



# Zephyr (Elemental Men #4)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** "I think I might be in love with you."

That's the third thing my new boss said to me, right after introducing himself and complimenting my name. I've worked in the corporate world long enough to know that's not normal workplace behavior. Worse, I think I feel the same way.

I don't believe in love at first sight, but this guy makes me feel like I'm walking on air.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### ZEPHYR

“I just want her to like me. Why won’t she like me? I’m always nice to her. We’ve been friends forever.”

“She does like you. You’ve been friends forever. She just doesn’t like like you. Maybe because you’re only nice to her because you want her to like you.”

The air whispers the snatch of conversation to me, and I resist the urge to nod in agreement. Neither of the speakers can see me—and if they could, they probably wouldn’t want my input anyway. But the advice giver is completely right. I’ve eavesdropped on enough situations like this to know it. Anyway, isn’t it common sense that nobody wants to be treated well only for what they can give? Do humans really still not get that, even after so many thousands of years of existing?

How hard is it to understand the concept of treating people nicely because they’re people ?

“You’re never going to believe who I just saw going into a hotel with his ex!”

I perk up a little. Maybe it makes me shallow, but I like gossip. That’s why the breeze brings me so much of it. We both get a little down-spirited by all the bad things we learn, so occasionally, a bit of gossip acts as a palate cleanser.

“Zeph!”

Blinking, I turn to look at Flame. He has that exasperated expression he gets when he's been talking to me and I haven't been listening. It's not my fault, though. There are so many voices talking to me all the time that I can't pay active attention to all of them. I would have heard his words later. Probably.

"Yes?"

He eyes me suspiciously. "You didn't hear any of that, did you?"

I shrug. "I don't think so. Was it important?"

Sighing, he says, "Does somebody else want to do this?"

I turn to see who he's talking to—I thought I was alone out here on the deck until he spoke—and am surprised to see Flame's boyfriend, Bran, and Perry. I smile at them. They're both so nice, and things have been easier since we had humans join us.

"You're doing fine," Bran encourages Flame in a soothing voice. "Zeph can't help it that he's so distracted. He's listening now." He glances at me. "Right?"

"...their divorce has been final for three years, and it's not like they had kids. Why would they need to meet at all?"

"Right," I confirm, giving the breeze a little "tell me later" push. This seems like it might be important. "I'm listening."

Flame waits a beat, studying me to make sure I'm actually focused on him, then says, "The new guy starts tomorrow, so if you can't stay focused, try to stay out of his way. He's human, and we haven't decided yet how to tell him the truth about us."

"Or if we even should," Perry adds.

I nod. “Sure. I can stay out of his way. I do have a question about him, though.”

Flame smiles, looking relieved and happy. “What?”

“What new guy?”

The smile disappears, and Perry groans. “No. Come on , Zeph. We’ve been talking about this for months. You were there. You agreed!”

“Sorry?” I shrug. “I guess I mustn’t have been listening that well.” Even as I say it, the air whispers about the noxious fumes being spilled by a factory elsewhere, distracting me.

“It’s not Zephyr’s fault,” Bran says, capturing my attention again. “We should have checked that he’d heard us. We know it’s difficult for him to stay focused.” He pats my shoulder. “Are you still listening?”

“I’m listening,” I promise. “You’re being nice to me.”

“I’m just saying, it’s not normal to meet up with your ex at a hotel when you both live in the same town. Not unless you’re hoping nobody notices.” Ooh, that really could be interesting. Are they planning to get back together? Or plotting something dastardly? Maybe they already did a dastardly deed when they were married, and there’s a chance someone’s going to find out, so they’re meeting to plot how to keep it a secret. I set the air to finding out more details.

“...Cody was managing to keep up, but now that he’s about to start college, he doesn’t know if he’ll have the same amount of time to spend on it,” Bran is saying, and I make myself pay attention. Cody is his brother who manages our website and social media. He’s due to start school at UCLA next month, which I’m both happy and sad about. Cody’s one of my favorite people, and I’m going to miss having him

here in the house... but he's so excited about going to college and getting to stretch his brain that I can't be too upset.

Ohhhhh, okay. I think I do remember them talking about this. Cody's said a few times that he's not really qualified enough to manage the website and other stuff now that it's found its feet and started getting the attention we needed. He wanted to find someone to help him, but the secrecy issue is important. It's not like we can tell just anyone that we're incarnated elements—or, as Cody calls us, superheroes. I like that. It makes me feel like I'm actually adding value to humans' lives, even if they don't know it.

“We all agreed that we'd hire somebody to take over,” Bran explains. “He starts tomorrow so Cody can show him how everything's set up and work with him for a few weeks, make sure he'll fit in.” He pauses and pulls a face. “As much as anyone can fit in here.”

