I'd be so good to you. We could take it nice and easy for our first time.

What do you think? Doesn't that sound preferable, Detective?

Better than being strung up and forced to take a metal hook.

Or," he reached forward and snatched a handful of Aodhan's hair, yanking the doctor up, "would you rather I let him loose?"

Aodhan howled as the new angle drove Titus deeper into his body, but he didn't

resist, allowing himself to be resituated so his back was sealed against the director's front.

His large cock came into better view, the curved tip rosy and flushed.

It glinted in the bright light of the room, wet and swollen.

"I could let him tear you apart with this," Titus said, indicating Aodhan's heavy member. "Give you that sting of pain you love so much. I'll fuck you on his cock and make you both scream my name. Is that offer more appealing to you?"

Calix forced himself to shake his head, though he wasn't sure who he was fooling. The precome dribbling down his shaft to paint his thighs certainly gave him away. But he held tight to his dignity, especially since it was already thin and the only thing he had left.

"Only a lunatic would give in to someone like you," he snarled, digging his nails into his palms hard enough to break skin. Of course, that was a mistake, because the second the pain zipped through him, another wave of pleasure quickly followed.

What was wrong with him? Why was he always like this?

He'd gotten over his embarrassment about enjoying pain in the bedroom. It wasn't like both of them hadn't already seen him come apart on Aodhan's cock while he bled for him. It was too late to regret or turn back the clock, so acceptance was the only option anyway.

But there was a difference in liking pain and being okay with this .

"Just kill me," Calix growled. "Do it and get it over with."

Titus's disappointment was instant and so potent that Cal almost backpedaled and apologized. He didn't speak to him again; instead, he turned his head away in a clear dismissal that shouldn't have bothered Cal, but did.

Growing up, whenever Sister Grace had punished him, he'd believed her when she'd said it was because she loved him.

He'd believed her when she'd said she knew what was best, even when he begged her to stop and actually meant it.

Even when he didn't want it. Now that he was an adult, he obviously knew better.

He understood that people who beat children never did it out of caring or love.

Just like people who kidnapped others or shot someone in the head without flinching.

Calix knew what they'd already done to him was inexcusable and unforgivable. Heinous.

He knew there were millions of others who'd grown up in similar circumstances to his that didn't turn out the way he had. That didn't lean into their past as a crutch or make excuses or try to pretend to be something they weren't.

But it was easier when you were normal, wasn't it? Easier when you could be angry over things that deserved your anger. Horrified by the things that were arguably horrific.

He knew there was something seriously wrong with him. Something disgusting and twisted and abnormal. Because sure, liking blood play and rough sex and BDSM and being tied up weren't bad.

When it was between two—or more—consenting adults.

This wasn't play. It wasn't an agreed-upon scene. Nothing about this was legal, and no part of him should be straining against his bonds to try and get a little closer.

And yet he was.

When Titus started to strip out of his clothes, exposing honey-toned skin and a well-defined muscular physique, Cal couldn't look away.

He tried, internally begging himself not to give in to this. Not to let on just how messed up he truly was, but it was like his eyes had a mind of their own. Like his entire body belonged to somebody else.

Someone who was a slave to lust and, clearly, prone to self-loathing.

But...It wasn't like he had anywhere else to be. No one was looking for him. No one cared.

No one wanted him. Even as highly ranked as he was, his commanding officer hadn't tried to stop him from quitting once. The most he did was order him to complete one last case and that was it. So...even if all Aodhan and Titus wanted was to humiliate and torture him, wasn't that still something?

Wasn't that still better?

At least this time, he was attracted to his assailants.

"Good Light," the words slipped out of him, quiet enough he didn't think anyone else heard. What the hell was he thinking? He couldn't honestly be that easy, could he?

The whole point of quitting his job was to escape, not only his shitty life, but himself.

He wanted away from everyone in this room, including Calix-pathetic-Valimir.

Something moved on Titus's back suddenly, catching Cal's attention and momentarily putting an end to his inner turmoil and contradicting notions.

"What...is...that?" He watched, completely engrossed, as a tattoo seemingly slithered into existence.

It was a snake with pearlescent scales that shimmered pink from certain angles when the light hit it. Though it was very clearly a tattoo, it moved as though real, sliding around from Titus's left side, trailing up his back and down over his right shoulder.

"Ready to take all of me, little killer?" For the first time, Titus's tone of voice altered, an edge to it, like he was close to losing that coiled control of his.

"Yes," Aodhan groaned. He was shoved back onto the chair so he was bent over it, and he humped back eagerly, welcoming the next thrust.

The tattoo moved down Titus's right arm, and Calix watched it, unable to look away as it traveled over the back of the director's hand. He grabbed onto Aodhan's shoulder, squeezing, and then the image of the snake rose up, separating from his skin.

The strike was swift, so fast Cal would have missed it if he'd blinked. The snake snapped forward and latched onto the side of Aodhan's neck, teeth digging in.

Aodhan screamed and came at the same time, come shooting across the room as he jerked, caught between the chair and the director, who was still slamming ruthlessly into him from behind.

The snake let go and turned to Calix, hissing and showing off its blood-stained teeth. As soon as their gazes connected, a tingling rush seemed to pass between them.

Cal's orgasm snuck up on him, coming out of nowhere, shattering any illusions he'd still had that he could resist this fucked up thing going on.

Shattering any hope of maintaining the lie he'd told himself every day since Nero Quinten stepped in front of his car.

That Calix was the victim.

And not just another monster waiting for judgment day.

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Titus carefully tipped the kettle, filling his cup with steaming liquid as he listened to the birds chirping outside from the open window over the kitchen sink.

And the moans and sobs from the attached room.

The door to where they were keeping Calix was closed, but he could still be heard through the wood. His cries had gotten louder the second Titus had turned the sink on, leaving him to wonder if the detective was putting on a show for him.

Aodhan was already such an attention seeker. He didn't know how he was going to handle it if Calix turned out to be the same.

Not that it came as too much of a surprise. There'd been something there from the moment they'd first met. Titus had seen the plea in the younger man's gray eyes. It wasn't just to help get him out of the bind he'd put himself in by hitting a classmate with his hovercar. It ran deeper than that.

From that single look alone, he'd found his imagination getting away from him. Titus had envisioned everything, from his and Calix's first time to their last, before the hour-long meeting between him and Bruce had even ended.

He'd planned an entire lifetime between them, had prepared for it.

Only for Calix to sneak off planet the second Titus turned his back.

That wouldn't happen again.

“He’s so loud.” Aodhan padded into the kitchen, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He’d already changed into his work clothes and had brought Titus’s briefcase down for him, which he set on one of the kitchen chairs before heading over to him.

“He’s performative,” Titus corrected, handing Aodhan the steaming cup of black tea he’d just made. The corner of his mouth tipped up when the doctor took a sip and sighed in contentment. Titus hated tea personally, but he loved how much it made his second happy.

Loved that he could be the one to supply that happiness.

Which was why he allowed it, even though he typically preferred them to share things. There was a closeness to be felt through that single act. A control, if he were being honest, but control allowed him to feel closer to a person, so it counted.

“Are you sure he’s going to be all right here alone?” Aodhan tucked himself into the corner between the L-shaped counter spaces and took another sip, peering at him over the porcelain rim of the cup.

“I lowered the hook last night before we went to bed,” he reminded. “He’ll be fine.”

“It’s been a long time.” The doctor glanced over Titus’s shoulder at the closed door. “What if he passes out from overexertion?”

Titus drank from his own cup, this one filled with coffee, and quirked a brow. “Would you like to take his place? Give him a break?”

“I’m thinking logically,” he stated, “not emotionally.”

Even though he knew that was true, Titus mentally pulled on the invisible string that connected them.

The psychic link allowed him to tap into Aodhan's emotions, but they'd been together long enough they were able to switch it on and off.

In the beginning, the doctor had struggled with it, hadn't understood when Titus had explained it was a feeling, like flexing a muscle, more than anything physical they could touch.

For the most part, they both left the connection off, only switching it on to check in throughout the day.

Some Connects left the channel open indefinitely, but since Titus didn't feel all that much, and Aodhan wasn't much better...

There was only so much rush of random bloodlust either of them could take before it became triggering.

That was another reason Calix would be so good for them. Though Titus had suspicions about his morals and level of empathy, he was positive that the detective had a more typical emotional range than the two of them did.

A pod was all about balance, and he refused to settle for anything less than the best. If he was going to be tied to two people for the rest of his very long life, Titus was going to ensure both were a perfect match.

That meant finding more than just someone with a compatible energy pattern.

He needed someone who wouldn't break after discovering who he and Aodhan really were.

Someone who wouldn't shatter or succumb to fear and ruin the whole thing.

Aodhan's mild annoyance and lingering tiredness from the night before trickled through the connection. It didn't alter anything that Titus himself was feeling, and he could tell the difference between who was feeling what. It was more an awareness than anything else.

"If you're so concerned, take him down before we go." Titus waved at the door and finished his coffee before placing the empty cup in the sink.

"How much longer until he gives in, do you think?" Aodhan ignored his suggestion.

Titus shrugged a single shoulder. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"Are you sure? Because this was your plan."

He grunted. "If you'll recall, this was not my original plan. We were meant to use Amory to keep him on planet and lure him in slowly. This is my version of improvising. Yours wasn't much different."

"He'd be stuffed full of one of our cocks instead if we'd done it my way," Aodhan reminded. "That sounds better for all of us. We'd be forming a bond, in any case. Why are we wasting time getting him used to that metal hook up his ass when we could be getting him addicted to us instead?"

Calix was a sex starved creature. If they got him used to being sexually stimulated, got him addicted to orgasming several times a day, and taught him he could only obtain pleasure through them, he'd be much easier to control.

They needed his submission. Needed him to crave being theirs as badly as they craved having him. Unfortunately, they couldn't be attached to Cal for twenty-four hours, day after day. If the process had been a fast and easy one, sure, maybe Aodhan's preferred method would have worked. As it were...

“Because he wouldn’t take kindly to us ,” Titus said.

“Not yet. You haven’t seemed to realize, but he’s the most stubborn one here.

Yes,” he drawled when Aodhan opened his mouth, “even more stubborn than you are. You’ve lived a life of uncaring.

There’s never been a time when you weren’t comfortable in your own skin, being your whole authentic self. ”

Aodhan snorted. “Tell that to the hospital staff who think of me as the friendliest, kindest person any of them have ever met.”

“You enjoy slipping into that role. The mask thrills you.” Titus took a step closer, boxing Aodhan in with an arm on either side of his hips on the counter. “It’s arguably your favorite game. ‘How many can I trick today?’ You laugh at them, at how naïve they are. It’s fun for you.”

Aodhan Solace had been born with a golden spoon that he’d never lost the taste for.

Hell, he hadn’t even bothered to try. He’d been cocky and arrogant when the two of them had met.

Titus had reined him in a little, taught him control.

But he’d never tried to change him. He didn’t put himself to impossible tasks.

“You grew up with a family that let you get away with anything, even to the point they’d needed to adopt another son just to continue the family business since you’d made your stance on taking over it clear.

On Vitality, the Solace name alone ensured you were never scolded at school.

No one has ever dared tell you no, little killer. ”

Aodhan tipped his chin up, somewhat defiantly, though the flirty glint in his pink gaze gave away how into being cornered he actually was. “Pretty sure you say no to me all the time, Mercy.”

“I don’t count.”

“That so?”

“Are you implying I’m like everyone else?” he teased.

Aodhan shook his head and shifted the cup to one hand so he could grab a fistful of Titus’s shirt in the other. “You’re my First.”

Titus smiled softly and planted a rewarding kiss on Aodan’s temple. It’d taken a lot to get them here, to a place where the doctor willingly set aside his pride and submitted. His earlier thoughts needed correcting. There was one thing about Aodhan that Titus had demanded be changed.

The doctor had lived his entire life up to meeting him as a top, but Titus had fixed that for both of them. Had overpowered and shown him how good it could be underneath him.

The main reason Aodhan had eventually given in and agreed to bond with him had been simple. Titus could give him things no one else could. Could make him experience things no one else was able to.

Could be willing to accept and nurture parts of Aodhan that no one else would be

willing to.

He'd made himself the perfect partner for his little killer.

He'd do the same for his little monster.

"You're so full of yourself." Aodhan chuckled and used that hand in his shirt to push him away.

Titus had been feeling smug, and that emotion must have slipped through their connection.

"Bet you called us both 'little' in your head." Aodhan straightened and smirked. "There's nothing little about me, babe." He moved in, stepping into Titus's space before twisting on his heels so he could trap him against the sink.

Titus allowed it. He liked when the doctor was like this, playful and bold, with all of his attention directed at him.

Aodhan set his hands on the edge of the sink, caging Titus in the same way he'd done to him earlier. "You were going somewhere with that little speech of yours," he teased. "Well? Go on, Director. Don't let me stop you."

"As if you wield that kind of power."

"I'm the only one who does."

"Now who's the one full of himself?" Titus crossed his arms, needing some semblance of distance between them so he really could continue the conversation.

Between the other man's flirting and the sounds still pouring from the locked room

nearby, it was a wonder he could focus on anything but the thought of tossing Aodhan onto the kitchen table and having his filthy way with him for breakfast.

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There wasn't any time for that. They were both due at the hospital in under an hour, which meant they needed to start wrapping things up and getting ready to leave.

"Calix grew up in an orphanage, fighting for the attention he should have been freely given. He's learned how to hide, not just from others, but from himself. Do you really think a sixth-ranked detective isn't capable of putting two plus two together?"

Aodhan tipped his head. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"He knows there's something more to this, more to us, and not just when it comes to why we took him." Titus thought back to the conversation they'd had at the station about a month ago. "He asked me about Zane's wedding. There was genuine suspicion in his eyes when he did."

It was one of the few moments the detective had been one hundred percent honest in front of him, and Titus had almost given them away just to reward him for it.

"I told you not to use your ability to make him uncomfortable in front of you," Aodhan chided.

"He would have been uncomfortable even if I hadn't. I know about his past, remember?" Using his ability to alter a person's emotional state had merely pushed things further along. He'd wanted Calix unnerved by him.

That way guaranteed he was often on the detective's mind.

He'd been forgotten once already. Never again.

“A past,” Titus continued, “he can’t even admit to.

We were able to convince him Rhett and Amory were behind the serial murders because everyone else was easily convinced, and Calix didn’t really care.

” The detective had been hellbent on quitting the I.P.F.

no matter the outcome. “But Bruce? That’ll be harder for him to swallow. ”

Proof was in the way Cal had allowed Titus to dance around topics yesterday. He’d asked questions, but never really pushed for real answers. Had gotten defensive and snide, but never showed true fear or fury.

Either Calix had already guessed at more than he was willing to admit, or he was overwhelmed and unable to think straight.

Titus would bet money it was the first scenario.

“He cared about the old man,” Aodhan agreed solemnly. “We’ll need proof before we tell him, but I still haven’t found anything.”

“Which is why,” he placed his hands on the doctor’s waist and eased him back a step, “we’re doing things my way. He won’t be able to deny what he already subconsciously knows forever, and if that happens before we’ve broken him down, he’ll fight us even harder.”

“Exhaust him until he thinks it’s his own decision when he gives in,” Aodhan said. “This method might work in theory, but somehow I feel like it’ll take a million years to get it to, and I’m not the most patient person on the planet, Mercy. What if we just told him—”

“He hit that boy on purpose,” Titus cut him off.

He’d seen the video. The truth had been blatantly obvious, that was why he’d deleted it.

He hadn’t wanted anyone else to catch the way Calix hadn’t hesitated, or the erection in his pants, which was somewhat visible in the footage when he’d stepped out of the car.

“He slammed on the brakes and drove his car into Nero Quinten in a rare moment of honesty. But he couldn’t handle it. ”

His true self had frightened him, disgusted him even. Enough that he’d started believing the story he’d spun to the police and the paramedics and the crowd who’d all arrived to deal with the aftermath of his momentary slip.

“Our little monster is the best kind of liar there is. He’s so good, he can even convince himself that his false truths are real.

If we confirm what he already suspects, that you and I are responsible for the deaths that brought him here, that I manipulated Rhett’s mental state with my abilities and used him as our fall guy, he’ll react the way any decent detective would.

He’ll fight and then he’ll push us away. ”

Titus ran a hand through Aodhan’s dark brown hair, then slid his palm to the back of his head to cup the base of his skull.

“We need him to acknowledge his darkness before we can safely welcome him fully into ours. That’s not simple or easy, baby.

That will, in fact, take time. You knew who you were—”

“I know who I am.” Aodhan gripped his wrist but didn’t pull him off. “I’m your Second.” Those gorgeous bubblegum pink eyes of his glinted with wicked determination. “And he’s our Third.”

“Yeah, baby,” he agreed.

They stared at one another for another moment before the doctor grunted and stepped back. “If you’re wrong about this, I’ll be pissed, Mercy.”

“I know.”

“I want him.”

“I know.”

“I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.”

“I know.” Titus tapped at the center of Aodhan’s chest. “It’s because of the bond. You can feel his energy frequency.”

“Other people feel fuzzy or itchy whenever I channel your Connect sixth sense. But not him. He feels like cool, running water against my skin on a scorching summer day. He feels like bliss.”

“It’s because he matches both of us so perfectly.

” He’d explained all of this before, but Titus found himself saying it again, mostly to keep Aodhan from getting too distracted and changing his mind about leaving without touching Calix beforehand.

“Once we’re all connected, there will be less chaos within all three of us. ”

Aodhan hadn’t liked that part at first, was fine with his dark urges and how frequently they sprang up on him, but he’d come around. If he could limit the number of kills he made in a year, they’d have a better chance of escaping notice, after all.

“If he doesn’t like his darkness, we’ll offer him a way to lighten it,” Aodhan hummed. “We get him to confront his true nature, and then we become the balm to lessen the sting. I get it. I get that we need to lead him to water to get him to drink. But how do we find our way to the stream, Mercy?”

“That’s the part we’re going to have to work on while we wait for him to tire out,” he confided. “Think we can manage?”

Aodhan snorted. “Between the two of us? Yeah. Yeah, I think we can come up with something.”

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“If this was what you really wanted, why did you bother keeping up with the act for so long?” Calix winced as Aodhan rotated his shoulder, checking for any damage after leaving him strung up for three days straight.

“What exactly is the ‘this’ you’re referring to, baby?” the doctor asked, though it was clear by his tone he was merely humoring him, more focused on checking the rest of his body than in what was being said between them.

“I’m fine,” Cal snapped, yanking himself free from Aodhan’s hold, even though there wasn’t anywhere for him to go. He was back on the chair, his ankles cuffed to the legs to keep him from kicking the doctor who was crouched at his side with a medical kit open on the ground next to him.

“You’ve got anal lacerations, and we’ve restricted blood flow to your hands for too long,” Aodhan corrected. “Don’t worry. After an hour’s rest, you’ll be ready to be put back on the hook. You Emergents are made of tough stuff.”

“Wait.” Calix grabbed onto Aodhan’s sleeve. “No. I can’t do that again.”

The doctor stood but didn’t shake him off. “Let’s talk, Detective. How does that sound?”

Better than the hook.

“You have questions. Ask them.” Aodan’s free hand brushed a strand of damp hair off of Cal’s forehead before he pressed against him, testing his temperature. “You aren’t getting sick. We can keep going.”

“No.” Calix couldn’t get up because his ankles were attached to the chair, and his wrists were still bound together with handcuffs. The most he could do was cling to the doctor and try to get through to him. “Just tell me what you really want from me. If you aren’t going to eventually let me go—”

“I’ll never let you go,” Aodhan said. “You’re mine.”

“And Titus?”

“Mercy is mine, too.”

“You approached me because of him. Because you were jealous over nothing. There’s nothing between him and me.”

“Did he tell you that?” Aodhan snorted. “Sometimes he’s a real pain in the ass, you know? And I don’t mean in the fun way, FYI. Are you doubting me, baby? Because of a little thing like that? Does it really matter why we met?”

“You hurt me,” he reminded, voice more a growl than anything. This time, he did push Aodhan’s arm away, dropping his hands into his lap.

“But I didn’t kill you, did I? I fell for you instead. Isn’t that worth something?”

“No.”

“Because you don’t believe me?”

“Because it can’t.”

Aodhan was quiet for a second and then stepped behind him, resting both hands on Cal’s shoulders. “I know you’re afraid, but there’s no reason for you to be. We’re

preparing you for something greater. You didn't even have a plan, Calix. You quit your job, and then what?"

"That's up to me."

"Oh, sweetheart, no, no it really isn't." He sighed. "When you think about it, you only have yourself to blame for all of this. If you just told us the truth from the start, we could have skipped over all this training and gone straight to playing happy family."

"Don't you dare preach about honesty to me." Calix tried to shake off the doctor's hold, but Aodhan merely dug his fingers in, hard enough to make Cal wince.

"Everything I've ever said to you was true," Aodhan told him. "Sure, there was a layer of deceit there, and my intentions for you were never pure, but I've wanted you since that night. I've wanted to make you mine and keep you forever. What's more romantic than that?"

"You already have a boyfriend," Cal snapped.

"You aren't opposed to being a part of a throuple."

"That's besides the point!"

Aodhan grinned at him triumphantly, slipping a hand beneath Cal's chin to force his head back so he couldn't look away. "Got you."

Shit.

"Why would I want to be in a relationship with you after everything you've put me through?" Calix countered.

“Why not?” He ran the pad of his thumb over Cal’s jaw. “I can give you everything you’ve ever wanted. In fact, I can give it to you doubled, because I come with Mercy. Isn’t that what you cried out for that night of the reunion? You said it over and over again. Mercy...Mercy...”

It took him a moment, but eventually he recalled seeing that part in the video. The words he’d been mumbling between tears and snot hadn’t been his own though, not really.

“I was remembering something else,” he said. “Something I heard from someone else. I was not calling out for your lover, or begging for you to take pity on me.”

“Pity?” Aodhan’s expression turned blank and he tipped his head. “Should I have pitied you?”

“You’re a damn doctor,” he reminded tersely. “Anyone who gets injured should be—”

“People break all the time. Unless I’m the one breaking them, I don’t see why I should feel anything toward them at all.

Make no mistake, I’m good at my job. I wouldn’t let my indifference interfere with healing someone when I should, but if you’re asking me to also feel things toward them like pity and empathy...

I apologize, Detective, that just isn’t going to happen. ”

Cal frowned.

“Can you tell me you feel that way about the people you encounter on your cases?” Aodhan suddenly asked. “Did you feel pity toward Heathe’s girlfriend when you

heard her skull had been bashed in, for example?”

His eyes narrowed. “Heathe claims there was someone else there that day...Was it you?”

“No, I wouldn’t have been of much use there.”

“How many people have you killed?”

“Does that really matter?”

“Yes.”

“I can tell when you’re lying, baby,” Aodhan confessed. “I think I forgot to mention that before, but you have a pretty obvious tick that gives you away.”

“I do not.”

“You do. Would you like me to tell you what it is?”

Calix tried to lower his head, but Aodhan held firm.

“Uh uh, no running this time. No hiding either.” The doctor produced a scalpel from somewhere, holding it up to the light as though showing it off to Cal.

“I’m not supposed to touch your dick or your hole aside from giving my medical examination.

But we can find a way around that, right?

We can still play together and have a good time. ”

His mouth went dry, but it wasn't just from the threat of the sharp blade or the returning flash of fear. Calix remembered the way it'd felt in his hotel room, when Aodhan had given him one of the best orgasms of his life by carving the letter A into his ass.

"Do you miss my mark, baby?" Aodhan's voice dropped into a low purr. "Did you wish I'd given you something lasting instead?"

Yes.

Good Light. Yes. He'd been so disappointed when the minor cut had started to heal. Had liked that tiny hint of a claim left on his skin.

"I thought you were normal then," Calix said, and Aodhan smirked at him.

"Got you again. You just told a lie."

He frowned, but before he could deny it, the doctor hushed him.

"You get defensive when you're lying, for starters," Aodhan brought the sharp tip of the scalpel close to Cal's eye and tapped the tender under area carefully. "And this muscle twitches ever so slightly."

"That's..." He'd never noticed or felt that happening before.

"Blame your left eye, not me. But it really is incredibly subtle. I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't spent all of this time with you searching for a tell in the first place."

"Why would you do that?"

“Because I’m a liar too, which means I don’t trust anyone else not to be.”

“Smart.”

“Thanks, baby.”

“Aodhan?” Calix waited until the doctor lifted a brow, silently urging him on. “Drop the baby crap. And if you don’t intend to blind me, get that fucking thing out of my face before you slip and do something we both permanently regret.”

He laughed but moved the scalpel away. “Get it out of your system, the cussing? Mercy really doesn’t like it. I wasn’t joking before.”

“I don’t give a shit what he does or doesn’t like.”

“Liar,” Aodhan said in a sing-song voice, chuckling before he tapped the blade against Calix’s left nipple, grinning when Cal tensed. “Where would you like me to cut you? Here? Or,” he dragged the flat side of the scalpel down the center of Cal’s chest all the way to his navel, “lower?”

“Aodhan.”

“Don’t give me that look.” Some of his good mood soured and he scowled. “Don’t act like I’m going to disembowel you or something. Good Light, Cal, I’m still me.”

“I don’t know you,” he said. “I never did.”

“Wrong. You’ve known exactly who I am this entire time. Or are you really going to sit here and pretend you’re too dumb to have suspicions after I brought you to that party? Good people don’t just watch as another being is sawed in half. Not for any reason.”

“I’ve never claimed to be good.”

“Me neither. That’s sort of the point. You’ve always had a glimpse beneath the surface when it came to me. You’ve always known I wasn’t a sweet, vanilla lover, come to whisk you away in some grand fashion.”

“I at least thought you had class,” Calix stated. “I’m seeing now I was wrong.”

“Nah, I’m still classy, the issue is now that you’ve met Mercy, you’ve seen what I have to contend with.

I grew up wealthy, but him? He grew up like an Imperial.

Connects are worlds apart from us. I bet you my entire fortune that none of this was even necessary.

If he’d gone straight to your captain at the I.P.F.

and told him he was taking you as our Third, you would have been handed over with a pretty bow wrapped around this gorgeous neck of yours. ”

Aodhan’s other hand slipped around Cal’s throat, squeezing lightly once before relaxing and just settling there.

“The I.P.F. didn’t own me. They wouldn’t have the authority to—” Calix hissed when the tip of the scalpel knicked the skin just about his navel.

“Whoopsie.”

Cal glared, but didn’t bother trying to pick up his sentence again.

“Want to make a deal?” Aodhan offered. “If you tell me the truth, I’ll let you wrap your hands around your dick and stroke yourself to completion while I cut you the way you like.”

“Truth about what?”

“You want Mercy and me to throw you on the ground and fuck you until you’re a sobbing mess, don’t you?”

The idea of a Connect choosing you as their Third gets you all hot and bothered.

Honestly, you’re angry, but not as angry as you want us to believe.

You’re just putting up a front to protect your ego.

I got to you, didn’t I? Made you want me? Made you care?”

Calix could tell when someone was purposely trying to get a rise out of him. For whatever reason, it was clear the doctor wanted to push his buttons and make him crack. Pretending? What a joke. Aodhan was the one pretending here.

If Cal was smarter, he’d agree to being honest and tell the truth, but even though that wasn’t technically what the doctor wanted to hear, even though he was so obviously hoping Calix would resist, the truth would still bring some inkling of satisfaction to the doctor.

At least if he continued refusing, Cal got something out of it, too.

He really only ever felt in control when he was rushing headfirst into danger.

“If that really was true,” Calix lifted his chin defiantly, “then why was I about to hop

on a spaceship off planet as soon as we said our goodbyes?”

Aodhan paused, staring at him, mood darkening with each passing second until the energy surrounding him became heavy and threatening. “You really were.”

“I told the truth, so—”

The doctor chucked the scalpel across the room, then hauled Calix roughly. He shoved him toward the contraption still dangling from the ceiling, wordlessly fighting Cal when he started to struggle.

“Wait!”

“No, I don’t think I will.” Aodhan attached Cal’s wrists to the loop hanging from the ceiling and strung him up.

“You said—”

“That’s not the truth I was after and you know it,” he growled.

“That doesn’t matter. You said—”

“Didn’t anyone warn you not to play games with a devil?”

Calix swore loudly as the hook was forced back into his body.

“Learn your lesson, baby,” Aodhan hissed from behind him, his hot breath fanning against Cal’s nape. “I set my pride aside and told you how I feel. I expect the same treatment in return. You were going to leave me? Yeah, okay. Now you’ll never get the chance.”

“What if I never tell you I like you back?” Cal seriously must hate himself.

Every last atom of his being screamed at him to shut the hell up, but it was too late.

“Then I guess I’ll have to carve my name into every inch of your flesh so you’ll never forget who you belong to.”

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Cal cried out as his hole was battered, the stretch and burn caused by Aodhan's thick girth making his hands clench hard enough his knuckles felt like they would pop out of their sockets.

His wrists were bound above him, leather straps digging into his tender flesh, and the sound of chains clinking as he was rocked forward, forced to hang there while he was used, threatened to drive him half mad.

He'd take the cock over the awful sex toy that had been forced inside of him these past days—maybe even weeks—though. Just the thought of the anal hook had him clenching around that intruding member, causing the man at his back to moan his name and pick up the pace.

This torture had been happening on a loop ever since he'd foolishly goaded Aodhan.

He'd allowed stubbornness and fear to get the best of him, and it'd been a mistake.

A really, really bad one, because now his entire body trembled and ached.

Tears streamed down his face, most of them soaked up by the blindfold that had been tied around his face at some point.

Neither of his psychopathic captors had attempted to start a meaningful conversation with him since.

If Aodhan was there, he was either fucking Calix or prepping him for the hook.

Titus only made his presence known when he was helping Cal to the bathroom, which was an attached room of some kind, or treating his overused body with sun cream.

Sometimes he'd hold a straw up to Calix's dry lips and allow him some water. There'd been no food—Not that he'd asked for any. He hardly had an appetite.

This couldn't continue. He wouldn't last, and for all he knew, they really would keep this up until he died and simply cut their losses.

Find someone else to take his place.

That thought shouldn't bother him, but the tightness in his chest was too strong to ignore.

Too much had gone into tricking him here for it to be for something as simple as passing the time. He hadn't been unlucky and stumbled into their trap. He'd been chosen. Led here for some reason.

But why?

Titus had been in the process of telling him, he was certain. If only he'd been open to hearing it...But he'd been afraid. Both of himself and of whatever the director had been about to divulge. Now, all he got was Aodhan at his back, mindlessly fucking him without explanation or warning.

