



# The Hidden God of Open Doors

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Forget finding his perfect match. Rune is just desperate to talk to someone.

Rune is lonely, immortal, and trapped in a mysterious prison. Objects appear and disappear as the decades pass, and his only companions are the books and television. He hasn't spoken to a real, live person in over two hundred years.

Until one day a phone appears, with a magical dating app already installed.

The app promises to find Rune's perfect match for Valentine's Day. Rune is tempted, even though he knows that's impossible. Nobody wants a perfect match they can't meet.

Then he matches with Raider—a confident ex-treasure hunter who shamelessly flirts past Rune's loneliness.

And Raider doesn't believe in impossible.

**Total Pages (Source):** 9

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:37 am*

Exhaustion blurring his eyes, Rune shuffles into his mismatched kitchen. He's not sure what time it is—every appliance lists a different hour, and Rune doesn't have any windows to check for daylight. Morning is whenever Rune wakes up. Evening is whenever he goes to sleep again.

Rune's hexagonal prison is comfortable, dark, and lonely. Wooden screens separate the chamber into a bedroom, parlor, and kitchen. Like the rest of his belongings, the screens appeared out of nowhere one day. New things are rare, but Rune has lived here long enough to accumulate a lot. There wouldn't be enough space for everything, except items also vanish when Rune stops using them.

Books, puzzles, needle and thread. More modern clothing sometimes, though Rune's current tie-dye T-shirt is at least fifty years old. The television—once tiny and silent, now large and loud—keeps Rune sort-of sane. Before it appeared, Rune only caught glimpses of the outside world through the magic mirror.

Rune has been here, wherever here is, for a very long time. At least a hundred years. Maybe two hundred. Maybe many more. His memory is too bad to track time properly. He forgets years. He forgets where he comes from and who trapped him here—but he remembers why they did.

They said Rune was a demon. They imprisoned him because he was wicked, dangerous, and unnatural.

A human would have died in this chamber. Rune doesn't age and doesn't change. His body appears twenty-two, though he isn't sure how he knows that, and his light brown skin never wrinkles. His narrow limbs neither widen nor shrink. This stasis is

the only supernatural ability Rune is aware of, which seems unfair. If he's such a dangerous demon, shouldn't he have better magic?

Unless the magically appearing objects are his power too. That might just be a function of the chamber, though.

Rune doesn't wonder about that today. Because the new item on his kitchen table requires all his attention. He's seen similar small, sleek black rectangles countless time on recent television shows:

A cell phone.

Excitement chases away Rune's exhaustion. "How did you get in here?"

The phone doesn't answer now, but unlike most items Rune acquires, phones can talk back. They just have to connect to other phones. Rune covers his eyes and counts to twenty, trying to quell his silly hopes.

"It might not even work," Rune tells himself.

The warning doesn't work any more than counting to twenty did. Holding his breath, Rune picks up the phone. The cool metal case sits large in his palm.

A simple tap illuminates the screen. Iridescent pink hearts swarm like a tiny pink galaxy as the background. Rune tilts the screen back and forth, fascinated, before noticing the little square image in the top left corner.

The cell phones on Rune's television usually have lots of little square apps. His only has a few, and the one labeled Heart2Heart draws his attention.

The name sounds familiar, which means Rune's either read about it or seen it on

television. He taps it—and jumps back, startled by the noise. A new interface fills the screen. More hearts, exclamation marks, and photos of smiling people. He pushes back his long black hair and slumps in a chair to figure this out.

Eventually, he has the gist. Heart2Heart invites him to make an account, so he can sign up for their special Valentine's Day event. The app has partnered with Cupid, and the minor god of love will find Rune's perfect date.

Rune almost sets the phone right back down. What's the point? Rune can't go on any date, much less a perfect one. He may be trapped who-knows-where, with nobody to talk to but himself and inanimate objects, but he knows the point of dating apps: dating.

Nobody will want to match with someone they can never meet.

Nobody will want to match with an evil demon.

Rune chews the inside of his lip. The phone warms with the heat of his hand. Yearning twists deeper into Rune's heart—and there's an option to exchange messages before the date.

He's nobody's perfect match. But what if he doesn't ask for much? Just talking to someone would be so nice.

Exhaustion isn't what blurs Rune's vision this time. He wipes his eyes and starts painstakingly tapping his way through making an account.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:37 am*

Raider has an hour to kill before the ritual contractors show up. He's used to the "hurry up and wait" lifestyle, but he's antsy in a way he never used to get on the job.

Which is fucking hilarious. Twenty years of high-stakes paranormal treasure hunting? No problem. Six months into his new career as a small business owner? Raider's ready to tear his hair out.

Or his sister's hair, if Val keeps bugging him about dating.

Propping his boots up on his shop counter, Raider leans back in his chair. The shop is nearly ready—an organized, practical space. Plain wooden shelves for the safe merchandise, and spell-proof glass-fronted cabinets for the slightly less safe merchandise. Anything actually risky will be downstairs. The shelves and cabinets are all empty now, of course. Raider can't store much inventory before his contractors finish setting up the ritual protections. He's more used to breaking wards than setting them, so calling in other experts is safer.

Val suggested beaded curtains and incense burners, but Raider vetoed the woo factor. He doesn't need to wonder whether mysterious wispy smoke is just incense or something actually haunted.

Raider won that argument, because Artifacts, Alchemy, Etc. is his retirement project. Not hers. But Val is much more determined about her new crusade: shoving Raider back into the dating scene. She hasn't shut up about this HH app, and she's only gotten more annoying since their Valentine's Day event rolled out.

"Valentine's Day is only a month away," Val said over beers last night. "You need

someone to keep you company in your old age. You're going to turn into a hermit living over your little shop."

Raider waved at the crowded sports bar around them. "Much pathetic, very hermit."

Val rolled her eyes. "Hanging out with your cool, awesome sister doesn't count. I swear, the only way you're getting laid is if Cupid hand-delivers you a piece of ass."

"Whatever, Valkyrie," Raider says. But Val must be getting more mature too, because the use of her full name doesn't piss her off like it used to. She just smirks like she knows exactly what Raider's doing.

The worst part is Val's probably right. Not about the old age thing—Raider is only thirty-five. And he only looks twenty-nine.

Which is the problem. Raider hasn't indulged in anything more than mindless hookups in six years. Hooking up is easy. Raider's a confident man, which would be hot enough even if he wasn't also actually hot. Six foot two, phenomenal tattooed biceps, and piercing golden eyes? Raider's not really his own type, but he's obviously a ten.

Serious dating, however, gets complicated with the whole immortality thing.

Drinking from the Fountain of Youth seemed like a good idea at the time. After all the effort needed to find the fountain in the first place, not drinking seemed like a waste. Raider doesn't exactly regret the sip, but he hadn't thought through the practicalities.

Val understands to an extent. She was right there with him on that job, and she drank from the fountain too. She'll be twenty-seven forever, and her brown eyes turned gold the same as Raider's. The key difference between Raider and his sister is that

Val is happy to date vampires.

Call him vanilla, but Raider prefers sticking his dick in warm-blooded partners.

He also doesn't want to cling to his youth—ironic, yeah. Raider wants a steadier life than the thrills of treasure hunting, at least for the next few decades. He and Val want to spend more time with their parents. Artifacts, Alchemy, Etc. is also Raider's chance to provide a more responsible home for all artifacts rescued and returned. He can appraise and identify mysterious items, disable dangerous curses, and buy and sell anything with a verified record.