“Basically, Cody's going to make sure he's ‘cool,’ so if he does somehow find out the truth, we won't have to worry that he'll do something drastic,” Flame adds.

I nod. “Okay. So the new guy is going to take Cody's job, but Cody's going to train him up first.” Makes sense. “Who is this guy? Did we interview people?” I'm pretty sure I would remember that.

“Aether and I did the interviewing, with Cody,” Perry says. “But we all discussed the applications first and agreed on a shortlist.”

“And then we all discussed the outcomes of the interviews,” Bran adds, “before voting on who we were going to hire. It was a unanimous vote.”

I have zero memory of that. “Did I vote?”

All three of them nod. Huh.

“I must agree with the majority, then.”

“Or you weren’t listening,” Flame points out.

“Mm. That’s possible, too.” The air stirs around me, giddily murmuring about Ted and Brenda, who are arguing in a hotel room because they never told Ted’s elderly mother they were getting divorced, and now she’s visiting from Spain and expects to see them living together in wedded bliss. “Wow, how did they think they were going to keep that secret?”

“Zeph!” Flame throws up his hands in exasperation. “Are you not listening again?”

“I’m listening!” I protest. “We all voted to hire this guy...” Shit. Did they say his name?

“Storm,” Bran supplies, grinning. “Storm Lattimer.”

Wait. That’s got to be a test, right? He’s checking to see if I’m listening. “Storm? Really?” I look at Perry, who shrugs.

“It’s what he put on all the official papers and the name we used for his background check. Legally, that’s his name.”

I scratch my head. “Huh. That was my name once.”

“Was it?” Bran seems genuinely surprised, but Perry’s grinning and even Flame seems less serious than usual.

“Yeah. A few lifetimes ago. I didn’t think humans usually picked names like that for

their kids.”

“Humans do all kinds of stuff,” Flame reminds me. “How do you think River got his name?”

That’s a good point.

“Storm Lattimer,” I repeat. “Don’t yell at me, but I guess he’s qualified? To do Cody’s job?”

“More than,” Perry assures me. “That was what Cody wanted—someone who can take us to the next level. Storm has a bachelor’s degree in marketing with a double major in marketing and web design, a master’s in social media management, and five years’ experience in the field. He’s worked closely with a PR team, so he’s picked up a lot of tips and tricks there. A year ago he was promoted to team leader.”

Promoted? I frown. “If he’s a team leader for a company that’s big enough to need a social media team?—”

“Marketing team,” Bran corrects.

“—then why does he want to come and work for us?”

“We asked him the same thing,” Perry says. “According to him, he’s burnt out on corporate life and wants an opportunity to get off that track. He likes the idea of working for a non-profit. Our background check showed that he has a history of volunteering with conservation charities and organizations, so we think he’d be a good fit.” He hesitates. “Aether liked him. Took one look and didn’t want to even do the interview, just hire him.”

“He did?” I blink a few times. “That’s strange.”

Flame and Perry exchange a look before Perry adds, “He said Storm was meant to be with us. That this is the first incarnation where this has happened.”

“Huh.”

“We’re just going to have to pretend,” Brenda concedes finally. “We can manage that until your mother leaves. The truth would give her a heart attack, and I don’t want that on my conscience.”

“Don’t you think that’s interesting?” Flame presses.

“Very,” I agree. Brenda can’t seriously think she and Ted will be able to pretend to be in love? Unless they still do love each other? But then why did they divorce? “His mother probably knows him well enough to guess when he’s lying.”

“And we’ve lost him,” Flame mutters.

“Zephyr,” Bran says loudly. “Could you focus for just a minute more, please?”

I look at his serious face and smile. “I’m so glad you’re one of us now,” I tell him.

He smiles back. “Me too. You guys are going to keep me sane when Cody goes to college. Now, tell me what we’ve been talking about.”

Hasn’t he been paying attention? That’s not like Bran. Still, he’s always so nice to me; I’ll cover for him this time. “Cody’s successor is starting his job tomorrow,” I explain. “His name is Storm Lattimer, and he’s really qualified to expand on everything Cody’s done for us. He’s going to work with Cody for a few weeks, just to see if he vibes well, and then he’ll take over when Cody moves to LA. He doesn’t know about us, yet, so we have to be careful—though Aether really liked him in the interview, so we’re probably safe there. Not like Ted.”



They all stare at me.

“I’m so going to regret asking this,” Flame says. “Who’s Ted?”

I frown. “How do you know about Ted? Wait, do you know why he and Brenda got divorced?”

Flame throws up his hands. “I give up.”

“On what?”

“Relax,” Bran tells him, wrapping an arm around his waist. “Zeph knows what he needs to know. Zephyr, what are you going to do while Storm is in the house?”

I have to do something? Oh, I know this—I have the answer.

