



To Cuddle A Gremlin (Monsters in Love Side Stories #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Granite's librarian, Sebastian, has been crushing on the new tech guru, Isadore, for months. He visits the local cafe every day at lunch just to sate his urges to see the gremlin. He doesn't need to talk to him, just be in the same space.

New to Granite, Isadore isn't sure what to make of the humans or their technology. It's fun to play with and he loves the chaos humans bring to the world. Though, one good thing about this dimension is the shy and quiet Sebastian. A spark familiar to Isadore draws him closer to the enigmatic human.

Through the encouragement of an online friend, Sebastian approaches Isadore for a date, despite all his misgivings. He's had a run of bad luck with trying to find the right person.

Can Isadore break through the barrier of Sebastian's insecurities and find the sweet soul underneath and will Sebastian allow love and fate to overcome his fears of being cursed?

With three dates to find out if love is stronger than doubt, these two men will learn a lot about themselves.

Total Pages (Source): 18

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am

CHAPTER 1

Kazmier: Did you see the new update?

Crash: Yeah, bout time we got new content

Kazmier: Right? But the devs require real world currency

Kazmier: I don't have the cash to buy all the shit to boost my characters.

Crash: Me neither. Sigh, I guess we need to do more grinding

Kazmier: Ugh, grinding. The best part of any MMO

Crash: I thought it was the witty conversation

Kazmier: Crash, are you flirting with me?

Crash: What? No. I'd never. Just no.

Kazmier: You doth protest too much

Crash: Listen, I gotta raid. Later

Kazmier: Scaredy cat.

The crackling pop of a coffeepot hitting the ground shattered the quiet hum of

lunchtime at the small café. Sebastian lifted his head so fast he twinged a muscle in his neck. He'd been chatting with an online friend, Kazmier, in a mobile game while not looking at his crush, who happened to be sitting across the restaurant. His own nickname, Crash, was an homage to how he felt on dates. He always crashed and burned.

Isadore Jones, with long auburn hair and smiling eyes, was a cryptid of sorts and had light grey skin and pointy ears. Sebastian would never dare ask what species because that would be rude. Being in the same room made Sebastian nervous. Isadore was bright and cheerful, the exact opposite of Sebastian. Daring to even talk to Isadore would fluster him.

Taking a calming breath, Sebastian glanced around the café and saw Becky, the newest waitress, with a broom and dustpan. She was still a bit clumsy and nervous. Most of the regulars recognized the anxiety and tried to make Becky feel more at ease. As he glanced around the restaurant, Sebastian met the deep sea-blue eyes of the man he was carefully not watching. Isadore winked at him, and Sebastian's cheeks heated. Dammit, Isadore wasn't supposed to know he'd been mooning after him. He returned the smile before dropping his attention to the cell phone game.

Clearing his mind, Sebastian ignored the rush of anxiety from meeting Isadore's eyes. Every day for the past year, Sebastian would come into the café on the corner for lunch, and every day, Isadore would be sitting in his usual spot with either his brother Tony or friend Henry. His long, wavy hair would be pulled away from his face in a loose bun or caught up in a half-ponytail. He'd either be working on two laptops at once or joking around with his friends. If Tony got huffy, Isadore would give puppy-dog eyes, and Tony would subside. His endless joie de vivre fascinated Sebastian, who couldn't joke to save his life.

On the rare occasion, Sebastian forgot himself, and he'd catch Isadore's eye and receive an arched eyebrow and a gentle smile. It seemed like an invitation, but no

way would the tall, awkward, and shy Sebastian get the nerve to approach Isadore. His tongue froze up and twisted at the mere idea of sharing a conversation.

He took his time shutting his tablet and bundling himself against the cool fall weather. Then Sebastian paid his bill and meandered out of the café, darting a last look at the man in the corner. Isadore was already staring at his laptop, nodding at what his companions were saying. Sebastian's moment, if he had one, was gone.

His walk back to the library where he worked was brisk as he tried not to feel the cold. His huffs and puffs fogged his glasses, making the short trek more treacherous than normal as he dodged people walking the other way. Once past the gauntlet of pedestrians and in the warm vestibule, he unwound his scarf and removed his toque. Sebastian ducked into the staff workroom, where his coworker Sammi scooped up the last of her pasta.

"How was the café today?" Sammi asked, swinging her braids over her shoulder as Sebastian fluffed his spiky black hair. Wearing a toque always gave him hat head. He was tempted to ignore Sammi's question, but their relationship was built on listening and sharing. She helped him find words to use when confronted with strong personalities. As much as he wanted to discuss Isadore's smile to Sammi, he wasn't sure he could explain what Isadore's expression did to his insides. She'd encourage with forcefulness to confront Isadore, but he needed to be mentally prepared to start speaking to him. He liked watching people from afar and making up stories about their lives. It was safe. His imagination didn't expect him to greet strangers with a positive expression while interacting with them on a continuous basis.

Gathering strength, he met the deep brown eyes of his coworker and answered. "Food was good. I made a decent trade in one of the micro-transactions in my games. Becky broke another carafe. Scared the crap out of me."

"Oh, interesting. How many coffeepots is that now?" Sammi's brow furrowed as she

puzzled over the coffeepot situation. Sebastian smiled. He had managed to change the subject enough so she was too distracted to ask about Mr. Mysterious, as he called Isadore. “I do wonder how she manages to keep her job. Anyway, anything else interesting happen? Besides Becky and your cell phone game.”

Sebastian shook his head, willing himself to stay silent. The urge to explain how intriguing Isadore was threatened to overwhelm Sebastian. He ached to decipher why Isadore had this ability to spark emotions when no one else managed. And while he hoped to hold onto his concerns until he had the time to study them, Sammi had skills to pry out his most tightly kept secrets. While sympathetic to Sebastian’s struggles with people and unfamiliar territory, Sammi’s curiosity about Isadore was insatiable. She had to know every detail, and her biggest goal in life was to convince Sebastian to speak to him. Every day, she pulled him farther from the shell he protected himself with.

“Sebastian?”

Sebastian set his hand on the door handle, ready to step out, but he stopped at how she said his name. “I think he smiled at me as I left.”

“Sebby, ohh. That’s amazing. Oh, I am so happy!” Sammi squeezed his hands and beamed. They exited the staff room together and settled at the circulation desk, where a senior stood patiently. “Mrs. Wilde, my favourite lady. I hope you weren’t waiting long.”

“No, dear. I wasn’t.” Mrs. Wilde was an older patron who visited the library every week. With her husband gone, she lived vicariously through the stories of the local librarians.

“You two are beaming. What have you been up to?” Mrs. Wilde asked. She studied Sebastian with a teacher’s patience. She was almost as bad as Sammi at yanking

loose the secrets he locked in a vault.

“Nothing...not much. So, James Patterson has two new books out. Have you read them yet?” Sebastian tried to change the subject to something safe. Discussing his crush at work always left him flustered and unsure. He scanned every item. “Would you like me to put the titles on hold for you?”

“Yes, please. Gosh, that man sure cranks the stories out. He’s so handsome, so pensive. Is your diner friend like this? Have I met him?” Mrs. Wilde stretched to place her books in a well-used canvas bag, her hands shaking as she gripped the spine of a thick hardcover. “I’m sure you’d snag him with that beautiful smile of yours.”

“Do you need any help to your car, Mrs. Wilde?” Sebastian asked, distressed about Mrs. Wilde’s unsteady gait. Her desire to butt into his social life was less important than her safety. Sebastian worried about his older patrons and the slickness of the sidewalks in the early winter. He shifted to go around the circulation desk, but Mrs. Wilde waved him off.

“Don’t concern yourself with me, Sebastian dear. This old girl has been carrying books for many years, and I’ll continue for another hundred.” Mrs. Wilde rested her heavy bag in the crook of her arm and, with careful steps, walked out of the main portion of the bustling library.

“You do have a pretty smile, Sebby.” Sammi snickered. Sebastian considered tweaking one of her many braids, but his action would encourage her, and he didn’t need her subtle pokes.

When the evening librarian arrived to take over the desk, Sebastian dropped his shoulders in relief. The amount of people and cryptids coming in was greater than he expected, and he was desperate for quiet. He enjoyed the cryptid folk, as they were endlessly curious about what the building represented and the stories housed here.

Some of the braver shifters asked about adding their books to the library's collection so everyone would have a story to read. Sebastian's boss was enthusiastic and agreed. The year after the explosion of light in the neighbouring park had been challenging as humans and cryptids tried to find ways to live side by side without fear or prejudice.

As the sun was setting and the streetlights flickered on, otherworldly beings came out from the shadows. They knew the library was a safe place and visited often. Sebastian smiled at a tall and narrow female with snakeskin as she unwound a scarf. Her sigh of relief was heartfelt. Ontario weather was not a blessing to a lot of the cold-blooded newcomers.

Sebastian tugged his wool toque over his ears and stepped outside. His first moment in the cold dark was interrupted as he bumped into a warm body. Strong hands on his sides steadied him. Sebastian sucked a deep breath of cold air as he pinwheeled and grabbed onto the leather coat of his saviour. The smell of coffee and vanilla wafted over him as Sebastian lifted his gaze and met the piercing blue eyes of Isadore. His happy expression shone through the gloom of the street, causing Sebastian to return a smile. A shadow of stubble graced his jaw, and his dark auburn hair was hidden under a grey toque.

Blinking at the abruptness of Isadore's arrival, Sebastian fumbled his greeting. "I'm sorry. I didn't—I mean, hello?"

"Hey, I didn't mean to run into you." Isadore's voice was rough velvet, which sent shivers throughout Sebastian. This visceral reaction was so unusual and raw, Sebastian fumbled.

He opened his mouth and snapped it shut. Words refused to come out. "No, I'm fine. I didn't see you. I should have been paying attention. It's no problem." Talking to Isadore should have been easy. Sebastian had just exited his job. His work personality was still in play. But Isadore holding him and smiling at him was too potent and too

near. Nothing had prepared Sebastian for this moment, so his throat locked up, keeping the sentences from forming.

“Shh! It’s okay. I startled you. You don’t need to apologize.” Isadore released Sebastian once he righted himself. Sebastian peeked at Isadore’s beautiful eyes and blushed. “Are you sure you’re alright? You seem a bit off.”

“I’m fine. I’m fine. Peachy keen. Yeah. Anyway, I’ve gotta go. I’m sorry.” Sebastian rolled his shoulders once and skipped to the side, avoiding Isadore’s outstretched hands. His cheeks flamed from his word vomit.

“Hey, man. No worries, eh? I’ll catch you at the café sometime then?” Isadore called and winced as Sebastian tripped over air. “You okay?”

“Yes! Totally! Completely A-OK.” Sebastian waved off Isadore’s help and straightened his coat as though he didn’t just trip over nothing.

Best impression ever. Good job. Sighing, Sebastian ignored the urge to peek behind him and tried not to react to the cough-snort from Isadore. Story of my life . Every person Sebastian ever tried to impress laughed at him at one time or another. Why would Isadore be any different?

His walk home was filled with imaginings of new towns and better jobs. He had his master's in library science. Better places than Granite could use his skills. As long as he didn’t talk to anyone. Maybe in a year or three, he could return to his home and no one would remember who he was. Maybe he’d even learn to not trip on air? That was a pipe dream. To avoid Isadore and his embarrassing faux pas, Sebastian would brown-bag his lunches from now on. He’d save face and money. Totally a win-win situation.

However, he wouldn’t be able to get his fix of Isadore and his wonderful laugh.

Which made Sebastian sad. He liked watching Isadore joking with his friends.

Maybe a good night's sleep would put the world to right and no one would remember his gaffe. Sebastian stepped into his apartment, shocked at how quickly he made it home. His big orange tabby wound himself around Sebastian's legs, a loving welcome and harsh demand for food. The familiarity calmed Sebastian's racing thoughts.

Best to put the problem to bed and relax for the rest of the evening. Sebastian would face his problems—or not—in the cold morning light.

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CHAPTER 2

Kazmier: You okay? You're awfully quiet.

Crash: I'm fine. Long day. Just tired.

Kazmier: If you need to talk, I'm willing to lend an ear.

Crash: Thanks.

Kazmier: So, out with it. What happened? You never did a run-by of my farm.

Crash: Think I just want to focus on my own farm. I've got a whack of gachapons and

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Kazmier: Lucky duck. You got mad skillz. The maddest.

Crash: How do you talk to someone you like?

Kazmier: Carefully? You had an encounter, I'm assuming?

Crash: Well, this person I like dropped by my work.

Kazmier: Tell me more.

“Hi there. I was hoping to run into you again,” Isadore said.

Sebastian twitched before freezing in place, and Isadore winced. He hadn't meant to scare Sebastian, but he didn't want him to hide away either. Isadore had figured out Sebastian's schedule and waited outside the library doors for him to leave for the day. Yes, what Isadore was doing was adjacent to stalking, but Isadore had a feeling Sebastian had plans to avoid him.

Sebastian was all awkward limbs and shy smiles. He never looked at the world straight on, always under the cover of a ducked head. Just the other day, Isadore saw for the first time the palest hazel eyes hiding behind Sebastian's black frames. Isadore had never seen a human with such an unique colour. Only creatures of late fall had shades of brown like Sebastian. What intrigued Isadore the most was Sebastian's intense focus on what he enjoyed and lack of awareness of the world around him. His innate kindness to others grabbed Isadore's attention as well.

"You—you came back. Why?" Sebastian gaped at Isadore before clapping a hand over his mouth. "Dear God, I didn't mean to be so insulting. I am so sorry. Hello."

"Hello." Isadore smiled. He itched to stroke the blossoming pink cheeks, but humans didn't appreciate touches from strangers, so he kept his hands to himself. Ever since coming from the other dimension where the majority of his kind lived, Isadore had been fascinated by this world's societal mores and norms, but learning to abide by them was challenging. "You left so fast yesterday I didn't have the opportunity to make sure you were alright."

"Oh, right. Yeah, I'm fine. Happens all the time. No need to worry about me. It's all good." Sebastian waved off Isadore's concern with a big smile.

Isadore drank in Sebastian's fine-boned beauty while maintaining distance. He longed to feel the pale skin with the back of his hand. Keeping to himself was a challenge. His people were tactile, and touch was a love language. To not feel Sebastian in some fashion irritated Isadore.

“I know. But I wanted to see for myself. You...didn’t visit the café this afternoon, and I was concerned.” Isadore clenched his fists in his pockets. Why was this place so cold? This interaction wasn’t going as he planned. But the arrested look in Sebastian’s eyes was new and kept Isadore from giving up.

“Oh, thanks. I’m—I’m good. I just—” Sebastian huffed in frustration before taking a deep breath. “I had lunch in the library. Saving money.”

Money was another one of the foreign concepts to this world, but Isadore had discovered humans liked to hoard it. “Yeah, I understand. Food can become pricey if you go every day.”

“Yup, exactly.” Sebastian rocked on his feet, a furrow forming on his brow. He glanced at the ground, the library, and everywhere but Isadore. Sebastian had reached his limit and needed Isadore to give him space. Isadore had managed to talk to Sebastian without him running away, and that right now was enough.

“Since you seem to be okay, I’m gonna go. Nice chatting with you.” Isadore itched to pat Sebastian’s hand or even going so far as to steal a hug for a reminder of this interaction, but Sebastian’s tense bearing warned him off. “See you soon at the café?”

Sebastian nodded and smiled before spinning around and heading in the opposite direction of where he went yesterday. “Fucking hell.”

Isadore jerked his head and blinked. Sebastian’s curse wasn’t anything he expected. The swear was delightful, and Sebastian wasn’t as immune to Isadore’s charms as he thought. But how could Isadore translate that into some sort of affection? Wooing Sebastian required strategy and tactic, something Isadore was too impatient to implement.

In the morning, Isadore sprawled at his usual table in the front corner of the cafe,

facing the door. His best friend, Harry, sat with his back to the plate-glass window, eying the deli counter where Isadore's brother, Tony, was working his type of magic. Isadore kept his eyes on the street, not paying attention to what Harry was rambling on about. Harry liked very specific things in his life: comics, art, and Isadore's older brother.

"Isadore, are you even listening to me?" Harry snapped his fingers at him. Isadore dragged his eyes away and arched an eyebrow as Harry sliced a piece of chocolate croissant.

"I am." Isadore rested his chin on his laced fingers and batted his eyes at Harry, whose clothes were tailored and his hair just so. "How do you manage to keep your style so perfect?"

"I use high-end products and baby the crap out of it. Stop pouting. Your Sebastian isn't coming, but the sweet and adorable Sammi is." Harry jerked his chin toward the door before fingering his bangs into place. Sammi stepped through the glass door and began unwinding her long scarf from its loops around her neck. The jewel tones of the wool set off the rich brown of her skin. Her braids were coiled into two buns at the top of her shoulders. Isadore had to force himself to sit still and not barrage her with endless questions about Sebastian.

"Do you think I scared him? Is Sammi going to tell me to back off? I knew meeting him twice was a douche move. God. Courting humans is worse than courting gremlins." Isadore shuddered. Gremlin traditions involved bringing electrical components to a mate's family as a dowry. But Sebastian was skittish, and trying to remain within his periphery was hard.

"God, Issie, I don't know. I wasn't there. You said this wasn't going to be a dissect-everything-I-did-outside-the-library lunch," Harry grumbled, his eyes darting toward the kitchen doors.

“And I thought you weren’t going to stare at Tony the whole time either. But I’ll stop, I promise,” Isadore snapped back. He watched as Sammi moved through the lunch line, his eagerness to join her threatening to upset the fragile peace between him and Harry. When did talking about feelings become so contentious between them? They'd never argued about this before. He was an adult with his own hovel and his own hoard. He shouldn’t be behaving like a fledgling. “There’s no point in rehashing what I did. I fucked up.”

“You did. And I wasn’t looking at Tony. I was glancing at the ... menu board.” Harry sipped his coffee. Isadore rolled his eyes as Harry’s cheeks pinked up. How Harry could have a crush on Isadore’s brother was something he would never understand. Tony was grumpy, fussy, and hated people fawning over him. Which was a brownie’s worst nightmare. Tony avoided Harry because of his artistic nature and despised Sebastian for his shy persona and inability to meet Tony’s gaze when ordering at the counter. “Tony or Tara added new items.”

“Fine.” Isadore took a bite of his ham sandwich, giving up on teasing Harry. “Do you think I should try again?”

“Are you talking about freaking Sebastian out?” Sammi asked as she appeared at their table. Isadore jumped before smiling at the petite woman.

“Yes, the conversation has become mind-numbingly mundane. Is there any chance we can get these two to stop pussyfooting around each other?” Harry asked, leaning back in his seat. The buttons on his shirt strained against his barrel chest. “Hello, Beautiful Sammi, how are you today?”

Sammi leaned against Harry, giving him a side hug. “Hey there, Handsome Harry. I’m doing fantastic. The sun is shining, the air is fresh, and we have no blights on the horizon.”

Shuddering, Harry shook his head. “Spring can’t get here fast enough.”

“The Winter Solstice has to happen first, Harry,” Isadore chided. This year, the chamber of commerce was working hard with the new residents to create a welcoming season for everyone. Each member of the chamber wanted the past year wiped from their collective memories. The warlock, Darius, and his friends in their fight to save the town from an eldritch demon had done a lot of damage to the community spirit. Isadore had stayed out of the way, not wanting to step on toes or become a target. His kind didn’t do well around demons or magic.

“Which is the perfect segue into getting you and sweet Sebastian together. This type of holiday spirit is his kryptonite. He’s addicted to the lights and the festivities, though you wouldn’t be able to tell.” Sammi returned her attention to Isadore.

Perking up, Isadore did his best not to rub his hands together like a villain would. Sammi’s tidbit helped Isadore with some possible plans. Though Isadore preferred to discover the information from the person themselves, Sammi was proving to be a perfect spy. “Really? That’s amazing. I can work with this.”

“Gee, thanks, bestie. Appreciate the love.” Harry turned to look at Sammi. “Maybe the lunches have been a little quiet without the random sighs of adoration or play-by-play. Do you have an idea when we can expect things to be back to normal?”

“I don’t know. Geez, I’m not Sebastian’s social planner.” Sammi elbowed Harry before wrapping her scarf around her neck. “Just be gentle. He’s not like most people.”

“I’m discovering that,” Isadore admitted. She left, and the bell on the door jingled. Isadore rolled his eyes at Harry obviously peering into the kitchen. “It’s the afternoon, Harry. Tony’s doing paperwork.”

“Still looking at the menu board.”

“Still hasn’t changed,” Isadore returned. He pushed away from the table and stood.

“You are no help. You realize that, right?”

“Never said I was.” Harry said. “Hey, where you going?”

“Just having a chat with the manager of the joint. And you should get to your shop before the comic geeks take the new issues.”

“They wouldn’t—yes, they would. Dammit. Listen, Issie. Relax when it comes to your young man. If it’s meant to be, something will happen.” Harry clapped Isadore’s shoulder before giving the kitchen one last longing look.

“Back at ya, pal.” Isadore smiled at the server at the counter before heading to the office beyond the kitchen. When Isadore and Tony came to Granite, Tara had welcomed them with open arms. She hated daytime and much preferred the stillness and cover of darkness to work. Tony had chosen to be a brownie at puberty rather than a gremlin. He was happy as anything to cook in a perfect kitchen without the responsibility of dealing with people and their need to thank him.

“Anthony! Where you hiding?” Isadore called as he sniffed the air. Rich aromas came from every corner. As long as he stayed away from any preparation station, he was allowed to visit his brother.

“What do you want? I don’t have time for your bullshit today.” Tony popped his dark head out of the office. Ink marks dotted his cheeks, and his hair was sticking up everywhere. Tony’s attitude rolled off Isadore’s back. His brother was constantly grumpy and hated being interrupted during paperwork time.

Isadore sprawled in the office chair across from Tony’s desk and wrinkled his nose at

the amount of receipts and paper on the desk. “I don’t have bullshit. I just wanted to say hi to my favourite brother.”

“Seriously, Is. I can’t right now. The computer is screwing up. Tara needs my order before tomorrow, and I lost sight of what I was doing.” Tony glared at his brother with pale green eyes. They were similar in appearance, with the exception of Tony’s dark brown hair and muscular build. He’d taken to the humans’ desire for honed muscles, where Isadore shuddered at the idea. Tony picked up a sheaf of papers before returning them to the same spot. Isadore sighed and straightened the mess on Tony’s desk.

“How many times have I told you to stop pressing buttons? The machines are delicate beasts and require a soft touch and gentle words of encouragement.” Isadore came around the desk and shoved his brother away from the keyboard. “I wanted to see how you were doing because you usually drop by the table to grumble at me.”

“I was working on my supply order, which is important, and I already dealt with your ‘woe is me’ attitude about that guy you like.” Tony dropped his head back on the office chair. “You said?—”

“Whatever. I also told you to stop clicking everywhere. You have like ten workbooks open.” Isadore wiggled his fingers over the keyboard, using both skills and literal magic to clean up his brother’s chaos. Normally he wouldn’t spell the computer to do certain tasks, however Tony’s snarly frustration with electronics had Isadore tempted.

“No I don’t.” Tony tried to push Isadore away, but Isadore was too stubborn and intent on making his brother’s life easier. He ached to talk about Sebastian with his brother, but Tony was at his limit. Maybe another day and not when they were in the diner.

“Yes, you do. Just let me do this,” Isadore growled. Creating a foolproof Excel file

for Tony was the least he could and gave him some control. His emotions toward Sebastian weren't so easily managed. But one day, he'd learn how to maintain calm.

“You gotta have patience, little brother. If this guy likes you, he'll figure out something. Just takes time.” Tony squeezed Isadore's shoulder once before passing him a magically appearing cookie.

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CHAPTER 3

Kaz sent Crash a gift

Crash opened gift and received a shiny unicorn.

Crash: Thank you. You didn't have to. It's too much. You can't afford this

Crash: Kaz? How's it going?

Crash: You haven't been on in a bit.

Crash: Are you okay?

Sebastian stood in his closet, trying to decide what to wear for work. The week had been long, and all he wanted to do was flop out on the couch and snuggle with Tiger, his big orange tabby. But landlords needed rent, and Tigers required food. Slipping on a pair of dark blue slacks and a button-down shirt with tiny dragons, Sebastian nodded at his mirrored self. The dragons were subtle, allowing him a secret thrill. No one would be able to see what they were unless they stood close. Today was the day. He was going to stop hiding at the library and resume his lunchtime at the diner.

Winter had begun to make its appearance as the air became brisker and the hint of snow threatened. Sebastian grumbled as he squished the black toque over his head and pulled on his thicker gloves. Stepping outside, he shivered and picked up his pace. The cold walk would get his blood moving and warm him up.

Sebastian ducked inside the busy café so he could purchase a Friday treat for his coworkers. Becky was pouring coffee for the dining room guests, and the other morning server, Ren, stood at the cash register, ready to make the to-go coffees for the takeout guests.

“Hey, Ren.” Sebastian bobbed his head. Ren returned the greeting with a big smile. He was quick at completing orders.

“Good morning. Are you getting coffee for everyone?” Ren tapped a few buttons before looking at Sebastian.

“Just Sammi, Jake, and me this morning.” Sebastian appreciated having his coffee order memorized. Staff remembering what he liked gave him a warm feeling of acceptance and positivity.

“Great. Tony’ll make them for you.” Ren’s nose twitched before sneezing. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to do that.”

“No worries. Is Tony in a good mood this morning?” Sebastian braced himself for their mercurial boss. Tony intimidated Sebastian with his gruff mannerisms. He never smiled, and every time he prepared Sebastian’s collection of drinks, he did so as though he was doing Sebastian a favour. Straightening his shoulders, Sebastian shuffled down to the coffee bar where the older version of Isadore growled.

“I’ll be with you in a sec,” Tony grumbled, his gaze flicking up once while steaming the milk. “You’re the guy my brother likes.”

Sebastian swallowed wrong and began coughing at Tony’s admittance. Why would Tony tell him that? No way would Isadore like him. It couldn’t be true, could it? He tried to deny what Tony said, but the steel green eyes dared him otherwise. Both Tony and Isadore struck him mute in different ways.

“Whatever. I don’t get it, but he becomes so friggin’ dopey, which annoys me.” Tony passed him one of the hot beverages before starting the next drink. “I guess if I turn my head at a certain angle, I can see what he does. You are cute in a delicate fawn sort of fashion.”

Sebastian nodded and shook his head, baffled by the turn of conversation and happy at the same time. Was Tony trying to bullshit him? Isadore liking him wasn’t real. It had to be wishful thinking. Being polite was the best option. If Tony was lying, then Sebastian hadn’t shown his hand, just in case. But what if it was true? God, he’d have to figure out how to act like someone who knew what they were doing. “Thank you? I think?”

Tony passed him the last two drinks before flicking his fingers at Sebastian. “Take your drinks and go.”

Sebastian hurried to the library with his tray of coffee. His cheeks were glowing with cold and possibly incandescent joy. He had to assume Tony hadn’t been lying. He was too much of an honest person to lead Sebastian on. The grin refused to disappear from his face as he slid into the staff room where Sammi scrolled through her phone.

“Someone is in a happy mood this morning,” Sammi murmured as Sebastian deposited the tray on the work room desk. He flattened his mouth, embarrassed at being caught smiling. Sammi tilted her head to the side as she studied Sebastian. “Was he at the café already?”

“What? No! I didn’t see him. Just Ren and Tony. Who said... Tony said Isadore likes me,” Sebastian’s cheeks grew hot. Sharing what Tony told him had Sebastian doubting the likelihood. Especially when Sammi’s eyes widened. “Why would he say that? It can’t be true. Is he trying to make me not go back? Tony terrifies me.”

“Oh, Sebby. Relax. This is a good thing. You want Tony’s approval.” Sammi patted

Sebastian's cheek. "Lucky you, having Tony realize how special you are."

Rolling his eyes, Sebastian tried to ignore the fluttering butterflies in his stomach to be the mature man he was. "Tony'll probably do something to my coffee."

"Oh, he will not. Next time you pop by the café, smile at him. That's it. Nothing else," Sammi instructed.

To get Sammi off his back, Sebastian agreed. "Fine. I will. I promise I will smile at Tony and greet him."

"Ooh, what's going on? Are you talking about the yummy man at the café? He is such a sweet boy. His coffees are divine, and his grumpy expression makes us all swoon." Mrs. Gordon placed her collection of thrillers on the desk while jumping into the conversation.

"Yes, ma'am. How are you today?" Sebastian scanned each item while chatting. Mrs. Gordon was a patron with a penchant for murderous stories and nonfiction.

"I love listening to you and Samantha. I feel so young with you."

"You're so sweet. You want to live my life for me?" Sebastian joked, relaxing into his librarian persona. The people on the other side of the desk were comfortable, and he didn't have to stress about what to say. The same chatter dominated every conversation.

"Young man, if I had my chance to relive my younger years, I'd jump on that in a heartbeat. However, this is something you need to do for yourself. Allow yourself to be chased by Isadore. Don't dillydally until he's given up," Mrs. Gordon advised. "Regrets don't keep you warm at night."

“See, even Mrs. Gordon thinks you need to get some balls and talk to the man. We’re gonna start a pool here to see how long it takes for you to initiate the conversation.”

“Thank you for your vote of confidence,” Sebastian muttered. His friends were right. He had to find his ability to approach Isadore without stammering. It wasn’t fair he made Isadore do all the heavy lifting.

When lunchtime rolled around, Sebastian grabbed his bag out of the fridge and sat at the crowded table. The peace and quiet was almost too much after the busy morning. He was glad he had decided to bring food rather than braving the café.

“Really, Sebby? You’re brown bagging again?” Sammi growled. She was dressed to go outside with her scarf loosely wound around her neck. “If he’s at the café when I get there, you’re coming down to see him too.”

Swallowing his bite of casserole, Sebastian shook his head. “Sammi, I had a rough morning. I made a delicious meal for myself. I just want to enjoy some quiet. Please?”

Sammi scowled before stomping off. Sebastian ate another forkful before staring out the window. Social batteries could run low at work as well. He still had a long afternoon to get through.