Was this it? Was that the big reveal? Had they captured him so he could be used as their fuck toy?

Not that Titus had touched him so far.

It was either Aodhan's cock or the anal hook with the bulbous tip inside of his body. Calix never got a reprieve, was always stuffed full of one thing or the other, as though the chance of him closing up and not remaining open for the next time Aodhan got horny was too inconvenient for the doctor.

The blindfold around his face kept him from seeing his surroundings, but Calix recognized the familiar scent of Aodhan, could place the sound of his footsteps whenever he entered and exited the room.

In the beginning, he'd attempted to get the doctor to speak, but he'd been shushed every time, and once Aodhan's patience had worn thin, his aggression had grown.

Even now, Cal's abused hole ached from the way the hook had been practically torn out of his body without preparation or proper lubrication. The doctor had spit on him a moment before spearing through him with his cock, but even that hadn't been enough at first.

The pain, something he usually begged for, hadn't been welcome this time, made sharper and less pleasant by the fact Calix had no clue what the hell was really going on.

He didn't want to admit it, but he missed the old Aodhan. Missed the way the doctor had laughed with him and made him hurt for both of their pleasure instead of merely his own.

Cal had been used before, had been whittled down to nothing more than an object to fuck. It wasn't being forced to take it that he enjoyed. He liked the possessiveness. Liked being wanted.

There was no passion in this, only Aodhan getting off. Sure, he made sure Calix came every time too, but all that was doing was making it harder. Making it more

confusing.

Because Cal was starting to crave those moments where Aodhan pressed in close and nipped at his neck and wrapped his hand around Cal's dick to pump him to completion. They were the most intimate parts, short and fleeting.

They made him want for something he shouldn't...But his resolve was quickly crumbling and turning to dust.

How many times had he been fucked already?

Dangling from the ceiling like this? The weight was only taken off his arms when he stood on his tiptoes, or at times like these, when Aodhan took him and held him up with a strong grip on his hips.

As soon as the doctor finished, he'd pull out, replace the hook, and leave Cal struggling to maintain balance all over again.

He didn't even get enough time to recover from the orgasms; his exhausted body pushed so far past its limits it was a wonder he hadn't already passed out.

Hell, maybe he had and he just didn't remember.

He couldn't do it again. Couldn't be left here like that. There had to be something specific the other man wanted from him, some reaction, or some plea. Which meant he needed to switch tactics before he got himself killed.

Cal had already tried curses and insults. Threats. Frenzied, panic-filled accusations. After the first couple of times being screwed on Aodhan's cock like some blowup doll, he'd even begged a little. But none of that had worked.

His mind could barely hold more than a few thoughts before fracturing. The mixture of pain, pleasure, and fear gripped him too tightly for rational thinking to take root. And it was only going to get worse the more worn down he became.

There had to be something he was missing.

Something obvious.

The doctor had lured him here, to his home, but he'd waited until the end of the case to do it. Even though he could have easily invited Calix over before then, when the two of them were hooking up on the sly.

Why? Had he merely waited to avoid the chance of anyone coming to look for Cal?

He'd quit the I.P.F. after the case had wrapped, but they'd been expecting him to return to his base to turn in his blaster and clear out his desk and apartment.

He should have arrived days ago, and yet the doctor hadn't mentioned anything about anyone looking for him.

"Aodhan," Calix desperately tried again, his hoarse voice barely audible over the sounds of the clanking metal and the rutting man behind him. "Stop."

"Going to lie again and say you don't like it?" The doctor snorted and then reached around to cruelly flick Cal's weeping dick. "This says otherwise, baby. So does the mess you've already made on the floor."

Did that mean no one had bothered to clean up the spunk on the ground? How was that his fault? It wasn't like he'd asked to come fifty million times!

"Damn it," Calix cursed and felt his resolve completely vanish. "If I hadn't liked you,

I never would have come here in the first place.”

Aodhan instantly stilled.

“I was going to leave. But I had to see you first. I was hoping...Good Light. I was hoping we could stay in touch. I wanted to keep seeing you. I didn’t want this to be over.”

The doctor seemed to process his words before he twisted Calix’s nipple hard enough to make him gasp.

“That’s all past tense, Detective,” Aodhan said.

“I liked the guy who gave a shit about me and wanted me,” Cal stated. “Not the one who’s been using me like his own personal flashlight.”

“Flashlights don’t come too.”

“Aodhan. Are you really going to stay angry? I just told you what you wanted.”

“I’m not so easily satisfied.”

This wasn’t going to get him anywhere. Titus was right. Aodhan operated on instinct, not reasoning, which meant he wouldn’t let up until he wanted to.

Or...

Until someone else made him.

“Titus.” Cal was always too exhausted and embarrassed to talk to the older man whenever he helped him. That was most likely another mistake. But...what were the

odds that the director was also in the room, watching? “Mercy.”

Aodhan let out a frustrated growl, but he didn’t start fucking into him again, remaining still with his cock buried all the way to the hilt as time seemed to freeze around them.

Calix held his breath, unsure what to do next or whether or not he’d done the right thing at all. But one thing was clear, even if nothing else was. Aodhan wasn’t in charge here.

Titus Mercer was.

A million and one questions raced through his mind, but Cal bit down on his tongue, forcing himself to remain silent until he was given a clue. Speaking out of turn now might set him back to square one, and he really didn’t want that.

“Well?” Aodhan finally broke first. “Are you begging or not, Detective? Want someone to save you from the big bad devil at your back?”

It was either the doctor’s way of leading him where he needed to go, or he was fucking with him in the wrong direction to be an asshole. Unfortunately, Cal was out of time and couldn’t waste precious seconds trying to suss out which way Aodhan was trying to play this.

“Yes,” Calix licked his dry lips, wincing at the cracked sound of his voice. “Yes, I am. I’m begging.”

“For what?” Aodhan asked.

“...Mercy.” That’s what the doctor had called him, Cal was sure of it. And not just about that, Aodhan had spoken to Titus with care and maybe even something deeper.

Something that could be considered akin to love.

If it hadn't come from a complete and total psycho.

Which was what Aodhan was. Only a psychopath would trick someone into falling for them, only to betray them like this.

And all while they had another lover on the side.

Or, that probably wasn't accurate.

Judging by what Titus had told Calix, he was the sidepiece, not the director.

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“He’s your Second, isn’t he?” Obviously that was the case. Titus was a Connect and Aodhan had to be his first chosen bondmate. “The reason you’re confident enough to let us sleep together is because he’s already bonded to you.”

There was a soft rustling sound somewhere on the other side of the room, and Cal tilted his head toward it, unable to make out much of anything else when Aodhan suddenly stepped away from him completely.

Cal hissed as that cock was dragged out, then waited, almost not believing when he was left empty and the hook wasn’t replaced. He was sore, could feel fluids dripping down his thighs, yet his dick didn’t soften any, even with the attention to his prostate gone.

He floundered, struggling on his tiptoes a second before the chains holding his arms up were lowered half an inch.

It wasn’t much, but it was enough for his feet to fully touch the cold ground.

The massive sigh of relief left him in a whoosh, one he wasn’t even embarrassed about, but he tensed all over again when he felt the doctor’s warm presence move around him.

“I’ve got to leave for my shift, Detective,” Aodhan sounded disappointed. “You owe me one for not letting me come first. Now I’ll have to spend the rest of my day hard for you.”

A snap of anger flashed through him, almost making him growl a reply, but he caught

himself. Cal pressed his mouth into a firm line, not daring to respond to that accusation, lest the inch he'd just been gifted be taken back.

Aodhan chuckled and then chucked him under the chin with a single finger. There were kissing noises, like they were making out right in front of Cal, and then a moment later, the sound of the door opening and closing came, followed by a thick silence.

One he wasn't buying for a second.

Calix squirmed, certain he wasn't alone despite having no indication otherwise aside from his gut feeling. The same feeling he always got when in the director's presence.

"I know you're there," he cut through the silence first, unsurprisingly. When the other man in the room didn't say anything right away, Cal gave in to the fear, allowing a thread of it to enter his tone. "Please."

"What are you asking for, little monster?"

He flinched at the nickname. "Don't."

"Why not? A thing should be called as it is, don't you agree?"

And you?" A hand, colder than the one belonging to the doctor, reached out and lightly grasped Calix's jaw, tipping his head slightly back.

"You're a monstrous thing if I ever saw one.

I'll have you know, I'm very familiar with monstrous things, Cal.

You could even say I know them...intimately. "

A shiver raced down his spine before he could help it, and the director chuckled darkly at him.

“What is this?” Calix forced himself to ask.

“You were doing so well with being honest. Are you sure you want to turn back now?” It was impossible to tell what Titus thought about that, whether he was curious or disappointed.

Whether he even cared one way or the other.

“Yes.” Somehow, now that it was the two of them alone again, the courage he’d managed to scrape together fled.

“Why? Do you think I’m not capable of doing what Aodhan’s been doing? Think I can’t use you in the same fashion and make you feel small?”

“You admit it?” Calix had thought that was what they’d been doing, but even seeing their aim hadn’t prevented him from falling for the trap.

“Unlike you, I’m not afraid of my own desires. You’re so clever, Detective. Why bother with prolonging the inevitable?”

“You’re right. I’m no fool,” Cal added quietly. “It’s obvious you’re the one in charge here.”

“I am,” he didn’t even try to deny it, his thumb stroking against Cal’s bottom lip. The touch was soft, careful.

Terrifying in its possessiveness.

And thrilling.

Oh, so thrilling.

“Aodhan is my Second,” Titus finally confirmed.

“And your Third?”

“Is that your adorable way of asking if we’ve got one?”

Calix refused to answer that, and Titus chuckled.

“We do.”

He wouldn’t feel bad.

He wouldn’t—

“Don’t be sad,” the director cooed, proving that Calix had obviously given himself away somehow. “Come on. Tell me what you’ve been thinking.”

He shouldn’t, but...He’d gotten them talking to him again. Shouldn’t he take advantage of that while he could?

“You said you wanted me...” It was too embarrassing to say and Calix found the rest of his sentence dying in his throat.

“Let’s work our way up to it, shall we?” Titus let him go and stepped back. “You performed so well the night of the reunion, little monster. Acted exactly how I’d hoped you would. I never got the chance to properly reward you for that.”

“Reward me?”

He hummed. “For acting on instinct and being yourself. Although I suppose, since you were only aroused because you thought it was Heathe, you should earn a punishment instead. You used to have a crush on him, did you not?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to deny it, but Calix caught himself.

“I did, but it was never all that serious.” He’d liked the other student in high school, but it’d been the epitome of childhood crushes, never slipping into anything stronger than that.

“I would have slept with him that night if he’d asked me, but I would have left him in the morning without a second thought. ”

“Don’t say any of this to Aodhan. Don’t get me wrong, I’m furious at you for thinking about spreading for someone else, but unlike our delectable doctor, I can think rationally.

You didn’t know us then, didn’t know how badly we wanted you.

It’s forgivable.” He walked around Cal, making a soothing sound when Calix tensed.

“Relax, I’m going to apply sun cream, that’s all.

He doesn’t have any scheduled surgeries today, which means he could decide to be bad and leave the hospital early. ”

“What about you?” he asked, mostly to distract himself as he felt those cool fingers dip between his cheeks. They prodded at his sore entrance carefully, rubbing cream around his puckered hole before slipping inside of him. He whimpered, but was

hushed again.

“Relax,” Titus repeated, wrapping an arm around Cal’s waist to help keep him still as he worked on pushing globs of ointment into his torn passage. “I took a few weeks off. They won’t expect me back for a while. That means we have plenty of time to get acquainted.”

“Fantastic.”

He shoved his finger deeper, holding that position when Calix swore.

“Sarcasm won’t get you anywhere right now, little monster.

It’s best you behave while I’m being kind.

Admittedly, there are quite a few things I’m cross with you about, your brief yet lingering attraction toward Heathe bottom of the barrel.

Aodhan isn’t the only one you should be wary of. ”

“I can say with absolute honesty,” Cal replied, “that I am one hundred percent aware of exactly who I need to be most wary of.”

“Good boy.” He seemed pleased by that response, even going so far as to plant a lingering kiss on the curve of Cal’s left shoulder before he started gently massaging his hole again.

“I made Aodhan believe I had lingering feelings for you by leaving out that article. I knew it would be enough to get him to react.”

“Feelings?” he shook his head. “You’ve never had feelings for me. Don’t take this the

wrong way, Director, but I'm not entirely convinced you have feelings at all."

"I do," he reassured. "Not many, but there are a few. A few more, now that I've taken a mate."

"I confess I don't know a lot about your species, but I do know Aodhan Solace is barely a step above you in the feelings department.

He can't be enlightening you all that much.

"Emotions were supposedly shared through the Connect bond.

Cal didn't entirely understand how it worked, but since they were both pretty inept in that area...

"If you'd stuck around instead of running to the Academy, you would have experienced all of the emotions I'm capable of firsthand."

"What...does that mean?"

"Can you stop playing dumb now, Calix? It really doesn't suit you, and it's making me wonder if I might not have chosen wrong after all."

That was a dangerous thing to say, and the threat didn't go unnoticed.

Or unheeded.

As much as he hated falling in line, as shitty as it made him feel, there was really only two ways this could go. He could push things too far and really end up dead.

Or he could give in, figure out exactly what it was these two men wanted from him,

and get it over with.

“I know what it sounds like you’re alluding to,” Cal tentatively began, “but...”

“You don’t respect yourself enough to believe it could be true,” Titus finished for him, humming in understanding. “All right. I’ll go easier on you for now. I’m telling you I wanted you back then, Detective. I’m saying I still want you now.”

He couldn’t help but scoff at that notion. “You already have Aodhan.”

“You sound jealous,” Titus noted.

“I’m not.”

“There’s no need to be.”

“I’m not.” Good Light help him, he was. He was, despite all of this and all of the things he’d just discovered. Despite the fact he’d been used and there was a chance none of what’d transpired between him and the doctor had ever been real.

Cal was jealous of the thought of Aodhan with the director.

Jealous of the idea of Titus with Aodhan.

Those old longings he’d thought he’d put to bed ages ago had crept to the surface again and Cal knew he couldn’t trust them. He’d always known Titus Mercer was an impossibility. The fantasy of a horny teenager on the run. That’s all.

Only, some of those fantasies had been confirmed, had they not? Titus’s admission that he was in charge, that he ruled over Aodhan, meant he was every bit as dominant in real life as he’d been in Cal’s imagination.

The doctor had gotten to experience it firsthand.

All while he'd been playing with Cal on the side.

Lying and using him.

Pretending to care.

"I'm not jealous," he stated more clearly. "I'm livid. You tricked me. Both of you. And now you want me to believe it's because of some twisted sense of desire? Ever consider asking me out instead?"

"Aodhan would never have gone for something so simple. No, he needed to be led to that conclusion on his own. There was no other way."

"You've just confessed to tricking him, too. What would he think about all of this, huh? If he found out it was all a manipulation to get him to dance to your tune?" When he didn't receive a reply, he tried a different angle. "Conclusion? What conclusion?"

"Have you ever dreamed of me, little monster?" Titus eased a second finger into his hole. "I still think of the way you looked at me that first time we met."

It'd been in the police station, where Cal had already spent the past four days being interrogated. Titus had walked in to get Bruce, and the two of them had locked eyes. To say his first thought wasn't that Titus Mercer was the most gorgeous man he'd ever seen would be a lie.

"Answer the question, Cal," Titus suggested. "Or, would you rather I replace the hook and string you back up? Hmm? We can try this again some other time, maybe tomorrow, when you're once again brought to the state of exhaustion and too tired to

fight.”

“I haven’t thought about you in years,” Calix stated. “But before you reach for the hook, don’t take it personally. I tried hard not to think about anything from my life here.”

“I didn’t ask if you’ve thought about me. I asked if you’ve dreamed about me.”

He swallowed and caught himself just before he shifted on his feet and gave his nerves away. “Yes. Happy?”

“In what capacity?”

“I…” Was he ordering Cal to describe his wet dreams to him? Good Light. That was too far. He—

Titus slipped a third finger into him and stretched them, scraping against the tender parts that were already rubbed raw.

“You saw how I looked at you the day we first met,” Calix whispered, hanging his head. “Of course I’ve dreamed of you. Not of this…exact setup, but…”

“It’s not too far off.” Titus kissed his shoulder lightly again. “I know this is difficult for you, that you still need time to adjust, but don’t push me too hard, little monster. There’s a reason even someone like Aodhan Solace submits in my presence.”

Why did that make it sound like Aodhan was worse than Calix was even imagining? A master manipulator and a cold-blooded killer, but what else?

“Who is he?” Calix couldn’t help but ask weakly. “Who is he really?”

“Mine,” Titus replied, then made a soothing sound in the back of his throat before Cal could react to the claim. “And yours.”

If they’d taught him anything at all by doing this, it was that Aodhan had never once ever really been his. No matter how badly he wanted him to be. Then, and now. “No.”

“Are you saying you don’t want him anymore? He’ll be pained to hear that. But if you’re good for me, maybe I can be convinced to keep this conversation between the two of us. What he doesn’t know can’t hurt you.”

Calix’s brow furrowed.

“Or you can keep acting tough, Detective. Whichever direction you lead, I’ll follow.”

“...Why? Why are you doing this? If it’s just because you wanted me, fine. I’m right here. I’m tied up and I can’t fight back. Just fuck me and get it over—”

“That’s your problem,” Titus cut him off. “You’re always trying to do things the easy way. If you’d used the brain I know you have that day in the school parking lot, for example, the two of us never would have met.”

“Don’t.” He’d always wondered what the other man truly thought of him, but he’d also always known he never wanted to hear it. “Don’t bring that up.”

“Why not? It’s our beginning, isn’t it?”

“No.”

“How come?”

“Because you and I have never even started.” Too late, he realized it was the wrong thing to say.

“Is that what you want, little monster?” Titus practically purred. “A proper start? It’s not too late for one.”

“I want you to unchain me,” he said. “I want to leave.”

The director gave a sigh, a wealth of disappointment in the sound. “It seems you really aren’t worn out after all. Let’s try again tomorrow, shall we?”

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Titus removed his fingers—no doubt to replace the hook in Cal's ass—and Calix forced himself to ask one of the questions he'd been pretending not to have.

“It was you, wasn't it?” The accusation slipped past his lips, and he continued without giving the other man a chance to confirm or deny it. “That day in the woods. It was you.”

If Heathe hadn't been the one who planned the night of the reunion, it was safe to assume he also wasn't responsible for what had gone down in the woods.

A part of Calix had always known it wasn't Heathe, but he'd buried those thoughts down deep, unwilling to allow them to clutter his mind in the middle of work.

He'd convinced himself that, no matter what he believed, at the end of the day, it was clear whoever had accosted him with his own blaster had meant to punish him for something he'd done.

And he'd done a lot that was worth being punished for.

“If it's really about having me, that day in the woods was your chance,” Calix scrambled to piece things together now that he'd been gifted a single moment of clarity.

Any second, the director could decide to shove the sex toy back into him, rendering him a mess of scrambled thoughts and jumbled nerves all over again.

“You made me think it had something to do with Nero and Heathe. Why?”

“I was disciplining you,” the director said. He stepped closer, the heat from his large frame enveloping Calix’s bare back, so close, and yet keeping enough of a distance that they didn’t touch anywhere. “It worked, didn’t it?”

“What?”

“Subconsciously, my intentions wormed their way into you. There were no more entertaining thoughts about dating that forensic scientist after our time in the forest.”

Mitri Meadows was one of the people Calix had met while working the case. He’d been there that day as well, at the scene of the crime, doing his job. They both had. There’d never been any mention of—

Oh.

That was right.

Cal had forgotten. Bruce had tried setting the two of them up that day, hadn’t he?

“It’d been a joke,” he whispered, the uncertainty in his tone ringing clear enough even he could hear it. But it didn’t make him back down. “Bruce wanted me to get out more, that’s all.”

“We both know that’s a lie, Detective.”

Cal stiffened. “No part of me ever considered going out with Mitri. Why would I? I’m not staying on planet. I’m—”

“You aren’t going anywhere. I thought that much was obvious by now.

” A hand stroked down the length of Calix’s spine, starting from the spot just beneath

his neck, trailing down to his tailbone slowly.

“If it helps any, this almost came as a surprise to me as well. I thought we’d have much more time to get you acclimated and warm you up to the idea.

I didn’t think things would fall into place this easily.

Anytime people are introduced as components to a scheme, there’s always an increased chance of things going awry.

And Aodhan...Well. You know better than most how unpredictable he can be.”

There was too much information coming at him all at once, it was impossible to untangle and make sense of it all, so Calix tried to focus on the most important bits. The parts that might help him better understand—and therefore use to his advantage—his situation.

“What am I really doing here?” he asked. “Why did you attack me in the woods? Why did you let Aodhan...do all those things with me if you’ve already claimed him? If you’re attracted to me, why haven’t you done anything about it?”

“You mean why is our doctor always the one having all the fun with your hole?” Titus slapped Cal’s ass, grabbing a handful of his cheek and squeezing until Cal was left clenching his teeth against the sting.

“You have great instincts, can sense danger miles away even without my influence. And what’s more, you have training from the Academy.

This is a puzzle you can solve on your own.

Stop trying to lead me into doing the hard work for you.

We've only been at this a week. I've got all the time in the world to spare for you, little monster. ”

So it'd only been one week. That was something, at least.

...something bad.

Because if Aodhan and Titus could make seven days stretch and feel like three months, there was no telling what else they were capable of doing. How else they would choose to break Calix down.

“I need to hear it come from you,” he insisted. “Just tell me.”

“It's your addiction to adrenaline that's caused it,” the director continued as though Cal hadn't spoken. “It's made you rash and reckless.”

“Clearly, since I find myself here, in the clutches of a psychopath.”

“There you go, getting hot and bothered again, forgetting about the danger you're in and opting to run that filthy mouth of yours.

You're lucky that I like it. That I, unlike our doctor, have patience.

True patience at that. We're going to have to reset your flight or fight responses, but one step at a time. ”

Cal didn't like the sound of that. “Titus...Mercy.”

He snorted. “That won't work just because you want it to. There's no easy way out of this, little monstrous thing.”

He kept calling him that. Kept referring to him as a monster.

Aodhan had obviously told him all about the kinks Calix liked, how he enjoyed being hurt, and bled.

How he liked it rough. The video they'd filmed of him at the reunion would have clued them into that all on its own, however.

No wonder the doctor had spoken so frankly with him about his darker sexual proclivities. He'd already known Cal would agree.

That Cal would salivate at the mouth to participate.

Aodhan and Titus were in it together. The first had taken Calix at the reunion, the second in that forest at the crime scene...Titus had also shot and killed Amory in the middle of their damn kitchen...Cleanly. Without hesitation.

As though it wasn't his first time.

"I don't think you're one to speak on monsters," Cal risked saying, sensing he was letting the older man lead him where he wanted, but unable to hold back any longer.

He was proving he no longer had a strong will to live, that his penchant for pushing things past the threshold that would guarantee survival was real.

Even knowing that, he couldn't bring himself to stop; the rush that came from diving headfirst, from toeing the line with danger, bubbled within him, chasing off the discomfort he'd been feeling the past three days.

"You've admitted to orchestrating several crimes, and you murdered someone in cold blood.

Whether she was a wanted criminal or not, that doesn't matter.

You're going to have to kill me, too. There's no way I'm going to let you fuck me after all of this and get away with the things you've done.

If that's the case, just get it over with.

I don't want to be here any longer than I have to be. ”

“You still think this ends with your death, Detective?” Titus obviously didn't agree with that assessment. “You're either failing to see the big picture or pretending not to.”

“I agree to your demands, and you let me live. I refuse, and you put me down. Pretty sure I'm seeing exactly what I'm meant to be seeing.”

“Wrong.”

“Try removing the blindfold then,” he dared. “Maybe that'll help clear things up for me.”

“Adorable. Should I? It won't bother me, but you... We both know you won't be able to handle the embarrassment. Do you really think you can look me in the eye right now? If that's the case...” His fingers tugged lightly at the knot securing the thick black material over Calix's eyes.

“Wait.” Fuck. He couldn't be this weak. This pathetic. And yet... He hung his head again.

Titus was right. The thought of meeting the other man's gaze made Calix's heart thump wildly in his chest, and not in a good way. At least right now, there was a

shield of sorts between them. A screen that allowed him to lean into the false bravado.

One it'd just become painfully apparent they both knew was an act.

"If you say it, I'll tell you whether or not you're right," Titus darkly promised.

"Isn't that a good compromise?" His hand shifted, roaming up Calix's side, the pads of his fingers just barely making contact.

"Should I help make you more honest? You've shown interest in speeding this up.

If you want answers so badly, you'll have to be more willing to engage in a give and take of sorts. "

"Why do I get the feeling that if I agree to that, I'll be the one doing all the giving, and you'll be the one doing all the taking?"

"I can give too." Titus moved closer, until Calix felt the unmistakable bulge of the man's cock press against his sore ass cheeks. "Would you like that?"

The events of the forest played over and over again in his mind as he considered his options. There was no escaping this, but was there even a chance for him to gain the upper hand when he still felt so left in the dark? At least if this was Aodhan, he'd have experience to help him, but with Titus...

The man had fucked him with a gun one time and hadn't revealed himself in the process.

Aside from that, he'd never made any moves on Cal, hadn't even flirted with him during their interactions at the hospital and the station.

If not for this, for the way he so obviously wanted him now, and remembering how openly he'd talked about wanting to fuck Cal in the woods, he'd never guess the director's interest.

None of this was fair. And that was the worst part. The part where Calix felt wronged, not because of his current predicament, but because he still didn't know what was really going on or how deeply the other man's interest actually ran.

Sick. That's what he was.

But he wasn't alone in that.

"If I say no?" He clenched his fists and held himself steady, refusing to give in and rub back against that bulge. "If I tell you to back off and say I don't want you?"

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“Then I’d respect your decision,” Titus replied without missing a beat, and when that clearly stunned Cal into silence, he chuckled. “I’m not Aodhan, little monster. I don’t need to force anyone onto my cock, not even you. You’ll find yourself there eventually, of your own volition.”

“No.” Calix tried to ignore the images flashing through his mind, the pictures he automatically conjured of him and the director in bed together.

What they might look like tangled up in the sheets.

What that cock he could still feel pressed between his cheeks might feel like buried deep inside of him.

He could try to convince himself that those were old fantasies coming to light, brought on by insanity and lack of sleep and dehydration, or any other number of excuses.

But it wouldn’t be true. He’d always wanted what the director offered, had yearned for the other man to pin him down and take advantage of him.

But that was in the past and this was now.

This was reality.

That made a big difference.

...didn’t it?

“I remember the way you used to look at me,” Titus repeated his earlier sentiment. “At the police station. In the hospital and the courtroom. It’s not like the way Aodhan first looked at me, all empty, waiting for me to fill him up. No, you were different. Pleading, almost.”

“I wasn’t.” Had he been? Back then, he’d been a desperate kid praying someone would come and save him from the tremendous mistake he’d made.

Hoping someone would come and save him from himself.

“I helped you escape from that lapse in judgment, didn’t I?” Titus shifted behind him, and almost immediately, warmth began to radiate from beneath Calix’s skin. “Helped you get away with it.”

“You didn’t do shit. I was innocent.” He shook his head, trying to shake off the feeling, only realizing at the last second that this too was familiar. “No, stop. You did this before. In the woods. You...”

“Pheromones,” Titus reminded. “That’s what this is. They’re useful for so many things, like making a person scared or sad or...” The sound of a bottle cap popping open interrupted him a second before something cold and plastic was introduced to Cal’s entrance.

“Wait.” Cal tried to struggle, but there was nowhere to go. “Don’t.”

“Wrong answer. And it was so obvious, too. I was going to say pheromones can be used on libido.”

Calix made a sound of protest as the bottle was squeezed, and he felt a gush of chilly fluid shoot inside of him.

When he rubbed his thighs together, it made a slick sound, the lewd noise causing his dick to lengthen.

He felt like he was on fire all of a sudden, his balls aching and full, the need for relief all-consuming to the point he almost gave in and begged to be given the choice again.

“I bet you want me to ask you if I can fuck you now.” He clicked his tongue. “Unfortunately for you, that ship has sailed. I don’t give many second chances, Calix, and you’ve yet to earn one from me. So, no, little monster, you won’t be getting my cock today.”

The bottle was removed, but before Cal could complain, something familiar was brought to his needy hole.

The end of the hook slipped back into him with ease, the lube that had just been pumped into him allowing slick passage as it was pushed snugly in place.

When the tip dragged against Cal’s prostate, he moaned, but that was all the attention that spot was given.

As soon as he’d inserted it, Titus let go and moved away.

“Wait,” Cal demanded when he heard the footsteps heading in the opposite direction.

“I don’t have time to coddle you more today,” Titus said.

Despite his words, another wave of heat entered Cal, and he would have doubled over if not for the restraints still holding his arms up in the air. At least they hadn’t been lifted again, and he could stand flat on his feet for better balance.

The need was eating away at him like a live thing, his nipples perking up and his hips

starting to flick of their own accord. With every movement, he felt the curve of the hook lodged within him shift, though it didn't come close to the place he wanted it.

"Stop," Calix finally begged. "Please. Make it stop."

"I offered that to you already and you chose to reject me. Actions have consequences, Detective, and I've already helped you escape yours once."

"Titus." He could feel precome streaming out of his tip, the lack of friction causing him to whine. "Mercy. Please."

"Stay in here like a good boy and think of what you've done wrong, little monster." The door opened. "Maybe if you repent enough, I'll be kinder to you next time."

The door didn't slam shut, and there was no finalizing sound like the turning of a lock or anything of the sort. But Calix felt trapped all the same.

Alone in that room, Cal mindlessly fucked himself on the end of the toy as best he could, sobbing as all thoughts of solving riddles or escape were fully consumed by lust and the need to come.

The need to be taken and claimed by the monster who'd threatened him with that potential fate already.

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Aodhan bit his bottom lip to keep from moaning as he watched the video clip Mercy just sent him.

In it, Calix was wildly thrusting, rocking back onto the anal hook, slapping his dick against his own stomach from the force of his movements. Desperate to get off. Just how they liked him.

It was tempting to drop everything, get into his hovercar, and speed home, but that wasn't part of the plan, and Aodhan had already been warned not to lose his cool.

As though reading his mind even from this distance, another text from Mercy came in, momentarily blocking out part of the video on the small multi-slate screen.