“There’s no way my mother will believe we have separate bedrooms.”

“Share a bedroom?” I gasp. “How can he think she’ll agree to that?”

“Zeph!” Flame exclaims, but Perry intervenes.

“Leave him alone.” He pauses. “Wait, is this still Ted and Brenda? Why are they sharing a bedroom if they’re divorced?”

“So his mom doesn’t find out,” I explain. “Brenda doesn’t want to give her a heart attack.”

Perry looks at Bran. “Does that make sense to you?”

“Not even a little bit, but now I really want to know more. Ow! Tone down the

sparks, hot stuff.” Bran slaps at the tiny spark that landed on his arm, simultaneously stomping on the one that landed on the deck. “Some of us aren’t flame retardant.”

Flame’s offended growl is funny. “Why would you want to be? And Zephyr,” he turns on me before I can get distracted, “what is your only job while Storm is here?”

“Don’t give him a reason to guess what we really are.”

### CHAPTER TWO

#### STORM

Today's going to be a great day. New job. New outlook on life. New clothes and hair. New coffee order.

Okay, I might regret that last one. Whatever this is—I went with the daily special, in the hopes that I could shake my life up a bit and do something new and exciting—it's too sweet for me. I need caffeine to get going in the morning, not sugar and milk with a side of caffeine.

But that's fine! It's fiiiiine. I'm changing things up, getting out of the rut. That means experimenting and occasionally making choices with bad outcomes. I know now that I don't like... whatever this is. Tomorrow, I'll try again.

And in the meantime, I'll hope and pray that my new employers offer coffee to their staff. Does it count as staff when it's just me?

Just. Me.

Oh my god. What was I thinking? I've clearly gone insane, because there's no other reason I'd take a job where I'm the only employee. I can't work alone! I'm a team player. I'm used to working in a corporate office with a lunchroom, for fuck's sake. Not to mention all the meeting rooms, which everyone knows are only sometimes used for meetings but mostly used for private gossip. I love gossip. I'm the gossip king! On more than one occasion, I've strolled around the office with homemade

cookies, claiming I had to make them because of the insomnia I don't actually have. I just needed an excuse to wander from desk to desk, chatting with people. Everyone knows the best way to learn secrets is over baked goods. Offer someone a cookie, muffin, or piece of cake, tell them you baked it yourself, and ka-ching! It's like the key to the gossip vault.

How will I cope without regular breaks to congregate around the coffee machine in the lunchroom? Even if I take the breaks, there's nobody to congregate with!

Not that it will matter... working for a small group of dedicated conservationists means there isn't likely to be any office gossip. These are serious people with serious goals. That was very appealing, from a job perspective. I just didn't think through the ramifications on a day-to-day basis.

"Turn right at the T-intersection," my GPS instructs, and I obey. Now is not the time to hyperventilate. I'm nearly there, and the last thing I want to do is give a bad impression on my first day. Sure, I might decide to go running back to my old job with my tail tucked between my legs, but if I do, it won't be because my new job thinks I'm a flake. I'm going to be together and amazing and they're going to love me, dammit!

I have a new outlook on life. New clothes and hair. I can do anything!

"Your destination is ahead in point two of a mile."

Wait, my new office is here ? Across the street from the beach? I slow and put my blinker on, but this part of the road is quiet... because not many people can afford to live in these fucking expensive houses on the beach.

"Your destination is on the right. You have reached your destination."

I turn into the driveway, checking the number on the mailbox as I do so. Yep, that matches up with the address Cody sent me. This is wild. Sure, they said they worked from home, and that after my settling-in period, I was welcome to either come here for my workday or just log in from home and only visit when I needed to speak to them in person, but... I didn't think this was what they meant by home!

My original plan was to work here two days a week and do the rest from home, but honestly, if the house is as nice as the driveway, I might commute full-time. It's not that far.

I park off to the side—the driveway is huge—and take a moment to study my new office. I'm a few minutes early, so I have time to collect myself. The garages—plural—are underneath, with the house above. Wide steps lead up to a huge deck, the kind that's about the same size as my apartment, and the whole thing has very clean, modern, California-beach-type vibes. Even the landscaping out here is all native plants that do well in sand dunes. I'd expect that from environmentalists, though.

Getting out of the car, I lock it—though there's probably no need. Who'd want to steal a ten-year-old Honda here?—and turn back to the house. I wonder if they have solar panels on the?—

“What the fuck?” The words burst from me involuntarily, and I want to check that nobody was close enough to hear, but I can't take my eyes off the man standing on the roof. Shirtless. Hair floating in the breeze. Flying a kite.

Man. Roof. Kite. Shirtless.

Why... How... What... Huh?

I squeeze my eyes closed, convinced it's a trick of the light. Or maybe they have

some kind of fancy wind-monitoring equipment up there. Oh! A new generation of windmill, one that's safe for residential neighborhood use! That would be so cool.