Except Raider's nervous about getting stuck in a new rut too. Throwing himself into his new business with the same dangerous intensity as his last job. His reckless work ethic made him the best in the fucking business—okay, Val would dispute that. But it didn't leave much of him left.

So, Raider needs something besides work. Learn a language. Exercise. Dungeons and Dragons. Or even...

Fuck, he hates when Val is right.

What's the harm in signing up for a dating app? Raider will either score or not. Maybe he'll find some casual fun to pass the time until he figures out how to actually date while immortal.

Before he can second-guess himself, Raider crosses his feet on the counter and downloads the HeartHeart app. It installs while Raider flips through his photos for acceptable dating profile pics. He passes over the ones with his sister—despite the family resemblance, someone might misunderstand. He also skips the ones with top-secret mystical artifacts. By the time he picks a couple that aren't horrible, the app has finished loading.

Raider skims through the intro screens without reading them completely. Standard dating app things. The Valentine's Day event catches his attention: Let Cupid find your perfect match.

Perfect. The divine cherub can do the work for him.

Blind date vs. chatting first is an easy choice. Raider's trying to reduce surprises in his life right now. He uploads the photos, then ignores most of the specific profile fields to dump everything in the main description boxes. Starting with the important numbers.

Wants: 35, 6', 9", top, looking for casual but not fast. I recently moved to start a new business and could use some new friends, plus or minus benefits. Can I send you random memes throughout the day? My sister is getting tired of the memes, and I need a new victim. Bonus points if you have a great ass.

Don't want: Someone who likes socializing and clubbing. Someone who needs to be constantly on the move, traveling etc. Someone involved in artifact hunting. I'm serious about my new business, and I'm done with adventures and misadventures alike—though get a few drinks in me and I'll tell you all the stories. Well. Most of the stories ;)

Raider types it all out in one go and hits match before he can talk himself out of it—right when the front bell rings. Shoving his phone away, he jumps over the counter to let the ritual contractor in.

The evaluation takes all afternoon. The contractor hasn't even started the security spells by the time Raider shows her out. That will have to be another appointment. A delivery arrives on the contractor's heels, and Raider spends the rest of the evening setting up the safe box shelves in the basement.



It's hectic, but a good kind of hectic. Raider's putting things in place, setting things up. Not breaking things down. He's feeling good about his progress when he retreats to his upstairs apartment, cracks open a can of beer, and finally remembers the HeartHeart app.

Raider flops onto his leather couch and fishes out his phone. When he opens the app, a congratulatory banner flashes across the screen—Cupid found his perfect, magical match.

When Raider clicks into the profile, his jaw drops. Eyes glued to the phone screen, he sets his beer on the coffee table so he doesn't drop it too. Because Rune is only the most stunning man Raider has ever seen.

The photo is soft, a selfie taken indoors. Rune's glossy dark hair falls to his shoulders, framing a soft, narrow face. A spark of fire gleams in the young man's dark eyes. His sharp collar bones disappear under the neck of his tie-dye shirt. He isn't smiling—there's a determined look to his eyes, like he's concentrating very hard on taking the selfie.

“Well, fuck.”

Raider hadn't listed “eleven out of ten, sexiest twink alive” as one of his requirements. But that apparently is what Cupid has delivered.

Time to rein in his excitement.

Raider retrieves his beer for a long drag. There's no way this Rune is completely perfect. With looks like this, there must be another reason Rune is single.

Ready for the red flags, Raider scrolls to the profile information. Rune left most of the fields—age, location, profession—blank too, all his details in the same want and

don't want fields.

Wants: Someone with a sense of humor, easy to talk to. I'm alone a lot, and having someone to chat with would be nice. I like learning about people, and I'd love to hear about your job and your weather and your regular day. As for anything romantic, I don't know. I would want someone very patient. I've never done anything like this before. I hope I'm not asking for too much.

Don't want: Meeting in person.

Okay, starting with how alone Rune is counts as a yellow flag, minimum. But there's a sense of naive honesty to the description. Raider definitely believes Rune has never used a dating app before, because there's nothing about hiking or dogs or craft beer.

Still, Raider can handle yellow flags. The main disappointment is not wanting to meet in person. Even though Raider said he was okay with just friends—Cupid wasn't supposed to believe that.

But Raider puts that aside when the inbox blinks. Clicking in, he finds a pile of unread messages. The first came hours ago, right after the contractor arrived.

Rune: Cupid says we're matches, and that I should say hello. Hello!

The second arrived half an hour later.

Rune: You must be busy. Your information says you're starting a business. That sounds really cool!

Rune: I don't know if I'm actually a good match for you. I don't remember ever doing anything interesting. So, I understand if you don't want to talk with me. I'm probably pretty boring.

Rune: I've just looked that up, and self-deprecation is not recommended for dating conversations. I'm sorry.

Rune: I am boring, but I don't mean that as self-deprecation. That's just how it is, and it doesn't bother me. I hope it doesn't bother you.

Rune: I've sent you too many messages. I'm sorry. I'll delete some of them.

There's another hour-long gap.

Rune: I don't know how to delete them.

Rune: I'm sorry. I don't know how to do any of this. I don't know why I thought it would work. I'm probably not what you want. I don't even think I have a great ass. I hope you're having a great day, and that your business is going really well.

Raider can't help it. The corner of his mouth lifts. Adorable, nervous, earnest. This guy is absolutely not what Val wanted him to go for—but Raider can't help it. He loves a project.

So, Raider takes another swig of beer and taps a reply.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:37 am*

Rune paces the confines of his prison. It's been hours since he matched, and Raider still hasn't responded.

There are plenty of possible reasons for the silence. Raider is busy. He's sleeping. But Rune's head keeps turning over other possibilities, each just as likely. Maybe Raider took one look at Rune's profile and wasn't interested. Maybe Raider doesn't want a man he can't meet in person.

Worst of all—Rune keeps coming back to this, then shying away—

Maybe Raider doesn't actually exist. Even if Rune could acquire a phone, what makes him think it's connected to a real person? None of Rune's appliances work how they should according to his books and television. There's no electricity here. Maybe the phone is just a toy.

And stupid, gullible Rune is working himself into a dither over a hallucination.

The loss shouldn't be so disappointing. When Rune woke up, he wasn't thinking about being able to talk to someone. But now that possibility has been dangled in front of him, his eyes sting. His stomach turns nauseous at the thought of it being taken away.

With one arm wrapped around his stomach, Rune retrieves the phone from the kitchen table. Like picking at a scab, he scrolls through Raider's profile again.

Raider's photo fascinates Rune. Pale, sun-warmed skin speaks of a life outdoors. Dark brown hair, bright golden eyes, and tattoos. A black-ink snake winds around

Raider's left arm, and a flowering vine twists around the right. The tattoos are clear because in the photo, Raider is wearing a lime green, loose tank top. A bottle in his hand, he leans against a railing. Cloud-studded blue sky sweeps behind him.

Before Rune flips to the other photos, the inbox icon blinks. Drawn to the attractive flash of color, Rune clicks it before realizing what it means. Below Rune's awkward rambling sits a reply from Raider.

Raider: Sorry, cutie, I got caught up in work. Besides, you should let me be the judge

The word cutie spins through Rune's soul with shocking warmth. Stunned, he closes the app and turns the phone off.

He turns the phone back on, reopens the app, and finds the message still there. Leaning against his kitchen counter, Rune carefully types back.

Rune: What should you be the judge of?

Three dots immediately dance next to the tiny picture of Raider's face.