“Sebastian, I heard Samantha trying to convince you to go after the young man at the café. Are you sure this is the direction you’d take?” Jacob, the branch manager, placed his dish in the microwave and pressed a button. Jacob was an older man with thinning, pale hair and kind eyes. He was the nicest person to work for and always willing to listen.

“She’s—you know. She’s Sammi. Very—” Sebastian waved his fork around as he attempted to find a diplomatic way to describe her. “It’s easier if you let her talk.”

“If Samantha getting involved in your courtship is going to cause trouble, you must tell her that her suggestions aren’t helpful,” Jacob lectured. “This sort of interference has a good chance of blowing up in everyone’s faces. So be careful.”

“Yessir. Thank you.” Sebastian lowered his head and focused on his meal. While being chastised by his boss on his lunch had Sebastian’s stomach churning, Sebastian accepted that Jacob was right. He had to tell Sammi to step back. “Sir, would it be alright if I worked on the reference floor this afternoon?”

Jake nodded. “Remember, hiding is not the answer. You must be clear with Sammi about your boundaries.”

“Yessir.” Sebastian finished his pasta before playing on his phone. As the lunch hour disappeared, Sebastian plotted ways to explain to Sammi why her method wasn’t in Sebastian’s best interests. Every idea was flimsy, with no substance to back it up. The afternoon on the upstairs reference desk flew by. He answered questions about bestsellers and what movie was the one everyone was talking about. Sammi phoned a few times to encourage Sebastian to chase after Isadore, but the desk was too busy for Sebastian to fully engage.

When the evening librarian came to take over, Sebastian heaved a sigh of relief. Patrons with password issues or book requests for the latest social media sensation overwhelmed him. Being helpful was good, but tiring. He didn’t have a quiet moment to stew about his problems. How could he approach Isadore without appearing a creepy stalker?

The wind was bitter on his walk. He peeked in corners to see if Isadore was hanging around, but he was alone. Of course not. The outside was cold. No one would want to wait in the freezing air for a bumbling fool.

Once at home, he logged into his game and checked to see if Kazmier had left any

messages. Still nothing. Concerned, Sebastian sent another private message. Was he obsessive? Possibly, but Kazmier helped Sebastian fight through anxiety by suggesting breathing techniques. He listened rather than offering suggestions. Sebastian was comfortable with them. And not being able to share his day ratcheted up some of his worries.

As Sebastian lay in bed, unsettled but tired, he made the resolve to approach Isadore sooner rather than later. And he'd mention his plan to no one, so if he failed, only he'd be upset.

"Okay, Sebby. Today is the day you talk to Isadore. If you like him, it should be easy to say something. Isadore isn't that scary. He's really sweet," Sammi insisted, placing a piece of reinforced tape on the spine of a book.

Shrugging, Sebastian passed her another one from the processing cart. Sammi had been after him all morning to approach Isadore, and he had reached his breaking point. This was what Jacob had warned him about the previous day. "I'm fine with how I'm doing this. Sometimes, nodding is good, like saying hi without words. I don't need to rush. If it's meant to be, we'll connect, but nothing has to start until I'm ready."

"Sebby, you shouldn't be okay with living in a social rut. You have to get out and take life by the horns. You'll be happier if you check this off your to-do list." Sammi reached up and squished Sebastian's cheeks between her cool hands. "You deserve someone. You're not the weirdo freak your family calls you. You're amazing."

"I deserve a lot of things, Samantha, and one of them is not to be pestered about Isadore every day." He stepped backwards, letting her hands slide off his face. Her comment about his family stung and wasn't relevant to the conversation. Was he so much of a pushover that boundaries didn't exist in her mind? This had to stop. "Sammi, I'm fine, really. I am happy with how my life is at the moment. Honestly, if

you continue to push, bad things will happen. You've seen it." Sebastian grinned to take the edge off his comment. His day needed to be done now.

"Okay, okay. I'll lay off. I just think if you tried harder, you could get everything you've always wanted and be happy." Sammi pushed the cart back to its spot and shut down her station, ending the impromptu interrogation.

Shoving his toque over his ears, Sebastian braced himself for a cold walk home. He accepted humans were social creatures who needed others to feel complete. And even he longed for someone to share his joys with. Sebastian didn't have a family who delighted in his victories. They wanted him to be traditional, have a wife and children, and do everything they did. When he ventured to the house he grew up in, Sebastian smiled and nodded, not wanting to get caught up in their daily drama of who wronged them at the time. But that was a problem for a different day.

"Hi, uh, wait up?" A husky voice came out of the blue, startling Sebastian into meeping. He meeped. Of course.

Pasting a smile on his face, Sebastian turned and discovered Isadore, rosy-cheeked and smiling. He drank in the sight of Isadore bundled up against the cold. His beautiful auburn hair was covered by a hat with earflaps. Isadore slid his hand down Sebastian's arms, grazing his fingers.

"You look cold." Sebastian lifted his hand toward Isadore's face but pulled back at the last second. "You could have stepped inside the library."

Isadore shrugged, like he was okay with the blustery day. "So it's a bit nippy. This is nothing compared to my home realm. I can see why your people would have issues." He shuffled closer to Sebastian, his torso blocking the wind.

"Yeah, this weather. The temps dropped again." Sebastian cringed. He had Isadore

literally within his grasp, and the conversation sucked.

“How do you mean?” Isadore cocked his head in puzzlement. Sebastian worked through what he said and blushed.

“The weather. It’s got a bite with the temperatures falling.” Make it stop. Please, oh God, stop the inane words from leaving my mouth. Get the right ones instead.

“Oh yes, I understand. Anyway, I was wondering if you—” Isadore started with a bright smile. Sebastian waited, his breath held, curious and anxious about what Isadore wanted to ask, when Isadore’s phone rang. With an aggrieved expression, Isadore turned away and answered it professionally. Sebastian stepped to the side to give an illusion of privacy and watched the slow traffic.

“Sorry ‘bout that. Work phone.”

Sebastian nodded. “No worries, pal. It’s cool. Totally cool.”

“It’s just a mix-up at the Centre for new residents. Dammit.” Isadore sighed. “I wanted to do this right. Shit. So, lunch? Tomorrow at the café? Say one-ish?”

Sebastian nodded, startled at how quickly Isadore brought up going out together. He’d never be able to ask the question without pondering the ramifications, analyzing every angle.

Isadore clasped Sebastian’s coat sleeve and gave Sebastian that perfect smile. “I really gotta go help Adam. I would have loved to have chatted longer. But tomorrow, right?”

“Right,” Sebastian agreed, nervous and excited at the same time. Isadore nodded once more before spinning around and heading toward the centre of town. His three-

quarter wool coat flapped around, but he looked so cool, as though he was from the movies.

A silly grin made a home on Sebastian's face as he stuffed his hands in his coat pockets and aimed for his apartment. The frosty air was a balm on his heated cheeks. He had a date. Sort of. He had a lunch date with Isadore. Oh shit. I have a date. With a person. A person who I like.

This could be good. Or it could be bad. And Sebastian wanted it to be good so bad.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am

CHAPTER 4

Kazmier: Dude I am so sorry I went AWOL

Kazmier: Sh*t went down, and I left my tablet at work

Crash: No worries. Well maybe a little. Everything okay?

Kazmier: Just family chaos.

Crash: You're back now. So all good.

Kazmier: Anything interesting happen?

Crash: *shrug* I messed around on my farm.

Kazmier: Crash, babe. I'm sorry.

Crash: I had life stuff too, and I didn't want to be a burden.

Kazmier: Dish. Tell Daddy Kaz all your concerns.

Crash: Uhhh. Well, if you don't call yourself that, I will fill you in.

Kazmier: Right, right. Not your scene. Tell me all.

Crash: I have a date.

After fixing Adam's computer problem, Isadore strutted into the café. "Hi there. My name is Isadore, and I have a date with the sweet and perfect Sebastian."

"Isadorable! You did it! Oh my God!" Harry clapped his hands together loudly, disturbing the rest of the clientele in the quiet café.

"Harry, calm down and let Isadore sit." Charles, their quieter third, pushed Harry back to his seat. Returning his attention to Isadore, Charles arched an eyebrow. "That was fast. I thought you were going to walk him home."

"Adam needed help at the Centre. Apparently, Trey did something to the computers, or Isaac did and borked them in ways humans can't comprehend."

"Cryptids and human-made computers are not meant to go hand in hand. I hope you explained how magic and technology don't mix." Charles sighed. "Anyway, going back to your date; be nice to Sebastian. Stay calm and relaxed. He's super shy with anyone new. Gran says he can be quite funny once he lets down his guard."

"Your Gran knows him? From the library?" Isadore sat forward and threw his attention at Charles. This was gold.

"Yes, from the library. Where else would we meet him? It's the fucking library. It's a gathering place for everyone," Charles said bluntly, before running a hand over his head. "If you act like you do on any of your other dates, this one will fail before you sit. So, chill out and let Sebastian lead."

"I am an excellent date. People tell me I'm a great companion. I'm smooth. I'm cool. I really want this to work out so much." Isadore slumped in his chair and groaned. "Charles, he's so sweet and kind."

"And if all you know about him is what he appears to be, I imagine he knows less

than you do. Have you told him what sort of cryptid you are?" Charles asked. Isadore shook his head. They hadn't had much of a conversation yet. "Take it slow. Let this, whatever it is, grow organically. And for Gods' sake, try not to be so dramatic."

Crossing his arms in front of his chest, Isadore admitted defeat. Charles was right. Everything about this was new territory, and Sebastian was so of a much a shy spirit that Isadore couldn't just capture him in a globe. "Okay, okay. I will be charming and quiet, and I definitely won't move my arms."

"You should be fine then." Charles relaxed. "I am invested in this now. So, seriously, don't fuck up."

"I know! Believe me, I know." Isadore waved away Charles's admonitions before opening his laptop. He had a computer problem to solve, and he always did his best work in the presence of his friends. Neither Charles nor Harry minded being second fiddle to his vocation. It was all part and parcel of being part of the gremlin family. He could tinker around with mechanics like nobody's business and still listen to the conversations flowing around.

As he twisted his hair back and away from his face, Isadore thought about his date with Sebastian. For all of his bravado and confidence, Isadore accepted Sebastian's initial discomfort would be part of their date. He had witnessed quite a few of Sebastian's moments of frozen anxiety. When he first watched Sebastian come to the diner, waves of stress wafted off the tall man. His shoulders had been rigid, and his gaze remained straight ahead. Isadore had been struck dumb by Sebastian's strength and determination. Despite how uncomfortable he appeared every time he visited the café, Sebastian made an effort to sit and have his lunch. His demeanor was professional, and he chatted politely with the staff, but he never made eye contact with any of the restaurant guests. Once the waitstaff took his order, his shoulders dropped. The longer he observed, the more Sebastian became relaxed and started making small talk with the servers. Isadore had been so proud and thus began his plot

to learn more about his shy and pretty librarian.

Isadore and Charles discussed the best spots to go and ideas for places to take Sebastian if they managed to go beyond shy smiles and waves. Harry's ideas had been so over-the-top Isadore forbade from any more suggestions. Tomorrow was an initial date to allow Sebastian to see that Isadore was a worthy person. It had to go well.

As Isadore managed to solve the crisis at the new Cryptid Centre, the café emptied itself around him, leaving him the sole customer.

Tony fell into the seat beside Isadore and nudged him with his knee. "You know you have an office at your own place, right?"

Isadore hissed as he chased a line of code that'd been the root of all problems. He ignored his brother as long as he could before lifting his head. "What'd you say?"

"An office at home? Where your shit is," Tony snarked. "Don't you think it'd be easier to do computer stuff there?"

"Not really? I had an idea, and Adam is across the street if I need him. So more efficient for me," Isadore explained. Telling his brother he was more productive in the dining room was worth a snide remark or three.

"This is not your workspace. The tables are for paying customers. I can't have you hogging one the whole day. We built you a dedicated work area in our house." Tony crossed his arms and glared. Isadore scowled back. "Honestly, Isadore. Go somewhere else."

"I buy snacks and coffee the whole time I'm here. I'm a paying customer who needs a spot. When one of my clients is across the street, this is a better location for me."

Isadore rolled his shoulders, the tight muscles tugging and pulling. He needed to get out of the human skin soon so he could breathe. “I get shit done here. The ambiance is helpful.”

“What about the library?” Tony asked. Isadore snapped into an upright position, wary of where his brother was heading. “Unless, you know, you’re afraid.”

“I am not afraid of the library. It has many fantastic features. It overlooks the river, and there’s enough space to get my projects done without being interrupted. However, people would be able to see what I’m working on, and it’d be an invasion of privacy.” Isadore imagined setting his computer up at the library and not being able to concentrate. He’d probably find a spot near where Sebastian worked and stare at him all day. With his soft smile and awkward movements, yeah, Isadore wouldn’t have any control over himself.

“Oh, Isa. Stop lying to yourself. Admit you’re scared of the library and the smart creatures roaming around in there.”

“Fuck off, Tony. You’re deliberately being a douche.”

Tony’s comments were typical and brotherly, so the words weren’t as harsh as they could have been. However, retribution was required. Isadore chucked a wadded-up napkin at his brother. It struck Tony on the nose, and he crowed victoriously. His ass of a brother deserved the hit.

“Then act like a fucking grown-up.” Tony swiped the napkin and tossed it away. “Time to go. Restaurant’s closed now. I need you out.”

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks for letting me use your space.” Isadore packed up his gear and winced as Tony’s back cracked. “You should ask Harry to fix your spine. I know he’d be happy to lend a hand,” Isadore teased.

“How about I ask your shy boy tomorrow when he comes here for your date?” Tony snapped.

“You wouldn’t dare do anything to Sebastian!” Isadore loved his brother, but sometimes Tony’s teasing went too far, and feelings were hurt. Isadore straightened up. “I’ll end you so fast!”

“If you keep harping about Harry, I will.” Tony leaned forward, intent on making his point. His ears were pressed back against his head, showing off his agitation. Isadore imagined his own pointy ears were doing the same.

Isadore had crossed the first hurdle in his courtship, coaxing his skittish librarian into a date. No way in hell was Tony going to undo all his hard work with a few words. Brotherly affection had limits. “You can’t ruin this for me. Sebastian is something special, and I have to see where this goes.”

“Come on, Isadore. You’ve barely spoken with this guy! How do you figure he’s the one? Everyone else you’ve dated had more personality than him. He’s so bland. This morning was the first time he showed any signs of life.”

Isadore's hackles rose at Tony’s words. Isadore breathed through his nose, reminding himself that Tony was his brother and didn’t need to have his nose smacked for such mean insults. They didn’t hit in their family. Not in public, anyway.

“How would you know? You’re always so rude to him. You don’t think people tell me? So lay off.” Isadore roughly zipped his laptop case and stormed out of the quiet café. The cold was a shock. Crap, he'd left his coat inside. His dramatic exit was ruined by frosty temperatures. He stood by their shared car and waited for Tony to lock up.

“You’re an idiot, and I forgive you your outburst,” Tony said as he tossed Isadore’s

coat to him. “If Sebastian is who you want, I will do my best to support you. But Gods, Isa, you can do way better.”

“I’m not discussing this with you.” Isadore buttoned his coat and sighed as he began to warm up. The walk to their little enclave was fast.

“Whatever. Come on. Let’s get out of this cold. My toes are going numb.”

That evening in the large bolt-hole the gremlins and brownies called home, Isadore snuggled in the pack with his multitude of niblings vying for his attention. They were all curious to discover more about humans. He tried his best to explain, but Isadore’s ability to describe the human world lacked interesting topics that children found exciting. Cafés and computers were boring.

“Isadore darling, I heard you have a date tomorrow.” Isadore’s older sister, Katya, threw herself in the chair kitty-corner to the couch where Isadore was relaxing. Katya styled herself both a brownie and gremlin. She loved the domesticity of homes, but electronics drew her attention as much as it did for Isadore. Her auburn waves were pulled away from her face with tiny gems and beads.

“I got up my nerve and asked Sebastian this afternoon,” Isadore confessed. Katya was the matriarch of their enclave, and every decision went through her first.

“Oh, I like him. He’s very sweet. The kiddos enjoy the books he chooses for them. He’s not like your other beaux.” Katya tipped her head to the side. Her gaze bored into Isadore, making him squirm.

“I realize that.” Isadore pulled on his hair and glared at his sister. Remembering what his previous relationships did to him was like picking a scab. He hated picturing them. Each one had told him that he was too much. He took the lead too frequently, and he was too intense in his affection. They were homebodies, preferred the bolt-

hole most gremlins lived in, while Isadore wanted to explore and discover their new world. “I like Sebastian. He’s... he’s special. And I hope this date will open his eyes to me. I know I can be a bit overwhelming, but dammit, Katya. He makes my heart sing when I catch a glimpse of him. And I can literally see him light up when he finds me. I am trying not to be a stalker, but... there’s something, right?”

Katya softened. Her own courtship with her mate started off just as rocky as this one with Sebastian. She understood patience and mistakes. Bumps along the path to love always happened. The journey lit the path to discovery and passion. “Too true, my dear. Too true. I’m assuming your crisis in faith has something to do with your brother?”

“He told me Sebastian is plain and not good enough or not worthy of my time.” Isadore kissed the top of one nibling’s head as they got comfortable snuggling in close. He loved this time of day when he could be with his family. Everyone was tactile and yet still respectful of space. He could have this heart-to-heart conversation with the kids around.

“Tony is a brownie through and through. They are a stubborn lot and have set ideas about how this mating thing is to go. You aren’t fitting his mould. So ignore him and follow your heart, you gremlin.”

Though gremlins and brownies were intrinsically different in how they approached life, being family brought them closer. Their obsessions with their calling were the only difference. Each child had a chance at puberty to follow the path that made the most sense. It was a rare gremlin that chose both a brownie aspect and gremlin aspect and combined them into one.

“Katty, you haven’t seen this guy though,” Tony interrupted. He came out of the kitchen with a bowl of something delicious-smelling. Isadore’s mouth watered even as he scowled.

“Oh, but I have. If you were listening, you’d know that the kids and I chat with him at the library when we visit, and they think he’s fun. So, stop being a stick in the mud. Isadore likes him, and that’s more important than your silly impression.”

“Thank you, Katty.”

“Uncle Isa, can we play the farm game on your iPad? I like looking at the cute animals!” one of his nieces asked, stopping the conversation about Sebastian. Isadore was relieved. Having his motives questioned and debated wasn’t on his task list. Gods, all he wanted was for Sebastian to give him a chance and see how well they suited each other. And hopefully get a second date.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am

CHAPTER 5

Crash: Omg omg omg

Kazmier: What happened?

Crash: I think I have a date, and I'm gonna throw up

Kazmier: Aww it's not that bad. You're still talking.

Crash: Not helping

Kazmier: Fine, tell me about this date.

Crash: What if I screw things up?

Kazmier: You won't. It'll be amazing

Crash: What if I embarrass myself in front of a lot of people and the date?

Kazmier: If you do, smile and move on. It'll be a good story.

Crash: I'll never be able to face him again. You don't understand.

Kazmier: If he truly likes you, he will help you get past it.

Crash: I have a curse, and it's going to ruin everything.

Kazmier: Walk me through it then 3

“Are you sure I should wear the stormtrooper shirt? I don’t want to scare him away with my nerdiness.”

“But you love that shirt. You always look so happy and relaxed with it on,” Sammi cajoled, laughter evident in her tone, even over the phone. “Put on the chinos. They make that ass of yours pop.”

“I’ll give you the pants, but I’m not sold on the shirt or that you think my ass pops.” Sebastian studied the tiny stormtroopers and then his Darth Vader black on black. Shrugging into the long-sleeved shirt, he gazed at himself in the mirror. “I think Vader needs to be shown off.”

“Aww, Sebastian, not that one.” Her tinny voice whined loudly from the cell phone as he turned on the selfie function and snapped a picture. “Sebby, too much black. Wear the stormtrooper shirt.”

“I like the Vader one.” He resisted the urge to stomp his foot, but only by a smidge.

“Fine, if it makes you happy. So now let’s play with your hair,” she demanded. Sighing, he went to the bathroom and followed her precise instructions as he prepared for the day ahead. He had a date. Today. With Isadore. Sebastian’s stomach dropped, and he had to grab hold of the sink. This was going to be the end of his life. His curse was going to make its presence known, and Isadore would never want to be seen with him again.

Sebastian blushed as his older patrons oohed and ahed over his appearance. Three ladies stood at the desk, clustered around his computer monitor, giving him advice about how to behave while out with Isadore.

“Now, boy, make sure you treat him nice. We want you to be with the right person. Who’s treating? You or him?” Ms. Smith turned to her friend at the desk. “I am never sure with homosexual relations. Do you know?”

Sebastian opened his mouth and closed it again. Heat bloomed over his face. No way was he going to live down this conversation. “Yes, ladies, I will do my best.”

“Since it will be his first date with someone important,” Sammi murmured as she walked by with a stack of books.

“What was that, Sammi?” Ms. O’Leary asked, catching some of what Sammi had said. “You were mumbling a bit.”

“I wished him well.” Sammi dimpled, her eyes big and innocent as a child’s. “It’s so exciting to be a part of Sebastian’s dating experience, eh?”

“I like to think every date requires special attention.” Sebastian blushed even more as the ladies giggled at him.

“It’s a shame nobody has snapped you up yet. You are the sweetest thing.” Ms. O’Leary made pinching motions toward Sebastian’s face, and Sebastian backed up and crashed into his desk. Sebastian bit off the swear words and turned the conversation to new releases and favourite authors.

Sniffing, the ladies toddled off once he began asking about book titles they hadn’t read and he wanted them to try out. Once they were gone, the butterflies in his stomach began fluttering violently.

“Can you imagine them at the café when I meet up with Isadore?” Sebastian tried joking to lighten himself up.

Sammi smirked. “They’d go there just to see you in action.”

“Do I look okay? Am I ready?” He shifted on his feet and attempted to run his fingers through the stiffened spikes. “What if?—”

“No what-ifs. It’s going to go great. Lean down a bit.”

Ducking to allow Sammi access to his hair, Sebastian closed his eyes as she slicked back his cowlick and brushed a thumb across his cheekbone.

“Remember to smile. You have a fantastic vocabulary, so use it. And most important, he’s not an evil asshole, and he wants to be there with you.”

Nodding vigorously, Sebastian grinned. “We will do the talking thing. If you insist.”

“I do. I expect a picture with you and him smiling.” Sammi nudged him toward the exit. “Go get ’em, tiger.”

Standing in the entranceway of the café, Sebastian waited for his glasses to unfog so he could see where everyone was seated. Inhaling deeply, he nodded once he spotted Isadore sitting at Sebastian’s usual spot. So far, so good.

“Hi, I made it,” Sebastian said as he approached Isadore. He was on a date.

“You did.” Isadore stood and helped Sebastian with his coat. “I, uh, ordered you a coffee. Becks agreed.”

“Oh, thank you.” Sebastian fumbled while pulling the chair back and tripped into the seat. “Shit. I’m not this clumsy.”

“I get it. I’m hella nervous too.” Isadore bobbed his head before sitting himself. “It’s

just lunch. We're having a chat, getting to know each other."

"Right. That's important. I'm Sebastian, and I like coffee?" Sebastian held his hand out. Isadore eyed it with some confusion before grasping it in his warm ones. Sebastian glanced at Isadore's long, pointed ears and claw-like fingers. "Shit, that was a human greeting. I am so sorry."

"It's fine. It's a habit for you. Something I'm getting used to. Will not understanding your human interactions be a problem?" Isadore arched an eyebrow as he leaned in his seat.

"What? Why? No!" Sebastian sucked in air and choked. God, he'd already offended Isadore after being in his presence for a minute. That had to be a record. Gathering himself, Sebastian prepared to apologize, but the light in Isadore's eyes told him his gaffe wasn't as bad as he expected. "That sort of stuff never occurred to me. By the way, your eyes are amazing. They're like the deep layers of glaciers, so bright and still so mysterious."

"That's beautiful. Thank you. No one's ever compared my eyes to ice before." Isadore's cheeks pinked up.

"I didn't mean. Oh my God. I am so sorry. I'm sitting here insulting you, and this is supposed to be a date." Mortification swept through Sebastian, destroying his mediocre confidence in one motion. What a fool. He'd compared Isadore's perfect icy blue eyes to glaciers. Fucking glaciers. Slow-moving blobs of snow.

"No. You can't take my compliment away. I loved it." Isadore stretched out his hand across the table and beckoned to Sebastian with a wiggle of his claws. Sebastian set his hand down, and Isadore grasped it so Sebastian couldn't escape. "It was sweet and adorable and completely unexpected. Exactly like you."

“That’s not me. Geez, I’m not sweet. What gave you that idea?” Sebastian freed his hand and placed it on his hot cheeks. God, he was surprised he hadn’t set off the fire alarms. “I’m very?—”

“Kind? You are the nicest person I’ve met since we came to this town,” Isadore explained as he sipped his water, his eyes never leaving Sebastian.

Sebastian furrowed his brow, sweating under his Vader shirt. “I—I. Maybe this is not a good idea. I can feel the bad luck closing in. Something is going to happen, and it will be my fault.” The butterflies turned to thorny vines in his stomach. Honest compliments were uncommon, so Isadore’s behaviour baffled him.

“Sebastian, shh. Take a deep breath. I’ll stop. I promise. Please don’t leave yet,” Isadore apologized. His demeanour softened as he leaned away from Sebastian. Somehow, those few small inches allowed the vines to rest. Breathing became easier. He was fine. Isadore was perfect. “Thank you for joining me. I enjoy your company. This café is special to me, and it helps me feel at home.”

“Where was your home?” Sebastian asked. He hoped his question wasn’t too invasive. Some cryptids were protective of their former dimensions. They didn’t want their location bandied about because of bad apples.

“It was a cold realm. We stayed in warrens beneath the earth during the long winter season. Coming to this place was eye-opening. And we all discovered new aspects to ourselves.”

“How so?” Sebastian tipped his head to the side, feeling comfortable for the first time since the date began.

“Tony is happiest in the kitchen. Not good with compliments.”

“Brownie.”

“I love all of your electronic devices and toys. It’s fascinating to me to dive into the insides of computers and tablets to see how they work.” Isadore lit up as he discussed his job.

Sebastian took a stab in the dark about what Isadore was. He didn’t want to be insulting, but his guess made sense. “Gremlin?”

“That’s the term we’re using here. According to your internet, gremlins are small beasties who cause a lot of mischief. I am trying hard not to be that creature. I want to be one who finds the problems and solves them while being a teeny bit impish.” Isadore lifted his nose up and sniffed. The snobby routine was ruined by his wide smile.

Sebastian snickered. This was fun. “Just a bit?”

Isadore pinched his fingers together and nodded. “This much.”

“Why don’t I believe that?” Sebastian joked. Being with Isadore felt a lot like an in-person chat with Kazmier. They had the same easy way of bantering, and it soothed Sebastian.

“Because you don’t know me well enough, obviously.” Isadore laughed. “Your eyes are like the changing leaves on a beech tree.”

Snorting at the odd compliment, Sebastian shook his head at Isadore’s sincerity. “That was pretty bad.”

“I don’t have access to all those words like you do.” Isadore set his hand on the table, palm up, as an invitation for Sebastian to hold. “I stand by them though.”

“You are so odd,” Sebastian muttered, hiding his face once more.

“Odd is good though.” Isadore beckoned once more, and Sebastian gambled on his luck. Holding another person’s hand was a huge step, but the reward was Isadore’s pleased expression. “Tony is going to bring out our food. I took the liberty of ordering 'cause I know you have a time limit. Should I have asked permission?”

Sebastian glanced at the doorway to the kitchen and nodded. “Oh, thank you. How thoughtful.”

“Oh, blessed stars. I’ve read some dating things, and they said doing that was the highest offense ever, but I didn’t want to waste your lunch.” The relief on Isadore’s face caused bubbles to fizz and pop in Sebastian’s stomach. He’d done that. He made Isadore smile and glow in such magical ways. This man with his sharp cheekbones and crooked nose was all Sebastian’s. The bubbles exploded with an effervescent joy, and for the first time ever, Sebastian felt that bone-deep need for another person. “You—you have the nicest face,” Sebastian blurted out, studying every nook and cranny. “I’d like to trace it.”

Pupils dilated, Isadore swallowed hard. “Sebastian. That’s—what the hell?”

“Oh my God! Sebby! Watch out!” The heat of slick food had him arching back before he realized what had happened. Becky had tripped on a chair and tipped her tray of lunches onto Sebastian.

As the gooey liquid dribbled down his back, Sebastian kept his eyes locked on Isadore before him. The dismay on Isadore’s face told him that bad things had happened. The shock of having someone’s lunch dumped on him and the horror on the diners’ faces had Sebastian freezing in place. Becky yipped and began cleaning up the plates on the ground. Isadore snorted, jostling Sebastian out of the frozen pose. The sound reminded him of high school when bullies would trip him in the hall,

causing people to laugh, including his cousins. Wounded by the sound Isadore made and embarrassed by the commotion surrounding him, Sebastian stood up and threw his coat on. He knocked the water glasses over, creating more of a mess. Mortified, he swore and slunk out of the café, ignoring Isadore's pleas to stop. With his head held high, blind and deaf to anyone laughing or calling, Sebastian left.

Returning to the library was cold and humiliating. Sebastian accepted the curse had returned. This was evidence of it. This was the reason why dating should never have been part of Sebastian's life goals. Sebastian contemplated bypassing the library and going straight home. However, with every step, a drip of food moved down his back. Every movement caused the fabric to stick to his skin. Every second, the rehash of words created a whirl of anxiety to twist into thorny vines. Gasps turning into snorts echoed in his ears. He'd heard the sneer in Isadore's laughter. Every date he attempted turned into a humiliating encounter, to the point where it felt like a jinx. Sebastian soon called it a bad luck curse. When he tripped or was too earnest, his dates always rolled their eyes and mocked him.

Slipping into the workroom, Sebastian tugged off his coat. The wool was probably ruined. He didn't even see Sammi sitting at the small table.