Opening my eyes, eager to see the new technology, I barely give them a second to adjust before looking back up at the roof.

Where there is definitely a man. Not a windmill. A man. With no shirt. Flying a kite.

Why... Why does he look familiar? And also like a romance novel hero? The books my mom used to get from the drugstore when I was a kid had guys like that on the covers. It was how I realized I wasn't straight; all that man chest gave me naughty thoughts. Could he be a cover model I've seen while waiting to check out at Walmart?

"Storm?" someone calls, and I tear my gaze away from the blond hottie. Perry and Cody, who've been my contacts so far, are coming down the front steps, welcoming smiles on their faces.

"Hi," I call, then surreptitiously check my chin for drool. That's the last thing I need... especially since the kite-flying sex god is probably someone they know.

Oh god, he's one of my bosses! My brain kicks back online, and I remember exactly where I've seen him before—on the Conservation Kings website and socials, when I was doing my background on the company. He picked the screen name Zephyr, and his specialty is air pollution and the effects it and climate change have had on storm activity.

"I feel like we should have planned a welcome event or something," Perry says as they reach me, and without meaning to, I glance back at the roof.

They follow my gaze. Cody bursts out laughing, but Perry groans. "Oh, for fuc—uh, I

mean... Fudge. Shi—Cra—dangit!”

That makes me laugh too. “I don’t care if you swear,” I assure him. “As long as you don’t care if I do.” I’ve been known to drop the occasional f-bomb during a planning meeting that’s not going to plan.

“Oh, thank fuck” is his reply, and Cody grins at me.

“Swearing is normal here. Things get a little... zany sometimes. Exhibit A.” He gestures to the roof. “That’s Zephyr, by the way. In case you didn’t recognize him.”

Not touching that with a ten-foot pole. “What’s he doing? I mean, I can see what he’s doing,” I correct. “But why’s he flying the kite from the roof?” There’s probably a really good reason for it. One that’s going to change the way we think of air pressure or something. It’s going to be ground-breaking, and I’ll have been part of the process, even if only peripherally.

Perry scoffs. “He says he feels like he can breathe up there. Don’t even ask me; I have no fucking clue. Zephyr!” He raises his voice.

Zephyr doesn’t react, his head tipped back so he can watch the kite.

“Zeph!” Cody yells.

“Should you be shouting? What if he gets startled and falls off the roof?” I ask worriedly. That would be bad—for me too. Because nobody feels good about the guy who started work on the day of a serious workplace accident. No winners in this scenario.

“Trust me,” Cody says, “there’s no way Zephyr could get hurt from falling off the roof. It’s just not possible.”

Um... okay. "Does he bounce?" I joke, and they exchange glances.

"Something like that. Look, let's just leave him up there for now, and I'll send someone to get him in a bit. You can meet him later." Perry gestures toward the house. "Come on in, and we'll introduce you to everyone and give you a tour before we leave you to fill out enough forms to make your head spin."

My laugh is polite this time, since I'm still preoccupied by the man on the roof. Shirtless. With that hair. "Ah, I'd forgotten the joys of first-day paperwork."

"At least we're not a law firm," Perry jokes. "The stuff I had to sign just to work reception there was ridiculous."

The deck is just as gorgeous at eye level as it looked from below, and I sneak a glance around that's not all that sneaky.

"You're welcome to work out here, if you want to," Cody says. "The Wi-Fi signal is good for anywhere on the property or even over at the beach. I'll get you the password later—and remind Perry to give it to you again when he changes it every week."

"Thanks," I reply. "Do you have a lot of issues with Wi-Fi piggybacking?" That surprises me a little. I would have thought in this neighborhood, everyone could afford their own internet access. Maybe tourists on the beach, since the signal is good enough to reach there? But who goes to the beach with their device, looking for a Wi-Fi signal to hack?

"No, Perry's just paranoid."

Perry nods. "Sadly, it's true. Working for lawyers for so long made me very untrusting. I like my life a lot better now, but some things I just haven't been able to



let go of.” He holds open the front door, and I follow Cody inside, not sure how to respond.

The inside of the house is just as nice as the outside—even though we’re in a hallway, it’s wide and feels open and airy, the ceiling nice and high. It definitely will not be a hardship to have to work here.

“We promised to introduce you to Aqua and River first, so they can head out. River’s research is at a critical point, so they spend a lot of time diving right now.”

I whip out my phone and open the Notes app. “Sorry, just let me...” I don’t want to forget to find out more about this research.

“Are you taking notes?” Cody asks, then turns to Perry before I can answer. “See? This is why we needed an expert. I never took notes.”