Raider: How great your ass is ;)

Rune nearly drops his phone. Heat flushes his face, along with a stunned elation. Raider has to be real, because Rune never imagined his first remembered conversation would go like this .

Raider: Shit, don't let me scare you off. I saw you don't want to meet in person, and that's fine. Consider that boundary respected. Super respectfully

Rune: I'm not scared.

Raider: You sure? I can be very scary

A smile tugs Rune's lips. Typing on the little screen is getting easier. Is talking to people always this fun? He slides down the cabinets to sit on the floor, elbows braced on his knees.

Rune: I've heard of this conversational practice. You're flirting with me.

Raider: Guilty as charged :)

Raider: Have you really never dated anyone before? You're cute, you're funny. Regardless of great ass status, you're a catch

Rune: I don't get out much, and there aren't many options here.

Raider: Small town?

Rune: Small is an understatement. Or an overstatement?

Lying hurts, even through the glow of praise. The first real conversation Rune remembers and he's already behaving terribly. Guilt twists his stomach, but he can't bring himself to tell the truth. That he's trapped down here, that he doesn't know where he is, that he barely knows who he is. That he's probably evil. That he's been alone for so long.

Rune changes the subject instead.

Rune: What were you working on today? I don't know anyone who's started a business.

Getting Raider off track is easier than expected. Rune clings to the phone, genuinely

fascinated, as Raider fills the screen with a series of enthusiastic essays. Raider describes his recent retirement from treasure hunting—which sounds thrilling enough. But Raider’s genuine joy in his new relic shop is even more interesting. Rune has read and watched plenty of adventure stories. The connection is new. The emotion.

Basking in Raider’s passion warms Rune just as much as the occasional—okay, frequent—flirty comments.

Rune could listen for days, but eventually, Raider interrupts himself.

Raider: Fuck, it’s almost 1. Bedtime for Old Man Raider. I have another contractor meeting in seven hours, and I can’t pull all-nighters like I used to

Rune: 6 isn’t old, but you should still sleep.

Raider: You get some sleep too. Talk to you tomorrow :)

Rune: Will you?

Rune sends the question in surprised delight—but realizes as soon as he sends it that he might sound needy . One of the phone apps purports to be an internet browser. While waiting for Raider to reply earlier, Rune had looked up a guide to online dating. The guide said not to sound needy, along with avoiding self-deprecation.

Rune: Sorry

Raider: You’re free to ignore me, cutie, but I’m definitely hitting on you again tomorrow ;)

Raider: Give me a kiss goodnight?

Rune: How?

Raider: Touch your finger to your lips

Raider: Then touch the phone screen

Something flutters in Rune's chest. Touching his lips with a single fingertip, he's never been more aware of his own physical form. The texture and heat of his own skin. When Rune touches the phone, the screen is warm too. He presses his finger next to Raider's tiny photo.

Raider: Did you do it?

Rune: Yes

Raider: Good boy

Raider: I did too. Sweet dreams ;)

Then Raider goes offline, leaving Rune huddled around the glowing phone. Rune doesn't move, but he could float away on the thrill.

He talked to someone. A real person. And that real person wanted to talk to Rune too. Even if nothing else happens, even if Raider forgets or changes his mind about talking tomorrow?

This is already the best day Rune remembers.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:37 am*

Raider can't wait until after his meeting the next morning. He dashes off a quick "Good morning, cutie" through a bleary squint at his phone, before he even makes coffee. Seven in the morning shouldn't be a real time.

Rune's reply is immediate.

Rune: Good morning!

Raider: Wow, you're up early

Raider: Or maybe not. What time is it for you?

There's a long pause after that. Raider's coffee and loaded bagel are ready by the time his phone dings again.

Rune: 7:30 AM

Raider: Cool, same time zone :)

Raider sends a photo of his coffee and bagel. Nothing fit for social media—the bagel's a delicious bacon-y mess on the garage sale plate. The coffee is in a chipped, sickly green mug that says I Robbed the Royal Museum and All I Got Was This Cursed Mug.

Not actually cursed. Raider thoroughly tested it after Val gave it to him five birthdays ago.

Raider: Have you eaten yet?

Rune: Not yet.

Raider: Then I can't ask what you're eating... awesome. What are you wearing? ;)

There's another long pause. Raider doesn't mind. He imagines the pretty young man in the photo staring at the phone screen and squirming—and the mental image is appealing. Rune is clearly nervous about this whole Cupid match thing, but being patient with him is easy.

Raider's phone doesn't ding again until he's already downstairs. The empty shop front is serene, all gold and shadows in the early morning light. The pale wood shelves and cabinets are still empty, filled only with possibilities. Raider unlocks the front door, then leans against the counter to open the Heart2Heart app.

Instead of a message, there's a photo.

A blurry, soft photo of Rune standing in front of a full-length mirror. The photo cuts off at his neck, showing just a hint of long hair sweeping over his shoulders. He holds the phone with both hands in front of his chest, and he's wearing the same tie-dye shirt as in his profile photo.

This new photo shows that the shirt is baggy, comfortably shapeless, all blurry pink and purple and teal. It's too big for Rune's narrow frame, and the hem falls midway down Rune's thighs.

Rune's smooth, bare thighs.

Raider's mouth waters at the sleek lines of brown skin. He wants more than anything to reach under the hem of that baggy shirt to see what—if anything—Rune is wearing

underneath.

Operating on pure horny reflex, Raider saves the photo to his phone before replying.

Raider: You know how you were worried you weren't good at this dating app thing?

Raider: Stop fucking worrying

Raider: You're a master

Rune types for a full five minutes before sending a simple smile emoji.

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A few weeks pass, until Raider doesn't know what he was worried about either. Why did he resist Val's amazing ideas for so long? Not that Raider intends to tell her that. But online dating is a fucking breeze.

At least, talking to Rune is easy.

They switch to texting after the first few days. There's something weird about Rune's phone number—it shows up as Unknown Number and Raider can't figure out how to see the actual number. But Rune can text Raider's number just fine, and replying in the same thread works like texting anyone else.

Talking to Rune feels so natural. Raider's a month away from opening Artifacts, Alchemy, Etc., but some nights, he's more excited about talking to Rune than about his new business.

Even telling Rune about the immortality thing is easier than expected.

Rune: You asked why I don't have a boyfriend... why don't you?

Raider: It's a little complicated. Val and I sort of accidentally drank from the Fountain of Youth on a job

Rune: Accidentally?

Raider: We thought it was another fake, lol. There are a bunch of knockoffs that just rejuvenate you a bit. Clear your pores, firm up your ass a bit. But turns out no... we're actually immortal now

Raider: I'm not complaining, but it makes long-term relationship planning tough. My long-term is different than most people's

Raider: It's fine if that's a problem for you

Rune: No, it's a good thing.

Rune: I like the thought of you living forever :)

Val knows something's up. Raider meets her at least once a week for beer and pizza, and she picks up on it immediately. She's very intelligent and dangerously good at reading people. She always picked out the right person to bribe for information about local legends.

But Val doesn't need to be intelligent with the way Raider grins sappily every time he sets down his beer to answer a text. "So, what do you say?"

"What?" Raider asks, looking up from his phone.

Val points. "You're smiling like an idiot."

Raider rolls his eyes and hits send on one more message to Rune. “Okay, fine. You were right. That app was a good idea.”

“Holy shit.” Val covers her mouth on a mocking gasp. “That should have taken way longer to get out of you. Who is he, and when’s the wedding?”

