



The Hitman's Omega Priest (River City Omegas #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: An omega priest goes on the run with a hitman who shouldn't be alive.

Kensley Thorne lives the lonely, mundane life of an ordained priest, secured away from the wider world like most omega males.

Sent to the abbey when he was fourteen, Kensley resents his boring life, and he resents King, his older half-brother who sent him there.

He's also never forgotten Bishop, his brother's best friend, who's ten years older than Kensley...even after he learns of Bishop's violent death.

Bishop Anders has worked for King's organization for more than half his life, and after a nearly-successful assassination attempt, Bishop goes undercover...guarding the grownup version of the teenager he's never forgotten.

When one of King's enemies attempts to kidnap Kensley as leverage, Bishop intervenes and the pair goes into hiding.

Sparks fly the moment they touch, and they only burn brighter when Kensley realizes Bishop is his "dead" crush.

Fourteen years of Kensley denying his sexuality fuels their newfound passion, and despite living in constant danger, neither man has ever been happier.

But omega males are kept sequestered from the world for a reason, and King's enemies aren't the only ones who are after Kensley....

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Kensley Thorne had been a light sleeper ever since he came to live with his brother.

It was partly missing his mother, who'd died suddenly three years ago, and left custody of Kensley to an older half-brother he'd never met.

And it was partly living in a big, fancy house surrounded by guards who rarely spoke to him.

He was lonely, he missed his mom, and at fourteen-years-old, he resented the private tutors that prevented him from socializing with kids his age.

So, he was surprised to wake up from an unusually deep, dreamless sleep achy and restless, and covered in sweat.

His bedroom wasn't hot, and it was spring, his favorite time of year to sleep with his windows open.

He tossed off his blanket, confused, because he wasn't actually overheated.

The sweat seemed to be all on his back, butt and legs.

Fuck, did I piss myself in my sleep?

No, the front of his boxers was dry. He sat up and his abdomen cramped, like he had to take a shit.

Worried he'd eaten something off last night, and it was taking its sweet time catching

up to him, Kensley rolled out of bed and bolted into his attached bathroom.

Pulled off his damp boxers, which didn't smell like pee, but something more...

musky? Not like, butt musky. His teenage brain didn't have the words.

He tossed the wet shorts into the shower. Sat on the toilet but nothing happened except his usual morning piss. His heart was racing from this unexpected, weird thing. He'd woken up from wet dreams before, but there was no spunk on his junk, and he didn't remember dreaming at all.

I want to call Mom. Mom always knows.

But she was dead, and no one was home except the usual guards.

His brother, Alexander "King" Kingston, was due home around noon from a business trip.

Kensley didn't know what, exactly, King did for a living, but the guy was wealthy.

Kensley never wanted for material things.

Every gaming console he asked for, the newest designer sneakers, any video rental he wanted delivered that day.

The only thing King couldn't buy him was friends. Companionship.

A real sense of family.

Since he couldn't call his mother for advice, Kensley got in the shower and washed up.

He still felt weird, but maybe it was just gas.

Whatever. He dried off and put on clean shorts.

Checked his bed. There was a big wet spot in the middle, but it was clear and had that same, indescribable scent as his soiled shorts.

What if I'm sick? What if I have, like, butt cancer or something?

No, that was stupid. He was fourteen. He was too young for cancer.

Did people even get butt cancer?

Kensley stripped the bed, including the mattress cover, and stuffed it all into the laundry basket.

They had someone come by once a week to change the beds and collect laundry, and the service was coming in two days.

Was that too long? He didn't want his sheets to stain or get even smellier.

The house had a washer and dryer in the basement, but Kensley had never used it.

He could text Bishop. Bishop Anders was staying at the house this weekend.

He was King's best friend, and the pair worked together, but lately whenever King was out of town, Bishop was home.

Watching over Kensley. Sometimes, Kensley resented the extra attention; other times, he craved it.

Bishop was handsome, ten years older, and so mature.

And he was nice to Kensley, talking to him like an equal and not an obligation.

They even hung out, played video games, and Bishop was teaching him to play pool.

Sometimes, Bishop felt like another big brother.

Other times...it felt more special than that, as if they'd known each other in a past life and were finally reconnecting.

Last night, they'd watched a movie together.

Kensley didn't remember what, because he'd been so aware of Bishop.

Their fingers kept touching in the popcorn bowl...

No. Asking Bishop for help would just make Kensley look like a dumb kid, and he wanted Bishop to respect him. To see him as an equal, and possibly someone Bishop could really like when Kensley was older. Maybe Kensley was only fourteen, but this wasn't just a childish crush.

Didn't matter right now. He could be a grownup and do his own laundry. He'd figure it out. Then he'd figure out his other problem.

Kensley grabbed all the stuff again then left his room.

Padded barefoot down the wide hallway to the main staircase.

The quiet house was too damned big for Kensley, who'd spent a lot of his life in a two-bedroom apartment with his divorced mom, and the occasional visit from his

father, until the man died when he was seven.

He and his mom hadn't been poor, exactly, but this opulence was just... dumb.

Too many rooms, not enough people. King was twenty-six. The guy needed to stop traveling so much, find a wife, and have some kids. Kensley kind of liked the idea of being an uncle. A cool, fun uncle.

Even the damned basement was fancy, with finished walls and tiled floors.

One end had a pool table and some chairs, the other a laundry area.

Kensley stuffed his bedding into the washer.

It was pretty full but the lid closed. Then he searched a nearby cabinet and found a bottle of detergent.

Kensley was used to basic, pay-with-quarters machines, and this one had all kinds of cycles and symbols, and none of them made sense.

"Fuck."

And what the hell was...were his butt cheeks sweaty again?

"What the fuck is going on!" His shout echoed around the basement.

"Kensley?" Bishop's deep, familiar voice startled him into dropping the detergent.

On his damned foot.

Kensley screeched and fell onto his ass, face flaming with embarrassment, and his

foot screaming with pain.

Bishop was there, tall and dark-haired, and so concerned Kensley wanted to cry.

Not that he would; he needed Bishop to know he was strong and capable, not a whiny kid who cried over a bruised foot.

“Hey, let me see,” Bishop said. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Fucking fuckity fuck, that shit hurts.” But Kensley let Bishop take his bare foot in two gentle hands and examine it.

His touch was calming, comforting in a way that made Kensley feel protected.

Seen. Bishop was a decade older than Kensley, but he’d never treated Kensley like a tagalong kid.

He spoke to Kensley, instead of at Kensley.

King and his various guards spoke at Kensley.

“Can you wiggle your toes?” Bishop asked.

He tried. It hurt, but Kensley didn’t feel any sharp pain and nothing seemed broken. He also didn’t want Bishop to stop touching him. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Let’s go upstairs and put some ice on it. Just in case.” Bishop smiled, and that sent a wiggle of familiar warmth into Kensley’s belly. He loved Bishop’s smiles, because he handed them out so rarely. “I’d hate for King to come home and find out I let you get hurt while doing laundry.”

Kensley grunted. “You didn’t let me get hurt. I was the dumbass who dropped the detergent.”

“Well, I’m the dumbass that startled you, so we’re even.” Bishop moved into a crouch, and before Kensley could object, scooped him up in his arms like he was carrying a small child. For a brief moment, the cuddling felt nice, comfortable. Almost loving.

His heart skipped a beat, because Bishop smelled really good. Too good. Kensley knuckled Bishop’s shoulder. “Put me down. I can walk by my own damned self.”

“Okay, okay.” He gently deposited Kensley onto his feet and took a step backward.

Kensley immediately missed Bishop’s nearness, but he didn’t need to be carried around like a baby.

He shifted his weight to his right foot, because his left did hurt.

It wasn’t broken, but he probably did need ice, and he could walk to the kitchen like a grownup.

He couldn’t be weak in front of Bishop. He wanted Bishop to respect him. To like him.

Bishop, who was brushing at the front of his shirt, and Kensley’s stomach dropped. A damp spot. Shit.

“Kens, why are you doing laundry at eight-thirty in the morning?” His tone had changed in a weird way.

Still concerned but with an edge of...panic?

Nah, Bishop Anders didn't panic. He'd only ever been calm, cool and collected around Kensley.

His centeredness was one of the things Kensley loved about him.

"I felt like it." Mostly true.

"Have you done laundry once since you moved here?"

"Sure." Bishop stared, unblinking, and Kensley wilted. He couldn't lie to Bishop's face. Kensley wanted to impress him, not make him mad. "No, I haven't. Not here. These machines are weird."

Bishop hunched, as if trying to make himself smaller.

Less of an authority figure and more like a friend.

Someone who wanted Kensley to be honest with him, and part of Kensley wanted to confide in Bishop.

He trusted Bishop. And he'd never admit out loud that he had a huge crush on the gorgeous guy.

Bishop was way too old and totally not interested in a teenager, which made it a useless crush.

Ugh, why did everything have to be so confusing?

"I know we aren't super close friends, Kens," Bishop said, "but if something's wrong, you can trust me. Do you trust me?"

“Yes.” As far as he could tell, Bishop had never lied to him. He’d definitely never made fun of him, not once. “It’s embarrassing.”

“What is?” He glanced at the washer. “If you were sick this morning, it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I don’t know if I’m sick.”

“Okay. What happened?”

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Kensley leaned against the dryer, so he could take some weight off his throbbing foot.

“I woke up and my bed was wet, but I didn’t, like, pee on myself.

I felt a little sick, but it’s not stomachache sick.

I don’t know how to describe it, and it’s still kind of happening. It’s like my butt’s sweating.”

Bishop’s face slowly shifted from concerned friend to almost blank. Like all the other guards in the house, and that annoyed Kensley. “You’re fourteen,” Bishop said.

“Yeah, so? Is this, like, some weird puberty thing no one told me about? I thought my voice just dropped and I got hairy balls.”

“Yeah, that’s probably happening, but...” Bishop made a funny face, like he was thinking about Kensley’s balls. “Kens, do you know what alphas and omegas are?”

“Isn’t that something from the High Holy Book scriptures?”

“Maybe, I’m not religious. I didn’t think you were.”

Kensley shrugged. “Mom liked to read them sometimes for comfort, but we never really went to services. I just remember some prayer or something about the alpha and the omega.”

“So, your mother never taught you about all the genders?”

He shook his head, more confused than ever. People were men or women, what was so complicated? “What are you talking about?”

“Fuck. It’s not my place to tell you this. King really should.”

“Well, now you fucking-well are telling me.” Kensley reached out and yanked on Bishop’s forearm. He couldn’t even enjoy the contact, because if Bishop had answers, he was a jerk for keeping them to himself. “What the fuck is wrong with me? And what’s it got to do with this alpha omega shit?”

Bishop briefly looked pain, and then he squared his shoulders. “Please tell me you’ve at least had the sex talk.”

“Duh. Mom gave me a brief talk not long before she died, and one of my tutors did two hours on STDs last fall. I’ve seen movies, Bishop.”

“Porn movies?” Bishop actually looked shocked.

“No, not porn. What does my problem have to do with sex, though? This is my butt, not my dick.”

“Well, some people like having anal sex, especially gay men, so sex can involve your butt and your dick.” Bishop actually blushed and fidgeted, which made hope flare briefly behind Kensley’s breastbone. Was Bishop into guys? Could he ever like Kensley?

“Do you?” That sounded stupid. “I mean, do you ever, um?—?”

“We are not having that conversation.” Bishop crossed his arms. “I am a decade older than you, and you’re my best friend’s little brother. That topic is wildly inappropriate.”

“Fine,” Kensley snapped. Maybe he could get some answers out of Bishop another day, when Kensley could think more clearly. “What’s this other thing you were talking about, though? Alpha and omega?”

Bishop stared at the floor for a long, irritating moment, and then looked up.

His dark eyes were almost sad. “When it comes to procreation, humans are more complicated than just male and female. There are alpha females who have the ability to impregnate other women. They can also impregnate omega males. And omega males can also be impregnated by men. The designations are actually pretty rare, and because of their rarity, most of them are encouraged to join a religious order for their safety.”

Kensley chewed on that for a moment but it didn’t make sense. Okay, so two guys had butt sex, fine. Maybe future fun even, but—“How does a dude get pregnant?”

“Because omega males are born with a uterus inside them, and roughly every two months, for twenty-four hours, they’re fertile. If he has anal sex with a person who ejaculates inside, he can become pregnant.”

“Bullshit.” This was the stupidest conversation he’d ever had, and he kind of wanted to hit Bishop again for lying.

Kensley had been honest about a humiliating experience, and now Bishop was mocking him?

Stupid fucking crush. “Look, can you just help me set the laundry, and then I’ll figure this out? I don’t need your mean lies.”

“Kens, I’m not lying. I don’t want it to be true for you, but if you’re wet down there, it’s possible this is your first time presenting as an omega male.”

“Fuck off, Bishop!” Stunned by the unexpected betrayal, Kensley turned and started stalking across the basement. His wounded foot hated him for that, and he stumbled to his knees. “Fuck.”

“Let me help?—”

“Do not touch me.” Kensley used his blazing sense of betrayal at Bishop to get back on his feet and stumble forward. “Leave me the fuck alone!”

“I swear, I’m not trying to hurt you.”

“You already have.” He fled for the stairs, heart slowly breaking and unsure why.

The leaking problem wasn’t fixing itself.

Kensley stayed in his bedroom, not coming out for breakfast or lunch, and he was getting close to breaking King’s rules about contacting law enforcement, and just calling emergency services.

The weird, gassy feeling hadn’t left, and he’d changed his shorts three times in the last four hours.

It was like his asshole had a slow leak, and he didn’t know how the fuck to plug it.

He’d curled up on the floor, on a towel, and was staring at the opposite wall. He couldn’t concentrate to read, to watch TV, to do anything.

He got a text from King at twelve-forty that he was home.

Kensley ignored it. He was mad at Bishop for making up this omega shit; he was scared of what his body was doing; he needed it all to be a big lie.

He couldn't even bring himself to get on their limited internet and see if it could be true.

It wasn't. Nope. Not true. Bishop was just being a bastard.

But he's not. He's always been kind to me.

Bastard.

Twenty-four hours. Maybe he could wait this out and it would just go away.

Someone knocked on his door. "Leave me alone!"

"It's King."

"I don't care." But he did care. King was his only living relative, his only blood family left.

He wanted to confide in his brother, to get his advice, but what if King had also heard about this stupid omega thing?

King could be distant sometimes, but he'd never be part of such a cruel lie.

Then again, he'd never expected Bishop to be so cruel, either.

"Have you eaten yet today, Kens?"

"I'm not hungry." He'd drank some water from the bathroom faucet, but his stomach was a horrid mix of hunger grumbles and anxiety wobbles.

"Bishop told me what's going on. Can we talk? Please, brother?"

A new wave of fury at Bishop had Kensley up and limping to his door.

He hadn't locked it, but King was always respectful and waited for permission, instead of barging in.

Even during the worst of Kensley's grief over his mother's death, during the worst of his anger fits and screaming bouts, King showed kindness, respect, and love.

Bishop had betrayed him by lying.

Maybe his brother's love and respect would help Kensley figure this out.

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ONE

Bishop Anders gazed up at the wolf-shaped gargoyle looming over the northeast corner of Holy Order Ninth Cathedral, its gray, stone face a silent observer of all who entered.

Rainwater pelted his face and trickled down the sides of the statue in a never-ending stream that had been going since early morning.

The terrible weather only added to Bishop's mood over his current assignment, and he hesitated to carry such a heavy cloud of anger into the church.

He didn't believe in Heavenly Father or any sort of higher power, but he'd been shot at enough in his thirty-eight-years that it wouldn't surprise him if lightning struck the moment his booted foot touched the marble steps.

Exhausted of the cold rain soaking his skin and through his jacket, he squared his shoulders, gave the angry gargoyle one more glare, and took a step forward.

No lightning.

Other parishioners moved past him, eager to get out of the evening chill and into the glowing warmth of the church's vestibule.

The eye-watering odors of burning sage nearly made Bishop sneeze, and he tracked the source to a small altar on his left, beneath a portrait of Holy Father Absolom, the leader of this particular sect of the Church.

He was the most powerful Holy Father in River City, a leader in both spirituality and politics—which made him Bishop and King’s organization’s biggest opponent.

Entering one of the man’s cathedrals made Bishop’s skin itch.

But his boss and best friend, Alexander “King” Kingston, had ordered Bishop to attend services tonight and make contact with his new assignment: an omega priest named Kensley Thorne.

He followed the flow of parishioners through the wide vestibule, toward the double doors that led into the sanctuary.

Once again, he had a fleeting moment where he expected to be struck down for his lack of faith, in a society that placed all its power in the hands of a few highly religious figures.

But as he walked into the cavernous sanctuary, with its vaulted ceilings, massive paintings, and ornamental arches, he felt only a slight shift in the air temperature.

Cooler, somehow sharper, and he didn’t understand why.

Bishop’s gaze never stopped moving, despite keeping his head mostly still, observing all angles without being obvious about it.

The pews were sectioned off, the back rows stained a dark wood tone, like mahogany.

The closer to the front of the sanctuary, the lighter the stain.

Bishop’s reconnaissance told him this was to distinguish everyone by their social class.

The wealthy in reserved seats up front, the poorest of the poor vying for space in the rear.

Ushers in matching tan suits and bright red ties stood every few rows, watching who sat where. An elderly couple in fancy clothes was escorted personally to one of the first rows, while a young woman in a plain, faded dress was prevented from moving any closer than the fourth pew from the back.

The distinctions infuriated Bishop, who'd been raised in a small church, under the tenets that all were equal in the eyes of Heavenly Father.

But when money became the driving force of religion, and faith was twisted to serve goals other than loving their neighbor, Bishop had opted out.

Out of faith and into a life where loyalty was key to survival, and Bishop decided his own value as a man.

Yes, his lifestyle and work required a specific hierarchy to keep everyone safe and alive, but no one was subjugated.

Not the way the church subjugated the poor—or the way they subjugated omega males and alpha females.

Bishop took off his damp coat, which showed off his simple navy suit.

Nothing fancy, nothing high-end. He wanted a decent spot to see the service and observe his assignment, but he didn't want to be noticed—especially as someone brand-new to this church.

So, he chose an aisle seat in a pew just south of center, giving him an easy escape should he need one.

Organ music began to play, urging attendees to be seated.

He checked his watch. Five minutes to six.

He continued observing his surroundings, noting the three doors up on the stage, positioned behind the pulpit.

One led to the High Holy offices, two to other offices for the various priests and church officers.

Below and to the right of the stage, two connected doors led, according to his study of the building's blueprints, to conference rooms. The cathedral also had a basement with other conference and meeting rooms, as well as a kitchen, storage and an emergency exit.

Bishop knew this building inside and out. Every door, every window, and every fire alarm, despite having never set foot inside before. It was his job to know.

He also knew how to turn the innocent-looking ballpoint pen in his pocket into a single-shot projectile weapon in less than twenty seconds, should the need arise.

Every door to the church had hidden metal detectors that would have known if he'd carried a gun inside with him.

But Bishop never went anywhere without backup.

Not even sacred ground considered neutral territory.

At precisely six p.m., the organ music reached a crescendo, and a line of people filed in from one of the rear stage doors.

First came the choir in their blue robes and red sashes.

Bishop counted fifteen men and women, mostly young.

Two junior priests in red robes and white sashes followed, taking their places in chairs near the pulpit.

Then the senior priest, the man Bishop was here to observe, took his own chair.

Bishop didn't pay close attention to the arrival of the Holy Father and Holy Mother, because his attention was on his target.

Elder Kensley Thorne was twenty-eight-years-old, with hair so black it gleamed under the stage lights.

Steel-gray eyes that Bishop couldn't see from his spot, but he had looked into so many times in the three years he'd known a grieving, teenage Kensley.

Soulful eyes that didn't understand the violent world he'd been thrust into, thanks to his older half-brother King.

Eyes that always seemed to look right inside Bishop and see through his bravado and bullshit.

Eyes that seemed cold now, as he gazed over the heads of his congregation, seemingly bored while a junior priest stepped to the pulpit and opened the service with prayer.

Bishop bowed his head slightly out of respect, and to fit in as much as possible, without lowering his guard. He always assumed an enemy was nearby. That had kept him alive these last two years, while the rest of the world thought he was dead.

He went through the necessary motions of kneeling and pretending to pray, mouthing the words to hymns he didn't know or feel any connection to, mostly observing the congregation, until Kensley approached the pulpit.

Bishop leaned forward.

“Good evening, brothers and sisters,” Kensley said in a clear, familiar voice that warmed Bishop's chest in an unwanted way.

The same way it had as Kensley went through puberty, maturing from an irritating eleven-year-old into a handsome, young teenager—who had been and always would be off-limits to Bishop or anyone else associated with King.

Kensley had entered the Ordained Order of Omegas for his own safety. He had pledged himself to the god he worshipped, and no one could touch him. Especially not someone as unclean and sin-addled as Bishop. But Bishop could protect him, and it was his mission now to do so, or to die trying.

Kensley introduced the longer sermon, split in half by the Father and Mother, and Bishop tuned them out, his attention on the way Kensley sat stiffly in his chair.

Kensley was not comfortable in front of this large audience, and unless Bishop's instincts were off, Kensley didn't completely buy the religious lines he was attempting to sell.

Bishop didn't blame him. It had to be difficult to accept the tenets of a faith you were forced to join.

Forced not only for his rare presentation as an omega male at puberty, but also by his older brother to keep him (theoretically) safe from his enemies.

Kensley had been safe for the last fourteen years, but now their intel said King's enemies knew who Elder Thorne was and, despite the church grounds being off-limits by mutual understanding between the four ruling northeastern families, King wasn't risking it.

The longer Bishop stared at Kensley, the more he saw the eleven-year-old boy he'd first met, so full of grief over the death of his mother.

King and Kensley shared a father, a man far more ruthless than Bishop had ever known, which was why King had inherited such a large, solidly protected territory.

And King had spent every waking moment of the last seventeen years maintaining his rank among the other three rival families.

They'd both done their best to protect Kensley from the violence of their world, but one close call had been enough for King.

Kensley hadn't even been aware of it. But as soon as Kensley was designated as omega at age fourteen, King had seen the perfect excuse to send him away.

Bishop was pretty sure Kensley had never forgiven either of them.

Bishop had never forgiven himself for making such a fiery teenager think he wasn't loved or wanted.

Kensley's head turned once, and Bishop blinked hard, positive the object of his attention was staring right at him. But that wasn't possible, not from so great a distance, with Bishop's face one of several hundred in the congregation. A face no one recognized anymore as belonging to Bishop Anders.

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Kensley seemed to watch him for several long, intense minutes while the sermon droned on.

Bishop blocked out the words meant to condition and feed the beliefs of those already converted, not convince anyone new of their possible salvation.

The church had enough of the state under their control that they didn't need to spend energy on conversion, only on reinforcement of the status quo.

The Holy Father called for all to kneel for the final prayer, breaking the maybe-gaze-lock between Bishop and Kensley.

Bishop slid to his knees on the small slab of wood attached to the pew in front of him, then lowered his head enough to seem respectful without losing his view of the room.

The prayer ended. Everyone sat for one more choir performance, and then Kensley returned to the pulpit.

“Go forth in your connection with Heavenly Father, and may the Lord bless you with peace, love and prosperity, for through Him all things are possible. Amen.”

The downside of choosing an aisle seat was that Bishop couldn't linger without irritating people trying to leave, so he stood, moved to the far wall, and pretended to be searching for something in his coat pockets.

Slowly, deliberately, watching from the corner of his eye as Kensley and the two junior priests began interacting with the crowd.

Bishop was ninety-nine-percent sure that no one would orchestrate an assassination in the church, but he wanted more time to study Kensley.

Study him in order to protect him, of course. No other reason.

As the sanctuary emptied, hanging around became too conspicuous, so Bishop moved toward the vestibule.

He popped into the bathroom to relieve himself and, on the way back, observed more of the cathedral's interior.

Blueprints could tell him a lot but not everything.

It also allowed him to take in more details of the nearly empty corridor and vestibule.

He paused next to a large bulletin board full of local happenings and put on his still-soggy coat.

"Good evening, brother," Kensley said, his familiar-yet-deeper voice rolling over Bishop's skin like a warm hug.

Bishop turned, his heart pounding, alarmed at having been sneaked up on, and also overjoyed by being directly addressed.

Kensley stood less than three feet away, hands folded together in front of his billowy robe, expression open and curious.

Up close, he was even more handsome than Bishop had originally observed, and he shoved that reaction as far back as he could. Kensley was a job, not wank material.

"Hello, Elder," Bishop replied. "I apologize for lingering. I imagine you want to lock

the front doors.”

Kensley smiled in a way that made Bishop feel less like an anonymous parishioner and more like a singular person. “Our front doors are never locked, brother. We offer sanctuary to all, at any time of day or night. The Lord’s house does not close.”

“That doesn’t sound safe.”

“There is no safer place than within these four walls. Not only for our physical bodies, but also for our souls. And forgive me for overstepping, but you seem troubled. You have not attended service in a long time?”

Bishop stared, surprised at having been read so easily. But he might as well lean into the truth and continue the conversation. “It has been a while since I’ve attended services, Elder. Life has been complicated.”

“It can be very complicated, but the good news is how simple the love of our Lord is. I’m pleased you chose to join us tonight.”

“Same.” It took all his self-control not to look at Kensley’s lips. “Tonight has been very helpful.”

Kensley nodded, his smile never dropping but something in his eyes changed. They seemed to focus on Bishop in an intent way that nearly made Bishop squirm. Nearly. “Have we met before, brother?” Kensley asked. “You seem familiar.”

Yes, we’ve met, we were briefly family, but there’s a good reason you don’t recognize my face or have any reason to think I’m alive.

“Not in this lifetime,” Bishop replied. “Maybe I have one of those faces. I know I’d remember having met you.”

Kensley's cheeks darkened. "Perhaps I'm mistaken. I'm Elder Thorne, and if you are ever in need of counsel, I can be found here most days."

"I appreciate that, Elder. I am at a crossroads in my life. Previous decisions have led to poor results. It's good to know there's somewhere I can go that won't charge me two-hundred-an-hour to listen to me ramble about my feelings."

Kensley grinned, and in that simple quirk of lips, Bishop saw the young man he'd missed. "That is one of the many bonuses of seeking spiritual guidance over that of a paid psychiatrist. If you like, we can speak in one of the private meeting rooms."

"Right now?"

"Of course. Unless you have to be somewhere else."

Bishop wanted to take him up on the offer of "counseling" right now, so he could be alone with Kensley and pick his brain, but that was a bad idea.

Kensley was an adult omega male, a man Bishop should not see as a sexual being but did, because Kensley was all levels of hot and sexy and desirable.

Bishop didn't see him as a priest, as unobtainable, because Bishop had known him before Kensley took those vows.

He remembered a hot-tempered teen who loved to cuss, to make sexual innuendo, and who declared everlasting hatred against both King and Bishop for reporting Kensley's omega presentation to the church.

For forcing Kensley into a life he had not wanted.

"I can't tonight," Bishop forced himself to say. "But I do appreciate the offer. I, um,

haven't been active in the church for a long time, but I hope to change that."

"Music to an Elder's ears. You are always welcome here, Brother....?"

Bishop didn't insult Kensley by not acknowledging the unasked question. "Drew Burton."

"Brother Drew. Welcome, and I hope to see you at service again."

"Count on it, Elder Thorne." He extended his hand out of habit, and he was pleasantly surprised when Kensley reached out to shake.

He must have imagined the spark that raced from their joined hands, up Bishop's arm, and then down his spine.

Definitely imagined it, and he released Kensley's hand quickly.

Kensley glanced at his hand then smiled at Bishop. "Have a good evening."

"You, too. Good night."

Bishop turned, every cell in his body rebelling at leaving Kensley behind.

Yes, the young senior priest was safe inside his church, but it was more than that.

Bishop had sworn to himself and to King that he would protect Kensley, and walking away did not constitute protection.

Not when Bishop wanted to scoop Kensley up in his arms, stuff him into his car, and drive until they were both safe from King's enemies forever.

Maybe one day but not now.

For now, all Bishop could do was turn his coat collar up against the rain, walk into the cold night, and head home to his very empty apartment. An empty, efficiency apartment with a huge, Kensley-shaped hole in it he'd never noticed before tonight.

Kensley Thorne completed his evening service duties at nine-thirty on the dot, as he often did when he wasn't counseling a parishioner in need.

In his private office, he hung up his robe and sash, traded his sandals for regular sneakers, and locked up.

Headed down the private corridor that led into the abbey gardens.

A long colonnade protected him from the steady rain falling all around as he walked, soaking the ground for the coming spring warmth and growth.

One of his favorite parts of his existence here was tending their gardens during spring, summer, and deep into autumn, as the last of the squash and sweet potatoes emerged from still-fertile soil.

He loved the way nature reinvented itself over and over, always doing something new, while Kensley was stuck doing the same things, over and over, year after year. Never growing, never changing.

Existing.

Existing in a faith he only pretended to embrace, so he remained safe. Safe and stagnant and lonely.

Loneliness that had increased last month when yet another lonely birthday passed, the

only acknowledgement of him turning twenty-eight an anonymous fruit basket left with the cathedral's secretary.

He knew his brother had sent it, as he had every birthday since Kensley entered the Order.

It would never replace a phone call or visit, but he also knew better than to expect those things.

It was the heavy shroud of loneliness draped over his soul that had driven him to approach Drew Burton this evening.

He'd noticed the tall, golden-haired stranger when the congregation stood for the first hymn.

Kensley was a creature of habit, as were all members of the Order, and Kensley was certain that Drew had never attended the Wednesday evening service before.

And his intuition had been proven right when they spoke.

Drew had reminded Kensley a bit of his brother, in the way he carried himself, always alert and aware of his surroundings.

He'd also reminded Kensley of someone who'd died two years ago, a man he recalled from before the Order.

His brother's best friend, a dark-haired, serious man named Bishop Anders.

Bishop had lived a violent life, just like King, and he'd died in a violent manner.

Kensley had mourned the loss of so much potential—and the life of a young man

who'd once fiercely protected him.

Who'd been gentle and kind...until those last two days that had changed Kensley's life forever.

Drew was not the ghost of Bishop Anders, but he'd still made Kensley feel inexplicably safe.

The taller, muscled man carried so much wariness and pain in his dark eyes.

Eyes that didn't look at Kensley with disdain (a common expression directed at omegas, priests or not) or silent respect (for his rank as a senior priest).

Drew had looked at him with an openness Kensley hadn't experienced for half his life.

Openness tinged with curiosity and interest.

As a man with suppressed needs and desires, those things had stirred something new deep in Kensley's gut.

A gorgeous man was giving him serious, direct attention in a way never directed at priests by their congregation.

At least, not senior priests. It was the job of the junior priests to mingle in the crowd after services and extend offers of counsel.

Kensley doing so with a complete stranger—who didn't feel like a stranger—was totally out of character. And dangerous.

Maybe a little danger would spice up his incredibly boring life.

He let himself into the abbey, the large dormitory and cafeteria where the entire staff resided.

The Father and Mother had their own private residences with a private entrance and exit, but the rest of the Order members lived here in simple, private rooms and a shared cafeteria.

Everyone contributed to the cooking and cleaning as part of their acts of good work, since the priests who were omega or alpha were forbidden from doing good work in the community at large.

It was too dangerous for them to leave the four high walls surrounding the entire abbey, cathedral and grounds. Four walls that had become a prison.

Kensley passed through the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water.

Food was forbidden anywhere except the cafeteria, but drinks could be taken upstairs, as long as they remembered to bring the cup back.

Being caught with more than one cup in their room earned demerits and eventual acts of penitence.

The abbey was quiet all around him, which was not unusual this late in the evening.

His brothers and sisters were probably in their own rooms, reading, meditating, or praying.

They were allowed to read the Holy Scriptures, of course, or any sort of non-fiction books they liked.

They may not be of the world, but they still needed to learn about and understand the

world, in order to provide effective counsel.

Kensley's latest selection lay on the simple wood table beside his bed, his progress held by a bookmark he'd crafted last summer as part of a church fundraiser.

He'd learned to make handmade paper and layer in leaves and flowers which, when dried, he'd cut, sealed and added a simple yarn tassel.

He'd sold quite a few but had kept his favorite, which had several pressed sprigs of clover.

Clover reminded him of his childhood and happier times, when the world was bigger than a single city block.

He changed into simple tan pajamas and settled in bed to read more amusing stories written by an old, country doctor who oversaw a rural county in Maine.

A simple life in a simpler time, when a doctor was still paid in live chickens and baskets of freshly-picked apples.

When his eyelids grew heavy and he turned off his reading light, Kensley tried very hard not to allow the arresting memory of Drew Burton to follow him into slumber.

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TWO

In Kensley's limited experience, most men of faith were also creatures of habit, and he found that true about many of his parishioners.

They chose their service day and time, and that's when they showed up: Wednesday evening, Friday evening, or four different services on Sunday.

Some folks came on both a weekday evening, and on Sunday morning.

In Kensley's fourteen years with this church, and in his ten serving as a priest, Drew Burton was the first man to show up to every evening service at six: Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday.

Kensley looked forward to finding Drew in the crowd, usually in the same general area as the first time.

For two weeks, Drew attended three nights a week, and Kensley was unable to speak to him again until the third Wednesday.

Drew often lingered in the vestibule, observing the community bulletin board like someone genuinely interested in what was going on around him.

Kensley wasn't sure why he disbelieved it.

Drew was there for a reason, and Kensley hadn't forgotten their first conversation.

Drew being at a crossroads in his life and needing some sort of guidance.

He'd also yet to take Kensley up on his offer of counseling.

As the service let out and the congregation departed to areas of the city Kensley probably wouldn't recognize anymore, he once again found Drew staring at the bulletin board.

As Kensley approached, he tried to follow Drew's gaze.

The center of the board had a large yellow poster advertising this weekend's spaghetti dinner fundraiser.

Proceeds benefited the Orange Street Orphanage, which needed funds to add a new wing.

The fundraiser was Kensley's project. He wasn't able to physically volunteer at the orphanage, but he did his best to organize help for them and their growing number of children.

Kensley loved children. Even as a boy, he'd imagined growing up to be a father and having a family.

When he accepted that he was omega male, he'd briefly entertained the idea of finding a husband and bearing his own—briefly.

Omega men were not forbidden from having children, but it was frowned upon by society at large, because it was "abnormal" and against nature; the same as alpha women who could impregnate another woman.

They were safer, in general, as members of an Order, serving Heavenly Father, and

tucked away from most of the world, for most of the day/week/month/year. Kensley hadn't wanted to give up his dream of a family to join the Order.

He hadn't been given a choice.

"Good evening, Brother Drew," Kensley said.

Drew didn't startle or tense, he simply turned to face Kensley, smiling warmly.

"Good evening, Elder Thorne. You led a lovely service tonight."

"Thank you. I see you noticed our spaghetti dinner fundraiser. Are you a fan?"

"Of spaghetti or fundraisers?"

Kensley chuckled. "Both. It's for a very worthy cause, and there are door prizes. It's downstairs in our large meeting hall, Saturday evening at six."

"I've passed the orphanage more times than I can count, but I'm not much for sitting around with strangers and stuffing my face with pasta. Is there another way I can help with your fundraiser? Something more impactful than a direct donation?"

"You can volunteer to help on Saturday," Kensley blurted out. He was intrigued by Drew, and he wanted to get to know Drew more, but he had no idea about the man's social life, or if he'd want?—

"All right, I'll help. Um, I can't really cook all that well, but I suppose spaghetti is kind of foolproof."

"Nothing is foolproof to a well-armed fool."

"Is that from the Holy Scriptures?"

“I don’t think so. It’s something my brother used to say.” Kensley’s stomach curled up. He never spoke about King to near-strangers, but something about Drew was familiar. He didn’t feel like a stranger, and Kensley couldn’t explain it. He couldn’t explain it, but he knew it was dangerous.

Drew’s gentle smile never wavered. “It’s a fair statement, but I could probably scorch a pot of marinara sauce without really trying, so is there something I can do that doesn’t require cooking?”

“How about serving? The food, not as in an usher or anything. We’ll have bowls of salad and baskets of bread on the tables when diners arrive, but they have to come up to our hot station to get their spaghetti and sauce. You’d be serving on the hot line.”

“That sounds like something I could reasonably do without making a mess.”

“You don’t strike me as a naturally messy person. You seem very deliberate.”

“You know that from ten minutes of total conversation?”

“Part of my position here is observing people. You have a lot of layers, Brother Drew.”

“Don’t we all?” Drew’s near-teasing tone kept Kensley from reading any deeper into the comment. “So what time should I be here on Saturday?”

Kensley was grateful they were back to the fundraiser and off their personalities. “No later than five-twenty. I want to have a meeting with all my community volunteers at five-thirty, before we open the doors to diners.”

Something flickered in Drew’s eyes. “How many other outside volunteers do you have for this dinner?”

The new sharpness in Drew's tone unsettled him.

but Kensley had no reason to lie. "Only three besides you. A husband and wife pair who own a popular Italian restaurant uptown are doing the majority of the cooking, and I have another young man on the busboy crew who will watch the tables and remove empty plates, or refill empty bread baskets."

"Right. And what will your job be, if I may ask?"

"I'll be doing a bit of everything. Greasing the gears, so to speak, so the fundraiser runs smoothly.

This isn't the first I've spearheaded for our cathedral, and I doubt it will be the last. But as much as I love the support from my fellow priests, it is wonderful to gain volunteers from the community, so thank you for helping. "

"I haven't helped yet."

Kensley blinked hard. "Then I thank you for your promise to help. And I do hope I can count on you to show up as promised."

Drew nodded. "You have my word. But if it makes you feel better, ask me again Friday after service."

"I'll do that." He would definitely try.

And Kensley would fail to speak to Drew on Friday evening.

Kensley didn't attend the service at all, thanks to the appearance of his cycle.

An especially irritating part of being omega male, it left him indisposed for about

twenty-four-hours every two months, while his body angrily demanded it become pregnant.

He hated it for the cramps and slow, constant flow of fluid.

Since he was considered “unclean” during this period, he wasn’t allowed to leave the abbey.

By the afternoon of the fundraiser, he felt better, and a long shower had him back to top form.

He dressed and headed over to the cathedral to assist with the last steps of setup for a fundraiser so close to his heart.

The tantalizing scents of onion, garlic and tomato reached him before he descended the stairs into the basement.

Their commercial kitchen and public dining hall was down here.

Until twenty years ago, their church used to offer free meals to the hungry and homeless twice a week, but city-wide violence attributed to rival mob factions had stymied that service.

Now they were down to planned fundraisers and minimal public outreach.

He hated it, because he believed a huge part of his job was to touch the community as often as possible, and to spread the good word of the Holy Scriptures.

All Kensley could really do was touch the community members who came to him, and to believe in...well, whatever.

The restaurant owners were hard at work in the kitchen, preparing several gallons of their famous sauce from scratch.

The giant pots for spaghetti were full of water and already on the heat, since it took a long time for that much water to boil.

He also followed his nose to several ovens where garlic bread was slowly toasting.