“You live here and hear every update as it happens,” Perry retorts, but there’s an approving gleam in his eyes when he looks at me. “I’ll get the summary of River’s current research for you, and you can set up a time to talk with him about it when you’re ready. He and Aqua are around a lot, but if you’re only here part-time, you might miss them.”

“I’ll make myself available,” I assure him, already planning how best to share this online. Cody’s done a good job, but I didn’t see anything about new research on any of the Conservation Kings’ socials when I looked at them last week.

We walk into a kitchen that my grandmother, rest her soul, would have wept tears of joy over, and two men look up from the sink.

The blue-haired one, Aqua, grins wide. “Hiiii! Wanna play dolphins with us?”

Did he just say...?

Somehow, I don't think working here is going to be as quiet and serious as I expected.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### ZEPHYR

The air told me that the new guy had arrived. It whispered about him being nice, a little nervous, and a lot impressed by the sight of me. I tucked that happy thought away for safekeeping, and then the breeze and I concentrated on news, gossip, and the kite.

There's nothing like flying a kite to clear your mind. The wind is in control, and all you can do is try to stay aloft. It's even more fun to do it on a still day, when I'm the one manipulating the air currents, but the others told me I'm not allowed to if there are other people around. Keeping our existence secret from humans is hard .

The breeze whispers that Aether is coming out onto the roof, and a moment later he says, "Zeph?"

"Yeah?" I keep my gaze on the kite and half my attention on the tornado ripping through Kansas. It's technically still a little early for tornadoes, but unless it gets out of hand, I'm not going to intervene. Messing with this tornado could cause problems elsewhere—my element isn't localized like Flame's. It took me a lot of work for this tornado to happen now, in Kansas, and not a month ago in New York.

The humans really have no Idea how hard we're working to keep this planet from killing them. Despite what the others say, I'm not always sure they're worth it. I hear the nasty, awful things they say, the dark whispers when they think nobody's listening. The air brings me tales of the horrid, despicable things they do that they

don't think anyone will find out.

But I know what my job is. Until Perry says otherwise, I'll keep trying to save the humans. I can console myself with the ongoing saga of Ted and Brenda's fake happy marriage—they're currently arguing on the phone about whether Brenda can tell her sister the truth, and if not, "How the hell am I going to keep it from her, Ted, huh? Am I supposed to just disappear from her life while your mom's here? She'll think I've been murdered and call the cops. Do you want to be the prime suspect in my murder, Ted, because you know the cops always think the ex-husband did it. What would we tell your mom when the cops show up to question you, huh?"

I think I like Brenda. Maybe her sister too. I've asked the air to find out more about them both.

"Time to come down and meet the new guy... and have lunch."

I tear my eyes away from the kite in surprise. "He just got here. It's not lunchtime yet."

Aether smiles at me. "He's been here for a few hours, bro. It's definitely lunchtime. We're having sandwiches."

On cue, the air wafts the scent of cheese, cold meats, and pickles under my nose, and my stomach rumbles appreciatively. "Our human bodies are weird," I reflect, reeling the kite in carefully. "I never noticed I was hungry until you mentioned food. Why do you think that is?"

"Don't ask me." My old friend shrugs. "I've had my body for a lot less time than you have. We can ask Perry, though. He might know."

Tucking the kite back into its case, I make a humming sound. "He also might yell at

us to just eat and stop asking him questions.”

“Yeah.” Aether grins. “He’s so cute when he’s exasperated.”

He only thinks that because he can sway Perry out of a bad mood by kissing him. The rest of us don’t have that option.

I follow him across the roof and back through the dormer window into the tiny attic. None of us can work out why the architect added it, since it’s smaller than some of the closets in the bedrooms, but it does provide easy access to the roof. Since I’ve been banned from using wind currents to get up here when the neighbors might see, and the guys can’t do that without my help, it turned out to be a good thing all around.

“What’s the new guy like?” I ask, mostly to keep myself from getting distracted before we even get downstairs. Perry might get mad if I wander off before reaching the kitchen.

Aether stops on the stairs and turns around. I know he’s not likely to fall, but I still send some air to catch him if he does. It might not be possible to kill him by normal means, but that doesn’t mean the process wouldn’t hurt.

“You’ll like him,” my old friend assures me earnestly.

I nod. “The air said he was nice,” I agree. “But what’s he like? I wasn’t paying attention to the rest—there’s this tornado I have to keep track of.”

Aether opens his mouth, hesitates, then says, “He’s a good fit for the group. The air is right—he is nice. I think he’ll do a good job for us.” He turns around and continues down the stairs while I frown after him. He didn’t really answer my question at all.

Mentally shrugging, I follow him anyway. Aether's a little unconventional—it's why he and Aqua get along so well. Ultimately, their intentions are pure, and they only want the best for all of us. We just can't always follow their train of thought.