“Right after yours. How many vampire brides have you collected now?”

“What? No!” Val waves her hands. “I’m not marrying Grizelda or Severina, and you aren’t changing the subject. Are you at least doing something for next week?”

But Raider’s as stubborn as she is, and he’s changing the subject. Next week is Valentine’s Day, and Raider’s only plans are (definitely) texting Rune and (probably) jerking off to blurry selfies.

There’s something special about Rune. Raider wants to keep him all to himself until he’s figured him out. Raider and Val spent so long hunting artifacts and treasure together, defusing ancient ritual traps, restoring ancient artifacts to their rightful homes.

Raider wants something for himself.

Besides, this thing with Rune is still casual. Still new. They haven’t even voice-called yet—no way is Raider telling Val about him.

That thought rattles around Raider’s head later that night, while he puts away a month’s worth of laundry. Piles of clean towels and T-shirts and jeans sprawl across his king-sized bed. As his incoherent cleaning playlist blasts alt rock, country, and opera, Raider wonders what Rune’s voice sounds like.

Bad thought. Phone calls are a slippery slope. Rune doesn’t want to meet in person,

and Raider is fine with that.

Really, totally fine with that.

Catching up on all his chores and tidying up his apartment above the shop is what Raider would be doing anyway. He's not cleaning up on the off chance he gets to bring someone besides Val over.

Which is good, because Raider will never be done folding laundry at this rate. He keeps pausing to text Rune back.

Rune: Will it be dangerous keeping so many valuable artifacts in one place?

Raider: I've got security systems. And trust me, I can handle trespassers ;)

Rune: What about the magic artifacts though? Would they interact with each other?

Raider: Oh, I'm not keeping anything super dangerous in the main shop. No scary curses

Rune: That's good.

Rune is so interested in everything Raider does, from his shop to his evening runs to what he eats for breakfast. Even if it's the same coffee and bagel every morning. Raider thought Rune was faking the interest at first. Then he was flattered by it.

Now? Raider's getting worried. The adorable, shy young man seems so lonely.

I'm alone a lot , Rune's H2H profile says. So far, "a lot" seems to be "all the time." Rune is always available to talk, at any hour. He's vague about how he spends his days. Every time Raider tries angling for information, Rune deflects.

There's something strange about Rune's photos too. Not Rune himself, who appears perfect in every way. Not the awkward, blurry angles—the inexpert selfies are very charming. But something is odd about the background rooms. Raider can't quite put his finger on it, however many times he flips through the collection saved to his phone.

Maybe Raider is imagining things. No more treasure hunts, and setting up the shop is going too smoothly. Maybe Raider's so desperate for a new quest, he's turning this H2H match into a mystery to solve.

The speculation might be unfair. This is casual. Super casual. Just like Raider told Cupid he wanted.

Rune: You should get a cat.

Raider: Yeah?

Rune: You clearly like them. All of your funny image memes are about cats.

Raider: Maybe I should. My parents have dogs, but I used to travel too much to have my own pet

Raider: Do you have any pets?

Raider: If you have pets and haven't sent photos, I'm going to be very cross with you

Rune: Please don't be cross! I haven't withheld any pet photos

Rune sends a laughing emoji, proving he isn't actually distressed. Raider chews his lip, then gives into his urge to pry.

Raider: Are you allowed to have pets at your place? Or would your landlord or roommates not like it?

Sure enough, there's that telltale pause as Rune figures out how to avoid answering. What kind of life is Rune living that he has so much to conceal but so little practice concealing it?

Raider wrestles two fitted sheets into submission before the reply buzzes into his phone.

Rune: Maybe you shouldn't get a cat.

Rune: I don't know how I feel about someone else getting to sit on your lap.

Raider nearly drops his phone. His heart thuds louder than the operatic aria currently blasting. Every nerve in his body buzzes alive, and he can't even care that Rune is blatantly changing the subject. Because Raider's every drop of immortal blood is extremely interested in this new topic.

Rune: Sorry, was that too much?

Rune: That was probably too much. I wish I was better at this.

Raider: You're doing just fine, cutie. I know one way you could improve, though

Raider: Let me see if your ass is as cute as the rest of you

Rune starts typing. Then stops typing. Starts and stops several times before a deliciously long pause. Then the photo arrives, and Raider's fingers are too clumsy to type a reply.



He sits heavily on his bed, right on a bunch of clean towels, and taps the music off.  
As silence crashes over him, he calls Rune's unknown number.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:37 am*

Tinny music blares shockingly loud in Rune's hushed bedroom. He fumbles with the phone—is it broken? Did he click a cat video on accident? His hand slips, and the music stops. Call declined .

So, not broken. That was a phone call, and Rune just refused it.

“No,” Rune whispers. “No, no—ah!”

The music blares again. This time Rune keeps his wits enough to read the words on the screen. Call from Raider . Holding his breath in concentration, Rune accepts the call. The music stops.

Rune puts the phone to his ear. He should probably say something, but his throat is too tight, his heart too unsteady. He doesn't know what to say.

Then a smooth voice wraps around him like a warm sweater. “You there, cutie?”

Rune sits on the edge of his bed, hugging himself through his baggy sweatshirt. He's pulled his sweatpants back up, too, but feels somehow even more exposed than he did taking that photo.

The photo is nothing special. If anything, it's even worse than Rune's other photos—he had to twist so awkwardly in front of the mirror. Rune has sent lots of photos to Raider over the past few weeks. Breakfasts and books and his favorite fluffy socks, and so many photos of his face, his hands, even his feet, whenever Raider asks for one.

Raider seems so delighted by every small piece Rune can surrender of himself. Every photo and word and little smiling emoji. Rune thrives on the praise. Raider makes him forget how terrible he must be, to be locked away like this.

“I’m here,” Rune answers. He’s always here, so that’s not important. What’s important is this: “You’re talking to me.”

Weeks of texting, and they haven’t spoken out loud until now. Rune knows it’s been weeks because he’s kept track of time like never before. He figured out how to set his phone to match the time zone listed in Raider’s H2H profile. Then he changed all the other appliances to match. Rune has no idea what color the sky is above his prison, but he knows today is February 7, and it’s 11 p.m. for Raider now. Most nights, that would mean one to three more hours before Raider fell asleep.

Rune has no idea what the hour means when Raider is on the other end of this phone call. When Raider’s soft breath whispers against Rune’s ear.

“Is calling you okay?” Raider asks. “Gonna be honest, I really want it to be okay.”

“It’s okay,” Rune says quickly. But that’s insufficient. “I want to hear your voice, more than I can describe.”

Raider’s voice grows even warmer. “That’s good, cutie. Where are you right now? Are you alone?”

Rune’s always alone—but for once, that doesn’t seem like a bad thing. “I’m alone. I’m sitting on my bed.”

“Yeah? So am I.” There’s a faint noise, a mattress settling. “I’m sitting in bed thinking about that photo you just sent.”

Rune's breath hitches. "What about it?"

That warmth in Raider's voice must be a smile. "My hopes weren't high enough. You've got the prettiest ass I've ever seen."

Rune has never given much thought to his ass until now. He sometimes touches himself, of course—he's been alone in his chamber for possibly centuries, and he has to keep himself occupied somehow. But this is the first time Rune has cared whether or not his ass was pretty.

"How many have you seen?" Rune asks, curiously. Does he excel in a field of hundreds, or just a few?

"Why?" Raider asks, suddenly sly. "Are you jealous?"

Oh. Rune wasn't jealous until Raider asked.