Mercy: Behave.

Aodhan rolled his eyes, sneering when the clip ended. Before he could allow himself to replay it, he tossed the device aside, barely paying attention to it clattering on his desk. He was in his office in the hospital, hours from an important consultation.

With fucking blue balls.

He gripped his hard-on in his slacks and adjusted himself in his chair, widening his thighs for more comfort. This morning, he really should have pushed the issue, forced Calix to milk his cock like he was supposed to.

But that also would be breaking the rules, and he had agreed with Mercy at the start he'd follow them.

They both would, and if Aodhan broke them, that gave Mercy grounds to break them as well and...

He pursed his lips, brow furrowing.

He knew Mercy wanted Calix just as much as he did—he could literally feel as much through their mating bond—but that didn't mean the cumbersome director wouldn't change his mind. Until they locked Cal down as their Third, anything could happen, and Aodhan didn't want to risk that.

He'd meant every word he'd spoken to both Cal and Mercy. He wanted the detective. He wanted him tied to them permanently, with nowhere left to run, and no hope of ever escaping, even if he somehow managed to find a way out of their sight. It was almost unexplainable, this urge to defile and own.

The only other time he'd felt anything even remotely like it had been when he'd fallen into Mercy's trap.

Aodhan would get his way. He always did.

Which meant sticking to the rules and trusting his man's plan would get the job done.

His multi-slate chimed, pulling him from his thoughts, but his excitement thinking it was Mercy died the second he saw his brother's name flash across the screen.

"To what do I owe this rare honor?" he answered, making sure to fill his tone with a teasing he wasn't actually up to giving.

Still, it was only a little bit fake. There were few emotions he felt, and even fewer people he could feel them with or for, but his little brother happened to fall into that category.

That was why Aodhan had pushed him into the swimming pool when they were kids. He hadn't really been pushing Zane at all. He'd been pushing himself. Seeing how far these emotions truly went. How far his limits were.

Since their dad had fished Zane out early, Aodhan hadn't gotten a clear answer that day.

But there was always tomorrow.

Maybe this time Calix could help him.

"I can't make it this weekend," Zane Solace's clipped tone came through the speaker on the device. Aodhan might have taken his icy demeanor personally, if not for the fact Zane was like that with most people, aside from the Retinue.

The Retinue were a group of college students tasked with protecting the Prince of Vitality—as though their prince needed any kind of protecting. Hell, the way Aodhan saw it, it'd be a better use of their time to protect Vitality from that entire Imperial family, but what did he know.

Or care.

"Breaking your promises already," he clicked his tongue, even though he wasn't particularly saddened by this news. He'd actually forgotten about his brother's scheduled visit amidst all the excitement with Cal. "Is that how this is going to be?"

"I took care of your annoying coworker problem," Zane reminded. "My visits are even more for show now than they were before. Neither of us will lose sleep if I skip one."

"Big plans with my brother-in-law?"

“My husband and I are going somewhere, yes.”

Aodhan laughed, happy he'd struck a nerve as intended. “Always so possessive, little brother. You need to learn to chill.”

“No.”

Zane and his husband had only been married for a couple of months now, but the blowback from his wedding still lingered. One of the leads Calix had for his case happened at the wedding. Only, the detective had no clue that both killings that night had been done by the brothers.

“We both know you used my coworker to help solve your own problem,” Aodhan pointed out. “He made a perfect fall guy for you, didn't he? Everyone believed it.”

“Of course they did,” Zane scoffed, as arrogant as ever.

To get back someone who'd wronged him, Zane had murdered a man and framed someone else for the deed.

That someone else had been a pesky coworker of Aodhan's, who'd gone to the planet to celebrate the wedding along with other members of their hospital staff.

He'd tied it all back to the Imperial Heir of Vitality, killing two birds with one stone, so to speak. It'd been a flawless plan, really.

Except he'd forgotten to read Aodhan into it, and that very same night, Aodhan had ended up taking a life as well.

Zane had taken out a heart though. Aodhan had removed a head.

His killings had to fit a pattern in order to lead the I.P.F.

where he wanted them. They were just lucky their schemes didn't get tangled up.

If Zane had ruined things for him, not even the fact that they were brothers would have saved him from Aodhan's wrath.

He'd put too much into things, traveled away from Mercy in order to plant bread crumbs. Contacting the captain of Calix's branch and demanding he put their Third on the case had been the final move.

"We might not share blood, but we're definitely cut from the same cloth," Aodhan chuckled, then, when he didn't receive a reply, sighed and asked, "Well, aren't you at least going to ask me about your brother-in-law?"

"Last I checked, you and Titus Mercer aren't married." There was a long pause and then, "Unless this is your way of hinting that you've finally found a suitable Third."

Aodhan leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowing slightly. Despite the way he'd just chastised Zane, he found he didn't like the thought of his brother talking about Calix in any fashion. Still... "And if I am?"

"Then I would congratulate you," Zane replied. "If that's what you're doing. Is it?"

"We've yet to secure him but...yes."

Zane made a reproachful sound.

"Don't look down on me, little brother."

"Impossible, considering we're the same height." There was another thoughtful pause

before Zane gave in to whatever he was thinking. He always did. He was easy like that. “Perhaps you should have remained on Vitality after all, you have everything it takes to be considered a Devil.”

Had he just thought his brother easy? Scratch that. He meant manipulative.

“I was a Devil, before I transferred off planet for med school elsewhere. Nice try,” Aodhan drawled, “but you’ll have to do better if you want to pull my strings.

” He moved to prop an elbow on the edge of his desk, curious why Zane would want him on the same planet.

“What? Mom and Dad still giving you a hard time for shirking their last name?”

Zane had waited until the day of the wedding to announce that he was dropping Solace and taking on his husband’s last name instead.

To say it wasn’t well received would be an understatement.

“You were always my replacement,” he said matter-of-factly. “The whole reason they took you in was to ensure the family line continued to run the businesses. You can’t blame them for their hostility now that you’ve shattered all their hard work.”

“Understood.” It was impossible to tell if he’d hit another nerve or not. Zane didn’t give things away unless it was regarding his husband. That was the only time he couldn’t seem to control himself in front of Aodhan.

“Love makes you stupid,” he grunted, only to be met with a similar sound from his brother.

“Says the man who’s about to willingly enter a three-way relationship.”

“Comes with the territory. I knew what I was signing up for when I bound myself to Mercy.”

“So, you’re doing this for him? Going to accept another body into your bed because he asked you to?”

“On the contrary,” Aodhan argued. “I was the one who asked him.”

Because they might need a third in order to survive, but Aodhan sure as hell wasn’t going to allow anyone to get near them that he hadn’t picked himself. That’s also why this thing with Cal was so enthralling.

“I always believed it would be as you said,” he admitted, not sure why he was bothering, aside from the fact that at least he was comfortable knowing Zane wouldn’t judge him any more than he already did.

“That one day, Mercy would come to me and order me to accept some stranger. That I would never be able to feel even a modicum of what I do for him for someone else. But that isn’t what happened. ”

A pod needed sex to dissipate and flow energy properly between them, so it wasn’t like Aodhan could have ordered Mercy not to sleep with whichever unlucky bastard got chosen.

But then he’d met Cal. Had felt the tight grip of his hole around his cock, heard the soft, mewling sounds he made when he came.

He liked Calix Valimir. Liked the way he begged and cried all pretty. Liked how he craved to be hurt.

Liked that his dark pieces matched so perfectly with Aodhan’s and Mercy’s.

But more than that, he liked the way the guy talked and how he presented himself. How he tried to come off as a badass and strong, when in reality, he was lonely and broken inside.

Weightless. Floating without a tether, with nowhere to go and nothing to bind him.

Aodhan used to be like that.

He knew what it was like.

He knew that kind of quiet torture.

The fact that Calix had endured it, all on his own, was admirable. But no matter how proud of him he was for it, that didn't mean Aodhan was above using that weakness to his advantage.

"If I recall correctly," Zane said, "Connects need their mates to give permission for a bond to be set. Isn't that right?"

"Yes."

"And you're confident you can get that from this person?"

"I'm confident it doesn't matter."

Mercy said it did—constantly, like a damn broken record—but Aodhan felt otherwise.

"What's consent really?" He stood and stalked to the other side of his office, glaring out the window at the bustling streets below. On Vitality, where his brother lived, it was no doubt raining, but here the sun was out and the weather was warm.

People were taking advantage, those dressed in office wear and kids from the nearby college traveling from one building to another, probably for lunch.

He should end this discussion and get to the cafeteria before all the good options ran out and he was forced to pretend like he didn't mind eating vegetables as a whole meal again. Sometimes, he wished he could shed this whole tedious facade, do away with the nice guy act and just be.

Existence came with a price, though, one he paid in false smiles and smooth talking.

And what was the prize in all that? First, it'd been Mercy.

Now it was going to be Cal.

"Permission for something to happen or be done," Zane smartly defined.

"Funny."

"Whatever you do, make sure it doesn't bleed into my affairs."

"Just tell me not to piss off Mom and Dad."

"I don't care what they think," Zane stated. "But don't do anything to tarnish the Solace name. It's already hard enough to deal with them after I ditched it. If something happens and they no longer have their golden boy to fall back on..."

Aodhan rolled his eyes. "I've literally never taken their wants into consideration."

"Oh, I know. We all do."

A couple crossed the street directly in front of the hospital, holding hands, and

Aodhan's gaze tracked them as they entered a small soup restaurant famous for its fried dumplings.

Cal liked fried dumplings.

Mercy preferred them boiled.

Aodhan didn't care either way.

"Look, some brotherly advice—though I'm not sure why I'll bother," Zane said.

"This isn't like everything else you've come across.

Connects are an ancient species, with all the rules and regulations that come with being as old as creation itself.

You can't bulldoze your way through this one.

A bond can't be forced. You know this. You've experienced it. "

Yes, but by the time they'd gotten to that point, Aodhan had been more than willing to mate with Mercy. He'd even come to terms with what that would mean for their future, that they'd eventually have to add a third person to the mix.

Mercy had found him at a time when he'd been at his most vulnerable, and now, they'd discovered Calix at his lowest point. The formula was similar enough that it should work in their favor, and yet...

"I'm...nervous." It took everything in him to admit that, even if just to his brother, but Aodhan clipped the words out. "He can't refuse us. That can't be an option."

Because if Cal did, that meant Aodhan had put them at risk for nothing.

It would mean he'd have to remove the threat to everything they'd built...

"I won't kill him," he swore vehemently. "That means he only has one choice. Accept us, or—"

"If you won't kill him," Zane cut him off, "then he won't die. Unless you're planning on asking someone else to do the deed in your stead?"

"As if."

"Yeah, I didn't think so. It's not really your style. Speaking of. How have things been going since you've lost the support of Lyra?"

Lyra Diar, the Imperial Heir of the Vitality throne. At least, she had been, up until a month ago when her trial had concluded she was guilty of running an illegal organ harvesting ring. She'd been stripped of her title and banished off planet.

"I'll never underestimate you again, little brother."

"Is that your way of telling me to stay out of it?"

Aodhan gave one last look at the restaurant across the street and moved away from the window. "You can relax. I don't need Lyra to clean up after me. I never did. Now, let's say our goodbyes, shall we? I'm late for lunch."

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“What’s this?” Titus entered the kitchen, eyes taking in the set table. He’d showered and changed into more comfortable clothing, the black sweatpants hanging low on his hips, the gray t-shirt tight enough it showed off the length of his torso and the outline of his abs.

It was an outfit he knew his boyfriend was fond of, which was exactly why he’d chosen it, and when Aodhan moved toward him and took the towel he was using to dry his hair, he knew he’d made the right decision.

“Sit down,” Aodhan ordered, maneuvering him over to one of the chairs at the table. As soon as he had Titus in it, he started drying his hair for him, movements purposeful.

That was his doctor, single-minded and skilled at just about everything he wanted to be good at. The keyword being wanted . He was also the most stubborn person Titus had ever come across, and that stubbornness had often caused problems that could have easily been avoided.

This was a delicate situation. Choosing a third and closing a pod weren’t light matters.

Upsetting his Second in the process wouldn’t be worth it in the long run either.

Titus didn’t just have to manage Cal right now.

He needed to be sure to give Aodhan proper care and attention.

Had to be sure the doctor never felt like he was falling behind or becoming unfavored.

Had to—

“Cut it out.” Aodhan shoved his head lightly, dropping the towel on the corner of the table before rounding it so Titus could see the scowl on his gorgeous face. “Or at least have the decency of cutting the link before you start thinking about all of my shortcomings.”

A regular Connect bond could be strong, but theirs...They were a perfect match in frequency, a rare thing to find.

And now Titus had found it twice.

“You’re perfect.” He reached out and linked their fingers. “You know that.”

“I don’t need you to stroke my ego,” Aodhan complained, though it was obvious he liked it, despite his objections. “Just eat.”

He scanned the table, noting the two types of dumplings in the center, and the three plates that had been carefully organized, as though the doctor were expecting their company to join them for a lovely evening meal.

As much as Aodhan claimed not to care about the Solaces, it was impossible for him to shake his upbringing.

He refused to wear anything that wasn’t name brand—even when he was out playing with his knives—and his hair was always impeccably styled.

It was the first thing he fixed after sex, as though a single strand out of place would

harbor in the end of days or some other kind of travesty.

He liked to eat with all the bells and whistles in place: appropriate cutlery, fancy porcelain dishes, and food plated as though set to be photographed for a magazine. On the outside, he seemed carefree and charismatic, but in reality, he had his quirks same as the rest of them.

Titus wasn't one to complain. He'd gladly adjust and refine his palette to make the other man happy.

It better fit his personal appearance anyway, since he was the one known for being stony and strict.

At the hospital, he was admired for his rational thinking skills and his ability to separate emotions from nearly every aspect of his life.

Though their relationship was hardly a secret, they also had never waved it around.

Even at Zane's wedding a few months ago, they'd been careful not to get too close in front of their colleagues.

It'd been hard for him to hold back, to stand idly by while the entire staff and every patient who entered the hospital who had eyes leered at what was his, but it'd been necessary.

Then.

Titus was calm and still, whereas Aodhan was brash and charming. The doctor could talk the pants off anyone he set his mind to—that was the major reason Titus had needed him to meet with Calix first—but it was also a trait that drove him a bit mad at times.

“These are from the shop across the street from the hospital.” He purposefully left the food untouched, settling more comfortably in his chair with his shoulders squared and his feelings on full display. “I believe we agreed you would stop going there.”

“You decided,” Aodhan corrected, moving to drop into the seat across from him at the small round table. “It was just the once. I had a craving, okay?”

“A craving?” He eyed the table more pointedly. “For dumplings?”

It’d taken Titus ages to get the other man to even try one.

Aodhan had been so appalled by the thought of putting what he’d claimed was street food into his mouth.

Rich little bastard hadn’t even understood the concept of street food or what it really was, but it’d been endearing in its own sort of way, watching him pout as Titus had insisted.

While naked.

With Aodhan tied up.

His finger traced the rim of one of the fancy golden-edged platters. “And who, might I enquire, is meant to eat these?”

Aodhan huffed and crossed his arms. “You wanted me to come up with a plan that didn’t involve my cock, remember? Well.” He motioned at the food with his chin. “This is it.”

He chuckled. “You really think you can win the detective over with a plate of dumplings?”

“After you had us starve him for nearly three days?” Aodhan quirked a brow. “Yeah. Yeah, I really do.”

“Touché.” He tilted his head. “Do you feel bad for him?”

“I feel hungry for him.” As if to prove it, the doctor reached forward and snatched a fried dumpling, popping the whole thing into his mouth. But when Titus merely snickered, he frowned.

“The fact you used your hands and not the chopsticks gave you away, baby. Your mind is clearly elsewhere. I can only assume it’s on Calix, and since your solution was to bring him food...”

“I operate on hearts,” Aodhan said. “That doesn’t mean I have one.”

“You have one. It belongs to me, remember?” Titus stood with a flourish. “But there’s enough to share, at least with our detective.” He sneered down at the dumplings. “No one else, little killer. Never anyone else.”

Aodhan rolled his eyes. “The girl you’re not so subtly alluding to doesn’t even work there anymore, Mercy. She quit ages ago.”

His eyes were already narrowing before the doctor seemed to catch his mistake.

Aodhan swore and dropped his gaze. “One of the nurses told me. That’s all. He recalled I used to order from there a lot and asked if I stopped because the waitress left.”

“Which nurse?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Are you protecting him?”

The doctor got up as well, shoving his hands into the pockets of his form-fitting black slacks. He hadn't changed out of the clothes he'd gone to work in, and even though Titus had been teasing earlier, a closer look proved he'd been accurate in his assessment.

Aodhan was thinking too much.

That never boded well for others, Titus included.

“You're trying to distract me,” Aodhan guessed. “Why? What happened after I left?”

“He failed to grasp his situation. Have you?”

“Mercy. Let's bring him out, feed him, let him see how things can be. You don't know him like I do. Cal wants this. He wants stability and—”

“You do feel bad for him.” That was an interesting development. A positive one. A part of him had feared Aodhan would grow bored and change his mind, but if he'd developed an attachment to Calix, had formed an emotional bond with him...

Aodhan pursed his lips. “Are you testing him, or me?”

“If I confess it's both?”

“I'll be annoyed but not surprised.” He ran a hand through his dark brown hair. “I know you're plotting, you always are, but you told me I could pick the first position.”

“Which you have. That's why he's been dangling from the ceiling.”

“I thought he’d cave by now,” Aodhan confessed.

“What happened to knowing him so well?” He snorted and then took a step toward the door. “All right. We’ll play it your way. You want to try feeding him? Let’s do that.”

“He’s not a pet.”

“No, he’s meant to be our Third, but there’s a long way to go before he’s ready to accept that. I don’t think both of us playing the good cop is going to be very helpful in getting him there, do you?”

“Good cop?” Aodhan was the one to scoff this time. “Mercy, baby, we both know there’s only one person in this house that might fit that bill, and it isn’t even close to being you.”

Correct, because if Aodhan Solace was a devil, Titus Mercer was the God that owned him.

And soon he’d own the monster Calix Valimir, too.

* * *

Despite what Aodhan thought of him—and despite how accurate those thoughts were—Titus had already taken Cal down before leaving for his shower.

He found the unconscious man exactly where he’d left him, curled up on his side on the tiny bed tucked into the corner of the room that used to be used for storage.

It was directly across the hall from the kitchen, where they could easily keep an eye on the door as they went about their morning and evening routines.

They'd cleared it out for this purpose, since it was also the smallest room in the three-story home.

A smaller space would help sell the illusion that Calix had nothing left to lose, that his only hope was in giving himself to them completely.

Titus needed to craft the illusion that they were the only means of escape—though it wasn't entirely untrue.

“What kind of life have you lived these past eight years?” he murmured, lowering down onto the edge of the bed. His hand stroked lightly through the damp strands of blond hair, running the pale pink ends between his fingers.

Unlike Aodhan, who preferred the deep hue of red, pink had always been Titus's favorite color. It suited him that both his lovers shared some splash of it on their person, the doctor with his eyes, and the detective with his hair.

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Cal made a groggy noise and twitched, slowly coming awake.

Titus didn't rush the process, didn't shy away.

Instead, he kept petting him, allowing his touches to linger a bit longer, grow a bit bolder, with each passing second.

The moment he felt the detective come fully awake, he grabbed a fistful of that precious hair at the base of Cal's skull and used that hold to drag the man up into a sitting position.

Calix yelped, blindly reaching out to grab onto him, the blindfold still in place, preventing him from seeing who was before him.

Titus kept quiet, holding him steadily, the tight grip enough of a silent warning to keep Cal from trying to yank away. A warning that didn't go unheeded.

Their faces were close, less than three inches apart, and Titus was forced to acknowledge that perhaps Aodhan had been right about pushing their detective too close to starvation. Though, in his defense, he hadn't been the one delivering sexual torture on top of things.

If Aodhan had really been concerned, he could have kept his dick in his pants.

Calix's tongue—pink, Titus noted—darted out past his dry and cracked lips, wetting them quickly. His hands clasped and unclasped the material of Titus's t-shirt over his chest, but he didn't fully release him. He seemed to be listening for something,

feeling the situation out.

Using those instincts of his that Titus had praised earlier.

“...Mercy?” there was doubt in his tone, at first, but a second later he repeated, more firmly this time, “Do I call you that? Do I call you Titus or,” he licked his lips a second time, “do I call you Mercy?”

“What do you want to call me?”

“I...probably shouldn't say.”

Which meant it was something bad. Titus chuckled. “Try me.”

“That's why I shouldn't,” Cal said. “Because I don't want to try you.”

“How did you know it was me?” It could have been Aodhan sitting here.

The room stank of sex and sweat enough there was no way, even as close as they were, Calix could make out Titus's personal scent, so that was out.

He'd made no sound at all, even keeping his breathing shallow, and out of the two of them, Aodhan was the one who'd shown his rougher sides.

That's why Titus had opted to grab him by the hair in the first place. To throw him—

“It's the feel of you,” Calix replied. “The way I feel when I'm around you, it's...different.”

“Ah.” That explained that. He wasn't using his ability to manipulate the air around them at the moment, but he understood what Cal meant.

“What is it?” the detective asked. “Is it because you’re a Connect?”

“Yes.” He tipped his head, watching as Cal grew silent, clearly thinking over his next words carefully. “Say what’s on your mind. It’s just the two of us in this room.”

Titus wished they were already connected, because if they were, he’d be able to feel exactly what the other man was feeling, and would not have to settle for suppositions.

Calix seemed nervous, a different kind of trepidation than he’d previously displayed in this room. It was in the way he trembled ever so slightly, and how his fingers tightened more around the thin material of Titus’s t-shirt.

In the end, he gave in to whatever negative emotion he was feeling and shook his head slightly. “Never mind.”

“Tell me.”

“It was a moment of hubris, forget it.”

“Little monster.” Titus brought his mouth closer, sure that Cal could feel the gust of his hot breath against his chapped lips. “Don’t make me string you up again. How will you ever get answers if you’re too afraid to ask the right questions?”

Cal pushed lightly, but when Titus growled, he gave in. “Is that why I’m here?”

“What was that? You’ll have to speak louder.” He didn’t, Titus had heard him. How could he not, with the mere half an inch between them?

It was adorable that the detective felt shy over something like this, especially since Titus had obviously been leading him to this conclusion all the while.

Hadn't he tried to get Cal to admit it days ago?

He had to know this conversation was what Titus wanted from him, yet he was acting like a skittish, cornered animal.

In a move that reminded him of something Aodhan would do when scolded, Calix huffed. "Why bother? It's not possible anyway. You might be a Connect, but I didn't know about Aodhan and you before now. You probably already have a secret completed pod, and this is all—"

"To punish you?" Titus cut him off drolly. "For hitting a kid I care nothing about with your car eight years ago?"

Spelled out like that, it was absurd, and it was obvious that Calix was seeing that as well, for he quieted.

"If not for that, then why?" Cal's voice was soft, timid almost.

"Interesting logic. Aodhan is the one who insisted on using the hook. He's the one who's been—"

"You're punishing me," he insisted. "I just don't understand why if not for what I did to Nero."

This was a very different version of the detective than he'd been at the station, when Titus had tried bringing their past up only to be rebuffed. He'd known Aodhan was onto something about Calix being secretly into this, but he'd never dreamed it would truly be this easy.

Was it?

Or was this a trick?

“Are you playing the part of a good little sub,” he wondered aloud, “or is it real?”

“Don’t make it sound like this is normal.

It isn’t. Nothing about this is. This isn’t BDSM play.

This is kidnapping. Plain and simple.” Calix pursed his lips.

“You said if I wanted answers, I had to go about it a different way. You don’t react well to being talked back to.

I’ve adjusted my approach,” Cal surprised him by fully admitting.

“Why am I being punished, Mercy? I have to understand in order to properly learn the lesson. Aodhan I get.”

“Do you?”

“He’s angry I was going to leave the planet. A part of me knew he wanted this thing between us, fake or not, to continue.”

“Yet you were really going to go anyway.”

“I was.”

“How brazen of you to confess that, little monster.”

“You promised we were alone in the room.” Calix hesitated. “Did you lie?”

“I am good at that.” Titus loosened his hold in his hair just enough to be noticeable, but not enough for Cal to get the wrong idea. If he tried to pull away again, he’d retighten the reins in an instant. “Do you really want to know why you’re being put through this?”

“Yes.”

“For the exact same reason.” Titus heard rustling at the open door, but that didn’t stop him from biting out in a clipped tone, “You’re being punished for running away from me all those years ago.”

A sharp clapping noise made Cal jolt in his hold, but Titus had been expecting it and merely tipped his head in the direction of the entrance where Aodhan was standing.

“Finally,” Aodhan sounded angry, “we’re all being honest. I knew you’ve wanted him from the start.”

Titus was hoping confessing here, in the room where Aodhan already felt in control of their situation, would be enough to ease the bloodlust. But looking at the way his little killer held himself, as though about to explode out of his skin, or worse, cut someone else out of theirs, he realized he’d miscalculated.

Oopsie.

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To say things had gone from awful to awkward real fast would be an understatement.

Calix found himself roughly pulled away from Titus and dragged from the room, across a hallway, before being practically tossed into a wooden seat.

His nose caught wind of the rich smell of cooked meat and scallions a second later, and all protests over being lugged around like a sack of potatoes died on his tongue almost instantly after that.

He could barely even process the words being flung around him between his two captors, all his attention on that scent and the promise of food.

He hadn't even realized how starving he'd become, too caught up in the other sensations being forced upon him the past few days.

"Eat." Aodhan tore the blindfold off Cal's head roughly, practically tossing the fabric to the side. He hardly noticed the way Calix winced at the sudden bright lights, already turning away from him to address the older man standing by the fridge. "You too."

Cal blinked against the change, giving himself time to adjust. How long had it been since they'd blindfolded him?

It seemed like forever had passed. Their blurred faces took a while longer to come into focus, the scowl marring the doctor's gorgeous face one of the first things Cal's brain was able to process.

Aodhan was standing at the side of the table, arms crossed, glaring at Titus.

“Sit down,” Titus said. “You’re making Calix nervous.”

“He’s fine,” Aodhan disagreed, showing defiance he didn’t usually aim at the director’s way. “We need to talk about this, Mercy.”

“Talk about what?” He grunted and took a sip from a glass cup filled with ice water. “You should drink, Calix. You must be extremely dehydrated.”

“His hands are cuffed together.”

“So uncuff him then.”

Aodhan inhaled slowly as though trying for patience. “We aren’t doing it your way anymore. Not if you chose this method just to get back at him.”

“If the end justifies the means, does it really matter if I have ulterior motives?”

“It does if you keep them from me!”

Titus gave him a sharp look. “Don’t do that. Don’t pull a Cal and pretend not to know exactly what’s going on here. I’ve never kept anything from you, and that won’t change. You knew I wanted him, if you didn’t, you never would have agreed to making him our Third.”

“What?” Calix sputtered, though he went unnoticed as they continued to bicker around him.

They’d been dancing around that possibility for weeks now, and he was just going to put it out there in the midst of an argument with Aodhan? After all the shit they’d put

him through to get him to say it first?

If he hadn't been hungry enough to eat everything on the table and in their fridge, he would be figuring out a way to get to the knifeboard on the counter by the sink.

As it were, Calix was far too drained to bother or put up much of a fight.

Especially when the two were already so engrossed in each other.

"That's not what I'm annoyed about," Aodhan said.

"Your concern for him is admirable, but he isn't even connected to us yet." Titus leaned back in his chair. "Now, are you going to uncuff him and sit down, or are we going to wait until the food is cold before trying to feed our future Third?"

"Stop saying that." Calix almost wished they hadn't heard him that time either, because when both of their gazes suddenly landed on him, he felt his throat close under their intense scrutiny.

"Why? You'd already come to that conclusion all on your own," Titus stated. "That's what you were getting at back in the room."

"We were waiting for you to admit it," Aodhan stated the obvious, coming around and crouching behind Cal so he could unlock the cuffs. "But clearly we're both out of patience."

As soon as his wrists were freed, Cal brought his arms around and rubbed them protectively. He didn't like how close they both were to him, with Titus seated on his right and Aodhan pulling out the chair on his left. The door was also all the way across the room.

“Should we tie you up again?” Titus asked, catching him staring at the exit. “Or will you behave?” He speared one of the fried dumplings on the end of a single chopstick before bringing it close to Cal’s mouth.

The rich smell of boiled meat and savory sauce got the best of him, and without bothering to respond to the question, he found himself leaning forward, greedily taking the offering.

The second the flavors exploded on his tongue, he moaned, eyes momentarily slipping closed as a wave of pure bliss shot through him.

It was another trick. They’d starved him on purpose to make him desperate enough to sit here like a pet and behave for them in exchange for food. But even knowing that didn’t change the fact it’d worked.

Calix would be good for them.

For now.

At least until the dumplings ran out, in any case.

“I can’t be your Third,” Cal said, wringing his hands in his lap. It was an insane thing to even consider, and he refused to believe the feeling in his chest was anything other than horror. It certainly couldn’t be hope. “I don’t even know you people.”

“Detective.” Aodhan propped an elbow on the table and smiled at him—not the charming smile he used on the rest of the world, but a dark, almost suggestive one. “You know us better than anyone.”

He shook his head.

“All right,” Titus lifted another dumpling for him, “where would you like to start?”

Calix allowed him to slide the food between his lips, using the excuse of needing to chew to stall. He’d gotten snippets here and there in their other conversations, but no one had told him anything concrete. Was it because they couldn’t trust him, or because they were lying?

It was more likely that this was an elaborate hoax. That they got their kicks by tricking others into thinking they stood a chance.

“Being with a Connect is a big deal,” he tentatively began. “You can’t make me believe you really want me. To fuck me? Sure. Play with me a little? Yeah, okay. But want me?” Saying out loud made it seem even more ridiculous. “Make me your Third?”

“You’re the perfect candidate,” Aodhan disagreed. “You’re the only one either of us has shown any interest in. It has to be you.”

“Interest?” He snorted derisively. “Interest brought on from the night of the reunion? The night you raped me?”

The doctor should have at least pretended to feel bad, but he didn’t. Instead, he tilted his head, as though he was struggling to process what Cal was saying and why it might be important.

Then again, if everything he had been told was accurate, something like guilt probably wasn’t commonly felt by Aodhan. Hell, it took a special kind of asshole to plot what he had, and all because his boyfriend had left out a newspaper clipping from eight years ago.

“Clearly you aren’t the sharing type,” Calix drawled.