Other volunteers were mixing huge bowls of chopped lettuce, tomatoes, bell peppers, and red onion.

Everything seemed to be on track.

He pulled a stack of black tablecloths out of the linen closet and began setting up the long banquet tables.

Jonathan and Hosea, two of the junior priests, joined him a few minutes later and added vases of fresh carnations to the clothed tables.

The pair of teenagers had only been in the Order for about two years, and they frequently volunteered for Kensley's meal-based fundraisers.

He was sure it was for the chance to interact with the public outside the stricter structure of their services.

Kensley enjoyed these evenings for the same reason.

Even though they were all omega and all there for the same reason, it was still an isolating existence, void of real friendships or physical contact.

Their trio worked like a well-oiled machine.

At five-twenty, Drew, a new volunteer named Billy who was working off community service hours, and an elderly woman who'd looked familiar, but Kensley didn't immediately recognize, entered the banquet hall.

Drew seemed to take in every detail all at once, just like at services, and the habit suggested a career in law enforcement.

Maybe Drew's need for personal counsel was due to job stress?

He really wanted to ask, but this was not the time for socializing. They had a job to do and money to raise.

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At five-thirty, he made sure their volunteer chefs could step away for a few minutes and assembled everyone for a quick meeting.

After introductions all around (the elderly woman's name was Gloria, and she had once worked at the Orange Street Orphanage), Kensley went over the order of the evening: the meet-and-greet; how to handle the door prizes; who was serving and who was busing tables as folks ate.

At five-forty-five, Jonathan went upstairs to set up the sign directing guests to the banquet hall downstairs.

Baskets of hot bread and cold salad were placed at intervals on the tables.

Drew did every task asked of him with quiet precision, that ever-moving gaze always aware of the people around him.

It was both bizarre and somehow reassuring.

The church didn't hire security guards or private police for events, because in the long history of Holy Order Ninth Cathedral, no violent crime had ever occurred on their grounds.

But with Drew here, Kensley had the odd sense of having his own security guard.

He didn't mind the feeling at all. He understood the violence of men more than he believed in the protection of Heavenly Father.

As much as Kensley wanted to station himself right next to Drew for the evening, this was his event to host, so he had to socialize.

Drew, Gloria and Hosea were positioned behind the main serving station to offer up plates of spaghetti and sauce, and to watch the drink station.

Drew seemed perfectly comfortable in a blue apron, holding a ladle of marinara sauce.

And as the first guests arrived, Kensley slipped into his role as Elder Thorne, welcoming all and encouraging them to sit where they wished.

Random seating was part of the door prize gimmick.

Tickets to the dinner were not sold in advance, it was cash at the door, and by five minutes to six, the hall was nearly full, and Kensley was mentally calculating how quickly they could set up another table and eight chairs.

A group of four men entered at once, and Kensley only noticed because fundraisers like this were often heavily attended by couples or families.

Not clusters of men dressed in suits like they were about to walk onto a Wall Street trading floor, but hopefully that meant thick wallets.

By six, they were at capacity, and Kensley clapped to silence the room. He welcomed his guests, reiterated tonight's charity, and then went through the motions of praying for the food, and for "loose pockets" in relation to the donation buckets by the exits.

Now it was time to eat.

Bishop wasn't happy with his position scooping delectable-smelling sauce over piles

of cooked noodles for people who could have easily donated the entry fee ten times over, without expecting anything in return.

But he did it, because it was his job. For the vast majority of his life, Bishop did something because it was his job.

Didn't mean he ever had or currently did enjoy it. His adult life had never been about joy; it had always been about survival. And it still was: his survival and Kensley's.

The buffet line passed through quickly, and Bishop counted close to two hundred guests who eventually sat with plates of food.

A constant din of chatter filled the banquet hall, a kind of white noise that was irritating but not distracting.

He remained aware of Kensley's location, whether he was laughing with an elderly woman, or bringing someone a refill of their iced tea.

Kensley was more animated here than during any of the services Bishop had attended.

Elder Thorne, the dour senior priest, was calm, quiet, and rarely smiled.

Brother Kensley, a young man with a huge heart who wanted to connect, shined in this environment.

This was not a man who was meant to hide behind pulpits and robes and strict traditions.

He needed companionship and joy and engagement with other people, especially people his age, his omega designation be damned.

Bishop snorted then hid the noise behind a soft cough.

In some ways, being born omega male or alpha female did damn the person, often to a life of service to a religion they did not respect, for their “own safety.” He hated that he’d been party to convincing Kensley that joining the Order was best for him.

He was safe, sure, but Bishop seriously doubted he was happy.

At six-thirty, with the meal well on its way, Kensley interrupted with the first door prize.

“Everyone, please reach beneath your chair,” he said in a loud, strong voice that tickled up Bishop’s spine in an enticing way.

“Two tickets have been randomly placed beneath two chairs, and whoever finds them can come up to claim a prize off the door prize table. And I promise, we checked for bubblegum before we set up today.” That got a titter of laughter and a lot of squirming and reaching.

Bishop hadn’t paid much attention to the door prizes, which at a quick glance, were donations such as gift cards, a basket of specialty cooking items, and some handmade crafts.

The kinds of things he assumed parishioners would donate for a good cause.

A man with a shock of white hair who leaned heavily on a cane, and a teenage girl in a floral dress found the tickets, and they came up to claim their prizes.

Bishop watched, but unless Gramps had a knife hidden in his cane, Kensley was safe.

The meal resumed. At least a dozen people returned for second helpings.

Bishop had eaten before leaving his apartment, but the scent of the pasta sauce was still incredibly enticing to someone who lived off frozen dinners and sandwiches.

Eating out was difficult and delivery was risky, so he shopped at stores out of town and made his groceries last. Even though his face had changed, he still had enemies everywhere, and this version of Bishop Anders, moving through life as Drew Burton, didn't want to be noticed.

There was safety in living anonymously.

At six-forty-five, a representative from the orphanage gave a brief speech about what tonight's raised funds would be spent on, and then another door prize ticket was revealed.

Bishop was used to long stretches of boredom so he hid his well, while gently deflecting questions from his fellow volunteers and a few women who came up to his station to flirt.

The attention was flattering, but they were very much not his type.

His type was dark-haired, mysterious, and male, and his type was currently telling an animated story to a young couple at a nearby table.

Kensley had been his type since he'd first begun transforming from a gawky adolescent into a handsome young adult.

But Kensley was the most forbidden type of all: a priest.

An omega priest who was his best friend's younger brother.

Jonathan wheeled out a cart laden with slices of store-bought cakes and fancy

cookies, and guests began getting up to select dessert.

Bishop helped Gloria bring out two large carafes of coffee, and they eased into the final hour of the evening.

Doors were open until eight, and then they'd begin the full cleanup of food and utensils.

He'd hoped for a chance to speak privately with Kensley tonight, even if only for five minutes, but as the clock's long hand inched around its face, that chance shrank.

The banquet room slowly emptied and singles, couples and groups left, bellies full and a few with door prizes.

Volunteer cooks took the leftovers into the kitchen to mix the pasta and sauce—someone said it was easier to reheat that way—so Bishop volunteered himself as a busboy and collected empty bread baskets.

Something to do instead of just standing there watching Kensley.

He could watch Kensley all damned night.

Less than a quarter of the original guests still lingered when everything went straight to hell.

Five men dressed in black and wearing masks swarmed the room like a trained SWAT team, guns up, shouting for everyone to freeze in place.

Bishop only had a few split seconds to clock each man: four were boring, nothing to note, but the fifth sent a block of ice into his gut.

The guy held his gun like a pro, supported by his left hand, and on the four exposed fingers was a tattoo.

A pattern Bishop recognized as belonging to one of their rival families.

An enemy of King's. An enemy of Kensley's.

Training kicked in, alongside the expected chaos of fifty-odd people faced with shock, fear and the completely unexpected. Bishop located Kensley by the kitchen door, frozen.

Bishop hunched and rushed toward Kensley, adrenaline fueling his speed and focus, and he yanked Kensley down.

Instead of pushing through a swinging door and gaining the attention of the masked men, Bishop shoved Kensley farther into the back of the banquet hall, toward a simple door marked Exit.

He didn't know where it led, but this back corner was unlit and shadowy, and it didn't squeal with an alarm when Bishop pushed it open.

"What are y—?" Kensley tried to ask. Bishop wrapped a hand around his mouth and got them both through the door, opening it as little as possible and shutting just as fast.

They ended up in a dark corridor that dead-ended ten feet to the left, but went on a good hundred feet to the right, with a few interspersed standard doors, before ending at what looked like a heavy fire door.

No motion-sensors triggered lights, but it wasn't pitch black.

Bishop grabbed Kensley's hand and dragged him toward that fire door.

"What's going on?" Kensley asked.

"Hush! Don't talk." Bishop ran. Kensley didn't pull against him, but he wasn't keeping up, and that was almost annoying enough for Bishop to toss Kensley over his shoulder. But the corridor was short, and Bishop slammed into the release bar. Nothing.

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“Fuck.” Bishop tried again. Locked.

“Are you crazy?” Kensley asked. “We should have stayed and done what they wanted. It was obviously a robbery.”

And hopefully nothing worse, but Bishop wasn’t about to take that chance.

In the fourteen years since he’d been tasked with keeping a distant eye on this cathedral, it had not once been the target of an armed robbery, and especially not during a fundraiser.

But a robbery happened the first night Bishop was directly involved?

The first open-to-the-public fundraiser after he and King became aware of a possible threat to Kensley’s life?

Not a fucking coincidence.

“We don’t know what this is,” Bishop hissed. He hit the door once more, but they were not getting out this way. “Is there another exit?”

Kensley shook his head, fear glinting in his eyes in the dim light. “Only back the way we came. Why are you protecting me?”

“It’s my job. Come on.”

He took Kensley’s wrist and tugged him to the first door, no marking.

Locked. The next one opened, though, and he went inside.

A flash of dimness showed shelves, a mop bucket, and cleaning supplies.

Janitorial closet. He shoved the door shut, brain whirring with his next move.

He could probably find weapons in this closet, but nothing that would stand up to gunfire.

And his “pen” only had one small bullet, which wouldn’t help him against five aggressors.

Not if what he suspected was true: those armed men were here for Kensley.

It was the only sensible conclusion.

He felt all along the door and knob, but he didn’t find any locking mechanism.

And why should he? No one locked a janitorial closet from the inside.

He yanked off the cheap tie he’d purchased for tonight, pulled the door open just enough to hang the tie off the exterior knob, and then shut it again.

“Take off your clothes,” he snapped at Kensley.

He could barely see Kensley in the dim light but heard the affronted squawk. “Excuse me?”

“Look, if my hunch is right, and those men are looking for you, then they’re looking for a celibate omega priest, not a gay guy into closet hookups. If you want to live, then strip.”

“You’re insane.”

“No, I’m not, and if you trust me and we get out of this, then I promise I will answer all of your questions as honestly as I can. But I can’t do that if I’m dead and you’re captured.”

Kensley looked all around the near-dark room before glaring at Bishop. “What are you going to do?”

“As little as I can to get us out of this safely. I promise. Please.”

Something in that soft, firm “Please” convinced Kensley.

He’d thoroughly enjoyed his evening, conversing with familiar parishioners and a few new-to-him faces, talking up the needs of the orphanage to anyone who’d listen.

Kensley craved these precious hours, when he could half-pretend he was a normal man at a gathering of friends, and he’d looked forward to another chance to speak privately with Drew sometime tonight.

Until the moment armed and masked men chose to crash the fundraiser, and Kensley had frozen, no idea what to do other than comply.

His first instinct was to protect his fellow priests and parishioners, but Drew had yanked him away from danger like a man perfectly in-charge of the situation.

But now Drew was asking him to take his clothes off? To blindly trust him?

He shouldn’t do either but he did. And he had no idea why.

In the near-dark of the janitorial closet, Kensley shed his public frock, which was a

step closer to normal clothing than his regular robe, and it left him in only his linen shorts and sleeveless shirt.

He shivered in the cool room, unused to being so exposed in front of another person not his doctor.

He'd certainly never been completely naked with an adult male in his life—not for lack of wanting, but purely for lack of chance.

Now, he stood in a closet, clad in only his undergarments, vulnerable to anyone's attack, and a dagger of fear slid into his gut. "Please, don't hurt me," Kensley whispered.

"Never. I'm here to protect you."

"Why?"

Drew raised his hand, fingers hovering by Kensley's cheek without touching. Kensley wanted to lean in, for those fingers to touch. For someone to touch. He also feared the same.

Something banged distantly, not a gunshot (he prayed), probably a door slamming.

With a new jolt of fear chilling him to the bone, Kensley yanked the shirt off over his head, gave it a frantic toss, and then pulled at his shorts.

He didn't understand why, but he trusted Drew.

He was far less afraid of being naked with Drew, than of whoever was banging their way toward them.

“On your knees,” Drew said. “If they open the door, follow my lead.”

“Okay.” Kensley dropped to his knees, a familiar position of prayer, but he’d never once done it while clad in his birthday suit.

His only consolation was that Drew was watching the door, not Kensley.

Kensley gazed up, scared and confused, and he didn’t realize right away what Drew was doing with his hands.

Not even when the front panels of Drew’s pants parted and he withdrew his bare penis.

A squawk of protest strangled in Kensley’s throat at the same time as the door knob rattled.

Drew’s hand grabbed the back of his head and held his face shockingly close to Drew’s crotch.

Musk and sweat met his nose, and Kensley couldn’t help but stare at the shadowy flesh directly in front of his eyes.

Flesh that should not be tempting enough for him to lick his lips.

What on earth is happening?

“Security,” a strange male voice snapped as the door squealed open. “What’re you doing in here?”

“Getting my money’s worth,” Drew said in a haughty tone. “You mind?”

Kensley flinched away from the glare of what was probably a flashlight and grabbed the leg of Drew's pants.

He couldn't think straight with a bare dick this close to his mouth, less than two minutes after armed men stormed his fundraiser.

His entire world had turned completely upside down.

He didn't quite understand what his role was, only that he needed to follow Drew's lead, so he kept his head low and didn't speak.

"Yeah, I mind," the stranger said. "How long have you been in here? We had a report of a pickpocketing during tonight's fundraiser."

A what? Liar!

"Been about ten minutes," Drew replied. "Not my first round with the help tonight, and I think the kid is having a little trouble with his technique. If he had any idea how to pick a pocket, I'd have it up and be balls deep in his ass right now."

The crude words telegraphed an equally crude image into Kensley's brain, which sent a zing of bizarre energy up Kensley's spine.

And it wasn't disgust. It was...interest? His hole clenched and his balls tightened, and blood began rushing to his own crotch.

Thickening his dick at the most inappropriate time possible—followed by his omega body's greatest betrayal: he got wet.

Sure, Kensley got hard like all other people with dicks, but as an omega male, he also exuded wetness from his anus when excited.

Wetness that made it easier for another man to mount him, to fuck him, to fill him with his seed: all evil acts of evil men, according to the priests who'd taught Kensley from puberty onward.

An omega's arousal could turn otherwise pious men lustful and provoke them to violence, or so said the Holy Scriptures Addendum Twelve.

Therefore, men found to be omega should be restricted to the priesthood for their safety, and so as not to tempt the uncontrollable desires of others. Blah, blah, blah.

None of the priests, male or female, were permitted to masturbate, so it had been a long time since Kensley had gotten hard, much less wet, and never once while in a tiny room with two other men.

One of whom Kensley knew for sure meant to do him harm.

And it had certainly never happened while up-dick-and-personal with another man he trusted implicitly.

"Okay, well," the stranger said, "we're searching the premises, so I'd stay put for at least the next fifteen minutes. An officer will come get you when it's clear."

"Sure thing, sir," Drew replied. "We will maintain current positions."

"All right." The door shut, and Kensley shivered, as much from relief as the closet's chill.

Drew released a harsh breath. "That went a lot better than I expected. At least the idiot bought our lie."

"He isn't one of our local police officers," Kensley told Drew's penis, which was

definitely not as flaccid as before. Beat cops regularly checked in at the cathedral, so the priests were aware of their presence in the neighborhood. “I didn’t recognize his voice.”

“He was probably one of the gunmen.” Drew wrapped gentle hands around Kensley’s upper arms and helped him stand, and Kensley nearly combusted with embarrassment as his growing erection brushed Drew’s.

“Shit, sorry, I didn’t mean to put you in this position, Kens. It was the first thing I thought of.”

“Kens.” He fumbled at the wall by the door and found the light switch.

No sense in being clandestine now that the bad guys knew where they were.

An arm’s reach apart and in glaring light, he stared at Drew.

They’d never stood this close together, never been near enough for Kensley to feel Drew’s breath on his cheeks.

On his lips. Drew’s eyes bore into his in a way that only made him harder, his hole wetter, his breaths shorter.

Those eyes.

Those eyes. His eyes.

“I know you,” Kensley said. Embarrassment over his arousal dimmed beneath shock at what he was seeing. “Only three people in my life ever called me Kens. One of them was my mother, who died when I was eleven.”

“I know.”

“And you’re not my brother.”

“No, I’m not.”

That voice. Oh, my word, this can’t be real. He’s dead.

Kensley should be reaching for his clothes and looking for the nearest phone so he could call the police.

He should be worried for the safety of his parishioners.

Instead, he was naked, in a closet, turned on by a ghost. The ghost of his childhood crush.

“The other person who called me Kens was my brother’s best friend. ”

Drew’s eyes softened, his always-attentive expression shifting into something kind and gentle. “Kens...”

“Oh, my word.” Kensley swayed, grateful for the firm grip keeping him from falling over. “Bishop.”

Drew smiled, and in that simple expression, Bishop Anders reappeared.

His face had changed, was thinner and more rugged, his nose slimmer, but it was Bishop.

His protector now had been his protector as a grieving boy and troubled teen, and Kensley had once thought Bishop would always be there for him.

And then Bishop had died, and Kensley's heart had shattered.

"You're alive." Kensley breathed the words more than he spoke them.

"I am."

Joy and grief hit him all at once, and he didn't think.

With a sharp cry of relief, Kensley threw his arms around Bishop's shoulders and hugged him.

Bishop's muscled arms squeezed around his waist, the embrace mashing their erections together, and Kensley didn't care.

His entire body buzzed with energy, more alive than he'd felt in his entire life.

Like true joy was just around the corner, and all he had to do was be brave enough to take a few steps forward.

"I can't believe you're alive," Kensley said, then buried his nose in Bishop's neck, fighting back the urge to sob all over the man.

He was too freaking turned on to actually cry.

He was naked, in a private space, with a man he'd desired for years, and everything inside him wanted to bend over and offer his slick ass to Bishop.

To finally do something he'd fantasized about for half his life, when he understood he was attracted to men.

And to one much-older man in particular.

Kensley had been filled with anger and resentment the day he made his celibacy vows, and he'd lied through his teeth about not having unclean thoughts during each monthly confession. He could break all his vows right here and now, and let Bishop whisk him away to a different life.

"We can't stay here," Bishop whispered. "The man who opened the door? I spotted a tattoo on his knuckles. I recognized it, so there's a good chance those men came here looking for you, sweetheart."

Sweetheart.

Kensley raised his head but didn't release his hold on Bishop. "Because of King?"

"Yes. I can't explain it all right now, I need to get you someplace safe." He released Kensley's waist and rested both hands on his shoulders. His groin shifted against Kensley's, and they both moaned. "You need to get dressed."

"I don't want to, not yet." Kensley was slowly losing his mind in the very best way. Every base instinct he'd ignored, every desire he'd rejected, was screaming at him to act before he exploded. "I've never felt like this before. I'm so wet."

Bishop growled, then ducked and twisted right out of their embrace, ending up a few feet away, attempting to tuck his erection back into his pants. "Get dressed, Kens, we need to leave before those men search this hallway again."

Hurt from the rejection, but also smart enough to know Bishop was right, Kensley reached for his underwear. "Where are we going?"

"My apartment first. I need to check in with King, tell him what's happening, and he'll help us get to a long-term safe house."

“Okay.” Kensley had all his clothes and shoes back on when it occurred to him to ask, “What about my personal belongings? They’re in my room.”

“We don’t have time to get anything, I’m sorry. Your safety is my top priority right now.”

“I know. You never lied to me before, Bishop.” The one time he’d accused Bishop of lying, he’d actually been telling the truth; Kensley hadn’t wanted to hear it. “I trust you.”

“Good, because this is going to sound a little crazy, but I’ve studied the floor plans, so I know how to get us out of here without doubling back to the banquet hall.”

“How?”

Bishop pointed at the air vent above their heads. “We’re going spelunking.”

THREE

Theoretically, Kensley knew that spelunking involved caves, sometimes climbing, and often tight, enclosed spaces, but it was an activity in which he had never partaken. The last time he'd climbed anything bigger than an eight-foot ladder while cleaning the abbey's dining room, was when he was nine.

He'd been living with his mom in a small apartment on the outskirts of the city, where families still had yards, and it was safe for children to wander their neighborhoods until dark.

In one yard near their apartment building, a house had burned down before Kensley was even born, and while no one had rebuilt that lot, a huge oak tree had continued to grow in one corner.

The lot and its tree had become an enticing meeting ground for neighborhood kids, Kensley included.

He'd loved climbing that tree, as high as he could go before the branches creaked precariously.

Until the day an older boy went too high, the branch cracked, and he plummeted to the ground. He'd lived, but spent the summer with his left leg in a cast, and it had turned Kensley off unnecessary climbing.

Getting a boost up by the ass from Bishop, into the vents overhead, was way too close to tree climbing for Kensley's liking, but he didn't have a choice.

He believed that armed men had stormed his fundraiser to find and take Kensley as retaliation against his older brother King, who was a powerful mafia boss.

It was bizarre and movie-worthy, and too insane to be a lie.

So he climbed.

The vents were not as spacious as in movies, but he could crawl on his belly and elbows and the tips of his toes.

He didn't know how Bishop would fit, but he did, and with harshly whispered directions to go this way or that way, Kensley moved through the ventilation system.

He wasn't sure where in the building he was, but he eventually dead-ended at an exterior vent.

With no idea what else to do, he pushed.

The vent cover bent slightly, but didn't pop off as easily as he wanted it to.

"What now?" he asked.

Bishop tugged on his ankle. "Reach back for this tool. Use it at the four corners. Should loosen the screws."

"I hope so." As bizarre as his life had become in the last fifteen minutes, Kensley reached backward, using his own leg as a guide, until his fingers brushed something that felt like a flat-head screwdriver.

He didn't waste time investigating the tool.

He did as Bishop instructed, sliding the flat end between the grate and the wall.

He yanked and tugged, and something popped free.

“That’s good,” Bishop said, his voice soft and tinny. “Keep going, we’re almost out.”

“Where are we?”

“Exterior abbey wall, Marshall Street. Where that long boxwood hedge is. No one should see us.”

“Okay.”

Kensley wasn’t sure when he’d become a fugitive from his own life, but there he was, on his belly, hoping to escape his own home with a man he’d thought dead these last two years.

He still needed an explanation, and he trusted Bishop to give it to him, but first he had to get this dang vent cover— POP .

He shoved harder and the entire vent fell forward and into the mulch.

Cold air smacked Kensley in the face, and he did the next-most-bizarre thing in his life by falling face-first out of a ventilation shaft and onto the ground.

He rolled sideways, half-expecting to hit a bush, his frock tangling around his legs.

Bishop hit the ground much more gracefully, came up on both feet, and gently pulled Kensley upright. “We’re half a block from Paisley Street. We’re going to walk slowly to the intersection and then go left. If I say run, you run and don’t stop. Otherwise, walk with me and follow my lead.”

Kensley nodded. “We aren’t going to end up in a gunfight, are we?”

“Unlikely, but obey if I give an order.”

“I will.”

“Then let’s walk.”

Late on a Saturday evening was an odd time to pretend he was taking a casual stroll up a city street, but Kensley did his best. His body still thrummed with arousal, and his underwear was uncomfortably sticky, but both were tempered by the imminent threat from his brother’s business.

Threats that could easily end in the loss of life. His own life, in particular.

At the end of the block, they made the turn.

Kensley listened for sirens but heard nothing.

Were those five armed men still terrorizing his guests?

Had they moved on because Kensley was nowhere to be found?

The last thing he wanted was for an innocent person to get hurt because of him. Or his brother.

And how on earth was Bishop still alive?

More than two years ago, Kensley had gotten word that Bishop’s condo had exploded, supposedly because of a bad gas connection, and that Bishop had been home.

He'd heard the authorities had pulled a body and positively identified it as Bishop Anders.

And now that dead man was walking beside him in a manner both hurried and nonchalant, and Kensley did not understand.

As they walked, another odd sensation settled over him.

A sensation he didn't recognize and had no words for, but it wasn't a negative one.

Apartment buildings and duplexes loomed high in the dark sky.

Streetlights lit the block every dozen feet.

Public benches, trash cans, parking spots, and the occasional bus stop lined the street.

It wasn't until they made another turn onto another, almost identical block that the new sensation hit Kensley: freedom.

He was out and about in a city he hadn't been free to explore in half his lifetime.

He gazed up at the sky, unable to see stars because of the city lights, but he could imagine them from childhood nights spent wishing upon them.

He imagined the constellations from his studies, their glorious patterns of light against midnight black.

The mystery of laying on a blanket in the backyard, gazing up at the sky with his mom, pointing out the shapes he saw, learning the shapes that were really there. The stories behind those shapes.

Kensley didn't realize he'd stopped walking until Bishop grabbed his elbow and tugged him forward.

He went without complaint, a little drunk with the size of his newfound freedom and the blank canvas of his future spread out in front of him.

All he knew for sure was that he was with Bishop, and Bishop would protect him with his life. The rest was endless possibilities.

They walked for a while, and then Bishop was shoving him into a car with a terse, "Stay down, keep low." Kensley curled onto the floorboards of the backseat, following directions without comment or complaint.

He was out. He was free. He'd do anything Bishop told him to do, up to and including strip and bend over, if it meant he never had to go back to the abbey.

His only regret was the small wooden box of personal possessions he'd been allowed to keep: a few childhood photographs, his birth certificate, his mom's gold cross necklace, and the only snapshot he'd ever owned of himself and King together.

While his brother's face was frequently in newspapers, it was often either an old mugshot or a picture of him scowling.

In the snapshot, King was a smiling adolescent boy, holding his baby brother. He looked happy.

Kensley might never see those belongings again, but he couldn't grieve the loss right now. His brain was too full of his intense attraction to Bishop and the immense danger they were in right now. He had to live in the moment and do what Bishop told him to.

“We’re about five minutes from my place.” Bishop’s voice startled Kensley after such a long silence. “It’s got underground parking, but you can’t walk upstairs in that robe. It’s too recognizable, and there are security cameras in the elevators.”

“Don’t you think me walking to your apartment in my underwear will be a little suspicious?”

Bishop chuckled, a deep, rumbling sound Kensley had dearly missed. “Little bit. Listen, it’s going to be safer for you to stay in the car when we get there. The back windows are tinted, and it’s a secure building. No one is likely to peek into the backseat.”

Kensley disliked the idea of waiting in the car, but this was Bishop’s line of work and far beyond Kensley’s comfort zone. “For how long? You’re coming back, right?”

The car slowed, and Kensley heard the click of the turn signal. “Yes, I shouldn’t be gone longer than ten minutes. I need to call King, and I’ve got a bug-out bag ready to go in the closet. I just need to grab some sweats for you.”

“Sweats?”

“No offense, Elder Thorne, but you aren’t going to fit into my jeans without an extra-small belt to cinch around your skinny waist.”

Kensley laughed, and the sound felt inappropriate given their dire situation. “No doubt. So, we aren’t staying here?”

“No. My face might not be the same as it was when people called me Bishop, but folks at the church know Drew Burton’s face. As soon as the authorities get involved, they’ll come looking for me. You aren’t the only person who disappeared from the fundraiser tonight.”

“Good point. Okay, I’ll stay put and out of sight, I promise.”

“Thank you. Are you hungry? I didn’t see you eat anything tonight.”

His stomach answered that question by releasing an audible growl. “I didn’t eat, no.”

“All right, I’ll grab some protein bars and whatever else I’ve got in the cupboards. We can’t risk swinging by a drive-thru.”

“I understand. Anything you have is fine.” He nearly asked what was in a bug-out bag, but it seemed self-explanatory, and Kensley didn’t want to come across as sheltered as they both knew he was.

As if the sheltering is my own fault.

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The car slowed more, dipped, and it got even darker.

The cement passing overhead, instead of the night sky, told him they were in the parking garage.

He didn't know how many levels down Bishop drove before pulling into a space and turning off the car.

He could see the back of Bishop's head, which disappeared and then came up with a ball cap on it.

"Sit tight, Kens, I'll be back as fast as I can, I promise," Bishop said.

"Okay. Um, be careful."

"I will."

Bishop climbed out. The door shut and locked, plunging Kensley into eerie silence that was almost too loud.

He adjusted his position slightly, because his left foot was starting to fall asleep, but he didn't want to rock the car.

That was a dead giveaway he was inside, if anyone happened to pass by.

He didn't know how large the apartment complex was, but he imagined fairly huge if it had its own parking garage.

And it was Saturday night, so residents were probably coming and going all evening.

With nothing but his racing thoughts for company, Kensley settled in to wait.

Bishop had spent the last thirty minutes anticipating an ambush at any moment, and he was impressed they made it from that exterior vent all the way to his building with no interference.

Using his injuries from the explosion to their advantage and obtaining plastic surgery during his recovery had given Bishop a new face, as well as the ability to move around in the world anonymously.

It had allowed him to watch Kensley, to establish a rapport with him, and to be in the perfect position to save his life tonight.

Now he had to take the next steps to ensure they both stayed alive.

A baseball cap and fake eyeglasses weren't the most original disguise, but he needed to protect his identity until they got out of town.

He avoided the elevators and was breathing hard by the time he made it up six flights of stairs to his floor.

He'd chosen an apartment close to the stairwell for exactly this reason.

He managed to get inside without running into any of his neighbors.

After taking a moment to catch his breath and double-check no one was hiding anywhere in the apartment—he'd taken all the doors off their hinges and the tub had a clear plastic curtain, leaving almost no blind spots—he called King.

“Are you safe?” King asked.

“You’ve heard?”

“It just hit the police scanners. Armed robbery at the cathedral, five suspects, one priest and one guest unaccounted for.” King released a harsh breath. “You got him out?”

“I did. I’m getting a few things, and then we need to leave town. As soon as your enemies figure out Drew Burton disappeared with their target, my identity won’t be safe.”

“I know. Drive out to Location Backhoe. It’ll be safe for a couple of days, until I decide our next move. Any idea who those men were working for?”

“Some idea.” Bishop described the tattoo he’d spotted on the knuckles of the one gunman, as well as the man’s general description. He’d had to take the mask off to pose as a security guard, which was good for them. “He wasn’t someone I recognized, but I’ll know him if I see him again.”

“All right, I’ll have Ziggy send you pictures of all of Castle’s known associates. Intel is that he’s hiring private contractors now, instead of relying on his own people.”

“Is Castle getting paranoid about loyalty?”

“If we all weren’t paranoid about loyalty, we’d have been dead years ago.”

Too true. King kept his trusted inner circle incredibly small, and it took many years of work to rise in the ranks.

Bishop had seen a lot of men die over the years, sometimes in the line of work, and

sometimes because they'd lost King's trust. Theirs was not a business most men could quit and walk away from.

Bishop had been given that chance after the explosion.

A chance to take his new face and walk away, because no one would recognize him or be able to use him against King.

Not his business enemies, and not the cops or FBI.

And as appealing as the idea had briefly been, King was his brother by choice—and Bishop hadn't been able to turn down the assignment to watch Kensley full-time.

To watch him up close.

Up close and naked and wet, and holy fuck, but that entire experience had been the biggest test of Bishop's restraint and professionalism in his entire life. Hopefully, King didn't ask for details of their escape, or Bishop was going to get some choice words about Bishop's cover story choice.

"So, I'll go to Backhoe," Bishop said, "and await further instructions."

"Yeah." King cleared his throat. "How is he?"

"Scared and trying to be brave. But he hasn't cracked, and he's following my instructions. He trusts me."

"You told him your identity?"

"He figured it out on his own. He might have been out of the world these last fourteen years, brother, but he's smart."

“He always was. I know you need to hit the road. Text me when you arrive. I’ll call when I can.”

“All right. Be safe.”

“You too.”

Bishop ended the call, turned off his phone, and then fetched his bug-out bag from the bedroom closet.

It had everything he needed for an emergency trip, including clothes, toiletries, a first aid kit, protein bars and MREs.

He dug into his dresser for the smallest sweats he owned, as well as extra undershirts.

The bug-out bag was stuffed full, so he grabbed another gym bag from under his bed, and then raided his kitchen cupboards for extra non-perishable foods, unsure what would be at the safe house. Backhoe wasn’t used often.

He found six bottles of water and stashed those in the gym bag, along with a spare phone charger.

The last thing was his gun and spare clips from behind the vent grate in the bathroom.

Most people wouldn’t think to stash (or look for) a gun in a bathroom, because of the moisture, but Bishop took brief showers and cleaned the gun regularly.

He wouldn’t miss the efficiency apartment.

It hadn’t been his home; it was a place to sleep and to plan, and to make private phone calls.

He'd also been very careful about limiting his use of the place and keeping it tidy, so he took an extra three minutes to quickly wipe down all the surfaces he could, tossed the rag into his small bag of garbage, and took that with him.

One more chapter of his life closing. He had no idea what the next chapter would bring, but at least Kensley would be part of it—for a little while.

Bishop locked up and left, careful to maintain a casual pace the entire way down to the parking garage. He put his bug-out bag and garbage in the trunk, then climbed back inside the car. Kensley's head immediately popped up, gray eyes wide and curious.

"Here." Bishop handed him the bag with sweats and snacks. "There's clothes and food. We've got about thirty minutes before we're safely outside the city and you can sit on the seat, okay?"

"Okay. I guess you can't tell me where we're going?"

"No, but it's secure. King will have it set up for us. He's glad you're safe."

"That makes two of us."

"Three of us." Bishop smiled, trying to put as much warmth into it as he could.

King liked to tease him that his smiles always looked sinister.

"The car's fully gassed, so we won't have to stop.

If I remember right, it'll take about three hours, give or take, to get there. If you want to sleep, you can."

“Forget it. I’m too wired to sleep right now.”

“Don’t blame you there.” Bishop carefully maneuvered his way out of the garage and back onto the lively city streets. “For what it’s worth, I’m so sorry this is happening. That fundraiser was for a good cause.”

“Yeah. I mean, the orphanage will still get the donations, but I have a feeling the church won’t be doing new fundraisers anytime soon. Not with a priest and a guest going missing. You’re a civ—I mean, Drew Burton is a civilian, right? No ties to my brother?”

“No ties, Drew is a completely unique creation with a back story that includes growing up in Vermont, moving to River City for college, and then staying to work in information technology. He’s got a driver’s license, birth certificate, and he even files his taxes every year.”

“Wow. How do you create a person like that?”

Bishop slowed for a red light, careful to clock every other car at the intersection.

No sign of police lights anywhere, and they were going in the opposite direction of the cathedral.

“Your brother has a guy who can do it. Real computer genius with a knack for creative accounting. It’s not my area, so I don’t question it. ”

“That makes sense.” A plastic bottle crinkled and a cap twisted. Bishop eased the car forward when his light changed, so he didn’t make Kensley choke on his water. “So, um, where have you been these last two years?”

“Around.” Bishop had promised Kensley the truth, but the middle of their escape

wasn't the right time. "I will tell you, Kens, just not right now."

Kensley grunted. "How's King? I mean, I see things in the newspaper, but that's legal stuff. How is he? Is he happy?"

"As happy as he can be. He just...doesn't trust, so he's lonely."

"Still not married?"

"No." King had been severely burned—financially and emotionally—ten years ago by his only long-term lover, and he'd yet to trust anyone else to get close to his heart.

Sometimes, Bishop didn't think his best friend even knew what he was looking for, but he'd never find it if he stayed inside the four walls of his high-security penthouse.

King protected his territory fiercely, but at what cost?

What was the point of stockpiling power and wealth when you had nothing to truly live for?

Other than a few close associates like Bishop.

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“He sent me to the Order to save my life, but I don’t have a life,” Kensley said with a new hint of bitterness in his voice. “And King isn’t even out there living? Bastard.”

Bishop’s eyebrows rose. “He never wanted you used as leverage against him.”

“Great plan, as we’re speeding out of the city to some distant safe house, because one of his enemies came after me in my church!”

He angled the rearview for a better look at Kensley’s face.

Kensley was glaring at the opposite car door, cheeks red, but he seemed more determined than scared.

He hadn’t looked genuinely scared since Bishop told him to take his clothes off, as if instinctively believing he’d be safe, as long as he followed Bishop’s orders.

Bishop was used to that with his employees, but not with civilians.

Then again, Kensley remembered the much younger man Bishop had once been—before violence and vengeance and anger took over his life. Before Bishop became a stone-cold killer.

“The churches have historically been neutral territory,” Bishop said. “We’ve never crossed that line, never brought our grudges there, never hurt anyone inside of a church. They crossed a line sending those men after you. I’m just glad we were proactive and I was there.”

“So am I.” Kensley angled his head so their eyes met in the rearview. “Thank you for saving my life. Goodness knows what they would have done to me to retaliate against King.”

“We’re not going to find out, Kens. I’ll keep you safe.”

“I believe you.”

“Good. Settle in, we’ll talk later.”

Bishop turned on the radio. The first station had a brief bulletin about the armed robbery at Holy Order Ninth Cathedral during a fundraising dinner.

The newscaster said all but two attendees were accounted for, but that officers were still searching the entire abbey grounds and news was developing.

That made Bishop grin. They could search until the sun came up, and the only things they’d find were two open vents, and no sign of Elder Thorne or the volunteer named Drew.

It would take them a while to find Drew’s apartment, and even then, he’d left no evidence that anyone lived there except a workaholic bachelor.

Not that Drew was a real person anyway. The authorities would end up chasing ghosts for most of the weekend, giving King time to figure out a more permanent place to stash Kensley.

He switched over to a classic rock station and drove.

He’d memorized the locations of all King’s safe houses a decade ago, and so far, only two had been used and discarded.

Once they were less than forty minutes away and getting into more remote, wilderness locations, he turned his cell phone on and added the address to its GPS.

Despite his protests, Kensley was asleep, stretched out on the backseat.

While adrenaline could hit fast and make you feel like you'd be awake for a week, once it wore off, fatigue set in swiftly.

Good. Kensley deserved the rest. Bishop was used to toeing the line between life and death.

Hell, he'd dangled by a thread for a while after the explosion.

But this? All this terror and hiding and running away? It was all new to Kens.

The safe house designated Backhoe was a single-story hunting cabin, in a remote area about five miles from the nearest small town.

It had a generator and well system, and Bishop had been here once, maybe eight years ago, to recover from a gunshot wound.

Since it had never been tied to any active case against the organization, King hadn't cut the cabin loose.

Once Bishop hit the outskirts of town, he double-checked his directions, and then turned off his GPS.

Since he knew King would call him next from a burner phone, he didn't turn his own cell phone off.