Maybe Rune is jealous, if jealousy is the sensation of roots digging between his ribs. The thin, painful blades of yearning. Raider has traveled the world. He's seen so many sights and met so many people. Rune doesn't resent Raider's freedom, but gods, he wishes he could see the sky again.

Quietly, Rune presses his hand above his lip. He muffles his own stinging breath. The sob doesn't leave his throat.

Thankfully, Raider takes his silence for bashfulness. "You know I'm not just here for your ass, right? I like talking to you. I've never liked talking to someone this much."

Raider isn't here at all. But right now, Rune can almost feel the warm breath against his neck. The sweet, heavy arm around his waist. The imagined sensation pulls Rune from his despair with terrifying ease.

“I haven’t either,” Rune says quietly, then shakes himself from his wistful melancholy. “It’s okay if you’re just here for my ass. At least, it’s okay now that you’ve confirmed it’s a good one.”

“It’s perfect,” Raider purrs over the phone. “I was going to spend all night jerking off to it. But I’d rather jerk you off instead.”

The chamber brightens and darkens at once, Rune’s vision narrowing. His sweatshirt is too warm, too itchy. He desperately wants what Raider offers. “I don’t think my phone has that function.”

Raider’s laugh is sinful. “You’d think Heart2Heart would add a remote handjob function. But I was thinking old-school phone sex. I’ll tell you how to touch yourself. You’ll give me all sorts of pretty gasps and moans. How does that sound?”

Oh, gods. When he can breathe again, Rune answers, “Yes. That sounds. Yes.”

“Good boy,” Raider says, which never fails to drive Rune mad, even though Rune is surely far older than Raider. “Are you still wearing that sweatshirt from the photo?”

“Yes.” Rune swallows. “I put my sweatpants back on too.”

“Okay, take the sweatshirt off, but leave the sweatpants on.” Raider shifts across the line. “Then get comfortable.”

Rune has to set the phone down to take his sweatshirt off. Grabbing it again is such a relief—but he hesitates before putting it back to his ear.

Raider likes photos of him, and Rune likes how Raider responds to photos of him. So Rune settles back against his soft white pillows and tentatively switches apps. The call stays on as Rune snaps a quick photo—this one is much easier than the ass shot.

He just holds the phone at arm's length above him, catching everything down to the waistband of his tented sweatpants. He sends it, then puts the phone back to his ear in time to hear the ding on the other end.

“You there?” Raider's voice sounds slightly different. A little more distant.

“Check your messages,” Rune says.

There's a pause. Then low, delicious swearing. “You're getting too damn good at this,” Raider accuses, but he doesn't sound mad at all. “Fuck. Okay, put me on speaker.”

Rune hesitates. He could figure out how to do that, probably. But he doesn't want to. “I feel closer to you like this, holding you to my ear.”

“Fuck,” Raider says again. There's a pause, then his voice changes back. The tinny distance is gone. “I'm holding you, too, okay? Now, touch your stomach, right below your belly button.”

Every touch is novel. Astounding. Rune has masturbated plenty before. It's as good a way as any to pass the time. More interesting than staring at the wall. Less interesting than the season finale of *Vampire Housewives*.

This is nothing like masturbation. Sure, the actions are the same. Raider talks Rune through tugging his nipples. Caressing his throat. Sucking his fingers—they do that for a long time, because whenever Rune makes a particularly wet noise, Raider groans and loses his concentration.

Then stroking Rune's nipples again, this time his fingers wet with his own spit and his every nerve singing with Raider's rough voice.

“You’re so hard for me, aren’t you?” Raider says. “Touch your gorgeous dick through your sweatpants. Just your fingertips.”

Rune gasps and arches into his own touch. Fuck. This has never felt so good. “Are you touching yourself too?” Rune manages to ask, because it’s suddenly very important. Rune can’t be the only one experiencing this. He needs Raider to feel even half as good as he does.

“I’m doing exactly what you’re doing,” Raider says, his voice unsteady. “Trying not to come with every sound out of your pretty little mouth. Gods, yes. Just like that.”

Rune whimpers and writhes against his sheets.

Raider groans. “Fuck. I’m close. Stroke yourself through your pants. Slowly, gorgeous.”

That’s all Rune can take. He doesn’t even manage to reach beneath his waistband, and his own palm is an afterthought in the blaze of Raider’s voice. Desperation shatters through him, and Rune comes with a strangled cry.

Raider echoes him with a groan. “Fuck, Rune, did you just come?”

“Yeah,” Rune breathes.

“Fuck, that’s so hot. I need another minute—talk to me?”

Rune falls back against the bed, every inch of skin too sensitive. His cock softens slowly. “I don’t know what to say, but I’ll try. You made me feel so good.” Once again, Rune’s words are rusty. Inadequate. “I wish I could make you feel that good too.”

“You’re doing a damn good job.” Raider’s voice is tight and rough and so present around Rune. “You sound so fucking sweet.”

The praise is so warm and overwhelming, the edges of Rune’s vision shimmer. “I like when you say things like that,” Rune confesses softly. “I want to be good.”

Raider answers with a quiet sound. A beat of silence. Then a gasp. The mattress creaks.

“Did you come?” Rune’s own pulse pounds harder, his cock stirring at the thought. Next time he’ll ask Raider for pictures. He’s so greedy for more.

Greedy enough to hope for a next time.

“Yeah, I came.” Raider sounds content. Maybe even smug. “I could listen to your voice all night, sweet thing. You sound even better than I thought you would, and my expectations were pretty fucking high.”

Rune curls up, clutching the phone to his ear, as Raider rattles off more praise. Each sweet word sinks into Rune’s soul, touching him on a deeper, more primal level than anything else they’ve done tonight.

Until Raider pauses for breath. “Hey, Rune?”

“Yes?”

“I want to do this again,” Raider says, which makes Rune’s heart soar. “Can I see you in person?”

Rune freezes, then shatters. You can’t, he tries to say, but his throat chokes on it. I can’t.



He hangs up.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:37 am*

The silence brings Raider back into reality—sprawled bonelessly on his bed, jeans around his thighs. His pile of clean laundry isn't clean anymore. Sweat dampens his brow. Raider's mind is still so muddled that he probably hung up on accident.

Except when Raider calls back, Rune hangs up without answering. And Raider replays everything he just said.

Can I see you in person?

Fuck.

Regret shreds Raider's postcoital wishful thinking. Hiking his jeans back up, he jumps out of bed to uselessly pace his bedroom. His heart races as he calls again.

This time, the call rings out, neither answered nor declined, for five minutes before falling silent. Not a good sign. But it's better than an immediate rejection, and Raider seizes onto his pathetic, desperate hope to call a third time.

Rune rejects it on the third ring.

Raider flings his phone onto the bed before he does something stupid like call a fourth time. Dragging his clean hand over his face, he mutters, "Fuck, fuck, fuck," over and over.

Rune had one boundary. One very clearly defined boundary. And Raider had to fucking push it, right after Rune offered up the best phone sex of Raider's life.

Quite possibly the best sex of Raider's life, period.

Rune sounded even better than Raider imagined. He responded so beautifully to Raider's every word, and Raider is a greedy man. He wants so much more. He wants to sink his fingers into Rune's tight little ass. Shove all those baggy shirts and sweaters up his chest, explore every perfect inch of him.

Raider wants to bury his face in Rune's hair and tell him how perfect he is, over and over. He wants to talk to Rune for long enough, tell Rune enough of himself, that someday Rune feels safe to talk about himself in return.