“I’m not,” he agreed. “So don’t get any bright ideas, baby.”

“It’s us,” Titus chimed in. “The three of us. No one else.”

“I’m locked up in your house. Who exactly do you think I’m going to find to fuck here? What? Afraid I’ll jump the mailman?” Cal glared at them both, realizing he was going about this the wrong way. “You don’t have any claim on me. You don’t get to make those kinds of demands.”

His mind turned back to the video. To the words echoing from the speaker of the multi-slate.

What kind of freak gets hard while they’re raped?

“You don’t get say you want me after what you did,” Cal forced himself to insist, scowling but taking the next offered dumpling Titus held up for him.

“I’ll apologize for that night,” Aodhan told him, though there was no kindness written on his face. “But only if you’ll admit that you liked it.”

“You looked down on me for getting off,” he growled.

“You remember?” Aodhan tilted his head.

“No. You played me the video like some sick sadist. I saw it there.” He’d barely caught it through the shock, but it knocked something loose within him. “Because of the drugs, I don’t really recall much of that night at all. I don’t remember anything about...that.”

“Our first time was admittedly messy.” The doctor hesitated and then placed his chopsticks down on the table.

“I was being cruel on purpose. I was frustrated and didn’t understand why I was changing my mind about you, but I didn’t mean that.

Lots of people get turned on in situations like those, baby.

It’s just stimulation. It couldn’t be helped.

It doesn’t say anything about you or your character. ”

It wouldn’t be the first time Calix’s body had reacted when his mind had rejected what was being done to him.

But it was the first time hearing from his abuser that it wasn’t his fault.

That he wasn’t deplorable and a lost cause.

“He’s right.” Titus fed him another dumpling.

“It’s just like how you got hard when you hit Nero with your car.

” He pretended not to notice when Calix winced.

“Everyone likes to believe the mind has complete and total control over the body, but that’s just not the case.

Physical reactions such as those are unavoidable. ”

“He was hurting me,” Cal pointed out. “I was bleeding. That can’t be—”

“Maybe for some, the pain would have been enough to keep them from being turned on,” Aodhan replied. “But for others, people like you, who enjoy the pain? Maybe not

even. Overstimulation could easily confuse the brain, making it misplace those feelings.”

“I didn’t want it!”

“No, of course not,” Titus comforted him, and it seemed legitimate.

“You were against it, disgusted by it, but your body reacted,” Aodhan said.

“That’s all it was, Cal. It wasn’t your intention, or your fault.

That’s not the reason I keep saying you liked it.

I don’t mean to belittle or to blame you.

It’s not that I wrongly believe you wanted it in the moment, I know you didn’t. ”

Calix glanced away, but that didn’t stop the other man from finishing his statement.

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“I say you like it because now that you know it was me, you want me to do it again. You want me to sneak up on you, throw you to the ground, and force you to take whatever I want to give. Most importantly? You want it to hurt.”

He did.

He hadn't filed a report for that night or for what Titus had done to him in the woods because, truthfully, neither of those events had mattered all that much to him.

Before, he'd at least been able to convince himself the reason for that was because he'd been drugged the first time and had his pheromones messed with the second.

The problem was, he couldn't exactly come up with a solid excuse why he was currently sitting here, being hand-fed, listening to this all hopeful instead of plotting revenge against the two men who'd kidnapped and humiliated him.

There was something wrong with him.

He wasn't normal.

He'd always known that.

Sister Grace had known it too.

He glanced at Mercy. “You call me a monster.”

The director's brow furrowed. “Not because of what happened at the reunion, and not

because I think it's a bad thing. I don't mean it as an insult, Calix. I never have. I'm drawn to all your broken, jagged parts. I want you to be drawn to mine as well."

Aodhan leaned forward, hand moving to cup the base of Cal's skull.

If he noticed the way that caused him to tense, the doctor ignored it, keeping his touch right where it was.

"I didn't decide not to kill you because you came for me that night, Detective.

I decided to keep you because I liked the taste of your tears and the thrum of your heart beating beneath me.

I liked the way you smelled and the sounds you made.

I liked how you responded to me—even though it was against your will. "

"You really should apologize for your comment," Titus told him. "Clearly it's affected our Third more than you meant for it to."

"I am sorry, baby." Aodhan stroked the back of his head lightly. "Do you forgive me?"

"You're insane," Calix blurted, yanking out of the man's grasp. "Both of you. You've kidnapped me and kept me locked in a room for weeks! Forget the night of the reunion. What about these past days? Third? You cannot seriously be asking me to join your pod while I'm tied up and my ass hurts."

"Why not?" Titus shrugged.

"He claimed me while I was dangling upside down from the ceiling," Aodhan said,

grinning.

Cal stared between them. “Aren’t Connects supposed to cherish and protect their bond mates?” He clung onto the most important part. “Consent has to be freely given for a bond to even form.”

“That’s true,” the director agreed.

He scoffed. “If you think I’m going to consent after all of this—”

“Baby,” Aodhan’s grip lowered until he had him by the nape, “you’re misunderstanding things again. I’ve been fucking you so rigorously these past days to show you, but it’s clearly gone over your head.”

“You don’t have a choice here, Calix,” Titus said. “When it comes time to form the bond, you’ll have to agree, of course, but we have ways of making you do that.”

Cal shuddered. “What?”

Titus’s multi-slate rang, and his brow furrowed when he glanced at the screen before setting the chopsticks down with an annoyed click. “It’s the hospital. I have to take this.”

He got up and headed to the door, slipping the earbud attachment from the device into his left ear before accepting the call.

“Those idiots can’t go five minutes without him,” Aodhan drawled, clearly to himself as he cut a boiled dumpling in half and carefully brought a piece to his lips. It was the most refined way Cal had ever seen anyone eat a dumpling before, and it helped drive a single point even further home.

“You’re a psychopath.” Calix was trapped with crazy people.

“At least you’ll never be bored.” The doctor winked at him.

Cal glanced at the doorway, listening for any signs Titus was returning, and then shifted a little bit closer to Aodhan. “You know he’s manipulated us both here, don’t you?”

Aodhan paused, but didn’t tell him to shut up.

“You heard it yourself. He orchestrated this whole thing. Leaving out the newspaper clipping for you to find, confusing me in the forest—”

“How’d he confuse you in the forest?”

That wasn’t really important here, but he explained anyway. “He used his Connect ability to turn me on and then screwed me with my own gun.”

“Did you know it was him?”

Titus’s voice as he spoke to the hospital could be heard then, the sound drawing closer to the door as the man slowly walked back down the hallway toward them.

“No.” Calix needed to speed this up. It might be his only chance to try and get through to the doctor, especially since things were already tense between the two.

“Did it matter who it was?”

“No.” Cal pulled his gaze from the door and rested it back on the doctor, only realizing he’d been giving autopilot responses to questions he absolutely should not have been giving truthful answers to.

Aodhan had a smug air about him that was impossible not to notice. “Just admit that you liked it, baby. I bet you thought about it, the same way you thought about what happened at the party. Both of those events turned you on. Did you think about me when you touched yourself after?”

Why did Cal get the sense that the doctor was toying with him? He couldn't possibly know what he was saying was true. It had to be a really good guess. Right?

“What are you two talking about?” Titus reentered then, glancing with interest between the two of them.

“Oh, nothing much,” Aodhan's grin turned vicious. “Our dear detective was simply trying to turn me against you, that's all.”

“Is that so?”

Calix hated himself for it, but he instinctively dropped his gaze when Titus set a steely look on him.

“He seems to think I'm too stupid to have figured out your little newspaper trick was a setup.” Aodhan pouted. “I didn't realize you thought so low of me, Detective. I'm wounded.”

“Hand me that knife,” Cal stated, “so I can wound you for real.”

Titus heaved a sigh. “Why do you always insist on making things so difficult for yourself, Calix?”

Before he could respond to that, the doctor stood with a flourish.

“Done eating, baby? You are? Great. Then let's get you back on the hook.”

“This time,” Titus drawled, though it was obvious his comment was to Aodhan, as though Cal wasn’t even there, “he doesn’t come off of it until he’s actually learned his lesson. Is that understood?”

“Yeah, Mercy.” Aodhan reached for Cal. “I’m with you.”

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“Are you ready to be a little more honest with me, Cal?” Mercy’s voice, whispered against the curve of his left ear, had him whimpering. “I’m going to need you to use your words. Can you do that?”

“Yes.” Anything to be let down again. This time, he hadn’t even had company. After dinner, they’d hauled him back into the small room, chained his arms up, inserted the hook, and...left. “Yes.”

It wasn’t like he’d missed them or anything, but it sucked being alone with just his thoughts, especially since those thoughts were traitorous at best, and diabolical at worst.

Cal had successfully avoided himself for years, and now, in just a handful of days, these bastards were undoing all his hard work. It both infuriated and terrified him, and he hated how he needed to lean into Titus to keep from stumbling the second he was freed from their demonic contraption.

Hated how the older man let him and even welcomed him closer with an arm around his waist.

“I’m going to remove the blindfold,” Titus told him in a gentle voice. “Then I’m going to take you upstairs so you can wash up. Okay?”

He nodded his head, then recalled the earlier instruction he’d been given. “Yes.”

“Good boy.”

A whimper slipped out, but before he could get embarrassed, the blindfold was untied, leaving him blinking against the light. It was dimmed, not nearly as harsh as it'd been the other day when they'd taken him to the kitchen.

"Can you walk?" Titus tilted his head, inspecting him as soon as he asked, and then clicked his tongue. "Never mind. Hold onto me."

"What—" He was lifted into the director's arms, and clamped his mouth shut against any protests he might have had. Truthfully, after hanging there for gods knew how long, his entire body ached, and as stubborn as he typically was, the thought of falling on his face because he'd insisted on trying to walk was enough to quiet him.

They moved out of the room and down the hallway toward the stairs before heading to the next level of the house.

Titus didn't seem tired the entire climb, carrying Calix with ease all the way to the opposite side of the home, to another bedroom, though he didn't put him down right away.

Instead, he brought him to an attached bathroom, gently lowering Calix to the ground in front of the sink so Cal could steady himself against the counter.

"I know you prefer to shower," Titus said as he made his way to the clawfoot tub, passing the glass shower stall on his way, "but I'm afraid you'll fall over on your own. At least this way, when you insist you can bathe yourself, I'll be less concerned."

The bathroom was fairly large, considering it'd been meant for a single person.

The tub sat beneath a window that had been left ajar, allowing a cool breeze to filter in, bringing with it the scent of pine and summer air.

It was too dark to make anything out, but Calix assumed he wouldn't have much of a view anyway, plus it'd been set high up on the wall.

They were also on the second floor. Escaping through it was nearly impossible.

Even if he'd still been in shape and didn't feel like blinking was enough effort to cause him to keel over.

"How do you know I like to shower?" he asked, taking it all in as the director turned on the spouts and adjusted the water.

The color scheme was simple, elegant, yet flirty, with white marble, gold embellishments, and baby pink walls.

The shade was so soft, it could be mistaken for cream. "You like pink."

"I have a certain fondness for it, yes." Titus stood and turned to face him but didn't approach. "As for your question, do you really want an answer?"

Probably not.

"Yes."

The corner of Titus's mouth twitched. Could he tell Cal was pretending not to be afraid? The setting might have changed, but it wasn't much better than the hook. At least that tiny room was familiar now.

The bathroom was warm and inviting, almost peaceful with the sound of running water and the steam slowly filling up the space.

The lighting was dim and golden, and the cool porcelain from the counter pressed

against his backside was like a balm against his sweaty skin.

His ass hurt and the ache in his shoulders from having his arms forced into the same position were painful reminders that this relaxed environment wasn't real.

There was another trick at play here, but where, and what was it?

"There were cameras in your hotel room, Detective," Titus replied casually.

"What?"

"I put them there," he continued. "I put most of the items you used there. The items the hotel stocks are mediocre at best. We couldn't have you using garbage. Consuming trash."

The first time Troya had visited Cal's room, he'd complained.

He'd pointed out all these things that he supposedly didn't have in his own room, most of them basics like beer in the fridge, or full bottles of quality shampoo.

Extra throw pillows for the couch that were softer than the ones the Inspector had...

"You...were watching me?" All of those things had been there since the moment Calix had entered, which meant Titus had known before his arrival what room he'd be assigned. "I arrived before the reunion."

Even if Titus had known Aodhan planned to make a move against Cal, there was no way either of them could have known exactly when he'd be there...

Or for what purpose...

“You can stop thinking about that,” Titus told him. “You aren’t ready to travel down that road.”

“What road am I thinking about?” Cal asked it, but he didn’t want him to answer. Because the other man was right. He ran a hand through his hair, grimacing at how oily and gross it felt.

“Let’s just keep talking about the cameras, shall we? Aren’t you curious? About why I was watching you?”

“Because you want to make me your Third.” He paused as soon as he said it.

Titus smiled at him approvingly. “Don’t be embarrassed. You’re not being full of yourself. We really do intend to take you as our Third. I’m glad you’re starting to come to terms with it.”

“Like hell,” Calix growled, but the older man merely tutted at him and then motioned to the tub, which was now full.

“You should bathe. Take your time. I’ll be in the bedroom waiting.”

“Listening,” he corrected, knowing exactly what Titus meant to be doing.

“You’re tired. There’s a good chance you’ll pass out. I’ll listen just in case, but I won’t enter unless you’re unresponsive. Agreed?”

He shifted on his feet. “Why? Why are you suddenly making deals?”

This would have been the perfect opportunity. If he wanted, Titus could have him in the tub on all fours, fucking and cleaning him off at the same time. At the very least, he could insist on sticking around to watch, since that seemed to be one of his

pastimes anyway.

Calix's gaze flicked up to the corners of the room. "Are there cameras here?"

"No, Be'urn. There are no cameras in this house."

"What does that word mean?"

"It's Vital," Mercy explained. "Aodhan says it's a term of endearment or a respectable way to call a male who's younger than you. But only when you're close. Since I'm older, the equivalent would be Be'tessie, in case you were wondering."

"I wasn't." Setting aside the fact Cal was from Emergence and not Vitality like Aodhan, where they had their own titles and terms, he didn't like how intimate and familiar it sounded. "Don't call me that."

"You don't like when I call you little monster, and now you're opposed to this as well?" the director said. "What should I call you then?"

"Don't call me anything at all." He straightened from the counter, but had to keep a hand on the smooth surface to prevent himself from wobbling on his feet. "I refuse to be your Third, Titus. That isn't what I want."

"You want somewhere to start fresh," he moved closer as he spoke. "A place where you can safely be yourself, with people who won't judge you for who you are. People who can help you stop judging you for who you are."

Cal froze when the older man reached out to cup his cheek, unable to pull away from the warm touch.

"We can give you that," he promised. "Be my little monster, Calix. It's who you want

to be. It's who you already are. Be that, and in return, I'll be your everything. I'll make it all right. The same way I did eight years ago."

Was he so obviously lonely, or had Titus just gotten lucky?

No, probably not. He got the feeling the director wasn't the type to take chances.

Maybe he'd seen something in Cal when he'd spied on him in his hotel.

Maybe he'd seen it in the past. It didn't matter.

What mattered was whether or not Calix was willing to compromise himself for peace of mind.

If he agreed to be their Third, what then?

He sits alone in this big house day after day while the two of them go off to work at the hospital?

What if he didn't even like them? What if, once the smoke cleared, they had a few conversations and he realized they were incompatible and he was well and truly trapped?

"I'm going to refuse again." It was the right choice. The only choice, and yet...That was all he managed to say.

Titus released him and stepped back, but he didn't seem angry. "The water is getting cold. Take your bath, Calix. I'll be close. Remember, if I call you, you have to respond, or I'll come back in."

"Whatever." Cal looked away.

The director moved to the exit, pausing beneath the threshold. “The door stays open.”

“I said I got it,” he snapped.

“One last thing then.” Titus waited until Calix gave in and turned to him. “Aodhan’s decided to call you Be’urn from now on. You’d be wise not to reject him the way you rejected me. He won’t be as...understanding.”

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Calix tentatively stepped out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped tightly around his hips to keep him covered.

He'd spent as much time as he possibly could in the bath, waiting until the water had turned cold and he'd started to shiver before admitting defeat.

It wasn't like he could hide in there forever.

He was starting to think there wasn't anywhere he could hide at all.

Titus was sitting in a plush ivory chair set by a large bay window, flipping through the pages of a book. He didn't stop reading even though he had to know Cal was there.

The room was medium-sized, with a four-poster bed and an end table on either side.

There was a glass trunk filled with folded blankets set at the foot of the bed, and a desk across from that.

The color palette was the same in here as in the bathroom, and Calix flexed his toes against the pale pink carpet.

"You look better," Titus's voice was as soft as the material Cal was standing on. "How do you feel?"

"My wrists are rubbed raw and my ass stings," he replied bluntly, but if his tone bothered the older man, Titus didn't give it away. Calix clutched the knot holding the

towel in place tightly, a move that didn't go unnoticed.

"There are pajamas for you on the bed," the director motioned with his chin to his left and remained seated.

Cautiously, Cal made his way toward the folded bundle resting at the head of the mattress, eyeing Titus as he went. Obviously, being in the same room as the guy and a bed made him nervous, but Titus didn't so much as shift in the chair.

The clothes were silk, a shimmery pearl white that comfortably flowed around him as he tugged them on, starting with the button-up shirt. He dropped the towel and tugged the pants on last, only vaguely noting he hadn't been given underwear. For now, he was just happy with having clothes in general.

"What now?" he asked when he was fully dressed and nothing else happened.

"Are you still tired?" Titus flipped another page. "You could go to sleep. I'll wake you for breakfast."

He stared down at the bed and clenched his hands into fists.

Because yes, he was fucking tired, but what the actual hell?

The bed had been made with clean sheets, and all he had to do was pull the covers down and slip beneath them.

He was sure the second his head touched the fluffy pillow, he'd be out like a light.

And vulnerable.

"What are you planning? Why aren't you taking me back downstairs?" He really

didn't want to return there, but at the same time, he didn't like the way he was feeling now. Uncertain and confused.

Titus finally set his book aside. "Do you miss being filled already. We don't need the hook to solve that problem."

Calix's gaze automatically dropped to the spot between Titus's legs, and when that earned him a dark chuckle, he immediately tore it away. "Not a chance. I've seen what you're packing. It's twice as thick as the hook. No."

"It'll fit," Titus promised. "I'll make it."

"Go back to reading. I liked you better then."

"Sure." He picked the book back up, but didn't get a chance to look at it.

"Wait." Why was this so uncomfortable? Was he really just going to sit there all night while Cal slept? Why weren't they tying him up again? "The snake. Tell me about that."

"Snake?" Titus's dirty smirk gave away what he was thinking of, and Cal scoffed.

"Not the one in your pants! The tattoo."

"Of course."

"Do all Connects have moving ink?" He'd never heard anything about that in the past. Scanning over him now, Cal couldn't see any hint of the creature.

Was it a creature?

“Is it a separate entity?” he pondered aloud. “There are many parasitic species in the universe, several in this galaxy alone. If I were one of them, I’d probably hitch a ride with a Connect if given the opportunity to as well.”

“Fortunately for you,” Titus drawled, pulling him from his thoughts, “you’re not a parasite, but you’ve managed to ensnare a Connect anyway.”

“That’s not funny.” Cal crossed his arms. “Seriously. What is it?”

“If you were that curious, you could have asked me sooner.”

“Do you mean at dinner, the only meal you’ve fed me at a table so far?” He’d been starved between sessions, but every three or so days, there’d been food. “Or when I was hanging from the ceiling with a hook shoved up my ass?”

The first week he was here, they’d fed him there just like that. Dangling from the ceiling while speared on their demonic device.

“That is funny.” Titus stood, ignoring the way Calix braced despite the distance still between them. “Except for the part about not feeding you enough. I almost forgot. You should eat before bed. Come here.”

Cal stood his ground as Titus stepped to the door and leaned out into the hall. When he straightened, he was holding a small metal square box, which he brought to the desk.

“Aodhan dropped this off before heading for his night shift,” the director explained as he began to set the table. “He mentioned you know what kind of sauce to ask for if the flavor isn’t to your liking.”

“Kind of...” interest piqued, he moved so he could see around Titus to the table,

“...sauce?”

There were three slices of pizza on a white plate.

“Fucking asshole.” His cheeks turned pink, and he dropped his gaze the second Titus turned around, not wanting to be seen blushing at a time like this.

“I saw that too, you know,” the director had to notice his discomfort, but pushed ahead anyway. “I watched you come all over your food and eat it. It was...surprising isn’t the right word, but it’s the closest I can find. I had no idea you were that kinky, little monster.”

“If you watched us, that means you know I’m a lot kinkier than that,” he argued.

“What, because you like to be cut and bled?” Titus shook his head. “That’s nothing. Unoriginal.”

“Un—” Cal snapped his mouth shut, telling himself he wasn’t going to play into this. “You’re trying to get a rise out of me on purpose.”

“Busted,” Titus grinned. “I like it when you’re flustered. It’s cute.”

“Cute. I’m not an itsus.”

“You think itsus are cute?” He laughed. “Would you like one? Although I’m not sure how Aodhan would feel about having a pet...”

“People buy them to keep their gardens free from pests,” Calix drawled. “If you’re saying it’ll help get rid of Aodhan—”

“I’m saying we might come home one day to find it dissected and carefully laid out

on the kitchen table,” Titus corrected bluntly, and when Cal gasped, shrugged.

“I call him little killer for a reason. Are we still playing dumb, Detective? You aren’t exactly innocent yourself, though, are you, Azi. ”

“What’s that?” Was he switching it up because Calix had told him not to call him Be’urn?

“Dear one in my language, since you weren’t fond of Vital terms. Is it better?”

“No.” Cal made himself approach the desk, the smell of the food enough to spur him closer despite the potential threat. “And for the record, I’ve never killed anyone outside of the line of duty.”

“But you have killed before.” Titus pulled the chair out for him, motioning with his chin for him to sit.

It wasn’t a question, but Calix answered anyway. He took the seat too, because at this point, what the hell. “I have.”

“How many?”

“What?” The rich smell of sauce and melted cheese almost had him groaning, and he picked up a slice.

“How many bodies have you helped put in the ground, little monster?”

“Don’t know, I stopped counting after the first three.” He did groan after the first bite, then practically scarfed half the slice in under sixty seconds. When a hand landed on the nape of his neck, he didn’t bother shaking it off, just kept eating.

“That’s how far your guilt went? Just three?”

“I didn’t stop feeling bad,” he disagreed. “But I was doing my job.”

“Bad, but not guilty.”

“What do you want me to say, Mercy?” Calix froze with his second slice halfway to his lips.

“Keep eating,” Titus told him gently. “We’re just talking.”

“Did you try to kill him?” He’d wanted to know for a while now, and the question popped out. It felt easier to ask with the other man standing behind him, with no fear of eye contact. He would have asked when the blindfold was on if he hadn’t been too afraid.

Maybe it was the lingering relaxation from the hot bath, or the warm food, or the light, nonthreatening touches he was subconsciously leaning into...Cal wasn’t as scared in that moment as he had been.

“If we’re talking about killers, Amory wasn’t your first. So, did you try to kill Aodhan too? Was that your meet-cute?” Calix held his breath, waiting for a response, that hand still on the back of his neck a reminder that he didn’t have any power or control here.

At any moment, the director could decide he wanted nothing more to do with him and snuff him out.

“Picturing me trying to stab him in a garden surrounded by itsus?” Titus teased.

“As interesting as you are when you’re being playful—and terrifying, by the

way—I'm serious."

He was silent a moment, and then, "He might have tried to murder me, but I've never once wanted to take his life.

Own it, yes. But not destroy. He's too brilliant for that.

You are, too. That's why I'll keep you both shining for as long as possible.

And, Cal, Connects live a very, very long time. Are you ready for that?"

"I'm not ready for any of this." Calix went back to eating. "Same as I'm not ready to take a life outside of the line of duty. I've killed, but I'm not a killer."

"You suffered for years after merely hitting Nero with your car," Titus mused. "That makes sense. Don't worry. We'll never ask that of you. If we need someone dead, we can handle that on our own."

Cal was counting on it.

Titus shifted, resting a hip against the edge of the desk so they were facing one another again, but Cal refused to look up at him, feigning interest in the last slice of pizza.

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“Connects are unique for many reasons, the most important of which is the fact that we’re unique even amongst each other. While marks like my snake aren’t rare, they aren’t exactly common for my people either.” He rolled up the sleeve of his shirt and presented his right forearm.

The snake shifted down from beneath the fabric and into view, then stopped in place. As soon as it did, it appeared like any other tattoo would, just with a lot of detail in each individual pearlescent scale.

“What is it?” Cal asked, unable to mask his curiosity.

“Some of us are born with more energy than we can handle. While it’s true the energy fluctuates and eventually burns through our physical body with age, some of us end up with too much from the get-go. We’re taught to turn that energy into a source that can be moved, helping to expend it.”

“That...doesn’t make any sense.” Maybe he was too dumb to follow. “Whatever. So is it a part of your or not?”

“It doesn’t have a mind of its own, if that’s what you’re asking.

I can control it, but it also has its own autonomy.

As it moves, it helps shift the energy built up within me.

Energy feeds and controls it. Think of it like a motor.

You need energy to keep it running. It's the same concept, only my purpose isn't to keep the snake going, but to keep the energy burning.

It's good you aren't afraid. You may need to borrow him for a bit. ”

Calix pulled away. “What?”

“Aodhan needed to,” he explained. “Because he isn't a Connect, the influx of energy after we bonded was too much for him to handle on his own. This helped. You may not have the same experience, you're a Third, not a Second, so there are two of us to help you manage, but—”

“I was always told the position of Third was the most coveted,” he blurted, internally kicking himself for it afterward.

A pleased twinkle entered Titus's gaze. “That's right.”

“And Aodhan is okay with that?”

“He's not going to try to kill you again.

He's past that urge. And, no, Aodhan doesn't care that he's a Second and not a Third.

The Third is the most coveted because, as I just mentioned, they're typically cared for more.

I can take a Second on my own, but a Third?

A Third must be agreed upon by both of us.

Aodhan has nothing to be jealous of. Neither do you. ”

“I’m not. And I’m still not agreeing to anything.”

Titus hummed noncommittally and carefully rolled his sleeve back down. “Is there anything else you’d like to ask me?”

He wanted to know if this was real or some elaborate hoax. Wanted to know why they’d choose him out of everyone. But he couldn’t bring himself to ask either of those things, too fearful of the answers.

Because as fucked up as it was, he could get used to parts of this.

The parts where he was fed and bathed and cared for?

Yeah, those parts didn’t entirely suck, and they weren’t experiences he’d ever had with anyone else.

Cal did want to belong somewhere. He’d just never pictured that somewhere being the house of two murderers.

He’d been trying to get away from his darker nature, not enter a place where it would be nurtured.

Even if that meant he also started despising himself and who he was at his core being a little less.

“What makes you so sure I’ll end up accepting?” he ended up asking. “I didn’t even know you liked me before this.”

“If I didn’t like you, you wouldn’t be here.”

“Obviously.”

“I mean on this planet, Calix.”

“How do your abilities work?”

Titus tilted his head, watching him closely. “Still running, little monster?”

He’d been the one saying Cal wasn’t ready for that conversation not too long ago, but he didn’t bother pointing it out.

“What can I say,” he drawled, knowing exactly what the director was referring to and opting to just be honest, “it’s what I’m best at.”

“Aodhan says you’re best at taking cock.” Titus smirked when that had Cal coughing around his last bite of pizza. “Here.” He picked up the can of soda nearby and popped the top for him before holding it out.

Calix chugged a third of the contents and then frowned at the brand name. “This is the same one you bought me in the hospital cafeteria.”

“It’s my favorite. It has vitamin C, so you can even pretend that it’s not entirely bad for you. There’s another thing you’re good at . Pretending .”

Cal thought about his confession that he’d changed the items in his hotel room. The shampoo and conditioner brands in the bathroom here were the same as the ones he’d had in his hotel. This soda had been stocked in the hotel minibar. His gaze dropped down to the silk pajamas he was wearing.

“Titus,” he gave the other man a suspicious look, “what are you sleeping in?”

“Do you not like it?” The director reached out and undid the top button, careful not to allow them to touch skin to skin. “I think you look fantastic.”

“Answer me or I’ll stop talking to you.”

He chuckled. “You’re the one who wants to keep me talking. You’re afraid if you don’t keep me distracted, I’ll try something or put you back on the hook. You can relax. I’m not planning on doing either of those things. I won’t touch you tonight, Calix. You’re safe.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re an adrenaline junky and making you sit here is the least exciting thing in the world.”

“I’m not—”

“No?” He quirked a dark brow. “Should I read what your past partners have all said about you? The I.P.F. let you quit without much argument because everyone knew one day you’d either get yourself or an innocent bystander killed.”

Calix...couldn’t really say that wasn’t true. He’d heard it a thousand times, that he was reckless, that he didn’t have any self-preservation. That he leapt into danger without thinking.

“I didn’t do anything stupid this time,” he felt the need to clarify, though why he bothered was beyond him.

Titus found it ridiculous as well, scoffing at him. “Detective, you chased me into the woods your very first day on the job, and then you kept our interaction to yourself and didn’t report me or inform your team. Don’t even get me started on how you handled the rest of the case.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Your heart wasn’t in it,” he leaned closer, voice deepening as he spoke. “You know it. I know it. Aodhan knows it too. Want to tell me why that could be?”

Calix turned his head away.

“Fine, I’ll tell you. It’s because a part of you realized the truth.”

“Not true.”

“Aodhan and I both attended his brother’s wedding. We’re both medically trained and could easily separate a man’s head from his body. Aodhan brought you to a party where you saw a man cut in half, and every time you were confronted by me, you got a bad feeling.”

“You made me have the bad feeling,” Calix snapped. “I don’t want to discuss how it’s likely you also made Rhett act crazy in your office, or about how it’s likely you and Aodhan framed him for the murders you committed. Or—”

“How we probably did all of that to get you here?”

“Don’t.”

“Why not? It’s already out there. We might as well finish the thought. You’ve known the truth for a while now.”

“I have not!” Calix shot to his feet, the chair falling to the carpet, making a soft thumping sound. “I didn’t know shit until you shot a cop and knocked me out in your kitchen! If I had, I would have—”

“Arrested us?” Titus stood as well, slowly, and though he didn’t bridge the gap between them, the menacing air around him altered enough it could be felt.

“Stop it.” He retreated a full step, not even caring about his pride. “Just let me feel my own emotions.”