"What happened?" Her voice was low and cautious. He shrugged and blinked away the threatening tears.

"I happened. Evil God of Dates happened. Becks stumbled into me carrying food and dumped it on me," Sebastian stated. He was done.

"Oh, sweetie, how awful." Sammi grabbed the ruined coat and began wiping food residue away with a paper towel. "Do you want me to find Jake?"

Sebastian sighed as he sat. He had to go home; he couldn't work with food clinging to his back. "Thanks, Sammi. I don't think I can be here right now."

“No worries. I’ll send him in.” She left the room with one last worried look in his direction. Minutes later, his supervisor popped in, and the quick intake of breath told Sebastian exactly what Jacob saw.

“Sammi told me you had a mishap at lunch and you might want to leave for the day.” Jacob approached Sebastian and pressed his lips together. “I can see why. I am so sorry, Sebastian.”

Sebastian unbuttoned his shirt and pulled off the wrecked garment. With gentle strokes, he cleaned the stains as best he could with paper towels. He assumed salad dressing and soup were the main culprits. “Big mishap.”

“Do you need anything else? A ride home?” Jacob asked as he offered another wad of clean towels and took the soiled ones.

“I should be fine. The walk will help.” The smell of food wafted up to his nose as he continued his task, and Sebastian’s stomach turned.

“We will see you tomorrow. Get some rest tonight and try not to think about what happened. It was an accident, I’m sure,” Jake suggested before surveying the room once more and slipping out. Sebastian sat at the table, his date shirt wrecked. Sebastian wiped the tears from his cheeks, slid on his coat, and grimaced at the sensation of wet fabric against his back. It was fine. He was fine. The mantra echoed in his head as he walked out of the library without making eye contact with anyone entering the building.

Stepping through the sliding doors, Sebastian jumped when Isadore peeled away from the wall to stand in front of him. “I’ve told you to come inside. You don’t need to wait here in the cold.”

“I didn’t know if you’d like me there. May I walk you home?” Isadore’s cheery voice

was subdued, the opposite of its usual tone. “I can’t allow you to be alone while so uncomfortable.”

“I guess I can’t stop you.” Sebastian winced at the snarkiness of his voice. “I’m sorry. That was rude. It’s just that I stomped out of the café without helping. And you sat there. And it feels like everything is ruined.”

“Shush, the most important thing is you. Are you okay? Are you warm enough?” Isadore asked, peering into Sebastian’s face. Sebastian saw no mirth, no mockery in Isadore’s eyes. Maybe he’d been wrong about Isadore laughing at him.

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me. These things happen.” Sebastian waved the concern away, pretending to be strong. This was how he coped, and the lie helped him.

Glaring, Isadore took his own scarf and wrapped it in a loose loop around Sebastian’s neck, holding onto the ends. “You had soup dumped on you. Of course, you should be upset. I’m upset. Stars, Sebastian, this was not how I wanted our date to end.”

“Why you? Food didn’t cascade all over your back.” Sebastian tipped his head to the side in confusion.

Isadore heaved a great sigh before explaining. “A terrible accident happened to my friend, and I didn’t get to see if they were alright. They could have been hurt. Oh, Sebastian. May I hug you? It will help me put the fear at bay.”

Sebastian blinked at Isadore’s request. He’d never been asked for a hug, and he never assumed that Isadore would be as upset about his ordeal as he was. “Sure. I guess?”

Shuffling closer to Sebastian, Isadore slid his arms around Sebastian’s waist and squeezed. Instinctively, Sebastian looped his own around Isadore’s neck. The hold

was comforting and broke Sebastian's mighty grip on his emotions. He dropped his head on Isadore's shoulder and let out a watery sigh. Nothing was said. Isadore squeezed Sebastian in his arms, and the world faded to black for a few brief minutes.

Isadore stepped back and gazed at Sebastian before speaking. "That was perfect. You give amazing hugs."

"You're welcome?" Sebastian shifted on his feet, unsure of what was next. Getting clean and away from people beckoned to him. His clothes were sticking to his skin, but being in Isadore's presence soothed him. "I'm sorry, but?—"

"You're ready to go home. I get it. I'm feeling that way myself." Isadore agreed. This wasn't in Sebastian's playbook. No one he liked ever stayed with him when bad things happened. They always made excuses and disappeared.

"Really?"

"Oh yeah. My lunch date with this incredible guy was cut short because of a food-related accident. We were just getting in the groove of a fun conversation and then he got understandably upset. It wasn't how I wished my afternoon would go. I don't know what to do now." Isadore dipped his head to the side and studied Sebastian.

"Me neither. I was hoping—" Sebastian's nerve almost betrayed him, but he persevered. Something good had to come out from the day because maybe he deserved it. "I was hoping we might try again, sort of like a do-over?"

"That sounds delightful. I'd like to try again. In fact, I insist on it. But I'm not sure when. There's this festival the BIA is planning that sounds like fun. Would you like to be my date?"

Sebastian hadn't expected Isadore would come up with a plan so fast. He'd expected

him to hem and haw and say he'd call Sebastian. "You mean at the park behind the library?"

"The nighttime one where the cryptids and the humans are working together to dispel the bad karma from previous years? Yes, that place. How about it?" Isadore played with the ends of the scarf again. He was a tactile person, and Sebastian swallowed. He wasn't sure if he should be annoyed or intrigued. Both made sense, but joy bubbled up, winning over the negative thoughts.

"I'd love to. For sure. Thank you." Sebastian nodded. Despite the awful middle part, his day was looking up.

"Great. Let me have your number, and I will confirm details with you. Okay?" Isadore whipped out a phone and waited for Sebastian to do the same. They exchanged numbers. "Fantastic! Do you want me to walk home with you? I can't leave you like this."

"I think...I think I'm gonna be okay. My apartment is five minutes away." Sebastian scratched his chin and lifted his lips for his first real smile since the food dumping. "Thank you again?"

"No worries. I did what a good person would do. And you're giving me another chance. That's the thanks I want. You have a relaxing rest of your day. Use water and baking soda mixture on your coat, and the paste should help remove the worst of the stains, okay?" Isadore said.

Sebastian nodded and did one last brave thing. He took a step forward and brushed a light kiss on Isadore's cheek. The scent of coffee and mint washed over him, and a warm feeling filled his stomach. The intake of breath from Isadore was the reaction he'd hoped for as he stepped away. "I'll return your scarf when I see you next."

“Yeah, no worries, mate.” The awed confusion in Isadore’s voice made Sebastian giggle as he left Isadore standing alone in the middle of the street.

Despite the world always trying to trip him and his dates up, Sebastian had managed to get a second date with Isadore. And this was with the awfulness of food sliding down his back.

Not even having to clean his clothes could dim Sebastian’s joy.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am

CHAPTER 6

Crash: Stop sending me expensive gifts

Kazmier: You deserve it, so no.

Crash: You told me you couldn't afford it, so please...

Kazmier: You had a sh*tty day, and I'm fixing it as best I can.

Crash: But I don't know how to reciprocate. . It's not fair

Kazmier: Be my love slave. I'll accept that.

Crash: Dude, that's like weird, isn't it?

Kazmier: Not unless you make it weird.

Crash: But...

Kazmier: Let me do this. I have to do this. You are so sweet and so adorable that I hate seeing you upset. I must fix it.

Isadore sat in the chair in his brother's office and spun around. He regretted leaving Sebastian to walk home alone, but the determination and stubbornness in Sebastian's stance warned Isadore to back off. Stars, how the hell had his date with Sebastian gone downhill so fast? Were the fates working against him?

Tony leaned on the doorframe to the office and cleared his throat. “Your guy is a jinx. Becks broke a whole set of dishes. She seems to do that while he’s around.”

“Why is Sebastian to blame? We were sitting down, having a pleasant conversation,” Isadore snapped. Jinx wasn’t a word a person threw around lightly. It did terrible things and caused a true mischief maker to show up. “He was so adorable, wasn’t he?”

“Izzy, he’s a spaz. Why would you want to be around him?” Tony grumbled. “He barely gets any sentences out when he comes here.”

Isadore counted to ten in his head before speaking. He had thought they had discussed this and everything had been resolved. Why was Tony still stuck on this? It wasn’t his life; it was Isadore’s, and he was excited to be a part of something sweet and amazing.

“That’s because you intimidate him. Make him nervous. If I can get Sebastian to relax, I think I’ll find the real person behind the “clumsy” persona.” Isadore dragged out Sebastian’s name with a delicious hiss. “I chased after him, you know. He was so upset. But I managed to set up a second date.”

Tony groaned as he came into the office and pushed his brother off the chair. “You are such a sap. Get out of my office and stay out. You can’t use it for your nefarious deeds. This is my space.”

“Fine, I’ll leave.” Isadore elbowed his brother lightly in the stomach as he passed Tony. As much as he bragged about getting a second date with Sebastian, Isadore worried that he might have pushed Sebastian too far too fast. The poor guy had a shocking experience and here was Isadore asking for another.

Harry and Charles were in a corner of the café, hidden from the world. Dungeons &

Dragons manuals and character sheets filled the table, leaving a small empty space for mugs and plates. Isadore peered at the sheets and wrinkled his nose. Campaign creation time. “What’s going on?”

“New game session is starting at the comic shop next week,” Harry murmured. For once, his attention was on something other than Tony. “If I do this at the store, people will ask questions, and I can’t get any work done.”

“You know Tony hates it when you block a table for the whole afternoon.” Isadore sat and studied a hand-drawn map. “What sort of campaign are you playing? This looks like an all-out battle.”

“Charles asked nicely, so we’re good for a while. And as long as we buy coffee and snacks, we’re paying customers,” Harry answered, his attention on what he was doing. His perfect hair was messed up as he ran his fingers through it. Isadore rolled his eyes. Why did Tony always give him shit when these two did the same thing all the time? Likely because they were brothers, and irritating each other was what they did.

“I heard Becks caused an international incident at lunch. What happened?” Charles asked, lifting his head to meet Isadore’s gaze. Sympathy filled his bright blue eyes as Isadore shrugged. Charles’s big eyes were his best feature. Isadore would have dated Charles at some point if he didn’t analyze everything Isadore did.

“Becky tipped a full tray of food down Sebastian’s back. Broke all the dishes. Worst mess since she started. Poor Sebastian ran out like the hounds of hell were on his ass. He was so upset. Managed to catch up with him before he left the library. I should have walked him home.”

“Did he ask you to?” Charles asked.

“No, and I asked. Still said no.” Isadore didn’t think he had done enough, but the wounded look he’d seen had him biting off anything else he’d try. Going out again had to be Sebastian’s decision. Isadore couldn’t railroad him into making that choice. “How can I get him to like me if I can’t show him that I’m trustworthy?”

“By listening to him.” Charles rolled his eyes. “He’s a grown man, Iz. Like a true adult. You have let him come to you.”

“Listen to the psycho, Isadorable. He’s being smart. Your Sebastian likely needs to lick his wounds, and you sort of require privacy for that. It’s not a first date activity.” Harry glanced up from the critical hit chart he was creating. His eyes were unfocused as he spoke to Isadore. “You chasing after him is like chasing after a cat after you step on its tail. You know how they react.” Harry mimicked the actions with comical flair. “Let me love you!”

“I’m not that bad.” Isadore ran a hand through his hair, untangling knots with his fingers. “Did you see before hell broke loose? He lit up the room.”

“He’s in love,” Harry whispered loudly across the table to Charles, who grinned. “Definitely in love. It Isa-dorable.”

“Oh, shut up.” Isadore tossed a crumpled napkin at his friends. Their joking and teasing nature broke up some of the fears Isadore had about letting Sebastian go home without him. “At least I have a chance with the person I’m interested in, Harrison.”

“Hey, now you’re being cruel. I am trying, okay? Anyway, I found someone else who might be better. He’s on this gaming forum, and he’s decent.” Harry scowled. Ribbing Harry about his all-consuming crush on Tony was automatic. Harry was human and had fallen for Tony the minute he had stepped through to the Granite side of the dimensional portal. Tony, on the other hand, was adamant about not having anything to do with Harry. Isadore hadn’t been able to pick apart Tony’s reasons.

Someday, he'd figure it out. "Anyway, why aren't we bothering Chuck? Have you noticed his secret smiles when the phone toodles?"

"Don't bring me into this. I offered my advice. You leave your love interests alone, and maybe, possibly, they'll return your affection," Charles lectured, eying both Isadore and Harry. "Honestly, though, Iz, he's out of his element when he visits, but he comes for you. Let him show you what he wants. Let him lead you, alright?"

"Yeah, I got that impression as well." Isadore sighed before dropping his head back on the chair. "So, what's the game here?"

"Which game? The one we're planning or the one you are?" Harry blinked innocent eyes at Isadore. "Because I need more of a lead-in than what you're asking."

"Fuck off, Harry. I'm talking about yours." Isadore waited a beat before speaking. "Have you made any progress with your forum friend?"

"Not sure. He runs so hot and cold. Always asks me about dick pics and such." Harry scratched a mark on his document before continuing. "But then he gets on these epic long rants about shipping characters from comics or movies."

"Don't be a snob now, Harry. People are allowed to like who they like," Charles chastised, not even looking up from his task.

"But, Charles, he was telling me things, awful, awful things," Harry whined, leaning forward. Isadore rolled his eyes and sipped his coffee. He half-listened to Harry complain about his friend while contemplating the best way to woo and win Sebastian, his pretty librarian.

Isadore's will broke after two days. He had given Sebastian space long enough. As much as he wanted to be a fly on the wall of the library or even Sebastian's home,

Isadore respected Sebastian's wishes. Of course, it helped that Adam at the Cryptid Centre needed a shit ton of work done on their website and social media presence. That was neither here nor there. Now was about Sebastian. Isadore gazed into the warm library and strengthened his resolve. He liked the idea of being outside until Sebastian left his post. It was his schtick. Sebastian made such fun, soft noises, though if Isadore waiting in the cold truly freaked Sebastian, Isadore would stop.

Shifting on his feet, because holy fuck it was cold, Isadore killed time with the farming adventure game he had discovered. Someone on the same server reminded him so much of home and peace. He had memorized when Crash logged in and tried to be on whenever Crash was. Keeping an eye on the door to the library, Isadore spent some real money on the game and gifted his friend an animal he had missed out on during a previous event. Of course, Crash would complain, but he'd forgive Isadore. All Isadore had to offer was a little sweet talk and distractions. What was it about Crash that made him giddy? Isadore bit his lip. These feelings toward Crash were similar to what Sebastian did to him, but there was no way they could be the same person. What would happen if his instincts were wrong? Could he give up either one? God, what a mess.

Isadore shook his head and smiled brightly as the library door slid open. Sebastian was buried deep in a soft grey scarf, and his hat was pulled down over his ears. His attention wasn't on the street before him but his bulky crossbody bag. Isadore witnessed the exact moment Sebastian noticed him. His movements slowed, and his eyes became big and excited behind the black frames. Soon, the bright emotions were shuttered behind stoicism and worry.

"Hey, Sebastian. I was wondering if I could join you for a walk?"

"Shit. Isadore. You came? Why?" Sebastian stammered. He glanced at the library before looking at Isadore. "You do realize the library is open to the public and is much warmer than standing out in the dark and cold?"

“Crossed my mind, however, hanging around outside for you is so much more entertaining,” Isadore answered, bouncing on his toes. “I like catching you unawares.”

“But it’s freezing out. How is it fun waiting and getting frostbite?” Sebastian asked. His scowl was endearing as well as his desire to keep Isadore safe. The concern melted some of Isadore’s cheekiness.

“Sweets, it just is.” The endearment slipped out. “Anyway, I wanted to give you space, and now I have to make sure you’re okay. You had a terrible day, and I should have walked you home. I am sorry.”

“It was—I was... Everything was more gross than painful,” Sebastian admitted, ducking away from Isadore.

“It looked uncomfortable. But you could have been burnt or cut. And I just let you go.” Isadore ignored the human societal rules and grabbed Sebastian’s hand. He tugged on him until Sebastian was glaring at him. “I should have stayed with you.”

“It wasn’t your fault. I told you no.” Sebastian huffed in frustration. His expression was so put-upon that Isadore leaned forward and bussed Sebastian’s cool lips. The touch was lighter than a feather, but the taste exploded within Isadore. His heart thumped wildly, and Isadore knew with one gentle kiss Sebastian was more than anything he had ever expected. As he pulled back, Sebastian’s eyes were bigger and darker than ever.

“Why—you—why you kissed me!” His stammer was more pronounced, and his cheeks had grown to a deeper shade of pink.

“I couldn’t help myself. I am so sorry, but you deserved something good,” Isadore confessed. “I won’t do it again. I promise. At least not until I have your permission.”

“No! That’s not it.” Sebastian twisted away before facing Isadore once more. “It’s embarrassing. I haven’t prepared or anything.”

“You think me kissing you is embarrassing?” Isadore had no idea where Sebastian’s train of thought was taking him. “I thought... well, I hoped it would lighten the mood. I’m sorry.”

“No! Please don’t apologize. I didn’t mean it that way. I never expected I’d be the type of person who someone would kiss to help.” Sebastian sighed. “This is why I don’t talk to anyone.”

“Don’t say that. I like listening to you. We’ve caught each other at a bad time, and we don’t know each other quite yet. So trying to find good things to chat about is hard. Please don’t give up.”

“I won’t. However, I need you to understand I will be okay if you don’t—”

Isadore, not wanting to press his advantage, set his gloved finger against Sebastian’s mouth.

Sebastian scowled and spat at Isadore. “Eww, gross. Now I have the taste of wool glove in my mouth.”

“Oops. I’m sorry. Won’t do that again with wool gloves.” Isadore shoved his hands into his coat’s deep pockets. “I was wondering if you’d like to have another attempt at a first date?”

“Like now?” Sebastian’s nose wrinkled. “I can’t. It’s kinda late, and my cat’ll want his dinner. And I need time to prepare.”

“No. Definitely not now. But maybe this weekend? It’s Thursday, so I can ask about

your plans for the next couple of days. Can we talk about the town festival?” Isadore threw everything into his eyes, praying Sebastian would say yes.

“Maybe we should wait. I mean, this is a little—we’ve had a few rough starts, and it’s?—”

“A walk around town. Show me your Granite. Nothing big or fancy. Just a few hours together,” Isadore begged.

“Sounds good. I can do that.” Sebastian seemed so unsure. Isadore ached to take everyone who dared to hurt this sweet man and beat some sense into them. Sebastian blinked, and his expression cleared. It was like a light shone down on him, washing away the negativity.

“Can I text you Saturday morning for more details?” If he told Sebastian when he would text, Isadore would have a good chance of a yes.

“Oh sure. I just don’t look at my phone when I’m at work. It’s frowned upon.” Sebastian inhaled deeply. “You can contact me anytime.”

“What a dangerous statement, friend. So very dangerous,” Isadore teased. Walking the fine line of fierce joy and the desire to bring Sebastian deeper into his life challenged Isadore. He was keen to attempt the chance.

“It’s okay. You can send stuff, I don’t mind,” Sebastian muttered shyly. Glancing around, he stepped close and stared deep into Isadore’s eyes before smashing his lips against Isadore’s mouth. Blushing, Sebastian smiled and dashed away.

Stunned, Isadore brushed his lips. The kiss was a delightful surprise. He hadn’t expected any sort of affection from someone as shy or reticent as Sebastian. And Sebastian had taken that first step, despite the fears that swamped him. Sebastian had

touched him, in public, fleeting as it was.

Now he had to plan a good and proper date with Sebastian. The location had to be safe and have plenty of exit strategies in case something happened. Isadore had a feeling lots of things “happened” to Sebastian. Nothing was going to occur on their date, not if he had anything to say about it.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am

CHAPTER 7

Crash: What do I do?

Kazmier: Where did this come from?

Crash: This is a terrible idea

Kazmier: You know you're not giving me any information or context, right?

Crash: I'm pretty sure I have a date.

Kazmier: Another one? And so soon? Interesting. How can you not realize if you have a date?

Crash: Because these things never happen to me, and I suck at them.

Kazmier: Everyone sucks at dates. It's in the rule book.

Crash: THERE'S A RULE BOOK? Why hadn't anyone told me?

Kazmier: I don't know. Anyway, you'll be fine. I believe in you and all that fun stuff.

Sebastian stared at Isadore's contact information. Still, the name and number were enough to leave Sebastian in awe. He had the phone number of a person he liked. And there hadn't been arm-twisting or begging involved.

The problem remained though, of going out with someone who wouldn't tease him or having the afternoon go off the rails in a spectacular fashion. Which was asking a lot of Sebastian. He shuddered at some of the first dates or friend outings he had in the past, and they remained locked in his memory banks, though blips of repeated mishaps peeked out, causing Sebastian to shudder.

God, Sebastian hoped this date with Isadore went well. He hoped it'd be perfect, therefore leading into something more involved. Isadore opened up a part of Sebastian that longed for a deep connection with another person.

Though Isadore asked if he could text Sebastian, his messages remained empty. With anyone else, Sebastian would have placed the blame on himself. With the cursor blinking, Sebastian sent a geeky and tame meme involving air brakes and gremlins. Isadore would be unfamiliar with the cartoon, but the Looney Tunes gremlin had always tickled Sebastian.

The reply was a raised eyebrow and a response asking if Sebastian made a joke. Sebastian blushed even though no one was around. The point was that Isadore understood and responded.

Sebastian's opening text broke the ice surrounding them, and Isadore sent him messages and memes with regularity. Most of the messages were innocent, asking about the festival they were going to attend and queries about Sebastian's hobbies. Isadore was always respectful of Sebastian's boundaries, and because of his reticence, Sebastian opened up and began flourishing under Isadore's attention. Sebastian didn't understand why he shared details about his life with Isadore, but Isadore made every revelation okay. Isadore didn't seem like the guy who would hold past mistakes to the light, which Sebastian appreciated.

A lot.

Today was the day of their second attempt at a first date. Isadore was going to meet him at the park entrance with hot drinks, and they'd explore the riverside area behind the old historic businesses. Sure, the downtown was where Sebastian worked, but seeing the area through fresh eyes seemed like a good idea. Sebastian shifted his feet, feeling the chill of the season creeping into his winter boots. It was gonna be one of those days where the sun shone bright and beautiful, but the air was crispy and cold. Basically, Sebastian's favourite part of winter.

"Sebastian, hey!" Isadore called out his name, and the smile formed on his face as Isadore strode toward him. He was carrying a tray with their drinks, and a paper bag was stuffed between the two cups. His hair was loose and tangled, framing his face. Reaching Sebastian, he pulled him into a quick hug and released him. "I brought treats. Is that okay? There's a new baker on the weekends who's feeling a bit nervous under Tony's exacting tutelage."

"Oh, how sweet. You didn't have to go out of your way for me. I could have—" Sebastian blew out air and tried again. "Thank you."

"You are very welcome. How about we sit at the table over there and enjoy a snack?" Isadore looped his hand through Sebastian's arm and led him to a picnic area near the park entrance. Sebastian marvelled at how easy Isadore was about bodily contact. He was tactile and not afraid to show affection. Sebastian liked the touches, the holds. Isadore reminded Sebastian of solid friendship and reassurance.

"Sounds great. Let's sit, and you can tell me about anything new and interesting that's happened." Isadore swept the seat and faced the quiet river. Sebastian settled beside him. The placement was different from what he was comfortable with, but he wanted to see what Isadore saw, and he was being brave.

"We're in the process of preparing crafts for children for the town festival. Decorating the library and all that fun stuff. We have a lot of Christmas-minded

people in this branch, so they're chafing at the bit to get started." Sebastian sipped the hot mocha and sighed as it warmed him from the inside out. "Good drink."

"I'll let the barista know. Explain this Christmas thing. I don't quite get the meaning." Isadore scratched his head, his claws more obvious than Sebastian had previously seen. He peeked at Isadore's ears and blinked at how long and pointed they were.

"Christmas is a religious holiday that celebrates the birth of a child. We give gifts and have a big feast. A lot of people observe the winter solstice, which is the shortest day of the day, light-wise. We have many major religious holidays at the same time, but Christmas seems to be the name we've stuck with. We have a month of celebrations and solemnity," Sebastian explained. He stared at the lampposts in the park decorated with pine garlands and lights entwined around them. Ice sprites were dancing on the needles, giving them a permanent frosted look.

"That sounds like a lot," Isadore said. "What do you do?"

Sebastian nibbled his cinnamon scone as he thought about his holiday season. He'd go to his parents' house in the country for Christmas Eve and Day. Be by himself on Boxing Day to recover from the forced socialization. Sebastian then decided not to share his family drama with Isadore. Sebastian sensed Isadore would become upset at how alone among his family Sebastian would be. They didn't need to rehash Sebastian's history on their first true date. "Sammi and I make a date and exchange gifts at the Nokk Inn. Lya has a delicious spread for anyone who wants to visit during December."

"Oh, I love that place. Even Tony enjoys their ambiance, and he's notoriously fickle." Isadore dropped his head on his fist and smiled at Sebastian. The blast of warmth aimed at Sebastian made the butterflies in his stomach flutter madly. "This is nice."

“It is, isn’t it?” Everything was going well, and Sebastian hadn’t stammered or made an ass of himself yet. This might be considered a successful date. “Did you celebrate the Winter Solstice?”

“We have a winter holiday, but it’s a sombre affair. We remember those lost to the demons and to the dark. We light candles and offer the names of those who left us too soon,” Isadore explained. This was the first time Sebastian had seen a downcast expression on Isadore’s face. It was humbling.

“And here I am blathering on about a happy, joyful holiday, and this isn’t what you—” Sebastian tried to apologize. He didn’t mean for Isadore to be sad.

“No, no, sweets. It’s okay. There are commonalities between our peoples. You don’t need to be sorry for something you have no control over. I think we can be happy and introspective at the same time. Meld the two styles together.”

Sebastian grudgingly allowed the concession, though in the back of his head, he wished he hadn’t asked. “A lot of people do that, actually.”

“See? We’re already progressing. Now, come on, show me your park. Tell me about this festival. Tara has committed the café’s resources to a booth, and I’d like to understand what that means.”

“You are very involved with the backroom aspects of the café. Is that just because of Tony?” Sebastian asked. God, he hoped he wasn’t being invasive.

“Mostly. She asked if I could help set up a contactless and wireless situation for her. She wanted to not depend on the public Wi-Fi for transactions,” Isadore explained. He offered his hand to Sebastian and helped him get up from the picnic table. Isadore never released Sebastian and kept his hand tucked with his arm. “Okay, tour guide, show me where the festival will be.”

Sebastian directed him to the entrance to the Riverside Park, where paths leading to and from the river were laid out. He paused at the Light Up Night memorial and shook his head. He shuddered. During the fight between Darius and Hastur, Granite had been under such a terrible pall that Sebastian worried that their lives would be irrevocably destroyed. But Darius and his friends managed to send Hastur back to hell. Bowing his head, Sebastian asked the demons or gods to maintain the locked barrier around Hastur and his ilk. He never had any dealings with the demon, but he remembered the devastation. Some people still hadn't forgiven Darius for destroying their town or inviting the demons to Granite, though the events weren't his fault.

"Is this where the thing happened?" Isadore asked, hushed. He knelt on one knee and bowed his head.

"The chamber of commerce thought it would be a good way to remind people that their lives can change so fast," Sebastian explained. "A lot of the townsfolk wanted to get rid of the statue as a bad memory, but we decided we needed a reminder. And we won."

"My people are grateful that a door opened for us. We have blossomed living here in this community." Isadore brushed the frost crystals from his knees.

"Do you have humans still crossing the street when they see you? A few cryptid patrons have complained about silly humans." Sebastian scowled. Bigoted people were bigoted, and he wished they'd go away.

"Not in a while. People have been positive and kind. I was talking to Isaac at the centre, and he said there has been an uptick in human/cryptid relations. He'd seemed thrilled with how busy he was."

"I like Isaac and Adam. They're nice." They all had gone to the local high school, though Sebastian was in the same grade as Darius. He knew the other two in passing.

“Sebastian? Is that you?” Sebastian’s back crawled as a familiar voice screeched out his name. He had hoped his date would end well. But the presence of his cousin jogging toward them warned him shit was about to happen.

“Who’s she?” Isadore asked sotto voce . Distaste changed how he stood and how he spoke to Sebastian.

“My cousin, Meggz. She’s... I’m sorry.” Sebastian didn’t know how to describe his family to Isadore, but Meggz talking to him would explain a lot, probably too much.

“Why are you apologizing? Not necessary.” Isadore patted Sebastian’s hand.

“Are you on a date? OMG, for reals? I thought you told everyone you were the bad luck king. Isn’t that what you told your mom?” Meggz ran up to Sebastian and pulled him away from Isadore with force. “Never imagined you’d find a date willing to be seen with you in public.”

“Thanks, Meggz.” Her words dug a hole within his chest and twisted. She knew the best way to hurt him. He yanked his arm away from her inch-long claws. She, as always, was dressed to impress. She wore tight, distressed jeans with a fluffy white coat. Meggz’s hair was artfully loose around her face but sprayed with an inch of its life with hairspray. Makeup caked her skin, and mascara clumped on her lashes. “What’re you doing outside?”

“Can’t a girl take a stroll around the park? Jeez, interrogate much, Sebby?” Meggz flipped her hair in irritation. “I could say the same about you. You actually left your hovel. So, are you on a date? Who is this... this... well, I was gonna say hunk, but you got them claws. You’re a wannabe human, aren’t you?”

Sebastian sucked in air at the blatant insult. His cousin was a little rude, but this was beyond. Isadore didn’t deserve such blatant disrespect.

“Oh, so you recognize the kind of people you wish to be?” Isadore delivered a clapback before Sebastian could leap in. “Must be sad to live in such shadows.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Meggz cocked her hip out as she scowled at Isadore.

“He’s saying that you’re behaving—” Sebastian started.

“You’re acting like one of those demons who attacked this town. Honestly, I can’t believe you’d treat your family like you are. Especially if, as you said, you hadn’t seen him in a while.” Isadore bared his teeth as he shifted his body in front of Sebastian, showing him Isadore had his back.