His cell was a burner, so without a psychic on payroll, cops would have a hard time

finding any cell tower records connecting King to Drew Burton.

Or have any idea Drew was now in a remote pocket of the state, far from the dangers of River City and its four rival mob factions.

Less than ten minutes of slow driving up single-car mountain roads ended at the cabin.

Part of him wanted to let Kensley rest, but he didn't need any surprises.

He shifted into park, left the engine idling, and reached back to shake Kensley awake.

Kensley sat up with a start and reached for blankets that weren't there.

"We're at the safe house," Bishop said. "It should be empty and ready, but I want you to wait here while I check it out."

"Yeah, of course." Kensley peered out one of the windows, but their view was of nothing more exciting than trees and wilderness and a whole lot of darkness. "How far off the grid are we?"

"Far enough to be safe. Sit tight. I'll come get you."

"Okay."

Bishop adored the blind trust. He slipped his gun into his coat pocket and began inspecting the property.

The cabin was dark and cold, nothing of note.

Snow would have made it easier to tell if anyone had been around, but the ground

was simply damp and covered in the remnants of last year's leaf fall.

No new tracks in the soft earth. Satisfied, Bishop got the generator going before he returned to the car.

"We're good to go," he told Kensley. "Please, grab the bag I gave you. I've got stuff in the trunk."

"Okay."

Bishop continued observing the darkness surrounding them, while he gathered the last of their supplies.

Even though he'd already inspected the cabin, he still went inside ahead of Kensley.

They turned on lights as they settled in.

The single-story cabin had a large living space with a small kitchenette tucked in the rear, by a door that led to the bedroom and bathroom.

One bedroom with a king-sized bed. A bed for Kensley. Bishop would sleep on the couch.

Yeah.

"This is nice," Kensley said after he'd taken a quick look around. "I mean it. It reminds me of the apartment I lived in with my mom. It was cozy like this. Just without the mountain views."

Bishop wasn't sure how to respond. "I grew up in a stone row house. We had windows facing front and back of more row houses, and on both sides, we had all the

noises of the attached neighbors.”

“We aren’t competing for the worst childhood, Bishop. Or who had the best house. Money has never mattered to me. Just relationships. Genuine relationships I could count on.”

“You can count on me.” He began organizing the kitchen with their supplies. The cabinets had the expected supply of canned goods, shelf-stable meals, and bottled water. Nothing that took a lot of effort or energy to prepare.

With everything in place and all the doors locked, Bishop checked the time. Almost two in the morning.

“Kens?”

He found Kensley asleep on the outdated, floral-print sofa, both arms curled around a flat throw pillow.

Kensley looked so young, so unbothered while asleep, even though he’d yet to change out of his robe.

Bishop shoved away the burned-in mental image of how Kensley had looked naked, kneeling in front of him in that dim closet.

That had been a moment of pure survival, nothing else.

Certainly not one to tuck into the back of Bishop’s mind for when this was all over, and it remained the only truly glorious moment of his life.

Be professional, you idiot.

He gently shook Kensley's shoulder, and when he didn't wake, Bishop gathered his limp body into his arms. Carried him into the small bedroom.

Tucking Kensley into bed took a bit of effort, but he managed, leaving enough room for a second person, but that was out of the question.

As much as Bishop longed to curl his bigger body around Kensley's and sleep together until sunrise, Bishop couldn't.

For as safe as he did believe they were for now, Bishop could not indulge in forbidden fruits best left untasted.

He'd gotten too close for comfort (and personal safety) back in the janitor's closet.

And it hadn't just been the handsome, naked omega male on his knees; it had been the fact that Kensley had also been aroused.

Aroused and dripping wet, and if he'd turned around... if he'd begged to be fucked...

Bishop was thankful he hadn't.

After securing all the cabin's windows and doors, he found a blanket in the bedroom's freestanding wardrobe, curled up on the couch with his gun, and tried to sleep.

FOUR

Kensley woke with a start, surrounded by pitch black, and in a much bigger bed than he was used to.

Softer sheets, thicker blankets, and a slightly musty smell, instead of his favorite incense.

He gazed around the room, allowing his eyes to adjust to a faint glow from beyond the open bedroom door.

Definitely not his room at the abbey, but where?—?

Bishop. Their escape to a cabin in the woods.

Kensley remembered arriving, looking around, and then sitting on the couch to wait for further instructions.

He must have passed out after the last of his adrenaline waned.

Had Bishop carried him to bed? His shoes were off, but he still wore the robe, which was now awkwardly twisted around his hips and kind of stifling in the warm room.

He shoved the sheet and blanket down, and swung his legs over the side of the wide bed so he could unbutton the robe.

Shucked it off so he was in his undershirt and shorts, allowing his heated skin to cool.

Silence lay thickly around him. No howling wind, no crickets or frogs singing in the night.

The room had no clock that he could see, and dark curtains had been drawn over the windows, giving him no idea of the time, only that it was still pre-dawn.

What would happen today? Would Bishop finally give Kensley the answers he craved?

Would they talk about what had happened in the janitor's closet?

Would Kensley find the courage to tell Bishop about his long-suppressed feelings?

To act on those feelings and obliterate the vows he never wanted to take in the first place?

As quietly as he could, Kensley slid off the bed and into the attached bathroom.

The glaring orange light stung his eyes, and he waited for them to adjust. The mirror was water-stained and had a crack on one edge, and the shower needed a good scrubbing, but it was mostly clean.

The toilet flushed after he used it, water swirling down the rust-stained bowl.

Not the luxurious accommodations he was sure his big brother was used to in his daily life, but they couldn't exactly use conspicuous locations as safe houses, could they?

Uncertain where the bag of clothes he'd been given last night had ended up, Kensley used a scratchy face cloth to wash up.

His butt was a bit crusty from last night's arousal.

He typically shaved every morning to keep his persistent five-o'clock-shadow at bay, but it didn't matter today.

No one was going to give him demerits for being unkempt.

Not today and, if he had any say, not ever again.

When he exited the bathroom, a light was on in the living space, so Kensley followed it to the source—a tall lamp beside the couch.

Bishop was sitting up, hands resting on his knees, a black handgun on the cushion beside him.

Kensley's stomach squirmed at the sight of it, because he abhorred violence, but this was the life he was in now.

One of violence, vengeance, and danger. The gun was a necessary evil.

"Did I wake you?" Kensley asked.

"Water in the pipes did." Bishop shrugged. "Old cabin, small space, plus I tend to sleep light. Comes with the job."

"Right." He finally spotted the digital clock on the microwave. Almost six. No wonder he'd woken up. This was close to typical rise-and-shine for him. "So, um, what's for breakfast?"

"Whatever you want from what we've got. Don't expect anything fresh, like bacon and eggs, but there might be instant oatmeal. Probably dry cereal and boxed milk.

Help yourself if you're hungry."

"Would you like something? The least I can do after you saved my life is make you breakfast."

Bishop smiled, and the genuine kindness in his expression made the corners of his eyes crinkle. "That'd be fine. I'm not a picky eater."

"Well, good, because I'm not much of a cook. We all swap cooking duties in the abbey, but it's always very standard, simple food. I would actually love anything except oatmeal for a change."

"I take it that was a breakfast staple?"

"Six mornings a week. On Sunday, they added simple extras to the menu, like sausage or eggs."

"Sounds boring."

Kensley shrugged as he walked into the kitchenette to rummage for food. "Food was fuel to get us through the day, not something to derive pleasure from. Pleasure was to be found in service and prayer."

He sensed, more than heard, Bishop approach. "Our mouths are made for more pleasurable things than reciting prayers."

Heat coursed through Kensley, fast and scorching, and he grabbed the edge of the counter for balance. He didn't turn around, though, keeping his attention on the selection of canned goods on a cupboard shelf. "So I've heard. I do also find singing hymns pleasurable."

“Humming is good, too.” Bishop was behind him, so close Kensley could feel his body heat. “Anything up there look good to you?”

His mouth went dry, and Kensley was having trouble catching his breath. “I’m not sure. It’s all so, um, new. Having choices.”

“I imagine choice is both freeing and confusing, after so much time following routines and doing what you’re told.”

Air moved by his shoulder, and Kensley tensed, waiting for a hand to touch him.

Instead, Bishop moved away, and it gave Kensley room to breathe.

Imagining all the things he wanted to do with Bishop, while he was alone with a chance of acting on those thoughts, was one thing.

When faced with the real man and a bed and a lot of alone time?

It was too overwhelming, and he was grateful that Bishop had professional restraint on his side.

This was a protection gig, not a booty call.

“It is freeing,” Kensley told the cupboard. “And a little terrifying.”

“I imagine so. I would also check the other cupboards for options, unless you want beef and barley soup for breakfast.”

He snickered softly and did as told. A box of pancake mix looked like heaven.

He even found a shelf-stable box of milk to use, instead of water.

No syrup or jam but he did find an unopened, unexpired jar of peanut butter he could thin with more milk.

A scoop of powdered concentrate became a pitcher of fruit punch, and Kensley was pleased to serve them both pancakes with peanut butter sauce.

As Kensley sat across from Bishop at the small dinette set, it hit him that this was the first meal they'd shared since Kensley was fourteen.

That last, big supper at King's house before the shit hit the fan and Kensley was summarily packed up and shipped off.

King had made a pan of stuffed shells with spinach, his specialty, the flavor of which Kensley had never forgotten.

He'd never forgotten refusing to hug King or Bishop goodbye, too furious at their betrayal, or the devastated look on Bishop's face as the Cadillac pulled away from the house. Taking Kensley away from them.

Ripping him, once again, out of another life he liked and into one he never asked for.

Halfway through silently eating, Bishop stood, found a jar of instant coffee, and began heating a mug of water in the microwave.

It hadn't even occurred to Kensley to ask about coffee, because they didn't drink it at the abbey.

It was only offered to guests during fundraisers or functions. He'd never liked the taste, anyway.

Once Bishop settled with his steaming black coffee, Kensley said, "Will you tell me

now? About your fake death?”

Bishop didn't tense or fidget; he simply stared at his coffee for a long time, either gathering his thoughts or conjuring up another excuse not to talk about it.

Kensley wouldn't know until the big, broody man finally spoke.

“I know you saw what was in the newspapers, that the furnace in my house blew up, and I supposedly died of complications from my burns.”

“Yes.” Kensley's heart had shattered that day, not only for the death of his childhood friend, but also for the agonizing way in which he'd reportedly died.

Second and third-degree burns were serious and painful, and no one deserved to die like that.

“I was horrified at the idea of you dying alone, hooked up to tubes, drowning in your own bodily fluids.”

“I was definitely in pain and hooked up to tubes, but King and Ziggy were able to fake my death and move me to a private facility in Puerto Rico to finish recovering. Honestly, I was in a medically induced coma for the first six weeks, and I didn't really understand what had happened for another few weeks after.

By then, they'd done the reconstructive surgeries on my face and, well... ”

Bishop stood and took off his long-sleeved sweater, leaving him in a white sleeveless tee.

Kensley tensed, uncertain, until he saw the burn scars on Bishop's upper arms and shoulders.

He imagined more lurked beneath the t-shirt.

A shirt that hugged a perfectly toned torso that tapered into his snug jeans.

And those scars, while scary and an awful reminder of his ordeal, also meant Bishop had survived.

“The worst of the burns were actually on my back and shoulders,” Bishop continued.

“It was mostly broken bones in my face, and at first, I was furious with King for the plastic surgery that I didn’t really need.

But as I recovered, I understood his reasons.

I could have chosen to leave, but King was my family, and I was still an asset.

Now I was also a ghost. Someone no one in River City knew, someone the families and the feds didn’t know.

I could move around, gather intel. Keep an eye on you. ”

“How long?”

“How long what?”

“How long have you been back? How long have you been watching me? Why didn’t you...?”

Bishop put his sweater back on. “Why didn’t I what?”

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“I was going to ask why didn’t you just tell me who you were, but it’s a stupid question. I wouldn’t have believed you. I had to see you in action. To see the way you protected me last night.”

“Some things can’t be told. They have to be seen. Trust me, Kens, I wanted to say something so many times, but I liked the way you looked at me. I was just a man, a clean slate with no murderous, violent past. Not someone who’d disappointed you.”

Kensley shook his head. “You never disappointed me.”

“I agreed with King’s plan to send you away. To force you into the Order. I saw your face the day you left.”

“You were just following King’s orders.” Like always. He kept that bitter thought to himself, desperate not to wallow in old hurts. This was a new day, a fresh start, a chance to do something else. To be someone else. “My other questions?”

Bishop nodded. “I’ve been back in the city for a little over a year, establishing my new identity. We’ve always watched the church from a distance. I started observing you more once I’d recovered, but you never leave the grounds. The only way to make contact was to actually attend a service.”

“I remember. I didn’t know you, but you still called to me. Your spirit.” Kensley no longer trusted his first impressions of “Drew Burton,” unsure what had been his priest instinct and what had been recognition. “Does anyone besides King or Ziggy know who you are?”

Bishop shook his head. “Them and you. Hopefully, it stays that way, but nothing is foolproof, and there is every possibility that a few months down the road law enforcement will find DNA evidence to link me to Drew. Fingerprints are easier to wipe away than DNA, and if they don’t find my DNA in Drew’s apartment, they’re likely to find it somewhere in the banquet hall. ”

“So, you aren’t safe anymore, either?”

“Well, safe for the immediate future. And I have the resources at my fingertips to keep you safe, and that’s what matters most to me.

We have time. If King doesn’t call today, he’ll call tomorrow with our next steps.

And if that means leaving the state? Leaving the country?

It’s worth it, Kens, because I don’t have anything left to lose except you. ”

Oxygen fled Kensley’s lungs, and he was glad to be sitting, or he might have fallen over from the shock of the blunt admission. He fought for proper breath to ask, “Because I was your protection assignment?”

“Because I care about you. I always have.”

“I’m your best friend’s little brother.”

“You started as that, yes. I watched you grow up into a strong, defiant young man. Even when you went to the Order, we both watched from a distance to make sure you were healthy and safe. I admit, Kens, that I lost personal track of you for a time, because I was heavily involved in the business. I didn’t have the time or energy to watch, but King never left you unguarded. I swear to you.”

Bishop looked at his lap for several seconds before meeting Kensley's eyes. "It wasn't until after the fire that I saw a picture of you again. Of the man you'd become. If King hadn't asked me to use my new anonymity to watch over you, I would have volunteered."

"Why?"

"Don't you know why?"

He did, but Kensley also needed to hear Bishop say it. To make it as real as possible, before Kensley made his choice. He'd seen the heartbreak on Bishop's face when King told Kensley he was being sent to the Order. For his "safety."

"Do you think someone can fall in love at fourteen?" Kensley asked.

Bishop's eyes glistened. "I think it's possible. But it's dangerous. Especially if you fall in love with the wrong person."

Kensley had to swallow several times to wet his parched mouth. "Who's the wrong person?"

"Someone a decade older. Someone harder, angrier, who's only ever known a life of crime and violence. A man who has killed in both self-defense and on the orders of another. A hitman with no past and no future."

"What if that fourteen-year-old grows up into a lonely twenty-eight-year-old with no future he cares to imagine, back in that lonely tower, set apart from the world like a fragile, wilting rose under glass. Trapped there until he's rescued by a fabled knight and given a chance to actually live.

To feel something real, like he did when he was young. "

“Kens, I can’t.” But the growl in his voice said otherwise, hinting at barely maintained control. “King will kill me if I touch you.”

“My brother hasn’t survived this long by being an idiot, Bishop. None of his other goons would protect me like you have, because none of them care about me like you do.”

“You’re an omega, Kens, he doesn’t trust anyone else not to take advantage of you. To seduce you and get you wet, so they know what it’s like to fuck a guy who drips for it.” Bishop’s face and neck flushed, and he gripped the edge of the table so hard a knuckle popped. “Fuck.”

“There isn’t another man alive I’d let touch me like that. Only you.”

“Stop.”

“No.” Kensley stood, his chair scraping backward, and he crossed to stand beside Bishop.

Bishop kept staring straight ahead, but his chest was heaving.

His knuckles white. Perspiration gathered at his temples.

“I never wanted to join the Order, you know that. I don’t believe in any of it.

I don’t believe my very existence will tempt virtuous men to sin.

I definitely don’t believe I’m some sort of sacred object to be hidden away and only brought out for public worship.

I’m a human being, Bishop, with all the same wants and desires as anyone else. ”

“If you don’t stop...” Bishop let out a long, low growl that stirred arousal deep in Kensley’s gut and sent blood rushing to his dick. His thin cotton undershorts did nothing to hide his growing erection, and even though Bishop wasn’t looking at him, Bishop still swallowed hard, Adam’s apple bobbing.

Kensley could still walk away, straight into the bedroom and shut the door.

End this torturous dance, let Bishop off the hook, make this whole protection detail just a job with no emotional attachment.

But he didn’t want to. For the first time in half his life, he was free.

Free to do whatever the hell he wanted, vows be damned, and right now?

Right now, all he wanted in the world was for Bishop to strip him naked and have his way with Kensley’s body. He’d submit and love every second of it, because he’d chosen it. “I don’t want to stop,” Kensley whispered. He ran a single finger down the line of Bishop’s jaw. “Please.”

Kensley didn’t see Bishop move, barely heard the scrape of his chair and the snarl of a beast unleashed, and then his arms were immobile by his sides, both hands behind his back and secured in one of Bishop’s.

Bishop’s other hand grabbed his jaw and held him still, dark eyes glimmering with desire so deep, so heady that Kensley moaned.

Bishop mashed their groins together, and Kensley moaned a second time, enthralled by the thick erection pressing into his own.

His hole clenched, and he felt the first trickle of wetness.

“Are you sure this is what you want, Kens?” Bishop’s voice rumbled into Kensley’s sternum, deep and almost scary.

“For me to bend you over this table and shove my cock up your wet, dripping ass? To take your virginity in a dirty old cabin in the middle of nowhere? For the hitman to fuck his priest?”

“Fuck, yeeeees.” Kensley struggled against Bishop’s hold, but Bishop’s grip was ironclad, giving him no room to do more than pant and thrust harder against Bishop’s dick. “I need it, please. I’ve wanted it for so long. Wanted you , Bishop.”

Bishop’s hand slid from his jaw to his shoulder, then down to his hip.

Further around to press hard against his crease.

Kensley gasped and humped back, wanting that hand touching bare skin.

Needing pressure. Bishop rubbed over the thin cotton, pressing deeper.

“You’re wet for me, omega. Reading about it in a textbook is one thing, but damn. ”

“Please.” Tired of begging, tired of Bishop second-guessing him, Kensley’s oft-hidden defiant side came out, and he did the only thing that made sense: he bit the side of Bishop’s neck.

Not a hard bite, but more than a nip, and it startled Bishop into releasing his hands.

Kensley immediately dragged his fingers through Bishop’s thick hair, then curled them near the nape of his neck, holding Bishop’s head still.

Their mouths mere inches apart, hot breaths mingling the scents of coffee and desire.

Bishop grabbed his hips and held tight, head angled so Kensley couldn't see his eyes. All he saw were Bishop's parted lips, then the slip of tongue that wetted them. "I'm going to hell for this," Bishop whispered.

"I'd rather follow you to hell than keep living in this purgatory."

"Fuck."

Kensley had never been kissed before. Not a real, passionate kiss on the mouth; the kind that came from a lover whose only desire was to take him apart, one piece at a time.

He'd read about it, squirreling away romance novels secretly traded among the priests, reading about things they'd only imagined.

Experiencing fictional desires while barred from exploring real ones.

Kensley hadn't known what to expect from an actual kiss, beyond flowery descriptions in worn, stained pages.

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Nothing he'd read prepared Kensley for the way Bishop owned his mouth.

Lips and tongue and teeth and panting breaths became his entire world.

Bishop's unique taste filled his senses, blocking out everything except the need for more.

Now. All at once. Nothing existed beyond the kiss and the way it lit Kensley's body from the inside out.

His dick throbbed and his hole contracted, soaking his underwear with proof of his desire.

He melted under the power of it all, surrendering to the force of the kiss, and the world ceased to exist until the moment his bare ass hit cotton sheets.

Kensley didn't know or care where his underclothes had gone.

All he knew was the hard, thick body writhing above him, grinding him into the mattress, kissing him into the next century.

He was mouth and dick and hands, and a hot, leaking ass that needed something to fill it more than he needed oxygen.

He would finally have something bigger inside him than his own finger, and nothing would stop him.

He yanked at Bishop's jeans, desperate to see him, to feel his bare skin against Kensley's, for some part of Bishop's body to touch his slick hole. "Get your fucking clothes off," Kensley snapped, surprising himself with the sharp order.

Bishop nipped his chin, his smile both tender and dangerous, and climbed off the bed to strip, peeling back layers of clothes and revealing swaths of flesh.

Some tanned and smooth, some pale and waxy, and all of it beautiful.

His thick erection hung low, and Kensley's mouth watered for a taste.

He didn't think; he crawled to the edge of the bed and licked the head.

Bishop groaned, both hands reaching for and stopping just above Kensley's shoulders.

Needing Bishop undone, Kensley wrapped his lips about the crown of his cock and sucked, poking his tongue into the slit, savoring the sharp flavor of Bishop's flesh and precome.

Loving the weight of the satin flesh, the soft skin over rippling heat.

He wanted more but his untested gag reflex refused to let him worship Bishop the way he craved.

One day.

Bishop's restraint broke, and he tangled both hands in Kensley's hair, squeezing hard, waking Kensley's scalp with the sting.

It wasn't painful. The possessiveness, the need to hold and claim, to use his willing

mouth, was everything Kensley had imagined.

Maybe he couldn't give Bishop his throat today, but Bishop could have every other part of his body.

"Fuck, Kens." One of Bishop's hand released his hair and slid down his neck. Along the ridges of his spine to the small of his back. To the very top of his crack.

Kensley made an agreeable noise and sucked harder, needing this before he internally combusted.

Bishop flattened his hand and slid it farther back, his middle finger dragging down his crease until it rested over his hole.

Kensley arched his spine, desperate for that wicked finger to penetrate him.

To feel how wet Kensley was, how much he desired this.

Bishop's finger slid inside his loose hole, and Kensley keened around his mouthful of cock.

Humped backward, wanting more than a single finger, wanting his whole damned hand if that's what Bishop chose to give him.

Instead, Bishop played, twisting his finger, stretching his rim, shallowly fucking him with it.

Kensley could probably come like this, but he needed Bishop to fuck him with his cock.

To take what he so enthusiastically offered.

He released Bishop's erection and pressed his face into Bishop's pubes, taking a moment to breathe and enjoy the new, intense experience of someone else playing with his hole for the first time.

An intensity that doubled when Bishop added a second finger and fucked him harder with them.

It created the dirtiest sound as skin and wetness combined, the perfect soundtrack for this moment.

"Please, Bishop, fuck me," Kensley whined.

"Am fucking you, baby. Your hole is so hot and ready for me." The hand in his hair loosened. "But your brother will skin me alive if I knock you up."

"You won't. My cycle ended two days ago."

"Fuck, Kens." That must have been the last tenuous thread keeping Bishop's restraint in check, and it snapped.

He had Kensley flat on his back, both legs shoved up high and out of the way, exposing Kensley's cock, balls and hole to him.

Bishop studied his crotch with an almost feral expression, a predator admiring its prey before pouncing. "Are you?—?"

Kensley punched him hard in the sternum. "If you ask me if I want this one more time, I'm going to hit you with a piece of furniture."

Bishop laughed. "There's nothing sexier than a man who knows his own mind."

“Good, because this man needs you to fuck him already.”

With a sharp growl that sent bolts of lust down Kensley’s spine, Bishop rested Kensley’s right leg on his shoulder, freeing his hand to steady his cock.

A cock that finally pressed against Kensley’s hole.

Kensley tried to bear down, to make this happen faster, but Bishop just sat there, staring where their bodies joined.

Kensley reached between them and wrapped his hand around Bishop’s.

Met Bishop’s simmering gaze. They held eye contact while they both guided Bishop’s cock inside.

The thick glide of Bishop’s penetration turned his entire world upside down, and Kensley was addicted.

Nothing in the world could ever top this moment, as his omega body was finally used for its intended purpose.

Finally filled and pleased and worshipped, instead of hidden and ignored.

Bishop bent to kiss him as he began thrusting hard and deep.

Each time his cockhead scraped across Kensley’s prostate, another gush of wetness added to the amazing slide.

Kensley’s own cock was trapped between their bellies.

He wanted to reach between them, to jack himself off, to relieve the desperate

pressure building in his balls—he also didn’t want this to end.

He needed it to last forever, for it to carry him away to a place where no one was hunting for him.

Where no one could hurt him. A place where this was real and not just a temporary indulgence.

“Fuck, I’m close,” Bishop panted. He reached down and fisted Kensley’s erection. The rough touch sent Kensley over the edge after only a few strokes.

None of his books prepared Kensley for the reality of an orgasm born of a hand on his dick and a dick in his ass, thrusting him to the edge and over.

His entire body seemed to vibrate apart and come back together in a brand-new form, satiated and exhausted, and humming with pleasure and sensation, every nerve a buzzing live wire.

He blinked up at Bishop while he caught his breath, newly aware that Bishop had stopped fucking him.

“Did you come?” Kensley asked.

“Not yet. I had to stop and watch you. You are so fucking gorgeous like this.”

“Want to see you come, too. In me.”

Bishop braced both hands on the bed beside Kensley’s head and dragged his cock out slowly.

So slowly that Kensley thought he’d actually pull out completely.

Then Bishop shoved back inside, and Kensley cried out, thrilled at this new aggression.

Desperate for Bishop to stop thinking and to chase his own release.

To use his wet hole the way it was meant for, and Kensley hung on.

He took in every detail he could, from the lines on Bishop's forehead to the scents of sweat and musk and sex.

The way their skin shimmered with perspiration, semen, and slick.

The pants and grunts and slaps of flesh on flesh.

Kensley clenched his hole. Bishop hollered, pushed deep inside, and emptied into Kensley's greedy body.

He swore he felt the heat of Bishop's release flooding his insides, claiming him, marking him as Bishop's and no one else's.

Binding them forever.

Reality was a touch less romantic and more messy.

Bishop pulled out then smothered him with his broad, sweaty body, his softening cock rubbing gently against Kensley's while they kissed.

Kensley shifted his hips and winced at the tenderness.

He'd been wet and ready but damn, Bishop still had a big dick, and he'd gone hard.

Kensley didn't regret a single thing, though.

"That was...better than I imagined," Kensley whispered. "Wow."

"I love hearing wow. If I'm going to hell for fucking a priest, it was worth it."

Kensley snorted and skated his fingertips across the rough skin on Bishop's back. "Definitely worth it. I can't wait to do it again."

Bishop raised up on one elbow, his expression difficult to read. He was smiling but he also seemed...uncertain? "Yeah?"

"Hell yeah. This wasn't a one-and-done to lose my virginity, Bishop.

I've loved you for half my life. Even after I thought you'd died, I didn't stop loving you.

I don't want to think about King's next phone call, or who's trying to use me against him.

I want to exist in this, right here and now. Us."

"We can't exist like this forever."

"I know. But can we pretend for a little while longer?"

"Absolutely." Bishop settled over him again, his head resting on the pillow beside Kensley's, gazing at him with something like love in his eyes. "Just us."

"Yeah. Just us."

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FIVE

Bishop was definitely going to hell and, as he stretched out beside a freshly-washed and now-sleeping Kensley, he didn't fucking care.

He could die tomorrow, and he'd storm the gates of hell with glee, because he'd been able to make love to a man he'd lusted after for years.

A man he never thought would love him back, or who would come so readily to his bed.

Three times in twelve hours.

His shoulders and thighs ached from exertion, and even his dick was a little tender from all the friction, but he'd never complain.

After their first amazing, mind-blowing time having sex, they'd lazed around until the chill sent them for a hot shower.

Together. Bishop hadn't been able to stop touching Kensley, and Kensley had eagerly given in to being bathed by him.

Bishop had been very thorough, especially with the delicate bits, and they'd ended up fucking for a second time in the shower.

It had been a little awkward and slippery, and they'd finished on the bathroom floor, but no regrets at all.

The rest of the afternoon had been quiet, with them snacking on the not-great selection of food, cuddling on the couch, and waiting for his phone to ring.

Eventually, King texted that he was still finalizing details and would call tomorrow.

Kensley had gotten restless. After a quick exploration of the cabin, he found a drop-down ladder to an attic-like storage space.

He'd discovered an old TV/VCR combo and a box of tapes, and they'd settled in to watch reruns of a black-and-white cop show someone thought was worth recording.

It was cheesy and fun, and the vintage commercials were hilarious.

After heating up a few cans of beef stew, Kensley had plopped himself right on Bishop's lap, and round three began.

It went from the kitchen to the couch, and finally ended in the bedroom.

Bishop changed the sheets while Kensley showered, and by the time Bishop finished cleaning up, his precious Kens was fast asleep in bed.

He double-checked that the house was secure before sliding into bed with him, loving the way Kensley shifted closer in his sleep.

In its own way, it had been a perfect day. They could have been a pair of newlyweds, spending their honeymoon in a friend's cabin, so they could hike and enjoy the fresh air. The truth was a far more bitter pill to swallow, so Bishop held onto the fantasy as he tried to sleep.

But he couldn't sleep. Nightmares kept jerking him awake on jolts of fear and loss.

He didn't remember his dreams after he woke from them, only how he felt, and he hated feeling so out of control.

Like he'd lost something precious. He could have been dreaming about losing Kensley, or the loss of his old life in that fire, he didn't know.

But it left him unsettled and restless, and he was out of bed before dawn.

He desperately wanted to go outside and run, but that was dangerous for a whole host of reasons.

The last thing he wanted was for Kensley to wake up alone, panic, and try to drive somewhere.

They were safe enough here, and the odds of anyone finding them were almost zero—but almost zero wasn't zero.

Bishop wasn't taking unnecessary risks with Kensley's life.

He would not lose him now that he had him. For the first time since Kensley went away, Bishop felt...complete.

So, he did a hell of a lot of squats and pushups in the living room, and then made himself coffee.

He'd just settled on the couch with his mug and an old magazine when Kensley shuffled out of the bedroom, the quilt wrapped around his—he assumed—naked body.

His face was creased, hair messy, chin covered in another day's worth of dark scruff—and he'd never looked more gorgeous.

“Morning,” Kensley said. “I was kind of hoping to wake up with this super-hot guy in bed with me.”

“Sorry about that. I couldn’t sleep, and I didn’t want to wake you with all my thrashing around.”

“I doubt you would have. I’ve never slept so soundly in my life. I guess a couple of amazing orgasms are good for my REM cycles.”

Bishop was a little jealous, but mostly happy that Kensley had been able to relax and find restful sleep. Bishop doubted he’d be able to do the same until they’d relocated to a more permanent hiding place. “We’ll have to see what we can do for tonight’s REM cycles.”

Kensley wiggled his eyebrows, and then padded into the kitchenette. Poured a glass of fruit punch and joined Bishop on the couch, curling up close. “This feels like a dream. I don’t want to wake up, but I’m also realistic enough to know we might not be here another night.”

“You’re right. I have no idea what King is planning or when he’s going to call. But I have enough experience bugging out of a location in less than ten minutes to know it won’t matter what his instructions are. I’ll get us there, I promise.”

“I know you will.” Kensley leaned in for a quick kiss. “And in case you need to hear it again today, I have zero regrets about anything we did yesterday, and I hope you don’t either.”

“Absolutely no regrets, but it does help to hear it.” Bishop needed a longer kiss so he claimed it.

“I don’t know where we go from here, Kens, but I’m not going to abandon you, or

dump you off on some other guy to guard.

I can't imagine a scenario in which King would ask me to do that, but even if he did, I wouldn't listen. ”

“You'd really go against my brother's orders?”

“To keep you safe? Yes. Yesterday wasn't just me getting off with an omega, or even getting with a guy for whom I've had feelings for years. It's more important than that.”

“For me, too. It's so strange to think how completely my life has changed in forty-eight-hours. I'm a wholly different person.”

Bishop couldn't help winking. “Holy person, huh?”

Kensley poked him in the ribs. “Shut up. I told you I hated that life.”

“You said you hated it, but you didn't tell me about it. Tell me now.”

“I think I'd rather eat cold canned beans for breakfast.” Kensley started to stand.

Bishop was faster. He put his coffee mug down on the nearby table, and then managed to snag Kensley around the waist before he could get away.

Kensley yelped and protected his drink from sloshing on the way back down to Bishop's lap.

Bishop loved having Kensley on his lap, in his arms. He fit perfectly, like they'd been made to hold each other. Two halves finally reunited.

“Excuse you, you brute.” Kensley put his glass down then crossed his arms, his affronted glare too cute to take seriously. “Am I a prisoner now?”

“Not at all. But I told you a lot about me yesterday, and we haven’t talked much about you. I do understand if you have some deep-seated resentment toward me for forcing you into the Order.”

“That was my brother’s call, not yours.”

“I told him I suspected you were omega.”

“He still made the call to the Order.”

“I didn’t try to talk him out of it.”

“I’m guessing that’s because one, King is your boss so his word goes, and two, you agreed I’d be safest there?”

” When Bishop nodded, Kensley sighed. “I was safe there, Bishop, but I also wasn’t living.

I was so angry when I first arrived and began my training, and one of the first things they beat out of you in the Order is your personality.

Your individuality. They strip you of your identity, not just as a person, but especially as an omega male or alpha female, so they can fill you up with prayers and sermons and practiced rhetoric. ”

Bishop’s skin scrawled and his temper rose. “What do you mean by beat it out of you?”

“You know the saying ‘spare the rod, spoil the child’?”

He growled.

Kensley rested his head on Bishop’s shoulder, hiding most of his face.

“Entering the Order isn’t like enrolling in school.

There’s no set schedule that begins in September, so each new member is inducted as they arrive, and I wasn’t the only newbie dumped there my first week.

And I never told anyone this, but when I was ten, my mother had me evaluated by a psychologist because of my behavior, and I was diagnosed as having oppositional defiant disorder.

Whether that was true or not, I don’t know, and being shoved into a life and belief system I didn’t want was... traumatic.”

His voice broke, and Bishop held him tighter. Desperate to take away this pain but unable to do anything except listen. Kensley stretched his left hand out, fingers splayed, and Bishop noticed the odd angle of his pinkie.

“In the first twelve months,” Kensley said softly, “my left hand was swollen for most of it, because of a thick wooden ruler. Something didn’t heal right.

Disobedience was punished immediately. Back-talking was punished, and so was questioning.

We were not allowed to question anything, not our training, our discipline, the Holy Scriptures, nothing.

And everything they did to”—he made air quotes—“beat it out of us? It didn’t always leave a mark. ”

Bishop swallowed down his anger so he could find his voice. “Maybe not a physical mark.”

“Yeah. There was a punishment room we nicknamed Purgatory, because it was a glorified closet. Thin mattress on the floor, a bucket for personal business, no light, only two meals a day, instead of three. Only water to drink. You could be in there a day or for up to two weeks, depending on the infraction.” He released a long, ragged breath.

“There was a girl named Meg who presented as alpha female, and she entered about a month after me. She was sixteen, as defiant as I was, and she had terrible claustrophobia.”

Bishop closed his eyes briefly, hating what sounded like a haunting memory for Kensley.

“Sometimes at night, when it was quiet, I could hear her screaming from Purgatory, that she couldn’t breathe, that the dark was crushing her. After about six months of training, she disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

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“We were told her parents had withdrawn her from the Order, but who knows? The poor girl probably ended up in a psychiatric ward because of their treatment. Eventually, I figured out that becoming a robot who spewed back everything I was told was smarter than having thoughts or opinions. It definitely hurt less, and I didn’t have to suffer in Purgatory. ”

“Purgatory sounds like solitary confinement in prison. Why the fuck would priests use that as punishment in a religious institution?”

Kensley shrugged, lifting his head to meet Bishop’s eyes, his own swimming in regret. “Same reason as in prison. To break us down. Make us stop fighting. Submission.”

Bishop stroked his fingers through Kensley’s thick, black hair. “I’m so sorry.”

“You wanted to know. Some people broke. I could see it in their eyes. The way they moved through the abbey, like someone who was already dead. I guess I was too damned stubborn to let them win, so I learned how to play the game. How to be the robot they wanted me to be, without actually losing what was left of my soul.”

“I’m glad. When we first spoke a few weeks ago, I could tell there was something behind the facade you presented as Elder Thorne.

I could still see the Kensley I remembered.

The one who stole the remote, and hogged the popcorn, and who wouldn’t let me carry you after you hurt your foot.

If you weren't still in there, I don't think you'd have trusted me to keep you safe Saturday night, or to come with me. To be with me."

"You're right. Even before I was positive who you were, I knew Drew Burton could get me out of the life that was slowly killing me.

" Kensley traced his fingers over Bishop's heart.

"I'm not sure how excited I am about a life as a fugitive from King's enemies, but this existence right now? I'm very happy to be here with you."

"Me too. I am so fucking sorry for everything you went through. I wish I could take some of that pain away."

"You've survived your own pain. I've only ever burned my hand on a hot pot handle. I can't imagine what you suffered. Was...?"

"What?"

"Was the boiler explosion actually an accident? Or was it one of your enemies?"

Bishop sighed and gently squeezed Kensley's thigh. "The fire inspector's report did not find evidence of arson or tampering, so it was officially deemed an accident."

"Unofficially?"

He growled softly. "A few days after, while I was in a coma, King got a text from a burner phone. A photo of my place before and after the fire. Ziggy was unable to trace it, but King believes it was a taunt. Someone claiming to have done it to get me out of the way, and now bragging because to the rest of the world, Bishop Anders did die from his burns."

“Do you think it’s true? That an enemy did it?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t ruled it out, because my death definitely benefited the other families trying to get King out of the way.

He was angry and scrambling, and don’t ever tell him I said this out loud, but he was extremely vulnerable for a few months.

But he kept his inner circle pucker-tight and got through it. Like he always does.”

“There’s a reason they call him King of Cats on the streets. Nine lives and all that.”

Bishop chuckled. “Yes, they do. I just hope he’s ready for whatever is about to go down, because what this adversary did?

Openly committing a burglary and attempted kidnapping inside of a church?

There’s not a bought cop on the force who’d look away from this, and we know the police commissioner has his head so far up the Holy Father’s ass that they share a digestive system. It was a huge risk.”

“To use me against King.”

“But they lost their chance to get you. And I won’t give them another one.”

Kensley smiled, bright and warm. “I know you won’t.” He kissed Bishop again, this time with a bit more intent behind it. “So now that I’ve talked about my past a little bit, can we forage for breakfast? I really don’t want cold beans.”

“Yes, we can. I need to reheat my coffee, too.”

They ended up finishing the last of the pancake batter, supplemented it with a can of fruit cocktail, and they ate at the small table like they'd done this a hundred times before.

Shared a simple meal and pleasant conversation, with nothing more pressing to do than wait.

Bishop was used to waiting, used to endless hours of boredom, but he could see that Kensley wasn't.

Kensley was used to schedules and routines, and to knowing what he was doing exactly when and why.