“Your own emotions are liars.” The director slid his hands into his front pockets, but instead of feeling comforted by the fact he didn’t plan to reach out, Cal felt even more nervous. “Why didn’t you tell Bruce about Aodhan’s connection to the party?”

“Bruce knew about the party.”

“He didn’t know what it really was.”

“Did you kill him because he found out?” Calix tossed up a palm immediately and shook his head. “Wait. Don’t answer that.”

That would ruin everything.

Which meant he should want him to answer. Should want to hear straight from the director’s mouth that they had been responsible, that way this stupid, tiny flame kindling in his chest toward them could be snuffed out before—

“I didn’t,” Titus said. “Neither did Aodhan. Do you believe me?”

“No.” They’d lied about everything else to trap him here, why wouldn’t they lie about this?

“Why would we want to kill him? You cared for him.”

“Maybe you had your reasons, or maybe it was an accident. It doesn’t matter. What matters is he’s dead. What matters is you both messed up my investigation and framed an innocent man.” He pursed his lips. “No, two innocent people. Was Amory involved at all? Did you kill her for fun?”

“Do you feel bad because you think it’s partly your fault that they’re dead?”

” Titus hypothesized. “If you’d reported what had actually happened at the party, Bruce might have investigated and realized Aodhan has more involvement with criminal organizations than the good chief would have ever guessed. He really liked Aodhan.”

“I know he did.” That was half the reason Calix had trusted the doctor. He rubbed at his temple and admitted, “I’m confused. I don’t know how much of this is your suggestion and how much of it is true. Stop messing with my emotions and let me think.”

“I gave you a mild sense of foreboding so you wouldn’t get any bright ideas about attacking me,” Titus said. “You’re unchained. You could try it. But that was all I did.”

“Liar. I feel...” He pressed a hand against the center of his chest, his heart beating wildly, his breathing growing more frantic with every breath, “...I...”

“You’re having a panic attack,” Titus informed him, casually, like it was no big deal. “It was too soon for this conversation. You aren’t ready to face the truth.”

“Which is?”

“We covered our tracks. We had alibis for the wedding and for all the times of the murders. You could sense something was off, but there was no way for you to really know that it was Aodhan you were after, Calix.” He sighed when Cal merely glared.

“I’m saying you’re being too hard on yourself.

Yes, it seems obvious now, but two weeks ago, with the information you had?

” He shrugged. “You weren’t the only one working the case.

No one else suspected my little killer either. ”

“Get out.”

Calix didn’t want to hear this because what type of person did that make him?

He’d slept with Aodhan despite his suspicions, despite all the signs that pointed to the doctor's potential involvement. Bruce had said Aodhan was clear. That Titus was clear. Cal could have done some digging on his own after the party, but he’d chosen to keep hush-hush about the whole ordeal instead.

Even now, having put the pieces together and proven his instincts about this case had been correct, he wasn’t willing to accept it.

He wasn’t willing to accept the fact that, according to them, Titus and Aodhan had set this whole thing up from the start. They’d left a string of bodies in their wake for the sole purpose of getting Calix to return to Emergence where they could get him.

“No one’s ever done this much for you,” Titus’s voice was sultry, coaxing.

Like the devil whispering in his ear, tempting him.

“You’re overwhelmed by it all,” he continued. “Don’t think about this morally, Azi. Think about this emotionally.”

“Get out.”

Titus watched him for a moment and then nodded. “There’s a chain under the bed. Lock it around your left ankle.”

Calix hesitated.

“I’ll leave as soon as it’s done.”

If it meant getting to be alone, fine.

Cal stormed over to the bed, dropping down to search beneath it.

The chain was there, with one cuff attached to a long length of golden links that were drilled directly into the floor beneath the large piece of furniture.

He pulled it out and then sat, snapping the cuff around his ankle before his nerves could get the best of him again.

He wanted to say something witty and cruel, some biting remark that would help get across how frustrated he currently felt, but nothing came to mind, and he was too afraid of opening his mouth and saying the wrong thing, opting to glare instead.

Satisfied his order had been followed, Titus moved to the door, taking the empty food box with him.

“Try to get some sleep, Azi.” The director pulled the door shut behind him.

It was a few minutes later when Cal realized he’d carried the half-empty soda can to the bed with him.

He chucked it at the closed door and watched the bubbly blue liquid seep into and stain the carpet, mildly comforted that he could ruin something of Titus’s.

The same way Titus was ruining him.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:36 am

Aodhan didn't know why, but he was in a piss poor mood Monday morning.

No, that wasn't true.

He knew exactly why.

It'd been four days since the last time he'd touched their Third, let alone fucked him.

Mercy insisted on this plan of his, refusing to allow either of them to break the rules despite how stir crazy it was making them both.

He could tell too, could tell in the way the director held him down every night and screwed him senseless almost until the sun rose in the sky.

It was the energy. Feeling another person that matched them so perfectly, so close, and being unable to connect with them...Aodhan could feel that physical struggle coming from Mercy through their bond.

Thank the gods he hadn't been born a Connect. What a troublesome thing to be. Always forced to seek out solace in another being—two other beings, even. If not for Mercy, Aodhan would have been more than happy to remain alone for the rest of his days.

And yet, here he was, brooding because he desperately wanted someone but had to wait.

They'd made progress at least. Cal had admitted he'd figured out they wanted him to

complete their pod. He'd brought up nothing about the topic to Aodhan personally, but he didn't flinch away when he came to talk.

That was all he'd done. All Aodhan was allowed to do.

Talk.

Mercy took care of everything else. Bathing, clothing, food...Considering the guy had started all this by starving Cal, it was kind of ironic that he was now in charge of his everyday needs.

But it had to be that way. Calix had already developed some form of attachment to Aodhan. He needed to form one with Mercy next.

He was still attached too, even if he hated it.

For Cal, Aodhan would always be the first person who accepted his darker proclivities.

The first to openly explore them with him.

That kind of acceptance after a lifetime of rejection wasn't easy to shake, not for someone who cared about that sort of thing.

For someone who cared what other people thought of them.

Calix cared a lot. He cared about how he was perceived.

Aodhan was fairly certain all they had to do to get him into line was threaten to expose him to the planet. The thought of everyone seeing him spread his thighs for Aodhan, seeing him beg to be sliced by Aodhan's scalpel...That would be enough to

make Calix accept them. He wasn't above blackmail.

But apparently Mercy was.

"Fuck me," Aodhan growled as he entered the elevator at the hospital and jabbed the button to the sixth floor with more force than necessary. He shifted on his feet as he waited for the doors to close, his ass smarting from how hard Mercy had pounded him over the breakfast table.

At least Aodhan got to be as loud as he wanted so they could tease the detective upstairs.

Was Cal as horny as he was?

"Hold the lift!" A pale arm slammed through the doors just as they were about to shut, and Aodhan almost cursed again when they opened to reveal Mitri Meadows. He bowed his head and stepped inside, hitting the button for the mortuary. "Good morning, Doctor."

What an absolute nightmare.

"Morning." Aodhan slapped the most welcoming smile he had in his arsenal on and turned to beam it Mitri's way. "How've you been? I heard there was a pile-up on Sky Route four yesterday that kept everyone pretty busy."

"Don't even bring that up," Mitri groaned. "The station is short-staffed and everything is falling apart without the chief around."

He made a sympathetic sound in the back of his throat. "They still haven't hired a replacement?"

“No, and with everyone capable on the hunt for Amory, it seems unlikely they’ll get around to it any time soon.

Truthfully, no one is really qualified. Too many Emergents are joining the Academy straight out of high school.

We aren’t getting enough new recruits here.

” Mitri’s look altered, and for a moment, he seemed hesitant.

Why the hell was this elevator moving so slowly today?

“If there’s anything I can help you with, please feel free to ask,” Aodhan said, keeping his chipper tone despite picturing what the other man’s brains might look like splattered all over the shiny metallic walls.

“Well,” he adjusted his glasses awkwardly, “I was wondering if you’ve been in contact with Detective Valimir? I’ve tried to get a hold of him myself, but his multi-slate seems to be off every time I try, and he hasn’t responded to any of my messages.”

The bastard had been contacting Cal?

Aodhan slid his hands into the pockets of his white coat to keep Mitri from seeing the way he clenched his fists. “I haven’t spoken to him today. Why?”

“Oh.” He deflated. “It’s the hire-ups. Everyone knows that Calix quit the I.P.F. They’re hoping he’ll come back to Emergence and take Bruce’s place.”

Huh.

That wasn't an entirely bad idea...

"An ex-detective would be the best candidate," he agreed.

"My thoughts exactly." Mitri sighed. "Unfortunately, none of us can get in touch with him."

"Tell you what," Aodhan said as they finally made it to his floor, "I'll give it a shot later."

"Yeah? Do you think he'll pick up for you?"

"What are you implying? My own boyfriend won't pick up my calls?" He flashed him a smile and pressed a palm to the center of his chest as though wounded. "Ouch. It hurts you think that low of me."

Mitri's brow furrowed. "I didn't realize the two of you were dating... You said—"

"I haven't spoken to him today," he pointed out before the guy could finish. His hand shot out to catch the doors just as they started closing. "Looks like I have to go. I'll let him know you've been trying to contact him."

Like fucking hell he would.

If Mercy weren't so strict about his kills, Aodhan would make the forensic scientist his next target. Cut out his heart and tear off the pieces the bastard had wrongly dedicated to Calix.

As soon as he'd stepped out and the doors closed, he turned on his heel and headed toward his office, selecting a number on his multi-slate as he shoved the earbud into place.

“Plan a party,” he snapped as soon as the line connected, not bothering with pleasantries. He couldn’t stop thinking about Mitri’s expression just now. He’d looked at him like he didn’t believe he and Cal were together.

Did he think he’d be a better candidate?

Over his dead body—Mitri’s, not Aodhan’s, because no matter what Mercy said about lying low, if the forensic scientist tried anything with Calix, Aodhan would kill him.

He should have already, when the guy had jokingly gone along with Bruce’s suggestion the two of them date.

They were all lucky that had never come to fruition, otherwise heads would be rolling.

Again.

“Good morning, Nyxian. How are you, Nyxian? I miss you, Nyxian,” a smooth voice trickled into his ear from the earbud. “Is that so hard to say, friend?”

“Should I tell Mercy you’re hitting on me and try to call again later?”

” he practically growled, entering his office and slamming the door behind him in frustration.

He didn’t like this. Didn’t like feeling so chaotic and out of control.

Sure, he was impulsive by nature, but he’d mastered control eons ago. But now...

It was the same feeling he’d gotten at the last party, when he’d called off their plans

and sent Calix home without consulting with either Mercy or Nyxian. Aodhan didn't like to share his things, but what's more, he didn't like the idea of Calix falsely believing he could ever turn to someone else.

If he got loose now, would he go to Mitri? Probably. The forensic scientist was the only other person on planet whom Cal had some sort of relation to now that Bruce and Amory were dead. Troya had left the same day they'd captured the detective, so he wasn't here to aid him in escape either.

No, if Cal slipped free, he'd go straight to Mitri for sure.

Aodhan needed to teach him how useless that would be. How bad of a decision it was to involve anyone else in this thing between them.

"It's too early for threats," Nyxian drawled, the soft sound of whimpers accompanying his voice this time.

He paused by his desk, listening more closely for a few seconds before asking, "Are you fucking right now?"

"Just be grateful I picked up your call despite being in the middle of something."

"Is it the merman?"

"He has a name, you know."

"He also has legs," Aodhan quipped. "So?"

"Harbor," Nyxian's tone gentled, and it was clear he was no longer speaking to him, "wake up. Don't pass out on me again. We're getting to the good part."

Aodhan plopped down in his chair and adjusted his tie, wishing he could rip the damn thing off. “Plan the party, Xian. Nothing too crazy. We’ll be bringing our Third.”

“Claimed him already, did you?”

His lips pressed into a thin line, irritation only growing when his friend barked out a mocking laugh.

“Getting ahead of yourself, as always. All right, A. I’ll set a date, pick a theme, and send over the details,” he growled, but that sound wasn’t for Aodhan either, “as soon as I’ve bred my vilec.”

Aodhan scowled at his device when the call was cut. “What the hell is up with everyone and the sudden breed kink?”

Children?

Hard pass.

Unless...

Shit. Did Calix want kids? He fucking hoped not. Connects tended to be pansexual, but Mercy had pretty much decided on his fate when he’d chosen not one, but two men of species who didn’t have males capable of birthing offspring.

“Can male mermaids get pregnant?” Damn it. Why was he thinking about this?

He clicked his number one contact, skin feeling like it was buzzing as he waited for the call to be accepted.

“Have you made it to work without maiming anyone, little killer?” Mercy asked by

way of greeting, sounding like he'd just woken up despite having made coffee and kissed Aodhan out the door this morning.

“And what have you been up to?”

“Calix is still sleeping,” he said, “so I took a nap.”

“With him?”

“Where else?”

Not. Fair.

He kicked at the bottom of his desk, the loud sound echoing around him.

“Don't pout,” Mercy told him, but he sounded pleased with himself nonetheless.

“Nyxian's putting something together. I'm bringing Cal.”

There was a pause and then the sound of rustling, no doubt Mercy getting up and leaving Calix's room in case they woke him. Sure enough, the soft clicking of the door shutting came a second later, followed by a deep, disapproving sigh.

“That isn't sticking to plan,” Mercy pointed out.

“I'm speeding things up.”

“That's not wise.”

“I bagged you, didn't I? I think I know how to handle the detective.”

“Aodhan.”

“He’s been cooped up in that room for almost a week now with nothing to do,” he reminded. “I think we’ve bored him half to death already. He’s itching for some excitement.”

Cal really was. Aodhan had caught him staring at his mouth last night at dinner, and the hungry look in his eyes he hadn’t been able to mask in time wasn’t for the food set out on the desk in his bedroom.

“He’ll be begging for one of us to touch him soon anyway,” Aodhan continued. “I’m merely suggesting we give him the best setting to do so.”

“We can’t touch him until he realizes he wants us,” Mercy said. “We need him begging first.”

“Just use your ability. The party is the perfect place.”

“Physically forcing the issue isn’t always the solution,” he disagreed. “I can only release certain pheromones in the air for so long. We’re not trying for something temporary, we’re trying for something lasting. Something real.”

“I don’t care if it’s real,” he stated. “I only care about getting what I want.”

And what he wanted was Calix, on his knees, those pink lips stretched around his cock, a pool of blood—

“Get yourself together, little killer,” Mercy warned. “Or I’ll do it for you. I let you get away with a lot, but I won’t allow you to jeopardize this.”

He blew out a breath and willed those images of taking Cal in someone else's entrails

aside. “I’m not suggesting we deviate from the plan. We stick to it. I’m just saying we give him that final shove now instead of later.

He’s close, Mercy. I can feel it. He’ll break for us.

You’re the one who said he needs to be the one to discover all his pieces. ”

“He can’t accept who he is,” he said. “That makes it impossible for him to accept us.”

Personally, Aodhan didn’t think Calix was doing too bad of a job at that. After learning that he was a murderer, he hadn’t freaked out or anything of the like. In fact, he treated Aodhan no differently. Kind of like how he’d reacted to Mercy after watching him shoot Amory.

Cal was angry with them, of course, and for good reason.

But...

“He doesn’t hate us.” There was a knock on his door. “We’re doing this, Mercy. Trust me. I always get what I want.”

“So you keep saying.” Still, the older man made another annoyed sound and then hummed. “Fine. Get back to work so you can come home and I can spank that ass for not listening to me. Again.”

Aodhan perked up at the thought, ignoring the knocking when it came again.

The damn nurses could wait.

“Will you edge me?” he asked.

“Don’t worry, baby,” Mercy practically purred. “You always get what you want. Eventually.”

Aodhan shivered.

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Last time they'd had their Third dressed like this, Titus had been too far away to truly enjoy it. Now, he unabashedly took in the view, gazing at Calix as the younger man finished adjusting the bubblegum pink silk vest to the three-piece suit.

They could have gotten new ones, but a part of him still felt like that night had been stolen from him, even if Aodhan had been the one to decide to take it. Because of that, Titus had wanted to see Calix in the suit he'd picked out. Wanted to see them both in them.

And apparently, he wasn't the only one.

The second Aodhan stepped into the room, Cal's gaze shot toward him, eyes roaming up his fit form, only to linger on the collar secured around the doctor's neck.

Titus's collar. A sign of ownership to warn off any of the other partygoers.

A bunch of bored rich people he only bothered to interact with in case of emergency.

Sometimes it paid to have friends in high places, both literally and figuratively.

Though tonight's bunch were the lowest of the low.

Members no one couldn't live without. They'd called in a favor with Nyxian, the Organizer.

It'd cost them too, but that was no matter.

He wasn't short on coin. The Mercer family name carried a lot of weight throughout the universe on its own, with coffers filled enough to last several dozen Connect lifespans, not to mention the funds he added from being the director of one of the galaxy's top hospitals.

But real power came through connections, so networking, as tedious as it was, was a necessary boredom.

Plus, Aodhan always enjoyed it. He got off on tricking the rich and depraved every bit as much as he did fooling the average person. Probably even a little bit more, since half the members of the club also boasted above-average intelligence.

Since one could simply buy their way in, there weren't many worthy of Titus's attention, let alone respect. Nyxian Kuji, the mastermind behind their obscene secret society, was possibly the only one, in fact.

There'd even been a brief moment where Titus had considered making him their Third, but the energy pattern had been slightly off. He hadn't wanted to settle for anything less than perfect, and he had time to keep searching, so he'd decided against it.

Not to mention, he'd hated the way the other man flirted with Aodhan in front of him, and if jealousy was a factor, becoming a pod was near impossible.

With Calix, things were different.

He didn't grow defensive over the way the detective was staring at his little killer. On the contrary. It sparked an ember of pride in the center of his chest, gave him a warm feeling that sent the energy frequency in the room zipping.

It felt right.

Both of them dressed in his favorite color, Aodhan's matching suit a shade lighter than the one Cal had been given.

"Do I get one of those?" Calix finally asked, touching the center of his bare throat, seemingly without realizing. His eyes stayed glued to the martingale collar in pink and gold that Aodhan was wearing.

"Remember what I said the last time you asked that?" Aodhan replied, the corner of his mouth turned up teasingly.

Titus hadn't been privy to whatever conversation he was referring to, but when the detective immediately turned his gaze his way, he sort of got an idea. "Would you like one, little monster?"

Calix's expression shuddered instantly. "No."

He hadn't intended on giving him one yet anyway, knew Cal wasn't ready for it, so the swift refusal didn't bother him. "Meet me in the car."

"What are you going to be doing?"

He quirked a brow. "I can't exactly go like this, can I?"

Titus had waited with Calix while Aodhan had gone to change. Now it was his turn.

"What is it exactly you have up your sleeve?" Instead of following Aodhan to the door, Cal held his ground.

Though his tone was casual, the intense way he stared Titus down was anything but.

"You're trusting I won't run, which means you've already done something to ensure I

won't be able to. What is it?"

They'd explained where they were going earlier but had mostly kept things vague. Calix had been surprised when told they were allowing him to leave the house, but he'd simply gone along with it up to this point.

"If it's anything like the last party, there are going to be lots of people there. What makes you so sure I won't tell everyone you've kidnapped me and are holding me against my will?" he continued before either of them could give him an answer.

"Trust me, Be'urn," Aodhan walked back and took Calix by the wrist, "you won't find any help where we're going. Those people? They're more likely to pass you around until you're broken and bleeding than call the police on your behalf."

"You'll be safe because you're with us," Titus clarified.

"As for the rest of it..." He took a threatening step closer, altering the air around them until it was thick with a sense of foreboding and dread.

"Just because I've been easy on you, doesn't mean you should forget what I'm capable of.

You like to run into danger, but let me assure you, this," he shoved more of his ability out, twisting it so the fear was potent enough to cause Calix to stumble a step away from him, "is a state I can keep you in forever."

"A person can only handle so much fear," Aodhan joined in. "The adrenaline rush you're addicted to won't last, but the feeling that something awful is about to happen? That paranoia? That will stick with you."

Calix yanked his arm away from the doctor's hold. "I get it. Stop."

“You asked,” Titus reminded.

“Yeah, and now I know the answer. Cut it out.”

“Are you going—”

“I’ll behave,” he said. “Just stop. It feels...” He couldn’t finish his sentence, but Titus had an idea.

“Are you reminded of being trapped in a cell, waiting to find out if you’d thrown your life away? Is that the lowest you’ve ever been? The most afraid?”

“When I do eventually get out of here and have you arrested for all the shit you’ve done,” Cal replied, “you can get a taste of what it’s like firsthand.”

“That isn’t going to happen, Azi.”

“Because I’m not smart enough to escape?”

“Because you won’t betray us even if you do.”

Calix opened his mouth, but swiftly snapped it shut before speaking. He’d either realized Titus was right or had decided to pick his battles. The first option was preferable, but Titus wasn’t going to push him on this, not when there were places they needed to be.

People they needed to encounter.

“Whatever. Move.” Cal shoved Aodhan aside and left the room.

The doctor watched him go and let out a low whistle. “Weren’t you the one telling

me not to push him too hard?”

“He can handle it.”

“Yeah, and that,” he pointed at Titus, “is definitely my line.”

“Has everything been prepared accordingly?” Titus kept his hold on the pheromones, not needing to be in the same room as Calix to continue altering the ones around him.

Technically, he wasn’t holding them back from the area around Aodhan either, but existential dread wasn’t something the doctor was familiar with.

The only sign he gave that he felt anything from the change at all was a light scratching at the center of his chest.

“Nyxian confirmed we’re all set.” Aodhan cocked his head. “How do you know this will work?”

“I read his files from the orphanage,” he said as he opened the garment bag he’d brought with him to Cal’s room and began getting dressed.

He couldn’t wait for them to do away with this separate bedroom nonsense and start sharing the one upstairs.

“They’re surprisingly detailed, despite all the things Sister Grace put him through. ”

“Laws weren’t as strict back then. She was able to get away with torturing her charges.”

He caught the sour note in the doctor’s tone. “You want to get even?”

“Don’t you?”

“In due time.”

Aodhan blew out a breath and then moved to the door. “I’m going to go make sure he’s not trying something stupid. We’ll wait for you in the car.”

“As soon as you step outside, my hold will break,” he reminded.

“I won’t let him make a run for it.”

“We need him to be able to walk tonight.”

“I won’t break his legs either, Good Light.” Aodhan shot him a glare and then left with a huff.

Titus trusted that Aodhan wouldn’t actually permanently damage their man, but he dressed quickly anyway.

Surprisingly enough, it was Calix who was the unpredictable one at the moment.

There was no telling whether he would try to run now that they’d let him out of the house, or if he’d stay in line, knowing it was a pointless battle.

“What have I gotten myself into?” he murmured as he grabbed the box that held his red mask. One unruly bondmate was enough, but he’d had to go and find himself two. He wondered if his cousin would laugh at him if he found out.

Not that they’d spoken in years.

He had very little in the way of family, having left the Connect homeworld at only

fourteen years old.

That wasn't unusual for their species. Ever since birth rates had lowered to dangerous levels, the considered age for relocating continued to drop.

Sixteen had been the average age when he'd left, so he'd only been two years ahead of that, and he'd heard rumors that it was now fifteen.

His parents hadn't given him a choice, shipping him off to a coed boarding school on the opposite side of the galaxy. The hope had been for him to find a suitable match while doing his studies, but he'd spent most of his focus on learning and preparing for medical school instead.

Every now and again, he was summoned back, but he only went if the invitation was by Imperial decree. He'd no doubt receive fewer of those as well, once word got out that he'd chosen a third who also couldn't help continue their species.

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The house was quiet as he exited, either a very good sign or a bad one.

He kept his enigmatic expression in place when he stepped out onto the porch and saw Aodhan and Calix standing by the sleek black hover car they only took out on occasions like this.

It was registered under an alias that couldn't be linked back to them, though that was an extra precaution he didn't really need, considering who he was.

Connects could get away with just about anything.

Calix's gaze dropped to the mask in his hand as he approached.

"You don't seem surprised," Titus said.

"Kind of figured it was you that night," he drawled. "Not many can affect people's emotions, and I doubt you'd let Aodhan get away with hooking up with someone else."

"I won't let you get away with it either.

" He cornered the detective against the side door of the car while Aodhan snickered and went to turn the vehicle on.

"Fair warning, I'll be pumping aphrodisiacs into the air at this party as well, after the main event.

I heard you were propositioned the last time. ”

“Just some woman,” Calix shrugged, but it was obvious he was uncomfortable. Still, he knew better than to ask Titus to step back.

Progress.

He captured Cal’s chin. “Tonight isn’t a game.”

“It’s a test. I’m aware.”

Every day that passed, the detective proved to him more and more that he’d botched his last case on purpose.

Whether that was because he’d grown suspicious of Titus and Aodhan, or simply because his heart hadn’t been in it, it didn’t really make a difference.

How Calix felt about them was constantly changing.

“You’ll really behave?” Titus asked.

Calix scowled but still didn’t pull away or shove him back. “Connects are said to be experts at mental manipulation. I started keeping my eyes out for it after Troya told me what you are.”

“And?”

“I know what you’re trying to do—What you’re doing,” he corrected himself.

“You’ve shown me Aodhan is obsessed with me and you’re the only one who can keep him from accidentally pushing things too far.

You've made it clear you can be caring and nice so long as I stay in line.

But, Titus? None of that proves to me you really want to take me as your Third. ”

For the first time since they took him over a month ago, Calix sounded somewhat open to the idea.

Yes, definitely progress.

“Even if I changed my mind later on,” Titus replied, “the bond is unbreakable. Once we form it, I couldn't get rid of you. Neither could Aodhan.”

“All that guarantees is I'll spend the rest of my life trapped. There's a difference, you know? A difference between being forced to stay with people who are stuck with me, and people who actually want me.”

“Are you asking for love, Calix?” He slid his hand across his jaw and rested it over his throat, feeling the steady thump of the other man's pulse beneath his thumb.

“Can you even give me that?” Cal held his gaze without flinching. “Are you even capable?”

Titus could lie, it would be the smarter move.

But with Calix staring up at him so earnestly, he found himself unwilling, even if it would help tie the man to him.

“I love Aodhan.” He did. Not more than himself, but as an extension of himself.

The doctor felt the same way. “I'm capable of falling in love with you, too. ”

“So you took me just because our frequencies match.”

They’d had Calix in their home for a little over a month now, and Titus didn’t monitor the conversations had between his Second and Third.

The problem with that was he didn’t know how much Aodhan had said or to what end.

It seemed like there was something specific Cal was trying to get at, but even though Titus typically was able to read the other man like an open book, he struggled to identify what was being asked between the lines.

“Do you love us?” he questioned.

“It’s been weeks,” Cal stated. “If I don’t love you, and you don’t love me, shouldn’t we call it quits? Wouldn’t that be simpler?”

He clicked his tongue. “Always trying to take the easy way out, Detective.”

“I’m no longer a detective,” he reminded.

Up until now, he’d allowed them to continue to call him that, but it seemed he’d reached his limits.

“I’m not an agent anymore. I’m nothing.” He held up a hand when Titus went to speak, stopping him.

“That’s not me being self-deprecating. A clean slate was what I wanted.

That’s the problem, can’t you see? There’s nothing clean about the two of you. You can’t give me what I want.”

“Perhaps not.” Titus released him, and it took all his willpower not to react to the flash of disappointment in Calix’s eyes.

The temptation to skip the party, drag him back upstairs, throw him on the bed, and show him how good Titus could love him was strong.

But he resisted. They were close to a breakthrough, and he wouldn’t allow his desires to cost them that.

“But I can give you what you need , little monster. That’s more important than your wants. ”

“No part of me needs to see another man get sawed in half.”

“That’s old news.” Aodhan came back around, motioning for Titus to take the driver's seat. “The theme tonight is different.”

Cal eyed him suspiciously. “What’s the theme?”

Ever the instigator, the doctor leaned forward and whispered against the curve of Cal’s ear, “Auction.”

Titus shook his head and turned away.

Tonight was either going to be the best idea he’d ever had.

Or the most foolish.

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They weren't auctioning off people.

Titus had driven them to another unknown location deep in the heart of a forest on the outskirts of the city.

They'd taken so many twists and turns down narrow roads, there wasn't a chance of Cal finding his way back on his own.

Especially not with Aodhan seated next to him, distracting him with random conversation the entire time.

The building where the party was being held was different from the last one.

Instead of a home, it appeared to be a large building once used to sell furniture.

The outside hadn't looked like much, but the inside had been lavishly decorated with rich red carpeting and tan painted walls with gold trim.

Almost immediately, they'd been directed to the main hall where a row of chairs had been set up into three sections. They were close to the front in the middle row, not giving Calix much of a chance of escape should he have to throw up like he did at the last party.

It also didn't give him much to look at, but he tried to scan the surrounding people, not familiar enough with those in power on the planet any longer. He'd been away too long, and the masks everyone wore did a surprisingly good job of shielding their identities.

“They’re not all from Emergence,” Titus rested a hand on Calix’s upper thigh and leaned in closer to say.

If they weren’t somewhere so public, he would shove the director off.

Probably.

“That’s Experiment.” Titus motioned to the far left with his chin.

A tall man standing off the side of the left row, talking with a redheaded woman, was pointed out.

He was in form-fitting black leather pants and a sleeveless crop top made of silk with small gold embellishments and what appeared to be real diamonds.

The mask he had on was covered in black rhinestones that glimmered every time he moved his head even a centimeter.

“Who?” Calix guessed he was probably relatively attractive beneath the mask.

“That’s not a name.”

“He’s a famous model from Uturn.”

“I think he’s friends with Yuze Quint,” Aodhan said.

“Oh, really?” Cal’s interest was somewhat piqued by that, which didn’t go unnoticed. When Aodhan stiffened on his left side, he rolled his eyes. “Relax. I’ve seen some ads and stuff, that’s all. He’s been the cover model of at least one major magazine on pretty much every planet in this galaxy.”

“Yet you haven’t heard of Experient? ...Do you have a thing for blondes?”

“You’re not dying your hair,” Titus quipped before the conversation could go any further in that direction.

“I don’t have a preference when it comes to hair color,” Calix answered anyway, hoping to help end this discussion. “It wasn’t even Yuze I was paying attention to the first time I saw him in an ad. It was the watch he was wearing.”

“Watches are incredibly obsolete,” Titus stated. “Everyone has a multi-slate nowadays. What’s the point?”

“Signifying social status and wealth?” Aodhan replied. “Getting to show people less fortunate how much richer I am than they are?”