But Raider's not selfish enough to push if Rune doesn't want that too. Maybe Cupid was wrong, and Raider isn't Rune's perfect match. Even if Raider's pretty sure Rune is his .

Taking a deep breath, Raider buttons his jeans. In the bathroom, he washes his hands and face. The cold water shakes his thoughts back in order. He stares into his immortal-gold eyes, then returns to his phone.

Praying Rune hasn't blocked him, Raider sends a text message.

Raider: I'm sorry for asking to see you in person. I wasn't thinking, and there's no excuse. You've been totally clear, and I fucked up. I was calling to apologize and make sure you're okay.

Raider: You're such a sweet, clever, special person. You deserve to have exactly what you want. I'd love to be part of that, in whatever capacity you might let me.

Raider: Totally understand if you don't want to talk tonight. Or ever. So I'll let you be after this. I'll message you again tomorrow night, but feel free to text or call whenever you want. I'll be here.

When Raider lowers his phone, his room is emptier. Everything was refurbished according to his tastes, right before he moved in. He's spent the better part of the past year setting up this home and shop as a new homebase. A project he believes in, something a little more stable and a lot more ethical than the treasure hunting gig.

Suddenly, Raider can't see himself still living here a year from now. Five years from now. He won't be able to stand the silence. Six more months, tops, and he'll be ditching everything to race around the world again. Chasing something he's never found in all his perilous adventures. A sense of purpose. A sense of self.

Raider scrubs his hand over his face. Fuck, it's way too late at night to rethink his entire life. Time for bed, if he can fall asleep. "You've only known him for a few weeks," Raider tells himself. "You haven't even met in person."

He's halfway to the bathroom for a sad, cold shower when his phone buzzes.

Skidding across the floor, Raider stumbles over his laundry basket in his race to the bed. He scrambles for the phone and answers before realizing it isn't a voice call.

A pair of flickering dark eyes fill the screen. They blink, then retreat, as Rune holds his phone far away enough that Raider can see more of him.

Dark hair loose over his bare shoulders, hunched in front of a bare gray wall. Even in the dim lighting, Rune is even more captivating in motion than in still photos.

Something burns deep in Rune's eyes. Like he isn't human.

"Hi," Raider says stupidly, then sits on the floor. He leans back against the bed, cradling Rune's image in his hands. "Are you okay?"

Rune's shoulders rise with a deep breath. "No, I'm not okay. But that isn't your

fault.”

“I pushed. I forgot, and that’s my fault.”

Rune shakes his head. He’s so small and pitiful, Raider aches to reach through the screen and brush his hair behind his ear. “I want to meet you. I want it so badly, Raider. But I can’t.” The screen jostles as Rune covers his mouth with one hand. In a small voice through his fingers, he says, “I’m trapped here.”

Protective anger flares. Raider bites it back and says, as soothingly as he can through gritted teeth, “What do you mean, Rune? You can tell me anything.”

Rune takes another deep breath and starts talking.

Raider struggles to keep up. Rune’s story is rambling, fragmented. He’s clearly never relayed it to another person before—but the shattered pieces are razor-sharp. Raider’s worried anger only rises with each new detail.

That’s why Rune’s photos always looked off. His prison has no windows.

According to Rune, he’s a wicked demon. Unknown people led him into this empty chamber and sealed him inside. He doesn’t know how long he was alone in the darkness before the light appeared. A single lantern hanging from the wall. But over the years, more items appeared. Clothing. Furniture. A full-length mirror was Rune’s first true prize—a magic mirror that gave him glimpses of the outside world. He could even hear voices through it, but nobody could hear him.

Books. Paint. Items disappeared too. A clock, except Rune shattered the clock before it could disappear, because each tick hurt too much. One day, a television appeared in the parlor, and some of the pictures were the glimpses Rune was used to, but some were black and white and silent.

Raider has plenty of questions by the time Rune's voice fades, but he's certain of two things.

One, Rune isn't a demon. Raider's dealt with demons before. Rune is way better adjusted than any human would be in similar circumstances, but he's not a demon.

Two, this is why Cupid matched them. Raider can't resist one last treasure hunt.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Raider asks.

Drained by the story, Rune slumps against the wall. "I'm bad. I'm selfish. I can't leave, but I thought I could at least... I just wanted to talk to someone. And once I met you, I wanted you to like me."

"I do like you," Raider says. "A lot. But even if I didn't want to fuck you senseless, I would still help you."

Rune pauses. His fiery dark gaze stills. "What do you mean?"

Raider grins. "Tell me everything you know, cutie. I'm breaking you out."

At seven in the morning—after three hours of talking and four hours of sleep—Raider rolls out of bed. Rune says there's no rush. He's been trapped so long, what's another day? Another month? Another year?

But Raider can't stand the thought of Rune being trapped for a second longer than necessary. So really, Val should be grateful Raider waits until seven to call.

"You're calling me at fuckface o'clock in the morning because you want me on a gig?" Val demands, entirely ungrateful.

“It’s the last time, I swear,” Raider says, plugging in his coffee maker.

“You said last time was the last time!” Val groans. “Ugh. Whatever. I have some free time. What are we digging up now?”

Raider grins. “My boyfriend.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:37 am*

One week later, Rune still can't believe Raider's promise. He shouldn't believe him. But Rune wants to, with every fiber of his soul. Even the agony of hope is better than the lack of it.

If Raider is to be believed, he and his sister Val are currently less than a hundred feet away, inspecting the outside of Rune's prison. The idea of that proximity is overwhelming, whether it's true or not.

"How're you doing there?" Val asks over the line.

Rune's phone sits on his kitchen table, right where he first found it. He has it on speaker so he can pace as he talks. He's barely spent a moment without someone on the phone for the past week, except when both Raider and Val had to sleep. Raider even bought extra phones, so he could talk on one while the rest charged.

That's something Rune hadn't even considered. His phone never loses battery. Raider was very interested in that detail—another of his thousand questions about every item and event in Rune's chamber. The fact that Rune's belongings manifest without any intentional spell or ritual seems particularly important, as is the mechanism of disappearance.

"Do they disappear while you're not paying attention, or because you're not paying attention?" Raider asked at one point. He was more intrigued than frustrated when Rune couldn't answer. "Do they appear because you need those specific items in particular?"

"I don't see how," Rune had said. "I didn't know televisions existed when mine



appeared. I don't know how I knew it was called a television. I've always just wanted to connect with the world, even if I could never escape."

"Until now," Raider said quickly. "Trust me, pretty boy. You're getting the fuck out of there."

Raider's so sweet. He even asked to make sure the attention wasn't overwhelming. But Rune wants to be overwhelmed. He's afraid of what will happen if he closes his eyes. Whether due to the constant attention or something else, Rune hasn't lost any time since he met Raider. He remembers everything, and even more importantly, Raider remembers him. No matter what happens today, Raider will continue through the centuries with Rune's voice in his heart. If that's the only freedom Rune gets, that will be enough.

Now, Rune answers, "I'm still fine. Have you figured out what spell they used?"

Val sighs. "Kinda sorta. It would help if we knew exactly what cult the casters were from."

"I'm sorry I can't remember more."

"Not your fault, honey." Val raises her voice. "Maybe if Raider read some fucking books, ever, we'd have made some progress."

Raider's cheerful "Fuck you!" rings out from the distance. Audible only over the phone, not through the walls. Even though he's right there.