The sound of voices draws me toward the kitchen. Lunch is an excellent idea—I wonder if we have any diet soda left? I like the way the air bubbles tickle my insides. Picking up my pace, I?—

Stop as a warm laugh reaches my ears. Around me, the air stills, taking in the sound. It's... magic.

“Zeph?” Aether puts a hand on my arm. There's an odd little smile on his face. “Come on. They're waiting for us.”

Of course. He's— they're waiting. For us. To eat lunch.

I stumble the last few steps into the kitchen, and my gaze skims over the assembled faces until it lands on him .

The air shivers in delight. It likes him. Likes how his presence makes me feel.

As though he can feel me looking at him, he glances up and sees us. “Oh! Uh... hi.” Carefully putting down the sandwich he was transferring to a plate, he wipes off his hands and then comes toward me. “You must be Zephyr. I'm Storm—Storm Lattimer, the new Marketing and Social Media Manager.” He extends his hand, then shivers as the breeze whirls lightly around him, getting his measure. “Sorry, I think there's a draft here or something.”

The air Instantly warms a few degrees, and a bewildered expression crosses his face. I take his hand and shake it before he can give it too much thought. “I'm Zephyr. It's very good to meet you, Storm.” Smiling into his pretty brown eyes, I add, “What a

wonderful name.”

“Thank you. Uhh... I hated it when I was a kid. My mom was fifteen when she had me and she was hooked on this soap opera, so she thought it would be a good idea to name me after one of the characters. Coulda been worse, I guess. She could have liked Ridge better. Can you imagine the nicknames I would have gotten in school if my name had been Ridge?” His eyes widen. “God, I’m babbling. Could we forget I just said all of that? And that I’m still holding your hand. I’m going to let go now and say something normal like a normal person so you’ll be impressed by my ability to be normal.”

I hold tight to his hand as Cody whispers, “This is awesome.”

“I like your babble,” I say. “You have a lovely voice and kind eyes. Your hair is good too.” I admire the styled caramel-colored waves on his head. “I think I might be in love with you.”

“Okay,” Perry shouts, starting forward, “Zeph?—”

“You make all the whispers go quiet,” I continue, pretending Perry’s not there. Luckily, Aether grabbed his arm and stopped him from interfering. “I feel like I’ve known you forever.”

He stares at me for a long time. The room is dead quiet while everyone waits to see if I’ve scared him off on his first day. I haven’t. I can’t have. He’s made of stronger stuff than that.

And he’s meant for me. I can tell by the way the air envelops him. By the way it’s so happy about his presence that the whispers slow down, allowing me to focus on him . I’m not stupid—distracted, yes, but I know what’s been going on. I know that for the first time ever, fate has given us help. That help has come, so far, in the form of soul

mates for us. Aqua was instantly attracted to River, forming a connection like no other in his past. Flame was obsessed with Bran for years—longer than the others know, if what the wind told me is true.

So why shouldn't I get a turn? I deserve someone to love too. Maybe I wasn't really expecting it to happen, but it only took the sound of Storm's laugh to convince me I was getting my chance.

"This is the weirdest first day of work I've ever had," he whispers finally. "It might even be the weirdest day ever."

I let go of his hand and pat it. "We don't really do normal here. It's boring. Would you like a sandwich? I don't want you to go hungry."

He blinks three times. "Uh. Thank you?"

Grinning, and enjoying the excited little whoosh of the breeze, I slip my arm around him and guide him back to the island. There are enough stools for the six of us. "Where's George?" I ask. The part of me that has had to deal with his bad moods for far too many lifetimes wants to rub it in that I get someone to love before him. I also think he'll be reassured by this—why would the rest of us get someone, but not him? He's got a special person in his future, and that's awesome .

"He went to the quarry," Cody says. "I don't know why. There's plenty of rocks closer to here that he can coo over."

I settle Storm on a stool and hand him the plate with his sandwich. "Would you like some soda?" I spotted it before. "It should still have plenty of bubbles, but if it tastes flat, I can?—"

"Storm can get his own soda," Flame practically yells. "I mean... get him a soda if he



wants one, but if it's flat, we have plenty of other things to drink." He glares at me, and I refrain from rolling my eyes. Really? We're still trying to keep secrets from Storm, even though he's my mate? I pat his shoulder.

"I'll get you a soda." I don't care what Flame says, if it's flat, I'm aerating it.

"I don't want to make things uncomfortable," Storm says. "We haven't talked about this... I mean... I guess I hadn't considered..." He trails off, looking unsettled. The air strokes soothingly over his skin, and he startles. "Whoa, okay, I'm not sure where this draft is coming from, but you guys might need to get your HVAC checked out. Or maybe it's a partly blocked vent? That can cause some weird airflow."

"We'll take care of it," Perry says grimly. He and Flame are still giving me death glares. Too bad for them, those don't work on me.