“Yeah, well. If the tall freak actually visited his family, then maybe?—”

Isadore stopped her insults with a disdainful rise of his eyebrow. “Why would he visit if he could expect this kind of welcome from a relative?”

“Oh, fuck off. You’re a goddamn monster. You have no understanding about our dynamics. This is how we show our love for each other. Get a fucking clue,” Meggz snapped. “Remove your asshole friend from my presence, Sebby. He’s being mean, and I don’t have time for his kind of shit.”

“You approached us.” Sebastian scratched his cheek while trying to still be civil. His cousin could fly off in any direction, and he’d be caught in the crossfire no matter what. This was what he was hoping Isadore would never see.

“Yeah, I wanted to talk to my cousin. Because, family before all else. We grew up together, remember, Sebby? All your secrets are up here.” Meggz tapped her foot on the ground, impatient and angry. Never a good combination.

“I don’t think that counts as being protective of your cousin. From where I come from, families bolster each other. They don’t tear people down like you’re doing to Sebastian. Your way seems kinda monstrous.” Isadore slid his hand along Sebastian’s arm until he could lace his fingers tightly with Sebastian’s. Support and comfort were together, giving him strength.

“What the fuck do you know? God, Sebby. Throw this freak away and get a new guy. He’s a fucking ass. Calling me a goddamn monster.” With one last hair flip, Meggz stormed past them. Her perfume was strong as the scent drenched Sebastian, giving him a reminder of their encounter.

“Well, that wasn’t how I wanted to introduce you to my family. I’m sorry you had to meet Meggz.” Sebastian swallowed. God, this was when he tried to prove to Isadore he was a functional adult. And then Meggz happened, right on the bad luck cue.

“She was a bit of a pill. Put her out of your head and give me a tour of your park. Paint me a picture of your Light Up Night festival.” Isadore brought their hands up and kissed the back of Sebastian’s hand. The light kiss soothed Sebastian’s nerves and still left him exposed for that other shoe to drop.

“Meggz is one example. I don’t want you to think —”

“Sebastian, don’t worry about her. Focus on us. Let her go. She doesn’t deserve a minute of your attention,” Isadore ordered.

Sebastian blew out air and gave his body a full shake, removing all the negativity Meggz left behind. Isadore was right. She didn’t deserve any of his brain space. Isadore’s composure fed Sebastian’s and gave him the peace of mind he never considered. The sensation was so overwhelming Sebastian could only mutter, “You’re really nice.”

CHAPTER 8

Isadore worried that when Sebastian's cousin flew in with her black attitude, she would ruin his afternoon with Sebastian. And his date had been flowing quite well too. Isadore was right in his assumptions about Sebastian needing space and active listening to open up. He relaxed and smiled easier when Isadore asked him questions without interruption.

Though, when Meggz showed up, his expectations for the afternoon began collapsing. Sebastian's stammer reappeared, and Isadore's terrible habit of interrupting came back in full force. Yes, he'd stepped in to help Sebastian get rid of Meggz, but the actions were still rude as hell, and Sebastian didn't deserve him jumping in and fighting on his behalf.

"I shouldn't have butted in like I did. I don't own your brain. My idea was a suggestion." Isadore backpedalled. Sebastian was quiet and looking at the ground. "Sebastian? Talk to me, please? I have to make sure you're okay. I know your cousin attempted to ruin our date, but we're fine, right?"

"We were getting along so well, and now you're... you're going to realize maybe this was a bad idea. I'm not strong enough to stand up to my family, and you're—I really wanted this date to be perfect."

"It's not over yet. We had a blip. All dates have blips. It's in the rule book," Isadore insisted. Would his joke be enough? He'd do anything to keep Sebastian by his side. "We can sit over there and regroup. Catch our breath. This afternoon is absolutely spectacular."

“Does everyone have rule books?” Sebastian asked before shaking his head. “I don’t want to take more of your day if you have something else to do.”

“You are my grand plan. Learning about you, discovering who Sebastian is behind the librarian persona. Opening myself up for the same scrutiny.” Isadore sat them down on a bench and grabbed both of Sebastian’s hands in his. “This is our moment in the sun. We have no plans other than what we decide. No fuss, no muss, just us.” Isadore rhymed so Sebastian would roll his eyes, which he did and smiled as well. “I want to spend time with you. That’s what we chose, right?”

Sebastian nodded, frowning. “We did. We are going to have the best date. Nothing Meggz did will change our plans.”

“Exactamundo. Good company, good food. Is that a hot chocolate stand? I need a bit of a warmup.” Isadore squeezed Sebastian’s hands once more before slipping to the small booth off to the side of the trail. Odd place for a vendor, but he didn’t mind the distance as Sebastian managed a moment to catch his breath without an audience.

Isadore ground his teeth as he approached the small kiosk. Letting his true feelings out now while he was alone gave him a big sense of relief. Being a part of Sebastian shrinking down to a bare minimum was awful. Meggz deserved a day in the burrow where Isadore’s family lived. She’d then see how real families behaved. Yes, Isadore’s clan wasn’t perfect, but they at least respected one another. Isadore snuck a glance toward Sebastian, who had sprawled on the bench, his long legs sticking out in the path and his head dropped back. He was still there, and he hadn’t moved. So Isadore’s speech had worked somewhat.

The young teen beamed at him as she gave him two cups of hot chocolate and a cookie each. “Thank you so much! All proceeds from these sales will go toward the new cryptid/human relation centre and Light Up Night.”

“Thank you.” Isadore’s mood was bolstered by the sweetness of the donations and the girl’s happy chatter.

Isadore’s smile never wavered as he sat beside Sebastian, who had pulled himself together. “Did you know the hot chocolate is for a charity? I’d never thought of charity food.”

“People really want everyone to succeed. Light Up Night is such a big part of our winter season, and to have everyone’s memories torn because of a nasty event hurts. The festival is our way of taking back the night. Thank you for the treat.” Sebastian’s words were smooth and steady. The tension Isadore didn’t know he had melted away, leaving behind relief and wild joy.

“I was feeling a bit... I needed some sugar. This is a gorgeous park. I can just picture how the lights and decorations will brighten up the area.” Isadore glanced around at the open spaces and the tree-lined paths. The river ran lazily through the park, adding to the ambience.

“Imagine the ground covered with a blanket of snow. Like proper snow, none of this frosty business. I think the ice sprites and river sprites are going to cook something up. It’s going to be so magical.” Sebastian sighed. “This is my most favourite time of year. It’s anticipation and cozy at the same time. Well, that doesn’t make sense, but yeah.” Sebastian’s cheeks darkened as he ran out of steam. Isadore had never been more thrilled at the words coming from Sebastian’s mouth.

“You are so handsome right now,” Isadore murmured.

A pink flush filled Sebastian’s cheeks at Isadore’s compliment.

“You must think me a complete idjit, getting all excited over a silly town festival.” Sebastian ducked his head, which Isadore wouldn’t have.

“Absolutely not. If anything, you’ve become more special.” Keeping his eyes on Sebastian, Isadore angled his head and pressed his lips against Sebastian’s. The effervescence of the kiss caused goose bumps to rise on the back of Isadore’s neck. The sharp intake of Sebastian’s breath echoed, and his posture relaxed. Isadore didn’t expect himself to be enraptured by the moment. Sebastian, while unsure, led Isadore through a merry chase. His innocent kiss set off every desire and urge within Isadore. This was the person he was meant to be with.

Isadore pulled away and blinked in quick succession. What was supposed to be a moment to show Sebastian how special he was had exploded into a kiss beyond anything Isadore had reckoned. “Wow.”

Sebastian was silent, but the confused joy in his eyes spoke a thousand words. He pressed his lips together and hummed.

“So, anyway, when you’re at the café, you’re always on your device. What has you so enthralled?” Isadore scrambled for an innocuous topic. Wouldn’t he love to take Sebastian back to his home and explore more of what had just happened. Isadore realized Sebastian needed more than a quick buzz to get his desires flaring, so a distracting question was required.

“Oh just a game. Nothing interesting,” Sebastian waved off Isadore’s question.

“If you’re hooked, then something has to draw you to it. Tell me more.” Isadore beckoned him. The paths in the parks led them to a small cedar copse. Judging by the lack of frost prints, no one had ventured to this area, making it a good spot to coax Sebastian into opening up. No one would cause him to shrink into himself.

“Well, it’s a massively multiplayer online game where you build farms and villages. Sometimes you raid to get better items for your land.” Sebastian gave him the barest information, but the way his eyes shone as he shared told Isadore a lot. This game

was special to Sebastian.

“I know what you’re talking about. There’s lots of islands that you can decorate to suit your own style. Like right now I’m working on the farm. Trying to match what’s in my head with what they have is hard, but fun at the same time.” Isadore smiled as he discovered the connection between him and Sebastian. The tether would keep them together when the storm of everything else tried to separate them.

“You’ve heard about Last Farm? Really?” Sebastian stared off into the distance in awe. “I’ve never met anyone who liked the same style as me. What’s your favourite part?”

“I like the beach, though I might blame that on how cold it is in the real world. I am not fond of this damp cold. I hadn’t realized Granite had snow and ice as well,” Isadore teased, nudging Sebastian lightly with his elbow.

“This is nothing. Wait til January comes around,” Sebastian said dryly. “Then you’ll understand what a true Canadian winter is like.”

“I don’t need to, thank you.” Isadore marvelled at Sebastian’s relaxed demeanour and teasing. This was what he had been trying to draw out and what Tony refused to see. “What’s your favourite creature?”

“The opal fox. The pearlescent shimmer makes me happy. You?”

Isadore blinked. Sebastian’s answer reminded him of someone else, a person he couldn’t put a pin on. Shaking his head, he gave a random answer, a dragon of sorts, because being the centre of Sebastian’s attention was distracting.

“Oh, one of my internet buddies likes zodiac creatures. He collects a bunch and creates a line of creatures. He probably wants to be a kook.” A small smile appeared.

“Should I be jealous?” Isadore snagged Sebastian’s hand as they approached the river’s edge. The water danced through the rapids, sending a spray of icy water toward them.

“Oh, no way.” Sebastian wiped his face and scowled. “He’s an internet guy. Somehow, I doubt we’d ever meet. I mean?—”

Isadore placed a finger over Sebastian’s lips. Whatever came out of Sebastian’s mouth was going to be an insult about him, and Isadore promised he’d stop him if it was anything terrible.

“Sorry.” Sebastian mumbled against Isadore’s finger. Turning away, he gazed at the river. “When did it get so dark?”

“I’m not sure.” Isadore wrinkled his nose. Losing track of the afternoon wasn’t normal. He had a supernatural sense of time, based on light and the angle of the sun. It was part of his makeup as a gremlin. “I suppose the world is telling us our date is at an end.”

“We don’t have to stop, do we? I mean, we can go find a restaurant and have dinner or a drink.” Sebastian’s cheeks pinked up. “Or not. It’s up to you. I forgot I should probably go home and feed my cat. You’ve been with me for a while, so we can go our separate ways. You have a billion other things to do that are much more?—”

Stopping Sebastian’s flow of words with a kiss could earn him some negative points, but Isadore leaned in. Sebastian wanted to stay with him. He was eager to be with Isadore, and Isadore reacted naturally—by kissing Sebastian and stopping the excuses. Now he savoured the feel of Sebastian’s lips beneath his. The icy cold sensation shocked him as their mingled breath warmed him up. Sebastian remained still as Isadore gentled his kiss. Terrifying the man into submission wasn’t in the playbook. Isadore longed for Sebastian’s wholehearted participation. Joy would be a

bonus.

Caressing Sebastian's cheek with his thumb, Isadore tilted his head slightly and traced the seam of Sebastian's mouth with the tip of his tongue, asking permission to go further. Sighing, Sebastian opened, allowing Isadore to proceed. He kept the kiss light, not wanting to spook Sebastian, pulling back when Sebastian tensed.

Sebastian blinked his eyes behind the wire-framed lenses. Fog blocked Isadore's view, but the owlish look was still present. He was adorable. "Um, uh, that was nice."

"Right? Absolutely perfect." Taking all of the chances, Isadore licked the tip of Sebastian's nose. "This was the best afternoon. You did a wonderful job showing me around."

"But..."

"Your pet. And you should decompress. Sebastian, our day was filled with a lot of ups and downs. I don't want to overwhelm you anymore." Isadore reassured Sebastian as best he could. He understood when people were overstimulated and pushed themselves beyond their limits. Sebastian had a crazy day, and Isadore refused to cause more problems by prodding Sebastian more than necessary.

"Can we do this again?" Sebastian asked almost shyly.

"We will. For sure. First off, we have to come here when the festival is up and running and then I want to do other things with you. I have so many ideas. But we can start off slow and steady, which is always good."

"Whatever you think is best." Sebastian nodded. Isadore was tempted to roll his eyes, but he remained neutral. Sebastian agreed now, but he'd push when he had to. Isadore believed in Sebastian. "Can I walk you home?"

“I’d love it.”

CHAPTER 9

Kazmier: OMG. I have to tell someone.

Crash: Tell what now

Kazmier: So today, I went out in the real world and hung out. It was fantastic.

Crash: Oh, that's cool. Did you have fun?

Kazmier: We did. It was a low-key date. Nothing extravagant, but it made my day, no, weekend.

Crash: I'm so glad for you.

Kazmier: I'm gonna be riding this high forever.

Crash: Yay. But take it easy, alright?

Sebastian shoved his phone in his pocket. This queasy feeling at the bottom of his stomach irritated him. Kazmier having a date was fine. Hell, he had one too. And it wasn't as though Kazmier was his. They chatted through a game and made no other attempts at communicating. Sebastian groaned as he fell over on his couch. Was this normal? Feelings were such a strange concept, and to have such intense ones for two different people was interesting. Sebastian understood that he'd have to choose or make a decision, but for the moment, he sank into the sensation. Someday, he could be the person someone wanted to keep by their side. And in a pipe dream, he had this

idea Kazmier would be the first person he could trust. Because this ephemeral connection he had with Isadore might break. They were still so new, but with Kazmier? Oh, Sebastian dreamed. They'd meet in real life, and if this chemistry was one-sided, well, at least Sebastian would have made a friend. Maybe he could befriend Isadore in the game, and the three of them could chatter. Kazmier would like Isadore. They had the same vibe. Sebastian sighed. He could make it happen.

He was almost at work. Texting and walking at the same time was dangerous. He almost ended up on the road when he last tried. Stop dwelling on the negative. Worry about the day ahead. Sammi would be at the door, eager to hear how his weekend went, and he'd tell her the whole story, even when his cousin attempted to ruin Isadore's opinion of him. Isadore was so amazing when he'd refused to give Meggz any inches. Sebastian wished he had been able to tell Meggz off. And then Isadore had been so cool afterward, getting them a drink. He never flinched or made excuses, which gave Sebastian conflicted feelings. He wanted to be like him, but he hated that Isadore stood up to Meggz.

As he approached the staff entrance, Sammi waited outside the door, her hands stuffed in her coat pockets, bouncing around.

"So how was your date? It must have gone well. You're standing tall and happy."

"I had a good time. A lot better than lunch. Though... for a brief minute, I thought shit was gonna happen. We ran into Meggz," Sebastian shared, anxiety tightening his throat. His shoulders hurt from the tension of waiting for a message or something from his family, complaining about how rude he was.

Sammi's face was dark as a thundercloud as he described with minimal detail about what Meggz said and tried to do. "If I ever run into any of your family, I will kick their asses."

“They stay on their side of town. They’d never even think about coming into the library.” Sebastian laughed as he swiped his fob to enter the library. Sammi’s scowl remained on her face while she hung up her coat and scarf in the staff workroom.

“They don’t deserve you. Anyway, Meggz is just jealous you managed to snag a hottie like Isadore.” Sammi sniffed. “Does she still act like a prostitute?”

Sebastian raised his eyebrow. Meggz always dressed to impress, and her clothes were meant for someone half her age. She tried so hard to be attractive to all men that she often missed the mark.

“Okay, fine. Dumb question.” Sammi popped a pod into the coffeemaker and lounged against the counter. “How are you though? I know seeing even a cousin can be a challenge.”

Sebastian’s mind went blank. The insults and gaslighting would’ve had him flustered for a while after, however, with Isadore’s calm help, he managed to shake off the doubt and fear faster than usual. The resulting sensation was different, but a good different. It was freeing. “I’m fine. Isadore stopped her from being her bitchy self. He was so firm with her.”

“Good. It’s about time someone had your back.” Sammi patted his arm before turning her attention to the patrons entering the library.

The day flew by with queries from patrons and no opportunity to zip out of the library for a snack. No one was sure why the library was busy, but soon enough, five o’clock was there, and Sebastian could go home. His brain buzzed with the interactions from screaming children to older adults needing to fax something. When Isadore popped his head inside the library, Sebastian discovered how quickly his afternoon had disappeared. Isadore’s cheeks were pink and rosy, while his toque covered his pointed ears.

“So I was wondering if I could walk you home?” Isadore leaned on the standing desk and smiled brilliantly at Sebastian. Isadore gave Sebastian a slow glance over, sending a shiver down Sebastian’s spine. Sammi clasped her hands together and swooned. Sebastian blushed at her antics, embarrassed at being caught speechless

“Sure, yes. Let me grab my stuff.” Sebastian led Isadore to the staffroom as he ignored Sammi’s whistles. He refused to meet Isadore’s eyes while Sammi called out her goodbyes. What would Isadore say once he learned they’d been talking about him the whole day? Sebastian wasn’t ready to meet his knowing smile.

Pausing at the touch of Isadore’s hand, he blinked at Isadore, who adjusted Sebastian’s collar and tightened his scarf. “Is Sammi always like that?”

Sebastian’s ears burned at the question. Of course Isadore would ask why Sammi whistled at him. He was a curious fellow, and he had this irritating quality of understanding when the topic was about him. “Most of the time? She likes to cause trouble. She also wanted me to tell you that you’re gorgeous.”

Isadore arched an eyebrow. “Oh, really now? What about you? What’s your opinion?”

Sebastian sucked in air and choked on his spit. Of course, his way of getting back at Sammi would backfire. This was why he never played these games. He was terrible at them. “Yes, maybe? I think so.”

“You’re going with maybe?” Isadore bumped his shoulder against Sebastian’s. “My heart is breaking. It’s lying there, cracking under all that faint praise.”

“Wha—what are you—I didn’t mean—I’m sorry. I mean you are—It’s just—Shit.” Sebastian stopped talking and moving. He hadn’t meant to insult Isadore. Because Isadore was so handsome, especially when he smirked at Sebastian, as he was doing

now.

Isadore cupped Sebastian's head in his hands and tugged down before kissing Sebastian's forehead. "Breathe there, Bas. I'm teasing."

The nickname caused the butterflies in Sebastian's stomach to explode into flight. "You're always so touchy-feely. Why?" The words out of his mouth were snarly and the exact opposite of what he wanted to say.

"Because it connects me to you, and you lean into it every time. Despite your weak protest, I will continue." Isadore pecked Sebastian's lips before cocking his head to the side. "Unless, of course, you are upset. Then I will stop."

"I-uh, I'm not sure," Sebastian stuttered. He cursed his inability to string sentences together. And he was sure Isadore was flirting with him. Clearing his throat, Sebastian tried once more to get his point across. "No. Yes, yes, I do. I do. Maybe? Shit."

"Well, that was clear as mud." Isadore stepped close enough to brush against Sebastian but not stress him out. It was like he understood Sebastian's needs more than Sebastian himself. How could he read him so well? "I'll take that as a win."

"Someone has to." Sebastian sighed. He had to stop being so nervous around Isadore, otherwise Isadore would think he was a loser, and honestly, this was the first time Sebastian hoped that he could get beyond the initial hump. With his apartment coming into sight, Sebastian panicked once more. He'd like to invite Isadore upstairs, but what would they do? What would Isadore expect? Was this an actual date? Did Isadore expect some sort of sex thing? Oh my God, this was why Sebastian never had second or third dates. This lack of clarity would be the death of him. And his indecision or inability to make his own boundaries clear was always a death knell.

“Bas, Bas, you’re worrying way too much.” Gripping Sebastian’s coat, Isadore brushed his cold nose against Sebastian’s, shocking him out of his spiralling thoughts. “This was a walk home. Nothing more, nothing less. This was not a date, and it definitely wasn’t what you humans call a ‘date three.’”

Sebastian paled at the mention of date three. He knew what that was. He’d read books and consumed enough media to understand date three meant sexual congress. “What? Date three? How? I’m not ready for that!”

“And that’s okay, sweet Bas. We’ve had a few shitty beginnings, so I have no assumptions—”

Sebastian inhaled and stepped away from the comfort of Isadore’s heat and closeness. “How could you say that? I accept dating’s hard, and I tried—” He stumbled, fighting to get his thoughts out. Hurt and humiliated didn’t describe how much under the bus he felt at the casual way Isadore threw the words out into the universe.

“Sebastian, I did not say—” Isadore grabbed a hold of the coat’s belt loops to stop Sebastian from leaving. “Listen to me. I did not say that our—”

“Thank you for walking me home.” Sebastian sniffed and fobbed the main door. He slipped inside before Isadore could get over his shock and continue their conversation. Sebastian walked to the elevator, ignoring the vibrating of his phone.

“I wasn’t done.” Isadore pulled his arm and stopped Sebastian from pressing the elevator button.

“How did you get in here?” Sebastian gasped. He thought he could disappear.

“Gremlin, remember? Good with all electronics.” Isadore shook his head and stared at Sebastian, boring a hole through his skull. “Now. Listen.”

Sebastian swallowed and waited for Isadore to explain why continuing their dalliance was a terrible idea. People hated when Sebastian jumped to too many conclusions. Why was Isadore so nice? He should just cut bait and disappear. Sebastian understood when people ghosted him. He could find a new place to have lunch at. The Mothman's Tea Shoppe would be an okay spot. It was a few doors down from the library. But the decor was so delicate, and what if Sebastian brought his bad luck mojo there?

"Sebastian, focus." Sebastian lifted his eyes and met Isadore's stern ones. He didn't think he'd ever seen Isadore unhappy. The expression made his stomach queasy. "Sebastian, whatever you're thinking, stop. Let's sit on this bench and talk like rational people."

"I was being rational."

The glare burnt away all of Sebastian's pithy comments. "Anyway, let's try this again. I wasn't belittling you or saying our miscommunication was your fault. Life happens, and you just tend to get trapped by it. However, going forward, we can do our best to circumvent fate, okay? You with me?"

Sebastian took a deep breath and released the air slowly. "I get you."

"Good. I wasn't insulting you or trying to hurt you." Isadore rubbed the back of Sebastian's hand in a soothing manner. The touch helped clear some of the jumbled mess masquerading as his mind.

"I'm sorry. I was awful. I don't know why I thought such terrible things. I should—"

"Stop. Take a deep breath and relax. Still not insulting you or berating you."

"Right." Sebastian braced himself for the next volley. He could sense the incoming

disappointment.

“So, instead of having our next date be the Light Up night, how ‘bout you plan something you know you’ll enjoy and we do that?” Isadore suggested. “The articles you see online or hear others talking about aren't what you and I want. Those concepts don't fit our beliefs or thought patterns. As a gremlin I get confused with human conceptions. The rules and societal etiquette are baffling. Everything is a dance or mating ritual for a specific set of people. Not everyone is built the same. I vote we do what makes us happy. What gives us joy. So tell me, show me in date form, what gives you the best feeling?”

Sebastian tugged off his toque and crumpled the soft wool in his hands. The silence was deafening, but Isadore’s words required his deepest thoughts, and because of that, Sebastian couldn’t rush into anything. “Can I get back to you?”

Isadore blinked. He tipped his chin up and gave Sebastian a thorough look before nodding. “If you need time to think, I can wait.”

“Really?” Sebastian had expected Isadore to be angry at Sebastian’s choice. His acquiescence was a bit of a shock. He didn’t know how to react or what to say.

“Really. I want this to work too. So I will help you find your path. I’m not going to jump down your throat because you need a minute.” Isadore shuffled closer to Sebastian on the bench and rested his head against Sebastian’s. The touch was featherlight but still gave Sebastian a sensation of permanence.

“That’s pretty decent. I can handle this then.” Sebastian relaxed as a whole new world opened up. Sitting with Isadore with their heads touching was almost intoxicating. No pressure or expectation hung over him. He could be himself and not get in trouble. How was this dream possible?

A phone buzzed, interrupting their quiet time. Isadore jumped a mile before blushing. He pulled the device out of his pocket and stared at the message. “Emergency from Harry. Something happened to his point of sale. So will you text me and tell me what works for you?”

“Of course.” Sebastian wiped a hand across his eyes. The grittiness from the day and emotional whittles from now made them ache. “Sooner rather than later.”

“Exactly. Remember, no pressure. Just us.” Isadore stood and stretched. “Now off to fix Harry’s problem. Gah.”

Sebastian got to his feet and closed his eyes. Now it was make or break. He liked Isadore. He liked the physical affection Isadore doled out. He wanted to be a part of their relationship as well, to show Isadore it wasn’t all one-sided, even if Sebastian was a bit wishy-washy with his words. He touched Isadore’s shoulder and leaned down. The height difference appeared greater now. Isadore’s eyes were as warm as always, and he was ready to tilt his chin up for whatever Sebastian had planned. How he understood Sebastian was a mystery Sebastian hoped he’d never solve. It gave him shivers, good ones.

The soft brush of their lips was a delight. The swirl of joy was just as perfect as the first time Isadore kissed him. Sebastian had always assumed kissing was a hoax made to get people to procreate. Isadore used his skills to allow Sebastian to enjoy the moment. Sebastian was wrong. The feelings were real. The kiss gave Sebastian an effervescent joy. Their kiss together was what they created and sent his soul singing. He pressed harder, feeling the chilled skin, and the dichotomy between heated breath and cool lips caused him to moan. Sebastian winced at the breathiness of his voice. He was meant to be a sophisticated guy, and to make that sound was embarrassing. Somehow though, Isadore sank into his embrace, clutching at Sebastian’s forearms. Was this really happening? Sebastian’s mind spun with confusion and bliss.

Gasping, Sebastian lifted his head and gave himself a quick shake. “I didn’t mean... That was so rude of me.”

“No, don’t be taking away my kiss. I need the memory to sustain me.” Isadore licked his lips and hummed appreciatively. “I knew you had it in you.”

“Really? I liked it, but I thought...” Sebastian stopped. This was what Isadore had meant when he said Sebastian put himself down too often. “You’re a good kisser.”

“Thank you. You are too. Remember, this isn’t a race. There aren’t any rules, so don’t do anything you think I would like because the books say so. I want what your heart longs for.”

Isadore’s fierce assurances hit Sebastian hard. He hadn’t meant to kiss Isadore because of some societal norms or what other people said. But the way Isadore emphasized the words, he understood he’d been following a script, though he still swore fate was blocking him from having a perfect date.

“You’re right. I just... I don’t know what I’m doing. Everything’s been all so unreal.” Sebastian sucked in air and went for broke. This moment called for honesty, and Isadore hadn’t bailed on him yet. “No one has ever done this. With me.”

Isadore swore. “Goddamnit. I have to help Harry, and I don’t want to. I’d love to finish this conversation, Sebastian. Because you deserve goodness and happy memories. I will give them to you... just not now. Fuck.”

Sebastian smiled, though his muscles refused to act natural. “I get it. You’re a good friend. Harry’s lucky to have someone like you in his corner.”

“And you have me too. There’s plenty of me to go around.” Isadore spread his arms out and spun, encompassing the whole apartment lobby. “Don’t ever worry no one’s

got your back. I do and will.”

“I appreciate your kindness,” Sebastian said by rote. He had friends, but they weren’t like Isadore. Sammi would always be there for him, true. But she didn’t... she had her own agenda. He never understood where he stood in her plans, but Isadore was true to his word. “Would you like to go on a date?”

One of the brightest smiles Sebastian had ever seen lit up Isadore’s face. The pale grey of his skin brightened to a silver while his long, pointed ears wiggled happily. “Of course. Send me the deets as soon as you decide. Tell you what. Text me whenever you want. Whenever .”

Dear God, what did Sebastian do? He'd made a date. He'd done the most random thrown-out thing in his life, and he was pretty damn excited.

CHAPTER 10

Kazmier: So tell me about yourself outside this game.

Crash: Why?

Kazmier: Cuz I'm bored and do mass production. Everyone else is so focused on their own stuff.

Crash: I'm not that interesting.

Kazmier: Aww, come on. Talk to me. Talk to me like I'm one of your French people.

Crash: Please don't quote Titanic. You are no Leonardo DiCaprio.

Kazmier: You ruin all my fun. So what's your favourite thing to do? Like outside this game?

Crash: Hang out with my cat. Low-key stuff.

Isadore pondered the screen. The niggling he had earlier about who Crash was had blown up into something more tangible. He needed a bit more proof before he could declare his hypothesis a success. But now, Crash was being cagey, and Isadore didn't like it.

"They need people to help hang up the festive frippery. I suggested you could connect the wireless to the internet. That's what your job is, isn't it?" Tony asked as

he came over to Isadore's table, holding a mug of something steaming that smelled delicious. "Apparently this light show is a big deal."

"They're trying to take back what the bastard demon did a few years ago," Isadore explained. "Are you going to give me the drink or stand there and torture me?"

"Depends on how you answer, of course. What's got you all in a huff? I thought you'd be in a good mood cause you walked your loverboy home."

"You're being an ass," Isadore growled. He made grabby hands for the drink and sniffed the rich, minty scent. Best part of this human world was the new flavours. Never in his burrow would he expect such taste combinations. "I told Adam I'd help them. So you didn't need to ask."

"See, I didn't know that." Tony hovered for a moment before sliding into the seat across from Isadore. "Why are you grumbly? I thought your courtship was going well."

"It has nothing to do with Sebastian. He's fine. I walked him home and at the moment he's planning our date. This is something else." Isadore wrinkled his nose. Sharing anything about what Isadore enjoyed with Tony was useless. He didn't like technology and was up front about certain things. He'd expect Isadore to be the same way.

"I'm not a complete asshole. Talk to me. You used to tell me about your day." Tony leaned forward and laced his fingers together. His posture told Isadore he was willing to listen. Now was not the time to accuse him of being dismissive of Isadore's interests.