Still, the sound of Raider's voice puts a silly grin on Rune's face. He twists his fingers in the hem of his shirt. Raider told him to get properly dressed—which means jeans and socks along with his tie-dye shirt. Rune's last pair of shoes disappeared around five years ago, possibly because he never wore them. So, Raider has shoes

waiting for him in their camper.

Rune's head spins with how much he's learned about his own prison in the past week. Apparently, he lives underneath a valley that locals say is haunted, right next to a popular campground. There's a lake to fish in. Maybe it's the lake Rune used to see in his mirror.

Winter is fading outside, and everything is ready to bloom.

Rune's prison is a hexagonal structure, riddled with ritual carvings, in the center of a larger network of catacombs. Val estimates that the carvings are two hundred years old. Raider gave Rune a virtual tour on video call, and Rune couldn't interpret anything. The timing makes sense with an obscure, superstitious cult that used to operate in the area, according to Raider and Val.

Raider sounds closer when he speaks again. "Hey, cutie, I'm going to talk to Val alone for a second. Hang tight, and I'll call you back in ten minutes, okay?"

"Is something wrong?" Rune asks, nervous.

"I just can't concentrate when I'm listening to your sweet voice," Raider answers smoothly. "You're too deliciously distracting."

Val groans loudly as the praise heats through Rune's soul. It soothes him, sparkling at the edge of his vision. Rune is perfectly content when Raider hangs up the call.

Maybe that's what's been keeping Rune awake and aware since he met Raider. That glorious praise makes Rune feel so alive. So real. Like he exists more completely when Raider tells him how good he is.

Closing his eyes, Rune basks in the praise until Raider calls back—a video call this

time.

“Hi, gorgeous.” Raider’s golden eyes gleam. “I’ve figured out how to get you out, but I’m going to need your help.”

“Okay,” Rune agrees, though he doesn’t understand.

Raider’s grin widens, warming away Rune’s doubts. “Trust me, beautiful. I’ve done this before. There are two parts to this spell. I can deactivate the outer part, but you need to open the door.”

Rune’s brow furrows. Ice crackles inside him. “There isn’t a door.” The phone trembles before Rune composes himself. “I’ve looked for a door. I would have found it.”

Raider just nods, reassuring and steady. “It won’t appear until I’ve taken care of the outside spell. But I need to figure out where it will be. Can you give me another tour of the place?”

Rune nods.

“Good boy,” Raider says.

A flush heats Rune’s face as he flips the camera to show the rest of the room. At Raider’s directions, Rune circles the chamber. Hopefully Raider is getting what he needs, because Rune loses himself in the strangest reverie.

He hates these gray stone walls—but they’re familiar. He hates and loves the plush rugs and smooth wooden floors. His prison and shelter for the past two hundred years, if Val is to be believed about the carvings.

“Raider,” Rune says as he scans the camera over the tiny, mismatched kitchen. “Are you sure I’m not a demon?”

“One hundred percent.”

“What if I’m something else bad?” Rune swallows down a lump in his throat. “What if it’s better for me to be here?”

Raider’s certainty doesn’t falter. “Doesn’t matter. I want you out, so I’m getting you out. Besides, I already know exactly what you are—my perfect match.”

Rune laughs despite everything. “That’s all right, then.”

“There,” Raider says suddenly.

Rune pauses in his parlor. “What?”

“The mirror on the wall. The door is behind that.”

“Oh,” Rune whispers. “Of course.”

The mirror used to show him pictures, before the newly invented television arrived. Raider corroborated enough of Rune’s hazy memories that some of those images must have been true glimpses of the outside world. Rune has no idea how it works, but he’s grateful for the mirror’s help. Now it hides one last gift.

“The configuration must be weaker there,” Raider says.

Excitement shivers through Rune. “Do I move the mirror?”

“Not yet. Val, what side is he on?”

Val has something set up to track the movements of Rune's phone. "North side!" she calls out.

"Okay, wait for me, cutie." Raider holds the phone closer, his golden eyes lighting up. Like being closer to Rune brightens him. "You're so wonderful, you know that, right? You're so good and patient."

Rune squirms with the praise, pulse quickening. As if each word is a finger stroking the back of his neck. "I'm not that patient."

Raider grins. "Impatient is even better. Trust me, I can't fucking wait to get my hands on you. You're so perfect. You're all I've been thinking about."

"Raider..." Rune starts, but can't think of anything else to say. Gods, Raider has to know what he's doing to Rune. He never lays the praise on so thick—Rune can hardly concentrate through the barrage of sweet words.

"Good boy," Raider adds, which is unfairly distracting. "Okay, I'm going to hang up, then voice call. I need my hands free for this."

When Raider calls back, Rune presses the phone to his ear.

"Are you ready?" Raider asks.

"Please," Rune whispers.

From a distance, Val calls out, "I'm starting."

A chime echoes through the connection. A hiss like a sudden flame. The scattering of small stones.

“Okay!” Val says.

Raider takes a deep breath, right in Rune’s ear. “All right, cutie, you’ve been so fucking brave. The door’s going to appear behind the mirror. You won’t see it at first, but the cracks will start to glow. They’ll be orange like the light in your beautiful eyes. Once you see the outline, all you have to do is push.”

Rune floats on the high of every sweet word. “I need both hands, so I’m... I’m hanging up now.”

“That’s perfect,” Raider says. “Just open the door, and I’m waiting for you. You’ve been so good waiting for me. You’ve got this.”

With a shaky exhale, Rune hangs up. Slips the phone into his back pocket. Raider’s words still circle, cushioning Rune’s every move. Grateful joy floods his chest, chasing away every fear and doubt.

Raider is waiting for him. Raider says he’s good.

This will be okay. This will work.

Rune grips the edge of the mirror. It separates easily from the stone wall. The heavy wooden frame bites into his fingers, and he has to concentrate to settle it on the floor.

There’s a patch of darker stone where the mirror once hung. As Rune watches, the darkness flickers. Spreads. Warm, orange light slices through the solid stone. A thin outline twice as wide as Rune and half again as tall.

A door. Just like Raider described.

The stone is coarse and dusty beneath Rune’s palm. The slightest pressure pushes the

door outward—and Rune is free.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:37 am*

Raider's pressed so close to the stone wall, he has to step back when the door moves. Nerves strung tight, praying this will work, he stumbles back to give Rune space.

Because that's Rune, divinely beautiful and aching real, framed with light and stone. He's smaller than Raider imagined. Maybe five foot seven at the most, his frame swamped in the purple tie-dye shirt. His face is open and soft with nervous awe, and so much trust Raider isn't sure he deserves.

"Well, fuck," Val says, voice echoing in the catacombs. "It fucking worked."

"You did it, Rune," Raider says, and holds out his hand.

Rune steps forward slowly, eyes darting everywhere, and touches Raider's palm. Like a bird landing on an unfamiliar branch—and balancing perfectly. If Val's research is correct, this is the first time Rune has touched anyone in two hundred years.

Her research probably is correct, because she's been on a winning "I told you so" streak all month.

"Happy Valentine's Day, cutie," Raider says, with an unstoppable grin. He's never cared much about holidays before, but this is definitely his new favorite. "How's this for a date?"

"Happy Valentine's Day," Rune repeats softly. His voice is strange, the accent hard to place, but not as strange as it should be given his long captivity. "You're here."

"I'm here." Raider's palm heats beneath the slight touch. He wants so much more,



but he'll go as slowly as he needs to. And he thinks he can help Rune out a bit. "You're doing so good, cutie."

Sure enough, the praise brings Rune to motion again. His eyes glitter at the simple words, which lends weight to Raider's current working theory about Rune's origins.