He was easily bored and needed something to keep his active mind occupied while they waited for King's call.

And since sex was the one thing that seemed to get Kensley's brain to shut down for a little while, as soon as they cleaned up breakfast, Bishop pounced.

Kensley wanted this to be his life forever, wanted to live inside this bubble of cuddling, talking, and amazing sex until the end of time.

He was also a realist, and he knew this was temporary.

Despite his unflagging desire and his body's natural lubrication, his ass was a touch sore after their fourth round of sex in twenty-four-hours.

Okay, more than a touch, because he was currently stretched out on his stomach, browsing through a ten-year-old nature photography magazine, while Bishop dozed on the bed beside him.

He hated that Bishop hadn't been able to sleep much last night.

Not only because Bishop needed to be focused and sharp until they reached their final destination, but because he disliked seeing Bishop unsettled and upset.

Kensley had no true idea of everything Bishop had experienced working for King, committing more crimes than he was comfortable thinking about. Taking risk after risk.

Even asleep beside him, Bishop looked troubled, and nowhere near as relaxed as a guy who'd just gotten laid should be.

But Bishop carried a lot of burdens, many he'd never be able to share with Kensley, and Kensley understood that.

Kensley knew there were stories he'd never want to hear, even if he thought Bishop would tell him.

Sharing what little he had with Bishop about his first year in the Order had tested Kensley's tenuous grip on the shields he'd carefully constructed around certain aspects of his own past. Around the worst moments of his life, far beyond his hand being beaten with a ruler, or being dumped into a windowless room for days on end.

Nope, not going there.

He flipped through the pages of the magazine, studying the pictures and barely reading the accompanying articles, until a soft strain of music filled the room.

Bishop grunted and stirred. Kensley pinpointed the source of the music and, without thinking, grabbed Bishop's cell phone off the end table and accepted the call.

“Bishop?” King’s familiar, gravelly voice filled Kensley with equal parts joy at hearing his brother’s voice directly for the first time in years, and rage at the same.

“No, it’s me.”

“Kens. Where’s Bishop?”

Bishop was awake and glaring at Kensley. They wrestled for the phone, but Kensley managed to squirm off the bed and switch the call over to speaker. “He’s here,” Kensley said, “and you’re on speaker. Sorry, I needed to hear your voice and talk to you.”

King released a long breath, followed by a distinct grunt. “I’m glad to hear your voice too. Wow.”

“A bit more grown up?”

“Yes. It’s deeper and there’s a...directness that’s new.”

“Professional side effect.” Kensley held Bishop’s annoyed stare and silently cheered when Bishop took a step backward, hands on hips, which was more cute than intimidating since he was naked. “Hello, brother.”

“Hello. I don’t know what to say to you.”

“You haven’t been imagining this moment for years like I have? Exactly what you’d say when you and I were face-to-face again?”

“A little, yes, but I wasn’t expecting you to answer Bishop’s phone. How are you? I’m so sorry if this experience is scaring you.”

“Some parts have been scary, but I feel safe here with Bishop.” He grinned at the man. “He’s been an amazing bodyguard.”

“I knew he would be. It’s why I chose him.”

“The new face doesn’t hurt, either, right?”

King grunted again. “I’m sorry I couldn’t communicate the truth about his supposed death. You not knowing was safer.”

“Until knowing became necessary?”

“Exactly. You always were sharp, Kens. I wasn’t surprised when Bishop told me you figured him out.”

“Well, you can change someone’s face and have them adopt an accent, but you can’t change their inner spirit.

Their soul. And eyes are windows to the soul.

” Kensley truly believed that, and he kind of hoped he didn’t see King in person anytime soon, or King would likely see Kensley’s feelings for Bishop in his eyes, glowing like a neon sign.

“Very true,” King said and, for a moment, Kensley thought his brother was acknowledging Kensley’s feelings for Bishop. But King was referring to the comment about eyes being windows. “Bishop?”

“I’m listening,” Bishop replied, taking a few steps closer.

“I’m sending you travel instructions. I’ll have passports for you both waiting at your

next destination, along with additional instructions and your final destination. When you get there, lay low until I send word that it's safe."

Bishop nodded. "All right. How long do you think we'll have to stay?"

"I don't know. The house will be set up with supplies for two weeks, but you'll be able to shop at the local market when necessary."

"Does this place at least have cable?" Kensley asked. "Or real books?"

"Yes to books," King said. "No cable but there is restricted Wi-Fi. And there's another amenity I'm sure you'll want to take advantage of."

"Which is?"

"A surprise. And a peace offering for ripping you out of your life."

Kensley resisted thanking his brother for ripping him out of that soul-sucking existence, but he didn't need King angsting anew over the decision to send him to the Order. Not when he had so much else on his overflowing plate. All of them staying alive was the most important thing right now.

The present was priority, not the past.

"When do we leave here?" Bishop asked.

"The next stop doesn't have overnight accommodations, so I'd suggest leaving in the morning. You'll reach your final destination by sunset tomorrow."

All the vagueness was starting to irritate Kensley, but he also understood that both men were using an overabundance of caution. Even though their phones should be

clean of bugs, King hadn't survived this long in his violent world by taking dumb chances.

"Understood," Bishop said. "I'll call when we get there."

"Good. Kens?"

"Yes?" Kensley replied.

"I love you, little brother. Stay safe."

"I love you, too, and I will. Promise."

The call dropped, and Kensley gave Bishop his phone back.

Bishop pulled him into a hug that Kensley sank into, loving the way he fit so well in Bishop's arms. Part of Kensley wanted to weep with joy over having spoken to King again, and hearing with his own ears that King was doing all this because he loved him.

But Kensley was too anxious about tomorrow's unknown travel plans.

"Do you have an idea of where we're going?" he asked.

"An idea, yes, especially with him providing us with passports."

"I hope it's a tropical island, but with my luck it'll be an igloo in northern Canada or something."

Bishop chuckled. "I don't think they have igloos in Canada."

“They might. Have you explored the whole country?”

“Nope. But I have been to British Columbia, and it’s gorgeous.”

“So you think we’re going to BC?”

“Possibly. I obviously won’t know for sure until we get where we’re going tom—”
His phone pinged, and he checked the notification.

“Instructions for tomorrow. We’ll know when we get to the passport pickup, Kens, so there’s no sense in guessing or wondering.

Let’s figure out what we want to create for lunch, and then watch more of that old cop show. ”

Kensley pouted for about three seconds then shrugged. “Okay, fine. Food and TV, it is. At least we know there will be more things to do wherever we’re going. I am so freaking bored here, and it’s getting to me. I can’t imagine having to stay cooped up here for two more weeks.”

“Am I not entertaining you enough?” Bishop groped his ass. “I’ll have to do better.”

“You can do better later. My ass needs a rest. Even with the natural lube, I’m not used to all this friction.”

Bishop’s smirk flattened. “Did I hurt you?”

“Not at all, I’m just sore and need a break from fucking, which I know can be hard to resist when I’m turned-on and wet, and trust me, my body knows I’ve got years of celibacy to make up for. But I am a grown man and can control myself for a couple of hours. As long as we both put on some clothes.”

“All right.” He gently held Kensley by the elbows and stared at him with so much intensity that his belly wobbled.

“Promise that if I ever do go too hard, or do anything that’s causing you pain, you’ll speak up.

This is very new to you, and I should have known better than to fuck you so many times, so close together. I’m sorry.”

Kensley pressed a shushing finger to Bishop’s lips. “Don’t apologize. I wanted every second of what we’ve done. And now that we know we’ve got at least two more weeks to look forward to? We can slow down a little.”

“Yes, we can.”

They shared a kiss then parted to dress. Kensley hoped their new destination came with more clothes, because he wasn’t going to be able to keep wearing the same oversized sweats and single pair of underwear that he’d been rinsing out in the sink. But that was a worry for tomorrow.

Today, he didn’t have to worry about anything except making canned goods taste like real food, and then relaxing on the couch with his boyf—bodyguard.

Yeah. Bodyguard. And friend.

Their relationship was still too new, their circumstances far too unstable, to use the other b-word.

Yet.

SIX

Bishop Anders hated few things more than he hated uncertainty.

Uncertainty over tonight's final destination, and uncertainty over how to proceed with Kensley—not only physically but emotionally.

Emotions were not his strong suit, never had been.

He was very aware that he'd gotten nicknames like "Ice Cold" and "Checkmate," not only within the organization, but also outside it. It never used to bother him.

He didn't want to be ice cold with Kensley, but he had no real experience being open.

In sharing his thoughts and fears and emotions.

Thankfully, Kensley seemed to be in a similar boat, because Bishop had to pry answers about his training out of him yesterday.

And Bishop knew there was a lot more Kensley wasn't saying.

They'd spent the rest of their last day in the cabin eating whatever they wanted, watching a lot of VHS tapes, and kissing.

Lots of kissing that Bishop prevented from going any further (mostly), no matter how many towels Kensley soaked through from his arousal.

Around ten o'clock, after complaining about his boner for most of the day, Bishop happily sucked Kensley off and put him to bed.

Kensley had slept soundly, while Bishop paced and worried most of the night, finally dropping off next to his Kens around three.

He planned to leave by seven, so he set his phone's alarm to wake him at six-thirty.

It jolted him awake, and he was surprised to find Kensley snuggled up close, one arm thrown across Bishop's chest.

The simple and wholly unique experience had sent tender feelings right to Bishop's heart.

He hated getting up, but they had a schedule to keep.

They could snuggle all they wanted when they reached their destination tonight.

Bishop was pretty sure he knew where, based on King's mention of the "amenities," but he was still uncertain.

The uncertainty left him grumpy after a quick shower, and a mug of coffee did little to perk him up.

"Breakfast options seem to be instant oatmeal packets," Kensley said with an exaggerated grimace, "or canned ravioli."

"Tough choices." Bishop produced two protein bars from his bug-out bag. "I say option number three."

"Good call." Kensley happily plucked one of the bars from Bishop's hand. "Birthday

cake. Interesting flavor for a big guy like you.”

“Hey, I can have muscles and still like sweets.” He scarfed his bar down while gathering the last of their scattered belongings.

Cleaning the place made no sense, because their DNA was all over the furniture, bedding, and probably on the rugs, too.

Now that they’d used it during such a crucial operation, King would probably offload it or hire an arsonist to make it go away.

“Is it strange that I’m kind of going to miss this place?” Kensley asked once they were in the packed car. “I had a lot of first-time experiences in this cabin.”

“Not strange at all. And the good news is there are still quite a few first-time experiences I want to help you with, so you’ll have new memories to treasure somewhere else.”

Kensley cast him a sultry grin. “I’m holding you to that.”

“Good. Because I don’t make promises I can’t keep.”

“I know. You’ve never lied to me.”

Bishop flinched as he turned the car around in the narrow parking area beside the cabin. “I mean...Drew Burton?”

“That was different. You didn’t lie to hurt me, it was to protect yourself. The same way I lied to save myself from pain while in the Order. Pretending to acquiesce and believe in everything they shoveled at me. Spewing it back whenever prompted. I lied every day for years to protect myself.”

“You have a very unique way of looking at things.” Bishop drove down the dirt tracks toward the paved road to town.

He’d checked their route last night, and he could get them mostly there before risking his GPS.

He’d already powered down his cell phone for the next few hours, until they were out of state.

Kensley didn’t respond to his comment, choosing to fiddle with the radio instead.

They got a lot of static until he hit a country station.

Must have decided it was better than silence, because he left it on at a low level.

“I miss listening to music,” Kensley said.

“Music that isn’t from a hymnal and played on an organ. ”

Ah, that made sense. “Listen to anything you want.”

“Oh, I plan to.” He winked and relaxed into the passenger seat.

The woods and mountains passed in a blur of browns and greens, and they soon left the bumpy dirt track for the slightly less bumpy paved road.

Bishop did his best to avoid potholes now that he was driving in daylight.

Kensley hummed to the music and might have even sung if he’d had a clue of the lyrics.

It was peaceful, and in no time, they were driving southwest, heading toward Pennsylvania.

They chatted about the scenery, the billboards, other cars, anything except where they were going, or anything too personal.

Bishop stayed alert for police cars or obvious tails, and he kept up with traffic without speeding or attracting unwanted attention.

He crossed the NY/PA border around noon, and found a small town with a local deli so he could buy them lunch with cash.

They ate at a rest stop, and for a little while, Bishop forgot they were in a life-and-death situation.

He could have been any guy on a road trip with his lover.

I want that. One day, when this is over and we're out of this shit.

He hoped.

After their break, Bishop turned on his phone and the GPS.

Less than an hour later, he pulled up at a private airstrip King had used more than once to charter small flights, and not always legally.

A burly man with white hair and a cigar clenched in his teeth showed Bishop where to park his car inside a small hangar.

Bishop and Kensley collected their things and followed their guide to a larger hangar, where a pilot was waiting with a manila envelope.

The envelope had their passports, as well as a copy of their flight plan.

Just as Bishop suspected, they were going to a private island near the Bahamas, in the greater Lucayan Archipelago.

King had “inherited” it from a previous competitor, and Bishop had gone on vacation there a handful of times.

It was secluded, with private security on land and in the water, and King paid handsomely for the privilege.

Their passports were obviously assumed names, but King had gone a step further and made them a married couple.

No one would look at that and suspect one of them was a priest. When he showed them to Kensley, Kens began giggling in an adorable way.

“Gosh, however will we pretend to be such?” he whispered, careful the pilot didn’t overhear.

Bishop winked. “How indeed?”

“I’ve never been to the Bahamas or anywhere close.”

“All the islands down there are beautiful. And other than some security, we’ll have our island all to ourselves. Private villa, private beach.”

“King mentioned a market?”

“If we need supplies, we can take a boat to a larger island that has an open air market.”

“Got it. Just, um, one other thing?”

“What is it?”

“I’ve never flown on a plane before. Not a big commercial jet and definitely not a small plane like this one. I’m not afraid of heights, but I don’t like enclosed spaces.”

“Well, this is a private plane, but it’s about the same size inside as the cabin’s living room. We won’t be cramped. My boss travels in style, remember? This isn’t a rickety, hollow puddle-jumper. I’ll even hold your hand.”

“You are definitely holding my hand.”

“If you’re both ready?” the pilot asked. He indicated the short set up steps up to the plane’s interior.

Bishop clasped Kensley’s hand and led him inside.

Flying over the ocean was one of the most humbling experiences of Kensley’s life.

He’d been terrified during takeoff, and he hadn’t released Bishop’s hand until the small plane had leveled out.

Then he’d dared to look out the window, and he’d marveled at how tiny everything below was.

Patches of green and brown and gray. Mountains and farmland and small cities, and other things too tiny to identify.

He’d felt infinitely small himself, finally getting a view of the world the way Heavenly Father might see it.

If he believed Heavenly Father existed, which he didn't.

He believed in things like fate and karma, and maybe even in soulmates, but not that one all-powerful creator was responsible for everything.

Life was too infinite and varied for that.

Bishop found a stash of food and drinks.

Nothing fancy, but Kensley still accepted a cold cola, and they snacked on cheese and dried salami with crackers.

"If King was on this flight," Bishop said, "it would have been stocked with good Scotch and smoked salmon. But this is better than canned ravioli."

Kensley laughed and enjoyed another cracker.

The flight over land was briefer than he expected, and soon they were flying over a vast panorama of different blues: the darker blue and white of the ocean, and the paler blue of the sky, dotted with the occasional fluffy cloud.

As a child, Kensley had gone to Ocean City, New Jersey, with his mother, but this was wholly unique.

He couldn't touch the ocean, smell the salt air, or feel the moisture on his skin, but he wouldn't trade the experience for anything.

When the pilot announced their descent, Kensley buckled back into his seat and closed his eyes, once again squeezing the life out of Bishop's hand, so he missed the new scenery.

All Kensley could do was breathe and hope they landed safely—which they did, and Kensley didn't open his eyes until they'd come to a complete stop.

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“Hey, we’re here,” Bishop said. “My fingertips are going to fall off if you don’t ease up.”

“Sorry.” Kensley’s own fingers ached from his tight grip, and he shook his hand out. “Hopefully, I won’t be such a basket case whenever we fly out of here.”

“I mean, I don’t mind the handholding, but I do need circulation.”

“Noted.” Kensley looked down at his loose, borrowed sweats. “Um, how warm is it going to be outside?”

Bishop’s easy smile melted briefly into a leer. “Warm enough you’ll want out of those as soon as possible. Come on, there should be a golf cart we can drive over to the house, and then we are on our own for the better part of two weeks. You can walk around the villa naked if you want.”

His cheeks heated. “Um, we’ll see about that. But there is one thing I’ve always wanted to do.”

“Which is?”

“Nighttime skinny-dipping.”

Bishop made a soft, agreeable noise. “Oh, we are definitely doing that. But only in either the villa’s hot tub, or the lagoon. The regular ocean is too dangerous at night.”

Kensley nearly swooned. “The villa has a hot tub?”

“Yes.”

“Then I will probably be spending most of the next two weeks in there, because I have never been in one, and I have heard only amazing things about them. So yes, naked hot tub time for sure.”

“For sure. How about I give you a tour of the island, before we finalize our plans for the next two weeks? There might be other spots you want to spend time in besides the hot tub.”

“It’s your villa. I’m sure we’ll explore all the pertinent spots at some point or another. I want to see and do everything at least once.”

“That can be arranged.”

Kensley’s heart was beating double-time as he descended the steps, out of the cool interior of the plane and into heat and sunshine and a gentle, salty breeze.

The airstrip was a single paved track with a small garage-style building at one end.

A man was waiting next to an open-top Jeep, and he waved at them.

Bishop waved back. He collected their bags and stowed them in the front passenger seat of the Jeep.

“I’m Walsh,” the man said. He had a build similar to Bishop but was a few inches shorter.

He also had a gun strapped to his hip. “I’m island security, sirs.

If you have any questions, here is a radio.

” Walsh gave a two-way radio to Bishop. “Frequency two. I will be around, both here and in my quarters, but I’ll do my best to give you both privacy for the duration of your stay. ”

“Thank you, Walsh,” Bishop replied. “I’m Joseph Reynolds, and this is my husband Mark.”

The names on their passports.

Walsh opened the back door. Bishop helped Kensley up first, and then climbed in beside him.

Kensley took in every detail of the lush vegetation, the tall palm trees reaching toward the cerulean sky, the stretches of sandy ground, as Walsh drove down a narrow dirt track.

For a good quarter-mile, they were under a canopy of trees and plants, so thick it cut out much of the streaming sunlight.

And then it opened into what Kensley could only describe as a palace.

A sprawling, single-story home made of sandstone, with tall, arched windows, and details of painted Mediterranean tiles.

A fountain shot burbling water into the sky, and it wasn’t until Walsh parked near the fountain that Kensley noticed the tall iron fence surrounding the place, half hidden by foliage, and the heavy black gate that rolled closed. Keeping the world out.

Walsh carried their luggage through a huge open doorway and into a spacious entry of what Kensley guessed was white marble floors.

Air seemed to blow right off the ocean from straight ahead, where he spotted more open doors and windows, as well as a distant sliver of the ocean.

The furniture was as high-end and breezy as the house, everything shiny and clean, and Kensley was afraid to breathe, much less touch anything, lest he leave a smudge behind.

“Holy crap,” Kensley whispered.

Walsh placed their bags on a long, bamboo bench, and then pulled a card out of his pocket.

Handed it to Bishop. “The security code for the gate is on there, if you need to use the plane or the launch. Call ahead if you want to go off-island, though, so I can turn off the perimeter alarms and make sure we’ve got eyes at your destination.

The boss wants you kept safe, and he pays me well to do that. ”

“I appreciate it,” Bishop replied, pocketing the card. “I was told we had supplies for two weeks?”

“Yes, sir, you do. But if you’d like something special brought over, I can arrange that for a bit extra.”

Kensley had a feeling that meant an exchange of cash, of which he had zero. His payment as a priest was room, board, and clean clothes. No retirement nest egg, because they were expected to live and die at the abbey.

“The Wi-Fi information is on the card, too,” Walsh continued.

“Everything else in the house is pretty self-explanatory, but there is a stack of user

manuals under the kitchen sink for reference. My quarters are four-hundred-yards south, far out of sight of the main house, but I'm close for emergencies. ”

“Thank you, Walsh.” Bishop shook his hand, and Kensley swore he saw them exchange something. A tip, maybe? “If we have questions, I've got the radio.”

“Good enough. Enjoy your stay, sirs.” He left quickly through the big, open doorway.

“This is a dream,” Kensley said, twirling around once with his arms outstretched. He was already overheated in his sweats, and he peeled the sweatshirt off. Dropped it onto their pile of belongings and toed off his shoes. Bare feet felt more appropriate in such a magnificent house.

Beyond curious, he began to explore like he had back at the cabin.

The kitchen was almost the same size as the living area, with an attached dining room.

All marble countertops and bright white appliances, and the fanciest coffee maker he'd ever seen outside of a catalog.

Everywhere he looked were tall windows with picturesque views of the ocean and wilderness, and it seemed a little strange for a safe house.

“Bulletproof glass,” Bishop said, coming up behind Kensley where he stood, gazing down a stone pathway that led to the beach.

A beach he couldn't wait to explore. “And the fence you saw? It stretches down to the water on both sides, and then out for a good hundred yards. We've also got motion sensors and people watching the water.

I know it seems open and easy to get to, but we are safe here, I promise. ”

“I believe you.” He spun around, grinning. “Where’s the hot tub?”

Bishop laughed then clasped his hand. He led Kensley through the kitchen to a sliding door that opened onto a gorgeous patio made of terracotta pavers and decorated with reddish-tone wood furniture.

Teak? He wasn’t sure. Just past the seating area was an enclosed space surrounded by shrubs, a wrought-iron fence, and lots of unlit oil-burning torches. In the middle was the covered hot tub.

“I love this, it’s so secluded,” Kensley said.

“Yes, it is.” Bishop looped an arm around his waist. “Sometime very soon, we’re going to get in that hot tub naked. You’re going to sit on my cock, and I’m just gonna hold you there while we soak and you squirm.”

Arousal shot right to his core, and Kensley gasped. “Why wait?”

As if answering for him, Bishop’s stomach growled, and they both laughed.

“Because neither one of us has had a decent meal all day, and if I’m gonna fuck you the way I want, I’m gonna need fuel.

” He twisted around so he was facing Kensley, both hands on his waist, dark eyes laser-focused.

“Unless you’re still sore. I don’t want to hurt you. ”

His hardening dick and slicking hole made testing that difficult, but Kensley had

spent the better part of today sitting down, and he felt fine.

Hadn't noticed anything since departing the plane.

His own stomach rumbled for food, but Kensley could not stop the way his body reacted to this man.

He pulled Bishop's hand off his waist and pushed it back, beneath the band of his sweats. Toward his crease.

Bishop's nostrils flared. "Kens."

"I can't help it. Feel how wet you make me." A thick digit pressed between his cheeks and slid right inside. Kensley groaned and pressed his forehead against Bishop's sternum. "Yes. Feels so good."

"Fuck." Bishop claimed him with a harsh kiss, thrusting his tongue into Kensley's mouth in time with his finger in Kensley's ass.

The dual fucking lit him up from both ends, and Kensley melted against Bishop, taking everything he gave.

Giving anything Bishop wanted to take. The hand on his ass kept Kensley's erection firmly against Bishop's, and Kensley hung on, unsure where he ended and Bishop began.

He was being devoured alive, and he didn't care.

And then Bishop wrenched free, leaving Kensley dazed and unsteady for only a split second, before rough hands spun him around and positioned Kensley with his hands on the hot tub cover.

Bishop yanked his sweatpants down but didn't take them off.

They stayed put around Kensley's ankles, trapping him in a delicious way, leaving him almost completely naked.

Kensley whined, because Bishop wasn't touching him, and he glanced over his shoulder.

Hoping to see Bishop taking his pants off.

Instead, Bishop went to his knees behind Kensley.

Heat flushed Kensley's face and neck, and old shame left him trembling all over.

Shame beaten into him when he was a teen, told over and over that an omega's arousal—and especially the fluid that leaked from his anus—was wrong, unnatural, and that it only led to sin.

“What are you doing?” Kensley asked, voice wrecked with want and fear.

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“Something I’ve wanted to do since our first kiss.” Bishop nipped his left cheek, and Kensley gasped. “Want to taste you, sweetheart. That okay?”

The fact that Bishop was asking when he had no reason to—nothing prevented him from taking what he wanted—chased some of Kensley’s shame away.

Bishop wanted to do this dirty, unspoken thing, but he was still making sure Kensley wanted it, too.

And he did. Kensley wanted to reclaim all parts of his sexuality as an omega, and that included this thing that made omegas unique from other men.

“Yes, please,” Kensley gasped. He didn’t know what to expect, so he closed his eyes, all senses focusing in on his exposed butt and wet hole.

Bishop pulled his cheeks apart, exposing him in a way he’d only been exposed to a doctor once, the exam that verified he was omega.

But this wasn’t in a clinic for health reasons, this was so much more.

Warm breath blew across his hole, and Kensley squeaked, startled by the odd sensation.

Something pressed against his hole but it wasn’t as thick as Bishop’s dick, and it didn’t feel like a finger, so what—Bishop snuffled.

Holy damn, Bishop was smelling him! He was using his freaking nose.

Kensley released a guttural noise he didn't recognize as coming from his own throat, undone by the sheer dirty eroticism of Bishop smelling his asshole.

His wet, waiting asshole that needed to be filled with a finger, a cock, or even a—"Fuck!"

The force of Bishop's tongue driving into his hole shocked that single word from Kensley's lips.

He jerked forward, away from the strange sensation, and then humped back, needing more, damn it!

That wicked tongue plunged and licked and sought in a way that Kensley could not describe or understand, only that he was being fucked in a way he'd never imagined.

Bishop was moaning, too, dropping appreciative noises as he drank from Kensley's hole, lapping up his cream with each stab of his tongue.

Kensley's straining cock needed attention, but he couldn't move, sprawled on his chest over the hot tub cover.

His thighs trembled and his knees shook.

He wasn't going to last long under this onslaught of pleasure and desire, and as much as he longed for the hard slam of Bishop's cock in his hole, the crash of hips to ass, he could stay like this forever.

Floating in a blissful state of shock and sensation overload that was short-circuiting his higher thought functions.

He was need and ass and cock, and he had to come soon before he combusted.

“Please, fuck me, please,” Kensley babbled, commands running together in his head, word salad dropping from his lips.

He heard a lewd smacking sound, and then Kensley’s hole was empty. “Was gonna wait, sweetheart, but I can’t. Fuck, you taste better than the finest cognac. Sweeter than the best wine on earth.”

Kensley flailed with one hand, his objective to find Bishop’s cock and stick it in him, but he’d lost muscle control.

Bishop didn’t make him suffer long. A belt jangled, and then a familiar cock shoved into Kensley’s aching hole.

Kensley yelled something, he didn’t know or care, because yes!

This is what he needed, what his body craved from this man, who’d stolen his heart and now owned his body.

“Yessss,” Kensley slurred, then shocked himself by shoving back against Bishop. “More.”

Fingers dug into his hips. “You’ll take what I give you, omega.”

A new, strange fire lit inside Kensley, something close to anger but without the negative emotions. It gave him the strength to reach back and rake his nails down Bishop’s hip. “Fuck me! Take me!”

Bishop snarled, drew back until Kensley feared he’d pull out completely, and then slammed back inside.

Kensley hollered, feeling that in his throat, and he could barely hang on while Bishop

set a frenzied pace.

He had no grip on the hot tub cover and slid forward until his pelvis slammed against the side of the hot tub on every sharp thrust of Bishop's hips.

This primal act should have terrified him, but it only made Kensley feel free.

Free to accept this side of himself. The side that wanted to be used by this man, by Bishop Anders and no one else.

Something new and primitive bloomed deep inside of Kensley, bigger than any orgasm, stronger than any physical bond could ever be.

He didn't understand it, and he didn't care.

Kensley needed this man to fill him with his come, to mark him in this most primal way.

Didn't matter they'd done this before, something was different.

They were different.

"Fuck, Kens," Bishop gasped, hips snapping hard enough to bruise, and Kensley welcomed every brutal thrust. "It feels...feels...fuck."

"Don't stop!"

"Not gonna, but fuck."

They both knew this wasn't normal. This was beyond the other times they'd had sex, and Kensley didn't care.

He moaned and humped and clawed at the plastic cover beneath him, unable to do much more than silently beg for his orgasm.

For this fantastic torture to finally reach its climax and give Kensley some relief.

He needed real pressure on his dick, more than the constant rubbing against the hot tub—and then it was enough.

Kensley shouted as he came, his entire body pulsing and clenching, turning upside down, inside out.

Reality fractured, and it took a long time to come back together into a picture that made sense.

He was still splayed over the cover, panting, Bishop's hot, heaving body plastered on top of him.

A thick, pulsing cock still filled his passage, but Bishop was no longer thrusting.

He simply breathed against Kensley's neck, fingers still digging into Kensley's hips.

As awareness woke Kensley up a fraction, he felt something that must be a hallucination—the hot curl of Bishop's semen traveling up Kensley's passage, seeking a destination that was, in this moment, of no use since he was days past his last cycle.

But Kensley clung to the fantasy that Bishop's seed made it to his womb, where an egg eagerly awaited fertilization. That those two entities met and created something unique that would eventually implant inside of Kensley's body.

Their child.

Only a dream but a wonderful one. A dream he wanted to realize one day with this man.

Kensley didn't know what to say or how to ask, so he stood there until Bishop's cock began to soften inside him, answering the question of whether or not he'd come.

Bishop pulled back and slipped out, and Kensley didn't have time to miss his warmth, because Kensley's limp body was yanked up and around, and he was enveloped by the biggest, warmest hug of his entire life.

Kensley clutched at Bishop, shaking with need and shock and things he couldn't name.

Pleasure was too small a word for what he felt in that moment. Joy? Contentment? Love? He didn't know.

His strength gave out. Kensley was vaguely aware of being swept up into Bishop's capable arms. Carried out of the hot sea air and into someplace cooler.

Something soft at his back. Bishop snuggling up close.

Kensley reached for words, for something to express how he felt, to show Bishop how much he adored this.

Maybe it was their long day of travel. Maybe it was endorphins from their mind-blowing sex. Kensley didn't know why he fell asleep almost immediately, only that he did so while being held like he was the most precious jewel on earth.

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Bishop woke after the sun had set, disoriented and annoyed at himself, and unsure why.

Not for the sex. He'd never had sex as life-altering as what he'd shared with Kensley by the hot tub, and he had no words to describe it.

He'd loved every explosive second, even those moments post-orgasm when his muscles had been locked in place, not allowing him to do anything but grind into Kensley's ass, desperate to keep his come inside his lover.

His most primal urges had imagined him shooting right into his omega's womb, impregnating him with their child, binding them together for the rest of their lives.

The idea of wanting a family with Kensley, when omega pregnancies were already so rare and often scorned by society, had left Bishop irritated while he lounged in bed, staring up at the ceiling, aware of Kensley snoring lightly beside him.

Dreams of a normal life with a spouse and children had been something for nighttime, for his sleeping brain to deliver in short bursts, until reality woke him back up.

His lifestyle wasn't fit for those things. It was why he only indulged in the occasional one-night-stand. Anyone he chose to love would constantly be in danger.

Like Kensley was in danger now, through no fault of Bishop's.

King should have sent Kensley far away years ago, out of the country if possible, but King had wanted to be able to monitor his little brother.

To offer protection when necessary, and it became all too necessary on Saturday night.

Bishop wouldn't change a single thing about these last few days with Kensley; he was also smart enough to recognize how fragile their current peace and safety were.

Bishop slowly eased up so he was sitting against the headboard, reluctant to wake Kensley yet.

His sweet, sexy omega was sprawled on his back in a way that took up almost half of the king-size bed, a sheet drawn up to mid-chest, one arm thrown across his eyes, even though the room was shadowy and mostly dark.

Moonlight spilled in from the massive windows, because Bishop hadn't drawn the curtains before falling asleep.

He trusted the bullet-proof glass, but he did not trust Walsh. Not with Kensley's life and safety. The only person Bishop trusted with Kens was himself.

Kensley mumbled and that outstretched arm flopped down to cover his belly almost protectively, without ever waking.

Bishop stared at his hand, imagining it resting over a much rounder belly, one holding their child.

That belly growing larger as the months passed, until his precious Kensley gave birth, and they finally held their son or daughter in their arms.

He could see it. He wanted it more than life itself.

But he couldn't have it.

Could he?

His stomach gurgled, reminding him they still hadn't eaten.

Eager to please his omega, Bishop slid out of bed, found a light silk robe, and quietly closed the curtains in the bedroom before seeking out the kitchen.

A package of strip steaks in the fridge begged to be cooked, so Bishop set about preparing a hearty meal to refuel them both.

Bishop had promised to make Kensley sit on his cock in the hot tub, and that was still happening in the near future.

Remembering the way Kensley had lost his mind tonight, being fucked over the hot tub cover, gave Bishop a half-boner the entire time he cooked.

The scent of the searing meat must have roused Kensley, because he shuffled into the kitchen wearing an identical robe, his hair damp from the shower.

He brought with him the delightful scent of coconut, possibly from the shampoo.

"I thought I smelled something amazing," Kensley said. "I'm starving."

"Me too. The fridge has all kinds of drink options, so help yourself to whatever you're in the mood for."

"Hmm." Kensley inspected the fridge's contents, and Bishop observed his profile.

The way his eyebrows lifted and his lips parted in surprise.

An entire shelf was stocked with canned beer and soda, and bottles of plain and flavored water, plus containers of juice and two bottles of wine.

And there should be more in the pantry to replenish whatever they drank.

Kensley surprised him by selecting a beer. "I've never had beer before."

Bishop smiled and tested the doneness of the meat with his finger. "It's not something everyone likes, especially if you aren't into bitter notes."

"Do you?"

"Definitely. It's a simple way to take the edge off a stressful day without losing control."

"Good. Then you can drink the rest if I hate it." With a bright grin, Kensley popped the tab, sniffed at the opening, and then snorted hard. "Bubbles."

Bishop laughed. "Don't stick your nose in it, goofball. Just take a big swig."

Kensley shrugged. "Bottom's up." He did as told, his throat working down three long gulps before lowering the can. He shuddered once, and then thrust the can at Bishop. "Okay, that's not...no, thank you."

"It's an acquired taste." Bishop downed the rest of the beer, which wasn't much, and that impressed him a little. Kensley was not shy about trying new things. "Wine might be more to your taste."

"I don't think I want the alcohol, anyway." He grabbed a can of what looked like root

beer and cracked it. Drank some and smacked his lips. “Much better. I remember loving root beer so much when I was young. We never had it at the abbey.”

“I’m sorry,” Bishop said without thinking.

“For what?”

“For all the things you lost from your childhood when we sent you there.”

“You didn’t send me there. King did. And on some level, I do resent him for it. I haven’t fully forgiven him, but I wasn’t a prisoner. Not really. I simply wasn’t brave enough to leave on my own.”

Bishop disliked the upset frown on Kensley’s face, so he walked over and kissed it away.

Kensley tasted so sweet, an addictive mix of root beer and his own unique flavor.

He could stand there and kiss him for hours, but he didn’t want their steaks to burn, so he pulled back.

Rubbed his nose against Kensley’s. “Set the table while I finish up dinner.”

“Okay.”

Watching Kensley search for the plates and flatware was highly entertaining, and Bishop grinned through the rest of meal prep, finally presenting them each with a juicy, medium-rare steak, microwaved “baked” potato, and a frozen veggie medley he’d nuked and tossed with butter and a local spice blend.

Kensley gaped at his plate. “Wow, this is the best-looking meal I’ve been served

in...I don't know how long. A real steak is...yeah. Wow.”

“I'll feed you steak every day if it makes you happy.

” He reached across the table to clasp Kensley's hand.

“No loving god would want you to constantly deprive yourself of life's pleasures to prove how pious and faithful you are.

That's the church's way of controlling you, so you don't think for yourself or question the way they limit you. ”

“I know. I'm seeing it more plainly every hour I'm away from that place. I never wanted or believed in that life. Now that I've truly tasted freedom, I'd rather die than go back.”

Bishop squeezed his hand. “It won't come to that. There are always other solutions.”

“I hope so.” Kensley returned the squeeze then picked up his utensils. “I cannot wait to eat this, oh my word.”

“Dig in, m—uh, enjoy.” Lame, but Bishop couldn't quite make himself say “my love” in casual conversation. Sweetheart, in the heat of the moment, was one thing, but “my love” was practically a declaration, and it was way too soon to make it.

He watched Kensley cut into the center of his steak and peek at the interior. His skeptical frown was beyond adorable. “Is it supposed to be so pink?”

“Yes, this is the best temperature to eat a good steak,” Bishop replied. “Trust me, it'll be tender and juicy. If steak is gray, you might as well eat the sole of your shoe.”

“Okay.” Kensley sliced off a bite and made a show of sliding it off the tines of the fork with his lips. Of chewing slowly, his gaze drifting off to the side as he tasted this new thing. Swallowed. “Okay, you’re right. Wow. You’re good with meat.”

Bishop laughed at the innuendo that Kensley didn’t seem to get. “Yes, I am.”

The meal was the best one Bishop could remember in years.

Not only the simple, yet delicious food, but also the company.

Watching Kensley eat real food, rather than what they’d cobbled together out of boxes and cans, invigorated Bishop with a new sense of wonder.

That there were still new and amazing things to experience in life, and he wasn’t finished finding them.

And he had the honor of giving Kensley all new experiences that had nothing to do with sex.

He couldn’t wait to take Kensley down to the beach tomorrow.

To swim and sunbathe and experience the ocean together.

If it was safe, he wanted to take the launch over to the open air market, so they could shop local booths for food and fun and maybe lunch someplace.

He wanted to treat this as much like a vacation as he could, until the real world threats against them inevitably reared their ugly heads and ruined the illusion.

Kensley deserved it all and more.

Bishop drank another beer with his meal, positive the one-and-a-half he'd imbibed on a full stomach wouldn't affect his judgment.

Kensley volunteered to do the dishes and clean up.

Bishop used that as a good excuse to go outside and get the hot tub uncovered and heating up.

He selected a temperature that would be bearable with the evening's warmth, and then tracked down a couple of large, fluffy towels.

It felt strange to wander the villa in just a robe, no firearm holstered behind his back, his cell phone at the ready in case of emergency.

He was here as a guard, after all, not on vacation.

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But there were enough motion sensors and alarms around the property to notify them if anything larger than a ground dove landed on their soil. And speaking of safety...

Kensley was wiping down the counter with a towel, all remnants of their meal put away, every surface spotless—probably something he had to do after meals at the abbey. Bishop took his hand and led him to what looked like a floor-sized gilded mirror in the hall near the bedroom door.

“It’s unlikely we’ll ever need to use this while we’re here,” Bishop said, “but I want you to know where it is, in case.”

“What’s where?”

Bishop hooked his fingers behind a scrolled detail at chest-height and pressed a latch.

The mirror popped forward, and Bishop pulled it open to reveal a set of stairs that descended into darkness.