"There's this person?—"

“So you’re dangling two people at once. Geez, Izzy, that’s gross?—“

“Dammit, Tony. I am trying to share, like you wanted. And what I was going to say is I have a sneaky suspicion that the online guy and Sebastian might be the same. So what do I do? How do I find out?” Isadore pulled on his hair, trying to keep his frustration level low.

“Oh. Oh, wow. That’s not. Hmm.” Tony scowled in contemplation. “I think if you were to confront either one, then you might hurt them.”

“Right? And I absolutely will not embarrass them. But I don’t want to bait him and make him feel awful that I discovered the truth.” Isadore sighed. “Why is courting humans so damn hard?”

“This is why we don’t play games. Just go back to the burrow and find a mate the traditional way. There’s a bunch of fairies who’d jump at the chance to be with you,” Tony reassured him, which didn’t help because Isadore wanted Sebastian, only Sebastian. He hoped one day Sebastian would overcome his anxiety and be with him as well. Their few interactions together showed Isadore that Sebastian was opening up, becoming comfortable in Isadore’s presence.

“You’re no help. The families back home don’t want to explore this realm. They are content to be trapped inside the icy burrows. They have no desire to see how we’ve adapted. I’m honestly surprised you left with your staid stick-in-the-mud ways.” Isadore poked back. This was not what he wanted to do. He wasn’t supposed to argue with his brother. He promised himself he wouldn’t. “Anyway. That’s where I’m at.”

Tony pursed his lips. “Okay, fine. That’s a shitty situation. The thing I can suggest is to drop massive hints. Be obvious. He might realize what you’re trying to get at. Though, you’d think?—“

“Fucking hell, Anthony.” Isadore stood up, annoyed at his brother and the situation. Obviously, Tony wasn’t going to be of any use, and Isadore was a fool to believe he would offer something positive. “I’m going home. I’ll see you whenever.”

Sitting in his small basement apartment attached to one of the houses purchased for any cryptids to use, Isadore contemplated the video game he supposed Sebastian also played. He didn’t start the game. Chatting with Crash while he was feeling so out of sorts would wash him in unwanted emotions. Isadore was spontaneous, and he had this feeling he’d confront Crash without considering the consequences. He’d already seen what had been done to Sebastian. He’d curl up and become an impenetrable fortress.

Tony was useless as older brothers were. Harry had hearts in his eyes and would want to be around for front row seats. Isadore had a feeling Harry imagined a romantic come-together moment between him and Tony as opposed to what Isadore expected to happen. Gods, he hoped he wasn’t behaving like Harry in regards to him and Sebastian. He had to be more mature about relationships.

Pulling out his phone instead, Isadore opened a text window and shared a library meme with Sebastian. Isadore hoped his gambit paid off. Start subtle and see where everything went.

Sebastian: That’s adorable. And so very true.

Isadore: Right? I thought of you and had to send it. How’s your night going?

Sebastian: Pretty good. I’m just watching some movies at the moment. Trying to figure out what to do for our date.

Isadore: No pressure. Absolutely no pressure. Whatever you decide will be fun. I’ve enjoyed every single one of our outings.

Sebastian: ...

Isadore: Honestly. I enjoyed all of them. You're funny and intriguing. You make me laugh.

Sebastian: So I was considering going to a local hiking trail called Waite's Falls. It's a little challenging, but the view is so worth the hike. That area is one of my most favourite thinking spots.

Isadore: Oh? Tell me more.

Sebastian: This isn't a dumb idea?

Isadore: I really like it. I'd love to see more of you, more locations outside Granite. Everything I've seen is still so... tainted.

Sebastian: I get it. SO many places have been marked by the King in Yellow.

Isadore: I wasn't here until near the end, but his filth still radiates.

Sebastian: I want to apologize for blowing up at you earlier.

Isadore blinked at the screen. The last interaction he had with Sebastian had ended on a positive note. So he thought.

Isadore: What do you mean? We're fine.

Sebastian: Yeah. But I was rude to you and then I kissed you without consent. It wasn't right.

Isadore: Goddamn, man. That kiss was fucking explosive. You can't take it back. I

refuse to let you. I ache for more. Next time I see you, it's gonna be payback to the nth degree.

Isadore cringed. Was he too demanding? Sebastian was a reserved man, and to explain to him how much Isadore wanted to push him against a wall might be a bit much.

Sebastian: Impossible. You don't have to lie to me.

Isadore: I am totally not. Just wait and see.

Sebastian: So the next nice weekend, I can pick you up, and we can go to the trailhead. Is that okay?

Isadore: Tell me the day and I will be there.

Isadore pressed his palms against his eyes, ready to fight the demons surrounding Sebastian. So much was going against him, but Isadore was determined. Sebastian was his future. Nothing was going to change that, not even the man himself.

Sebastian:

The heart emoji spoke of Sebastian's change toward the better since they met. His brief but sincere token of affection gave Isadore strength. He had to stand tall against Sebastian's anxiety.

CHAPTER 11

Crash: I think the date idea was a good one

Kazmier: You never told me what you were going to do. Share with the world, friend.

Crash: No way, I'd jinx it. I can't jinx it. This means too much to me. I want this to succeed so much. Just offer me good vibes and stuff.

Kazmier: Of course, man. I'll send you a cute minion to help out.

Crash: Do not give me one of those ultra rares. They're yours!

Kazmier: You can't stop me. Nothing you say will change my mind. I am sending you all the things because you should have all the good luck. You deserve this. Please?

Crash: The date's going to be fun. I will have the best day of my life.

Kazmier: Go get 'em, tiger.

Sebastian blinked at the small chat window on his iPad. Talking to Kazmier was eerily familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on why. He hadn't wanted to share with Kazmier about his idea because Isadore was still so special to him. Sebastian accepted being outdoors was low on the list of date ideas, so he braced himself for Sammi to roll her eyes. He didn't want to deal with Kazmier's eager nosiness.

Hiking to Waite's Falls was something he did in the summer. The atmosphere was so peaceful that nothing could go wrong. This was why he decided to take Isadore there. His memories from every visit were fond.

Stepping into the library for the day, he was accosted by Sammi as he hung up his coat in the workroom.

"So how did the walk home go? He had a determined alpha expression. So was he?"

"Was he what?" Sebastian recalled Isadore's face, which had been full of worry and concern. Not alpha-y, as Sammi suggested.

"Dominant, alpha to your beta or omega. You know how cryptids are." Sammi bounced on her toes, eager to hear.

"I'm pretty sure the whole alpha society has been debunked." Sebastian tried to duck around Sammi, but she blocked his way with a slight shift of her weight. "Sammi...."

"Sebby. And the alpha thing is all the rage in books. People eat that shit up. Including you. I've seen your holds." Sammi crossed her arms. "Did you kiss? Did he passionately declare his love or matehood?"

"What? NO! Of course not. We talked about our next date and stuff. I said I was going to make a plan." Sebastian didn't mean to share their plans with Sammi. "Where do you get your ideas? They're ridiculous."

"No, they're essential for plot development. I'm dying of curiosity. What does he kiss like? Tell me, Sebby." Sammi hadn't heard what he said, which gave him peace of mind. The mere idea of discussing kisses with her went beyond his comfort level. They were for him and Isadore. Details weren't to be shared, especially not as workplace gossip. But if he didn't offer her a blow-by-blow account, then she'd press

him about what he had planned for the weekend, which was also something special.

"He was like... sparklers and chocolate. Like a good zing followed by smoothness. Shouldn't we go open the branch? I think we need to do work." Sebastian slithered past Sammi and trotted to the circulation desk where Jake was sitting. "Morning, Jake."

"Good morning, Sebastian. I hope you had a good evening." Jake greeted him. Sebastian's boss was always professional and kind.

"I did and you as well?" Sebastian opened the cataloguing program and smiled as Sammi gave him the stink eye. Since Jake was on the computer beside Sebastian, her place for the morning would be on the second floor, far enough away she couldn't bother Sebastian for more information about his date or his kiss.

"See if you can get Sebastian to share with you where he's going on Saturday afternoon," Sammi said as she held on to the bannister leading upstairs.

"Oh? Anywhere interesting?" One of the older patrons, Ms. O'Leary, Sebastian's regular, perked up as she set her bag of returns on the desk. "Tell me more, darling."

"Uh, just for a walk near the river. I imagine the frost would be pretty spectacular this time of year." Sebastian braced himself for comments. To some people, his idea could be considered lame.

"Really? Physical exertion? Are you sure?" Sammi came back down. "Shouldn't you be doing a movie or something? Or better yet, Netflixing and chilling? You know, hands start wandering as you cuddle together under cosy blankets?"

"I don't have Netflix. I use the resources here," Sebastian began.

“Then a movie at home. You don’t need to take me so literally.”

"Sammi, dear. Remember, Sebastian is a gentleman. I don’t think watching Netflix is part of his repertoire. Hiking is a good, inexpensive way to find out more about a person. Though, I’d keep an eye on the weather. I’ve heard a big storm is headed toward us. We don’t want you to get trapped or anything.”

“I’ve been watching the system. So far, so good.” Sebastian smiled. Ms. O’Leary’s general acceptance was a balm for his anxiety. He’d been worried everyone would mock him. “But if the weather does become terrible, I’ll make alternative plans.”

“Good boy. Being prepared is the hallmark of a conscientious person.” Ms. O’Leary patted Sebastian’s arm and toddled off toward the stairs where Sammi still stood. “Come on, dear, let’s pick some good stories for me.”

“Alright, Ms. O’Leary. I have some authors for you to try.” Sammi held her arm out for Ms. O’Leary. Their chatter petered off to quiet whispers as they disappeared upstairs.

Sebastian sighed. He had dodged a small bullet with Sammi. If the day continued to be busy, then he wouldn’t have to deal with more questions about his date. Her mind would have jumped off to other topics, and she’d leave him alone.

The library was—as he hoped—hopping as people prepared themselves for a possibility of a storm. Hiking remained at the forefront of his mind, though Netflix niggled at him as well. The planted doubts sprouted wings as he worried about the icy roads and snowstorms. Maybe Sammi was right. Maybe Isadore would like to spend the afternoon indoors, cuddled together as snow swirled around. His last hour was wasted scowling as he fought with himself. The dreaded third date twisted around his fears of conversation. What did one do if they couldn’t talk? Indulge in some hanky-panky? Well, fuck that as well, because Sebastian didn’t know how to do that either.

God, why did he assume he was a capable person who could participate in romantic dealings?

This was when he'd go online and talk to Kazmier about this stuff, but asking him for dating advice made his stomach unhappy. He didn't want to offend Kazmier or lead him on. When had he become this person that dangled two people on a string? This was not Sebastian. He was nice.

As he left the library, he glanced around the dim corners for Isadore, and sure enough, Isadore was leaning against the stone wall, his foot rested against the brick and his head back. He hadn't noticed Sebastian yet, so Sebastian had a moment when he could study him without worry. His silvery skin shimmered under the exterior pot light. He was a starry person who drew everyone's attention.

When Isadore reacted to Sebastian's presence, his expression lit up. He held out his hand for Sebastian to take. "I hope you don't mind me coming every day. These few minutes where we can chat are my favourite moments."

"No, it's no problem," Sebastian mumbled. Again, words weren't his forte. He wished he could explain to Isadore what being with Isadore meant to him and how any minute with him was what he looked forward to most. Though he stressed he wouldn't be enough for Isadore.

"Awesome. So how was your day?" Isadore offered his elbow, and the gentlemanly gesture was sweet and so unexpected Sebastian's defenses melted away.

"I am trying to organize our date, and I asked for advice from my coworkers, which only stressed me out more," Sebastian admitted. Isadore pressed his arm in commiseration, which set Sebastian off. "It's just they all think they have better ideas, but that's not what I want."

“What you have planned will be a lot better because you’re the one who’s putting thought into it. I trust you to know what the heck will give you the most joy. And I am a firm believer of what makes you happy will make me happy.”

Isadore’s reassuring words soothed some of the spikes of anxiety, which had become jagged after talking to Sammi and his patrons. Of course, Isadore would understand. He’d been there when Sebastian had fallen apart, and he was still ready to catch Sebastian. How had Sebastian managed to catch this awesome guy? His heart swelled with this unthinkable emotion, and he longed to laugh with buoyant joy.

“Well, I hope you enjoy what I have planned, but I don’t expect you to be over the moon.” Sebastian hedged. The sidewalk was a bit slick, so he held tight to Isadore.

“Sebastian...” Isadore’s exasperation echoed through the gloom of evening, but hiking wasn’t everyone’s favourite thing, and Sebastian accepted that. However, he had to show Isadore this side of himself.

“I’m not trying to put myself down. Seriously,” Sebastian insisted. “Physical activities aren’t typical date material from what everyone’s been telling me...”

“I will like it. I promise. Tell me about this date of yours. What’s on the agenda?”

“Hiking?” Sebastian lifted his hands. He hadn’t thought about what to do once they arrived at the trailhead. He knew which trail he wanted to use and the surprise at the end. But he hadn’t expanded beyond Waite’s Falls because of the negative reactions from everyone else.

“Which will be delightful, I imagine. What makes the area so special?” Isadore slowed their walk, his hand lingering on top of Sebastian’s. The soft encouragement was enough to launch Sebastian into sharing the many inspiring details about Waite’s Falls.

As they approached Sebastian's apartment building, he realized he had been leading the conversation. Isadore had been attentive, and for the first time, he'd been comfortable chatting. Was it possible this was one of those changes he'd heard about? Maybe he wasn't as cursed as he thought.

That right there was the biggest epiphany he'd ever been hit with.

"You have this look on your face. Share." Isadore pulled them to stop and tipped his head to the side.

"You're a really great guy." The words were less than what Sebastian wanted to say, but he was overcome with disbelief. "You let me talk."

"Yeah, and? I like listening to you chat, and what you said fascinated me."

"It's just... people never mean that when they spend time with me."

"I was going to say something trite about hanging out with the wrong crowd, but that's not what I mean. You've made me so curious to know what the Falls looks like. You've described it beautifully." Isadore smiled.

"I'm thrilled you want to see it as well." Sebastian relaxed.

He was good, and this was good. Finally, things might be looking up.

CHAPTER 12

Isadore hadn't realized how out of sorts Sebastian had been or how much he'd been holding himself back until Isadore asked him about their date. The man blossomed before his eyes. A fountain of joy and knowledge exploded before him.

What had happened to Sebastian that a simple question or listening ear lit him up? He thought he could be mischievous and tease Sebastian about their outing, but seeing Sebastian expound on his choice changed his mind. Isadore would do whatever he could to keep Sebastian animated.

"I am so excited to do this with you. We're gonna have the best day ever." Isadore pushed up on his toes and brushed his lips against Sebastian's soft ones. His quick intake of air gave Isadore the boost he needed. "You are so fucking sweet, I can't even."

"Oh, stop." Sebastian huffed before glancing at the apartment door. Isadore had discovered this tic whenever Sebastian became too overwhelmed. He began looking for a way out of a situation. Isadore hoped Sebastian would become comfortable enough with him that escape would be the furthest from his mind. Sebastian's trust would come with time, but Isadore was impatient.

"Never!" Isadore looped his arms around Sebastian's neck and kicked his leg out. "If I can get you to smile or talk with me, I will do whatever I need to continue seeing your happy face."

"You're so odd." Sebastian kissed him on the mouth before stepping backward near

the building. Isadore remained as still as possible, thrilled to have received a bit of affection from Sebastian. He didn't know what prompted Sebastian to kiss him, but he wasn't going to question it either. "I have a cat."

"And he needs to be fed. I get it." Isadore sighed. Keeping himself from Sebastian was hard, but this was Sebastian's show, and he'd already made the move to retreat. "I will see you tomorrow then."

"You don't have to do that."

"Yes, Sebastian. Best part of my day is seeing you light up, and I will walk you home again. I will continue to do so until it becomes second nature. And even then..."

"If you have other things to do, you don't have to." Sebastian waved Isadore off.

"Uh huh. Listen to me, Sebastian. Get this through your head. I like you. I want to hang out with you. So you're stuck with me. Unless something terrible happens, I will be waiting for you outside the library or I will let you know."

Isadore hoped this continued push and pull would stop. The prickles surrounding Sebastian were fading. Only once in a while did Sebastian's instinct to protect himself come to the fore.

"Oh."

"Being with you is so important to me." Isadore shoved his hands in his pockets and spun around. He itched to say goodbye, but the last word had to have weight. Sebastian had to understand what an impact he had on Isadore's life.

The small interactions with Sebastian gave Isadore peace as he walked Sebastian to his apartment building. Each time, something changed. Either Sebastian became more

open or at ease. He lit up the second he saw Isadore outside the library. The smiles weren't fake or tight any more. Isadore cheered at every nuance of Sebastian's expressions.

When Isadore found himself standing behind Sebastian in the café, his thoughts shifted. He was in a special sort of hell as Sebastian had taken his toque off in the warmth of the café, leaving his hair sticking up in odd ways. His shoulders were relaxed as he stood tall, opposed to when Isadore first met him where Sebastian did his best to hide within his body. Isadore was proud to see Sebastian wasn't as closed off as he had been. He wasn't defending himself against the world.

Devilishness had its way with Isadore, and he stepped into Sebastian's space, grasping his slim hips beneath the fall jacket. Sebastian jumped at the sudden touch, and an almost fearful noise erupted from his throat. Sebastian tipped his head to the left as though peeking to see who had done what.

"Hi, Bas." Isadore had decided using a shortened version of Sebastian's name gave him a bit of ownership. Something only Isadore could claim, especially when Sebastian released a happy sigh.

"Oh, hi, good morning? I didn't expect to see you so early." Sebastian relaxed into Isadore's hold. "Would you like me to buy you a coffee?"

Isadore squeezed Sebastian's hips lightly before releasing him. The warmth of his skin and the subtle melting was more than Isadore could handle. Too bad he had to meet a client within the next half hour. Gods, the things he longed to do.

"It's a surprise to me too." Isadore shuffled up beside Sebastian and subtly stepped into Sebastian's personal space. Any other day, Sebastian would shift away, but today he leaned in, which Isadore claimed as a win. "Adam wants to talk to me before he forgets why he asked me to see him. So I have to hurry up, and now you're here and,

well, oops?”

“This place does have the ability to pause everyone.” Sebastian had this way of looking at Isadore as though he held the secrets and knowledge of everything. The pressure to be that person wasn’t as heavy as Isadore thought.

“I’m trying not to give in and sit, but you know how it is. Life... really hot guys, and the smell of fresh baked food.”

Sebastian snorted and shook his head. But he didn’t deny any of Isadore’s claims as he might have before. This was progress, and Isadore wasn’t going to push Sebastian any further. “It’s my turn to buy coffee for the staff.”

“Aww, what a wonderful tradition. I’ll leave you to it, then. See you later.” Isadore squeezed Sebastian’s arm and stepped back, allowing him to place his order with the counter staff.

“Bye, Isadore.” Sebastian speaking his name was bliss. He was going to savour the moment forever or until Sebastian said it while Isadore was giving him a reason to shout. However, Isadore wasn’t going to jump the gun.

Isadore smiled at Trish as he stepped up to the counter. He asked for his coffee and Adam’s and blatantly stared at Sebastian as he exited the restaurant. His long legs ate up the ground as he slid through the line without jostling the tray of coffee.

“I see Sebastian is starting to relax in your presence now. He’s less twitchy whenever he’s in here,” Trish said. “You’re not gonna hurt him, are you?”

“Of course not! Why would you try to jinx me? He’s my lodestar. I might not have realized before, but he has to be why I was drawn here. I had no reason to leave my burrow, but the minute I saw him, I knew.” Isadore swung his arm around,

encompassing the café, and Trish blinked her cat-like eyes. This was the problem with hanging around cryptids. They had no compunction of diving right into the problem at hand. “I am not going to hurt him.”

“You make sure you don't. He's one of the few humans who didn't give a rats' ass when we first descended on the town. He and his pallies at the library opened the door for us in a big way. So...” Trish flashed her sharp incisors before smiling at Isadore.

“Fine. I promise.” Isadore took his tray full of coffee and flounced out. Sebastian had people backing him up, but man, why was Isadore considered the bad guy?

Isadore kept his texts to Sebastian lighthearted and sweet. He didn't push any boundaries. But as the days passed and the big outing to Waite's Falls drew closer, Sebastian grew increasingly more succinct and less engaged. When Isadore walked him home, Sebastian was a bundle of nerves and prone to injury. If Isadore had known how much of a stressor this was, he would've never suggested or allowed Sebastian to plan their date. He had hoped the day would be fun and chill, allowing Sebastian to blossom.

The night before their hike, Isadore slid into Tony's office and spun around on the office chair. As much as Isadore hated asking Tony for advice about Sebastian, this was important enough for him to try. Again.

“So what do I do? Even his texts are starting to be unresponsive.” Isadore dropped his head back and stared at the tile ceiling. Tony lounged on his chair, relaxing for once.

“You see him every day. Have you asked him? Specifically? Instead of texting? Normal people are fond of using their voices.”

“I don't want to interrogate him! He says the right things, and he agrees so politely. I

try to draw shit out, but he's like a wall. I've told him it's not necessary to go all out, but he looks at me with these doe eyes, and I can't. I just can't."

"And you like this guy?" Tony's skepticism rankled. It wasn't as though Sebastian was a deer all the time. Some evenings, Sebastian could chatter the whole way home... as long as Isadore didn't bring up certain topics.

"It's more than that. He's better and sweeter. Just so very skittish. I realize a date can be a big deal. I'm so..." Isadore shook his head.

"Grow up then. You sound as though you understand the problem. So do something. Help Sebastian through his barriers. Don't complain about it. You're only causing bigger issues. Which is the exact opposite of what you want. I've seen you together, and as much as it disgusts me to say, he looks like he's really into you as well. You need to get over your own perceptions."

"I hate you." Isadore scowled. Sometimes Tony was right, and Isadore wasn't. Stupid, frustrating brothers who were insightful.

"Yeah, well. I'm your brother." Tony made shooing motions with his hands. "Now go somewhere else. I don't need your sad frowns ruining my night."

"Fine. Tomorrow is gonna be a good day. It has to be."

The sun was bright, and the air was crisp when Isadore dashed out of his home. Sebastian's dark car sat at the curb, idling. Making sure his braid was fastened first, Isadore slid into the passenger seat and kissed Sebastian hello. A soft pink brightened Sebastian's cheeks, but he didn't complain or jerk back. Progress had been made.

"Where's your hat?" The words were strangled as Sebastian fumbled with a takeout cup before passing it to Isadore.

“In my pocket, along with my mitts and scarf,” Isadore assured Sebastian. “I have your list of suggested items in my wallet as well. Good morning, Sebastian.”

“Oh, right. Morning, Isadore. Did you sleep okay?” Sebastian turned to peek at Isadore. A furrow of determination had settled on his brow, but he was at ease as he shifted the car into drive. He handled the frosty roads with confidence. “I’m looking forward to this hike. You should really enjoy it too.”

“Well, I guarantee I will. I’m hanging out with you in an area in which you thrive. No one should bother us, so all in all, pretty amazing plans.”

“It’s just—I don’t want—I think...I’m hoping you won’t think I’m a loser,” Sebastian stammered. He tightened his hold on the steering wheel and glared out the glass.

“Sebastian, sweets, I will have fun today because you will. We send out the aura we wish to receive. Don’t try to censor or contain yourself because of me. I want your thoughts to be unfiltered, and I won’t get upset.” Isadore wished he could do more to ease Sebastian’s nerves. However, time was the only healer at this point. “I brought everything you told me to, including a water bottle and extra snacks.”

“If there’s any moment when you’re bored, tell me. I’ve done this hike so often that it’s another day for me.” Sebastian glanced at Isadore before returning his attention to the road. His knuckles were white with tension.

“Bas, darling. We’ll be fine. Just take a breath and let out all the nerves. Nothing can go wrong.” Isadore settled in his seat and allowed Sebastian to chauffeur them to the trailhead.

Once parked, Isadore studied his companion with a critical eye. Sebastian wore a thick toque hiding his beautiful hair, and his coat was rated for below zero weather. The fabric was waterproof while the waistband cinched close to his body. No way

was cold air going up his torso. Sebastian's boots were thick-soled and covered his calf. He was ready to kick ass. Isadore swooned at how hot Sebastian was. If only Sebastian could see himself.

Sebastian took long strides toward Isadore and fussed with his jacket and toque, making sure all of Isadore's sensitive bits were covered. Isadore grinned as Sebastian pulled the zipper under his chin. Leaning forward, Isadore pressed a light kiss on Sebastian's surprised mouth. "You are so fucking sexy right now, taking care of me like this."

Blinking, Sebastian gazed into Isadore's eyes. "You're so odd."

Isadore grinned before kissing Sebastian once more. He was like coffee and mint, both tasty and addictive. Isadore meant to keep the kiss light, but he didn't count on Sebastian sinking into the embrace, holding tight to Isadore's lapels. The touch of lips exploded into feelings of lust and need. Pulling away from his soft lips was one of the hardest choices Isadore had to make, and hellfire, he wished Sebastian didn't look so sad. "Dammit, Bas, I was trying to reassure you, not fucking bang you."

Sebastian tipped his head to the side and licked his lips. Again, Isadore wished they weren't at the beginning of Sebastian's epic hike. He ached to wreck that mouth in ways that were illegal in thirty dimensions. "Thank you? I think?"

"One day, you're not going to stutter or stammer when I suggest such dubious activities." Isadore brushed a gloved thumb over Sebastian's full lower lip. "Then again, maybe that's not terrible. Anyhoo, allons-y, Alonso."

"You like the Doctor?" Sebastian led them to the trailhead, their steps crushing the dusting of snow on the path.

"I do. Harry introduced the show to me when I first arrived in Granite. He started me

on the Chris Eccleston years, and I confess, he's my favourite." Isadore walked through the trailhead gate into what appeared to be a winter wonderland. All the trees were frost-covered, while each branch had a smattering of snow. A hushed feeling filtered through the forest as though they were the only creatures alive. Isadore was in awe of the eerily beautiful location.

The tension in Sebastian's posture disappeared as they began their walk. His chatter, stiff and broken, changed to a more natural tone as they ventured deeper. His enthusiasm grew by leaps and bounds as he showed Isadore various tree types and sneaky squirrels. This was the Sebastian Isadore ached to discover. To see him so delighted with the world was addictive. Isadore was having the time of his life.

Abruptly, Sebastian paused in the middle of the woods. No noise could be heard but the distant trickle of water. With a determined frown, he grasped Isadore's chin in a gentle grip. His thumb swept across Isadore's cheekbone as he kissed Isadore in what had to be the most adoring yet innocent bit of affection he'd ever been blessed to receive. His eyelids fluttered shut, and Isadore followed as Sebastian led them from a sweet and chaste kiss to a passionate embrace. Holding tight to Sebastian's arms, Isadore—not content to follow—took control and licked the seam of Sebastian's mouth until a soft gasp broke the stillness, and he allowed Isadore in. Isadore traced the inside of Sebastian's mouth, teasing him with light touches. Sebastian relaxed, inviting Isadore to lead. He licked the damp lower lip before nipping it.

Isadore tightened his hands along the waistband of Sebastian's coat and wished he could feel the soft skin of Sebastian's side. Pulling back, Isadore grinned at the evidence of a very good kiss. Sebastian was flush with desire, his lips puffy, and his eyes were dilated and hazy from lust. "The expression on your face is worth everything. I can handle freezing balls if you kiss me like that again."

"Okay, sure?" Sebastian smacked his lips and stood frozen in the middle of the path. His confusion was adorable, but the air wasn't getting any warmer. Isadore waited for

a few minutes for Sebastian's brain to kickstart before prodding him into continuing their hike. This was the absolute perfect morning. If nothing else happened, he'd received a fantastic kiss from his shy Sebastian.

"So, tell me about these falls. Why did you have to coerce me into seeing them?" Isadore asked as he grabbed Sebastian's hand and swung it gently. The cold air had a wonderful dousing effect on his painful dick. Clothes were going to stay on as long as they were outside.

"I didn't coerce you." Sebastian sighed. "I don't have the words to explain what they mean to me. The majesty of them is second to none in our small area. You don't expect a waterfall without being so close to the escarpment. So, it's a fun geographical anomaly."

Isadore basked in Sebastian's lecture on the waterfall. This was the reason why he went on a hike in December. Sebastian's enthusiasm was infectious, and Isadore could listen to him all day. Tugging Sebastian to a stop, he stepped close and kissed him once more. The surprised "oof" was pleasing to Isadore's ears. "You are fucking adorable."

"Thank you. We're almost there." Sebastian touched his lips with a reverence before spinning around and pushing onward.

"I can hear the roar. I have to say this has been amazing." Isadore allowed Sebastian to continue to lead them toward the noisy water. It gave him the opportunity to stare at Sebastian's ass without him becoming embarrassed or self-conscious. Courting Sebastian was a challenge, but Isadore wouldn't change anything for the world. So what if he wanted nothing more to take him and ravish him with no thought or consideration? Sebastian would be okay with Isadore's actions, however, he wouldn't be enthusiastic, and that, in the end, was Isadore's goal.

“I’ve had a really good time too.” Sebastian bumped shoulders with Isadore. Each unbidden touch was a godsend to Isadore.

“Let’s continue on before things become more stilted and awkward.” Isadore nudged Sebastian in the direction of the hike, hoping the joke would land as he meant it.

“I’m already there,” Sebastian muttered. Isadore shimmied in a quick victory dance. Had Sebastian’s real voice found its footing?

“Anyway, on with the day. We’ve got people to do and places to go.” Isadore took a glance at the sky and grimaced. Dark clouds were rolling in, adding a bit of a damper bite to the air.

“What was that? I didn’t catch what you said.” Sebastian spun around, pushing Isadore toward the snowy bushes.

“Nothing! Just a silly rhyme, like we’ve got things to do or whatever.”