It's also why Raider's scheme worked just now.

"I never knew there was a door there," Rune says. "Could I have found it before?"

"There wasn't a door," Raider admits.

Rune freezes. "What?"

Raider reaches out slowly. When he pushes Rune's hair back just like he's been yearning to, Rune shivers at the touch. Fuck, Raider has centuries to make up for.

"Your powers get stronger when I praise you," Raider says. "You can feel that, can't you, gorgeous? How wonderful and strong you are?"

Rune shivers and sways closer with his words.

Raider gently squeezes Rune's hand. "The door appeared because I told you it would, and you believed me." Raider crooks a grin. "Sorry for lying to you."

Rune blinks. "You didn't lie, though. It worked. Even if it only worked because I believed you."

Still probably counts as a lie, but Rune not being picky about the truth is a good thing. The door bullshit was a gamble after Raider realized they wouldn't be able to break the enclosure spell. Not without bringing this entire mountain range down, at

least. Raider would absolutely do that for Rune, no question. He'd just need some intense prep work to prevent casualties, environmental damage, and governmental interference.

Going to prison doesn't fit Raider's five-year business plan.

So, Raider and Val handled it the way they always handle tough jobs. They winged it. Val played generic ritual sounds from her phone, Raider praised the hell out of Rune to juice up his power, and Rune trusted Raider enough to believe the door would appear.

Val steps closer, but not too close. "Hi, Rune. Nice to meet you face to face. Thanks for keeping my brother from becoming a spinster."

Rune looks at her, dazed. "You're here too. Hello."

"Do you feel dizzy?" Raider asks. "Sick? Can you walk okay?"

"I'm overwhelmed, but I'm not sick or hurt." Rune's gaze returns to Raider, as if he's the most interesting thing in the entire dusty chamber. "You're here," Rune says again, quieter this time. "Can I touch you?"

Raider leans forward.

"Okay!" Val interrupts. "You two get out of here while I redo the safety charms."

"You're the best, sis." Raider nods to the open door. "Rune, do you need anything from inside?"

Rune doesn't even look back. "Nothing. Take me away, please."

Raider squeezes his hand and leads him from the catacombs. Stone tunnels give way to the bright, open sky. A breeze dances through the budding trees, and a narrow dirt path winds toward the campgrounds. The evergreen valley is gorgeous, even before spring fully blooms, but Rune's upturned face is more gorgeous than all the rest.

"I forgot how large the world was," Rune murmurs, then stops suddenly. "I think I should sit down."

They sit right there on the dirt path, cross-legged and facing each other. It's awkward, Rune clinging to Raider's hand the entire time. But Raider won't let go until Rune does.

Holding Rune feels right. Like Rune is the purpose Raider has been missing.

"We can sit here as long as you like," Raider says. "My camper's parked half a mile away, so we can go there when you're ready. Or just stay outside. I don't know if you'll want to be outside all the time, or if you'll want some enclosed space while you adjust."

The breeze ruffles Rune's hair. "I don't know either. There's so much of everything."

"You can go wherever you want, whenever you want. Just say the word." Raider grins. "I'll admit, what I want to do is take you home. Show you my shop. Take care of you, while you get used to this gigantic world."

"I'd like that." Rune gives a tiny grin in return. "Thank you. For that, and everything."

"I'd say any time, but nobody is ever locking you up again." Raider takes Rune's other hand, moving slowly, except Rune grabs him back so quickly.

Rune tilts his head. “You seem so sure I’m not an evil demon. What do you think I am?”

Rune’s fiery eyes aren’t human, but they aren’t demonic either. Humans have always feared what they don’t understand, especially when they find those mysteries living among them. Not a safe and distant mirage they can define according to their own laws.

“I think you’re a god, cutie.” Raider leans forward. His cheek presses against Rune’s, and Raider murmurs his next words right into Rune’s ear. “And I’m looking forward to worshipping you.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:37 am*

Rune doesn't miss the catacombs. According to Val, all the items inside the chamber disappeared or crumbled into disrepair an hour after Rune left. They were either called into being or kept whole by Rune's subconscious magic.

Val was annoyed because she wanted to check for valuables, but Rune doesn't mind. His clothes and phone stayed intact since they were with him. He doesn't care about the jeans or socks, and Raider has bought him a ridiculous number of colorful T-shirts in case the tie-dye one vanishes. Rune just makes sure to keep his phone nearby so it doesn't disappear.

It was his first true door to the rest of the world, summoned by the sheer power of Rune's yearning—with a little extra magic from Cupid.

Rune has spent the past few months living with Raider above Artifacts, Alchemy, Etc. Freedom is easier some days than others. Rune wants to explore the world, but it's so vast. Some days, the open sky above is too scary.

Yesterday, Rune left during the middle of Raider's workday to visit a dog park with Val. That was fun. Rune likes talking with Val—she watches more television than Raider does. It turns out some of the shows Rune used to watch on his magic television were real, so they have things to talk about. Rune also likes Val's vampire girlfriends, part of his slowly growing circle of real people to talk to.

Today, Rune is paying for yesterday's dog park adventure with a case of nerves. He doesn't intend to leave the shop until he can walk out the door without shaking again.

That's fine. As Raider says, there's no rush. They have all the time in the world. Rune

is a lot more excited about living forever now that he's actually living, instead of just existing. He hasn't lost a single moment since Raider first called him "cutie."

Besides, Rune likes being in the shop with Raider. Workdays are fun because Raider so clearly thrives on this. Removing curses. Finding new homes for old objects. Identifying family heirlooms, restoring family stories for the current generation.

But Rune especially loves this moment at the end of the day, when Raider's locking up. Rune leans on the counter as Raider seals an alarm talisman over the door. The beaded curtain rattles—a new addition, because Val suggested it and Rune thought it looked super interesting. And Raider grumbled but ordered it anyway.

Raider makes his usual circuit of the shop. Locking up the register. Taking a few specific artifacts to the basement. That takes him out of Rune's sight for a few minutes, but Rune isn't anxious about that anymore. Raider will return, and once everything else is in its place, Raider's attention is just for Rune.

"All right, one more relic to put away," Raider teases.

Rune wrinkles his nose. "Fuck you."

Raider laughs, because he always laughs when Rune swears—which is why Rune does it. Then Raider scoops Rune up onto the counter, and kisses Rune until they're both dazed with it.

Because Raider doesn't just worship with words. Every kiss, every slide of strong hands from waist to thighs, every breath whispering against Rune's throat, is an act of devotion.

Raider slides a hand under Rune's rainbow cat shirt. "What were you reading earlier?"

Rune winds his arms around Raider's shoulders, savoring the warm reality of his body. "A theology book. It made me wonder... What do you think I'm the god of?"

He doesn't expect Raider to have an answer—but Raider grins and crowds closer between Rune's thighs. "That's easy, cutie. You're the god of whatever you want to be."

"Whatever I want," Rune repeats. The phrase turns in his head, the freedom its own kind of magic.

Raider traces ticklish lines along Rune's ribs. "You could be the god of small businesses. The god of reality TV. The god of tie-dye. The god of looking so fucking cute bent over this counter as I—"

"Doors," Rune interrupts. "I like doors."

Raider's eyes soften. "That's perfect. As long as I still get to bend you over this counter."

Grinning, Rune pulls Raider in for another kiss. "I expect nothing less from my favorite disciple."

Sometimes freedom is the open sky. Sometimes it's this—a moment of love with his perfect match.

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Thank you for reading!