“A panic room. If, for any reason, which I highly doubt will happen, we are attacked, you are to come here.” He took Kensley’s hand so he could feel the latch, then showed him the light switch and how to shut the door from the inside.

“Only a handful of people know it’s here.

There is a supply of water and food, flashlights and batteries, as well as a satellite phone.

There's also an upholstered chair with a handgun inside the cushion. ”

Kensley blanched.

“Again, this is just a worst-case scenario option,” Bishop continued as he closed the mirror. “If you have to hide down there, you don’t come out again unless it’s me, King, or someone else who knows the password.”

“Which is what?”

“Hyacinth.”

Kensley’s frown shifted into an amused half-grin. “That’s my favorite flower.”

“I know. You told me once. You said you love it, because you can only smell it fresh for a few weeks each year, so that makes it precious.”

“Yeah. I planted some in the abbey garden my third year there, and they’ve bloomed each spring since.”

“I’m glad.” And he was. “But do you understand the panic room plan?”

“Yes, I do. Thank you for showing me, even though I won’t need to use it.” Kensley’s absolute faith in him made Bishop’s heart soar. “Are we going to keep touring the house and its hiding spaces, or are we going to play in the hot tub?”

Bishop growled softly. “Hot tub. I hope that steak dinner woke you up, because I don’t plan on letting you go back to sleep until sunrise.”

Kensley let out a sharp breath and stepped deeper into his personal space. “I slept longer than you today, so let’s see what you’ve got, Mr. Anders.”

“Gladly, Mr. Thorne.” He scooped Kensley into his arms before the smaller man had a chance to react, loving the way Kensley felt. The way he fit. As if they were made exactly for each other—not the first time he’d thought that, either.

For the briefest of moments, fourteen years ago, Bishop had picked a wounded teenage Kensley up off the floor, and he’d marveled at how perfectly Kensley had fit there.

As if we were made for each other...like the mythical charum.

Kensley laughed, which snapped Bishop out of that thought, then looped his arms around Bishop’s neck. Nuzzled his nose against Bishop’s cheek. “I like how you carry me. It makes me feel safe and protected, like earlier.”

“I’m glad. I love you in my arms.” Standing up, snuggling on the couch, curled up in bed—didn’t matter as long as he could hold Kensley close.

He carried Kensley outside to the bubbling hot tub, and then gently set him on his feet.

Gave Kensley only a moment to get his balance before yanking Kensley’s robe off, baring his omega to his gaze and his whims.

Kensley’s dick was already thickening, and Bishop swore he smelled the sweetness of the cream he’d gorged himself on a few hours ago.

He probably couldn’t, not with the strong scents of salt, ocean water, and chlorine, but he hadn’t forgotten the delectable aroma.

Bishop slipped his hand right into Kensley’s crease and rubbed at his damp hole. “You sore?”

Kensley moaned, hands grabbing the front of Bishop's robe. "Not too sore for you. It's like my hole was formed with your cock in mind, Bishop. Made just for you. I need it."

Those filthy words tore at what little restraint Bishop had while Kensley stood naked in front of him.

He shucked his own robe, and he didn't have a moment to plan his next move before Kensley slid to his knees.

He took Bishop's cock into his mouth, as deep as he could without choking, and then set a quick, bobbing pace.

More than that pretty mouth sucking his cock, Bishop fell into the way Kensley gazed up at him, eyes simmering with lust and desire, and something that could have been love.

Bishop threaded his fingers in Kensley's hair, adoring the way those silky strands slipped through his fingers, light like raven's feathers.

He wanted to hold, to thrust, to come down Kensley's throat, but that would end things far too soon.

So he let Kensley play his body for a while, worshiping Bishop's cock until his orgasm winked at him.

Teasing its nearness. He carefully pulled Kensley off, then up for a long, leisurely kiss.

A kiss that promised and teased, while hands stroked and pinched.

He kneaded Kensley's ass, pulling his cheeks apart and pressing them together, enjoying the way Kensley panted and moaned with each stretch of those taut globes.

"Fuck, Bishop," Kensley panted between kisses. "Now. In me, please."

He would never tire of those words. Never.

Bishop climbed into the hot tub first, and then he helped Kensley in.

Warm water jetted and swirled around his legs.

The tub was large enough to fit at least eight people comfortably, with long benches along two opposite sides, and shorter ones on the other two.

Bishop pulled Kensley to one of the long benches and sat, the water now up to mid-waist.

Kensley watched him with a lust-drunk expression, his cock bobbing in the water, fingertips skimming the bubbling surface.

He almost looked like a mythical water nymph, risen from the sea to tempt sailors to their doom, and Bishop could see how men would be drawn to someone like that.

Rippling light reflecting off his pale skin, moisture clinging to his roguish face, eyes full of wicked promises.

The silence too magical to break just yet, Bishop raised his hands from the water and patted its surface, mimicking patting his lap.

Inviting Kensley to sit. With a bite of his lower lip, Kensley turned his back to Bishop.

Bishop grabbed his hips and helped Kensley lower his body into the water.

Kensley reached around and clasped Bishop's cock, holding it steady while he sank down, his hot, slick passage sucking Bishop inside in a single, smooth motion.

Leaving Kensley seated on Bishop's lap, ass stuffed full of cock.

Kensley moaned, the sound bouncing around their private grotto, and when he clenched, Bishop's own moan answered.

The heat of the swirling water surrounded Bishop's lower half like a hug.

He arranged Kensley's legs so each one was draped over one of Bishop's own legs, spreading Kensley wide open.

Bishop reached around, first to lightly grope Kensley's cock, and then to probe lower.

Past Kensley's balls to rub at the rim of his hole, stretched taut by Bishop's cock.

"How do you feel?" Bishop asked.

"So...full. Like you're all the way up in my womb," Kensley whispered, his voice barely audible over the hum of the hot tub's motor. Bishop gave a tiny thrust just to hear Kensley whine. His head dropped back to Bishop's shoulder. "Guh."

Bishop closed his eyes and imagined he was that deep inside his omega, the head of his cock nudging right into his womb, ready to fill his fertile omega with his seed. To create a child they would love and raise and protect always.

Something reared up from deep inside Bishop, a sensation he'd never felt before, and had only heard the vaguest rumors of from others who'd fallen for omega males—a

kind of claiming he couldn't describe.

Not a physical one, despite their bodies joined so intimately.

It felt...spiritual. Soul-deep and ever-binding.

I want more.

Unsure how to deal with the feelings or if he should speak, Bishop let instinct control him.

He turned his head and bit the side of Kensley's throat, right over his throbbing pulse point.

Kensley shouted and keened. Bishop didn't break the skin or try to damage it, he nibbled and sucked with his mouth, while his fingers played with Kensley's cock and balls and taint.

Kensley writhed on his lap, but he didn't fight or try to get away.

Bishop wasn't holding him down. Kensley grabbed at Bishop's thighs and knees, pulling like he wanted to draw Bishop's entire body inside through his asshole.

"Fuuuuck!" Kensley screamed. "Bishop! What?—?"

"I've got you, sweetheart." Bishop licked the rough spot he'd made on Kensley's throat. "I feel it, too."

"Need...ugh!"

"What do you need?"

Kensley wrenched away, and Bishop's cock left that perfect inferno, but he didn't have time to process why.

Kensley turned, knelt on the bench, knees on each side of Bishop's hips, and sheathed Bishop's cock with his body once more.

They both cried out. Kensley swallowed a second yell with his mouth, kissing Bishop with a fierceness he'd never experienced before.

Kensley set a brutal pace, slamming his ass down on Bishop's thighs, dragging his cock against Bishop's abs with each thrust. Fucking like a man who'd die unless he orgasmed as soon as possible.

Bishop's own breaths got dangerously short as they kissed and rocked together, water splashing all around them, and it didn't matter.

Nothing mattered except release. Except experiencing this unfamiliar, powerful thing spinning between them, binding them together into something brand-new.

Something potent and wonderful. Bishop broke the kiss and sucked on the other side of Kensley's neck, desperate to add a matching bruise.

Kensley's nails scraped down his shoulders and back as he keened and fucked, an endless cycle of movement and pleasure.

Bishop lost all track of time, of sense, and of place.

He existed in this moment, when his body was alive and singing, and his entire world was Kensley Thorne.

At some point, the world stilled, and he could breathe again.

And then the world was rocking and pleasure was coursing.

It became a vortex of sensation, relaxation, sensation again, and then he was coming.

He didn't know how many times or how long it lasted, only that when his senses began clearing, Kensley was wrapped up in his arms, head resting on his shoulder.

The jets had turned off, and he vaguely recalled setting an hour timer.

His hands had come to rest over Kensley's ass, and he gently eased his soft cock the rest of the way out of Kensley's limp body.

Kensley snuffled as if in protest of the loss, but Bishop was sure his dick was out of the game for a while.

He lovingly stroked Kensley's gaping hole but didn't press inside, worried over how long and how hard they'd gone tonight.

"Doesn't hurt." Kensley's hot breath fanned across Bishop's damp neck. "All of me is yours."

Bishop growled possessively and dipped his middle finger inside that exquisite heat just to hear Kensley sigh.

More than the spoken words, Bishop felt their meaning in his very soul.

They had somehow claimed each other tonight, experienced something he'd never imagined, had only heard rumors of existing: the fated charum.

A primal connection between two beloved souls, stitched together in heaven and torn apart on earth, each destined to wander restlessly until reunited with their charus.

Was Kensley his other half? His charus? Had Bishop always felt this desire?

Since Kensley first came into his life? First began to inch into puberty and become appealing to Bishop?

Why every small touch from the handsome teen had felt like a direct line to Bishop's dick?

Why it had felt safer to see Kensley sent away, than to continue tempting Bishop with his nearness?

Were they meant to be together all this time?

He was too exhausted to examine it properly tonight.

"We need to get out." Bishop kissed Kensley's chin. "If we fall asleep out here, we'll both drown."

"M'hm."

Bishop didn't bother with their robes. He got Kensley's limp, uncooperative body out of the hot tub, but he was too slick to carry, so they both stumbled into the house.

Right into bed. Bishop pulled the covers up around their damp bodies and tucked Kensley close.

He barely had time to mumble a good-night to his omega before falling into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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EIGHT

Kensley drifted on an ocean of joy, surrounded by currents of pleasure, and the warmth of smiling skies, and he'd never been more content.

More sated and safe and, most importantly, loved.

Love he'd fallen asleep clutching tightly to, and love he still felt all around him as he slowly woke to a wonderfully-familiar physical sensation: Bishop's cock inside his ass.

Awareness told him so many things at once: he lay on his left side with Bishop plastered against him from behind, his half-erect cock spearing Kensley's hole without thrusting, as if Bishop had entered him in the night and then fallen asleep there.

Kensley smiled against his pillow, loving that they'd found each other so instinctively.

Their bodies joining, desperate for the same intense connection they'd shared in the hot tub.

Kensley had no words for that experience.

For losing his conscious mind for a while, rapt in the knowledge that he'd found something very precious, as if Bishop had been the missing half of his soul, and they'd finally mended back together.

His still knees ached, his back was a little tight, and both sides of his neck burned from Bishop's hard, biting kisses, but it was all worth it.

Had Kensley found his charus? Was that what last night had been? Had he instinctively known all those years ago?

He might not believe in Heavenly Father, but he believed in soulmates, in the existence of a true charum pairing.

And now that he'd had sex with the man who was the other half of himself, the person created to satisfy Kensley's inner omega, he couldn't imagine living another moment without Bishop.

The rational side of his brain wanted him to be angry at Bishop for penetrating Kensley in his sleep, for not asking as kindly as he'd asked so many other times.

The part of his soul who recognized Bishop told his brain to fuck off and enjoy it.

Enjoy knowing that, even in sleep, they'd come together as one complete person.

Kensley pressed backward, just to feel Bishop's dick slide deeper into his passage and his pubes graze his ass cheeks.

Bishop's arms tightened around his waist, and Kensley wasn't prepared for being rolled onto his stomach and smooshed into the mattress.

Bishop didn't start fucking him, though.

He kissed the back of Kensley's neck, then nibbled at his spine like he was a delicate snack.

It tickled enough for Kensley to start laughing.

“This is a spectacular way to wake up,” Bishop said with a deep roll of his hips.

“Oh yeah.” With Kensley’s left arm trapped awkwardly beneath him, he could barely reach around with his right to squeeze Bishop’s ass. “Need you to do something, baby, it’s hard to breathe like this.”

“Sorry about that.” He sounded more smug than sorry. The bed dipped as Bishop put more weight on his forearms, lifting his chest enough for Kensley to wiggle his arm free and breathe easier. Bishop also bowed his back, which pushed his dick impossibly deeper inside Kensley.

Kensley revisited that amazing fantasy of Bishop’s cockhead breaching his womb, and he moaned. “You’re evil.”

“You love it.”

“I do.”

“Good.” Bishop kissed his jaw. “Are you sure you’re okay with this? I didn’t mean to penetrate you without asking.”

“I’m perfectly okay. We’re...” He couldn’t make himself say the word. “Together. Unless I’m actively sick or injured, you’ll always have my permission.”

“Thank you. I’d rather be conscious and ask, but thank you.”

Kensley melted under the warmth of those perfect words and the respect behind them.

Someone like Bishop could easily take what he wanted, especially from those smaller

and weaker, but he didn't.

He asked. He demurred. He cared , and that was everything.

“Then how about you get us off, stud? I'm starving. ”

“I'd better fill you up then, omega.” Bishop hauled Kensley up onto his hands and knees, and began to fuck him.

The familiar slip and slam drove Kensley forward, and he braced against the ornate headboard while his lover drove into him.

Drove him higher with each thrust, until Kensley was soaring toward a quick release.

His come splattered the bed beneath him, and Kensley collapsed, his shaking arms unable to keep him upright.

Bishop pulled out, and then rolled Kensley onto his back.

Anticipating what his charus wanted, Kensley opened his mouth.

Bishop knelt over his head, but instead of pushing or choking, he gently eased his cock between Kensley's lips, giving him time to adjust. To relax his throat and take what was offered as deeply as possible.

Kensley's eyes watered from the stretch, but he didn't loosen his grip on Bishop's thighs.

He kept his lover there until Bishop threw back his head and came.

Kensley did his best to swallow what Bishop gave him, savoring the salty tang he

caught on his tongue, but most went straight down his throat.

Filling him up just as Bishop had promised.

When Bishop stopped coming, he slipped down and rolled them so Kensley was on top, their spent dicks rubbing together while they gently kissed.

Bishop wiggled a finger between Kensley's cheeks but didn't probe or press, just rested there.

Kensley enjoyed the dominant position for a while, perfectly content until his stomach released an audible growl.

Bishop laughed. "Guess I didn't fill you up enough."

"It was plenty, but I think I need some carbs." Kensley kissed Bishop's lips, nose and chin. "Maybe after a shower. I'm sticky all over."

"Then let's see about cleaning those nooks and crannies."

"Please."

After a lot of time and touching in the shower, Kensley and Bishop eventually stumbled into the kitchen and prepared a simple breakfast. They only wore board shorts, and Kensley felt no shame in being nearly naked while scrambling eggs and searing sausages.

He'd cooked breakfast hundreds of times at the abbey while fully dressed in robes and shoes, but this was a thousand times better.

Freer. Kensley was cooking food he loved, for a man he loved, in clothing that made

him comfortable.

Once they'd tucked into the food and cleaned up their mess, Bishop led him outside to the wide patio that faced the ocean.

Salty sea air stung Kensley's nose and eyes.

He inhaled deeply, barely able to see the vast ocean a few hundred feet ahead, past a line of palm trees, shrubs and small, native plants.

"I'm going to check in with Walsh," Bishop said. "If he gives a clear report, I'd like to go down to the beach for a while. Swim a little and enjoy the view."

"I'd love that. I've never swam in the ocean before."

"Can you swim?"

"A little. I swam in a public pool a few times when I was a kid." Kensley was a touch nervous, because a giant ocean with waves and currents was a lot scarier than the shallow end of an indoor pool. "The ocean is so big. Is it okay to be scared of it?"

"Of course. How about we do small steps? Instead of the ocean, how about the lagoon? There's no current and the water is very gentle."

"Okay."

"Great. Give me five minutes?"

"I'll be waiting."

After Bishop went inside, Kensley rested his hands on the waist-high stone wall

surrounding the patio and stared out at the slip of blue ahead of him.

It would be so easy to take a boat and disappear into the sea, to go where no one could track them, settle someplace like castaways on a deserted island.

But that wasn't realistic, and the ocean was dangerous, if you didn't know how to travel on it.

Kensley had no clue how, but part of him would rather risk the ocean's danger than whatever King's enemies might do if they caught him.

Shivering despite the warm sun, Kensley wrapped his arms around his middle and tilted his face to the sky.

He sensed more than heard Bishop's approach, and when he blinked his eyes open, he laughed at the sight of Bishop loaded down with equipment: at least two towels, an umbrella in a bag, and two sand chairs, plus a small cooler slung over one shoulder.

"Can I carry something?" Kensley asked.

Bishop handed him the cooler but kept everything else.

He winked then led Kensley across the patio to a gate, which opened onto a sandy path that wound into the underbrush.

Instead of heading for the beach ahead, they went to the right (Kensley had no idea the actual compass direction), through a thick overhead covering of palm fronds and other brush.

The path widened onto a sandy beach that stretched left and right in a semi-circle around a calm body of blue-green water.

Farthest from them was the actual ocean, which entered the lagoon on a froth of gentle waves, which were barely ripples by the time they reached shore.

The lagoon was probably a hundred yards at its widest, most of the beach shadowed by the trees surrounding its perimeter.

Kensley stared in awe of this beautiful, secluded slice of nature. The air seemed cooler here, the scents of salt and flowers stronger, everything somehow...magical.

“If heaven is a real place,” Kensley said, “this is it.”

Metal clanked as Bishop put his burdens down, and then warm arms wrapped around Kensley’s waist from behind. Bishop rested his chin on Kensley’s shoulder, and Kensley felt the broad smile on Bishop’s face. “I’ve been here a few times, but never in my life has it felt so much like paradise.”

“Can we stay here forever?”

“How about we stay in the moment? No later, no tomorrow, just now.”

“I love the sound of that.”

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After sharing a long kiss, Bishop put up the sun umbrella, while Kensley organized their chairs and towels.

Before Kensley could walk to the water, Bishop pulled a bottle of sunscreen out of a cooler pocket and wiggled his eyebrows.

They were both hard, erections straining against their shorts, by the time they'd slathered the other person with the coconut-scented lotion.

But as much as Kensley loved being fucked by Bishop, he was starting to feel it, even with his natural slick.

Curious how long Bishop could resist him, Kensley took off for the shore and splashed into the cool water up to mid-calf.

Sand tickled the soles of his bare feet, which were magnified by the clear water.

He had no idea how deep the water got, but he had no fear of it.

Not with Bishop walking up behind him, a wide grin on his handsome face.

His burn scars stood out more in the bright sunshine, but he didn't seem aware of them.

Their pasts had no place here.

"Trust me?" Bishop asked.

“Of course.” There was no question of trust after everything Bishop had done for him since Saturday.

Bishop scooped Kensley up in his arms and cradled him close, water from his feet splashing them both.

Kensley looped his arms around Bishop’s neck, completely unafraid—even when Bishop began walking farther into the lagoon.

The water slowly rose, until the tips of Kensley’s toes skimmed its surface.

Bishop stopped with the water at his waist and wetting the seat of Kensley’s shorts.

“About six feet farther out,” Bishop said, “the bottom drops and it gets deep. I’ve snorkeled out here before.”

“What’s out there?”

“Some coral. Porcupine and parrot fish, moray eels, sometimes starfish and seahorses. Conchs. I can teach you, if you want.”

“I’d love that. Maybe tomorrow. I need to practice swimming again.”

“Safety first.” Bishop kissed his cheek. “As much as my inner teenager would love to just toss you into the water, I’m going to put you down on your feet, okay? You can touch fine, and the current is weak.”

“Okay.” His belly wobbled on the way down, but he loved the way the water sucked him into its chilly embrace.

Much colder than by shore. He held tight to Bishop’s hand and laughed at the way his

shorts billowed in the water.

On a peal of laughter, he dunked low until the water came over his shoulders, then stood straight back up. “Feels so good.”

“Yeah?” Bishop went all the way under before rocketing back up on a big splash that wet Kensley’s face, and they both started laughing. “Ready to swim?”

“Definitely.”

And they did. Kensley lost track of time as they swam around the shallow water, ducking under, becoming familiar with their surroundings. Kensley started meekly at first, finding his courage the longer they played.

Eventually they slogged to shore and flopped onto their sand chairs.

The day had heated up immensely, so Kensley was glad for the umbrella’s shade.

Bishop pulled chilled bottles of water from the cooler, and they both drank.

Kensley was exhausted from the swim, content with the location, and safe with the company... .

And he woke to Bishop gently shaking his ankle. Kensley had fallen asleep in his chair, leaving him with a crick in his neck and a numb ass. “Ugh, what time is it?”

“About three in the afternoon,” Bishop replied.

“Did you tell that by looking at the sun and shadows?”

He chuckled. “My cell phone is in the cooler’s front pocket. I checked before I woke

you.”

“You let me sleep the afternoon away?”

“You look so peaceful when you sleep. I also ate a protein bar while you napped, but I imagine you’re starving by now.”

“Definitely hungry. I slept right through lunch. Any more of those protein bars?”

Bishop handed him one, chilly from the cooler. “Here. It’ll hold off the hunger pangs while I cook.”

“I can cook. You keep cooking for me.”

“I really don’t mind. I genuinely enjoy cooking.” Bishop’s warm smile was everything. “And I finally have someone in my life important enough to cook for.”

Kensley pulled him in for a long kiss. “Then let’s go, so you can cook for us.”

For several hours that afternoon, Bishop had been able to pretend he and Kensley truly were on vacation.

Playing and swimming in the lagoon had been amusing and relaxing, and he’d loved witnessing Kensley’s courage grow with each new dive.

Sitting by the shore and watching Kensley sleep in the shade of their umbrella had given Bishop images of doing this far into the future.

Of sharing these simple, quiet moments with the man he loved.

Yes, loved. The feelings were intense and terrifying and exciting, and Bishop

couldn't deny what he felt for Kensley: he was in love with his charus, the other half of his fated charum, and he would do everything in his power to protect what they were creating.

Since Bishop planned on returning to the lagoon many more times this week, he left the umbrella and chairs behind, collected the towels and cooler, and then led Kensley back to the house.

He was keenly aware of their surroundings, despite this morning's report from Walsh that the island was quiet.

Despite a text he'd sent about twenty minutes ago, asking for a report, and receiving the same.

Bishop could relax in increments, but he would never let his entire guard down.

Doing that could get him and Kensley killed. Or worse.

He sent Kensley to take a shower, while he went into the kitchen to plan their dinner. The pantry and freezer were fully stocked, which gave him plenty of options.

When Kensley entered the kitchen in fresh board shorts and a sleeveless tee, seared fish filets were finishing off in the oven with a pan of roasting potatoes, while Bishop completed a simple garlic-lemon sauce on the stovetop.

Kensley strolled with ease and confidence now, and it was a beautiful change to see.

"I've changed my mind, this is what heaven is," Kensley said. "A handsome, half-naked man cooking me dinner in a gorgeous beach house."

"It's our heaven for right now. Wine? There's a bottle of white that will go perfectly

with the fish.”

“Okay.”

Bishop poured them each a glass from a chilled bottle of chardonnay, then handed one to Kensley. Bishop wasn't much of a wine drinker, but he wanted tonight's meal to be...well, romantic. Wasn't wine romantic?

Kensley sniffed the rim of the glass, pert nose wrinkling. “Here's to new experiences.” He tipped the glass and the pale-yellow liquid slipped between his pink lips. Bishop watched, entranced by the simple sight, and then happy when Kensley grinned. “Okay, this is pretty good. When can we eat?”

Bishop glanced at the microwave's timer. “About four more minutes. Just enough time to set the table.”

“I'll—”

“No, I'll do it. You enjoy the wine.”

“If you insist.” Kensley took his glass to the table and sat, his gentle smile never wavering.

Bishop couldn't explain his bone-deep need to take care of Kensley: to cook and serve and pamper this man, when he'd never done this for a romantic partner.

Not that he'd ever had a romantic partner before.

And this thing between him and Kensley? It was deeper than romance.

Deeper than anything Bishop could describe or quantify, except with the word *charus*.

The fated charum was as mythical to him as the word soulmates or one true love.

Things people whispered about, words tossed around in movies by paid actors.

Not anything he'd given credence to in real life.

But he truly did feel like Kensley was the other half of him, missing his entire life, and now he was complete. Whole.

No matter the word, he had to protect it.

He delivered cutlery and napkins to the table, followed by their plated food.

Kensley's eyes shined like someone being served a gourmet meal of lobster, caviar and the rarest summer vegetables, when it was simple fish and potatoes.

But it was more than the food. It was the effort.

It was someone else doing for Kensley, when Kensley had spent the last fourteen years of his life in service to others.

"It smells amazing," Kensley said. "We so rarely got to eat fish. What kind is this?"

"Snapper. I'm not well-versed in fish cookery, though, so I apologize if it's a little overdone."

"Like I'd know if it was."

The fish was a little overcooked, but neither of them complained, and Bishop refilled Kensley's glass twice before they finished eating.

Kensley's cheeks were flushed, his eyes bright, and he was definitely tipping from loose into drunk, even with all the food.

He had no tolerance to speak of. They both washed the dishes, because Bishop didn't quite trust Kensley not to drop a plate, especially when Kensley blew suds at him and started giggling.

Tonight was going to end a bit sooner than Bishop had hoped, but that was okay.

They had at least two weeks here on the island, maybe longer, depending on what was happening back home.

Once the kitchen was in order, he led Kensley into the living room.

It had a long sectional sofa, and he settled them on the side closest to the huge windows.

They had a great view of the dimming sky and rising stars.

Kensley rested against his chest, one hand plucking at the hem of Bishop's shorts. Bishop grabbed that hand and rested it over Bishop's heart instead. "Relax for a while," he whispered. "There's no rush."

"Mmm. S'there more wine?"

"If you have any more, you're going to pass out."

"Keep me safe if I do?"

"Always." He pressed his lips to Kensley's temple. "You're mine, Kens."

“Yeah.”

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Bishop stared out the window at the darkening sky, while Kensley relaxed and slowly fell asleep in his arms. The occasional bird flew past, and he faintly heard the crash of the surf far beyond his line of sight. It was almost a perfect moment.

So perfect that Bishop fell asleep. He woke in near-darkness, aware of Kensley squirming on his lap.

Bishop's instant alertness clocked no dangers in the room, just Kensley moving down the couch and tugging on the waistband of Bishop's shorts.

Freeing his dick. He didn't object when Kensley took him into his mouth.

Sucked him to a full erection. Shed his own clothes and knee-walked up the length of the couch.

Bishop helped Kensley guide his cock into Kensley's wet, waiting hole.

They took their time, moving together in the darkness, the only sounds their own labored breathing, and the occasional squeak of the couch springs.

He let Kensley lead them to their climaxes, neither of them censoring their cries.

There was no need to, no one to hear or shame them for their pleasure.

For finding such beauty in each other.

After lazing together in the afterglow, they rose to shower. Dried each other off.

Kissed in bed until the sun rose, and they slept again.

Their time on the island took on a similar pattern of naps, making love, cooking together, and spending time at the lagoon.

On Friday afternoon, they took the longer trek down to the main beach.

Kensley had a blast prowling the shoreline for shells and shiny stones.

He found a small conch shell he delighted in holding to his ear to “hear” the sound of the ocean inside.

The next day, after nothing but “all is quiet” reports from Walsh, and two calls from King that no one was looking outside the tristate area for Kensley, Bishop decided it was time to explore the neighboring open air market.

He asked Walsh to do a quick scan of the boat for any sort of explosives or tracking devices before they arrived at the docks.

The last thing he wanted to do was make Kensley more nervous about the trip by doing the sweep in front of him.

The boat was easy enough to handle for their brief trip, and Kensley looked adorable stuffed into a bright orange life preserver, clinging to the rail as the wind blew his hair back.

At one point in the journey, their island disappeared behind them, and their destination had yet to appear ahead.

They were truly alone in the middle of the ocean, a tiny speck floating on a rolling sea of vast beauty and infinite possibilities.

For a few precious moments, the future was anything they could dream.

And then a brown smudge appeared on the horizon, and the spell was broken.

The feelings remained, though, and Bishop clung to them as he navigated their way to a small, private dock.

King's golf cart was gassed and waiting for them.

Bishop kept a sharp eye out as he drove, keenly aware of the weight of the pistol strapped to his back, just in case they ran into unexpected trouble.

The market was near the beach. Dozens of stalls stood beneath a tall pavilion with a thatched roof, and even more stalls surrounded it, some with umbrellas for shade, and others with colorful blankets hung on poles.

A gentle breeze came off the water, salting the air and keeping the bright sun from beating down too harshly.

They were approaching the nearest stall when Kensley grabbed his forearm and tugged Bishop to a stop. "Do we have money? I don't have any money," he said in a harsh whisper.

"I've got cash, it's okay." Bishop wanted to kiss him, but they were in an uncontrolled environment. Instead, he gently squeezed Kensley's hand after prying it off his arm, then released him. "Buy anything you want."

"What I want to buy is a villa on the water so we can stay forever, but I doubt you've got that much cash."

"You're right." But he did have access to that kind of money; money he'd been

saving since he got his first job.

And once this entire fiasco with the Castle family was behind them, Bishop had every intention of giving Kensley the dream life he deserved.

“How about we try to spend whatever is in my wallet?”

Kensley grinned. “Challenge accepted.”

The market didn’t have the same tourist trappings as those on the larger, more popular islands, which catered to thousands of visitors a day.

This market was more of a locals’ place, with produce and seafood vendors, potted herbs and spices, baskets and hats and other things woven from the island’s natural grasses.

Several stalls were cooking up different sorts of savory foods, and one vendor had local baked goods.

It reminded Bishop of any farmer’s market back in the States, only with an island vibe.

Kensley led the way, Bishop slightly behind him, both to keep an eye on Kensley and to have a front-row view of all Kensley’s facial expressions.

The curiosity and awe and delight as he inspected every stall, and Bishop did his best not look too much like a bodyguard.

The only purchase they made on the first round was a cup of mango sorbet, which was cold and tasty.

“Ready to start really spending my money?” Bishop teased, while they ate their sorbet in the shade of the pavilion.

Kensley seductively slid his spoon out of his mouth and grinned. “For sure.”

NINE

Three hours later, they were on the boat and heading home, a cooler packed with fresh fish and produce, and their other purchases secured inside a hatch.

Kensley leaned back in his seat and let the wind whip across his face, stomach full of lunch.

Kensley had never eaten conch before, and it was now his new favorite food.

They had several pounds of it in the cooler.

Kensley had truly enjoyed walking around the market and what small parts of the village Bishop allowed them to wander into.

The residents were cheerful and welcoming, and he'd loved sampling some of the local fruit, especially the oranges.

Bishop had warned Kensley this morning about being too honest about himself, so they'd invented a brief "history" for him, and used their passport names in front of others.

Being undercover had become almost a game while they shopped.

Kensley had fawned over a pair of handwoven sandals until Bishop handed over the cash. Kensley had never been much for jewelry, but he'd also picked out a simple necklace of shaved conch shell on a braided leather cord with two blue-painted beads.

Another stall that had stolen his attention was a young woman who created art out of what she called “broken and mismatched tools.” Most of it was spoons, knives, and forks, but he’d been able to pick out small screwdrivers, large nails, and other bits of scrap metal.

The artist created wind chimes, jewelry, and decorative things like candleholders.

He’d fallen in love with a pendant fashioned out of a twisted fork that was very abstract but still somehow reminded him of Bishop.

It didn’t have a cord or chain, but Kensley bought it anyway, and it was still in his shorts pocket.

He hadn’t told Bishop it was a gift, and he wasn’t sure how to present it as such yet.

Bishop radioed Walsh, who reported no one had been on or near the island all day. Always what they wanted to hear. He brought them in, docked and tied off the boat. Bishop handled the cooler, while Kensley carried their other purchases to the house.

After unpacking their conch, fish, and fruit, they went down to the lagoon for another late afternoon swim.

Since they’d barely touched each other all day, they went in naked and wrestled in the shallows more than they swam.

After a lot of horsing around, they swapped salty blow jobs on shore, and then went back up to the house to make dinner.

While Bishop cooked, Kensley poked around for something to string the metal pendant on, so he could gift it to Bishop.

The vacation house lacked any sort of crafting items, but he did find a ball of jute twine in one of the spare bedrooms. Kensley used that to braid a long, natural chain for the pendant, and he was proud of the results.

It was rustic and meaningful, even if he doubted Bishop would ever wear it.

After a bit more scavenging around the house, Kensley found a couple of bandanas in a dresser drawer.

They didn't seem like something King would wear, but he really didn't know his older brother.

He used one to wrap the corded pendant, and he put the soft bundle in his shorts pocket.

Sometimes, he still boggled that he was walking around in shorts, sometimes no shirt, and swimming in the ocean, when back home it was freezing and icy.

Then he remembered the reason why he was on a tropical island and not at home, and a hint of the shine faded.

After dinner, Kensley presented Bishop with his gift. Bishop stared at it for so long that Kensley was sure he hated it. Then Bishop put it around his neck, picked Kensley up, and carried him into the bedroom.

The following week, they returned to the market for more fresh conch and some vegetables.

Every word from King was to hold their position, and sometimes Kensley amused himself by wondering what King would think of all the sex Kensley and Bishop were having.

Often multiple times a day. Kensley never tired of the way Bishop's cock felt moving inside his body, filling him with his seed.

Sometimes he was sore and used his mouth instead, but he couldn't say no. He didn't want to say no.

In fact, all he could do was eat every morsel of food Bishop put in front of him (often with seconds), and pounce on his charus whenever comfortably possible. His asshole could only take so much friction in a day.

They spent their second Saturday on the island at the main beach, swimming and snorkeling, and making out under their umbrella.

Kensley loved that Bishop had an odd tan line around his neck from wearing his pendant.

Kensley had a similar line from the conch shell necklace he'd yet to take off.

Through saltwater swimming, lots of active sex, and frequent showering, both of those necklaces remained in place.

Physical symbols of their commitment to each other.

Once they returned to the house, Bishop began preparing dinner while Kensley showered. The routine was so familiar and right, as if they'd lived this life forever, instead of only twelve days. Twelve days of wonderful that Kensley wouldn't trade for the world.

Dinner tasted amazing, as always, but it sat strangely in Kensley's stomach. He was almost nauseated, which was rare for him when he wasn't also anxious, and his gut twisted oddly when he tried to help wash the dishes.

“Hey, Kens, are you okay?” Bishop asked. “You look a little green.”

“I feel kind of sick. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, we all get sick sometimes. Was it the food?” He looked like he’d been kicked in the balls. “I am so sorry if I cooked something wrong.”

“No, the food was amazing. Maybe I’m just tired.”

“Then go to bed. Lay down and relax.”

Relief flooded Kensley like a splash of cold water. “Are you sure?”

“Of course.” He gently kissed Kensley’s forehead. “You’ve had a pretty active couple of weeks, sweetheart. It’s okay to take a break and rest. I’ll make you some lemon tea, okay? It might help.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Kensley wanted to follow that up with an ‘I love you,’ but neither of them had said it out loud yet.

And cutting the evening short because of a sick stomach didn’t seem like the right time to exchange those special words.

He trudged into the bedroom, took off his shirt, and slid under the covers.

The cool cotton felt great against his hot skin, but he couldn’t find a comfortable position.

Not until a while later, when Bishop climbed into their bed and wrapped his big, comforting body around Kensley’s from behind.

A cocoon of safety and warmth, accompanied by the fragrant scent of lemon and ginger. The tea.

But Kensley didn't want it. All he wanted was Bishop, and the man's presence helped him relax and sleep.

It was dark out when Kensley's roiling stomach woke him. Bishop was still curled up close, and when Kensley tried to lurch away, Bishop held tight. "Don't. Gonna be sick," Kensley whined.

Bishop immediately let go, and it took all Kensley's coordination to get into the bathroom before he vomited into the toilet.

Not a lot came up, mostly bile, so he'd been asleep for a long time.

That didn't make him feel better, though, and the last thing he wanted was to come down with a stomach bug on a tropical island.

Water ran in the sink, and then a cup appeared in his peripheral vision.

Kensley took it with a trembling hand and swished his mouth of the bitter taste.

A cool washcloth draped across the back of his neck.

"I'm right here, sweetheart," Bishop whispered.

"I hope you didn't catch something at the market. "

"Yeah." That would really suck, especially if they got word from King that they needed to change locations tomorrow.

He rested his arm on the toilet rim, pressed his forehead against his arm, and concentrated on breathing, while he took stock of his body.

He'd had stomach bugs before, but this felt different.

Maybe it was because he had someone with him to pamper him through the illness, instead of occasionally being brought tea by a fellow priest, and frowned at for his weakness if he was too sick to perform his duties at the abbey.

"Think there's more coming?" Bishop asked.

Kensley swallowed a few times, but his stomach seemed to have calmed. "I don't think so."

"Then let's go back to bed and rest." Bishop took the washcloth off his neck and gently wiped Kensley's eyes, cheeks, and mouth, a soothing, loving gesture that made Kensley a bit weepy.

Kensley did not object when Bishop carried him to bed and tucked him in.

Promised to be back in a minute. He returned with a canned ginger ale, water, and a plastic basin.

Kensley sipped some of the ginger ale, and it didn't upset him.

He wasn't able to fall asleep, so he drifted in Bishop's arms until sunrise peeked through the mostly-closed curtains.

His stomach was still gurgling, but he didn't have the aches or fever that often accompanied the flu.

After letting Bishop bathe them both, Kensley sipped ginger tea and nibbled on dry toast, hoping both things stayed down. He hated throwing up, and he did not want a repeat of last night. This morning? Whatever.

“You need to take it easy today,” Bishop said as he ate a simple breakfast of fruit and frozen waffles. “Rest on the couch, or out on the patio, but no strenuous exercise.”

Kensley pouted. They hadn’t refrained from sex for longer than half a day since their first time, but Kensley didn’t want to make whatever this was worse. “Okay.”

“But if you throw up again, or anything gets worse, I’ll call Walsh about getting a trustworthy doctor out here. You’ve been in a kind of bubble for the last fourteen years. You might have a weaker immune system than we thought, and I’d die if anything happened to you.”

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That was as close to “I love you” as they’d gotten. Kensley squeezed his hand. “I’ll rest, I promise. I don’t want anything taking us away from each other.”

“Me, either. Today, I get to pamper you.”

“You already pamper me.”

“Well, I’ll extra-pamper you today. I’ll massage your feet. I’ll even read you a book, if none of the DVDs appeal.”

This home’s DVD collection was a nice upgrade from the cabin’s VHS tapes, but the selection was still limited, not recent by about ten years, and a lot more action films than Kensley preferred.

So, they hadn’t watched a lot of them. Bishop kept the Wi-Fi on his phone off most of the time, unless he needed to check for emails from King. But King usually called.