“Nah, it wasn’t that. It was... it was...” Sebastian huffed before starting up again. His feet were steady on the slick ground. If anyone was a cryptid, Sebastian was with his practical prancing along the trail. “I can handle snide comments, you know. If you said something sarcastic or worse. I’m not fragile.”

“Sebastian, I would never insult you on purpose. My comments might be unruly, a bit uncouth, and possibly a bit untoward, but never cruel.” Sebastian’s sensitivity toward words was a challenge, and Isadore did his best not to poke the bruises left by previous friends. As much as he was a sarcastic fiend, he’d never turn his harsh tongue on Sebastian. “I might have been a bit coarse.”

“Promise?” Sebastian held out a hand with his finger up. Isadore studied the finger before imitating the gesture, unsure of the meaning but hooking his own pinkie with

Sebastian's.

“Always and forever, sweets. Can we move? I’ve started losing feeling in one of my favourite body parts.” Isadore bounced on his toes, trying to stay warm. The day had started out nice, but now it was like an ice cloud descended, stealing the bright sun and warmth.

“Isadore! You could have said something.” Sebastian rolled his eyes and led them deeper within the woods. Rocky outcrops replaced the bushes as pines tried vainly to grow with little dirt. The distant roar of water became louder. He was intrigued and a bit unnerved. The sound was scary, but there was no way Sebastian would lead him to a dangerous location. Though Sebastian was a safety-conscious person, Isadore hoped he could throw some caution to the wind. Isadore liked the challenge of the unknown.

CHAPTER 13

Crash: Kaz? I need to talk. I think I did something and now I can't take it back.

Crash: Kaz? It's been a few days. Are you okay?

Crash: ...

Sebastian led the way through the snow-muffled woods. Occasionally, a dusting of snow fell from the trees onto their heads. The shock of sudden cold added to the atmosphere. As the tension from the work week and fear of Isadore's opinion unravelled, the knots in his back dissipated. His breathing evened out with every step, and he could lift his head to the sky and take a deep, clearing breath. Their conversation dwindled until all he heard was chattering chickadees and angry squirrels. Every once in a while, Sebastian cautioned Isadore about a slippery rock. Any other person would get annoyed, but not Isadore. He thanked Sebastian as he followed Sebastian's suggestions. Isadore's acceptance of Sebastian's warnings opened Sebastian's eyes to the dangers of toxic friends and family. God, when had he become such a doormat? Things had to change, and it appeared Isadore would be with him every step of his journey.

Pausing at the bottom of an incline, Sebastian cocked his head to smile at the sound of water. Soon, they'd be at his favourite spot. "The falls are up this way, a few more minutes. It's going to be a bit slick as you go up, so watch your step."

"I can see the incline, Sebastian. You don't need to tell me every time," Isadore snapped. Sebastian flushed with embarrassment. He struggled to nod and try to get

over the rock and roots. However, Isadore caught his hand and stopped his ascent. “I like you taking care of me. It’s sweet and adorable. I’m just... well, I’m enjoying our path to something more.”

Sebastian kept his mouth closed and agreed with Isadore. Isadore had growled at him. Of course, he was annoying. Isadore had the grace to smile it off and not tell Sebastian. He’d keep his warnings to himself. Isadore was a grown man. He could navigate the climb as well as Sebastian. All Sebastian had to do was place his feet carefully and pray that Isadore would copy him.

Waite’s Falls roared louder with every step. Sebastian itched to run and take in the sight. Seeing the water always restored his equilibrium, and today’s hike was supposed to be his answer. He loved the rush and sweeping away of his emotions. This was nature. This was perfect. Stepping on to the first flat surface, he approached the viewing platform to soak in the view of the ice-covered water. Isadore lumbered behind him, his breathing uneven from the unfamiliar terrain.

“Dude, you have the energy of a rabbit. How the hell did you get up here so fast?” Isadore bent over, his hands on his knees as he caught his breath. Straightening up, he flung his head back, his toque falling to the ground. Strands of hair escaped his braid and framed his face beautifully. Sebastian swallowed hard and crossed an arm across his body, unsure of himself and even Isadore. “This is amazing. Thank you for sharing.”

Sebastian led him to the viewing platform and leaned against the railing, basking in the icy mist. Isadore snuggled in and slid his arm through Sebastian’s, holding him close. Was this a moment? Could Sebastian rest on Isadore and not get yelled at? Taking a chance, he laid his head against Isadore’s and relaxed. The power of the water, the significance of being here with Isadore, and nature in general erased the anxiety building up and turned off the noise. Standing with Isadore beside him and listening to the sighs, Sebastian accepted he was just as comforting to Isadore as

Isadore was to him. When people threw out insults in the past, their words had nothing to do with him but everything to do with them. People enjoyed his presence. They wanted to be with him, and they accepted his quirks.

Isadore dropped his arm and wrestled with his pockets, his face contorting with puzzlement and confusion. After a minute of worry, Isadore whipped out his phone. With a waggle of his eyebrows, he pulled Sebastian close, nipping his ear, and when Sebastian turned his head in admonishment, he stole a kiss. The shutter of the camera clicked as their lips met. Grinning at his deviousness, Isadore pressed another kiss near the edge of Sebastian's toque. "A perfect picture for our perfect day."

"You're so odd," Sebastian grumbled, tugging his hat over his ears. Sebastian brushed the frost off the guardrail and crossed his arms, trying to hide his embarrassed pleasure.

"I think you're irresistible and sweet." Isadore stepped close behind Sebastian and rested his chin on his shoulder. "You underestimate how kind and good you are."

"As you might have noticed, I am resistible. Other people have managed to be repelled by my charms quite well." Sebastian grouched as he stared at the icy falls. The mist gathered, causing a chill to settle over them. Shivering, he curled his shoulders in, bringing Isadore closer to him.

Isadore hissed at Sebastian's movements. "Okay, darling, unless you want to get more closely acquainted, you gotta stop moving."

"Why?" Sebastian turned to face Isadore and gasped as his front grazed Isadore's. "Oh. Oh! "

"Exactly. You turn me on." Isadore pulled Sebastian tighter into his embrace and stared hard into his eyes. The cool grey of his skin highlighted the green flecks in his

eyes, drawing Sebastian in. “Those people who tossed you aside knew you were waiting for me to find you and tell you, you’re perfect just as you are.”

“Oh, come on.” Sebastian tried to pull off sarcasm, but a catch in his throat caught him by surprise. He gazed at the foamy icy pool and blew out the air. “You...you made my day. Thank you.”

“Thank you for sharing your favourite spot with me.” Isadore rested his head against Sebastian’s and sighed. They watched the mesmerizing view until their toes turned to blocks of ice and their stomachs began to growl.

“I brought some snacks, like a light lunch. If you want some?”

“My excellently prepared hero.” Isadore patted Sebastian’s ass, shocking Sebastian with his familiarity, before sitting at the slick bench on the opposite side of the viewing platform. Sebastian grimaced at the damp before pulling out a fluffy towel from his pack and wiping the seat down. Isadore peered at the loaded pack with interest. “What tasty treats will sate our hunger?”

“Well, I packed something that travelled well. It’s just plain, boring—You know what? We don’t have to eat this crap. I’m sure there’s something—”

Isadore leaned forward and pressed his mouth against Sebastian’s flow of doubts. The kiss should have been a warning. Isadore seemed to always understand when a kiss worked and when to let Sebastian speak. The pause helped reset his thoughts and calm him down.

Sebastian sighed as he dropped his head against Isadore’s. “How are you that good?”

“I’m not. I’m waiting for you to slap some sense into me when I steal your kisses. However, I have noticed that when I kiss you, you calm down. So, it’s my little dose

of medicine.” Isadore brushed a kiss on Sebastian’s forehead before clearing his throat and leaning back. “Want to try again?”

“I brought some peanut butter and jam sandwiches. They’re easy and tasty on a hike. I think they really hit the spot.” Sebastian discreetly wiped his eyes and peered into his backpack once more. A container with homemade cookies rattled at the bottom. “I also baked some cookies? I know they won’t–”

“Sebastian.” Isadore’s gentle reprimand had Sebastian taking another deep breath.

“My cookies won at the fair. I hope you like them.” Sebastian tried again, adding the small humble brag as a consolation for Isadore.

“I will. I love ginger cookies.” Isadore opened the lid and moaned happily. “I’m also not without gifts. I did remember you said you had some snacks prepared, but I thought I’d bring the beverages.”

Sebastian smiled at Isadore as Isadore pulled out a large insulated thermos. Isadore waved his prize. “I have water.”

Isadore poured out Sebastian’s hot chocolate in the thermos lid and passed it to Sebastian. The small picnic hit the spot as they munched on the treats. The anxiety that had begun building while Sebastian was distracted disappeared, and he enjoyed the moment with Isadore.

“I’m so glad I brought you here with me.” Sebastian gazed at the waterfall and sighed in contentment.

“Right? You have the best ideas.” Isadore slid over on the bench and weaved his arm through Sebastian’s. He kissed Sebastian’s jaw before resting his head against Sebastian’s shoulder.

“Thank you for indulging me,” Sebastian mumbled. This was way better than Netflixing and chilling.

“Hey.” Isadore turned Sebastian to face him and arched his eyebrow. “No badmouthing my friend. He’s a little insecure, but he just needs support from the right people. Like me.”

“Fine.” Sebastian rolled his eyes and oomphed as Isadore kissed him hard. The embrace was more aggressive than normal, and all Sebastian could do was sit there and accept it. Isadore speared his fingers under the knit toque to keep Sebastian in place as he tenderly ravaged his mouth. Isadore gentled his hold as it became evident Sebastian was a willing participant.

Isadore groaned as he caressed Sebastian’s cheek, sweeping his tongue inside and tangling his with Sebastian’s. The taste of strawberries and ginger enhanced the kiss, and Sebastian tentatively licked back, curious about the flavour of Isadore. Isadore sighed and snuggled closer to Sebastian on the bench. His hands fumbled with the zipper on Sebastian’s coat, drawing it down and giving him access to more. “Dammit, Sebastian.”

Sebastian dove into the moment, lacing his fingers through Isadore’s hair, pulling the strands out of the tight braid. Every emotion Sebastian had never felt before was striking him as bolts of lightning and desire. This was what he’d missed out on. This connection with another person had never formed, not like this. What Isadore shared with him was what he longed to give Isadore. Desire, adoration, and love entwined with one another as he opened up his heart to this kiss.

“Isa, Isa. What do I do?”

“Shh, go with it, sweet Bas. I’ll catch you.” Isadore slid his hand to Sebastian’s lower back and caressed the heated skin with cool fingers. He kissed Sebastian fiercely as

he explored the goose bumps along the edge of Sebastian's pants. "By the stars. Not the place for this."

Sebastian gasped as Isadore pulled away. His glasses were foggy and frosty as he stared up at the darkening sky. "Right. You're right."

"We will return to this at a safer location, with all the romantic bits and bobs, I promise." Isadore put Sebastian back to sorts before falling on the damp bench. "My toes aren't cold anymore."

"That's... that's always a good thing." Sebastian pressed his lips together, tasting Isadore and wishing he was brave enough to attempt sex at the waterfall.

"Right? I thought so." Isadore covered his face. "I'm gonna need a minute before I can stand. You got me all fired up, and I'm exhausted."

"Are you okay?" Sebastian slid over and examined Isadore while trying to figure out what he needed in case Isadore was unwell. He gave Isadore a once-over and blushed at the large bulge at his crotch. "Oh. I... I didn't think. I'm sorry."

Isadore rolled into a sitting position and pulled Sebastian in for a hug. "Don't apologize. You're good. How do you feel?"

Sebastian took mental stock. The hot emotions were zinging everywhere. And his own dick was mostly hard, which was unusual and wonderful. "Like a million bucks, but ready and shit. It's weird."

"Hmm, sounds like a perfect feeling. Hold on to it so when we get home you can show me in great detail what you mean." Isadore tidied up their garbage and drinks before stuffing them in Sebastian's pack. "Let's get on with part two of our date."

“Part two? I didn’t plan anything else.” Sebastian tugged his hat on and did the same to Isadore, making sure his pointed ears were covered. “I just had the hike on the agenda.”

“Part two is where I excel,” Isadore stated. “Come on. I’m eager.”

Once they were sure they had cleaned everything up, Sebastian led them to the trail. “The walk back will be tricky, so be careful.”

“Yes, boss. I’ll watch my every step and your delightful ass,” Isadore teased. Sebastian rolled his eyes as he held onto a young tree for support. A quick intake of air had Sebastian spinning around. Isadore was clutching a tree. “Sorry. Didn’t see the root. I’m good.”

“Okay, going down is worse than going up.” Sebastian placed each foot, his mind focused solely on the flat trail just ahead. He smiled in relief as he stepped on the path. He turned around to watch Isadore take miniscule steps down. “You’re almost set.”

“I deserve a victory kiss for this, you know—fuck.” Isadore’s left foot shot out as it slipped on a protruding rock. Sebastian ran toward Isadore, hoping to catch him before he fell, but he wasn’t quick enough. Isadore hit the ground hard, cracking his head against a small stump. He slid down the trail, his leg bent at an impossible angle. Fear gripped Sebastian. He regretted even thinking about heart attacks earlier. Had he manifested Isadore’s trip? No. Right now, he had to focus on stopping Isadore. Watching him fall while unable to do anything horrified Sebastian.

“Isadore, grab something! Anything!” Sebastian yelled as he dropped to the ground near Isadore to stop the fast slide. He slipped on the ice, smashing his chin on a rock. A sickening sound of bones breaking filled air as Isadore crashed into Sebastian. “Isadore?”

His body went into automatic motion as the rules of first aid filled his head. Every moment was dire as Sebastian confirmed Isadore was breathing, and he was warm. He pulled out his first aid kit and stared at the bandages and whistles. Everything was white, and Sebastian couldn't remember what the first rule of helping someone was. "Isa? How're you doing?"

"Hurts. It hurts so fucking much." The whisper was just a breath of air. Sebastian froze before jumping into action. He had to be the hero. Isadore needed him to be steady. Sebastian pulled Isadore out of the way and covered him up with his coat. His leg was definitely broken. Sebastian's mind went blank. All his First Aid courses disappeared from his memory banks. "Bas, I can't move my leg."

"I know, I know. I'm trying to remember what I'm supposed to check."

Sebastian peered into Isadore's eyes and bit his lip. Isadore was going into shock. His beautiful eyes were glazing over. Oh, God, what was that acronym again? Airway Breath C-? No. Not necessary. Isadore was breathing. Sebastian swallowed before trying again. Keep him awake? "Hey, you can't pass out. I need you here with me. I gotta call 911."

"Human doctors aren't going to be able to help me, Bas. You have to phone the lord. Lord... Typhon. He's our protector in this land. You have to get him." Isadore opened his eyes and glared hard at Sebastian. "He knows what to do."

"But I haven't met him!" Sebastian wailed. He scrambled for his phone and searched his contacts for anyone who could help. When Isadore said no humans, everything within him crashed to the ground. He didn't know anything but the human way. How was he going to fix this? Scrolling through his phone, he landed on a name and number he hadn't called in years. Guilt ate at him as he stared at the familiar icon. Shaking his head, Sebastian pressed the contact and braced himself for a firm denial. "Hello, Dare?"

“Yes?”

“This is Sebastian, and I have a problem.” Sebastian laid out everything that happened with short, choppy sentences. His eyes remained glued on Isadore. When Isadore gasped, Sebastian panicked and almost threw the phone away, despite Darius still talking to him.

“Sebastian, I’m sending Bale, my mate, to you, okay? Say yes if you’re listening.” Bale was a winged demon with fierce features. He was tall and scowly. He'd absolutely terrified Sebastian when he first saw him. “Sebastian!”

“Yes. Bale will meet me. He’ll look after Isadore. But what happens after?” Sebastian reached out a hand to hold Isadore and yipped as Isadore gripped it hard.

“You will stay by my side, and you will not think this is your fault,” Isadore spat out with gritted teeth.

“Exactly what he said. I know you, Sebastian. We might have stopped talking, but you’re you, and you are going to blame yourself, so listen to the man and accept that it was an accident,” Darius ordered. Sebastian swallowed and nodded, despite Darius being not able to see him. Darius didn’t understand Sebastian. They hadn’t said more than a few sentences to each other for years. He had no right. “Sebastian?”

“Fine! I’m not to blame,” Sebastian snapped. He could say the words, but he didn’t have to believe them. Isadore was hurt. He had to have caused this. Bad lucks and jinxes weren’t supposed to exist, but this had to be the exception. And their date had gone so amazingly well. Right. Once Isadore was saved and didn’t have a stark white bone sticking out of him, Sebastian would politely say goodbye. Isadore shouldn’t have to watch his safety or life around Sebastian.

Loud wingbeats could be heard, and a great being of immense size landed with a

whoosh, startling Sebastian out of his spiralling thoughts. A demon with shorn horns and ragged wings brushed tree debris and snow off his shoulders and legs. He had a compassionate look on his face as he took in the scene.

“I think your friend is here.” Sebastian gave Bale a once-over before hanging up the phone. Bale dropped to his knees and tore Isadore’s pants down the centre, revealing the goriest limb Sebastian witnessed.

“Okay, this is a little out of my skills range. I’m going to have to take him to Lord Typhon. He can heal the gremlin here. But we must move immediately. We can’t wait for your car. Are you okay with me flying you to his cavern?” Bale touched Isadore’s leg with gentle hands. Sweat broke out on Isadore’s brow as he fell back to the icy ground.

Sebastian hovered anxiously by Isadore’s side, unsure of his role since Bale arrived. “I can drive there to meet you?”

“Perfect. I’m sorry I have to leave you alone, but time is of the essence.” Bale wrapped the broken bone with a fleece blanket Sebastian had tossed in his backpack.

Isadore snagged the lapels of Sebastian’s jacket and brought him face-to-face. His eyes were dark and pain-filled, but the determination terrified Sebastian. “You will not blame yourself for this. You had nothing to do with what happened. Tell me you know this, Bas.”

“I do. I swear.” Sebastian held on to Isadore with sweaty hands. His heart pounded rapidly as he tried to hide how terrified he was from Isadore. Somehow Isadore’s scrutiny saw past Sebastian’s lying promise.

“Say the words then. Let me see you,” Isadore growled.

“Not my fault. Please, just let Bale take you. I’ll be right behind you.” Sebastian kissed the back of Isadore’s hands and fell to his ass to allow Bale access without hurting Isadore.

Minutes later, after Bale had carefully situated Isadore in his arms without hindering his wings or causing more pain, Bas lifted off into the canopy with Isadore cradled. Sebastian wiped his hand under his eyes as tears blurred his vision. Dammit, dammit. This was the worst day. God, what was he supposed to do now? He'd broken the only person who seemed to understand what made him better. With weary legs and cold, damp pants, Sebastian picked his way to the car. The weather had shifted like people said it would and coated him in great flakes of wet snow, soaking him within moments. Isadore’s angry face popped into his head, forcing him to remember the fall in great detail.

Isadore was wrong, of course. Sebastian’s jinx caused this. His inability to have a good time, a perfect date, was instrumental in Isadore falling and breaking his leg. Three dates, three disasters. Why the hell would Isadore even think this wasn’t some sort of curse?

No.

Sebastian was going to do them both a favour and step back. Isadore shouldn’t be around Sebastian anymore. He was too dangerous.

CHAPTER 14

Isadore didn't remember the flight. His thoughts were focused solely on the lightning pain in his leg. Bale was an excellent flyer, lifting himself on the thermals while holding onto Isadore as a precious package. Had he really left Sebastian behind? Hells, the poor man would be going out of his mind, and Isadore wasn't there to stop him from catastrophizing. He remembered telling Sebastian it wasn't his fault. Isadore hadn't been watching where he was stepping and hit that fucking rock at the precise angle to send him flying.

"We'll be meeting Lord Typhon soon. Darius contacted him right after he was done with Sebastian. Lord Typhon saved my wings. He will help you out as well," Bale said as he circled a clearing. Two men waited on the ground, and both were looking up.

"This wasn't how I meant to greet the Lord of All." Isadore grimaced. "Fuck."

"You never run into your Gods under normal situations." Bale landed with grace before depositing Isadore gently on the prepared litter. "Would you like me to bring your friend here? He seemed a bit shaky."

"I would be eternally grateful. You have to remind him he didn't cause this. He's got this idea that he's a curse. But he's not. Promise me!" Isadore pulled himself into a sitting position and stared deep into Bale's eyes. Someone had to talk some sense into Sebastian.

"Ahh, one of those fellas. I will do my best." Bale took a flying leap and disappeared

into the stormy weather. Isadore eyed Lord Typhon with some trepidation. His human appearance didn't make sense. In every image Isadore had seen of the great God, he had a multitude of tentacles and the blackest of eyes. To see him in thick boots and a knit hat confounded him. "My lord?"

"So, your insides are trying to exit your outsides. Well, this'll be a challenge, but I haven't had this sort of fun since Bale needed me. Don't look at me like that. I'm a good person." Lord Typhon ruffled Isadore's hair with a kind hand. "Where are your tentacles?" Isadore asked, the pain making his thoughts foggy and his normal filter nonexistent.

"They don't like the ice. I keep getting stuck, and it hurts. Have you tried putting your tongue on a frozen metal object?"

Isadore blinked at the unexpected question. He'd first come into contact with metal here in Granite. "I have not. Is it something I should do?"

"Absolutely not. The worst pain imaginable," Typhon cut off Isadore's pants. "Though I imagine you'd disagree otherwise. What have you done?"

"I slipped on a root," Isadore explained. He glanced down the untouched path. Where was Sebastian? Why hadn't he arrived yet? He better not have bailed on Isadore. They'd have words if he abandoned Isadore because of his belief in bad luck and curses.

"Roots are dangerous trip hazards. What I'm going to do is reset your leg. This will hurt. There's no getting around the discomfort. You'll also have a bit of a limp for a while. But I can heal the bone, so you won't be immobile. How's that sound?" Typhon's words were matter-of-fact while he touched Isadore's leg. Every motion sent shooting pains throughout Isadore's body, blinding him. His thoughts scattered as he tried to breathe. Isadore could only hold on to Sebastian. He was his hero, his

joy. If Sebastian was beside him, this agony would be a pittance.

“Delightful. Just make the pain go away,” Isadore ordered. Though the real worry was not seeing Sebastian here right now. “Where’s Sebastian? Shouldn’t he be here by now?”

“Bale said he would retrieve him. We must be patient with the skittish souls. They require delicate handling. I’m sure you’ve realized if you force their hand, bad things will happen, correct?”

“He should fucking believe me. I am not—” Isadore paused as agony spiked. “He’s my person. He’s the one I’ve been looking for.”

“Then he’ll come around. Keep holding onto that hope.” Typhon patted Isadore’s shoulder before rifling around in a small tote. “I have a few spell components I need to locate before we do healing magic.”

The familiar rumble of Sebastian’s car had Isadore relaxing. He had expected Bale to drop him off, but to hear the motor made some of his anxiety float away. Sebastian had arrived. Sebastian heard him and was willing to be by his side.

“Took a few minutes to convince him, but I managed,” Bale announced as he pushed an almost unwilling Sebastian toward the makeshift operating table.

Isadore recognized the fear in Sebastian’s eyes. The combination of Sebastian’s genuine worry and self-reproach swirled in those hazel beauties. Isadore prayed to all gods that Sebastian would realize the guilt was misplaced. “Bas.”

“I didn’t... I wasn’t. Dammit, Isadore, this is my fault. I should have chosen a better day. You could have died. And I should have told you the trail was slick. It always is.” Sebastian wrung his hands as he remained out of arms’ reach.

“Today was absolutely perfect. You aren’t taking that away. So I fell.”

“You broke your leg. You have a compound fracture. Your fucking bone is peeking out from the skin,” Sebastian’s voice kept raising and becoming higher pitched as he ticked off each description of Isadore’s injury.

“I didn’t need to hear about that last one, thank you.” Isadore’s stomach rolled as he imagined the injury. Combined with the already-there nausea and this new information, Isadore vomited. Sebastian was ready with a towel and his water bottle.

“Oh, God. I didn’t realize you were sick. I should have?—”

“Stop panicking. You are to sit by Isadore until I say you can leave him,” Typhon thundered as he dodged the mess. “If you’re going to take ownership of how he broke his leg, you will watch as I fix the bone. It’s the least you can do.”

“Uh, okay.” Sebastian held tight to Isadore’s hand as Typhon painted a cold concoction over Isadore’s leg. Isadore squeezed Sebastian, comforting him. “Don’t look. It’s not pretty.”

“I hadn’t planned on it.” Isadore stared up at the storm-grey sky. The sleet hadn’t made its way to this house yet. For once, he was grateful for the indecisive weather. “What a day for a walk.”

Sebastian made a grunting noise but kept his opinions to himself. “We won’t be able to go out for Light Up night.”

Isadore struggled to sit up, despite both Bale and Typhon holding him down.

“Really Sebastian? Just as I’m about to use magic? I can see why Isadore questioned your loyalty,” Typhon snapped. Sebastian bleached to a milk-white with cherry

cheeks.

“Stop arguing, everyone! Typhon, you focus on what you’re doing. Stop listening in on their baseless argument. Sebastian, you think you’re being helpful? You’re not. And Isadore, stop jumping to conclusions and allow yourself to heal,” Bale ordered. “You’re all children. Fucking hell, no wonder Darius is a recluse.”

Isadore fell back once more and allowed himself to relax under Typhon’s gentle magic. Warmth knitted his bones together. The sensation was odd, but kinda nice. Sebastian held his hand, squeezing and releasing in a nervous tic. His anxiety was understandable. This was beyond his comfort level. But he was still there, right by Isadore’s side.

Isadore woke up in a bedroom not his own. The walls were painted a soft grey, and the bed was comfy. Something was different, but he couldn’t place his finger on why his brain said so. Gentle snores to his right were animalistic. The heavy weight on his stomach was also new. Staring down, he met the golden eyes of a black-and-white cat. The creature smiled at him before launching off and disappearing. Isadore groaned at the sudden pressure, which woke up his bed partner.

“What’s going on?” Sebastian mumbled before opening his eyes wide. “You’re awake. I gotta get someone.”

Isadore smiled dimly before lurching upward as Sebastian fell off the bed in his haste. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m fine. The ground’s soft. I’ll be right back.” Sebastian placed a smacking kiss on Isadore’s cheek and scrambled out of the room. Isadore lay on the bed and stared at the popcorn ceiling, baffled by the seeming shift in Sebastian’s behaviour. He was pleased, but the relief was palpable and still confusing. What caused the change?

A man in his mid-thirties, with long black hair pulled away from his face, stepped into Isadore's room carrying two mugs of steaming herbs. "Hi, I'm Darius, and you're in my house. What Typhon did to you knocked you on your ass, and he didn't have a proper recovery spot in his hovel."

"Right. And Sebastian?" Isadore asked. His mind was still floaty, but the pain in his leg had been muted to something manageable.

"He's been worried. Typical behaviour for him. Bale told me you had words. So we had a small chat. As old friends do." Darius sat on the edge of the bed. He passed one mug to Isadore and sipped his own. "He's terrified."

"I don't understand why. Haven't I proven myself to him? Why can't he trust me?" Isadore hit the mattress beside him and growled.

Dare waited patiently before speaking. "He hasn't had the best luck with boyfriends. And when his family began whispering about curses, the words clung to his psyche. You are likely the only person who's stayed by his side, shouting at him and reminding him his narrative is false. The different angles of his story are at cross-purposes, which caused a lot of anxiety. Just think, he could have dumped your ass with us and abandoned you."

Isadore wrinkled his nose. The mere idea of Sebastian not showing up wasn't jiving with the person he knew and cared about. "He'd never. He's too nice for that."

"You are worth combating his negativity. You see him as someone worthy of being understood. Do you realize how special that is?" Darius leaned back. "You believe in him so much he's beginning to see that he's more than what a few people think. That's not to say there aren't going to be setbacks. Cause... whoa, nelly, he's got a mile of issues. But he's here. With you."

“You have shitty bedside talk.” Isadore sipped the fragrant tea and thought about what Darius was trying to say, and it made so much fucking sense. Relationships didn’t stop being work, but the rewards made the effort better for it.

“Never said I was going to be nice. That’s not my thing. Anyway, once Sebastian’s had some time to wake up and get a cookie or something in him, I’ll send him back.” Darius patted his leg gently before standing. “Keep fighting your good fight. Patience is key when dealing with feelings, according to everyone else.”

“I am very familiar with the adage, and I’ve been following it religiously. What is the point of you sharing trite sayings?” Isadore settled against the pillows and blew out the anger.

“Seemed right. Anyway, rest. You can stay here for however long you want. Don’t rush the healing.” Darius sidled out of the door, leaving Isadore alone in the cozy room.

Darius’s parting remarks distracted him from the worry of Sebastian and the dull throb below his knee. To have someone like Darius, both hero and anathema to Granite, give him common platitudes to bolster his ego about his love life, annoyed him. Isadore expected more wisdom or relative experiences, not sayings.

“Isadore?” Sebastian tapped on the door and peered in. His brow was still wrinkled, and a worried look haunted his eyes.

“Don’t stand there and hover. Especially with what you’re hiding. It smells like ginger and deliciousness.” Isadore wagged his fingers, beckoning Sebastian to come closer.

“Bale is an avid baker, and he showed me a few tricks.” Sebastian sidled into the room with a small plate and passed it to Isadore. “I was thinking maybe this is a bad

idea.”

“Bale’s cookies? Fuck no, man. They are amazing!” Isadore bit down on the soft baked cookie and moaned. The taste was a combination of flavours he never wanted to end. “And whatever you’re trying to say, I’ll counter it.”

Sebastian sat down near Isadore’s hip. “You don’t even know what’ll come out of my mouth.”

“I don’t have to. I know you, my sweets.” Isadore bussed the sugar-sparkled lips before sitting back and taking his own cookie. “You’re going to tell me you jinxed our date and that’s why my leg is broken. Therefore, you must break us up for fear of something like this happening again.”

“I wasn’t going to say it like that,” Sebastian whined. “You have to see reason.”