Cal pursed his lips. “I don’t want a watch anymore.”

“Right?” Aodhan brought his hand up to the front of Cal’s neck. “I think a golden collar would be better. We could put a bell on you, that way you couldn’t take a step without us knowing.”

“I’m pretty sure,” he brushed his hand aside, “that’s already the case.”

“Smart.” Titus smiled and then pointed to the front of the room. “It’s about to start.”

Calix shifted uncomfortably in his seat, taking in the stack of gilded cages set on the far side of the room. It’d been left purposefully darker there, shadows shrouding most of the animals up for auction. He could hear chirping and low growls, the occasional hiss, coming from that area.

The light orbs floating above them flickered, and everyone settled into their chairs, a hush falling over the room when a man dressed in dark blue stepped up to a black podium.

He wasn't the same person who'd been in charge at the last gathering—the one who'd cut the merman in half.

His hair was copper, and even from the distance between them, his pale blue eyes were noticeable.

“Greetings.” The man smirked at them all. “Let's skip the boring introductions and begin, shall we?”

Part of Cal wished he wouldn't, since he didn't have much experience and wanted to be able to follow along, but the other part was glad.

Maybe they could rush through this and he could feign feeling sick after.

If he could convince Titus and Aodhan to leave before things got... heated, that would be ideal.

For his mental health, that was.

Calix didn't want to admit that he was sex starved. He'd gone from never-ending orgasms to not even being able to jerk one off on his own without picturing one of the men on either side of him holding him down and forcing him to take it.

If they didn't leave immediately after the auction, Cal wouldn't even need Titus's influence to get hard. He was already so turned on, it was a miracle neither of them had commented on it yet. If they tried anything tonight, there was an incredibly high chance Calix wouldn't even bother resisting.

“Why are you suddenly so nervous?” Titus asked, but Cal gave a slight shake of his head, denying it.

“I’m trying to pay attention.” Barely. He was listening to the man in blue as he began the auction, two helpers dressed in black lifting a medium-sized cage and setting it on the display table.

Inside, there was a lizard-like creature with a barbed tail and ten eyes. He’d never seen one in person, but he recognized the animal as being on the endangered species list for several galaxies.

Aodhan let out a low whistle. “They’re starting off with a bang.”

“What are they going to do with it?” Calix was almost certain he didn’t want to know but... “Please tell me you didn’t bring me to another horrorfest.”

“Do you have a soft spot for animals?”

If he admitted it, what would they do?

Turned out he didn’t need to, Aodhan could already tell. He snorted and then rested his hand on Calix’s other thigh possessively. “Cute.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he kept his voice down so as not to interrupt the auction, but the glare he sent Aodhan’s way should have spoken volumes.

“I just think it’s adorable how you don’t give two shits about people, but you draw the line at animals.

What’s that about? Is it that they’re all helpless?

Or do you just like the fluffy ones? You seem very into appearance, since you’re a fan of a guy like Yuze.

I can see you only caring about the cuddly ones covered in fur. ”

“If you return my blaster, I’d be happy to show you just how many shits I give about—”

“Me?” the doctor cut him off and fluttered his lashes ridiculously.

“Fuck off.”

“That comes later.”

Calix stiffened, but Titus tsked at his other side.

“Enough, little killer. You’ll frighten him.”

Aodhan pressed his mouth against Cal’s ear, probably so Titus couldn’t hear, and whispered, “Maybe we should put you in the cage. That way you’re locked up with nowhere to run, no matter how frightened of me you get.”

He was about to snap some witty remark back when the next creature was called out and another cage was exchanged for the one that was already on the table. Air got caught in Cal’s lungs the second he saw the animal trapped within the small rectangular prison.

There was barely enough space to fit it, its white bat-like wings tucked tightly against its side, the tip of its left antler poking out from between bars.

There were two atop its head, the other scraping against the bars when it tried shifting.

Its body was feline, with fur the color of freshly fallen snow, and two ruby red eyes

peered out at the crowd, a mixture of anxiety and fear glimmering brightly.

Sylars were indigenous to several planets throughout the universe, but they were rare on Emergence and not often taken as pets due to their wild nature and scarcity.

Even shipping one from another planet where they were abundant could cost hundreds of coin, and most people weren't equipped with enough space or resources to properly care for one.

Calix hadn't seen one in ages, not since he'd been a kid bumbling through the forest behind the orphanage.

He'd been following two other boys who'd only recently moved in, but they'd purposefully lost him in the woods.

They hadn't stayed at the orphanage for long, adopted out within that same month they'd arrived, but their impression and influence on Cal had lasted.

The bidding started, and he struggled to focus as his mind pulled him back to memories he wished would remain buried.

Of stumbling on a furry body in the snow.

Hearing laughter and footsteps as they ran away.

Leaving him with a cooling bundle and bloodstained hands.

Had it been Cal's fault that day? He couldn't remember.

He didn't think it was. If he tried really hard, he could picture the older boy lifting the rock while the younger one held the poor creature down. Calix had never harmed an

animal before, not then, and not now, but...

His memory couldn't be trusted, because he couldn't be trusted.

If you tell yourself a lie long enough, you start to believe it. You forget it was made up in the beginning and buy into the false narrative to make yourself feel better. Cal knew this. Knew that was his expertise.

Whether he'd done it or not, he had been the one to carry the bleeding creature back to the orphanage. He'd been naïve. Had thought Sister Grace would help him.

Instead, she'd called him a monster.

She'd dragged him inside and tossed him into the tub and rubbed his skin raw with a sponge that had felt like sandpaper.

Those two boys had returned, and they called him a liar when he asked them to confess.

In his memory, Calix had arrived just in time to stand there and watch them deliver the killing blow.

He'd just stood there.

And watched.

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“How unfortunate,” Titus said, tearing Cal out of his thoughts and back to the present.

He was sweating, and his palms stung from where he’d been unintentionally digging his nails into his hands. Calix forced them to flex, but it took him another few seconds to get hold of himself enough to speak. “What?”

“Mr. Edwarz has a unique palate,” Titus said. “He’s got a real taste for things he shouldn’t.”

“You can’t mean...”

“He’s going to eat it.”

“If he wins,” Aodhan chimed in, listening to them despite how quiet they’d been.

There were other bidders, but no one ever bid more than a couple hundred coin above the elderly man in the front row, almost as though they were backing out gracefully.

Calix had never heard of the name before, but then, it was probably an alias, meant to protect his real identity just like the masks they all wore.

The images returned of himself at eight years old, dragging the body through the debris of the forest...

A trail of blood left in his wake...The lashing Sister Grace gave him when he’d cried and pleaded for help...

The bundle of cooling white flesh and fur tossed carelessly into the trash bin on the side of the road.

Like garbage instead of something that had once been a life.

Calix clutched onto Titus's sleeve without realizing, his eyes still locked onto the hissing creature in the gilded cage.

The tiny, pale pink collar with the golden bell helped create the illusion this was a regular pet auction, and nothing nefarious was going on.

But he'd just been told otherwise and, honestly, he'd known as much even without the verbal confirmation.

Was he really going to repeat history? Was he going to sit here and watch and do nothing?

That event had been the start of the end for him in Sister Grace's eyes. From that day on, he could do nothing right. She'd punish him for little things and watch him like a hawk, as though waiting for him to make a mistake. For him to hurt something or someone else.

His distorted recollection of the day the police came for him after Nero's accident returned as well, correcting itself.

When she'd cried out to Light for mercy, she hadn't been pleading on Calix's behalf.

Because to her, Calix had always been a monster.

"Please," it passed his lips, and once it had, his resolve shattered. "Mercy. Please, stop this."

“I can’t stop the entire auction,” he replied, but all Cal really heard was no, and he couldn’t accept that.

“Bid on it.”

“I don’t need a pet.”

“I do.”

“You don’t.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Oh, little monster, you can’t even take care of yourself.”

Calix forced his gaze away from the creature and onto Titus, searching his expression for any hints. Not that he really needed them. He’d known all along what the older man wanted him to say.

“I did it.” It was easy enough not to think of that day when the one from when he was much younger was still so fresh on his mind. When there was a way for redemption caged right in front of him, ripe for the taking.

Calix could part with one truth to protect another, especially when he’d known from the beginning that Titus had never been fooled by him.

“I was angry. Nero had spread a rumor about me and Sister Grace, took photos of the bruises she’d left in the locker room when we were changing in gym.

So, yeah. I did it. That idiot stepped in front of my car without even glancing my way, and that was the last straw.

How dare he shove me into the limelight and not even have the decency to look at me?

I hit the gas. On purpose. And,” he leaned in, pressing his trembling lips against the warm curve of Titus’s left ear, “I got hard the second I felt his body crash against the hood.”

“Would you do it again?”

“Yeah.” He should say no. That would be the smart thing to say.

But it wouldn’t be honest.

Up until sleeping with Aodhan, hitting Nero with his car had been the second biggest mistake of his life. Of course he should want a redo. Go back in time and make a different choice and save himself the grief.

Titus would see right through him if he tried to fib, though.

Just like how he’d seen right through everything else.

“Did you know?” he dared ask, pulling back enough that he could look at Titus’s face, all while his hand reached down to grab onto his wrist. “Is that why we’re really here?”

Calix lifted the director’s hand into the air, the paddle going up just in time to add their bid to the running. His hold tightened, refusing to allow Titus to lower it, even though the director hadn’t fought him yet.

It didn’t matter if it was a trick though. Didn’t matter if they’d brought him here to dangle a part of his past before him like a carrot on a stick.

Letting that creature die when he'd been eight had been the biggest mistake he'd ever made. Had turned into his biggest regret and set off a lifetime of pain and suffering, at both the hands of his caretaker and himself.

He couldn't let it happen again.

No matter the cost.

"Yes," Titus replied, before shouting out a number that had the rest of the room gasping and then clapping when he won. He never looked ahead, however, keeping his eyes locked on Calix right up until they started the bidding on the next creature. "Consider this my proposal gift, little monster."

"You tricked me."

"Is it really a trick when the other party is so aware of what's really going on?"

"How did you..." Calix frowned. "You've read Sister Grace's files?"

"Each and every one of them." Titus cradled the back of Cal's skull and kissed his forehead before standing. "Wait here. I'm going to go have your new pet put somewhere safe until it's time to leave."

Damn it. What had he done?

"For the record," Aodhan said, drawing his attention back his way. "I think you did good, Be'urn. I would have hit that prick with my car too."

Calix wasn't sure what it said about him that he was actually comforted by that.

...No. That was another lie.

He knew exactly what it said about him.

“Be prepared to pay us back for the gift.” Aodhan’s smug grin stayed with him the rest of the auction, causing a mixture of dread and anticipation to collect in Cal’s gut.

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“Are monsters born, or made?” Aodhan asked, trailing a hand up the center of Calix’s bare chest.

“What?” the word came out breathy and weak, and Cal struggled to get a hold of himself. Fighting against the pheromones being pumped into the air was impossible and, truth be told, he was only partially interested in fighting it.

He’d known what was going to be expected of him the second he’d begged Titus to buy the sylvan.

They’d relocated to a side room with a two-way mirror that took up an entire wall. The mirror faced the large room they’d been in earlier, where most of the other guests had either wandered off or started in on the second half of the night’s festivities.

Before they’d gone, Titus had done that thing of his, altering the feeling in the air until everyone around them had been a writhing, moaning mess.

It’d be hilarious watching what had to be the richest people in the galaxy lose their minds and their composure, if Cal didn’t happen to also be right there with them.

Now, he squirmed in the plush yellow chair Aodhan had pushed him into, helpless to stop the doctor’s wandering hands as they teasingly stripped him of all his clothing.

“Maybe a little bit of both,” Titus answered Aodhan, coming up behind the chair so he could stare down at Cal. “Ours was probably made. He’s too normal otherwise.”

“Thank Light he isn’t normal,” Aodhan disagreed. “He’d be so boring then.”

“I’m right here,” Cal pointed out, but the other two acted as though they didn’t hear.

Pretty soon, he was completely naked, lying back in the chair with his hands resting on the armrests. He was torn between wanting to resist and just...giving in.

“Do you feel like you owe us, Azi?” Titus figured him out easily enough. “For buying you the sylar?”

He refused to answer, but he pressed his lips together stubbornly, causing the other man to laugh.

“Once we’re bonded, I’ll buy you anything you want,” the director promised. “And I won’t expect anything in return. What’s yours will be mine, and what’s mine will be yours. Take,” his sharp green eyes lifted toward the doctor, “my little killer, for example.”

Aodhan licked the side of Calix’s right knee and grinned at him as he parted Cal’s thighs. When Calix made a sound of protest, he shushed him. “It’s okay, Be’urn. You’ve been feeling empty, haven’t you? Let me fill you up.”

“Just go back to calling me baby,” Cal growled, hissing when the doctor pressed a finger to his entrance. “And you,” he glared up at Titus, “what’s with the ‘little’? There’s nothing little about either of us, and we’re only, like, two inches shorter than you, if even.”

“Oh he’s getting snappy,” Aodhan chuckled.

“That means we’re making him nervous.” Titus ran his fingers through Cal’s hair. “Trying to distract us so we don’t notice how turned on you are right now, little monster?”

“I confessed to crippling a man,” Calix stated. “That’s not the type of behavior that’s meant to go un—”

“You want us to punish you?” His fingers twisted in a lock of his hair and he yanked Cal’s head up. “We can do that. We can do both.”

“I can punish you with my teeth,” Aodhan nipped at the tender flesh of Cal’s inner thigh and pressed his middle finger deep inside of him. “And reward you with my cock.”

“Spread him wider,” Titus ordered. I don’t have a good view from this vantage point.”

“I have questions.” Cal yelped when he was partially dragged down the chair so Aodhan could resituate him with his legs spread wide around him. They were lifted, his knees pressed back.

“Hold him,” the doctor said, and Titus reached forward and wrapped warm hands around the backs of Cal’s knees, keeping him in place.

“Go ahead,” Titus smirked over him. “Ask your questions.”

Aodhan drove two fingers into him and Calix gasped.

“That didn’t sound like a question. Have you already forgotten what you wanted to say?”

Calix’s eyes narrowed at the obvious challenge. “What happened to the no-touching-me game? Did you give up?”

“Does this look like giving up to you?” Titus’s arrogant expression had a flash of

indignation curling its way through the lust being forced on him.

“So it’s fine if Aodhan touches me, so long as you don’t?” Cal countered. “Not to mention the fact you have to pump me full of pheromones just to get me to this state.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Should we test that theory, monstrous one? I don’t think you’ll like the results. But if you insist...”

“Wait.” Too late, he realized his mistake, but he should have learned by now that once Titus decided on something, there was no turning back.

Without needing to be told, Aodhan pulled his fingers free and stood.

He moved away just as Titus let go of Cal’s legs, stepping off to the side to lean back against the window with his arms crossed.

He didn’t seem the least bit interested in the orgy taking place outside, the corner of his mouth tipping up in a mocking smile when Calix met his gaze.

“Should have kept your mouth shut,” the doctor drawled. “He was going to give you more time to adjust.”

Cal sent Titus an accusatory glare as the older man settled in the empty spot between his thighs. When he tried to close his legs, the director clicked his tongue, the sound somehow enough to get him to freeze up as though a blaster was being held to his head.

“How long have you been doing that?” the question was whispered low, but the realization felt like a bomb going off inside of him. He’d noticed every other time the Connect had used his abilities on him— “Mother fucker.”

He shot to his feet, but a hand shot out, wrapping around his throat, shoving him back down into the chair.

Calix grabbed onto Titus's arm, but he couldn't push the older man away, no matter how much he struggled.

The director only allowed it for a moment anyway, that same instinct to be docile in his presence rushing at him, forcing Calix to drop his gaze and loosen his hold without consciously meaning to.

"Have you figured it out?" Titus asked. "How much control over you I truly have?"

All those times he'd used his power on Cal to make him feel scared or angry or horny had been a veiled trick. The director had wanted him to know what he was doing, that way he could get away with his real endgame.

"You made sure I couldn't feel it was your influence making me—"

"Recognize I was your master?"

He'd always felt like the director was somehow above the rest of them. Had gotten the sense he was the one Cal needed to convince if he ever stood a chance of getting out of this or gaining higher ground.

"The problem with knowing you're smart is you forget you may not be the smartest in the room," Titus said.

"We spoke in circles, and I allowed you to occasionally feel like you had the upper hand because that's what was needed to get your guard down.

Make no mistake though, little monster, I'm the one in control here, and I don't just

mean of Aodhan Solace. ”

Calix’s eyes flicked over toward the doctor, but he didn’t seem offended by that comment. On the contrary, there was something almost like reverence written in Aodhan’s expression as he watched Titus’s back, barely even noticing Cal’s attention.

“How?” Cal needed to know. It was too late to fight against it now, so all thoughts of resistance went out the window, but still.

That explained why Titus always skirted questions about his abilities. He’d answered the ones about his snake tattoo without hesitation. It should have been a clue, but like an idiot, Cal had fallen for the distraction tactic.

“It was simply a matter of altering my pheromones around you. Changing the feeling you get from me when in my presence, as opposed to messing with the ones in the air. Everything emits pheromones, you know. I have plenty to work with, meaning there are many ways I can affect those around me. Even those,” he pointed over his shoulder toward the window, “not around me.”

The orgy was still going strong despite the fact Titus was in here and not out there. At the first party, Calix had also witnessed him cross the room without being touched or hit on, despite everyone else being barely able to keep their hands off anything that moved. Only Aodhan had reacted to him.

Then there had also been the director’s office the day Rhett had held him at gunpoint.

Rhett’s emotions had been all over the place, but Calix hadn’t been affected even once he was in the small room alone with the two of them.

He’d had suspicions the ability could be directed at a single person, but he really

should have spent more energy thinking about this, instead of feeling sorry for himself, wasting time wondering if his two captors would really keep him if he told them what they wanted to hear.

“You like animals so much,” Titus continued, “you should know a bit about how predators and prey work. Prey have instincts that alert them when a predator is near. Senses like smell, hearing, and sight all come into play, but sense in general can also be considered something all on its own. That intuition you get when something doesn’t feel right, even though you can’t quite put your finger on why.

Dominant alphas release pheromones naturally that warn everyone they’re top of the hierarchy. ”

There were certain species in the universe that had a second gender known as alpha, omega, and beta.

Calix had only taken one case on a planet where that was the norm, and he’d spent a night in bed with a man who’d claimed to be an alpha.

It’d been intense, but the man had still been too delicate, afraid of hurting Cal even though he’d told him over and over again that was what he wanted.

His own personal experience aside, he’d heard stories about how aggressive alphas could be when they entered their heat cycles. If he’d had the chance to stick around longer on that planet, he would have out of pure curiosity.

“Are you saying you learned how to mimic those pheromones?” Calix sucked in a breath when Titus’s hand drifted from his neck down the center of his chest leisurely.

“Don’t you feel like you should submit?” his voice turned sultry. “Doesn’t it feel like that would be in your best interest?”

It did, and in a way that Calix had never experienced before.

Only that wasn't entirely true, because now that he was aware of it, he could pinpoint that he'd felt this way around Titus before, on multiple occasions.

Hadn't he instantly pegged Titus as the one in charge, despite how forward Aodhan always was?

Before he'd been kidnapped, the director and him had spoken infrequently, and yet even then, Cal had gotten the odd sense that something wasn't right. That he should avoid the older man for his own well-being.

And now that avoiding was impossible?

He did want to submit.

Which seriously pissed him off.

Even if it made things easier for him in the long run.

"Frightening you outright wouldn't work," Titus said, touching him lower.

"Your penchant for rushing toward danger instead of away from it wouldn't have allowed it to.

But this? This is a different sort of unease, tinged in fear, yes, but not sourced from it.

Your subconscious simply knows which of us has the most power. It isn't you."

"Are you saying you'll hurt me if I don't comply?" Calix grunted. "Not seeing how that'll work in your favor either, Wa'rid."

They all tensed, and Cal inwardly cursed himself for the slip.

His comment would have been a lot more impactful if he hadn't accidentally tacked on the respectful title.

They'd been calling him things like Be'urn and Azi for weeks though, and it must have gotten to him.

Wa'rid was the title given to an older male one was close with in his language, and since they were currently on Emergence...

"I take that back," he said when it became apparent Titus was waiting for him to say something else. "We are not close. I shouldn't have—"

"Get up." Titus took three deliberate steps away, giving Calix room to follow the command.

"What?" Taken aback, he sat there instead of listening, though the sensation that he should get moving screamed in his head.

"Should I drag him out?" Aodhan suggested.

"No. He'll do it himself. Up. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

He opened his mouth to argue, but Titus beat him to it.

"You might like pain, little monster, but you don't like suffering. And you especially don't like," Titus tipped his head, "humiliation."

Calix glanced around him at the orgy in the back, sucking in a sharp breath. Bodies were writhing and slapping together chaotically, almost to the point he wasn't

entirely sure any of them would even notice if he was brought out there and forced to join them.

But it wasn't something he was willing to find out, and Titus knew that.

"I can fuck you here," the director reiterated, "in front of our Second, or I can put you on display out there and make you come on my cock in front of a live audience. The choice is entirely yours."

"What will it be?" Aodhan crossed his arms, scowling now. "Hurry up. Don't keep us in suspense."

Calix frowned at him.

"He doesn't like the idea of sharing you," Titus answered the question he was thinking before he could ask it, and when his breath hitched, reassured him.

"I mean in any capacity. No one else is allowed to touch you, Calix. Ever. Even if you decide to continue pushing me, and I end up having to carry you out there and breed you on the floor like one of the animals you care for. They can watch, but no one can lay a hand on you."

"Mercy," Aodhan growled, proving he really wasn't a fan of the watching idea either.

"It's not up to you, little killer," Titus insisted, holding Cal's gaze hostage. "It's up to him."

Calix already knew what it was like being gossiped about, and even though no one in the other room would have a right to judge him even if he was fucked in front of them, he couldn't bring himself to be unaffected by the notion.

They might be wearing masks, but that didn't make a difference either.

Anyone who really wanted to discover his identity could easily do so.

Not to mention, after weeks of leaving him hanging, both literally and figuratively, it sounded like the director was finally going to let him experience what his cock was like...Should he want that? No.

Had he been thinking about it for days and days?

Hell yes.

He stood up.

And waited for the next instruction.

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Blood was rushing to his head, making him dizzy even as pangs of pleasure continued to jolt through him. His arms and forehead were braced against the concrete ground, and he shook from the strain of being locked in this position for so long, and the onslaught of sensation being forced upon him.

Titus had taken the chair and then grabbed Calix, sitting him on his lap before shoving him forward so he was bent.

He hadn't needed Aodhan's help to get Cal into the position he wanted, with his thighs and knees pressed against the armrests at either side of the director, his ass high in the air as he was tipped over.

"Give me another bottle," Titus told Aodhan, and Calix whined and tried to pull away for what had to be the millionth time, only to receive a hard slap against his ass in response.

"Not another one," he pleaded. "That's the third one!"

He tipped his head and caught sight of the two empty lube bottles lying on the ground next to him, another pathetic sound slipping past his lips. Both bottles had been emptied into his passage, and he felt the fluids inside of him still, despite how long Titus had been fingering him since.

"He's big," Aodhan's voice came from somewhere above him. "You'll be grateful for it later."

"No." He shook his head. "It feels weird."

Titus inserted the narrow tip of the bottle into Cal and then squeezed, using his free hand to pull his cheeks further apart as though he was expecting his hole.

Embarrassment hit him, and Calix brought his arms closer to his face in an attempt to hide, not that either of them could see him anyway.

He'd never felt so full before in his life, and it was made worse by how odd the feeling was.

It wasn't the same as taking a solid object, the lube pushing at his insides, into all of those hidden crevices he didn't even know existed until now.

Three fingers speared through him to accompany the nozzle, scissoring and stretching him impossibly wide as his hole was fed more and more lube.

"That's going to be so messy when it comes out," Aodhan chuckled. "It'll be dripping from him when we leave. He'll be sitting in it the entire ride home. Did you remember to pack a towel? I don't want my back seats ruined, just his."

Cal growled at that, then gasped when Titus squirted the rest of the bottle into him, tossed it, and spanked him again for good measure.

The wet sound that emitted from his ass had him whimpering from the humiliation he'd been trying to avoid when he'd decided to listen to the director and not get fucked in a crowded room.

Was this actually any better?

...Yes. As frustrating as it was, it was still better. Because it was just Aodhan and Titus, and for some reason, that mattered.

He didn't feel safe or respected with them—he wasn't completely deluded—but he didn't feel judged either and that...

Damn it. That was apparently enough to sway him.

If he'd known he was this easy, he would have quit the I.P.F.

sooner and remained on that alpha planet after all.

Found himself a nice, and aggressive, man who'd—Cal yelped as he was slapped again.

"I don't like being ignored," Titus said. "Do I even want to know what you were thinking about just now, little monster?"

Cal shook his head with no hesitation.

Titus drove his hand in and out of him hard enough that he needed to brace an arm on Cal's narrow back just to keep him from falling off.

"You sound so wet," Aodhan commented. "It's already getting everywhere. Seriously—"

"Ask me about the towel one more time and you'll be put over my knees next," Titus warned sternly.

The doctor shut up.

"Come here," he ordered Aodhan. "Help please our Third."

Calix was hauled up off the ground and plopped down in Titus's lap. The squish of

the lube that immediately dripped from his hole had him wincing, but the director held him tightly until he'd settled and gave in.

As soon as he was satisfied Cal wouldn't try getting off him, Titus reached down and hooked his hands beneath Cal's thighs, lifting and spreading him wide.

"Wait!" Calix slammed back against Titus's hot chest, realizing with a start the other man had removed his shirt at some point.

Titus didn't listen, partially curled around Cal to keep him in place. "On your knees, little killer."

Aodhan did as he was told, dropping to the ground between their legs, gaze greedily taking them both in. His left hand stroked against the side of Cal's swollen dick, causing him to jerk at the contact. "Lift him. Our Third should please you as well."

"Hold on." Calix struggled to find purchase as he was hauled up an inch off Titus's lap, hands eventually landing on the armrests. He didn't get to say or do much else, eyes widening when Aodhan reached beneath him and the sound of a zipper being undone followed.

Aodhan dragged Titus's pants down to his ankles, then brought his hand to Cal's leaking hole and collected a glob of lube. When his hand disappeared from view again, it was obvious he was coating Titus's cock from the way the director tensed behind Cal.

"Hold on," Calix breathlessly repeated, unable to hold back a shiver when Aodhan winked at him. A second later, he felt the unmistakable brush of a cockhead circling his entrance.

"I opened you up enough. It won't hurt," Titus whispered against the crook of his

neck before he bit at him, hard enough that it stung but didn't break skin. "Much. But feel free to scream all you like. The two of you are always so vocal outside of the bedroom. Carry that energy over, okay?"

"No, I—" He wasn't ready.

But neither of them cared.

Calix felt the push of Titus's heated crown notch into him before he was suddenly dropped down onto it fully. In one move, he was impaled, the impossible length of the older man tearing through him despite how stretched he'd already been in preparation.

A howl ripped from his mouth, tears prickling at the corners of his eyes as the man beneath him started to thrust, jabbing his insides over and over with what felt like a searing steel rod.

He scrambled for a better purchase, finding Aodhan's shoulders, and dug his nails into the fabric of his suit jacket, wishing it were flesh instead.

Titus pounded into him mercilessly, jerking Cal's body up and down on his cock like he weighed nothing. Everything seemed to be happening too fast, his body unable to keep up as it was forced to receive him over and over again.

Cal cried out. It was too deep. Too full. Too everything.

"Is he being too rough?" Aodhan asked. "Want to get back at him?"

Calix shook his head, mostly because he couldn't think past the zips of electricity shooting through his veins. He shook everywhere, his body going into a mixture of shock and intense pleasure that was too overwhelming to process.

The doctor cupped his face in both hands, his thumbs trailing beneath the edge of the mask almost lovingly before he broke out in that wicked grin that signaled he was about to do something dangerous.

“Kiss me.” Aodhan pulled him in closer, bending Calix over more in the process.

He gave another cry when that allowed Titus to drive in even deeper, but Aodhan merely laughed at him.

“Kiss me,” he repeated, bringing his mouth close before whispering, low enough Titus probably couldn’t hear, “Let’s shut you up and see what happens.”

“No—” Opening his mouth was a mistake. The doctor instantly took advantage, and Cal gagged when Aodhan’s tongue thrust past his lips and stroked against his.

The invasion was every bit as brutal as the one in his ass, the assault frenzied and possessive, as though it was a competition between the two of them with Calix caught between.

Titus grabbed a handful of Cal’s hair and yanked him back roughly, grunting when Calix gasped.

“If you’re going to be brats, I can think of better things you both could be doing with your mouths.

” His gaze roamed down Cal’s chest, settling on his dick and then he motioned to it with his chin. “Suck it.”

Aodhan moved closer and licked Calix’s tight balls.

“I told you to—” He didn’t get the chance to finish his scolding.

Aodhan wasted no more energy on being a tease, wrapping his lips around Calix's dick and making a big show of swallowing him whole. He hummed when his crown hit the back of his throat, then bobbed up and down in the same quick motions of Titus's hips.

Cal moaned and thrashed, only quieting when Titus captured him by the jaw and turned his head for a kiss.

The director's mouth devoured his, delivering nips and swirls of his tongue to rival the way Aodhan was gulping down his dick.

He drew blood more than once, chuckling darkly whenever he did and Calix made a sound.

His free hand played with Cal's right nipple, pinching and tugging at it until it was sensitive and red, not letting up even when he pulled his mouth away and tipped Cal's head to the side to expose the length of his neck.

"Wait," Calix felt a wave of fear rush through him. "I won't. I don't give consent."

Titus growled threateningly, but Cal refused to let his instincts dictate his actions on this. On something so permanent.

"No."

"You'll bond with us now or later," Titus declared. "It makes no difference when, so why put off the inevitable?" He slammed Cal down on his cock and rocked his hips, ensuring he hit all those spots inside of him that made him feel like he was being electrocuted.

"If it doesn't make a difference," Calix somehow found it in him to argue, "then why

can't you give me more time?"

"If you don't love me now, you won't ever," Titus retaliated. "Isn't that what you said to me earlier, little monster?"

Shit.

"I...didn't..."

"What? No longer confident you can resist me?"

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Calix was only vaguely aware that he was crying, tears pooling down his face to wet his cheeks, but he couldn't tell if it was due to the conversation, the sense of helplessness he was experiencing, or the overstimulation of having his hole pounded and his dick sucked at once.