"You could never make things uncomfortable," I tell Storm, getting myself a sandwich. "They're all just overreacting. Aether, tell them."

### CHAPTER FOUR

#### STORM

I'm not entirely sure how it happened, but I think I'm dating one of my bosses who I just met five minutes ago. That's not even the weirdest part. Neither is the way there seems to be a breeze chasing me around the room and... this is going to sound deranged, but I think it's flirting with me? Or the huge secret that everyone is being so obvious about not wanting to tell me.

No, the weirdest part is that I'm cool with it all.

I take a few seconds to just think, turn everything that happened over in my head and process it through my "is this really normal" filter. None of it is normal, but I don't care. When I look at Zephyr, my first thought— Okay, so my first thought is that I want to lick every inch of his torso and feel all that white-blond hair on my skin. But the second thought, once my brain has had time to shove my hormones back into their box, is that just being in the same room as him makes me... happy. I look at him and feel warm and safe and loved, and seriously, what is that? All I know is his name and what he does for work... and that he likes flying kites half naked on the roof. None of that should make me feel loved. Or particularly safe, for that matter.

But it does. If I was one of those people who needed to go find themselves (which I don't) the part of myself I'd be looking for (which I wasn't) is Zephyr. He's here, and suddenly everything is more... just more. Better. Complete.

I'm a logical person. I like plans and analytics. I'm the last one to say love at first

sight is real, or even that soul mates are a thing. I've actually scoffed at people who've said that—my friends and I have an ongoing debate about it that only comes up when we're drunk.

Damn them for being right.

In the meantime, everyone's attention is on Aether, who's wearing a wide, happy smile.

"Aether, babe," Perry begins, sounding dangerous, "if you're about to say what I think you are, don't. Just do not."

What was Aether about to say? I desperately need to know now.

As though he can read my mind, he turns to me and reassures, "They're all overreacting. I can't tell you why, because Perry will get mad and I don't like making him mad. But everything is fine, and we don't care if you and Zephyr love each other and want to be together forever. That would actually be ideal. It's what's meant?"

"What part of 'Don't say it' did he not understand?" Flame asks Perry. "Seriously. You know him better than me. Do we need to start phrasing things differently?"

Zephyr slides onto the stool beside me, moving it closer as he does, and his bare arm brushes against mine. My whole body tingles—but also relaxes. It's unnerving. How can he make me so electrically aware and mellow at the same time?

"You don't need to tell me anything that's confidential," I venture. "Though I'm happy to sign an NDA if there's something I need to know that will affect my work. I just don't want to cause any problems. It's my first day, and we didn't exactly discuss the idea of office relationships." Because I didn't think it would be an issue when working for such a small organization, more than half of whom are already paired off.

That's a little unusual, now that I think about it. Were they already coupled up when they decided to start this venture? I know River still technically works for the Krills Institute, but his research seems to play a big role in what the Conservation Kings are doing.

"We don't have a policy about that," Zephyr says. "Do you want to go for a walk on the beach with me later? The afternoon sea breezes are beautiful." He makes a pensive face. "I think the tornado in Kansas is going to ease off soon."

I blink three times fast. "What?"

"A walk," he repeats. "You can tell me all the things you like."

"Uh... I mean, sure. After work, right?" I check, and Cody laughs.

"When the breeze calls him, more like."

I am so confused.

"What Cody means," Flame says with a glare, "is that we're flexible with work hours. As long as everything gets done, it doesn't bother us if you take the afternoon off and then work in the evening."

I nod. "Oh. Okay." Somehow, I get the feeling there's more to it.

Zephyr sighs. "Really? Can't we just?"

"Hello? Who's home?" a voice calls from the hallway, and a second later a tall man in jeans and a T-shirt appears in the doorway. He bears a striking resemblance to Cody, and his gaze flicks over us, but he doesn't smile until it reaches Flame. This must be the firefighter boyfriend, Cody's older brother.

“There you are,” Flame says, relief heavy in his voice. “Perfect timing. How was work?” He gets up, and they meet halfway across the kitchen for a kiss. It’s sweet, and I find myself smiling.

“Mmm, not as good as this,” the man says when he pulls back. “Sorry I’m so late—we got called out right before my shift was supposed to finish. House fire.”

“Was anyone hurt?” Cody asks. “Oh, and this is Storm. Storm, meet my brother, Bran.”

Bran takes me in, and it feels like he sees everything, including how close Zephyr is. “Hi, Storm. Nice to meet you. I hope everyone’s being nice and not making you uncomfortable.”