“I do, which is why I have an idea. You will go out with Charles a couple of times. He’ll show you that you’re not a jinx and that bad luck does not follow you.” Isadore ate another cookie and smiled at Sebastian. Isadore had a momentary concern Charles wouldn’t agree to his plan, but if he explained his thoughts, Charles might jump on board. He wanted to see Isadore and Sebastian succeed.

“You can’t just suggest a person to help me with dating. It’d feel like I’m using them. Like what happens if my bad luck curse happens?” Sebastian flailed, almost falling off the bed. “He has to know?—“

“He’s my best friend, Bas. I tell him most everything about the events in my life. He sympathizes with you. He’s really happy for me. It’s a good thing.” Isadore scooted over on the bed and patted the empty spot for Sebastian. He only hesitated for a brief minute before settling beside Isadore.

“I guess. But Isadore...” Sebastian laced their fingers together and shook his head, unable to continue. Isadore took the hand-holding as a gift and didn’t push. Sebastian was at the end of his tether.

He hadn't said no. He hadn't run out of the room as though his hair were on fire. Isadore accepted that this was the best he could do under the circumstances. It was as Darius said. Sebastian was still here in the house, with Isadore, when he could have left. He was sitting beside Isadore, their hands together.

This was the win Isadore was looking for.

CHAPTER 15

Crash: Kazmier, I think... We have to stop this flirting thing.

Kazmier: Oh? Explain.

Crash: I just... I'm not trying to lead you on. I like this other person IRL, and I don't want any dishonesty between us. You know?

Kazmier: Oh, hun. You are just too sweet. I won't flirt with you anymore. I swear. Tell me about this guy.

Crash: ... Are you sure?

Kazmier: Yup, I want to hear about the person who stole your heart. Talk to me, Goose.

Crash: He's really nice, and he hears me. He doesn't let me hide. I feel as though I can trust him to not hurt me.

Kazmier: You're right. Can't compete with that. Good luck, friend. I promise I won't flirt with you anymore... solemn and that shit.

Sebastian touched the screen and smiled. The rhythm of Kazmier's words was familiar, but he couldn't place a finger on why. But to have him at his back gave him such a sense of relief. He set his iPad on the coffee table and scratched Tiger behind the ears before standing. He had a date tonight with Charles. Spending time with

someone other than Isadore was Isadore's idea. Sebastian had thought the concept was odd, but Isadore insisted.

Sebastian didn't know Charles well and just through his grandmother. As he was one of Isadore's best friends, Sebastian agreed. This plan was to make Isadore happy while he recuperated. Sebastian had his misgivings about everything and how well Isadore was feeling. His leg gave him pains when he walked on tricky sidewalks, but Lord Typhon was sure in time Isadore would be racing up the hiking trails.

Charles suggested the Christmas pantomime, which was a real treat. The local theatre always put on a good show, and Sebastian enjoyed supporting the local actors. Yet going out in public in a massive group gave Sebastian a spike of anxiety.

The phone rang as though it realized Sebastian was having a crisis of faith. Whose harebrained idea was it to go out with someone other than Isadore? This was insane. His bad date karma was itching to blow up because, obviously, he was having an evening out with the wrong fucking person. Oh my God. He was going to break Charles. Isadore should never have suggested this. His leg must have muddled his thoughts to even propose such a scheme. "Hello?"

"Sebastian? This is Charles. I was hoping we could set up some concrete times. Isadore gave me your number."

"Ah, I see. Yeah, I can chat." Sebastian ran a hand over his head as he settled back on his couch. Tiger perked up from his spot before snuggling down again. "It was your idea to go to the panto? I went last year, and I had so much fun."

"Yeah, I helped with set design, so I'm excited to see how the cast does. They always do an interesting twist to traditional stories. This year, a bunch of cryptids volunteered, so we've had a lot of fun integrating their legends with our stories. Did you know a lot of their winter solstice stories are in line with ours? So fascinating."

Charles's excitement was infectious. Sebastian smiled and leaned against the couch cushion. He could see what made Isadore fond of him.

"I did not, so I'm intrigued to see the show. What day were you thinking?" Sebastian scratched Tiger's back, wishing he was talking with Isadore. His conversation with Kazmier, his epiphany of wanting to be with Isadore, opened his eyes. Maybe everything he thought was a barrier was just him being scared. God, was he that much of a wimp?

"Saturday night. I have free tickets from being a member of the crew. I hope that's okay?"

Sebastian hesitated. Saturday nights meant larger crowds, more chances to embarrass himself and his date. "Sounds fantastic. I can meet you at the theatre after work."

"Great. I'll see you then. Thank you for this. Harry was my other option, and he's a terrible theatregoer." Charles hung up the phone, and Sebastian was left alone, worrying this might be a bad idea. Charles was a friend. This was time spent outside his home, which was supposedly healthy. No one was going to get hurt. Sebastian might even enjoy himself.

The phone rang again, startling both Tiger and Sebastian. Two calls in one night? No one ever phoned him. He wasn't—no, that was a negative thought. Sebastian wasn't going to rehash anything about karma or bad luck. "Hello?"

"My darling. I miss you. Have you missed me?" Isadore's whiskey-dark voice smoothed away the rough edges of Sebastian's nerves.

"I saw you this morning when I was getting coffee." Sebastian fell back against the soft couch and stared up at the ceiling. Talking to Isadore on the phone was a lot easier this way. The added pressure of being together physically dissipated.

“I know, but it was so short. And you were running late. I didn’t get my fix,” Isadore whined. Even his pathetic tone made Sebastian blush.

“I’m sorry. I just...”

“Nah, don’t apologize. So... I tried calling but got a busy signal,” Isadore trailed off, riding over Sebastian’s stammer.

“Oh, that was Charles. We were confirming details about our... I feel awful sharing this with you. Are you sure this is a good idea?” Sebastian scrunched his hand nervously in Tiger’s fur. He took a deep breath to calm his racing heart. Isadore might be a go for the plan, but Sebastian’s second thoughts were having their own third ones.

“Yes, absolutely. You will see what a wonderful date you are and that not everything can go wrong. It doesn’t hurt that Charles wants to do this. He’s a bit of a loner, and this theatre business makes him happy. Gets him out of the house,” Isadore replied.

Sebastian wrinkled his brow at the statement. “Won’t people think that I’m two-timing you?”

“Who? Everyone who’s met you knows you’d never do that. Same with Charles. You’ve been reading too much.”

“I have not. And you can never read too much. Reading is good for the soul. You should read a book or two,” Sebastian shot back, his dignity taking the hit.

“Oh? Really? Who says I don’t read?” Isadore’s voice changed, and it sent shivers down Sebastian’s spine. The sound was rough and growly, creating lightning sparks everywhere.

“You just did!” Sebastian squawked. If he remained indignant, Isadore wouldn’t know his voice affected Sebastian in a sexy way.

“No, I just said that you read too much—”

“Which is the same as not reading enough. Only people who don’t read feel that way.” Sebastian pulled his feet up on the couch while he reclined. Talking on the phone was fun. Teasing Isadore gave Sebastian joy and sent the butterflies in his stomach fluttering. God, Isadore’s words caused the fluttering to move up into his heart and spread joy throughout his whole self.

“The point I was trying to make before you derailed me—thank you very much—is from what I’ve observed, friends go on friend dates without their significant others on evenings such as your panto. No one gets called out. It’s all in good fun, which is what I want the most from you. For you to enjoy yourself. And I think Charles will help you. He’s not overwhelming, and he can read a person like no one’s business. Be glad I didn’t suggest Harry.”

“I like Harry.”

“Me too. But Charles is a better fit.”

They continued to chat for another twenty minutes before Sebastian got antsy. Being on the phone wasn’t his favourite thing, even if it was Isadore on the other side.

“Enjoy your date with Charles. I’ll be dreaming of you,” Isadore said in a raspy voice.

“You could come, you know?” The words popped out of his mouth before Sebastian finished the thought in his head.

“No, darling. This is for you. I’d just get in the way, and we don’t want me to distract you. Thank you. That you extended the invitation means so much.” Isadore rebuffed Sebastian’s suggestion. “I will see you for breakfast on the Sunday after.”

“Oh? Okay, I didn’t realize that was a thing.” Sebastian sat up, waking Tiger with his abrupt movements.

“It is now. We need to dish about all the details, right? So I’ll see you on Sunday morning,” Isadore explained. “Bye, Bastian. Have fun with Charles.”

“Bye.”

Saturday came and along with it the nerves. Sebastian stood outside the theatre doors while he waited for Charles. Familiar carols cheerfully played on the outdoor speaker system, drawing in the attendees. The Christmas season was upon them. Snowflake lights adorned every streetlight and brightened the atmosphere.

“There you are! I was hoping I’d beat you here, but parking was tragic.” Charles gasped as he bent over to catch his breath. “What about you?”

Sebastian smiled. “I only had to walk down the street. But yeah, with the show tonight and the Sip ’n Shop event, the whole town came. It’s so nice to see how happy everyone is after the last couple of seasons.”

“Were you able to get to the Light Up Night?” Charles asked as they waited in line.

“No, with Isadore’s leg, I thought it’d be better to stay away.” Not going to the nighttime festival had been a bone of contention between Isadore and Sebastian. Isadore wanted to prove to Sebastian he was stable enough to enjoy the evening despite his broken leg by attending. Though Sebastian had been okay about Isadore’s leg, the slick sidewalk and his not-so-terrible curse caused him so much more

anxiety.

“He’s been grumpier than a bear with a thorn,” Charles said before passing his receipt to the ticket collector. “Thank you, love.”

Sebastian handed his coat and mitts to the person at coat check and adjusted his sweater. The lobby was full as they gaped at the decorations dotting every conceivable surface. Every surface was silver and gold with animals from the North Pole. The theme was Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

“You did a fantastic job!”

“Aww, this wasn’t just me. A lot of the other members of my team had the ideas.” Charles waved away Sebastian’s compliment.

“They did amazing. Congratulations,” Sebastian said with a decisive nod.

“Charles!” a deep and familiar voice called across from the sea of people. Bone-deep recognition of knowing who spoke sent tingles up and down Sebastian’s back and softly pooled arousal and joy in his stomach.

“Looks like someone couldn’t stay away,” Charles teased.

“What do I do?” Sebastian whispered. This was not in his plans. He was not prepared.

“Say hi, be happy. Be you?” Charles answered, before patting his shoulder. “Incoming!”

“Oh, Sebastian, I didn’t think you’d be here.” Isadore covered his mouth with his hand as though in shock. Sebastian drank in his appearance, having never seen Isadore in dress clothes. His white silk shirt moulded to his body while his black

pants looked like they were painted on. Because of his injury he wore clogs, which did not match his presented aesthetic. He was to die for, and Sebastian didn't understand how to deal with all the emotions swirling around.

"Liar. What are you doing here?" Sebastian asked before kissing Isadore on the cheek. Normal people greeted other people with cheek kisses, right?

"I'm on a date as well. I decided if you could go out for the night, I could as well," Isadore said with a grin.

"I just—"

"Isadore."

Both Charles and Sebastian spoke at the same time.

"Sorry, sorry. It's just you and Charles made this production sound like so much fun that Harry and I were jealous," Isadore explained.

"Harry's here? Dear god, why?" Charles pinched his nose before sighing. "He doesn't have the attention span."

"Because he was feeling left out, and he supports you," Isadore chided. "But anyway, I just came over to say hi. Have fun. I'll see you at the end?"

"Yeah, sounds like a plan." Sebastian watched as Isadore walked away, his hands in his pockets. "Was he okay?"

"Oh, yeah. He's showing you that he supports you and still gives you space," Charles said. "Though I'll have to apologize. I didn't mean to be so catty about Harry."

“Mistakes happen to everyone.” Sebastian offered. Charles didn’t feel bad either. “Words slip out before you have a chance to recall them.”

“Right? How dare social gaffes and blunders occur. All you can do is hope to be a good person.” The way Charles spoke was as though the message was for Sebastian, not himself.

“It’s hard.”

“As long as we try to be better every chance we get.” Charles led him to the theatre where many other people chatted while waiting for the house lights to dim.

“How’s your nana doing?” Sebastian changed the subject. The awkwardness between him and Isadore was raw. He was hoping to find his footing first through Charles and then Isadore. His goal was to show Isadore he could do this. But to have Isadore appear at the theatre where he was with another man—it threw everything out of whack, and he had returned to square one, anxious, worried, and dangerously close to believing the curse.

“She’s fine. She’s thrilled to see me get out of the house and into the dating pool. I didn’t have the heart to tell her this was all a sham.” Charles slumped into his chair, sharing with Sebastian that he was not as put together as he seemed.

“You have someone?” Sebastian asked with a delicate lilt. He wasn’t sure where he stood in regards to being in Charles’s confidence, but Charles seemed to need to unburden himself.

“Ehh, it’s nothing. They’re just—I don’t exist, but this isn’t the time nor place.” Charles smiled.

The house lights dimmed, and the panto began before Charles could finish his

thought. Sebastian patted his arm and watched as the actors took to the stage. The panto was everything Sebastian had hoped for. He lost himself in the story and yelled at the characters like he was supposed to. His worries disappeared like smoke. Despite having worked on the set, Charles behaved as though he'd never seen the show, making everything more enjoyable.

During intermission, Charles vanished into the crush, suggesting to stay while he got them refreshments. Sebastian relaxed as the space emptied out. Quiet conversations filled the air as people chatted about the show or found old friends elsewhere in the audience. His eyes drifted shut while the chatter ebbed and flowed around him.

A rush of air warned him someone settled in Charles's seat, and he sat up, ready to defend the chair. He gaped at Isadore relaxing beside him, a smirk ever-present on his mouth. "What are you doing here?"

Isadore had his leg stretched out in the aisle as he lounged. He was the epitome of a reformed rake. "Charles suggested it."

"He did not." Sebastian swirled around in his seat, searching the crowd for the tall blond man but not seeing him.

"He did so," Isadore shot back. He tilted his head to the side. "You doing okay? You seem tired."

"What? Oh, I'm fine. I've just been busy. Holidays bring out the crowds. People long all the books and movies." Sebastian waved away Isadore's concern. He didn't need to know how many sleepless nights Sebastian had spent worrying about Isadore and what he meant to Sebastian. Examining his feelings was painful and not something he'd wished to do. "Anyway, they just flashed the lights. You should go to your spot."

“We’ve traded dates,” Isadore said. “Don’t give me that look. This wasn’t our idea. It was his nan’s.”

“She did not. You probably saw the opportunity and took a chance. Charles has been looking forward to this evening for a while. I don’t want him to miss out on a good time.” Sebastian faced forward, unhappy with how this date had turned out. Rapid typing and constant vibrating warned him Isadore was furiously sending messages. A phone was thrust in his face, forcing him to read Charles’s text, which basically repeated what Isadore said.

“We aren’t going to ruin his night. I promise. Harry and I have a solid plan. We know how long and how hard Charles worked on this. I’d like to spend the rest of the evening with you. It was driving me bonkers seeing you and Charles chatting up here. The minute I found my seat, I realized maybe I made a teeny oops. I like the idea of you enjoying yourself with Charles. More friends are always better, in my humble opinion. However, I wished you were here with me. I’m sorry?” Isadore fluttered his eyelashes at Sebastian, causing him to giggle.

“Fine. I’m placing all blame on you if Harry does whatever Charles said Harry would do.” Sebastian acquiesced and tried not to inhale the lemony rich scent of Isadore’s cologne. The constant reminder Isadore was beside him enthralled Sebastian, so he barely watched the latter half of the play. As the panto ramped up the audience participation, he forgot himself and leaned toward Isadore, whispering his thoughts into his ear. Isadore rubbed a hand down his back, and Sebastian didn’t flinch or twist away. He certainly didn’t purr at the smooth glide or gentle scratch at the base of his neck.

They held hands until the last curtain call when everyone stood and cheered the cast. Sebastian swallowed the lump of emotions clogging his throat. This was his biggest dream come true. No one got hurt, physically or emotionally. He was happy, and he had a good time. All his worries had been pushed to the side, and it was so nice.

Isadore squeezed his hand tight. "Please let me take you home. I miss seeing you every day."

"But the sidewalk, your leg. I don't want to chance it and then there's Charles. He doesn't deserve me dumping him." Sebastian wavered. He liked hanging out with Charles, but this was Isadore, who soothed him and stirred him simultaneously.

"You are a dear, being concerned about everyone's happiness. As long as I keep a steady pace, my leg will be fine. Besides, we're going to meet with Charles and Harry in the lobby." Isadore stretched his leg out before standing. "I was waiting 'til the theatre was a bit emptier before we attempted to leave."

"How is your leg doing?" Sebastian asked. "You've never actually said."

"It's fine. Lord Typhon did a fantastic job. Though, the fucker aches when the weather changes. Walking can be a bit hazardous. Like my ankle will roll at any given moment."

"See! This is the exact reason why I don't want you to come home with me. What if—"

"Shh, Sebastian. I'm fine. It's okay." Isadore patted Sebastian with gentle touches.

"I'm sorry. I just worry." Sebastian hated bringing Isadore down. And this was supposed to be when he, himself, was carefree. "I'll get better with the stress and anxiety. You won't have to do your thing."

"Sebastian, you've already made such amazing progress. You're fine as you are. And I love how caring you are. If you want to become happier or more settled because it's your goal, good. But don't change because of me."

“I’d like to be more confident,” Sebastian mumbled. He’d love it if he was the self-assured man Isadore was. Then he wouldn’t feel so awkward and ready to hide every moment.

“You will. Takes time and positive thoughts. Like me. I am positive that soon you’ll invite me over to your place for a stay-at-home date.” Isadore looped his hand through the crook of Sebastian’s arm, and they walked together toward the lobby.

“I don’t think I’m ready.”

“Not for a true-true stay-at-home date, like the kind you’re thinking of, but a milder one, for sure you are.” Isadore’s unfazed smile was astounding, but Sebastian believed him. Sebastian gave him an awkward side hug and prayed Isadore understood the message.

“If that’s what you believe.”

“I do. Now, let’s say hello to Charles and Harry. They look like they’re dying to chat with us.” Isadore’s pace changed to a hurried walk as they approached his best friends.

Charles held Sebastian’s coat in his hands as he joined the circle. Harry was talking a mile a minute about the set decor and the actors themselves. A faint expression of pride was evident. Despite his comments earlier about Harry ruining his evening, Charles appeared content. “How was the rest of the play, Sebastian?”

“Well, my date left me in the middle and then this strange guy sat beside me,” Sebastian teased, though he braced himself for the fallout. Sometimes, he hit the wrong note in the conversation and people didn’t appreciate his humour.

“It seemed like you hated the attention.” Charles laughed.

“He totally did. Tried to escape. Huge ordeal.” Isadore elbowed Sebastian in the side. Everyone chuckled, including Sebastian. This was what he'd prayed for, dreamt about, and now Sebastian was part of a friend unit. This was the blessing of perseverance. He stared at the ground for a minute, a little overwhelmed with the concept of this new world. The patterned carpet helped steady him.

“Oh, ho! Run, Sebastian, while you still can. This gremlin has ideas and then it's all downhill from here for you!” Harry, the bigger man with the on-point clothing choices, hooted. Charles glanced at him with a raised eyebrow before he settled down.

“Ignore him. Harry has no tact,” Isadore ordered. “What are you two up to now?”

“We were going to go to the café and then head home. Harry has an early day. And you?” Charles asked.

“You know Isadorable wants to come with us and hang out. We are the better part of his night. Why, just before you decided to do the ol’ switcheroo, he was telling me?—“

“Harry, shut up,” Both Isadore and Charles said together. They smirked as their eyes met. Sebastian chuckled, but the camaraderie between the trio was strong, and he was feeling like a fourth wheel.

“We’d love it if you stayed with us for a bit. I don’t think we’ve had a proper conversation with Sebastian without one of you having to run off to work. Unless you have other, more nefarious plans?” Charles asked, meeting both Sebastian and Isadore’s eyes.

Sebastian’s cheeks heated up. Charles’s suggestion riffing off what Isadore asked earlier was unexpected. He didn’t know how to answer, and he didn’t want to be

wrong.

“Sure, we’ll come. I’d like to hear your opinion on the show. They did a good job?” Isadore asked, removing the pressure from Sebastian.

“Oh definitely.”

Sebastian blinked at how easily they segued into a different conversation without jeering commentary or hurtful words. Maybe he had been hanging out with the wrong people.

“What? Wait, hold up there, Isadorable. We’re kidding.” Harry stopped them in the middle of the wide sidewalk. “This is your fancy date. Don’t let us ruin it for you.”

“But we’d like to have coffee with you,” Sebastian answered. He scratched his head as he tried to understand what Harry was doing.

“Dude, I’d love to chat with you a while longer too, but not now. You two deserve to have this picture-perfect date end. All your sappy-happy juices are flowing, and there’s a full moon. This is the walk-home night of the century. We were pulling your leg. Geez, Chuck, take me home.” With a flourish, Harry spun around and snapped his fingers. Charles saluted Isadore and Sebastian before catching up.

“What just happened?” Sebastian asked.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Come on, you have to escort me to my house now. My ride just buggered off.” Isadore gazed at Sebastian with such adoration and love that Sebastian ducked his head away from the warmth. He didn’t deserve this. Not after everything he’d done wrong. “Stop thinking about it, Bas. Or I’ll do something so awful...”

“You’d never!” Sebastian straightened up and glared. The smirk was there. Isadore had said what he had on purpose. “Fine. But it’ll take a while. I’ve got these demons in my head.”

“As long as they’re not real demons.” Isadore drew Sebastian into a hug. “You are doing fantastic. A few hiccups along the way are expected as long as you recognize them for what they are. Bad and intrusive thoughts.”

“You are the—I really like you.” Sebastian swallowed before continuing. “I don’t know how you manage to keep me sane. Thank you for being so strong. You are the best person in Granite, and I’m so glad I met you.”

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am

CHAPTER 16

Kazmier: So I have a confession to make.

Crash: What do you mean?

Kazmier: I might have figured out who you are.

Crash: Again, huh?

Kazmier: We've met in IRL.

Crash: I would know if we did.

Kazmier: Kismet and the world of mates say otherwise.

Crash: Kazmier, you're confusing me. I gotta go. I have a guest over.

I sadore wasn't one to be struck speechless. He always found words when the silence grew uncomfortable. To be on the receiving end of this potential confession was mind-blowing, and he had to speak soon before Sebastian froze.

"You are pretty damn amazing yourself. You've changed since we met, and you're like... fractal frost on the river, spreading and shifting with every moment."

"That's really..."

“Hey, man, you just opened your heart to me, and I wasn’t expecting your poetry, so you gotta roll with my joy.” Isadore pressed his lips together as he stared at Sebastian with his black toque and scarf tied around his neck. His cheeks were rosy-red, either from the cold or embarrassment, but his eyes... Oh, his eyes said so much. They were clear and honest, still a bit fearful, but removing anxiety would take time. He laid his heart out for Isadore, and Gods, Isadore ached at the bravery.

“I’m sorry.”

“No apologies. You make me happy. You really do. And I am thrilled .” Isadore cupped Sebastian’s cheeks and kissed him hard on his surprised mouth. The taste of sugar and Sebastian was perfect.

As they approached Sebastian’s apartment building, Sebastian began glancing at him and looking away.

“What is it?”

“I was wondering... If you want...I mean, you don’t have to or anything.”

“Spit it out.” Isadore braced himself for whatever had Sebastian stumbling. The shy glances gave him hope that the evening wasn’t over, but he didn’t dare say anything.

“Did you want...would you like to come up and meet Tiger?” The whisper-soft question at the end was covered by Isadore’s whoop of excitement.

“Yes, love. Absolutely yes. I have been waiting for this day since forever.” Isadore raced over Sebastian’s words. The wide-eyed look on Sebastian’s face caused Isadore to stop and consider what he had said. “Err, sorry. A little too much?”

“Yeah, a bit.” The sheer sincerity from Sebastian was a surprise. Isadore bowed his

head in apology. “It’s okay, though. Just unexpected. Anyway, we’ll take the elevator?”

“Yes, please. You were right about the walk. I should have listened.” Isadore confessed. He had been trying to plow through the mild pain, but in his excitement of being with Sebastian, Isadore had forgotten to rest, so now he had to depend on Sebastian’s kindness.

“Isadore.” The chiding tone was delightful. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because being with you is so much more important than my leg. It’ll heal... eventually, but being with you, laughing with you, I can’t ever get that back.” Honesty was important. Explaining to Sebastian why he’d suffer in the cold to be with him required a bit of finagling. Sebastian’s desire to not cause waves was a challenge, but Isadore could help him. “Tell me about Tiger.”

The ride up to Sebastian’s floor was filled with stories about Tiger and his need to create nests in every room. Isadore was giggling by the time they got to Sebastian’s door. Loud meows could be heard in the hallway as they approached.

“He’s very bossy. His food bowl probably has a bare spot in it,” Sebastian explained. He fumbled with the lock before peeking at Isadore. “The key gets stuck.”

“I’m fine. No rush.” His words released the tumblers, and the door opened. “Oh hey, magic.”

“Was that you? I’ve never actually seen you do things as a gremlin.” Sebastian used his foot to block Tiger’s attempt at escaping. The action was so smooth, Isadore almost missed it.

“I have grey skin and pointy ears. I work with solving computer problems. That’s

pretty much it.” Isadore shrugged. Being a gremlin was the least interesting part of his life.

“Huh, if you say so. But Bale is a full-on demon, Hawk is a Mothman, and then there are dragons and vampires. And you’re happy being a gremlin?” Sebastian shook his head as he led the way into his home. A brown fabric couch dominated the room with a small kitchen off to the one side and a bedroom on the opposite. Books and blankets covered every available surface. This was Sebastian.

“I’ve never wished to be a hero or to be the centre of anyone’s attention. To be happy here, I only needed to sort of fit in, and that’s what I did.”

Sebastian hummed in agreement before disappearing into the kitchen. “You can be yourself if you want. You don’t have to act like a human around me.”

Isadore sat on the couch and stroked the velvety fabric. Sebastian’s words were heartfelt and seemed to be deeply personal.

Minutes later, Sebastian came out of the kitchen with two glasses of wine and a small tray of cheese and crackers. Tiger could be heard in the kitchen chewing on his dinner and making squeaky sounds. “I hope you don’t mind me assuming, but I thought this would be nice for a little post-show snack.”

“I am all for snacks and drinks. Never worry about that. You feed me, and I will be your love slave.” Isadore wagged his eyebrows and grinned as Sebastian shook his head. After Sebastian settled down beside Isadore on the couch, Isadore leaned over and brushed a light kiss on Sebastian’s mouth. “Thank you for your thoughtful acts. You are a sweetheart.”

“Do you need anything else? Tylenol or a pillow?” Sebastian made an attempt to get up once more, but Isadore used his incredible strength to keep him in place. “Am I

being too much?"

"I realize you're nervous, but you don't have to be. Tell me about your time with Charles. Was it everything you expected?" Isadore grabbed his wine and crackers before lounging. The slight blush on Sebastian's face was delightful. "Ohh, something happened. Share with the room."

"Are you like this with Charles and Harry? It feels gossipy." Sebastian picked at the fabric on his couch before continuing. "He's a great guy. I hope he finds a person that treats him as well as you treat me."

"He had someone in mind?" News to Isadore. Charles had never said anything about dating or the like. Isadore had assumed love wasn't in the cards. "Did he mention a name?"

"Uh, no. No names, just someone from the theatre group. I think his crush may be a cryptid too? He didn't tell you?" Sebastian cocked his head to the side. It was adorable. But then everything Sebastian did when he was relaxed was sweet and perfect. Stars, Isadore had it bad. "What is it? Do I have something in my teeth?"

"No, it just dawned on me that I really, really like you. These dates, these times I get to spend with you, are the happiest in my life," Isadore stated. The blush brightened on Sebastian's face as he tried to look everywhere but at Isadore.

"You have low standards."

"No. I know a good guy when I see one. And you, my dear, are one of the best." Isadore kissed the back of Sebastian's hand. "You bravely went on a date with a stranger and—"

"Had my date switch midway through because of this guy who's a bit of an odd duck.

No warning...nothing.” Sebastian slashed the air. “But the show was so much fun. I enjoyed both acts a lot. I need to do this more often.”

"You had to find the right people to do this. So the timing wasn't correct until now.” Isadore caressed Sebastian's cheek with a shaky hand. He'd given the positive experience to Sebastian, which had caused a light switch to flip on in Sebastian's soul. He smiled more. He was more relaxed. “Do you forgive yourself for not breaking my leg?”

Sebastian stared at the limb in question. Silence reigned as he considered. Isadore worried this might have been too soon to open that wound. “I guess? I still feel bad. I shouldn't have taken you?—“

“So not a curse?” Isadore interrupted the damaging tirade. They weren't going to tread that ground again.

“No, not a curse.”

Isadore flung himself into Sebastian's arms and pushed him to the couch's seat. He smiled triumphantly at Sebastian with his gobsmacked look.

“What the hell, Isadore?”

“Couldn't help myself. You admitted—finally—that you're not cursed, and now I want to celebrate.” Isadore peppered soft kisses over Sebastian's face, ignoring how he was sitting on Sebastian's lap. His ass rested comfortably over Sebastian's groin, and the press of his cock was delicious. Sebastian's expression was doubtful. He wasn't on the same plane as Isadore. To get him there would require a bit of finesse and understanding. Some people weren't interested in physicality, which Sebastian had to discover for himself. That was okay. Isadore could work with helping Sebastian find his place.

“You have this look on your face.” Sebastian brushed a hand over Isadore’s mouth. “It’s like you’re hungry.”

“I have you in my sights. I want to take a bite of you and never stop,” Isadore answered. Hopefully, that wasn’t too over-the-top. Terrifying Sebastian was not part of his agenda. Isadore only hoped to open his mind up to possibilities.

“Is that a gremlin fetish?”

“Uh, no, don’t think so?” Isadore sat on Sebastian, the wind taken out of his sails. “I was trying to be sexy.”

“Ahh, I see.”

Isadore blew out air and leaned forward, resting his elbows on both sides of Sebastian’s head. He could see the striations of many colours in Sebastian’s eyes and the nerves Sebastian tried to hide. “Nothing is going to happen that you don’t want. But I am going to push a few boundaries.”