"I don't even know you," he ended up saying, which, in hindsight, was probably the worst thing he could have said.

Because, truthfully, he did know Titus Mercer. He knew him very well, in fact.

How could he not, when the monstrous side of Calix recognized the monstrous side of the director?

He didn't need to know boring details like where the guy's family was or if he was still close with his mom. Didn't need to know what Titus stayed up doing at night or if he liked spicy food more than sweet food.

When he thought of falling for someone, none of those things had ever come to mind. All he'd ever wanted was for someone to look at him without disgust. To accept him for who he truly was.

To hurt him when he wanted it and scold him when he needed.

Being owned by a man he hardly knew wasn't the problem.

No, the issue here was Calix. Pure and simple.

“I can never be what you want me to be,” he confessed.

Aodhan made a choking sound, but didn't let up, the look in his eyes turning almost pitying when Cal risked glancing down at him.

“All right,” Titus said, and there was something chilling in his tone Calix had never heard before. “I see the kind route isn't working. Since you're unwilling, allow me to show you that I can be demonic enough for all three of us.”

“What—” The sounds on the other side of the glass changed so suddenly, it caught Cal off guard. He lifted his head just in time to see the chaos shift from carnal to bloodlust, moans turning to screams of rage as the people outside turned on one another.

They clawed and bit, some tearing huge chunks of flesh off the partners they'd just been mindlessly fucking seconds prior. Blood exploded in bursts, covering clothing and naked bodies, fists swinging and battle cries echoing in the air.

A man scrambled up to the two-way mirror and started pounding on the glass, his flaccid dick dangling between meaty thighs.

It took Calix a second to recognize it was Mr. Edwarz.

Before the man who'd bid on the sylar could do any sort of damage to the glass separating them, he was pulled back into the fray by three men and taken to the ground.

One bent over and used his teeth to tear the man's cock off, spitting the severed appendage to the side.

Calix squeezed his eyes shut, the mouth sucking on his dick no longer as welcomed

as it'd been before.

"He won't hurt you like that," Titus reassured, roughly grabbing Calix's jaw and shaking his head until his eyes popped open again. "I've only altered things out there. You're safe, so long as you stay with us. Keep watching, baby. This is your doing."

"No." Cal refused to take responsibility for this. "This is a nightmare. Make it stop."

"The people we like have already gone," Aodhan pulled off Cal's dick with a loud slurp and said.

He traced the scars on the inside of Cal's thigh.

"I wish these were gone as well. You'd look so much better with our names carved into your flesh, right here, as close to your intimate parts as we can get.

You liked it when I carved that A. If only I had a knife right now."

Calix shivered. "I thought you said it only affected the outside."

Titus grunted. "That's just Aodhan being Aodhan and you know it. He's not being influenced by me."

The doctor clicked his tongue. "Should I tell you a secret?"

Cal wasn't sure, but it wasn't really a question anyway.

"His ability doesn't really work on me," Aodhan confessed. "Sometimes, with some things, but rarely." He tapped the scars, then turned to Titus. "Can I fix these now, Mercy?"

“Unfortunately, our Third claims he isn’t ready.”

The doctor’s expression darkened. “Then we take.”

Another person slammed against the glass, leaving behind a smear of red that partially obstructed their view of the brutality taking place amongst the guests.

“He has to be willing,” Titus reminded, reaching down to cup Aodhan’s cheek lovingly.

That is, before he shoved his face back down to Cal’s dick.

“Keep sucking, little killer. If you’re good at it and make him come while he’s witnessing all the carnage, I’ll let you step outside and have your fun as well. ”

Aodhan perked up. “Promise?”

“Don’t,” Calix pleaded.

“Why not?” Titus asked. “You’re still hard. You’re still moaning from having your prostate battered. You still want us. Does it bother you that you can be so lascivious even with all those people dying right in front of you?”

He wanted to deny it, but his body was already betraying him.

“Kind of monstrous , don’t you think?” Titus continued. “For your dick to be gushing all that precome and your ass to be clinging to my cock, all while people have their eyes gauged out and their skin flayed? Oh. I see someone has found a knife.”

Calix didn’t want to look.

But more than that, he didn't want to admit that...

He didn't really feel as horrified as he should.

"You haven't asked me to stop yet," Titus noted, as if reading his mind. "You could try it, you know? You could beg me to spare them. I might consider it. For you."

Cal bit down on his tongue when Aodhan chose that moment to suck his dick back into that hot mouth of his.

"You won't though, will you?" the director chuckled. "Because as badly as you want to, you don't care about them."

"I watched them saw a man in half the last time," Calix snapped. "And this time, with the animals—"

"The animals are safe. I had them all relocated. They won't be harmed. After we're done, you can pick through them if you'd like. Keep the ones you want, the rest we can donate to local animal rescues who will know how to properly handle them."

That...

"Stop trying to make me like you." Cal sobbed when Titus thrust into him and simultaneously shoved his hips down to meet the spearing of his cock.

"Next time," he said directly against the curve of Calix's ear, "I'll let Aodhan brand you.

He'll erase those marks and ensure you won't go another day without knowing exactly who it is you belong to.

It won't be enough to carve ourselves into your flesh, little monster.

I'm going to sear us there. I'm going to give you a mark you can't cut out or erase. ”

Aodhan flicked his tongue over the tip of Calix's slit.

Titus drove into him mercilessly, repeating dirty promises about branding him and burning his name and all sorts of other devilish things that shouldn't have caused Cal's balls to tighten or his hole to clench.

But it did.

When he finally came, he was staring outside but completely unfocused on the ensuing murder spree. He filled Aodhan's throat with his come and weightlessly went when Titus forced him to the ground and fucked him through another orgasm against the cold, hard floor.

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Calix barely remembered the next four hours. Couldn't count how many times Titus stuffed him with his cock. How many times Cal came. Or if he'd passed out once or twice.

There were bits of recollection, like how he'd been wrapped tightly in the director's arms when they'd finally left the room. And how he'd frowned at Aodhan, who'd disappeared earlier and gone to join the fray outside.

The doctor had been the only thing left living in that entire space, sitting in the center of the room, surrounded by gored bodies as though he were the king of hell.

He'd been in the process of arranging organs when Titus had called him, and even though it'd seemed like he was immersed in what he'd been doing, the second he heard the older man, he'd dropped the stomach in his hand and walked over to them, crushing the very things he'd been playing with carelessly beneath his boots.

That might have been when Calix threw up.

Maybe not though.

There was a good chance he'd thrown up earlier, and not because of the bloodshed, but because of how exhausted he was from taking Titus's cock.

If this were him three months ago, he'd say it was because Aodhan stepped on someone's entrails, and Cal had seen guts explode out the torn end. But now lying, even to himself, to make himself feel better, was too cumbersome a task.

He thought they might have gone somewhere after that, but when he heard them calling his name next, he was confused to see they were just in another part of the warehouse.

“Open your eyes, baby,” Titus urged gently. “Aodhan has a gift for you.”

Cal was almost one hundred percent certain he did not want it, but he fought against exhaustion and made himself blink his eyes open anyway.

Only for confusion to grow.

At first, he didn't know what he was looking at.

It took far too long for his brain to process what he was seeing.

The room they were standing in must have been a storage room in the back.

It was small. There was nothing in there but some cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling and a single square table that was slightly off kilter.

That, and the severed head sitting on the table's center.

With some poor bastards torn dick shoved in the head's mouth.

Oh. There was also a pile of parts on the other side of the room.

“She brought her lover with her,” Aodhan began, though he sounded far away. “Don't worry, it wasn't one of the orphans. I checked. She doesn't sleep with them anymore, not since you were arrested.”

Calix brushed Titus's hands off his shoulders but didn't speak or make any other

moves to distance himself from the towering presence at his back.

“She does still beat them though. Well,” Aodhan snickered, “she did. She won’t be doing that now either.” He clapped, and when Calix turned his head toward the sound, he saw Aodhan had made it with hands that didn’t belong to him.

The doctor was holding two perfectly severed limbs, cut at the forearm. Once he noticed Cal was watching, he grinned and tossed them to the left, into a pile of other parts that had been cut and dissected and left in a careless heap.

“I can’t take credit for the dick though,” Aodhan told him. “She’d already ripped that off the guy by the time I arrived, but I thought it made a good garnish, don’t you agree?”

“You’re enjoying this too much,” Titus drawled, though there was humor in his voice.

“Not really,” he disagreed. “I didn’t get to hurt her nearly as much as I wanted. Not nearly as much as she deserved for what she did to Calix.”

“How long have you known?” Cal sounded different to his own ears, numb.

“Since the beginning,” Titus said.

“The beginning eight years ago,” he swallowed the lump in his throat, “or the beginning four months ago?”

“I found out after the trial. I looked into you after you disappeared.”

“Oh.” So always. He’d always known exactly what Calix had gone through as a teen.

“She used to beat you, touch you until you were hard, then call you disgusting while she forced your dick inside her cunt,” Aodhan growled.

“She died after an hour and thirty-seven minutes. I should have made it longer. I lost control when she realized why I was doing it, and she started to make excuses.”

“She waited until I was eighteen,” Calix said. “The sex. She waited until I was legal.”

“Yeah,” Aodhan sneered, “excuses just like that.”

“I don’t like being forcibly fucked because of her,” Cal stated, voice shaking slightly. “That isn’t the reason. I’m messed up but...Not like that. I hated what she did to me. Every time she did it, I felt like dying. She never made me like it, even if she could manipulate my body and make me—”

“Shh.” Titus wrapped his arms around his chest and pulled him tightly against himself. “You don’t have to explain. We already know. We aren’t judging you.”

“I can get off without the pain,” he rushed to continue anyway. “I don’t need to be held down and made to take it. I was interested in that sort of sex before she ever started touching me. Hell. The only reason she even started was because I got hard after she’d hit me and—”

“Whoa.” Aodhan stepped closer, momentarily blocking his view of the severed head. “We aren’t going to do that, Be’urn. We aren’t going to stand here and let you lie about something this serious.”

“I’m not—”

“Yes,” he insisted, “you are, because in no universe was anything that happened to you at that orphanage your fault. So you popped a boner? Big fucking deal. You were

a horny teenager just discovering what you liked and didn't like in the bedroom.

She took advantage of that. She was an adult, and she chose to abuse her power and take advantage of that. Of you."

A part of Cal had always hated himself for losing control in front of her that first time. Of giving her that opening. But...

Aodhan would tell him if he'd been the reason. The doctor never pulled punches, and Titus...Titus called him little monster. Titus knew about him, about everything.

"It's...not my fault?" he asked, softly. Pathetically. "Not even a little? I—"

"Not even a little," Aodhan stated vehemently.

"And while we're on the subject, it's not your fault for what happened to that kid either.

Well—" he blew out a breath, "it's your fault for hitting him with your car, but the asshole deserved it.

I'm still furious he found a way to reverse the damage.

He hasn't suffered nearly long enough either. "

"When did Nero find out about you and Sister Grace?" Titus gently asked.

Calix licked his dry lips. "Locker room. He saw the marks she'd left, assumed she'd beaten me.

She had, but he made a joke about it being more than that when he noticed the rope

burns on my wrists.

Said it must have been rough play in the bedroom gone wrong.

Something about my reaction must have given me away, because he realized he'd hit the nail on the head.

The next day, he was sharing photos of me he'd taken without my knowledge to the rest of the class.

Telling them how I fucked my caretaker to soothe my mommy issues."

Something had snapped in Cal that day. Before then, he'd liked pain, sure, but not delivering it. He'd sobbed like a baby after those two older kids had murdered the sylar in the woods. Cried himself to sleep, thinking about how Sister Grace had so carelessly tossed the body like it was nothing.

Calix had never wanted to harm anyone.

Until he did.

Until Nero Quinten was walking in front of his car, laughing on the phone, probably telling whoever was on the other end all about how Calix let Sister Grace ride his dick.

Let.

As if he'd let any of it happen.

As if he'd ever wanted it.

“He told the entire school I was a filthy pervert and then pretended like I didn’t exist. Like he was too good for me.” Calix shook his head. “He was never too good for me.”

“You’re too good for him, Azi.” Titus pressed a chaste kiss to his cheek. “Far too good. He should never have been allowed to breathe the same air as you, let alone get close enough to take photos of your bare skin.”

There was a knock on the door, and when Calix jumped at the sudden intrusion, Titus held him closer.

“Relax, it’s just Nyxian,” Aodhan explained, moving to walk around them to answer.

“Who?” Calix asked, but the second the doctor was no longer blocking his view of the table, he stopped caring about the answer.

“I have your creature. Would you like me to load it into your car now? I have places to be,” a new voice said to Aodhan as soon as the door was opened.

“Would you like a moment alone with her?” Titus whispered to Cal, stepping back when he didn’t immediately receive a response. “We’ll be right outside, Azi. Come to us when you’re done.”

Cal listened to them go and the sound of the door shutting behind them, sealing him inside the room with the remains of the person who’d raised him.

Whether or not she’d done a good job of that was debatable.

He’d both hated her and convinced himself he cared for her for so long that it was a struggle to grasp his emotions now.

It was a long while that he just stood there, staring into her eyes, taking in how they'd shifted and turned cross-eyed in death, the one on the left bloodshot and cloudy.

He'd never considered killing her, not when he'd been a teenager forced into her bed, and not after.

As an adult in the Academy, he'd put his past behind himself as best he could and tried to move on.

The only things that had lingered were his darker proclivities and kinks.

Sometimes they made him think of her, but more often than not, he'd been able to turn his thoughts to Titus instead.

He gave a sharp, single bark of laughter without realizing.

Ironic that Titus Mercer had been helping him this whole time.

That the man who'd orchestrated Calix's kidnapping, who'd allowed him to be strung up and sexually tortured—Not just sexually, actually, physically too.

He'd been left dangling from the ceiling with no food, long enough that his arms had lost feeling and his legs had twitched.

In retrospect, Titus had done way worse to him than Sister Grace had ever.

And yet...

Cal took a single step closer to the table, hand lifting as though to touch her face before dropping back to his side.

“I didn’t like when you touched me,” he murmured. “Not once.”

But Titus and Aodhan were different. Titus made him feel . Made him feel like, for the first time in his life, he might not actually be so alone.

Dangerous. Especially considering Cal was aware that much of that feeling was no doubt due to the Connect’s influence over him. His ability to manipulate him, even on a subconscious level.

Aodhan...Aodhan made him feel special. The doctor’s true nature didn’t care about anyone other than himself and Titus. Even though he’d left Cal alone with the director to go off on his killing spree tonight, Cal had still been able to feel the excitement buzzing off him before and after.

He’d felt Aodhan’s hatred toward Sister Grace as well.

It’d been real.

And it’d been for him.

The way Calix saw it, he had two options.

Give in and accept his fate.

Keep resisting and end up under their thumbs—and their bodies—with no autonomy.

If he went with the first, Cal was starting to believe they’d give him back some semblance of freedom. He didn’t know everything about the Connect bond, but he did understand that once they went through with it, they’d be able to find him wherever he went.

But...they'd be able to feel him too.

Cal scratched at the place over his heart, frowning. He hadn't yet come to terms with his emotions, the thought of letting someone else in to feel them for him was... off-putting.

"Everyone here already thinks I'm a monster." He leaned closer to Sister Grace. "You've helped me realize something tonight. Better a monster than a hypocrite."

Calix had lied, but he'd never pretended the things that happened were anything other than the horrible acts that they were. He'd convinced the world, and even himself for a while there, that the incident with Nero had been an accident, but he'd never claimed hitting him with his car had been okay.

He knew right from wrong.

He'd never claimed to be a saint.

"What's your excuse? Looks like you stopped fucking your charges, but never stopped attending shit like this."

If she came here tonight, that meant she was a member of this exclusive club. Aodhan had even mentioned she'd been with her lover, relishing in the debauchery she used to beat Cal for supposedly being curious about. Neither the doctor or Titus had seemed surprised either, which meant they'd known.

They hadn't brought him here to poke at old wounds and trick him into a confession to save the sylvan.

They'd brought him here for this.

As far as betrothal gifts went...

Calix clutched the top of her head, taking a fistful of her gray and brown hair, barely noticing when some of the blood it was matted with smeared onto his palm and squished between his fingers. He lifted her up until they were at eye level.

“Good Light. May the gods have mercy on that poor girl's soul,” he returned the last thing he’d ever heard her say.

Then he dropped her head with a sickening plop down onto the table, turned, and did the one thing he’d always dreamed of doing.

Calix Valimir finally left his past behind.

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Cal waited until around three am, when the house was completely silent, to make his move. He'd insisted on keeping the sylar with him in his room and had managed to convince Titus and Aodhan that he needed some time alone to process everything that had occurred at the party.

It hadn't been a lie. Not entirely.

He'd noticed the collar on the creature right away when he'd first spotted it locked in that small cage. Just as expected, the loop attaching the bell to the rest of it came off with a little bit of prying. He chunked the bell onto the bed and twisted the tiny piece of metal to his liking.

It took another twenty minutes to get it to work, but eventually, he managed to use it to unlock the golden cuff that Titus had annoyingly remembered to lock around Cal's ankle before he'd left.

The sylar watched him silently the entire time, sitting patiently at the head of the bed on the pillow he'd been sleeping on before Calix had begun this daring escape plan.

If he left the creature here, would Aodhan harm him out of anger?

Would Titus forget to feed it and starve it to death?

"You have to keep quiet," Cal whispered before scooping the creature up. He couldn't leave it behind, even if they didn't do anything to harm it. He was the one who'd begged for it, after all. Taking care of it was his responsibility.

The door wasn't locked, but then, he was pretty sure it never was.

Still, he eased it open an inch and put his ear to the crack, listening for any signs of movement.

He was just as careful as he stepped out and padded down the hallway toward the stairwell, pausing at the top to do the same, though no sounds came from below either.

Briefly, he glanced up at the ceiling. Their bedroom was on the third level. He'd never been invited up, but he knew that much. That put them far from the exits, with him in between. Seemed kind of stupid, and that wasn't a word he would use to describe either of them...

"Whatever," he mumbled under his breath.

He could stand here and fret over all the potential possibilities, or he could try his luck while he still had the guts and the opportunity.

He'd managed to get their guard down by going with them to the party and sleeping with them. This was his only chance.

The pink suit he'd worn had been covered in blood, lube, and come, so he'd been forced to remove it as soon as they'd gotten home.

He'd been allowed to change back into the pajama set Titus had given him, but he stopped at the foot of the stairs, frowning down at his bare feet.

Did he waste more time looking for shoes?

There weren't any by the front door...Better not.

The house was still quiet, his heart thrumming wildly in his chest, seemingly the loudest sound in the whole building as he walked toward the kitchen.

The back door would be a safer bet for certain.

Trying to go out the front would be riskier since it was the obvious escape route.

The stairs faced the front. If they heard any noise at all and came to investigate, they'd catch him at the front door easily.

But the back exit was on the opposite side of the house, tucked into a corner.

As expected, the kitchen was dark when he reached it, the only light coming from the one outside. He made his way toward it, carefully twisting the top lock, and then the bottom before pausing with his hand on the knob.

This had been too easy.

What if they were out there?

He pressed his ear to the glass, the frilly black half curtain that was draped over the window scratching at his cheek.

All he heard were the usual night sounds, crickets chirping and the occasional hoot or call of a bird.

No voices, nothing to indicate they were out there lying in wait or having a drink or a smoke or whatever the fuck else two men could do after midnight in their backyard.

A sweeping dread overcame him anyway, causing his skin to prickle and sweat to dot his brow.

He wiped it away and inhaled through his nose, counting down from four in an attempt to calm his nerves.

It didn't work. The fear only grew, this unsettling feeling that if he did this, he'd be making a terrible mistake.

Which was crazy.

Crazier than the fact he'd been kidnapped and sexually assaulted for weeks straight with no food and only enough water to keep him functioning properly to be fucked at the doctor's whim. Then left to twiddle his thumbs for another couple of weeks, all to make him crave their touch.

Which had worked.

Earlier, getting a taste of what sex with Titus was like...

Cal wanted more.

But the "gift" they'd left him in that storage room had been his breaking point. They were killers and psychopaths, and Calix might not be average or a decent person himself, but he had miles to go before he even had a hope of catching up to them.

If he stayed, he'd eventually be eaten alive.

He had to go now, while he still had the resolve to do so, and he was still willing to work on himself. They'd already convinced his body it needed them, and they were close to convincing his mind as well. Once that happened, he'd lose any chance of coming to terms with who he was on his own.

His whole life had been spent running.

He didn't want that.

He wanted freedom.

Reminded of that fact, Calix gritted his teeth against the sensation and stubbornly turned the knob, pulling the door open wide enough for him to slip out.

The chilly night air bit his skin, a cool balm when his entire body felt like it was on fire. His bare feet contacted smooth stone, and he glanced down to find he was standing on a white marble walkway that trailed off to the right and led to a small patio, complete with a glass table and chairs.

Three.

There were three chairs.

Just like in the kitchen.

Cal shook his head and pushed that detail aside. It didn't matter. None of this was real or okay. What would it make him, if he simply rolled over and gave in to their madness just because he was lonely?

And yes. Fine. He was lonely. But so what?

He'd take being lonely over letting them into his head enough to physically feel his emotions.

This last month, he'd barely gotten any time to think past the orgasms and constantly forced state of arousal, which he was certain was by design. But now, standing out in the fresh air, reality was finally starting to trickle back in.

Did he really think a Connect wanted to make him a part of their pod as he currently was?

He almost snorted.

Connects were one of the oldest species in the known galaxies, considered elite and practically revered wherever they went.

The fact Titus Mercer was here, on this planet, and kept what he was so close to the chest was a sign he wasn't out looking for life mates.

He must have stumbled on Aodhan accidentally and realized their particular breed of insanity matched.

Calix didn't know the director's real age, but he couldn't be nearing his one hundredth birthday. There was no chance he would be quiet about what he was if that were the case. He'd be worried and scrambling to find a Third, shouting from the rooftops he was a Connect and looking.

Titus didn't seem like the type to put his life in jeopardy, and Connects only had until they turned one hundred to complete a pod. Otherwise, the influx of energy within them, the source of most of their power and longevity, would start to eat away at them, beginning with their brains.

If a Connect didn't form a pod that could help them disperse and share that chaotic energy, they would first lose their minds, and then eventually die. Titus was crazy, but he seemed present, not like a person currently losing their marbles.

Calix was wanted because his energy pattern matched theirs. No other reason but. Hence why they'd spent all this time trying to change him, altering his way of thinking and his instincts to better submit to their desires.

He was a monster, but they were devils. Whispering dark promises and delivering illicit, convincing touches that made him crave more despite knowing how bad it all was for him. How bad they were for him. A monster didn't stand a chance against a single devil, let alone a pair of them.

Add to the equation that Calix was a monster who still didn't know his limits, who had only just accepted he was a monster at all and...He couldn't stay here.

Calix couldn't lose himself when he'd only just finally started scratching at the surface of who he truly was.

When he'd only just come to terms with the fact that all that garbage Sister Grace had fed him over the years had been nothing more than that. Trash spewed from a hypocritical woman who couldn't face her own desires or sins.

Cal refused to be like her.

Couldn't stay here. Couldn't allow their sweet words, dripping like poisoned honey from their lips, to confuse him the same way the younger version of him had allowed Sister Grace to.

This wasn't real and he wasn't anyone worth keeping.

Not yet.

Cal didn't have his multi-slate or his keys, but he rounded the house anyway, glancing around the side to check the driveway. His hovercar was gone, but that wasn't surprising. Of course they'd cover their tracks after kidnapping an Intergalactic Police Force agent.

He needed to get away for now, find somewhere safe he could hunker down and

carefully think about his next move. Titus being a Connect complicated matters in more ways than one, and the frustratingly collected director must be very aware of that fact.

Aodhan would be easier to avoid, but...He came from a prominent family and was the Second in a Connect pairing...Shit. Between the two of them, they'd probably get away with hiring an elite search team to hunt Calix down and drag him back here.

He needed to go somewhere off the grid. Somewhere where anonymity was the norm.

Their house was pretty far from the main city, a twenty-minute drive, meaning the walk, especially without shoes, would take three times that if he was lucky.

His best bet would be to reach one of the neighbors, though they were also a good distance away.

Cal recalled only passing one other house in this whole wooded area when he'd driven through it.

Thinking he was just coming to say goodbye to the kinky man he'd been sleeping with.

Like an idiot.

Not wanting to linger any longer, Calix started walking, forcing himself to maintain a steady pace instead of racing off into the night like some cliché movie character.

There was too much ground to cover, and he'd burn out way too soon if he did something stupid like that, so as badly as he wanted to get away, he needed to be smart about it.

It got darker and darker the further from the house he got, making it harder for him to make out more than a couple of feet in front of him. The streetlights were few and far between; the orange glow of one, so far down the path, made some of the stars glittering above seem closer.

He stuck toward the edge of the road, keeping to the pavement to avoid stepping on anything and injuring himself, but wanting the comfort of knowing he could dash off into the shelter of the trees if need be.

Even though it slowed him down even more, every now and again, he found himself stopping and glancing behind him.

It was too dark to make anything out, but not hearing anything also helped to calm his nerves.

All Cal needed to focus on was getting away and doing what he'd planned to do last month.

Leave.

He was going to take his new sexual awareness and fly to a planet where he could further explore that, safely and anonymously. He'd never been to the world ship Alter, but he'd heard enough about it over the years to know it would make the perfect fresh start for someone like him.

A world where no one knew who he was or what he'd done, and where no one would care even if it did somehow get leaked? Sign him up.

Calix was even more determined to leave once he finally reached the neighbor's house, but he hesitated at the end of the driveway.

He wouldn't wake the neighbors or call for help, and not just because Titus's status as a Connect meant he'd most likely get away with it, and all of this would be swept under the rug.

Cal's anger simply wasn't strong enough for him to want to report Aodhan or the director.

He almost laughed because, of course he was going to let them get away with it. That had to be another thing Aodhan and Titus knew full well before starting this.

Cal had been an easy target.

He deserved everything he'd gotten for being such a dumbass. Top agent with the most prestigious policing force in the universe? Ha. He was a joke.

And since he was already so low...

Hotwiring the single hovercar parked in the driveway was easy. He didn't even feel an inkling of guilt as he pulled the vehicle onto the street.

But driving away?

Seeing the road that led to Aodhan and Titus's house get further and further in the rearview mirror? That part was hard.

Calix decided to think of it as just another punishment he deserved for being a detective stupid enough to fall for the killer he was after.

Chose to ignore the tiny part of himself that urged him to turn around and go back.

To slip inside and return to the bedroom and pretend like he'd never escaped at all.

The image of Titus and Aodhan making love to each other, the reminder of how perfect they were together, and how he'd never truly belong, was what helped dampen that inner voice enough not to give in to it.

Even though it would be difficult, Cal was confident he could do the exact same thing he'd done the last time he'd fled the planet after making a massive, life-altering mistake.

He'd start again.

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“Do we really think I’m ready for this?”

Unsurprisingly, Vesper did nothing but silently stare at Calix from his perch on the bookshelf.

Cal had chosen the name for his sylvan once they’d settled on the planet Alter, choosing it for its meaning, evening prayer.

Considering where he’d come from and where he currently was, it was funny in a dark humor sort of way.

Or maybe that was just him.

He turned back to the outfits he’d laid out on the single bed in the room he’d been staying in for the past two months.

Calix had sold the golden collar Vesper had been wearing to a trade captain he’d met through his job as a detective.

Fortunately, he’d known what ports they flew in and out of, and with the stolen vehicle, it’d only taken him a few hours to reach the dock.

He’d been just in time to barter and hop on the first spaceship off Emergence.

But he wasn’t thinking about his escape from his past tonight. No, this was about planning for the future.

“Seriously though,” he turned to Vesper once more, “am I ready? Should I call it off and take a couple more weeks to prepare and think it over?”

The sylar yawned, showing its four rows of sharp teeth in the process.

“You’re right.” Cal sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “It’s too late for that. They should be arriving soon, if they aren’t here already.”

Tonight was his first official job as a stimulus.

Alter was a World Ship/planet that was basically one huge red light district.

People came here to let loose, partake in debauchery, and play out their darkest fantasies.

The sex workers were known as stimulus, and were held in higher esteem than on any other planet in any galaxy.

Sleeping with men for money had never been his personal dream growing up, but after a while, Calix had decided it was the right path for him.

He’d spent six weeks in training, had his certificate, and had been assigned his first clients. He couldn’t call it off over cold feet, not after all the work he’d put in to get here.

All the waiting.

Calix had taken work at Misdemeanor, a nightclub in the center of the capital city, in his first month on Alter.

He’d been nothing more than a waiter then, getting to know the ins and outs before

daring to move up.

Every club had its own set of rules, with varying levels of intimacy that was allowed between workers and their clients.

Misdemeanor was fine with customers doing some light petting, getting somewhat handsy with the waitstaff, but only so long as the waiter or waitress didn't give a firm no.

Cal never said no.

Sometimes, he even wished the people who touched him would be a bit firmer.

His boss, a nice woman in her sixties, couldn't have known he was chasing after the impossible, thinking about the two men he'd left behind.

Wishing it was them touching him at the bar instead of strangers.

She had, however, seen his potential. He'd worked there less than a month before she'd told him about a rare opportunity to quickly rise the ranks. She'd recommended him to Moonward Manor, one of the most prestigious clubs on the planet, with the highest level of pay.

The manor was in a more secluded location, on an island in the heart of a dense forest. The ferry was the only way on or off, which meant if someone missed their window, they'd be trapped for the night.

It was perfect.

Calix lifted his multi-slate and went over his employee checklist for the millionth time.

To help match them with potential clients, every worker had to compile a list of things they were willing and unwilling to do.

Half the reason Cal was so nervous was that he'd assumed he'd have more time after hitting submit, but less than ten minutes after his stimulus bio had been added to the website, he'd been assigned.

The Night Manager of the manor, Gael, had joked it was probably because Cal had checked yes to practically everything. Even the darker shit he said most refused to get into.

Like permanent damage to his person.

He'd selected no for broken bones or dismemberment of any kind, but had clicked yes for things like knife play, blood play, fire play, and even branding.

Calix closed his eyes and inhaled slowly, trying to calm his nerves.

What if this was a massive mistake?

What if his clients weren't who he expected? What if they hurt him for real, and not just in a play setting?

What if he allowed someone else to permanently alter his body by tattooing, marking, or branding him and—

No.

"It's been three months," he said to Vesper, mostly to distract himself, "and they haven't come. I can't keep waiting."