“I’d love it if you read to me,” Kensley said. “I love your voice. Will you act out the characters?”

“I’ll do my best.”

And that’s how they spent their Sunday morning, lounging in the shade on the back patio, while Bishop read to him from a collection of short stories set in and around the Bahamas.

He did his best with voices, but after totally butchering what should have been an

Australian accent (the character was a tourist), Kensley begged him to read normally.

Kensley attempted a simple peanut butter sandwich at lunchtime, but five minutes later, Bishop was holding the basin while Kensley upchucked.

After getting Kensley cleaned up and comfortable in bed again, Bishop demanded they take Kensley's temperature.

It was only up by a degree and a half, but that upset Bishop in a new way.

He began to pace, phone in his hand, mumbling to himself.

Kensley hated seeing him so unraveled by Kensley barfing twice, but he was also a little anxious about why he was sick.

And they were miles from a medical facility.

Who knew if the nearest hospital had ever treated an omega patient before?

Which shouldn't really matter, because his stomach was upset, that was all. The flu, bad shellfish, too much sunshine and salt air? Nothing to stress over.

Right?

Bishop was losing his damned mind, and he hated it.

He'd seen other people sick and weak, and he hadn't felt as completely helpless as he did right now, with his charus sick in bed and sporting a slight fever.

Not a serious fever, but still, a fever.

The house had a first aid kit, but no anti-nausea medicine, only aspirin that was three months out of date.

He'd brought antacids from his own apartment, but they were unlikely to help.

Normally, he'd wait and let King call him. This time, he wasn't waiting. He excused himself from the bedroom and strode down the hall to the living room.

"What's wrong?" King asked.

"Kensley's sick. He's thrown up twice in less than twelve hours, and he has a low-grade fever."

"Fuck. Any other symptoms?"

"He's kind of lethargic, but he hasn't eaten much. He also seems restless, which I know sounds contradictory, but I was reading to him earlier, and he kept twisting his fingers, or picking at his shirt. I don't think he realized he was doing it."

King was silent for a long, irritating moment. "Okay, I still need you to sit tight for now."

Bishop swallowed a growl.

"Keep an eye on him," King continued. "If his symptoms get worse, or his fever spikes, call Walsh, so he can take you guys to the nearest hospital. For now, I'm going to get Ziggy on top of finding a doctor in the area we can pay off to make a house call, no questions asked. And then I'll relocate you."

"Why not just get us out of here now?"

King grunted, his annoyance at being questioned clear in the sound. “That’s our plan, Bishop. Keep looking after my brother, until I can get help to you. Text me if anything changes.”

“All right.” Bishop stabbed at his phone screen, then shoved the damned thing into his pocket. He did not like sitting around and waiting when an emergency was looming. He needed to act. He needed to fix whatever was wrong with Kensley, but he didn’t know how.

Fury mounting, Bishop returned to the bedroom. Kensley was curled on his side, arms around a pillow, face pinched. Bishop sat and cuddled up behind him, wishing he could pull Kensley right inside and keep him safe from everyone in the world—even his own rebelling body.

“We’re to stay put for now,” Bishop said in a harsh whisper. “King is working on getting a doctor we can trust. But if you get suddenly worse, we’re to call Walsh for a lift to the nearest hospital.”

“A lift? Are we going to drive across the ocean?”

“Hardly. There’s a puddle jumper on the island. Walsh can fly it. It’s for supply runs and emergencies.”

“This might just count, huh?”

“Maybe. Hope not. I’d rather we get a doctor here than subject you to a public hospital. Too many strangers, too many variables.”

“The other island had strangers.”

“True, but it didn’t have strangers wearing masks, concealing their identities. I don’t

trust hospitals.”

“A hospital saved your life.”

Bishop’s back scars gave phantom twinges of pain. “They also allowed men inside who would have killed me if King hadn’t already faked my death and gotten me out of there.”

“I’m sorry.”

“None of that was your fault, sweetheart. Right now, you’re bearing the brunt of our sins, and you don’t deserve this.”

“Maybe not, but I got you, didn’t I? I got us, and I don’t regret a single moment of our time together, Bishop.

I swear.” Kensley grabbed one of Bishop’s hands and kissed his knuckles.

“No matter how this ends, I don’t regret anything.

I wasn’t truly living until the day we escaped the abbey, so thank you. ”

“No, thank you , Kens. I wasn’t living, either.” He pressed his nose into the crook of Kensley’s neck and inhaled deeply. He tried putting all his hopes and dreams and promises into their embrace, holding Kensley tight without crushing him. “Let’s keep living this life for as long as we can.”

“Okay.”

By late evening, Bishop was a furious, anxious mess waiting for Walsh to arrive with a doctor that Ziggy had vetted.

Kensley had continued to throw up anything he tried consuming, even plain water, and by the time King called about the doctor, his fever was lingering at 101 F.

Dr. Fatima was expected to arrive around ten, and by the time nine-fifty rolled around, Bishop wanted to punch the wall. Maybe break furniture.

Kensley, on the other hand, was shivering in bed, pale and miserable, but strangely calm, considering the circumstances. “It could just be the flu,” Kensley kept saying. His constant need to reassure Bishop made him love Kensley even more—but it didn’t relax him one iota.

At nine-fifty-three, the thunderous noise of a small, low-flying plane filled the air, and Bishop’s chest squeezed with hope.

Help was on the way. Bishop double-checked his gun was loaded, safety off, ready, and then tucked it back into the holster.

He needed to anticipate trouble at every turn, especially in the middle of a minor crisis.

They didn’t even have an evacuation plan in place.

King said it depended on what was wrong with Kensley and if it was safe to move him, or if they needed to go straight to a hospital. Dr. Fatima should be able to tell them.

Soon.

Bishop stalked to the front door and stood to the side, peering out one of the side windows.

Watched until headlights flashed from the direction of the opening gate.

They slowly approached. Bishop squinted, able to make out shapes in both the driver and passenger seats, but the headlight glare obscured their faces.

The Jeep circled around and stopped, the passenger side facing the house.

Right hand resting slightly behind his back, Bishop opened the front door with his left. Took half a stride out on the stone steps.

A woman with dark hair slid out of the passenger side, a woven bag in one hand. She was tall, wore a blue-and-yellow dress, and she took a full step forward before pausing. “Drew Burton?” she asked in a deep, lightly accented voice.

Bishop tensed, fingers brushing the butt of his gun, adrenaline narrowing his focus to the woman’s free hand, which was covered by the sleeve of her dress.

He couldn’t have been more suspicious of the woman if she had said his real name.

King only would have given the doctor the name on his passport.

He shifted his attention to the person in the driver’s seat, barely able to make them out past the doctor’s shoulder.

Dr. Fatima took a wide step to the side, and Bishop barely had time to draw his own weapon before he heard the shot. Something slammed into his chest and knocked him backward, right into darkness.

TEN

“...think he’s coming around.”

“Bishop? It’s King. Wake up, brother, you aren’t dead.”

Heavy pressure in his chest and searing pain in his skull greeted Bishop as he pulled himself out of a black sleep he didn’t remember falling into.

He followed King’s firm, familiar voice into wakefulness and cataloged other aches and pains in his body, but the worst was definitely center mass.

He also became aware of being on something soft, and of other voices rumbling in the background.

“Wh’hap’n?” he slurred. Why was King here? Where was here? Was he still in the island house with—? “Kensley! Where are you?” He tried to sit up, but the pain in his chest took his breath away, and he fell back down.

A firm hand pressed on his right shoulder. “Rest a minute,” King said. “You’re lucky you aren’t dead, my friend.”

“Kensley?”

“They took him.”

The cold fury in King’s voice helped Bishop focus on his boss and best friend.

Bishop was on the living room couch. King had dragged a chair closer and was sitting facing him, his hand on Bishop's shoulder.

While King's eyes radiated anger, they also reflected a hint of fear.

Fear that jolted missing information back into Bishop's brain.

"Was I shot?" Bishop asked.

"Yes." King held something up in his other hand. Something on a twine cord. "This stopped the bullet and saved your life."

Bishop took it. The fork pendant Kensley gave him. The one he never took off. It was bent now, with a spent round smashed in the middle. His eyes burned, and he looked down at his chest. A white bandage covered the spot that ached the most.

"Half an inch in either direction would have killed you."

He curled his hand around the pendant. "Where's Kensley?"

"I don't know. We're still piecing together the details, but best we figure, someone intercepted the real Dr. Fatima on her way to the airstrip, took her place along with an unknown companion, and they are who entered the compound. They shot you, probably assumed you were dead, and took Kensley."

"Panic room?"

"I checked. He's not in it. He's not on the island."

Bishop squeezed the pendant until his knuckles ached, refusing to allow grief or fear to control him.

Refusing to be swamped with guilt for not protecting Kensley.

For allowing him to be taken. No, he held on tight to his anger and sense of betrayal, and he glared at King.

“How? How did they know who Ziggy found for a doctor? How did they know we even needed one?” An infuriating thought hit him. “Walsh?”

King shook his head. “Walsh is dead. We found him down by the airstrip. Shot in the chest like you were.”

“Fuck. Why are we still here?”

“Because we haven’t left yet.” He gave Bishop an exasperated stare. “You got a solid knock upside the head when you hit the floor, so I needed you to wake up and prove you aren’t comatose or seriously concussed. Congratulations, you’re not.”

Bishop rolled his eyes then began testing his extremities. None felt broken or damaged; it was just his head and chest that hurt. “Surveillance video?”

“Being downloaded. We’re looking for everything we can find to figure out who organized this, and I’m leaving a cleanup crew behind. You, me and Garvey are leaving in the next twenty minutes.”

“Where?”

“The States. Home.”

“What if Kensley’s on another island? The archipelago is fucking huge.”

“Unlikely, and before you ask, I’ve got people on the island where Dr. Fatima lived,

looking in to what happened there. We obviously have to be careful with the local police.”

All things Bishop knew too well, and everything in him wanted to be involved. “Help me sit up, boss, I feel like an idiot laying down like this.”

King clasped his forearm and helped him sit, turn, and plant both feet on the floor. Bishop’s head swam for a few seconds, and he felt like he’d had a stake driven right through his breast bone, but he was upright.

“I’m so sorry,” Bishop said. “I failed.”

“You had no way to anticipate an ambush, and we found you with your gun on the ground, not the holster, so it wasn’t as if you didn’t show caution. I know you, Bishop. You don’t take un-calculated risks when it comes to the job.”

Kensley isn’t a job for me anymore. He’s my whole life.

And his life had been taken away from him. Again.

“He’s sick,” Bishop growled. “He’s scared.

Fuck knows what they’ll do to him.” If one single hair was out of place on Kensley’s head, he’d personally start snapping off fingers.

If someone touched him any other way...other body parts would get snapped off.

Bishop would take joy in exacting his revenge.

They just had to find Kensley first.

“How long has it been?” Bishop asked.

“About four hours. The people who took Kensley didn’t turn off the perimeter alarm when they opened the gate, so we got the notification immediately and headed straight here.”

Bishop wanted to throttle someone. A four-hour head start to gods knew where, to do gods knew what to Kensley, before they ransomed him back to King.

Someone now had a fuck-ton of leverage on King and his hold over the northeastern territory.

But if King was worried, he didn’t show it.

He couldn’t show it, not with so many of his people in the house.

King had been careful not to say Bishop’s real name too loudly when anyone else was nearby.

“So we’re going back to the city to just wait for the ransom call?” Bishop snapped, angry and exhausted, and badly in need of an oxy or something.

“Yes. If there’s a traitor or a spy down here amongst my allies, we’ll weed them out, but that is not our primary focus, you and me. We have other things to do.”

“Fine.” His need to do as King ordered was at war with his need to go feral and hunt down Kensley. But he couldn’t do it alone, even if he was physically at his best, which he wasn’t. He pocketed the pendant as he stood on annoyingly shaky legs. “I just need to grab a few things.”

“Three minutes.”

He resisted the impulse to flip King off, then went into the bedroom to throw a handful of personal items into his duffel.

He also took what he could of Kensley's personals, like the woven sandals he loved so much.

He wanted to take a minute and remember all the amazing days and nights he'd spent here with Kensley, but there was no time.

No time to reflect on the past, only to spend on the future.

Something in the rumpled sheets caught his eye. Bishop picked up Kensley's necklace with the shaved shells and two blue beads. Kensley hadn't taken it off since the day he bought it. Bishop's heart twisted with anger, and he vowed to give it back to his charus one day. As soon as humanly possible.

Garvey drove them to the airstrip and the small waiting plane.

Garvey went up front to sit with the pilot, leaving King and Bishop alone in the small cabin.

Before Bishop could choose a seat, King swung and punched him solidly in the jaw.

Bishop lost his balance and tumbled sideways into a nearby seat, his chest and ribs screeching in protest.

Shock kept Bishop from lashing out in retaliation—as did the grim line of King's mouth. He understood before King said it.

“That's for fucking around with my little brother,” King snarled in a low, dangerous voice, “when you were supposed to be protecting him.”

They'd been friends for too damned long for him to deny it. "How did you know?"

King shot him a glare full of "duh, dumbass." "Because only one bed has been slept in, and there's a basket of soiled sheets in the bathroom. It's simple math, Bishop. How could you?"

"It wasn't just me. We both made a choice."

"He's a fucking priest!"

The phrasing made Bishop's lips twitch with inappropriate humor.

The pilot's voice on speaker told them to sit and buckle up, so Bishop didn't get to reply for several minutes, not until the plane was rising smoothly into the sky.

"Kensley hated being in the Order. He told me so more than once. He was miserable and stifled, and he...admitted to having feelings for me since he was a teenager."

King glared. "So, you took advantage of a teenage crush?"

"Fuck no. He came onto me more than once, but I...you don't know the man he is now, King.

You only know an image of him. I got to know him, to see all the passion locked up inside of him, and before you punch me again, I don't just mean sexual passion.

I mean his joy and his desperation to express himself.

To do more than church services two nights a week and four on Sunday, and eating bland meals over and over.

You should have seen his face the first time I cooked him a real steak dinner. ”

King’s anger seemed to shift into mild interest, but he was still clutching the arms of his seat, which was across the narrow aisle from Bishop’s. “It’s a mortal sin to defile a member of the Order.”

Bishop rolled his eyes. “You don’t believe that bullshit any more than I do, and even if it is a sin? I don’t care. I felt something real and all-consuming with Kensley. I truly believe we are a predestined charum pair. Kensley is my charus. My soulmate.”

King opened and closed his mouth several times, his face an epic contortion of confusion and awe. “That’s just a myth.”

“No, the church says it’s a myth, so they can force omegas and alphas into loyal service to them.

To not question their authority, and to push aside their own sexual desires.

It’s about control, King. And Kensley finally freed himself from it.

I love him. It is killing me knowing he’s suffering right now. ”

“I believe you. You’ve never lied to me, and I can’t imagine you lying about something this enormous.” He swallowed hard. “Does Kens feel the same way?”

“Yes. We’ve never said ‘I love you’ to each other, but we’ve shown it. We’ve felt it. I need him back.”

“Okay. I mean, I’m still pissed at you for fucking my little brother, period, but I understand. And I don’t regret asking you to protect him. You were always the exact right choice.”

“Thank you.” He warily eyeballed his best friend. “So, are you going to punch me again? Or are we square?”

“We’re square. Unless a thorough examination of the security tapes shows you slacking in any way tonight, we’re square.”

Bishop felt slightly queasy at the idea that there might be tape of all the other things he and Kensley had done inside that house. “Um, what about the other footage?”

“We’ll scrub it, I promise. I’ll make sure Ziggy scrubs it.”

“Thank you.” Not that Bishop thought King would want his brother’s intimate moments released as some salacious sex tape, but it helped to hear it.

He rested his hand over his bandaged chest, beyond grateful that Kensley had bought that specific pendant, and that he’d made the chord that specific length. Without it, he’d be dead.

He’d cheated death for a second time in two years.

He looked out the window but couldn’t see the dark ocean below, not even with the light of what should have been a half moon.

It was as if the clouds had enveloped the plane, like fury and fear had enveloped Bishop’s heart.

But he wouldn’t give in to the fear; he couldn’t.

Fury, he could work with. Fury would fuel him.

“So home?” Bishop said to the window.

“Home. We need to be ready to launch a rescue as soon as we find out where Kensley is.” King spoke with so much certainty that Bishop nearly believed it.

He certainly hoped, for all their sakes, but he didn’t quite believe it. Not yet.

There were too many powerful people acting behind the scenes, too many moving parts to see everything clearly. But Bishop knew one thing for damned sure, as he searched the horizon for any sign of the ocean he’d joyfully swam in with Kensley: he’d bring his charus back safely, or he’d die trying.

ELEVEN

Awareness stole through Kensley as so many things became clear: him on his back, head and shoulders slightly reclined on something not terribly soft; strong antiseptic smells that hurt his nose; something beeping at a steady rate; his dry mouth with a weird taste in it.

Nothing like the beach house or even the abbey.

He tried to open his eyes, but they were tacky and dry, and when he attempted to raise his left hand, it was yanked back down by something clasped to his wrist. Alarm jolted Kensley harder toward consciousness, and he forced his eyelids apart.

He didn't recognize the ivory walls, lack of windows, or single closed door.

It could have been a closet or a room in a submarine, for all he knew.

He was in some sort of bed, his left wrist chained somewhere out of sight. An IV line was taped to the inside of his right elbow. He twisted his neck but could only see a simple IV pole setup, and what he hoped was a bag of saline hanging from it.

The entire thing was such a mind-fuck that it took his addled brain way too long to remember why this was completely wrong.

“Bishop!” His voice barely echoed in the small room. Or maybe he had no volume. His mind was still incredibly fuzzy. “Hello?”

No one answered. Kensley fixed on a random spot on the wall and tried to focus on the last things he remembered.

He'd been in bed, exhausted of vomiting, and running a fever, and while he was worried, he hadn't thought it was too serious.

Bishop had been prowling like a caged tiger, anxious for the doctor to arrive.

At some point, Bishop had gone to wait by the front door.

Kensley vaguely recalled the sound of an engine, probably Walsh's Jeep.

The bangs. The bangs!

Kensley's entire body jolted as more details came flooding back, leaving him cold all over. The bangs had startled him awake, and then suddenly a woman was in his room. She'd rushed him, jabbed him in the neck, and then...he woke up here.

They'd been ambushed. Had those bangs been gunshots?

His chest tightened, and he couldn't catch his breath.

Where was Bishop? Had he been shot? Killed?

Pure rage battled against his fear, and he yanked at the chain around his wrist. Tried to get up and only managed tumbling to the floor.

His elbow slammed off the hard surface, the shock of pain startling out a yelp.

The stretched IV line stung where it pierced his skin.

But that was nothing compared to the agony burning in his heart.

King's enemies had found them, and they'd taken him. Kensley didn't need a villain speech to know that. And he didn't care. They could torture him, experiment on him, hold him for ransom. None of that mattered if Bishop was dead.

"Please, don't do that, Elder Thorne," a female voice said. Kensley looked at the door, but it remained shut, and the voice had sounded tinny. "If you hurt yourself, I'll have to sedate you again."

"Who are you? Is Bishop dead?" he asked the disembodied voice.

"You can refer to me as Marta, if you like. It isn't my real name, but I did have a cat named Marta when I was a girl."

Kensley growled softly at the condescending tone. "Is Bishop dead?"

"I have no information on the fate of your island guard. My job is to keep you and your fetus in good health for the foreseeable future."

"My..." Kensley was glad to be sitting, because his head swam with shock and confusion. "What are you talking about? My fertile period isn't for another month. I'm not pregnant."

"Our blood tests show otherwise. Believe me, we were also quite shocked, Elder Thorne. But I suppose indiscretions are to be expected when healthy young men live in such close, isolated quarters as you once did."

He bristled at the intimation that he'd slept with any of the other abbey residents. The only person he'd been intimate with was Bishop, and Bishop was...missing. Until he saw a body, Kensley was going with missing. "You don't know me. Your

insinuations are disgusting.”

“And yet our tests don’t lie. If you are correct about your fertility period, then you are three to four weeks along. It’s very early in the pregnancy, and any number of factors can cause a miscarriage, which we do not wish to exacerbate.”

“But...” Bishop was the only man he’d ever had sex with, but his captors didn’t seem to know that. They were assuming he’d slept with a fellow priest and not his “island guard,” and he wasn’t about to educate them. He couldn’t give them extra fodder to use against him.

In all their couplings, Kensley and Bishop had never used protection, because Kensley wasn’t fertile. His fertile period had ended before the spaghetti dinner, before their first time together.

They were also beloved charum, and even though it was only a legend that he’d never witnessed in real life, it was rumored that when an omega male met his charus, together they could trigger the omega’s fertility. Create life through their connection and love.

Had that happened with him and Bishop? Had their love created a life? In so short a time?

“I’m glad you’re thinking this through,” Marta said. “You might also wish to get up off the cold floor.”

Kensley raised his right hand and stuck out his middle finger.

Waved it in several directions, because he couldn’t see an obvious surveillance camera.

He did get up off the hard, cold floor, though, and back into his uncomfortable bed.

But it was warmer, and he couldn't stop himself from resting a protective hand over his flat belly.

What if the only living piece of Bishop left was in there?

He had to protect this baby with everything in him, no matter what.

“What do you want from me?” Kensley asked the room. “Am I for ransom? Are you going to trade me?”

“Perhaps. We are less interested in your brother's territory than we are with money. And you, Elder Thorne, will go to the highest bidder.”

“Bidder? I'm not a painting in an auction, I'm a human being!”

“You are an omega male, very rare in society, and there are some who will pay high prices for men like you. Higher, perhaps, than your worth to your half-brother.”

Kensley closed his eyes and took long, deep breaths to calm his now-roiling stomach.

He was so tired of vomiting, but the idea of being sold into sexual slavery was far beyond his realm of comprehension.

What would that sort of abuse do to his baby?

Would his purchaser be kind until his baby was born?

Would they force his body into a miscarriage?

If he truly was pregnant, Kensley's life was no longer about himself. It was about protecting his child.

"When?" Kensley asked, surprised he didn't scream the question. "When does this happen? How long are you going to torture me?"

"Our goal is not to torture you, Elder Thorne, only to keep you alive. We will provide you with food and any necessary medicines."

"Yeah? What about a bathroom?" And now that he'd asked, his bladder throbbed.

"To your right, you will find a bedpan and urinal bottle. When one is full, place it by the room's door. It will be removed and replaced. You are always under surveillance, Elder Thorne. I do not wish to embarrass you, but please do not assume you will ever have a chance to escape."

"Don't assume I'll ever stop trying to escape. This is not my chosen life. I'm a prisoner, and I will do whatever it takes to protect myself and my baby. From you and whoever you try to sell me to."

"You have heart. I admire that. Your meal will arrive in one hour. Try to rest until then."

Kensley wanted to scream at the top of his lungs that Marta could shove her rest right up her ass, but it wouldn't change anything.

He was chained to this bed, in a room with no obvious exit, and someone watching him at all times.

Resistance might be futile, but vigilance would save his life. And his baby's.

“What about my illness on the island?” Kensley asked, not expecting a response. “All the vomiting? What was that?”

“The emetic is out of your system, and there will be no lasting damage. Rest now, please.”

The finality of those statements did little to relax Kensley.

Emetic told him that he’d been drugged somehow, which had forced Bishop into requesting a doctor.

A doctor who’d obviously been a fraud or replaced by this Marta woman.

Someone who’d betrayed them all, possibly killed Bishop, and kidnapped Kensley, all for profit.

But they’d been so careful. Who had betrayed them? Walsh? Someone else inside of King’s organization?

With no way of knowing anything for a while, Kensley snagged the urinal bottle, pulled the blanket up over his entire body so the spying cameras couldn’t see anything, and relieved himself.

Even though he wanted to throw his piss at a camera or other spying device, he didn’t know where they were.

He also didn’t want to stink up his prison, so he put the bottle back on the small table and tried to find a comfortable position on the bed.

The room had no TV, no books, no magazines, nothing to occupy him, except his own tumultuous thoughts. He had nothing to do but sleep. The problem was he had

no idea how long he'd been unconscious. Was it still Sunday? Monday? Had more than one day passed? He definitely wasn't sleepy.

He closed his eyes anyway and thought back to the island. Found his last memory of swimming with Bishop in the lagoon, and he clung to it while silently praying that Bishop was still alive and already planning his rescue.

Bishop hadn't felt this helpless since he first woke up after his residence exploded, and he'd been unable to do more than blink at basic yes or no questions.

He'd hated relying on other people during his recovery, but he had recovered.

He'd gone back to work, and he'd become reacquainted with Kensley.

Fallen in love with Kensley. Found his charus.

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And someone had taken him from Bishop.

For the last three days, Bishop had prowled the entire square footage of King's two-story penthouse, relying on others to bring him what little information they could dig up.

Bishop wanted to be the one interrogating those suspected of collaborating with Kensley's kidnappers, not relying on updates from King.

Bishop wanted to be on the front lines, doing the work, not waiting.

He fucking hated waiting. And he missed Kensley like crazy.

His heart had cracked into two jagged pieces, and it couldn't beat right without his charus.

He didn't know what he'd do if they didn't get Kensley back.

Find a way to fling himself off the balcony of this twenty-second-floor penthouse, probably.

After he personally found and murdered everyone who'd touched Kensley since his removal from the island.

Three fucking days.

The only thing keeping Bishop from losing his entire shit was knowing Kensley was

alive.

Kensley was valuable, not only as King's half-brother, but also as an omega male.

The natural lubrication that came with arousal made omegas a hot commodity on the black market.

King did everything possible to keep that sort of criminality out of his territory, but they lived in a huge country.

Bishop ached more with each passing hour that they didn't receive a ransom demand for Kensley.

Ached with the agony of knowing Kensley could be in the hands of someone who'd use and abuse his body and spirit for their own physical and/or financial gain.

Over and over, until Kensley's body gave out, and he was of no use to his captors.

The idea of Kensley's broken body being tossed aside like garbage made Bishop want to break something.

The sun began to set on Wednesday evening, their third full day apart.

Bishop paced the first-level kitchen with his phone clutched so tight in his left hand he swore it was going to break, desperate to hear something.

He'd gotten his ears chewed off last night by King, because of how frequently Bishop had been calling and texting, which was interfering with King's efforts to locate Kensley.

Bishop had toned it down today, but he hadn't gotten an update in three hours.

The private elevator dinged an arrival, so Bishop changed course from one end of the spacious kitchen, through the all-windows living room, and out to the penthouse foyer. King stepped off the elevator, shoulders back, jaw set, his face a thundercloud.

“What happened?” Bishop asked.

“I lost,” King snarled. “I actually fucking lost!”

“Lost what? What’s going on?”

King stalked over to the living room’s bar cart and grabbed the decanter of bourbon. “Someone sent me a link to a live auction, but the site was only active for exactly five minutes, and I had no idea how many other people were bidding.”

“Bidding.” Bishop’s stomach pitted. “Bidding on Kensley.”

“Yes.” King didn’t even pour, he simply took a long swig from the bourbon bottle. Coughed. “There was a live feed on him. I saw him for those five minutes. He looked scared but not hurt, but goddammit!”

Too many emotions battered him at once, and Bishop tried to tamp them down so he could think. So he could understand what his best friend was telling him. “How the fuck did you lose the bid? Isn’t his life worth everything you have?”

“Of course, it is!” King put the bottle down and rounded so fast Bishop expected his fist to fly, more furious than Bishop had seen King in his life.

“I’d have emptied every off-shore account, sold every building I own, you know that.

But the time was so short. Someone put in more at the last second, and I lost.”

Bishop had an idea of what King's net worth was, and for some unknown person to bid more than that? No one did that out of the kindness of their heart. They did it for evil. Pure and simple evil. "What's Ziggy doing?"

"Everything he can with my phone and that link. Whoever set this up has likely done it before. I have no problem breaking the law to get what I want, but human trafficking is my hard limit, and I have a gut feeling that's who took Kensley.

Not necessarily someone who wanted to target me, but someone who knew Kensley was an omega living outside the protection of the church. "

"So the people who tried to take him at the spaghetti dinner aren't the same people who stole him from me?"

"It's still possible, since no one has taken responsibility for that yet."

"But I saw the Castle family tattoo on one of them."

"He could have defected, I don't know." And King hated not knowing almost as much as Bishop. "My enemies want my territory and my power. I don't believe Castle has the resources to pay what this monster paid. These disgusting wastes of life who traffic in human beings only want money."

"Which means Kensley could be sent anywhere in the country."

"Or even outside the country, depending on how wide this ring's reach is."

"Then we have to find him before he's moved again."

"Trust me, that's what Ziggy is working on. He's even called in a few favors."

“Okay.” Bishop was somewhat hopeless when it came to technology, which was why they had Ziggy to do that shit for them.

And Ziggy was the best computer wizard and hacker money could buy loyalty from.

The man was paid very, very well for his services.

If anyone could break into what was probably a highly-protected cyber system for a human trafficking ring, it was Ziggy.

He had to believe it.

For as much as Bishop wanted to be furious at King for not winning the bid and bringing Kensley home, he couldn't. Not right now. He had to channel his rage into the same place as his fear: a box buried deep-down that would contain his emotions until the job at hand was complete.

Now that they had a quasi-lead on Kensley, he had something more specific to focus on: finding and destroying a human trafficking organization. The scum of the earth.

Bishop palmed his cell phone and made a call.

Kensley did not wear boredom well, and after what he believed to be three days in that stupid room (based on the way meals were spaced out, and not because he'd seen a ray of sunshine since Sunday), he'd made it his mission to dismantle his bed.

He didn't have any tools, and Marta's disembodied voice never told him to stop, so his captors must not have thought he was smart enough to use the bed pieces in any useful way.

He'd told Marta he'd never stop fighting, and he meant it.

He also spent a lot of time reciting scriptures out loud.

Not because he thought they would save him, or because he believed in the Holy Scriptures.

He needed to hear someone's voice in that chilly, lonely room, or he'd go insane.

No one visited him. He had no idea when the empty saline bag had been removed and his IV taken out, but he suspected one of his meals had been drugged. He'd slept extra heavily one night.

So he talked to himself and made an art project out of his bed, peed in a bottle, and slept on his thin mattress on the floor.

He still wasn't entirely sure he believed he was pregnant, but what motive did Marta have to lie?

This entire scenario was insane and a plot out of a terrible suspense film.

He'd never liked those kinds of movies, even as a young, pre-Order teen, when he was allowed to watch movies and television.

The only reason he didn't do something to actively harm himself and force human interaction was because he might be carrying Bishop's child.

And if Bishop was dead...no. Until Kensley was presented with a body, Bishop was alive and searching for him.

Bishop and King would never stop. They'd pay anything to get him home.

Right?

When his dinner tray slid under the door, Kensley tried to peek, but the opening was small.

Maybe two inches off the ground, and only about six wide, exactly enough space to get his small tray and flat food inside before it shut again.

He sniffed at what looked like a slab of gray turkey and gravy next to mashed potatoes, with a side of carrot rounds.

As boring as his other meals, but it was food. Fuel. For him and his maybe-baby.

He ate while it was hot, and within thirty minutes he was yawning. He'd been drugged again, and it hit him too quickly to try and throw up. All he could do, as his mind drifted away, was hope that when he woke up, Bishop would be smiling down at him.

TWELVE

Kensley did wake up to a face looking down at him, but it was not Bishop's, and the man was not smiling.

He was...well, not crying, but he had a face full of grief that instantly made Kensley's heart ache.

Kensley's mouth was dry, his arms and legs a little stiff, and he tried to get his bearings.

To understand he was in a bed somewhere.

A much softer bed than the hospital-like one of his last prison.

"Where am I?" he asked, unsure if he'd managed to verbalize the question or not when the stranger didn't speak for a long time.

"Your new life," the other man replied, his voice as broken as his expression. "I'm so sorry."

Kensley started to sit up, and the stranger moved back a few steps, not trying to discourage him or help him.

He simply watched. Kensley was wearing a pair of simple linen pajamas, which meant someone had changed his clothes.

Someone had touched him, seen him naked, and that lit a spark of fury behind his breastbone.

The room looked like any standard bedroom might, with a dresser directly in front of him, a single window, and two doors, one shut and one that stood halfway open. But unlike in a normal bedroom, this window had metal bars on it.

He also wasn't chained to the floor or the wall, so he shoved his covers aside and swung his feet over the side of the bed. "Where the fuck are we? Who are you?"

"It's been so long." His companion looked at his hands, as if the answer was written on them. "They only call me Omega. That's what they'll call you."

Terror sliced coldly through his chest. "Who's they?"

What's your name? How long have you been here?

"Kensley stood and walked to the window.

Saw only sprawling countryside that was mostly flat, full of grass and small trees, which told him very little.

It could be the Midwest as much as someplace in Europe.

"I don't know where we are, no one ever told me. I learned quickly not to ask questions. He'll punish you. He'll break you."

Kensley turned and studied the other man. Similar age, but taller with thin blond hair, gaunt cheekbones, and a general haggardness that made him seem twice as old. "I'm Kensley."

The other man's eyes went distant. "My name was...it was...Malori. I haven't said it in so long."

"What's out there?" He pointed at the half-open door.

"The rest of the apartment."

"Apartment? So, there's another door to the outside?"

"It's locked. There's no escaping, Kensley, believe me, I tried. So did the omega who was here before me."

Kensley really didn't want to know. "What happened to him?"

Malori shrugged one narrow shoulder. "About a week after they brought me here, when I stopped fighting back, he disappeared. If you're here, that means I'll disappear soon. But fuck, I am so tired."

"Tired of what? Why are we here?" He suspected but had to hear it. Had to know how hard he'd need to fight.

"Entertainment." Malori turned and left the bedroom.

Bewildered, and on the cusp of losing his shit, Kensley followed him into a living room.

Pretty typical setup with a couch, two chairs, side tables, a TV, and two more windows, both with metal bars.

The same view of indistinct countryside.

He spotted three more doors and tested them all.

The first was a bathroom, the second another bedroom, probably Malori's. The third didn't budge.

"It won't open from the inside," Malori said. "It's where Master enters. We only leave with him."

As much as Kensley's instincts told him to search for an escape, the perfectly defeated expression on Malori's face and the exhaustion in his voice, told Kensley it would be futile. "And go where?"

"Downstairs."

"Why?"

"We're omegas, Kensley. Why do you think?"

Bile scorched up Kensley's throat, and for the first time, despair tickled at the back of his mind.

King hadn't paid enough for him. Someone else had bought him.

And now he was in some sort of brothel for people with an omega fetish.

It explained everything about Malori's stooped shoulders and dead eyes.

"We need to get out of here," Kensley said.

"There's no way out. I'm not the first and you won't be the last."

Oh yes, I will be the last. Even if I die trying, I will tear this place down one brick at a time.

“My brother has a lot of money and power,” Kensley snapped, unwilling to give in to his despair.

He embraced his anger and frustration over trading one prison for another.

His entire life had been a series of prisons.

First the abbey, then the cabin, over the ocean to the beach house, and ending at that bizarre windowless room.

Now this. No. No more prisons. “King is looking for me. I know he is.”

Malori’s dead expression went briefly curious. “You have a loved one in the outside world?”

“Yes, my half-brother. You don’t?”

“No. My family was not supportive of me being omega. As if I had a choice. I had no belief in religion, so I didn’t join an Order.

I tried to survive, and I thought...I thought I’d found a new family.

But I was wrong, and now I’m here. I’ll eventually die here, but I had hoped they wouldn’t find another to replace me. ”

Kensley desperately wanted to hug his forlorn companion, but he doubted the gesture would be welcome.

“Whoever they are, they picked the wrong omega. Not only will I fight every step of the way, I know there are people looking for me.” Please, Bishop, be looking for me.

“They will find us, Malori. Believe that.”

“It’s sweet that you believe it.”

“It’s not sweet, it’s true.” Kensley would lose his mind if he believed anything else. “So, you don’t know where we are? Does this Master asshole have an accent or anything?”

Malori shook his head. “I don’t know where we are, and Master is very careful in how he speaks. The men and women who’ve had me...their accents vary. Some don’t even speak English.”

“So we could be anywhere in the world.” He refused to let that terrify him as much as it wanted to. Giving in to terror wouldn’t help him. “Do you know how long you’ve been here?”

“One thousand, one hundred and four days.” Malori pointed to a spot on the wall full of small hash marks. “I note every sunset I witness.”

Kensley wasn’t great with math in his head, but he knew that was more than three years. Three years of sexual slavery. He wanted to retch but kept hold of himself. “I’d rather die than live like that.” The words slipped out before Kensley could censor himself, and his face flushed.

Malori barely flinched. “I thought so, too. I imagined any number of ways to end my own life, but then I couldn’t. It wasn’t just my life at stake.”

“You got pregnant?”

“Yes. I was brought here just before my fertile cycle. I remember the face of the man who I believe impregnated me, but I don’t know his name. I never saw him again.”

Malori had been impregnated not long after he’d arrived here, but— “Wait, where’s your baby?”

“I don’t know.” Malori sank into one of the upholstered chairs, his entire body exuding a kind of peaceful misery that confused Kensley. “After I gave birth, I was allowed to nurse for ten days, and then my daughter was taken from me. And I went back to work.”

“Ten days.” Kensley swallowed back another urge to retch. He couldn’t imagine getting out of bed ten days after giving birth, much less being forced into sex. And to have his child stolen? Given away? Sold? A new kind of rage overtook his terror. “Fuck. I am so sorry, Malori.”

“I try not to think about her. Or my son.”

“What? You have two kids?”

“I birthed two. They were taken. They aren’t mine.”

The way Malori spoke suggested those words had been trained into him, and Kensley ached for his fellow omega’s pain. Kensley could not fathom the idea of having one child taken from him, never mind two. Forced pregnancy, forced birth, forced separation. It was revolting and inhumane.

“I am so sorry, I can’t even say it,” Kensley replied. He pressed his palms over his own belly, newly terrified for the baby he could be carrying. “I will fight for you, Malori. I’ll fight for all of us.”

“Please, don’t fight for me. I gave up a long time ago. Fight for yourself.”

“No.” Kensley moved to kneel next to Malori’s armchair and held the quivering omega’s hands in his.

“No, I’ll fight for us. Before this happened, I discovered the myth of charum is real.

I met my charus. I know he’s looking for me.

So is my brother. I’ll die before I stop fighting.

But you don’t have to fight. I know you’re tired. Just don’t give up.”

A single tear slipped down Malori’s left cheek. “I’ll do my best. I’m not sure how much I have left. It’s why they brought you here. I’m sorry you’re here because of me.”

“I’m not here because of you. I’m here because of greedy, disgusting men who think they have a right to what our bodies can do.

” Kensley was also here, in a way, because of his half-brother’s career choice, but blaming King’s business wouldn’t help him right now.

He had to focus on the present, and the present was all about survival.

“When you first arrived, how long was it before this Master came to see you?”

“Maybe a day. You were brought here this morning, and it’s close to dinnertime now. It’s hard to say when he’ll come see you.”

If he was recalling his days correctly, that made today Thursday. Kensley’s stomach

rumbled with both disgust and hunger. “How are we fed? I don’t see a kitchen anywhere.”