Sebastian swallowed audibly. “Okay... I guess?”

“It will be, and they’re teeny tiny ones. Like I’m gonna kiss you now.” Isadore kissed Sebastian, feeling the rapid breathing. He kept his touches light and airy so as not to scare Sebastian any more than necessary. “How did you like that bit of affection?”

“Somewhere around a twelve—mmmph.”

Isadore dove in and swept his tongue inside Sebastian’s mouth. The rich taste of wine and Sebastian made his mind swirl. But the most important thing he noted was how willing Sebastian was. He had relaxed into the cushions and held tight to Isadore’s hips. His grip was supportive, helping Isadore instead of barring him. Sebastian

trusted Isadore to do what was best for them. And Stars, Isadore prayed he was up to the task. Sebastian deserved it.

Isadore remained chaste in his kisses and his touches. Sebastian had to find pleasure in this. Sebastian's moans were delightful, but not sinful. He was enjoying what Isadore did, but the sounds weren't the ones of a person ready to take things further. Still good enough for Isadore to continue playing.

"Bastian, you having fun?" Isadore whispered, needing to know he was on the same wavelength.

"I think so? Kissing is nice, but I'm trying to understand why you're all breathless and stuff." The query in Sebastian's voice answered one of Isadore's unspoken questions.

"Because I'm turned on. Can you feel me?" Isadore placed Sebastian's hand on his hard cock. He winced at the sensation. His desire for Sebastian was strong, and having Sebastian caress him, even unintentionally, brought him close to climax. He exhaled heavily through his nose, steeling himself to Sebastian's innocent exploration.

"You're warm, almost hot." Sebastian wiggled on the couch as he frowned at Isadore. "In the books?—"

Isadore began shaking his head at Sebastian's words. Romance novels were not the best teacher. "Books don't always get it right. As much as we both love them, in this instance, they're a hindrance."

"But not every single one of them can be wrong. I mean, there has to be some truth to what the authors put out there." Sebastian's voice grew high-pitched the more he spoke. Everything Isadore had done to bring Sebastian down to a mid-level of arousal

disappeared.

“Shh, it’s okay. Sometimes they get real-world romance wrong. Writers don’t understand that not everyone wants the same thing. But we’ll find our own path. Like me, casually petting your side and you, relaxing into my touch. That’s good, right?” Isadore wriggled his way to lying beside Sebastian on the couch, their bodies pressed together from stem to stern. The pressure of Sebastian’s nervous self against Isadore gave him a barometer of how Sebastian felt and allowed him to change course at a moment’s notice. In this moment, Sebastian needed Isadore’s reassurance about everything they did.

“This is why no one comes up here because they have expectations from me or about me! And I just want to drink stuff and learn more about them. You—you...why does this have to be all so damned confusing?” Sebastian’s frustration came to a boiling point and exploded out in a torrent of words and gestures.

“Because life is like that? Do you want to lie here and snuggle? Sounds like a perfect activity. I like having you close to me.”

“But you’re hard! And that means that you’ll want sex, and I don’t think I can give it to you.” Sebastian tried to wrestle into a sitting position, but Isadore refused. If they sat up, Sebastian’s anxieties would have won.

“Yes, I am, but I can live with the pressure. It’s kinda pleasant. Don’t worry about me, love. This is for you. All for you.”

“But that’s not fair. It shouldn’t be about me. I need to suck it up and?—“

“Absolutely not.” Isadore captured Sebastian’s chin in his hand and stared deep into his eyes. “This is not one of those situations where you take one for the team. You have to enjoy this in order for me to as well.”

“But why?” Sebastian whined. He attempted to cover his face, but Isadore wouldn’t let him. Isadore had to see Sebastian’s expressions to make sure they were still on the same page.

“Because I get more pleasure if you are, and if you’re faking it...” Isadore trailed off before kissing Sebastian on the mouth.

Sebastian returned the kiss with fervor. His fingers curled around Isadore’s waist and pressed harder. His breath deepened as they continued. They were on the same page, but Isadore kept his touch slow and easy, which worked like a charm for Sebastian. And a happy Sebastian was a happy Isadore.

They kissed for a while on the couch. Isadore loved every minute. This was worth waiting for. Isadore could stay on this couch, with dim lights and Sebastian cozied up, kissing him forever and a day. Sebastian’s body language told Isadore the same thing, his hardening cock pressing alongside Isadore’s own. Gently, tentatively, Isadore slid a hand down between their bodies, caressing Sebastian on top of his clothes before finding the waistband of his jeans. With a deft twist of fingers, the button released, giving Isadore access to the warmth hiding there. Sebastian’s breath hitched for a moment and then settled.

Isadore continued moving his hand toward the target and wrapped his fingers around the silk-covered prize. Sebastian’s cock was stiff, despite what Sebastian said. He stroked the length, memorizing the feel and the heat. Sebastian’s breath was unsteady, and when Isadore met his gaze, his eyes were dark and tense. Not the combination Isadore was looking for, but he had pushed Sebastian’s boundaries. Sebastian was new to this, likely unused to strangers caressing his most sensitive spot.

He kept the kisses seductive and teasing, making sure Sebastian was still enjoying himself. Raunchy kisses at the moment weren’t in the plans. Sebastian had too much

bullshit going on in his head for Isadore to go all-out with bites and saliva. Getting him used to another person's touch, as well as his own desires, seemed to be the best idea. And from what Isadore could tell, Sebastian was enjoying himself. The noises Sebastian made delighted Isadore. They were joyful, eager, and aroused.

"Sebastian? I'm gonna caress you now. Is that okay? Tell me and I'll stop." Isadore stroked the long length of Sebastian's cock with his thumb, loving the sensation of steel wrapped in soft, silky fabric. He ached to feel the bare skin under his fingers, but he had to confirm Sebastian was still on board.

Sebastian blinked owlishly at Isadore. His hair was pointing in every direction, and his fair skin flushed, but he wasn't scared or trying to escape. "If you're sure."

"This will be good. I promise. You'll like it. Money-back guarantee." Isadore pressed his lips to the side of Sebastian's mouth before tipping back.

"Yeah, but..." Sebastian didn't finish, though the grimace said a million things, and all of them Isadore would dispute.

"May I?" Better get their activities on track before the negative thoughts in Sebastian's head began firing up once more.

"Of course..." The hesitancy was more curious than not, so Isadore jumped in.

He slid his hand under the waistband of Sebastian's underwear, soothing the contracting muscles before discovering Sebastian's cock. The silkiness was better than a dream. His shaft was thin but firm in Isadore's palm. Made sense considering Sebastian's lanky frame. Isadore gave the length a gentle tug and smiled as Sebastian hissed and pressed into his hold. Isadore stroked Sebastian's cock, feeling the liquid pool along the top, providing him some slick to pleasure Sebastian with rather than a dry rub. Everything about this situation was telling Isadore Sebastian was aroused

and getting pleasure. The panting breath, the hard-as-a-rock cock in his hand, and Sebastian's hips lifting upward. Taking a chance and needing to see what Sebastian tasted like, Isadore pushed Sebastian's pants down his hips and shoved his shirt to his chin.

"Okay, so you're going to stare at me?" Sebastian asked as he sat up to see what Isadore was doing.

"No, I'm going to blow you. Is that okay?" Isadore asked, caressing the thin skin around Sebastian's hipbones.

"What? Why?" Sebastian tried to scramble away from Isadore, but with his weight on Sebastian's spread legs, he couldn't get far. Yes, this was mean, but Isadore was still fighting against an unseen demon.

"You liked it when I stroked your dick, right? Nothing scary happened?" Isadore slid his hand up and down his cock, and the breath caught in Sebastian's throat.

"Well, yeah, but that's different, isn't it?"

"Way better. Let me show you." Isadore adjusted himself quickly. His own cock throbbed, and he was ready to come. He ignored the pleasurable agony though, because right now, Sebastian had to discover the goodness that came from someone else.

He licked the mushroom top, tasting the nectar pooling at the slit. It was sweet and salty, a perfect beginning. Sebastian's heartfelt moan made him smile as he began taking his cock into his throat. Despite being thin, Sebastian's cock filled his mouth. Isadore licked the base of his shaft with his tongue and pulled back as Sebastian shuddered. He was ready to come. Every minute Isadore hummed and sucked was one second longer than he expected. Isadore worshipped Sebastian as best he could,

delighting in every flavour he discovered.

Sebastian chanted Isadore's name while he held tight to Isadore's head, forcing him into place. He was beautiful in his pleasure, and Isadore was going to give him more.

He licked and sucked hard on Sebastian's cock, feeling the inevitable contraction, warning him that Sebastian's climax was imminent. Sebastian became still as a board as his body prepared itself. Isadore petted his stomach, telling him Isadore was there.

"Isa, Isa!" Sebastian panted as he pushed Isadore farther onto his cock. Isadore began swallowing as Sebastian exploded. His come was thick and plentiful. Isadore kept his cock in his mouth until Sebastian was done spurting. He reached down to adjust his own aching cock. With a hard rub, he grimaced as he came. Not exactly how he wanted to do this, but oh well. Right now, Sebastian's pleasure mattered. Isadore had an inkling that if Sebastian was uncomfortable or unhappy, they'd never get this far again. Once he was sure every drop had been cleaned up, Isadore released him with a pop and crawled up to snuggle close. A convenient afghan was there to cover them and protect them from the cool apartment air.

Isadore grimaced as he adjusted his own damp pants. He had come when Sebastian did. With desire, he had a hair trigger as well.

"You didn't like it. I knew it."

"I did so. Feel this." Isadore grabbed Sebastian's hand and pressed his fingers against the wet patch in his pants. "That is the evidence of me really enjoying seeing you fall apart."

"Oh. Oh !" Sebastian patted the area once more before gaping at Isadore. Realization dawned. "I'm sorry."

“No, don’t be. Consider it an honour. I got a lot of pleasure out of yours. But how are you?” Isadore stroked the side of Sebastian’s face, happy as ever, thrilled that Sebastian was staring at him with an adoring look. No fear, no doubts echoed in his eyes. Clarity shone back at him.

“A little weirded out. I didn’t expect to... you know.” He covered his face with an arm and groaned. “You must think I’m the biggest loser?—“

“I do not. You’re perfect and sweet and just right for me. I loved this. I loved being able to share this moment with you.” Isadore pulled Sebastian’s arm away and kissed the soft cheek, noting the tear tracks. He hadn’t realized Sebastian had been crying. “Hey, are you sure?”

“What do you mean?” Sebastian asked.

“You have tears. Are you sure you’re okay? Did I go too far?” Isadore swiped the stain with his thumb. The joyful bubble was deflating quickly as Isadore noted the spiky eyelashes and red rims. Here, he’d been proud as punch that he got Sebastian to come and the man was crying.

“No! I didn’t know. I’m fine. Really. But... can I sit up? I’m kinda thirsty.”

Isadore rolled off Sebastian, wincing at the cold sensation. Sebastian rearranged his clothes before rearranging himself on the couch. His behaviour wasn’t familiar to Isadore. He was used to more cuddling and less of whatever Sebastian was doing. He grabbed his wine and knocked back most of the glass. “Oh geez. I had sex.”

“You did.” Isadore sipped his own wine and eyed Sebastian. Trying to follow Sebastian’s thoughts was difficult. “Congratulations?”

“Thank you.” Sebastian picked at a loose thread on the couch. “It was more or less

what I expected, I think. Glad I did it, but... no offense, nothing to write home about.”

The simple phrase gave Isadore the definite aha moment. Sebastian was someone who could take sex or leave it. He had friends who were similar to Sebastian. “Aww. Would you want to try again? See if I can make it better?”

“What? Tonight? No way, man.” Sebastian’s vehement denial was quick. He reared back and blushed. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No worries.” Isadore laughed. Someone had reached their limit. “I’m happy I could show you another aspect of having a boyfriend.”

“I had fun tonight. You’ve been so amazing. And you never gave up,” Sebastian said. Isadore’s heart jumped at the sincerity in Sebastian’s words. “You make me happy and confident.”

“Aww, Sebastian.” Isadore shook his head as he tried to wrestle his emotions into submission. He hadn’t expected Sebastian to be so open now, especially after a vulnerable moment. “You do the same for me. Seriously.”

A loud chirrup from down the hall interrupted their deep conversation. Sebastian perked up and lasered in on the dark space. Another impatient meow beckoned them.

“It’s past my bedtime. Tiger likes it when I’m in bed at a specific time. I don’t have to be sleeping, just under the blankets. Would you like to join me?” Sebastian never met Isadore’s eyes. His hands were clenched on his thighs, as though the question was pulled from his body.

“I think maybe I’ll go home. You’ve had an emotional evening, and having me here will add to your stress. So how about we meet up at the café tomorrow morning with

Charles and Harry?” Isadore had jumped internally at Sebastian’s invitation. However, Sebastian wasn’t comfortable yet. Isadore could read the anxiety in his body language. Sleepovers were a step too far in their relationship. One day though, he’d be there. But not today.

“Sounds good. I’d like to talk to Charles about his part in the show. So, are you okay with leaving? You don’t have to.”

“Bas, love, thank you for a lovely evening.” Isadore stood and grimaced at the cold, wet fabric clinging to his skin. He walked to the front hallway and drew on his coat to hide the stain. Sebastian didn’t need any more pressure.

Sebastian followed him to the door and passed him a hat and mitts. His hair was tousled, and his full lips were bruised and delicious-looking. Isadore had done that. He had debauched Sebastian, and it was glorious.

“So... does this mean we’re boyfriends or partners or whatever?” Sebastian asked, his cheeks blazing a bright pink.

Isadore blinked at the question. He hadn’t thought about terms and definitions. Their relationship was special, and he hadn’t wanted to label it in case Sebastian needed a bit more time. For gremlins and their family, mates were decided when that first spark appeared. “I would call us that. If that makes you happy.”

“I’d like that. That sounds great. Thank you.” Sebastian tugged on his ear, but his smile, while small, was bashful and blissful. This was what he wanted. Isadore hadn’t coerced him. Gods, he was a hero.

“So tomorrow at the café?” Isadore asked brightly, proudly. Nothing could dim his joy now.

Isadore gave into the urge and snaked his arms around Sebastian's neck and pulled him close for one more kiss. He longed to sleep with the taste of Sebastian in his mouth. Sebastian sighed as he sank into Isadore's embrace, his fingers holding tight to the sleeve of his coat. "See you tomorrow."

"Okay."

CHAPTER 17

Crash: You're Isadore?

Kazmier: Yes? Is that okay? I didn't figure it out 'til recently.

Crash: I guess. I'm not sure what to do with this information.

Kazmier: Treat me as you always did. I'm the same person.

Crash: Stop buying me stuff then. It's not necessary.

Kazmier: That's definitely not gonna happen.

Crash: Why not?

Kazmier: Because it makes me happy to see you happy.

Crash: Dammit. I am not fond of this information.

Sebastian woke up in the morning with a fat cat on his chest purring away. Tiger had forgiven Sebastian once Isadore left. Last night's revelations had been shocking in a good way. Never had he expected sex to be pleasurable or have a partner who'd agree to his terms. He hoped everything would remain the same when he went to have breakfast with Isadore and his friends. God, he'd die if Isadore lied about anything. No, Isadore wouldn't lie to him. He'd admitted he was Kazmier in the game when he didn't have to. That was a show of honesty. That message startled him when it

arrived an hour after Isadore left the previous night.

Sebastian had matured as well. When Isadore replaced Charles at their date, Sebastian didn't have a meltdown, like he thought. The sensation he'd experienced was joy and relief. Not that he didn't like Charles. He was a great guy. He just wasn't Isadore. This epiphany had Sebastian inviting Isadore over and falling into his arms.

Isadore's kindness in leaving Sebastian's place was unexpected. When Sebastian was alone, he did a quick cleanup on his house and sat on the couch, processing everything. It was like he had told Isadore. Physical intimacy had always been a stumbling block because he didn't understand the need.

His phone made a twinkling noise, letting him know a text had been received. Grabbing it from the bedside table without disturbing Tiger was easy. The lump was content to stay where he was until Sebastian made the motion to get out of bed.

Isadore: Good morning! We plan to be at the café by 10ish! Hope you had a good sleep. I dreamt of you.

Sebastian blushed at the message. Even through words on a screen, Isadore caused Sebastian to squirm in delight.

Sebastian: I'll be there. I had a great time.

When he sent the text, Sebastian groaned at the banality of it. The text didn't convey the sheer essence of his emotions.

Isadore:

The heart emoji had Sebastian clutching the phone to his chest, causing Tiger to leap off in disgruntlement, which was a sign for Sebastian to get up and prepare for his

morning brunch. Tiger needed his breakfast, and Sebastian had to have a shower before joining Isadore at the cafe.

His boyfriend.

The two words set off fireworks in his chest. Sebastian swayed as he stood. This was big and something he never expected would happen. Shaking off the excitement, Sebastian did his morning chores and slipped out to the restaurant.

Walking into the café was daunting. His stomach tightened into a ball of thorns. The dining room was packed, and people peered at him as he searched for Isadore's shock of auburn hair. Of course, he'd be sitting at his usual table with Charles and Harry across from him. An empty chair beckoned Sebastian. As he wound his way through the dining room, Isadore turned and grinned.

"OMG, Isadorable, look at your sweetheart. He's just so friggin' edible," Harry announced loudly. Sebastian froze as he approached the table. The stares from the other guests intensified as he sat. Memories of Becky dumping soup down his back threatened to come back up. He could do this. He was better than his past self.

"Harrison. What did I say?" Charles snapped.

"Not to embarrass Sebastian. But look at him, Chuck. He's just so—"

"Unhappy?" Isadore responded dryly. He laced his fingers with Sebastian's and squeezed. The touch soothed some of his frazzled nerves from Harry's announcement.

"No! Well, yeah, but no. He has this glow to him. It shines from his eyes," Harry finished. "Would you like a cup of coffee? Becks left us the pot."

“Oh, thank you.” Sebastian settled in his seat. With Isadore holding his hand and Charles and Harry welcoming him to the fold, he had a good feeling about his future.

While Harry filled his mug, Becks came with platters of breakfast food for the whole table. She made sure to stay away from Sebastian, her cheeks bright red. “I hope I got your orders all right. There’s sausages, bacon, French toast, and fixings for waffles. Anything else?”

“That’s perfect, thank you.” Isadore took his fork and dragged a piece of toast and bacon to his plate. “Let’s dig in.”

Most of the conversation between the men was about the delicious food and the previous evening’s show. Sebastian had been worried he wouldn’t be able to participate, but he managed to hold his own.

Every once in a while, Harry would glance at the kitchen with a stark expression before taking a huge bite of food. Sebastian watched him briefly, trying to understand what Harry longed for.

“Isadorable, your man is making eyes at me. You need to have words with him.” Harry spoke loudly, attracting everyone’s attention within the radius of their table. Sebastian choked on his spit. So Harry was the type of person to bring focus to himself, and Sebastian wasn’t sure if he could handle Harry’s exuberance. People tittered and stared while Charles shook his head.

Isadore brought their hands up to the tabletop, showing them off. Sebastian didn’t understand what that proved, but by the expression on Harry’s eyes, nothing good. “Harry, we’ve had this conversation before. I’m sure even before we met here, Charles talked to you. Stop causing scenes. It makes people uncomfortable.”

“It’s okay.” Sebastian tried to interrupt, but he cowered at the fire burning in

Isadore's eyes. Though the anger wasn't aimed at him, the heat still singed his bravado.

"No, darling. It's not. You're not the only victim. Harry has embarrassed others in the same way. He seems to believe if he does it first, no one will hurt him, which is the furthest from the truth."

"I don't think that!" Harry clutched his chest and fluttered his eyes. "And if I did, it's only because I adore you."

"Doesn't work like that, Harry. So, finish your breakfast, and we'll have a proper discussion about jokes that aren't jokes." Charles patted Harry's shoulder. "He's a work-in-progress."

"How rude!" Harry sniffed.

"And you weren't?" Isadore asked.

"I said I did it out of affection!"

Sebastian watched the bickering between the three friends and wished he hadn't met Harry's gaze. If he had kept his eyes on his plate, none of this would have happened. He'd been curious, but he would never have said anything. Not yet, at least.

"Bas, it's okay," Isadore whispered as Charles and Harry continued to argue. "They have these spats every other day. It's their normal."

"But I caused this one," Sebastian whispered back. His stomach was in knots at the discovery.

"No. You did not. Harry took advantage of a weakness, and we're trying to cure him

of the habit. So, please? Smile? For me?”

Sebastian flexed his fingers on his lap to release some anxiety. Isadore was right. He didn't have to borrow everyone's issues. He wasn't at fault, nor was everything always his problem. “I was wondering if after breakfast, you'd like to come to the park with me? I know it's daytime, but I think it's still pretty.”

“I'd love to. Sounds delightful.” Isadore bumped his shoulder.

“What is?” Harry asked, stopping his arguing to snoop.

“Isadore and I have plans afterward,” Sebastian shared, though he wasn't sure he wanted Harry or Charles to join them. He liked the idea of being alone with Isadore in the light.

“Uh huh, but what are they?” Harry bit a piece of a jam-laden waffle and stared hard at Sebastian.

“Plans.”

“But—”

“They don't include you,” Charles stated. Harry frowned as he switched his gaze between Isadore and Sebastian. Sebastian almost caved at the puppy eyes and pouting lips.

“Put those away and leave them alone. Otherwise, you're footing the bill,” Tony ordered as he approached the table. Sebastian froze in place, remembering how much Tony distrusted him. He had told Sebastian plainly he didn't think Sebastian was good enough for Isadore. “What are you hiding from? Sit up straight.”

Sebastian thrust his shoulders back and planted his feet on the floor. Nothing would break. He was going to stay still as a statue while Tony chatted with his brother.

“Relax, Bas. Tony’s not gonna attack. He’s being helpful,” Isadore explained as he jerked his chin toward Harry, who had turned a bright pink and stumbled on his words. He couldn’t take his eyes off Tony.

“That’s who—”

“Exactly.”

“Ohh.” Sebastian nodded while Isadore discreetly threw money on the table.

“Come on. I want my date.” Isadore slid on his coat and helped Sebastian with his. Tony smirked at them while continuing to distract Harry and Charles.

“Aww, you can’t leave right when it’s getting to the good stuff!” Harry managed to turn his attention away from Tony long enough.

“Too bad, so sad, but we are.” Isadore wiggled his fingers and nudged Sebastian to the door. Once outside, he looped his arm through Sebastian’s and heaved a great sigh. “I enjoyed breakfast, but I’m glad it’s just the two of us.”

“I feel bad for abandoning Harry,” Sebastian confessed. He peeked over his shoulder at the café, expecting someone to come bursting out.

“You should be sorry for Charles. He has to deal with Harry’s over-the-top ways and his inability to form a proper sentence when Tony’s anywhere in the vicinity,” Isadore explained.

“Ahh, I see. I think.” Sebastian put the worries aside, though it was a challenge. Their

walk to the park was where his attention should be. The town was pretty, with sparkly greenery outside every storefront. Silver and gold buntings added an extra flair while blue snowflakes hung high above the street, waiting for darkness to light up. “I’m sorry we couldn’t come out for Light Up Night. I heard the event was quite spectacular. The ice sprites and winter cryptids, along with humans, did a bang-up job.”

“Sebastian, don’t dwell on the past. It’s okay. Life had other ideas for us. But we’re here now, happy and walking. Enjoying each other’s company.” Isadore stopped in the middle of the street and kissed Sebastian lightly on the mouth. Snow drifted from a wire and dusted them. They were in their own romantic snow globe.

Sebastian gasped at the cold sensation before heating up under Isadore’s lips. He never thought he’d have this moment. Standing in the middle of the street with a man he adored and who adored him back.

“Thank you, Isa, for being there for me. For not giving up. You are the best, and I’m honoured you stuck with me.” Sebastian fumbled with words. His cheeks heated up as he tried to share in an articulate way what having Isadore around meant to him.

“Did you know that you smell like candy and joy? I’ve become addicted to you, so good luck trying to cure me.” Isadore kissed him again in a smacking motion, doing a small jig in the streets.

Sebastian tugged his toque over his ears and stared at the ground. The idea of Isadore kissing him so blatantly in the streets overwhelmed him, yet it was good. He loved the sensation of Isadore’s joy washing over him. This was what happiness was.

EPILOGUE

Crash: Did you see the new creatures that came out?

Kazmier: Of course, I follow them on social media. I thought I showed you the website.

Crash: It's not the same as seeing them in game

Kazmier: Right. Because different pixels and all that.

Crash: I like the surprise.

“Why are we arguing online? You're right beside me.” Sebastian dropped his iPad on his lap and glared at Isadore.

"Because it's fun." Isadore leaned forward and kissed Sebastian lightly on his nose. The touches of affection from Isadore were sweet and warmed Sebastian to the core. He stroked the fat cat lying between them before returning his attention to the game. Minutes later, Sebastian received a notification that he received a present. Growling, he ignored the way the screen lit up and the shit-eating grin on Isadore's face.

“I don't think I like knowing you're Kazmier.” Sebastian grumbled. “I can't ignore you when you do stuff like this.”

“You couldn't before.” Isadore set his own device down and lifted Tiger to the couch top, where he settled into a ball. Tiger and Isadore had become fast friends. The cat

willingly put up with Isadore's manhandling, much like Sebastian. Isadore pressed his back against Sebastian's side, his legs sprawled across the length of the couch. "Does my gift really bother you?"

Sebastian kissed the top of Isadore's pointy ear as he tried to articulate his feelings. The idea of spending real-world money on a friend seemed so wasteful.

"Sebastian, you're not gonna be punished, and I'm not going to fly out of here in a huff. What's annoying you?" Isadore swung his legs around and faced Sebastian. His expression had changed to something more serious.

"I don't think I'm worth the effort." Sebastian dragged the words out. "I can't give you what you want, so why?—"

"Hey, hey, get all of those thoughts out of your head." Isadore gripped Sebastian's chin and made eye contact. Sebastian wished he could duck away, but Isadore's determination forbade hiding. "I love you. You are the dearest person in my heart. You give me everything you can, and that is the most important thing. When you feel the urge to go beyond your boundaries, amazing. But I will not be the one who pushes you."

"But that's not how—" Sebastian started once more. He'd stopped watching the Hallmark movies and reading romances at Isadore's request. He'd become so entangled with how the relationships in book-world behaved compared to the real world that he became stuck in place. Nothing Isadore could say or do was able to reassure him.

"Fantasy, my love. Romances are all pure fantasy. Yes, sometimes they fuck with your head with how you wish life could be, but they show you one aspect of a long-lasting love," Isadore interrupted. "Come on, let's go to the bedroom."

Sebastian pinched the bridge of his nose. "I know, but I worry that?—"

“Come on, bedroom time,” Isadore hauled Sebastian to a standing position and dragged him to his room. The space was dim with a bedside light on to illuminate. The big bed with its dark comforter drew a person’s eye when they stepped foot into his room. This was Sebastian’s hideaway, and Isadore took advantage of his knowledge every time Sebastian became squirrely about their relationship. “Top clothes off and then hop in.”

“This is ridiculous.” Sebastian complained, but he took off his shirt and pants anyway. He slid under the covers, and Isadore followed, tugging the comforter up over their heads. Sebastian was in a warm cocoon of cozy darkness. He couldn’t see Isadore’s face, but his easy breathing and the heat from his body reminded Sebastian he wasn’t alone.

“Feel better?”

“We were going to go out to the park tonight? A band you like was playing.” Despite his grumbling, the wretched anxiety loosened its grip on Sebastian’s heart and lungs. He could see where everything had gone wrong and how Isadore’s intuitiveness helped. “I don’t get how this works.”

“But it does.” Isadore rolled to his side and squirmed up against Sebastian. “Come on.”

Sebastian fitted himself along Isadore’s back and buried his face in the silky strands of Isadore’s hair. The scent of baked goods and Isadore soothed even more of Sebastian’s needles. He kissed the bare shoulder and released some of the building tension.

“See? I’m not going to pounce on you and ravish you. I like this cuddling bit. So fucking nice.” Isadore laced their fingers together and kissed the tips of Sebastian’s fingers.

Lying here with Isadore in his arms was perfect. The odd silkiness of Isadore's skin against his own comforted Sebastian. Skinship had been something he'd heard of but had never considered to be real. To be a part of this moment was heaven. "I like it too."

"I'm glad." Isadore wriggled against Sebastian until Sebastian had curled completely around him. In the romance books, this was when their activities became steamy, though Isadore kept still other than a few gentle pecks on Sebastian's hand.

"I read about this in a magazine article," Sebastian whispered. The moment required less volume, as though he was telling a secret. "Not enough people get this close. They think cuddling isn't... it's less than physicality. Like sex is more important. But that's not true, is it?"

"Intimacy is always the answer, but it can be both soft and quiet or sweaty and loud. Our definition can be whatever we want. We dictate how we do intimacy, and no stereotypical novel will tell us what to do, right?"

"We take all the information and sort out the chaff, so we keep the stuff that makes sense to us?" Sebastian said aloud. Why had it taken so long for Sebastian to find Isadore or even accept him once Isadore noticed him? Everything had clicked in his head. They worked because of communication, acceptance, and genuine affection toward each other. "You make me—I can't even think of the word."

"You do the same for me." Isadore turned around and kissed Sebastian. "We are the best couple ever. Nothing can steal that from us. Not even your nervous doubts."

"Hey." Sebastian dug stiffened fingers into Isadore's side, making him giggle and squirm. "I'm getting better. I talk to you before letting my anxieties swamp me, right?"

"You do, but stop tickling. I'll pee my pants."

“Better not.” Sebastian marvelled at the ability to hug Isadore while teasing him. And in his head, he could picture more moments like this.

Playing their mobile games together with a cat between them, hanging out with Harry and Charles at the café. It was all there in his possible future. And because of Isadore’s belief that Sebastian wasn’t cursed, Sebastian hadn’t had any more incidents. He wasn’t jinxed.

Cuddling gremlins was the best gift he could ever received.

The End.