On the checklist, there was also a box for stimulus to put down how many sexual partners they were willing to take on at once. He'd hesitated the most there, waffling between one and two before finally hitting the button for four—because why not at that point, right?

Tonight, he was entertaining two men whose interests had aligned with his own when they'd undergone the screening process.

Moonward took great care of their employees and ensured every one of their clients was clean and understood the agreed-upon rules.

There was a contract for all of them to sign, and a detailed written scene for how the night would go.

Calix had been in charge of providing the script, though he'd hoped one of the clients would offer to do it for him. He'd kept things fairly simple, not wanting to botch his first attempt by getting overly detailed.

They'd start in the forest on the east side of the manor at eight pm.

The clients had shown interest in a kidnaping/rape fantasy, and Cal hadn't seen reason not to go along with it.

Hell, it was probably for the best, since he had real-life experience in that department.

Their photos, which he'd received this morning, weren't bad either.

They were older than him. If he had to choose, he would prefer attractive men in their thirties over some of the other options.

"All right," Cal scratched Vesper beneath the chin, "for the next few hours, we don't

think about Titus or Aodhan. Clear? We just let the chips fall where they may.”

He stepped out of his room and locked the door behind him before traveling down the long hallway.

Unlike the club he’d started at, this place was quiet this time of night, most guests off with their stimulus in a cordoned off area or their rooms. Calix had booked the first half of the east woods for his session, which would keep others from accidentally walking in on him in the middle of his consensual non-consent play.

Another box he’d checked no on had been for exhibitionism.

Having an audience wasn’t something he was interested in.

As it were, tonight was already going to be difficult to get through.

Gael met him on the stairs, gifting him a friendly smile when Cal bowed his head in greeting. “I’ve gotta confess, I thought for sure you’d chicken out.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“We’re both ex I.P.F,” Gael reminded. “I better than most understand how hard it is to set your old way of thinking aside and fully immerse yourself in a place like this.”

Calix had learned early on that Gael had also once been a detective. Maybe that was why they’d instantly gotten along. He tried not to overthink it. That was his new mindset with everything. To not overthink.

To just let fate decide.

“I trust you’ve screened the clients,” Calix said. “A fellow detective would never let

me get in over my head. You agreed I was ready, remember?”

A strange look passed over Gael’s face before he got hold of it, but Cal couldn’t identify what it meant. The second the other man clapped him on the back reassuringly, he forgot all about it.

“Sure, I said you were ready because you insisted you were. But it’s unheard of for a stimulus to refuse to have intercourse with anyone during their training period, you know that, right?”

If I were anyone else, there’s no way I would have approved you for work.

If tonight’s going to be too much for you—”

“It isn’t.”

Gael sighed. “Are you sure? I can still adjust your contract and remove some of the more hardcore items. I’m the Night Manager. I won’t let anyone harm you unwillingly. No matter who that person or persons may be. I’m in your corner, got it?”

“Thanks.” Calix returned his smile from earlier. “I’ll keep in touch.”

The man watched him descend the rest of the steps, but he didn’t try to stop him again, and Calix didn’t encounter anyone else the rest of his walk through the manor. The side door slid open, and he stepped out into the cooled night breeze, heading straight for the woods without preamble.

Despite his nerves, he was eager to get this started.

He’d left his multi-slate in his room as per the agreement, so had to make do with the

sparse light from the few fairy lights strung up in the trees in this area.

There were also a dozen or so light orbs that floated throughout the woods, sometimes drifting into view, other times lighting up areas too deep in the forest to help him.

There was a path that was taken care of by the groundskeeper, and he stayed on it, keeping his pace steady as he made his way further and further away from the manor's main building.

They hadn't set an exact time or place by design, so anticipation and anxiety bubbled within him with each step. Every time he heard a sound, his shoulders would tense slightly, but whenever he looked, there was nothing but the dark forest.

It was almost a half hour later that he picked up on the soft footsteps behind him.

They were close, but not close enough to have him panicking just yet.

He couldn't tell if whoever was there wanted him to hear, or was still trying to be stealthy, and not wanting to mess up his client's plans, Calix forced himself to keep his gaze straight ahead, pretending not to notice he was being tailed.

Ten more minutes passed before he caught sight of the second stalker, nothing more than a shadow moving between the trees in his peripheral vision. Casually, Cal picked up the pace.

He let them trail him a little longer, enjoying making them wait, but the second he took the sharp left turn up head, he shot into motion. Calix raced down the path, only abandoning it once he heard pounding footsteps following behind.

The shadowy figure appeared again at his side, moving in closer, forcing him to twist

in another direction.

He fled, going over the map of the forest he'd memorized as soon as he'd been assigned this playscape.

If he wasn't mistaken, he was being led toward the lake.

It was an interesting choice if it was being done on purpose, considering it was still a ways away from the manor and pretty far off the beaten path.

Since they'd booked this whole area, there was no reason to seclude him. They wouldn't be interrupted, his clients had to know that. It was tempting to put an end to it, stop, and confront them, but Cal had waited months for this already.

What was another five or so minutes?

Both men chased him, not bothering to hide their presence now.

They crashed into tree branches and crushed twigs beneath their feet, all the while herding Calix where they wanted him to go.

Like the perfect prey he was pretending to be, he went along with it, stumbling every now and again to keep things interesting, never once breaking character, no matter how badly he wanted to catch a good look at his assailants.

The relief he felt the moment he burst through the tree line and caught sight of the still water of the lake glistening under the full moon was short-lived. He only managed one deep breath before one of the men crashed into him from behind.

Calix went down hard, a heavy weight falling on top of him, knocking the wind out of his lungs. But when he recovered enough to look up, the person on top of him

wasn't either of the men he'd received photos of.

“Hey, Be’urn.” Aodhan grinned viciously above him, as beautiful and demonic as Cal remembered him. “Caught you.”

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Cal kicked out, landing a blow to Aodhan's powerful thighs, but it did nothing to deter the other man. He found himself sprawled out on his back in the dirt again in no time at all, his clothing torn from his body in a flurry of motion that nearly gave him whiplash.

It seemed like the doctor had no intention of taking his time anymore, not even bothering with an explanation or further greeting, despite their lengthy time apart.

"No!" A burst of adrenaline shot through Calix the second he felt the cold air against his naked skin and his struggles increased.

After years of working for the I.P.F., it wasn't like he couldn't hold his own in a fight.

Reminded of that, Calix swung a fist, scrambling to his feet the second his knuckles connected with Aodhan's jaw.

Only to make it less than two steps before the pants bunched at his feet tripped him and sent him toppling face-first to the ground for the third time in only a handful of minutes.

"Come here," Aodhan growled, latching onto Cal's right ankle to tug him back toward him.

Calix hissed as he was dragged over debris, tiny pebbles and twigs cutting into his bare flesh as he was carelessly yanked down toward the embankment. He clawed at the dirt, but no matter how hard he struggled, his strength was nothing compared to

the doctors.

An image of one of the severed heads that had been a part of his case chose that moment to flash through his mind. The cut had been clean, clearly made by someone skilled. And strong.

Was that going to be his fate as well?

Had the serial killer doctor come all this way to make Cal his next victim? It would suck, but it was a possibility. Of course if the thought he'd been rejected, he'd want to keep Calix quiet.

"It's time you cool off, Be'urn." Aodhan grabbed a fistful of Cal's hair and twisted him around, holding him until he was kneeling in the mud. He flashed his teeth, grinning viciously in a way that was both enthralling and terrifying all at once. "Did I ever tell you about my little brother?"

The sudden curveball had Calix blinking in confusion, unable to respond, not that it seemed like Aodhan really expected him to.

"I tried drowning him as a kid," he said, sounding far too pleased with himself after confessing something as heinous as that. "Watching him sputter and flail about didn't really do anything for me. I wonder if this will be any different."

"What—" Cal didn't get to finish that sentence. In the next instance, he was shoved face-first into the lake. They were still on the edge, so there was only an inch or two of water there, but his face was submerged and held under, mud and dirty water gushing into Calix's mouth, coating his tongue.

He gagged and tried to straighten, but his hands kept slipping, the ground too soft in the water for him to use as leverage.

Had he miscalculated?

Maybe the doctor really was here to kill him.

Aodhan pulled him back out with the same level of ferocity, holding him steady as Cal gasped and sucked in oxygen.

Brackish water dripped down his forehead, stinging his eyes, and he desperately brushed the droplets and strands of his hair away, blinking against the burning sensation. “Aodhan, stop. Please.”

The man at his side let out a bark of laughter that was a little too manic around the edges for Cal’s comfort.

“Do you hear yourself? Not even you believed that was going to work. Three months, that’s how long it’s taken to hunt you down.

There’s no chance in hell my fury will be that easily satiated. ”

“I haven’t told anyone about you.” It was a desperate attempt, but Calix wasn’t above pulling out all the stops now.

Only, that seemed to piss Aodhan off even more.

“Oh, so now you want to live? Spent a few weeks sucking someone else’s dick and suddenly you’ve regained your sense of survival?”

So he knew all about how far Cal had gone during his training. “It was only a couple of times. It didn’t mean anything.”

“You’re mine, Be’urn,” Aodhan sneered, and when someone scoffed at their backs,

instantly corrected in the exact same possessive tone, “ Ours .”

Calix had forgotten all about the other figure chasing him through the forest, but at the sound, he stiffened, doubt returning tenfold.

He tried to turn his head to look over his shoulder, but Aodhan wouldn't allow that.

Not that he really needed visual confirmation to know who the person who'd joined them was. “...Mercy?”

“Did you think we were alone?” Aodhan said. “There are four of us here.”

“Four?” He hated it, but his stomach dropped, and for a moment the whole world seemed to spin.

He couldn't possibly have been holding onto a shred of hope all this time that they'd been serious about making him their Third, and yet...

Hearing that there were four made him want to cry more than choking on filthy lake water had.

“Yeah. There's us,” he forced Cal's eyes forward, pointing toward a spot ahead, “and him.”

At first, Calix didn't know what he was talking about, but eventually his eyes began to make out the floating lump ten or so feet out. He leaned forward a bit, not noticing how Aodhan allowed him to, and then gasped when he realized what he was looking at. “That's...”

A dead body.

“Mr. Smith,” Aodhan supplied, though Cal barely heard him.

There was a dead body in the lake.

The lake he’d basically just drunk from.

Calix vomited, released from Aodhan’s hold the second he started. He emptied the contents of his stomach into that very lake, watching as chunks of his lunch drifted off toward the corpse.

A strong arm wrapped around him and pulled him away from the water.

He was shoved down onto his back all over again, this time next to a pile of wood that had been carefully stacked.

He frowned at it, only processing what it was when the man on the other side of the pile lit a match and set the whole thing slowly ablaze.

The flicker of firelight danced across Mercy’s face, highlighting the cut of his cheekbones and the disapproving glint in his eye.

Cal wasn’t given long to look, letting out a yelp when his pants were completely removed and his shoes and socks were torn off and tossed over Aodhan’s shoulder.

The sound of them plopping into the water had Calix scrambling to get up, but suddenly Mercy was behind him, pinning his shoulders to the dirt, a knee at either side of Cal’s head.

He stared at the director, trying to find any clues as to what they intended to do to him written on the man’s face, but it was impossible.

Aside from a hint of disappointment, Mercy gave nothing away.

Aodhan forced Cal's legs apart and settled between his spread thighs, his presence there ensuring Calix couldn't close them. Wordlessly, he reached for something by the fire, but Cal could only partially make out the end of a long stick from his vantage point.

Panic bubbled, but before he could try and fight them off, Mercy tsked down at him.

"I was against this in the beginning, but that was before I found out about your intentions for the night," Mercy said.

"Hold on." Calix still didn't know what was about to happen, but the fact the director was so calm and stony about it meant it couldn't be anything good.

"I don't know why you're still coddling him," Aodhan growled, stabbing the stick into the fire roughly. "He wanted to be fucked so badly? He's going to get his wish. This? This is just a precursor. Hell, he'll probably enjoy it."

Cal vehemently shook his head, pleadingly holding Mercy's gaze. "No, please. Whatever this is, I don't want it."

"Should have thought of that before you agreed to give your hole to someone else." Aodhan lifted the stick from the fire and brought the end up so he could take a closer look at it, and by doing so, allowed Calix his first real glimpse as well.

It wasn't a stick at all. It was a rod.

With a hot iron that was glowing bright red orange.

"Good Light!" Cal dug his heels in, but the second he went to move, a wave of

pleasure tore through him. It was so sudden and intense that his eyes actually rolled to the back of his head, and his entire body tensed up.

It was like what had happened to him that time in the woods when Mercy had screwed him with his own blaster, only dialed up to one hundred. There was no easing him into things, no warning. His dick was semi-hard between his thighs one moment, and full and dripping the next.

He panted, peering up at the man responsible for this sudden onslaught of lust, and tried to fight against it.

“It’s pointless, little monster,” Mercy told him. “You can’t fight what you can’t see.”

Pheromones. Right.

“Why bother? He’ll end up enjoying this all on his own,” Aodhan stated, only for Mercy to send him a quick, dark look, before locking eyes with Cal again. As though he was trying to make Calix feel like he wasn’t alone.

Why bother was an accurate sentiment.

“He enjoys pain,” Mercy scolded. “Not torture.”

That had some of the lust dissipating, but seeming to sense that, Mercy moved his hands to cup the sides of Cal’s jaw.

As soon as the director did, another wave of pleasure flooded through him. He moaned and flicked his hips, dick bobbing in the cool breeze, splattering tiny droplets of precome across his abdomen.

“It’s ready,” Aodhan announced.

“Please!” Calix grabbed onto Mercy’s wrist. “Please!”

“Hush,” he shushed him. “We’re not cutting anything off. I told you before, I want you whole, remember? That’s more true than ever.”

Aodhan planted a palm against the side of Cal’s left knee and shoved his leg wider. “This is going to hurt.”

That was all the warning he gave before he pressed the heated iron against Cal’s tender flesh. He’d positioned it on the inner thigh, so close to Calix’s dick, he could feel the heat wafting off the metal.

Even with the pheromones, the pain was intense, the feel of his flesh melting and searing causing him to scream.

His voice echoed around them, but the noise didn’t seem to worry them.

Right along with the pain was something else, potent pleasure that sent tingling sensations racing across his skin.

His balls twitched, and he came so close to coming it was unreal.

It couldn’t have lasted long, and yet felt like an eternity all the same. And after, they continued to hold him down for a moment, even once Aodhan was satisfied and removed the iron.

Eventually, he tossed it onto the ground far away enough that it was out of reach, and then crooked two fingers at Mercy. “Your turn.”

“No,” Cal moaned, but couldn’t move as he was momentarily released, just long enough for the two of them to switch positions.

“Relax, Be’urn,” Aodhan said once he was situated at Cal’s head. “Concentrate on your dick instead. Want me to help? If you beg nicely, I might oblige, though I am still cross with you. The branding helped take the edge off, helped me feel a bit more confident, but still.”

Mercy adjusted Cal’s body in a similar fashion to how Aodhan had before, only this time, his focus was on Cal’s right side.

“I got rid of those ugly marks,” Aodhan continued to talk to him, almost casually, as Mercy slipped another rod into the flames and waited. “Replaced them with something better.”

“Better?” he hated that he was asking but...Calix sniffled. “What?”

“From now on, you aren’t allowed to hurt yourself,” Aodhan chided. “If you want pain, Be’urn, you come to one of us, understood?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“To which part?”

He should say the first part. Any sane person would. “I don’t understand.”

“I just seared my name into your flesh.” The doctor’s hands roamed across Cal’s chest, tweaking his nipples before dipping lower to swirl around his navel.

“Just branded you as mine for the entire universe to see. Try spreading for someone else now, Calix. Try denying what’s right in front of you one more time. ”

“What?”

“You're ours.” Aodhan’s hand wrapped around Cal’s dick the same moment Titus pulled the second brand from the fire and shoved it against a fresh patch of skin.

The mark was left in the same place, just on his inner right thigh, and though the level of pain was the same, Calix didn’t scream again. Instead he cried out for a different reason, relishing the mixture of intense agony blended with the rough feel of Aodhan’s hand jerking him off.

And the confidence that they hadn’t come here to kill him.

They’d come to claim him.

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“Stop fucking him, he’s passed the hell out.” Aodhan drawled from the window seat where he was packing up the medical supplies. He clicked his tongue when his words went unheeded but knew better than to physically intervene.

It’d been harder on Mercy these past few months in some ways. Allowing the perfect candidate for joining their pod slip through their fingers...He’d taken it pretty hard.

Even if it had all been a part of the plan.

Aodhan had only been better with it because he’d known there was no way Calix’s little vanishing act would last. The tracker they’d secretly implanted behind Cal’s right arm, up close to the armpit, was state-of-the-art and could keep tabs on him across the entire universe.

“You’re going to irritate his wounds,” Aodhan sighed, leaving the tube of cream he’d used on the seat next to him before closing the medical box and joining them once more.

He opted to sit on the floor at the side of the bed instead of climbing on it, reaching out to rest his palm over the back of Cal’s hand.

“Branding him relieved your anger,” Mercy growled, wild thrusts never faltering, “it did nothing to relieve mine.”

“If you were going to be like this, why did you wait so long to come get him?” Aodhan huffed.

They'd known all along where Cal was, but the director had insisted they wait him out.

He kept saying Calix needed time to work through some things, and they needed to give him the space to do so.

That everything would work out in the end.

"He almost took another man's cock." Mercy clearly hadn't counted on that possibility, even though they'd realized Cal was on Alter.

"It's not like you don't know what a stimulus does for a living," Aodhan drawled. "I wanted to stop him the moment we found out, but no. Now two more people are dead."

"I know," he said. "I shot one in the ass, remember?"

Aodhan rested his cheek on the mattress and peered up at the flushed face of his First. "That was so hot, by the way. Watching you take a life. Seeing that spark in your eyes. If we weren't already bound, I'd ask you to mate me again."

Titus snorted. "You want me to marry you."

He stiffened, but the director wasn't finished.

"Please. I know you, little killer. The second your brother got married, you've wanted it. You hate the idea of him having something you don't. He's the only person in the universe with whom you're competitive."

"If you ever tell Zane that," he replied darkly, "I will never forgive you."

Before Titus could respond, Calix groaned and then cried out.

Aodhan pressed his hand down on Cal's when he started to struggle. "Relax, Be'urn. Just be a good boy and take your punishment, yeah? If you're good for him, maybe he'll even let you off easy and only go one round."

"We've already passed one round," Titus reminded, and Aodhan gave him a look that screamed shut up.

"Hurts." Calix blinked through tears and seemed to focus on Aodhan, lips pursing into a pout as soon as he did. "How did we get to my room?"

"Carried you after you passed out." Aodhan had been surprised when Cal had. Branding someone wasn't pleasant, of course, but he'd been through worse kinds of pain. "Were you overstimulated?"

Cal nodded his head against the pillow.

Which was so damn cute, Aodhan almost kissed him. But Mercy wouldn't like that, not when he was still this angry. The sound of his hips slapping against Calix's backside was proof enough of that.

"If you ride him any harder, you'll risk breaking him," Aodhan chided. Not because he actually thought it was true.

Just for funzies.

The scratching from the bathroom started up again. They'd put the sylar in there to keep it out of the way, but it was getting on his last nerve.

Aodhan heaved a sigh. Sadly, all good things must come to an end. "When did you

take this out, Be'urn?"

Mercy frowned when Aodhan presented the small tracking device he'd been holding onto since they'd brought Cal here. He'd found it in the bathroom while getting clean water. "If you figured out he'd removed his tracker, why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Aodhan shrugged. "Maybe my anger wasn't as relieved as you assumed."

The director swore under his breath and finally came to a halt, though he didn't dismount.

"No." Calix reached back blindly, grabbing onto Mercy's thigh. "Don't stop. I'm close."

They both blinked at him in shock.

"This doesn't exactly seem like the punishment it's meant to be," Mercy said, though it was unclear if the words were meant for their Third or for himself.

"Keep going," Cal pleaded, lifting and rolling his hips to push Mercy's fat cock in deeper on his own. He let out a low moan and clawed at the sheets.

"When did you realize there was a tracker on you?" Mercy demanded, not giving in despite how sexy Calix looked.

If it'd been Aodhan, he would have cracked instantly. In fact, he was so hard in his pants, he feared the seam was about to burst from the pressure.

Cal pressed his lips into a stubborn line, gasping when Mercy gave a single pump of his hips and then stilled once more, his message clear. "Just after I left the house. When I was on the ship."

“And when did you take it out?” there was a hint of suspicion in his tone.

“After I arrived,” he confessed.

Aodhan’s brow furrowed in a mirror of their First’s expression. “If you’d known you were being tracked, why didn’t you get rid of it?” Unless... “You wanted us to come for you.”

Good. Fucking. Light.

“Did you...play us, Be’urn?” A proud chuckle burst out of him. “No way.”

“Hold on.” Mercy didn’t sound nearly as pleased with this turn of events as Aodhan was.

He braced a palm at either side of Cal and leaned over him, careful to keep his cock buried in their Third’s hole.

“You’re claiming you lured us here by taking on those clients tonight?

What would have happened if we didn’t come for you, huh? ”

Calix shrugged like it was no big deal, but he avoided Aodhan’s gaze. “Then I would have taken that as my answer.”

“Answer to what?” Aodhan asked.

“To whether or not you really wanted me.”

“I don’t let everyone who discovers I’m a serial killer walk away with their life, Be’urn.

” The only reason Cal was still breathing was because they wanted him to.

“We could have murdered you when we had you locked up in our house. Or even that night at the party. One more body to the count wouldn’t have made any difference to us.

When I told you I liked you, did that mean nothing? ”

“Speaking of that night,” Mercy interjected, a stillness about him that gave Aodhan pause and made him take notice. “You were so quiet after. You barely spoke the entire ride home. I assumed it was because you were in shock, and later plotting your escape, but now I wonder.”

Aodhan wasn’t following, and he hated that.

Mercy had just figured out something Aodhan hadn’t, but what?

“It’s because you realized he was arrogant, isn’t it?” Mercy guessed, staring down at Calix as though trying to burn holes through his skull. “That’s why you took the gamble. And me? Was I always a part of the equation, or was I a happy accident?”

Calix refused to answer, even when Mercy repeated his earlier move and drove into him once, then twice for good measure. The stubborn man kept his mouth firmly shut.

“I’m no longer in the mood for games, little monster,” he warned.

“Let me come,” Cal boldly said. “Give me an orgasm, and I’ll tell you.”

“An orgasm?” He snorted. “I don’t think so. I didn’t think you’d earned one before, and I most definitely don’t think you’ve earned one now, not if my suspicions are

correct.”

“Bond with me then,” he offered, without any hesitation whatsoever.

Aodhan dug his nails into the back of Cal’s palm, but he didn’t even flinch.

“Are you trying to lock us in, little monster? Trying to trap us into a lifelong bond while you still have the chance?” Mercy surprised Aodhan by saying, instead of immediately agreeing.

Calix closed his eyes. “Ah. So that’s how it is after all. I should have known. Of course. Since you didn’t love me then—”

“Oh, on the contrary,” Mercy’s tone shifted, becoming more of a purr that even sent a shiver of anticipation down Aodhan’s spine, though it wasn’t directed at him.

“I love you very much, little monster. Can’t you feel that?

Can’t you,” he pulled out to the tip and then slammed back into him, “feel my love for you? If bonding is what you truly desire, all right. I can give you that. I can give you myself and my Second, but first, you have to answer one more question for me. Refuse, and I’ll pull out and leave you here, on this planet you ran to, alone.

Is my threat clear enough for you, Calix? ”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Good boy.” Mercy’s eyes narrowed. “Was ensnaring a Connect your real endgame, or was it just an unfortunate result of you biting off more than you could chew?”

“It wasn’t an accident.” Cal twisted his head so he could meet Mercy’s gaze over his

shoulder when the older man stiffened.

“It can’t be considered an accident because this is what you wanted.

You made me this way, not the other way around.

I’ll admit my faults after, confess all my sins and transgressions if that’s what you want, but I won’t take responsibility for something I didn’t do.

Yes, I took a gamble. But I had no idea about you when I made that decision. ”

He tilted his head. “If you had, would—”

“I would have cut my losses and run a hell of a lot sooner,” Cal didn’t let him finish.

His expression softened. “And that would have been the biggest mistake of my life. Maybe that’s your persuasion and your influence, maybe not.

We’ll probably never know. If I wasn’t able to shake it after three months, even after sucking someone else’s—”

“Careful,” Aodhan growled.

“We’ll probably never know,” he repeated.

“I don’t care,” Mercy said.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:37 am

“Good. Because I don’t either.” Calix held the director's gaze unflinchingly, something silent passing between them.

Slowly, Aodhan got to his feet, partially seeing red for a flash before he could get a handle on it. For once, he was a bit slow on the uptake, but he caught up eventually. He settled an accusatory gaze on Calix when the other man turned to look at him.

“You played me.” His anger was hard to miss, and Cal noticeably flinched when he spoke. “Pull him back, Mercy. Make room for me. Our Third doesn’t want to talk until we’ve performed the bonding ceremony? Okay.”

“Hold on!” Calix yelped when Mercy did as instructed, tugging his body down the bed so that Aodhan could climb on at the front of it and get into position.

He spread his knees and undid his pants, pulling his cock free in front of Cal’s face. “Since you don’t want to use that pretty mouth of yours to confess, I’ll use it for other things. Open wide, Be’urn.”

Aodhan took his head, pressing his thumbs against Cal’s cheeks until he did as he was told and opened. His cock slid in, hard and quick, but instead of humping, he forced Cal down and held him there.

Mercy didn’t scold him for his actions, instead he started fucking in and out of Calix’s ass again, measure pumps that rammed Cal’s face even harder against Aodhan’s body.

Even without his tongue moving on him, his tight, hot mouth felt like velvety heaven

wrapped around Aodhan's length, and he moaned as his crown banged against the back of Cal's throat with each of Mercy's thrusts.

It wasn't long before Cal was tapping his thigh, pressing against him in an attempt to be released.

"Want to breathe?" Aodhan chuckled. "I'm not even mad about the secrets.

It's the fact that you seem to have forgotten I was here while you were bartering with our First. He agreed to make you our Third in exchange for time, but I didn't agree to shit.

"He tilted Cal's face up ever so slightly. "Beg me."

Calix sputtered and gasped when Aodhan pulled himself free, his forehead whacking against Aodhan's lower abdomen as Mercy kept driving into him, not even skipping a beat despite the turn Aodhan had taken them.

"As cute as those sounds are," Aodhan drawled, "that's not what I asked for."

"Please." Cal sucked in a sharp breath. "Please."

"You answered a question for him, so answer one for me."

"Yes."

"Look me in the eye, Calix."

He raised his head and locked their gazes, lips puffy and parted as he continued to shake with the pummeling of Mercy's massive cock.

He had one hand braced on the bed, the other clinging to Aodhan's upper thigh.

There were tears glistening in his gray eyes, and a hint of fear and doubt there that had Aodhan's cock twitching.

"I'm not about to tie my life to someone who's keeping secrets," Aodhan stated. "I'm not like Mercy in that regard. Call me arrogant."

Cal almost dropped his gaze, it was obvious.

"Tell me what you two were discussing, Be'urn."

"That's not a question."

"Okay." Fair. "Then I suppose my question can only be," he leaned closer, "do you want to be our Third or not?"

Calix glared and then made a sound of frustration. "Fine. Fine, yes."

"You need consent from all three of us for that to happen."

"Judging by the way you're acting, you've already figured it out. What need is there for me to say it?"

"Because I want to hear it."

Mercy reached down and pressed his fingers against the brand of his name, causing Calix to howl. "Hurry up, Azi. He's being serious."

"I hate you both!"

"Liar," Aodhan threaded his fingers through Cal's hair and tugged hard enough for it to sting. "Use that mouth of yours, or I'll stuff it full of my cock again, and this time I won't take it out until you've suffocated on it."

“Fine,” Cal repeated. “I played you. Happy?”

Wow.

“You wanted me to kill Sister Grace for you, didn’t you?” Aodhan was...impressed. So impressed, he started feeling something strange that he wasn’t entirely familiar with. Something warm and lifting.

“That’s pride, baby,” Mercy filled in for him, no doubt feeling what he was and catching snippets of Aodhan’s confusion in the mix.

“I know what pride is,” he argued, only for the older man to click his tongue.

“Not pride for yourself. This is vicarious pride. A wholly foreign concept to you up until now.” Mercy pummeled Calix’s hole until their Third was writhing and screaming from the onslaught of pleasure and pain from the irritation to the burns.

“You did so well, even if it was an accident. Making our little killer experience something new.”

How Calix had known about Sister Grace’s involvement with the society, and just how deep his deception went, were both things Aodhan was dying to know.

Later.

“You’re going to tell us everything once we’re done here,” Aodhan swore. “And we’re going to be able to feel every single thing you feel when you do. No more hiding. No more running.”

“Aodhan.” Calix seemed at a loss for words.

Or maybe he was just too busy getting his brains screwed out.

“You tricked me into killing for you?” Didn’t matter that Aodhan would have done it for him simply if Cal had asked.

Clearly the other man hadn’t realized that.

Yet. They had time. After tonight, they had all the time in the universe for Aodhan to show him all the lengths he’d willingly go to please him.

He captured Cal’s chin. “You truly are a little monster , aren’t you Calix Valimir? ”

If this had been three months ago, he would have shied away or denied it. But he didn’t do either of those things now. In the steadiest voice he could manage, considering he was still being fucked, Cal simply answered, “Yes.”

And damn it all.

If that didn’t prove Mercy had been right to give him those three months of alone time, nothing would.

“You’re never wrong, Mercy,” Aodhan praised, tracing Calix’s full bottom lip with his thumb before pushing in so his flesh rubbed against his teeth.

Instead of moving away from the pain, Cal leaned in closer.

“Open up, Be’urn.” He grabbed his cock and brought it up to those plush lips. Then he met Mercy’s intense stare over Calix’s lithe body. “Let’s claim our Third and bring him home for proper punishment.”

Mercy smirked. “I agree.”

“What about you, little monster?” Aodhan grinned down at him. “How does that sound to you?”

They all knew what he was really asking.

Consent.

Calix swallowed, and just when Aodhan was starting to worry he was about to pull a one eighty on them, he gave a single, curt nod. “I agree.”

“To what?” Mercy demanded.

“To the bond,” Cal said. “To you. To both of you.”

Aodhan was loath to admit it, but the sound of consent was like music to his ears.