“The dumbwaiter.”

“The what waiter?”

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Malori pointed at the wall near the door.

Kensley had assumed the large wooden grid there was a wall decoration, but as he looked directly at it, he saw the empty space behind.

“The dumbwaiter. It’s like a little elevator that moves food between floors.

They were popular in very old homes. I guess this one is old, too, because the food is sent up through there. ”

Kensley stood and walked to the dumbwaiter door. He pulled at the wooden frame, but it didn’t budge.

“I tried to get out that way, too,” Malori said. “Trust me, Master has this place escape-proofed.”

“Maybe. Like I said, I’ll never stop trying. Do they ever drug your food?”

“Yes, when they choose to, and before you suggest it, the punishment for not eating is worse than what they occasionally put in the food.”

“Which is what?”

Malori just shook his head. “I suspect they add vitamins or something, because I’m usually healthy. No colds or viruses. Not that I’m around many people I could catch something from.”

“If you’re healthy, then why bring me here?”

“Maybe Master is bored with me. And I’m so tired. My body is tired. I don’t produce lubricant the way I used to. I barely get aroused enough to do it, even with their drugs. My guess is he needs someone with a full tank, so to speak, so he keeps his clients happy.”

That was not a comforting thought, and it increased Kensley’s worry about Malori’s overall state of health.

He was thin, pale, and looked like he’d crumble to dust if shaken too hard.

Kensley had no doubt that if Malori didn’t get out of here soon, he’d probably die of physical exhaustion. And Kensley would not let that happen.

“I hear you, Malori,” Kensley said. “I hear that you’re tired. But I need you to hold on, okay? Even if you don’t believe me, I truly believe that my brother is looking for me. That he’ll find me. I need you to be alive when he does.”

“Why?”

“So you can come with us. So you can be free.”

“But why? My family hates me. I have no friends. My children were taken. What do I have to live for?”

“Live for the hope that once we’re someplace safe, we’ll find your children. We’ll reunite you with them.”

Something flickered in Malori’s eyes. Kensley didn’t dare think it was hope but...

maybe. Maybe Kensley had said the right thing and given Malori something to live for.

A goal to achieve. And Kensley would keep that promise.

Once they were rescued, he'd do everything in his power to reunite Malori with his son and daughter.

They didn't talk much after that exchange.

Two plates of food arrived, more healthy, boring stuff that Kensley ate simply because he was hungry.

Malori ate, too, with no enthusiasm, but he cleaned his plate.

They were both sent a glass of juice with the meal, and once they were done, Kensley investigated the bathroom so he could relieve his aching bladder.

Pretty basic, and he suspected there had once been a window in a spot where the drywall color didn't completely match the rest. The sink faucet also had a filter attachment, and there were small paper cups in a wall dispenser.

At least he didn't have to wait between meals for water, or to drink directly from the bathtub.

Small favors in what Kensley imagined had been a miserable existence for his new friend.

The television got a handful of channels, so they settled in and watched programs together, until they both began yawning.

Malori turned off the TV, but neither of them went to their respective rooms. Now that Kensley had a friend, he hesitated to leave his side.

To try and sleep in this new place where he could wake up completely alone again.

Malori must have been on a similar wavelength, because he said, “We can share. My bed, I mean.”

“I’d like that. In my last prison, I was completely alone for three days. I need to be around someone else.”

“Your last prison?”

“Up until a few weeks ago, I was a part of an Order. I lived in an abbey, away from the world, and then someone tried to kidnap me. They wanted to use me as leverage against my brother, but his top enforcer saved me. We went into hiding together, Bishop and me. I realized he was the other half of my heart and soul. We were each other’s charus.

But someone else found us. Took me. Kept me prisoner.

I thought my brother would be able to pay for my release, but I obviously ended up here.

” And he still had no idea why King hadn’t managed to buy his freedom.

Even more reason to get out of here and demand answers from his brother.

“I’m envious, I think,” Malori said softly. “Not only that you have people looking for you, but it sounds like you found love with Bishop. Hold on to that.”

“I am. It’s kept me sane this week.” He glanced at the bathroom door. “Please, tell me there are toothbrushes available. My teeth are so fuzzy I could knit a sweater out of them.” He hadn’t thought earlier to investigate the small cupboard for other supplies.

Malori smiled. “We have toothbrushes. Mouthwash, too. And floss. Your teeth are in good hands.”

“Floss is a little too fussy for me, but yay to the rest. Dibs to brush first?”

“Have at it. You might even want to take a shower. You’re a touch ripe.” A bit of light seemed to return to Malori’s eyes, but it dimmed quickly.

Kensley briefly squeezed his shoulder, and then went into the bathroom to finally clean up.

Morning arrived too fast for Kensley, and he woke to the pleasant sound of steady breathing beside him.

Malori was asleep, so close to the edge of the mattress he might fall off if he stretched too hard, but he seemed peaceful.

Or as peaceful as he could be, given the circumstances.

Kensley suspected that Malori had learned to find fragments of peace wherever he could.

His room was as bland as the one Kensley had woken up in yesterday, despite Malori existing here for three years.

Then again, where was Malori supposed to acquire any sort of decorations?

Especially if he only left these few rooms for the mysterious “downstairs” that existed for one specific purpose.

That purpose made Kensley’s gut roil. He eased out of bed and went into the bathroom to do his morning business.

Last night’s shower had felt amazing, so he took another one, because why not?

It wasn’t his water bill, and he wanted to wake up a little more.

Since he had no other clothes, he put the simple linen pajamas back on.

Malori was still asleep, and the room had no clocks anywhere.

Kensley flipped through the few TV channels, but nothing seemed to be local enough to give either a time stamp or weather report.

Based on the channels, though, he was pretty sure they were still in the States.

Kensley chose a program at random, mostly for the noise.

His previous prison had been so silent that he’d wanted to scream.

At least he no longer had to recite scriptures to stay sane.

He had a friend to converse with. He investigated the TV cabinet and discovered a handful of single-player card games and puzzles.

It gave him a tiny spark of hope that this Master didn’t want to torture them with complete boredom.

No books or magazines anywhere he could find, though, and he searched everywhere, including the closet in “his” bedroom.

The only things in there were a few more sets of those same pajamas and a pair of tan slippers. No socks, no underwear.

Prison garb. Nothing to individualize or humanize himself or Malori. Nothing besides their names. And Malori admitted that Master only referred to him as “Omega.”

So gross.

The rattle of the dumbwaiter drew him back into the main room. Malori joined him for oatmeal and fruit, which had some flavor to it. “How varied is the menu here?” Kensley asked, despite having no desire to be around long enough to experience multiple meals. He just hated oatmeal.

“Not much,” Malori replied. “Except for when I was pregnant. Then they sent small treats, like cookies or ice cream.”

“Did you ever see a doctor?”

“A few times, but she didn’t speak to me a lot, other than during the births. Her accent was muddled, too, like she was trying to disguise it.”

“I guess you never got her name.”

“She said Dr. Luther, but who knows if it was real?”

Kensley thought back to the brief glimpses of Marta he’d seen before she (at least, he assumed that had been Marta) drugged him at the beach house. “What does she look like? The doctor?”

“I’m not sure. Average height, white, I think, but she also wore a cap over her hair and a mask, like a surgeon.

Same as when she coached me through my births.

” Malori’s voice cracked. “I hoped my second birth would be different, that I’d actually get to keep my son.

I thought...but I was wrong. I was wrong about so much. ”

“I’m so sorry.” Kensley squeezed Malori’s wrist, not surprised when Malori flinched and shifted farther away.

“Master will probably come today. To see you.”

“Fantastic.” Kensley grunted then studied his spoon, curious what sort of weapon it would make.

As if reading his mind, Malori sighed. “Don’t even consider it.

They have cameras all over the place. If all the utensils and plates aren’t returned to the dumbwaiter, they’ll know.

They won’t send any more food until you do, and they’ll shut off the water to the bathroom.

Trust me, I tried everything my first few weeks. ”

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The precautions didn't surprise Kensley, but they did infuriate him.

He'd just have to get more creative in protecting himself when this Master appeared.

He hadn't even met the man and already resented referring to him as "Master." Nah, he'd think of this person as Sadist for now, because that's what he was.

A fucking sadist for selling Malori for sex, and for having done it to at least one other omega before Malori.

And they had no way of knowing how many others (male omegas, alpha females, or just regular people) were being exploited in the same way.

All for money.

King had money. King had power. But Kensley also knew his brother drew a hard line at sexual exploitation and human trafficking. When King found him, he would tear Kensley's captors apart.

Not wanting to press his luck on his second day here, Kensley returned his entire tray to the dumbwaiter.

When Malori did the same and closed the door, the gears ground to life, whisking their empty dishes away.

Kensley studied the dumbwaiter door, curious how strong the wood was.

His fingers brushed behind the decorative wood paneling and ran over cool metal. Reinforced.

Damn it.

Much smarter people than him had created this prison, so Kensley was unlikely to find a weakness or escape route. Wouldn't stop him from resisting with every breath in his body, though.

Malori settled in one of the armchairs and drew his legs up to his chest. "Please tell me about the outside world. It's been a lifetime since I've had someone to talk to who wasn't lying to me."

"I wish I could tell you more than I know, but like I said, up until a few weeks ago, I was living in an abbey." Kensley sat on the end of the couch nearest Malori's chair.

"I saw parishioners multiple times a week for services, but we rarely spoke about anything that wasn't spiritual.

I was friendly with my fellow priests, but we weren't allowed to watch TV or consume much media.

Then I spent the last two weeks on a tropical island, sequestered away from the world. "

"Tell me about the island? Please?"

Kensley did, describing his short-lived paradise, while leaving out all the sexy bits.

His heart ached for Bishop, and his body mourned the loss of his nearness, but he tried not to focus on those things.

On their now-five-days apart. He concentrated on the good things: the smell of saltwater; the crash of ocean waves; the sweetness of fresh conch; snorkeling over a coral reef.

“It sounds like a dream,” Malori whispered. “Something I’ve only seen on TV.”

“It was a wonderful experience, but there was still danger. I ended up here, didn’t I?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault. Will you tell me more about you? Your life before this?”

Malori frowned at his lap, where he didn’t stop twisting his fingers around each other.

“I barely remember my life before this. It wasn’t all that great, anyway.

Like I said, my family hated that I was omega.

My choices were the Order or the street, so I chose the street.

I lived in shelters and worked whenever I could, usually under the table.

But there was more money in dealing drugs. ”

“Oh.” He’d expected some history of prostitution, but selling drugs was just another way of selling your body—especially if you got hooked on your own product. Then again, the story wasn’t over yet.

“Dealing was dangerous, but I made enough to stay in cheap motels, to eat regularly. But I was also using, and addicts aren’t known for making great choices.

I got arrested a few times, spent some time in jail, thankfully in my own cell.

It's not like I've got omega stamped on my forehead, but sometimes I swear someone can look at me and just tell. You know?"

"Yeah." Kensley had gotten that sense a few times while exploring the open air market.

"I do sometimes wonder what they really know, versus what we're projecting.

Because you're right. We don't have marks or special features that scream omega male or alpha female.

We have to be aroused for anything to be obviously different. "

"Yeah." Malori grunted, eyes narrowing at nothing in particular—except maybe his own past. "I met this girl, another junkie named Hannah. We were sweet on each other, and one night while high we had sex."

Kensley nodded, annoyed at his jolt of surprise.

Being omega male and having a self-lubricating asshole did not automatically make him gay or interested in men at all.

The same way being alpha female didn't mean a woman was only attracted to other women.

But the way traditional ideas of sex and gender got twisted up in the omega and alpha designations were why the most conservative societies urged alphas and omegas to enter religious orders.

To keep them tucked away from “civilized” people.

“So, you like women?” Kensley asked. No sense in being coy about the topic when their reproductive parts were all tangled up in their identities and their current predicament.

“I’ve had consensual sex with women, and for a while, I thought I was in love with Hannah.

She introduced me to a small group of people, her family, as she called them.

My new family for a while. We protected each other, and I thought she’d keep my secret.

” He seemed to debate adding more details, and Kensley didn’t push.

The pain was all over Malori’s face. “Anyway, I ended up here. Forced detox was hell. And even though I’d admired men from afar, I’d never...

” Malori’s face crumpled but he didn’t cry.

Kensley could easily fill in the rest of that sentence. I’d never had consensual sex with a man. “I’m sorry.”

Malori shrugged one shoulder. “It doesn’t matter. If being here doesn’t kill me, if by some miracle your brother does find us, I don’t want to have sex ever again. Not with anyone. I just want to be left alone.”

Speaking about their future rescue was a good start. Maybe Kensley’s positive attitude was rubbing off on Malori. He hoped so. “If you want a solitary life someplace quiet, we’ll make sure that happens.”

“Thank you.” The words sounded more dismissive than anything else, but Malori had been living in hell these last few years.

A far more violating, degrading hell than the one Kensley had existed in at the abbey.

Kensley’s life had been stifling and boring, but he’d freely given his body to Bishop.

Malori had been violated dozens, maybe hundreds of times.

Their conversation fizzled after that. Malori focused on the television, expression bland, barely reacting to the program.

Now that he had more room to move around and wasn’t chained in place, Kensley began pacing the perimeter of the living space and both of their bedrooms. Over and over.

He walked until he broke a slight sweat and was breathing harder.

He needed to exercise, to be prepared for anything.

Sitting on his ass and moping wouldn’t help them.

Muscles warmed from his exertion, Kensley gulped water from the bathroom sink, and then returned to the couch.

As soon as his ass hit the cushion, something buzzed.

Malori sat up straight, feet hitting the floor, his face going nearly white.

Kensley stood back up, attention on the front door, hackles rising.

Someone was here.

THIRTEEN

Something buzzed a second time, and then the main door swung open.

A tall, average-looking man with brown hair and wearing a simple navy suit entered, followed by a woman in blue scrubs and a mask.

Kensley immediately clocked them as Sadist/Master and Doctor.

Possibly Malori's Dr. Luther, but definitely not the fake doctor from the island.

Her eyes were completely different. Neither had obvious weapons, but anything could be hiding beneath their long sleeves.

Doctor shut the door and remained near it.

A thousand different thoughts and emotions tangled up inside Kensley, but he ignored them all. He had to focus and think, not panic.

Sadist took a step closer, hands loose by his sides, grinning like they were old family friends. "Welcome to your new home, Kensley. I hope the Omega has helped you settle in."

"He's told me some stuff," Kensley snapped. "Do you know who you're fucking with?"

"Your purchase brief contained the pertinent information. Twenty-eight, former

senior priest, in good health, no known communicable diseases. Omega male. No children. What else do I need to know?”

Marta hadn't told this guy that Kensley was pregnant? Was he actually pregnant, or had that been a ruse to make Kensley behave and not hurt the maybe-baby? “My brother will find me and kill you for this.”

“I wish your brother luck, whoever he is. Marta and her people are consummate professionals, and I've been in business for decades.

I'm wanted by every alphabet-soup government agency there is on two continents.

I'm sure it's in your nature to resist, but you will fail.

If you wish to resist anyway, so you can console yourself later, after you've broken, then by all means. Test me.”

“Why do you hate omegas so much?”

“I don't hate you. On the contrary, I recognize how valuable you are and rare your gift is. How much men and women will pay to experience it for themselves.”

“How much they'll pay to rape and torture innocent people?”

Sadist's lips twisted into something almost...amused? Gross. “You have spirit, Kensley. I like it. I may not break you right away. I may draw it out, so it will be that much sweeter when you do break. When you beg for my mercy.”

“And you just said you don't hate omegas.”

“I don't. I find human beings, especially men, endlessly fascinating. And there is no

more fascinating a male specimen than an omega. Nor a sweeter hole to fuck than one glazed with your honey.”

Kensley pretended to retch. “Please don’t ever say ‘glazed with your honey’ again.

Eww.” There was something not quite sane in both the things Sadist said, and the look in his eyes.

They were somehow both cold and joyful, and it confused the hell out of Kensley.

Terrified him, too. It made Sadist unpredictable and dangerous.

He pulled on some of his residual rage and crossed his arms. Stuck out his chest. “So, are you going to rape me right here, or is there a special bedroom just for that?”

Sadist chuckled, and the sound sent chills worming through Kensley’s chest. “It isn’t your time yet. Your roommate there has a standing appointment, and it’s time for us to go. Mr. Landau wishes to say goodbye to you, Omega.”

Malori’s entire body shuddered as he stood. Kensley didn’t think. He yanked Malori behind him and glared at his enemies, hands balled into fists. Sadist smirked at him. Doctor lady didn’t move a muscle.

“Don’t do this,” Malori whispered. “He’ll just hurt you, and I’ll go with him anyway. I adore you for trying, but let me go, Kensley.”

Everything inside Kensley rebelled at giving in and allowing Malori to simply walk away. But he was smart enough to understand Malori was right. Kensley’s defiance would get them both hurt. He met Malori’s liquid gaze. “I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. Be well.”

Those two words felt like a terrible goodbye, and Kensley's heart shriveled up as he stood there, mute and useless, while Sadist and Doctor left with Malori.

Once the door shut, Kensley flung himself at it, pounding with both fists, furious and terrified for his new friend.

Malori knew what he was walking into, but that didn't make it any easier for Kensley to accept.

It made his own eventual fate all too clear and all too present.

Sadist would be back for him.

Tears burned his eyes, but instead of allowing them to flow, Kensley focused that energy into prowling the apartment again.

Searching for any weakness, any clue, anything he could use as a weapon.

But between the video surveillance that would be alerted if he began breaking furniture apart, and the apartment being sealed like a fortress, Kensley found nothing.

He hadn't expected to find anything, but it still infuriated him enough to tip the sofa over backward.

Even the damned couch was some sort of foam block contraption with no springs he could pry out and use as a weapon.

Time passed, he didn't know how much. A lunch tray arrived, and Kensley ignored it.

The food remained, though, and as much as Kensley hated giving in and taking their stuff while Malori was suffering, he needed to keep up his own strength.

Plus, his maybe-baby's. His angry stomach welcomed the turkey and cheese sandwich, and he drank the lukewarm juice to chase down the dry bread.

No utensils, only a paper plate and paper cup.

He palmed the apple and left the dumbwaiter.

He threw and caught the apple while he paced, gut still upset, despising this new sense of helplessness.

On his fourth circuit of the apartment, something bizarre and unexpected happened: he started getting hard.

He froze in the middle of his bedroom and stared down where his dick was slowly tenting his linen pants.

His hole clenched, and he felt the first unwanted trickle of wetness.

“No.”

They'd drugged his food with some sort of stimulant.

It was the only explanation for the awful arousal swamping his lower half.

Had they drugged Malori every time, too?

Forced his body into arousal and natural wetness to satisfy Sadist's customers?

How long would this last? Was someone coming for him?

Malori said he was taken elsewhere for the abuse, so why was this happening here?

Kensley ignored his dick and shut his bedroom door. Tried shoving the dresser but it wouldn't budge. Neither would the bed, which was one solid unit. Nothing he could use for a blockade. Was there a camera watching him right now? Would anything he did to protect himself matter?

With the loss of his bodily autonomy, thanks to those drugs, Kensley allowed himself to feel despair for the first time.

King wasn't coming to the rescue before he was violated.

Bishop wouldn't save him or save the day.

But in the name of all that was holy or sane in the world, Kensley would go down fighting.

He might find himself sobbing, bloody and broken by the end, but he'd leave his mark on whoever came through that door.

Without a clock, he didn't know how long it took for the outer door to buzz twice.

He imagined that meant there was a secondary outer door—one more level of security that worried him.

Kensley moved to a position on the opposite side of the bed, the only physical barrier he could put between himself and whoever was there.

With no lock, the doorknob turned easily.

Acid coated the back of Kensley's throat; adrenaline hummed in his veins.

Sadist stepped inside, dressed in the same suit and shiny shoes, his expression as

bland as before.

Kensley clocked his hands but still saw no obvious weapons.

He abhorred that he was standing there, dick straining, pants damp with fluid, sweating with fear and hatred, while Sadist simply looked bored.

“Whatever you want, you aren’t getting it easily,” Kensley snarled.

Sadist smiled, showing off perfectly straight, unnaturally white teeth. “How do you know what I want?”

“Please. You put a stimulant in my food for a reason, asshole.”

“You’re correct, I did. And since I wasn’t clear earlier, you may refer to me as Master.”

“Not happening. I like Sadist better.”

“Oh, I think we’re going to have a lot of fun together, you and I.” Sadist closed the door, then leaned his back against it, hands resting in his trouser pockets. So nonchalant that Kensley wanted to scream.

Time ticked by, and each heartbeat only drove Kensley’s anxiety and confusion higher.

What was Sadist doing? Waiting for Kensley’s guard to go down before he attacked?

The guy was at least eight inches taller than Kensley and outweighed him by a good forty pounds.

Kensley was a scrappy fighter, but eventually he'd lose, so what was Sadist waiting for?

"I admit, your comment earlier about your brother made me curious," Sadist said casually, as if remarking on the room's décor. "I had no idea I was entertaining the brother of someone so infamous in the northeast. What a stroke of luck for me."

Kensley did not allow himself to hope. "So, you know my brother will kill you if you hurt me. You should just let me go."

Sadist laughed. "After what I paid for you? Not a chance. As I said, I've been in business a long time, and I've survived by being smart.

As much as this location has served me well, it's time to move my business elsewhere.

But don't worry about your brother. I've already made sure he's fed information that will send him on, forgive the cliché, a wild omega chase. "

Hope began to wither. "My brother's too smart for that. He probably already knows where we are."

"Unlikely. But if he does, I shouldn't wait to leave my mark on you, should I? I do love a sweet, slick omega ass."

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“You can try.” Kensley pulled on all the courage he had left. “But you’ll leave your own blood on the floor.”

“Hmm.” He made no move to stand or attack, and Kensley hazarded a glance at Sadist’s crotch. No sign of an erection, despite the fact that Kensley was a ball of hormones, his body waiting and ready to be fucked. His traitorous dick demanded attention, and his slick ass demanded filling.

But Kensley remained upright, defensive, unwilling to give in to his base nature—a nature that was only awake because of drugs. Not because he was actually aroused or with someone he wanted to sleep with. Not like the way Bishop made his body sing with every touch and kiss and lick and thrust.

Sadist raised his right hand from his pants pocket, then reached inside of his jacket. Kensley braced for a weapon or cuffs, or something equally awful. Sadist pulled out a slim cell phone and began typing on it.

What the hell is he doing? Calling in help?

Kensley watched him, his coiled muscles screaming for him to either relax or bolt, to do something besides stand there like a spring waiting to pop. His teeth and jaw ached, but he couldn’t unclench. Couldn’t do anything except watch Sadist fuck around on his phone for an eternity.

At some point, Kensley’s bladder kicked but he ignored it.

He wasn’t going to ask to be let out to pee, even if his dick calmed down enough to

let urine pass.

He'd rather wet his pants than give Sadist the satisfaction of being asked for favors.

The pants were already half-soaked from his body's betrayal. What was a little more fluid?

The silence in the room was as stifling as the inaction, and Kensley wanted to scream.

To stamp his feet, to do anything to break the silent stand-off between himself and his captor.

But Sadist ignored him, and that fueled Kensley's temper.

Part of him wanted to rush the guy, to attack first so they could just get this over with.

But something deep inside, something that sounded a lot like Bishop, told him to wait.

"Be patient, sweetheart. Wait him out."

Easier imagined than done, especially with his future rapist less than ten feet away.

An eternity passed, and then Kensley's arousal began to dim. His dick softened, and his natural lube dried up. He wanted to be grateful, but what if Sadist actually preferred it dry? What if he wanted it to hurt? To damage? And Kensley still had to piss like crazy.

Sadist's phone chimed, and he looked at Kensley. Smiled at his state. "Ah, good. So, our average dose lasts ninety-seven minutes with your metabolism. We'll have to increase it for your first client. They always pay for at least two hours."

Kensley had no response to that. This entire thing had been...what? Some kind of sick test?

Sadist pocketed his phone, opened the door and left. Kensley didn't move, still coiled so tight he might sprain a muscle if he moved too fast. Not until he heard the two newly-familiar buzzes. Then silence. He carefully unlocked his body and ventured to the doorway. No one in the living room.

Dizzy with fear, confusion, anger, and his still-throbbing bladder, Kensley searched every inch of the apartment before going into the bathroom to relieve himself.

Then he showered off the sticky slick residue.

Once he was dried off and in fresh pajamas, exhaustion slapped him in the face, and he fell asleep on the couch.

The twin buzzers nearly knocked Kensley to the floor.

He scrambled to his feet, expecting another visit from Sadist, or maybe someone else intent on causing harm.

Malori shuffled inside and the door closed behind him.

He wore the same clothes as he'd left in, but they somehow seemed looser, as if Malori himself has shrunk.

His lips were swollen, his eyes red, but Kensley couldn't see any other obvious injuries.

Long sleeves and pants could hide a lot of things.

“Malori?”

He didn't look at Kensley, simply turned and kept shuffling toward his bedroom.

He didn't shut the door, though, so Kensley followed, stopping in the doorway.

Malori curled up on top of the covers, facing the wall, and Kensley swore his body deflated.

Kensley's heart broke for his new friend's obvious defeat.

“Can I get you anything?” he asked softly.

“No.”

The single word was as much a dismissal as a plea for someone to take his pain away.

Kensley searched through his years of training as a priest, through all the consolations and words of encouragement, and everything sounded flat.

Trite. Weak for the severity of the situation and the years of torture Malori had survived.

Kensley didn't imagine Malori would believe his prayers anymore than Kensley believed them.

“I'm here when you need me,” was all Kensley could think to say.

When their dinner trays came up, Kensley ate his quickly, and then took the second tray into Malori's room.

Gently shook Malori awake and helped him eat about half his portion of beef stew and bread.

Malori chewed with the enthusiasm of a dying man who simply wished it was over, so Kensley praised him for each bite. Every morsel swallowed.

They both needed their strength for whatever new nightmare came tomorrow.

He wanted to ask Malori if Sadist had done the same thing to him when Malori arrived.

If he'd tested the stimulant while Malori freaked out, not knowing if he'd be attacked or not.

But it didn't matter, and it changed nothing.

He didn't need Malori feeling guilty for not thinking to warn Kensley about the test. So, he put their dishes back in the dumbwaiter and watched TV alone.

A game show had just switched over to a rerun of an old court-drama show when Malori joined him on the couch.

He snuggled up close to Kensley, and Kensley didn't object when Malori put his head on Kensley's lap.

Malori's gaze was more focused but still full of grief and pain.

Kensley rested one hand on Malori's shoulder and tried to comfort him.

He couldn't imagine the hundreds of times Malori had returned to this empty apartment, alone with his emotional agony and physical exhaustion. Tonight, Malori

wasn't alone.

They shared Malori's bed again that night, Malori still curled far away. Kensley wasn't offended in the least. After his afternoon nap, Kensley had a hard time falling asleep, so he tossed and turned until exhaustion stole him away.

Saturday morning was the same as yesterday, with them taking turns in the bathroom, and then sharing simple breakfasts at the small table. Kensley had just put their plates back in the dumbwaiter when Malori said, "Please, don't grieve when I'm gone."

"What?" Kensley returned to the table and sat opposite Malori, confused and alarmed. "What are you talking about?"

"I think yesterday was my last customer. Even with the stimulant, I was...couldn't provide the lubricant he needed, so he created his own."

"Created—fuck." He didn't need details to understand what Malori's "customer" had done to create wetness, and it twisted his stomach up tight. Horror made the skin on the backs of his legs crawl. "I'm so sorry."

"It's not the first time, but it's hopefully the last. I am so fucking tired, Kensley.

If there was anything in this apartment to use, I'd end it now.

Before Master takes me away and does God knows what.

Buries me in a field. Tosses me down a well.

I just want this nightmare to be over. I don't want to hurt anymore. "

"I wish I could do more than keep asking you to have hope and not give up, because I

don't think I have the right to. I cannot imagine what you've survived, but Malori? You have survived it. I hope you can survive until we're rescued."

Malori tried to smile, but it came off more like a grimace. "I'll do my best. But in case I can't say it later, I'm glad I got to be your friend for a little while."

"Me too." Kensley wanted them to be friends for years to come, but that promise was beyond his control. All he could do was remain vigilant and wait for a chance to escape, no matter what shape it came in.

He did not expect hope to come inside the dumbwaiter when their lunch plates arrived.

Kensley went to fetch the tray, and he froze at the sight of a note on top of something wrapped in a piece of cloth.

He read the note without exposing it to whatever cameras were in the apartment: Leave this here for now so no one sees it. You'll know when to use it.

No signature, no other marks on the paper. He fondled the bundle while pretending to have trouble with the tray, and his heart leapt with hope. It felt like a small handgun.

King. Please, let this be King and Bishop, please!

Acting had never been his forte, but Kensley did his best to keep his expression neutral, while he carried the tray to the table.

Malori joined him with no enthusiasm for the meal.

He'd moved stiffly, slowly all morning, as if resigned to being carted off to his death at any moment.

But he ate his sandwich at Kensley's urging.

Kensley forced his own food down into a stomach rolling with nerves and anticipation.

If anything was going to happen, it would be within the hour or so they usually took to eat and return their dishes.

Time stretched out, its path barely marked by the stretch of a shadow from the barred kitchen window. Without a clock, he could only guess, but it felt like close to an hour. Grabbing onto desperation and inspiration, Kensley stood suddenly. Malori startled.

"Sorry, I just, ah." Kensley pressed a hand over his gut. "I need to use the bathroom. I'll be a little while, but I do want to finish my lunch. Don't send it back yet."

"Okay."

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The instant Kensley shut the bathroom door, he reconsidered his plan.

He had no idea if there was a camera in the bathroom.

Until now, it hadn't occurred to him that they might not even have this small privacy.

He had to risk it, though, and stall for as long as possible.

Give whoever had sent that gun a chance to get in position.

He pressed his ear to the door and counted to sixty, ticking each minute off on his fingers.

He counted to sixteen minutes and twenty-three seconds when he faintly heard the first buzzer.

Kensley grabbed the doorknob, nerves sizzling, heart slamming into his ribs.

This had to be it. His instincts screamed this was the moment.

When the second buzzer for their door rang, Kensley opened the bathroom door. The dumbwaiter was immediately to his left and the farthest point in the room from the front door.

The instant Sadist entered the apartment, Kensley retreated to the dumbwaiter, prepared to reach for the hidden gun, once he'd properly assessed the situation. Sadist clocked them both, his face wrinkled with something besides boredom or calm. He

was almost agitated.

“Our timetable to relocate has moved up, Kensley,” Sadist said. “Let’s go.”

He hadn’t included Malori in that statement. “Where are we going? Is Malori coming?”

“The Omega is going somewhere he won’t suffer much longer.”

As soon as Sadist’s hand slipped behind his back, Kensley reached into the dumbwaiter.

Yanked out the bundle and tore the fabric from around the gun.

Prayed the safety was off, because he didn’t know anything beyond point and pull the trigger.

He raised his gun and followed the sight to Sadist, who’d pulled a larger gun on Malori.

With no time to clock Malori’s reaction, Kensley aimed at Sadist’s chest, curled his finger around the trigger, and pulled.

Two loud noises filled the room, one after the other.

Kensley yelped when the gun jerked in his hands, his ears ringing from the report.

Sadist sprawled to the ground in a heap.

Malori was huddled on the floor beside his chair, head pressed to his pulled-up knees, shaking.

Kensley looked from Malori to Sadist, to the open door and what appeared to be a small lobby beyond it.

No one else rushed into the room, guns blazing.

Copying what he'd seen in a movie once, he leveled his gun at Sadist and took careful steps forward, expecting the man to sit up and fire at him.

The second bang had to have come from Sadist's gun, which was still loosely gripped in the man's right hand

Heart in his throat, Kensley used his foot to kick the gun away. Sadist didn't stir. He lay on his right side, head angled toward the door, and a small puddle of blood was oozing from beneath his jacket. "Malori?" Kensley asked, unsurprised his voice was shaking.

"Is he dead?" Malori's broken voice was barely audible over the pounding of Kensley's heart.

"I don't know." He nudged Sadist's leg with his foot, gun never wavering from the asshole's face. No reaction.

Malori appeared beside Kensley, quiet as a ghost. Kensley didn't take his eyes off Sadist, not even when Malori pried the gun out of Kensley's hand.

Held it straight out. Kensley shouted when Malori pulled the trigger three times in a row, each round hitting Sadist somewhere in the chest and neck, splattering blood into the air.

"Holy shit," Kensley wheezed. "Damn."

Malori aimed once more and shot Sadist in the groin. “It’s not enough, you sick fuck.”

“Um, I think he’s dead now.”

“Maybe.” Malori shot again, and Kensley looked away from the carnage. The next time, the chamber clicked. Six rounds spent. Malori tossed the gun at Sadist, then lurched toward Kensley.

In a flash of panic, Kensley thought Malori was attacking him. Then he spotted the blood on Malori’s shirt, darkening the tan fabric on his left shoulder. “Oh shit, Malori! He shot you.”

“Shot him back.”

“Yeah, you did. We need to get out of here.”

“How did you get a gun?”

“Someone left it for me in the dumbwaiter.”

“Huh?”

“My brother must be here.” Kensley looped Malori’s right arm around his shoulders, paused a moment to pick up Sadist’s gun, and then headed for the door.

He had no idea what was on the other side, but he wasn’t surprised to find a plain foyer and an elevator with only a down button.

An elevator that was moving up, based on the noise behind the sliding doors.

“Back, back.” Kensley retreated into the apartment, just in case, and stashed his friend behind the couch. Malori was turning white and starting to breathe hard, but he was alert. Kensley knelt at the end of the couch and aimed his weapon at the open apartment door.

The first buzzer sounded, which he knew now was the elevator arriving. Kensley wrapped his finger around the trigger and held his breath, ready to shoot if he didn’t recognize whoever stepped through that door. His and Malori’s lives depended on it.

Footsteps shuffled. Voices murmured. Kensley’s pulse spiked.

A bitter taste filled his mouth. Someone spoke and the noise stopped.

Had they noticed Sadist’s dead body inside the apartment?

Kensley’s brain spun with possibilities, everything from a friendly face, to a barrage of fire from Sadist’s minions.

“My charus!”

Kensley’s hand jerked and he nearly fired the gun. “Bishop! I’m here!”

Bishop made the most miraculous entrance in the world, dressed in all black, both hands bracing his own gun as he strode inside the apartment. He glanced down at Sadist briefly. “Kens?”

Kensley lowered his gun as he stood, his entire body reacting to Bishop’s proximity.

At seeing his charus in the flesh, very much alive, his eyes blazing with intensity.

Six days apart was too much, and Kensley didn’t think.

He threw himself at Bishop, who caught him with a single arm around the waist, never lowering that gun as he continued to survey the room.

“It’s just me and Malori, no one else,” Kensley said.

“Clear!” Bishop shouted.

Three men in black flooded the room, guns raised, and they began to search.

The fourth man to enter made Kensley’s heart kick hard.

King commanded the room with his presence, even more so after fourteen years.

Time had put lines around his eyes and a few flecks of gray at his temples, but that was his brother.

King’s relieved smile melted quickly into annoyance when he saw the body on the ground. “Is that Decker?” he asked.

“Looks like it, based on our surveillance photos,” Bishop replied. He finally wrapped his other arm around Kensley and squeezed the life out of him. Kensley pressed his face into Bishop’s neck and held on, fighting tears. Tears could wait until they were out of this horrific place.

“Man down,” someone said. “Gunshot wound to the shoulder.”

“His name’s Malori,” Kensley said. “He’s been here a long time. Please, help him.”

“We will, sweetheart,” Bishop replied, his heart thumping so hard Kensley felt it in his own chest. “I wanted to kill Decker myself for daring to touch you.”

“I’m okay. Just get me out of here.”

“Gladly.” Bishop holstered his gun, then swept Kensley up into his arms. Kensley didn’t protest being carried.

He never wanted to leave Bishop’s arms again, and he clung to his charus as they piled into the elevator.

He opened his eyes long enough to make sure Malori was with them, and he startled at the surprising sight of King cradling Malori in his arms, while Malori sobbed into King’s neck.

They were finally free, Malori most of all.

FOURTEEN

Ziggy deserved a massive raise for uncovering all the information they needed to locate Kensley, and if King didn't give him one, Bishop would.

Not only had Ziggy found the brothel, codenamed the Farm, but he'd also managed to locate a special weapons importer from the west coast, who was seeking a missing loved one: his alpha female sister.

King generally disliked trusting strangers, but he and Oswald had a common goal in finding their siblings, and so they threw their resources together and found the brothel hours before it would have been relocated.

Bishop couldn't imagine how much more difficult their recovery would have been if that had happened.

How much worse for wear Kensley would have been if he'd been with his purchaser much longer.

Six days had been bad enough, judging by the way Kensley clung to Bishop and refused to be parted from him.

Not during their flight from the secluded farmhouse where Kens and eight other victims had been imprisoned and abused.

Not during the long ride to the safe house they'd prepared two hundred miles east of the Farm's location.

Oswald and his men had taken his sister and gone their separate ways, and Bishop wished her a full recovery.

That left Bishop and King with Kensley, Malori, and six remaining victims, one of whom was an alpha female, and one other omega male.

The other four were two young men and two young women who'd been trafficked into Arye Decker's house of horrors.

Tormented and abused, many of them for years.

They'd divided into three black vans, no windows or markings, that made their way steadily east.

Bishop sat on a bench seat with Kensley dozing on his lap.

They hadn't spoken much, beyond their initial declarations, but this wasn't the time to inquire about the lengths to which Kensley had suffered.

On the seat behind them, King sat with Malori's head in his lap.

Malori's shoulder had been bandaged, but they couldn't do much more for the gunshot until they arrived at the safe house.

No one spoke. There was nothing to say.

Bishop's one regret was that Decker was dead before Bishop could kill him. His consolation was the shot right through Decker's dick—and that no employee of that monster had gotten out of the house alive. And Decker's victims were free. Now they had to make sure they stayed safe and began to heal.

He gently combed his fingers through Kensley's black curls, while his beloved slept, beyond grateful for such a simple touch.

Touches he'd taken for granted during their time on the island, but never again.

Every touch, every smile, every second was precious, and he wouldn't squander them.

They'd take every penny of Bishop's money and start over somewhere far away, where the Kingston name didn't reach.

Where King's enemies would never think to look.

Where no one would ever touch his charus without Kensley's explicit consent.

Thoughts of what Decker might have done to Kensley continued to plague him, engaging his temper, and sending his stress levels through the roof.

Desperate for a distraction, he peered over the back of his seat.

King held his phone in his left hand, thumb constantly moving over the screen, while his right remained on Malori's chest, several inches below the bandage.

Malori seemed to be fighting sleep, as if unsure if this was real, despite reassurances from Kensley that they were the good guys.

So to speak.

King's unusual attentiveness to Malori amused Bishop.

He'd never seen King act like this with anyone other than Kensley, and once with

Bishop when he'd been recovering from the explosion.

King no longer took long-term romantic partners of any gender, and he certainly didn't dote over them.

He slept with sexy, strong-willed people who challenged him, kept him on his toes until the novelty wore off.

This was a new, tender side of the man, and it was with a much-younger, horribly-abused, submissive omega.

Interesting.

King caught him staring and raised a single, slender eyebrow, daring him to comment.

Bishop turned around and stared out the front windshield, not able to see much beyond the thick mountain foliage.

Their safe house was a favor King had called in—the use of an off-season lodge that wouldn't open for another eight weeks.

The lodge was several miles from a summer tourist town, and it had its own well and generator, so no one would notice the spike in off-season electricity.

They'd already flown in King's personal doctor, and he should be waiting for them at the lodge, ready with all the supplies he'd need to physically treat his traumatized patients.

The psychological trauma was a far bigger issue, and one beyond their current means.

All King could really do was help them find their families again, or a new safe place to live with a new family.

They had the connections to make it happen.

“About ten minutes to destination,” their driver said, his voice snapping Bishop out of a light doze.

Kensley still slept deeply, and he didn’t stir until the van began rocking gently on the rough climb to the lodge.

Kensley yawned, tried to stretch, and then remembered he was on a narrow seat with his feet hanging off the end.

His disorientation dissolved the instant he recognized Bishop.

“We’re almost there,” Bishop said, thrilled to see Kensley’s lovely gray eyes. “We’ll have a doctor there to examine you, and then you can keep resting.”

“Not really that tired,” Kensley struggled to sit, so Bishop helped him, until Kensley was tucked under Bishop’s right arm, snuggled up close. “I slept okay there. Malori needs the doctor first.”

“He’ll see him,” King replied. “Your friend is very strong, Kens. He’s refused to sleep since we left that godforsaken place.”

“Don’t wanna fall asleep,” Malori said, so softly Bishop barely heard it over the rumble of the engine. “Might wake up back there.”

“You won’t. You have my word. I’ll keep you safe.”

Kensley turned wide, surprised eyes to Bishop, then smiled. Seemed Malori had a new protector.

The van went behind the lodge to what Bishop guessed was the employee and delivery entrance, and parked there.

The driver opened the side door so he could help Kensley and Bishop out first. He also supported Malori until King was out and could properly carry Malori inside.

They entered a large storage room by an industrial kitchen.

A very familiar face, Dr. Arwin Melish, was waiting for them, and he ushered King down a hallway to a small office that had been rigged like a field hospital's surgical unit.

Once King, Malori, and Dr. Melish were inside the office, Dr. Melish shut the door, leaving Bishop and Kensley alone in the hallway. "Dr. Melish is the best," Bishop said. "He took care of me after the explosion."

"Then Malori is in good hands," Kensley replied.

"He'll see you as soon as possible."

"I'm all right, Bishop." He turned, wrapped his arms around Bishop's waist, and pressed one cheek to his chest. "I was mostly stressed out and terrified, and the Sadist drugged me once, but I'm not physically wounded."

"Drugged?" He ground that single word to dust. "Decker drugged you?"

"Not like unconscious." Kensley glanced around, but the other victims were being taken to a different part of the house.

When he looked up, his cheeks flamed red, but his eyes were furious.

“The drug was like an arousal stimulant. I got hard and wet, and then Decker came in the room. I thought he was going to rape me, Bishop, and I would have fought him until I bled.”

Bishop’s temper blazed through his chest like wildfire.

“But he just watched me. Played on his phone. He sat there until it wore off, said it was only ninety minutes, and his clients preferred two hours.”

He growled long and low. “But he never touched you?”

“No. I mean, I was unconscious between the place Marta stashed me and waking up in that apartment with Malori, and they changed my clothes, so who knows who fondled what. But I don’t feel damaged, I promise.” Something in his gaze flickered. Not necessarily negative, but it was there.

“What? What else?”

“It’s not important right now. Can we find a room, preferably with a bed, and just hold each other? I need you to hold me until I hear Malori will be okay.”

“We can absolutely do that.”

“Thank you.”

On the second floor, Bishop found a suite that hadn’t been claimed yet, and he locked the door behind them.

The rustic interior might have been charming if he’d been here on vacation.

All the beds had been hastily made with rubber mattress protectors (probably to prevent mattress staining in case of injury) and whatever linens their people had brought with them. Didn't matter.

He shucked his shoes and climbed under the covers with Kensley. The room was chilly, but their body heat more than made up for it. Kensley snuggled close and tucked his head beneath Bishop's chin. And Bishop never wanted to let go.

Kensley's brain had been running at a hundred miles an hour, for what felt like weeks, from the time he discovered the gun in the dumbwaiter, until the moment he flung himself into Bishop's warm, waiting arms. He'd calmed slightly on the journey from his prison to the escape vans, and he'd finally relaxed enough to sleep once he was safely alone with Bishop, King, and Malori. Plus, the driver, but whatever.

He'd rested for a long time, and now he was back where he belonged: in bed with his charus. Holding each other. Loving each other. Existing in joy and peace and, for a little while, keeping the dangerous outside world at bay.

"I'm so sorry I failed you," Bishop whispered in the quiet.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:34 am

Kensley's heart panged. "You didn't. I know you didn't." But he also understood why Bishop felt that way. He'd been charged with protecting Kensley, and Kensley had been stolen, tormented, and threatened. He'd also been rescued by his beloved. "Tell me what happened that night? On the island?"

Bishop released a long, raspy breath. "I was waiting at the front door for Walsh and the doc. I heard the Jeep's engine, and then I saw the lights. It happened so fast, but I still should have seen it coming."

"Seen what?"

"An ambush. I couldn't immediately see the driver, and when the Jeep swung around, the woman posing as Dr. Fatima stepped out, and she said the name 'Drew Burton.' I knew it was wrong.

King never would have told her my pseudonym, he'd have used the names on our passports, but before I could defend us the driver shot me. "

Kensley's entire body jerked. Blood pulsed in his temples, and he sat upright, gaping down at Bishop. "You were shot? Where?" He searched for obvious bandages behind Bishop's black tee.

"Hey, I'm okay." Bishop stilled his roving hands, then reached into his cargo pants pocket. Tucked something heavy and warm into Kensley's hand. "This stopped the bullet. It saved my life."

He uncurled his fingers and stared at the silver object until it made sense. Shock and

gratitude coiled through his insides as he brought the mangled pendant to his lips. Kissed the metal.

“I’ve got a hell of a bruise on my chest, but it didn’t break the skin,” Bishop added. “Thank you for protecting me, even when you didn’t know you were.”

“I can’t believe it.” Kensley placed his hand on Bishop’s sternum.

“I was so scared you were dead. I heard the gunshots, but Marta wouldn’t tell me anything.

Not if you were alive or dead. She told me I was going to be sold, but I didn’t want to believe anything she said.

” Especially not that he was pregnant. And Decker hadn’t said a word about it, but what if?

What if Kensley really was carrying their child?

He needed to speak with this Dr. Melish as soon as possible. Not that there was much the doc could do at a vacation lodge, with no real testing equipment or ultrasound machine.

“Yes, well, we’ll be dealing with her organization soon enough,” Bishop snarled. “There’s nothing King and I hate more than human traffickers. Decker was half the battle, but the people who sold you to the Farm don’t get a pass.”

“You haven’t dealt with Marta yet?”

“No, recovering you was more important. Don’t worry, we won’t lose track of them.

” Bishop brushed his lips over Kensley’s.

“After I was shot, I lost consciousness. When I woke up, King and his people were there. We gathered what evidence we could, and we went home. King didn’t give me much time before he laid into me about fucking his baby brother. ”

Kensley snorted even as he blushed. “King knows?”

“I told him everything. Well, I edited the private parts, but you know what I mean. He supports us.”

“I’m glad.” Not that Kensley needed King’s blessing; it felt nice to have, though.

“Oh, I have something for you.” Bishop retrieved something else from his pocket and tucked it into Kensley’s hand.

Kensley grinned, heart fluttering as he immediately put the shell-and-bead necklace over his head, returning it to where it belonged. “Thank you so much. I guess I assumed Marta had taken it and thrown it away.”

“It was left behind at the beach house. I couldn’t bear leaving it behind, not after my necklace saved my life. I also rescued your sandals.”

“I’m glad.” He carefully put the mangled fork necklace around Bishop’s neck and situated the pendant on his chest. “Perfect.” But for as happy as he was to be here with Bishop, he still had so many questions. “Marta said I was going to be auctioned to the highest bidder.”

Bishop flinched. “King tried. He got a link to the auction, but it was only live for five minutes. He had no time to move money around or make assets liquid. Someone else came in with a higher bid at the last possible second. Trust me, I have never seen him

that furious in my life. Please don't think he didn't try, or that your freedom cost too much. ”

Kensley wanted to believe it. Bishop had no reason to lie. Still, Kensley needed to hear it from King's own lips.

“The upside of the auction link was it gave our tech guy a new route to search, and that lead is how we found Decker. How we found you.”

“So, I guess a few days of terror and fear of imminent rape was worth it in the end.” Before Bishop could growl and posture, Kensley wrapped his arms around his waist and rested his head on Bishop's broad chest. “If I hadn't gone to that place, Malori would be dead or about to die.

He said he was exhausted, used up, and Decker intimated that Malori would be killed soon.

I was his replacement. Me going there saved his life, Bishop. I will never regret that. Oh!”

He sat up so fast Bishop reached to steady him. Kensley grabbed Bishop's shoulders, pulse racing. “Malori had two children while he was held captive, Bishop. We have to help him find his kids.”

Bishop's lips parted as his eyebrows rose. A fresh wave of horror washed over his expressive face, brightening his eyes with tears. “Two? Motherfucker, I can't believe that.”

“He's so exhausted. And the last time they took Malori away and brought him back...

I don't think all of him came back. He was so empty last night.

Today, I think Decker was going to kill him, rather than take him with us when we left the compound, but I shot him before he could.

Decker, I mean. He shot Malori, and then Malori shot Decker until the gun was empty. ”

“I don’t blame Malori one bit. Decker was evil.

I don’t have the words for Malori’s situation.

I’d heard that brothels like this existed, but only as nebulous stories.

I’d never met or spoken to anyone who had actually been to one.

Everything was third or fourth hand. I cannot begin to fathom Malori’s pain.

Having two children stolen from him. How long was he there? ”

“About three years.”

“So he was pregnant roughly half the time he was held captive? Fuck me.”

“I promised we’d find his kids.”

“We’ll do everything we possibly can, I swear.” Bishop’s lips twitched. “Judging by the way King hasn’t left Malori’s side, I have a feeling King will move heaven and earth to find them.”

Kensley blinked a few times while the thought turned over in his mind. King hadn’t left Malori’s side since their escape, and it hadn’t occurred to him it was anything other than King’s overprotective streak. “You think so? Malori’s a lot younger than

him. He's younger than me."

"I'm speculating. But we will help Malori, as best we can. He has a lot of healing to do. So do you, Kens."

Kensley shook his head. "Not like him. Sure, I was stressed out and bored, and I nearly had a fear-induced stroke those ninety minutes I was drugged, but I'm okay."

Bishop rested a palm on his forehead, a hot, comforting weight. "Maybe you're okay physically, but you've been wounded here, sweetheart. You've been terrorized, and that leaves a mark. It doesn't go away just because your body isn't damaged. Your mind needs time to heal, too."

Those wonderful, comforting words squeezed a few more tears from what Kensley thought were exhausted wells. "It's hard not to compare Malori's trauma to mine and to come up short. But I do hear you. It'll take time."

"And I'll be with you every step of the way."

"Good. We need you." Kensley couldn't take the slip back, and he silently prayed Bishop didn't?—

"We?" Bishop seemed poised to brush it off as a slip of the tongue, but Kensley must not have managed his expression well. Bishop's eyes narrowed. "Kens?"

"Look, she was probably lying to keep me from hurting myself." Kensley took one of Bishop's hands and pressed it over his lower belly. When he found the words, he spoke them to their hands. "Marta? The lady who held me after the island? She said I was pregnant."

"P-p-pregnant? That's impossible."

“Not when it comes to a true charum. Apparently, finding each other and our bodies recognizing each other...it can trigger my fertility period. And considering all the sex we were having all over the island, it’s possible I am pregnant, but I have no proof.” He chanced looking Bishop in the eyes.

Eyes shining with so many things Kensley couldn’t hope to name, but above all he saw love. “You could be pregnant?” Bishop’s voice was soft, so full of awe it couldn’t hold the weight of it. “Really?”

“It’s possible, but I don’t kn—umf.”

The force of Bishop’s kiss stole his words and his breath, and then Kensley was on his back, surrounded by Bishop’s familiar, comforting body.

The embrace wasn’t sexual, despite their positions.

It was love and comfort and joy and acceptance, all rolled up into a hug and a kiss.

A long, reassuring hug and kiss that Kensley never wanted to end.

“My God, I can’t believe this,” Bishop said, hot breath puffing against Kensley’s damp lips. “Our baby.”

“Marta could have been lying. I was all alone in this hospital-style room, no one to talk to, no idea what they might do. She probably thought I’d behave if there was a baby at risk, especially wondering if you were dead or not.

” A new blast of fury over that manipulation heated his chest. “Fuck, I hate her for that. I could have fought harder to escape.”

“Maybe. But then you never would have led us to Malori and the others who were

being trafficked.”

“You’re right. And even if Marta was lying and I’m not pregnant, I’ll never regret helping set the others free. If all that happened to Malori, then I can’t imagine what the rest suffered.”

“Don’t. Don’t stress over it, because you can’t change the past. Please, take comfort in knowing you have positively affected their futures.”

Kensley leaned into Bishop’s chest. “I can do that. But what if I am pregnant?”

“Then we’re going to be very busy in nine months, aren’t we?” he replied with a soft rumble of laughter. “It’s been a long time since I gave any real thought to having children, and now it’s an imminent possibility.”

“And a terrifying one, considering King’s enemies are still out there. Are the people who tried to kidnap me at the abbey connected to Marta or Decker?”

“We still aren’t certain who sent them, and finding out hasn’t been a priority.”

Kensley grumped. “Great. So, I’m still a target. Our family is a target. How can we put a baby in the middle of this kind of life?”

Hurt etched all over Bishop’s face. “You don’t want to have a child with me?”

“I’m not saying never, but now isn’t exactly an ideal time.”

“I doubt there’s ever an ideal time to become a parent.”

Kensley wanted to argue, but he was up against a brick wall.

Bishop was visibly thrilled at the baby news, and nothing Kensley said would dull that shine.

The only thing that would was if a pregnancy test came back negative—if they found out Marta had lied.

That would hurt immensely, but it wouldn't be the end of the world.

He and Bishop could figure out the dangerous shit-show that was their life before bringing an innocent child into the fray.

Maybe.

All he could right now was hug Bishop and hope for the best—because their best was absolutely yet to come.

FIFTEEN

Kensley was so relieved and excited when Bishop got a text that Malori was sleeping peacefully and would make a full recovery from his gunshot, that he lost his mind a little and gave Bishop a blow job.

He'd missed being sexual with his charus, his protector, his love, and he put everything he had into sucking Bishop into a powerful orgasm.

Bishop kissed him for a long time, but Kensley couldn't get hard.

He was still too stressed out from the day and from waiting to find out if he was pregnant or not.

As anxious as he was about that, Kensley still made sure the other freed victims were seen by Dr. Melish, before Kensley acquiesced to his own exam in the modified office.

Since Kensley hadn't been violated, an anal exam felt a little overly cautious, but he endured the embarrassing procedure.

His vital signs were all normal for what he remembered from his last physical.

When the basic exams were over, Kensley asked Bishop to come into the room. He held Bishop's hand tight and asked, "Do you have a pregnancy test I can take?"

Dr. Melish blinked at him through large, wire-rimmed glasses. "I do. I didn't think

you were sexually active, Elder Thorne, and you said no one touched you while imprisoned.” He cut his eyes at Bishop. “I take it this development includes Mr. Burton there.”

For a split second, Kensley was confused. Bishop’s last name was Anders, not—oh. Bishop had said that only he and King knew Bishop’s true identity. To the rest of the world, he was still Drew Burton.

“It does,” Kensley replied. “The woman who sold me to Decker told me I was pregnant, but she didn’t show me proof.

And I honestly can’t say if I feel any different or not, because this past week has been incredibly stressful, so I don’t know if my upset stomach is anxiety or early morning sickness. ”

“Could be both.” Dr. Melish reached into one of several leather satchels and produced a small box. “This is the best I can do without a lab to run proper blood tests. Instructions are simple. Take the cap off the white end, pee on it, and cap it back up. Bring it to me.”

“Does it give one stripe or two?”

“Tests for omegas are slightly different. I have to add a solution to the stick for a positive or negative result.”

“Gotcha. Um.”

Dr. Melish smiled, and he reminded Kensley a bit of an old schoolteacher of his, a long time ago. “Bathroom is the first door to the left. If you don’t have to go, it can wait.”

“The hell it can.”

Kensley hadn't drank much liquid all day, but he'd squeeze out what he could to get his answer.

He was sick of waiting and wondering. He took the box to the single-person bathroom that was probably for lodge staff, peed on the stick, and brought it back to Dr. Melish within three minutes.

The good doc took it to a small table and pulled another container out of a different bag.

Kensley pressed his face into Bishop's chest, heart galloping away, even as his tension calmed a bit under Bishop's warm, protective touch.

No one spoke. Kensley wasn't sure he was breathing. Seconds ticked by loudly on a clock somewhere in the room. He couldn't move to look. Bishop's fingers traced small circles on his back. Time seemed to stand still.

“I'll need an official blood test and ultrasound to confirm,” Dr. Melish finally said, “but it does appear that you're pregnant, Elder Thorne.”

Static buzzed in Kensley's ears, and then his entire world became Bishop's crushing hug.

Bishop's joyous laughter and babbling promises to love and protect them both, no matter what.

Kensley held tight, his brain a storm of thoughts, his entire being a cacophony of battling emotions.

He wanted to be ecstatic at their good fortune, but reality kept dousing that joy with fear.

Fear of his current circumstances as a pawn in a game between King and some unknown player.

Fear at the idea of being pregnant at all—a future he'd never imagined for himself after joining the Order.

Fear of failing this innocent child growing inside him, of being a horrible parent, of not protecting them—and a thousand other things.

Bishop gently eased out of their embrace, his face painted with confusion. “You aren’t excited about this.”

“I’m scared, for so many reasons.”

“You don’t think I can protect you?”

“Of course, I do.” He clutched both of Bishop’s hands over his own heart.

“I love you, and I already love this baby. But we are deep in the middle of a violent world, and as much as I want to celebrate this news, it worries me. If the wrong people find out, it’s something else to potentially hold over King’s head. ”

“Forget about King and that world for a little while, sweetheart.” Bishop sat in the desk chair and drew Kensley onto his lap.

Looped both arms around his waist in a comforting hold.

“Just for tonight, let’s pretend none of that exists.

Let's go back upstairs to our room and pretend we're on vacation again. Just you and me."

Kensley's stomach chose that moment to release an angry growl, and he chuckled. "Can we find food first? I'm eating for two, remember?"

Bishop kissed him. "Of course. I'm sure someone has invaded the kitchen by now. There are a lot of mouths here tonight. Do you want to eat with the others? Or take food to our room?"

"With the others, I think. I've been isolated for so long. First the cabin, then the island, and then all of this. I need to be around people. Is that okay?"

"Of course. But we aren't sharing the pregnancy yet, right?"

"Right." Kensley glanced around, but Dr. Melish had given them privacy. And the doctor wouldn't blab Kensley's private business, not even to King. Right? "I'll have to tell King soon, but not tonight. Not until we know what our next step is."

"Agreed. We don't have to know every single thing right now. What's most important is that we're in this together. We're going to be a family." Hesitation crinkled the corners of Bishop's eyes. "If that's what you want?"

"Definitely!" He blushed, having not meant to shout that. "I am happy about this, it's just so unexpected. Getting pregnant this soon was not how I anticipated our relationship going, but I chose you the first time we had sex, Bishop. I don't want to be with anyone else, not ever. I love you."

Wonder and joy spread across Bishop's face, and a wide smile told him everything before Bishop said, "I love you, too, Kens. I've loved you for a long time and from a long distance but no longer. I can love you front and center, for the world to see.

From now on, it's you and me. Side by side."

Joy filled Kensley's heart to bursting. "Yes. My charus."

"My charus, as well. My always."

Bishop tried not to hover too conspicuously during their meal of steak and eggs, plus sides of salad, dinner rolls, and canned fruit, but he couldn't help it.

Every instinct in his body screamed to protect Kensley and their child at all costs—especially after the horrible news that Malori's own two children had been stolen from him.

If anyone ever took Kensley's child, he'd burn the world down until he found them again.

But Kensley wasn't kidding when he said he needed to be around people.

He spent every possible moment chatting with the other men and women they'd saved.

None of them had been recently wounded, or as physically traumatized as Malori, and while they were all shy and tentative to ask for things, they showed a lot of fighting spirit, especially the young alpha female named Ember.

Her courage and tenacity glowed as brightly as her name suggested.

From what Bishop overheard of their conversations, Ember had been the newest person sold into sexual slavery, about three months before Kensley arrived. She was angry but unbroken.

King didn't eat with the group, passing through the dining room to the kitchen for a plate, and then leaving the same way he came.

Bishop wanted to talk to his friend, but he also couldn't leave Kensley's side.

Not yet. Not with the pregnancy news still so fresh.

And even though the lodge's perimeter was surrounded by trusted guards, anything could happen at any time.

If their enemies somehow tracked them here and struck, he needed to be near Kensley.

He needed to be with his family.

Even after the food was cleared, the group remained in the dining room, talking quietly, seeming to like being clustered together, rather than off in separate rooms. Bishop couldn't blame them for not wanting to be alone, especially if they were kept as isolated from each other as Malori had been.

Such an existence was impossible to comprehend, and more horrifying to know all those souls had lived it from three months to three years.

Bishop didn't want to think about the victims who'd died in that brothel.

King's men remained at points around the room at all times, observant without interfering, so when King texted him at seven o'clock to meet in the parlor, Bishop kissed Kensley soundly on the mouth, and then excused himself.

It took him a few minutes to find the parlor in the sprawling lodge.

King sat in a tall, upholstered chair, which was angled toward a lit fireplace.

An open laptop was balanced on his thighs while he typed on his phone.

Without asking for permission, Bishop sat in the matching chair opposite King's and waited.

King finally looked at Bishop, his normally stone-cold expression stormy.

"I've got Hartford in charge of the six people we rescued.

I've arranged for a private, secure location for them to continue their mental recovery, and for him to help them ease back into civilian life over the next few months. "

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:34 am

“That’s good.” Bishop didn’t bother asking where. The fewer people who knew that sort of information, the safer those damaged souls would be. “Six?”

“Kensley is obviously staying with us.”

“Of course, he is. And Malori?”

King’s left eyebrow twitched. “He’s coming with us, too. He’s still medically fragile, and I want him close to Dr. Melish.”

Just to Doc Melish? Bishop didn’t voice the thought. It wasn’t his business, and Kensley would love knowing Malori was staying with them. “And we are going...?”

“Back to the city. Despite everything that’s happened these last few weeks, barring attack by helicopter, my penthouse is the safest place for us right now. I hate taking Kens out of one prison and putting him in another, but even if I thought he’d go back to the abbey, it’s not safe anymore.”

“No, he definitely wouldn’t go back.” He’d likely be excommunicated because of his pregnancy, once it was known. “And your penthouse is a far cry from that apartment.”

“But not quite as luxurious as a beach house on a private island?” King’s lips twisted, hinting at his teasing.

“Definitely not. But your rooftop patio is a great place for a tan when the weather warms up.” Bishop leaned forward and braced both elbows on his knees. “Boss, now

that we have Kens back and everyone is safe, are you really okay with us being together? Me and him?”

“Yes. I wasn’t blowing smoke to make you feel better in case Kensley was lost to us. You know that’s not my style. If you make each other happy, if this is real and you are actually charum, then you have my complete blessing.”

I need to hear that now more than you know. Not the time or place to lay the baby bomb on him, though. Kensley more than deserved to be present when King’s head metaphorically exploded. “So, when do we go home?”

“Tomorrow afternoon. I want everyone to get a good night’s sleep before we travel again.”

Bishop nodded. “And Marta’s organization?”

“Ziggy’s on top of it. With us taking down Decker, they’ll be hyper-vigilant. Probably go underground for a while. I also want to know who told them Kensley was on the island.”

“I thought we assumed it was someone on the market island we visited.”

“That’s one assumption, but it’s also possible someone within our organization sold us out. Our island is so remote that the odds of anyone recognizing Kensley from two visits to the market is extremely slim, unless someone squealed.”

“That’s sobering.”

“Hence why Hartford is overseeing the others and their relocation. The fewer people who know a secret...”

“The fewer people can screw you over.” Something King had drilled into Bishop’s head since their earliest days running street weapons. “Can I tell Kensley where we’re going?”

“You can tell him once we’re on the road and in a private car. I love him, but he’s chattier than a gaggle of grandmas at a church potluck.”

Bishop smiled. “Since when do you go to church potlucks?”

“I went to a few when I was a kid. My mom made amazing potato salad for those potlucks.” A rare moment of vulnerability peeked through with those words, but it passed quickly.

King rarely spoke of his earliest childhood, and Bishop imagined he had secrets that fueled his need for power, money and control.

Few people went into King’s line of work for the fun of it. Most went in with something to prove.

“I’ll keep our travel plans to myself until tomorrow,” Bishop said. “I assume Malori will be okay to travel by then?”

“He will. He hasn’t said much in my presence, but he has a fighting spirit. His body is weak, but his mind is sharp.”

“If he ended up in that place, I assume it means he has no family.”

“None that want him.” King’s face hardened. “Ziggy is digging into his background for me. Any connections or family who owed debts. In case I need to pay a visit to someone and show them what a mistake it was to sell Malori into sexual slavery.”

Bishop nodded his agreement. People did awful things to save their own skins.

Sometimes they got away with it; other times, karma caught up with them in the form of physical revenge.

Or worse. Bishop had disposed of more than one body during his tenure as King's lieutenant, and he'd gladly dispose of a few more, if it brought Malori peace.

"That's it for now," King said. "Get some sleep."

"Will do if you do."

King winked then waved him off, his attention already back on his phone.

Bishop returned to the dining room, where four of the rescues were playing cards.

Kensley was chatting with the other omega, whose name Bishop couldn't remember.

He was young, too, like Malori, but he had more energy, and he seemed more alert than some of the other victims. The young man also clutched his belly protectively, which raised Bishop's curiosity.

It wasn't his business, though. It was between the omega and Dr. Melish.

"Are you ready to clean up and retire for the evening?" Bishop asked Kensley, when the pair reached a lull in conversation.

Kensley blinked dumbly at him a few times, and then he grinned. "Sure. Actually, a shower would be great, just to get the last of that place's smell off my skin."

"Oh, that sounds fantastic," the other omega said, his voice much deeper than Bishop

expected for his youthful face. “I hope this place has plenty of hot water, because I need to get the feel of that last man’s hands off my skin.”

“I’m sure we’ll have enough to go around.” Kensley squeezed his wrist then stood. Smiled at Bishop. “So, do we have a plan for tomorrow?”

Bishop pulled Kensley’s arm through his and led him out of the dining room, down the hall to the main staircase. “We do. I can’t give you details yet, but I think you’ll be pleased.”

“What about Malori?”

“Again, I think you’ll be pleased. But it’s safer if I don’t tell you yet.”

Kensley squeezed Bishop’s arm. “In case something happens in the meantime?”

“Exactly. The odds of anyone finding us here are very small, but they are not zero. Once we are in a secure, untraceable vehicle, I’ll tell you where we’re going, I promise.”

“I trust you, Bishop. You’ve never failed me.”

Bishop still wasn’t so sure of that. Allowing Kensley to be stolen off the island felt like a huge personal failure to Bishop, despite Kensley’s (and King’s) reassurances that he couldn’t have prevented the ambush.

Bishop was lucky to be alive, period. He was also still alive for a reason, so Bishop would do his best to protect his loved ones, love his charus, and rain justice down hard on everyone who had and ever would try to hurt them.

Period.

SIXTEEN

The water pressure in the lodge wasn't as good as on the island, but Kensley imagined he wasn't the only freed captive needing to scrub his skin free of that awful brothel.

Even though Kensley had escaped the worst of the abuse, he still allowed the hot water to sluice over his skin, until the steam left him falling asleep on his feet.

Bishop was there, though, attentive as always, and he helped Kensley dry off.

Wrapped Kensley up in a towel and carried him to their bed.

They curled up together beneath thick, warm blankets, and Kensley slept peacefully, in his lover's arms for the first time in what felt like a lifetime.

He didn't dream, and he woke to Bishop dropping gentle kisses along the back of his neck.

Kensley rolled over and climbed right on top of Bishop's big, broad, gloriously naked body, and kissed the man his soul had chosen.

The father of his child. The owner of his heart.

His erection swelled and his hole slicked, and they made love quietly beneath the sheets, moving together like they had all the time in the world.

Kensley savored the heavy slide of Bishop's cock in his body, a claiming and a promise, and a source of absolute pleasure.

Bishop came first, filling Kensley with his gift, before sucking Kensley down and devouring his come in return.

They showered again, before joining the group downstairs for breakfast. Kensley's stomach rolled a bit at the sight and smell of bacon, but he managed a pancake with a small pat of butter.

King briefly appeared to collect food, and this time, he left the kitchen with two plates.

After the meal, Kensley found Malori in an upstairs bedroom.

He sat upright, his left shoulder bandaged, arm immobilized, and the sight of King sitting beside him, holding a forked piece of pancake for Malori to eat, sent a jolt of joy and surprise through Kensley's middle.

Malori tossed him a bashful, exhausted lip-twist that wasn't quite a smile, while King focused on the plate.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Kensley said, leaning down to press a kiss to Malori's temple. "I'd hug you, but I don't want to hurt you."

"Yesterday, I would have preferred dying in that apartment," Malori replied softly. "I couldn't see a future beyond those walls and that pain. Now, I think maybe...maybe I can smile again. One day."

"I know you will. And I hope that when you do, I'm there to see it."

"You promised me your brother would save us, and you were right. I owe you both."

“You owe nothing,” King said gruffly. “The people who put you there? The people who abused you? They owe you a great debt, and we will extract it from them.”

Malori’s eyes watered, and he silently accepted another bite of pancake.

Kensley excused himself. Bishop hadn’t expressly said it, but based on the interaction Kensley had just witnessed, he knew Malori was coming wherever Kensley and King were headed.

King was enchanted with Malori in a way Kensley had never seen before—not that he knew anything about his brother’s sex or social life. But he did trust his instincts.

King had promised to avenge Malori’s pain, and King wasn’t going to pass that task off to one of his people. King was taking on that job personally.

No one was allowed to leave the lodge for safety reasons, so Kensley and the others passed the morning much as they had last evening—playing games in the dining room and main lobby, which had an enormous fireplace, multiple couches, and a plethora of board games.

The only thing they lacked was a television, but Kensley imagined that if tourists were paying for the lodge experience, they weren’t here to watch TV.

He had a brief, private meeting with Dr. Melish about his pregnancy, making future plans to do an official blood test, and then to get Kensley started on prenatal vitamins, once he arrived at his final destination.

After lunch, Kensley said tearful goodbyes to everyone he’d befriended, at once grateful they were leaving to begin new lives, and also sad to lose those connections so soon.

King promised that they were in good hands with Hartford, and that one day, they’d

all be allowed to contact each other again—if they chose to.

But after a lifetime of losing his friends or having only surface relationships in the abbey, the separation still left Kensley in tears.

Tears Bishop gently wiped away in the privacy of their room.

Kensley was still nauseated and not in the mood for sex, so they held each other until Garvey knocked.

Said it was time for the last of them to leave the lodge.

Garvey drove a new van, this one with tinted windows and, like yesterday, Bishop and Kensley sat together in the middle bench seat, while King and Malori rode in the back.

Malori was awake, aware, and wound so tight Kensley worried for his physical and mental health.

An hour into the drive, King finally announced they were heading back to River City and his penthouse.

“It’s large enough that we could not see each other for days at a time, if you wish,” King said, more to Malori than anyone else.

“We’ll be safe there while we continue ferreting out Marta’s group, and whoever else was providing Decker with his victims.”

“And my children?” Malori asked, the only three words he’d spoken since the lodge.

“We won’t stop until we find them. You have my word.”

Malori nodded, and then turned his attention to the window and the landscape whizzing past.

Kensley pressed both hands over his lower belly, at once sad for Malori's losses and ecstatic for his own joy.

He would never rub his pregnancy in Malori's face, though, not ever.

He'd quietly tell King at some point. After that?

He would play things by ear. New chapters in Kensley's life had been unfolding since the day "Drew Burton" walked into his cathedral and they spoke in front of the bulletin board.

But this chapter? A chapter led by his charus and their future child? This was a chapter Kensley couldn't wait to experience. Its highs, its lows, and everything in between.

Kensley had a vague idea of what a penthouse was from movies he'd watched in his pre-Order years, and from the occasional news or magazine article he'd read about the super-wealthy.

He understood they were large, opulent apartments, usually on the top floors of very tall buildings, and sometimes they had pools, hot tubs and gardens, even!

His imagination did not do justice to the size or opulence of King's penthouse.

It took up the top two floors (two!) of a very tall, very secure building, and the roof had not only a large patio with dozens of plants, it also had a greenhouse, a small fountain, and multiple seating areas.

Both floors had long balconies with multiple entrances from both bedrooms and

common rooms, full kitchens, multiple bedrooms and bathrooms, plus an exercise room, and even a small, cozy library.

Kensley had to pinch himself multiple times during Bishop's tour, because no way was this his home for the next unknown number of months (years?).

Except it was his home. Their home. The penthouse even had wings, and his new home with Bishop was the upper south wing, which was like its own mini-apartment: a bedroom, living space, private bathroom, a kitchenette, and its own balcony entrance.

It was quiet, private, and Bishop insisted the windows were all bullet-proof, the glass shatter-proof, and the security system as state-of-the-art as possible.

King spared no expense in his home.

Bishop produced a familiar duffel bag from the bedroom and handed it to Kensley with a shy smile on his face. "Here."

"What's this?" Kensley loved gifts, but he suspected something bigger, judging by the look on Bishop's face. Bishop did not wear shyness often or well. Kensley pulled the zipper down and peered inside, his own face going slack. "Oh."

The clothes Bishop had bought for him on the island, their favorite DVD collection, his woven sandals, and the handful of other souvenirs Kensley had bought at the market.

The only personal items Kensley had left, after leaving his old life behind in the abbey, and Bishop had thoughtfully saved more than just his necklace and sandals during his flight from the island. "Oh, Bishop, thank you."

"You're welcome. I couldn't leave it there. It would have felt too much like

abandoning you, and I'll never do that. I will always come when you call for me, always fight when you need me."

"Same." Kensley ran his hand over the butter-soft sofa fabric, in awe of what he was being given, even if only temporarily.

"I can't believe this is ours." Despite the decadence of a private beach house, this seemed...

more. Better suited for a mansion in the country, not the top of a skyscraper in the middle of a crime-ridden city. Or a fairy tale castle.

"King bought the penthouse before it was even built." Bishop now stood with his hands in his pockets, seeming embarrassed by the wealth surrounding them.

"He worked with the builder to design it. I think he was hoping to fill it with family and kids, but his work just got more and more dangerous. He pushed people away too hard, so there was no one to stay and make it a home."

"I wish he'd asked me to live here instead of the abbey. Not because I want or need millions of dollars, or luxury soaps, but because I'm his family. When my mother died, all I wanted was my brother. I wanted to be near him, no matter the danger."

"But once you presented as omega, he chose your safety over keeping you close. Do you resent him for that?"

"Sometimes. But resentment doesn't change what is.

It doesn't change what we're doing now, or who we have become.

" Kensley crossed the large living room to stand in front of Bishop.

Pulled Bishop's hands out of his pockets and clasped them over his own heart.

"If I've learned anything else these last few weeks, it's that all we have is today.

Right now. And right now, we are safe. We are having a baby. "

"We are. When do you see Dr. Melish again?"

"He gave me his card and said to call when I've settled in, but I don't have a phone."

Bishop pointed to a desk in the corner. "There's a land line over there, but I'll see about getting you a cell phone. Not that you're going to be leaving the penthouse alone anytime soon, but this place is huge. It is possible to get lost, until you get used to navigating it."

Kensley laughed. "I believe you. But I don't want to call him yet.

Soon, I promise. Let's enjoy the privacy for a while.

I know King is here, and Malori's here, and there are probably bodyguards posted in every corner, but let's forget about them for an hour.

I want to sit in peace, until things inevitably get crazy again. "

"We can do that."

So they did, cuddled up together on the sofa, idly chatting about baby names, reminiscing about the island, and spinning stories about dream homes for their future children.

Creating a future that was still malleable, still unformed, still able to be so many things.

But more than anything else, Kensley wanted his future to be full of joy and love and hope.

And he knew Bishop wanted those things, too. Would provide those things and more.

Peace remained their companion for the rest of the day.

They made love before bed, and again in the morning.

They shared a late brunch in the main dining room with King and Malori, the latter of whom was less obviously stressed, but still exhausted and in pain.

He did feed himself, though, and Dr. Melish arrived in the afternoon for checkups.

He saw Malori first, and then met Kensley in his and Bishop's living room.

Kensley looked away during the blood draw for the official pregnancy test, and he accepted the bottle of prenatal vitamins Dr. Melish gave him.

Even if the official test was negative and Marta had, in fact, been lying, it wouldn't hurt to start taking them.

Kensley absolutely wanted kids with Bishop, be it in nine months or years down the road.

He'd never wanted anything more, or seen his future more clearly than right now.

Malori had his own room, but he ended up spending a lot of the next few days with Kensley and Bishop, mostly for the company, while he continued both his physical and emotional recovery.

King went out of town for a couple of days, which agitated Bishop, but their trio

passed the time with movies, card games, reading, and hours on the rooftop terrace, as the weather slowly warmed from rainy winter into chilly spring.

When King returned to the penthouse on the one-week anniversary of their rescue, Kensley gave King a copy of the blood test results Dr. Melish had emailed to Bishop. Proof that Kensley was about four-weeks pregnant.

King stared at the paper for an eternity, his hand trembling visibly enough that Kensley feared the worst. Next to him, Bishop tensed.

But when King finally looked at them, there was no censure in his eyes.

No anger or disappointment. King smiled, and that was all Kensley needed.

Kensley opened his arms to his big brother, and King came to him.

In that first, true hug, they shared so much. They shared regret and forgiveness and love. They shared a mutual hope for the future of their family, despite the violence around them. They shared silent promises and, when King tugged Bishop into the hug, they shared a commitment to each other.

To fighting for the family they'd lost, found, almost lost again, and would now do everything in their joint powers to protect. No matter who came at them.

One day at a time.

For the rest of time.

Thank you for reading! If you're eager to read Malori and King's story, stay tuned for **THE KINGPIN'S OMEGA LOVER**, coming July 29! And if you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review on Amazon or your other favorite book review sight.