“Not at all,” I reply, then wince. “I mean, yes, they’re being nice. I’m not uncomfortable.” He doesn’t look convinced, so I decide to go for broke. “To tell the truth, it’s the weirdest day of my life. I think I just found my soul mate, and since I used to laugh at people who’d say, ‘When you know, you know,’ I’m not sure if that makes me a hypocrite or delusional or what.” I take a breath. “But definitely everyone is great and I think this is a job I’ll love. If I haven’t completely blown it by falling in love with one of my bosses.”

I’m totally expecting a moment of awkward silence, but instead, Zephyr slings an arm around my shoulders and says, “I’m in love with you too. That’s the important part. The details can come later.”

Awwww.

Bran turns slowly to look at Flame, who’s thrown his hands up in exasperation. “How long was I gone?”

“It was all going so well,” Flame exclaims. “Everyone was being normal , and Cody already showed him a lot of what he’d need to do. He started making plans for us. And then, bam—Zeph came down from the roof and it all went to shit in less than a minute.”

“Yesterday’s conversation was just a frustrating exercise in futility,” Perry says bitterly to nobody in particular. Then his expression changes, as though a thought has occurred to him. “Zeph, any update on Brenda and Ted?”

Zephyr nods, chewing on a bite of his sandwich. That reminds me... I should eat. “Brenda wants to tell her sister so she won’t think Brenda’s missing and have the police arrest Ted for being a wife killer.”

I freeze with my sandwich halfway to my mouth. “Excuse me?”

“It’s okay,” Cody assures me. “Ted didn’t kill anyone, and he’s not going to.” He looks at Zephyr. “Right?”

Zephyr purses his lips. “He doesn’t seem like the type. All signs point to no. He just wants to make his mom happy and not accidentally give her a heart attack. She likes Brenda.”

This is trippy. “Are these neighbors?” And would it be rude for me to ask for the backstory?

“Not our neighbors,” Perry hedges. “Bran, you never answered Cody’s question. Was anyone hurt in that house fire?”

Bran crosses to the island and begins assembling a sandwich. “No, it’s all fine. They’d already left for work but forgot to turn off the iron.”

Immediately I wonder if I left my iron on, despite the fact that I not only didn't iron anything this morning but haven't ironed anything in about three months. I've been sending my shirts out to be pressed since the incident where I burned myself and scorched two shirts and (somehow) my shoes while ironing. Now I only get the cursed appliance out when the situation is truly dire.

"I don't know why you're all being so mean," Zephyr complains. "You got to tell your people. Why can't I tell my person? Aether says it's okay."

Here's the awkward silence I was expecting before. I keep my gaze on my sandwich, leaning just a little bit against Zephyr's solid presence beside me, and wonder if I should offer to go eat on the deck so they can have this conversation in private. Whatever it is, it's clear there's some level of need-to-know involved.

Oh my god, did I just start working for drug smugglers?

"I won't do anything illegal," I blurt. "Don't tell me anything. I don't want to know. I can just walk away now and say the job wasn't the right fit for me." Shit, that still leaves Zephyr... "I'll be one of those partners who had no idea about the secret double life my boyfriend was living. Keep it separate from our relationship." There's a note of hysteria creeping into my voice toward the end of that sentence.

"Oh boy," Bran murmurs. "Relax, Storm. There's nothing illegal happening here."

I nod. "Good. Right. Yeah. That's the line you need to hold. Nothing illegal here. Gotcha."

Flame sighs. "Why is this happening to me?" he asks. "Why couldn't it have happened to George?"

There's a moment while they all shudder.

“Changing the subject,” I say brightly, because why not? “Is there a reason he didn’t opt to have a screen name like the rest of you?”

“He’s a geologist,” Perry explains. “All the ones he liked were already taken.”

I think about that for a second. “Ah. You mean like The Rock?”

“Yep. Nothing else sounds as cool.”

“I mean, Stone or Stony wouldn’t be bad?” I even think that could be kind of sexy.

To my surprise, Aether, Flame, Zephyr, and Perry shake their heads in unison. “Pebble,” Zephyr says, as if that’s all the explanation it needs.

“Pebble? Like the cute baby from The Flintstones ?”

Flame laughs out loud. “That hadn’t even occurred to me, but I definitely have to tell George.”

“She was Pebbles,” Perry corrects. “With an s . But no. George tried using Stone once, and I called him Pebble as a joke. He got sick of hearing it.”

I bite my lip to hold in the laugh. I don’t want it getting back to George that I laughed at him—my first impression has to be the best possible, since I’m already kind of hooking up with his friend. Although, is it hooking up if all I’ve done is hold his hand and lean into him? Technically, I suppose no, but he passed me my sandwich. And I’m planning to do a lot more with him later.

“Fair enough,” I concede when I can speak with a straight face. “Do you think he’d be open to a discussion about a screen name, though? Because those seem to get a lot of engagement on your socials. The posts about George don’t have the same reach.”



Zephyr huffs. “That’s because all he talks about is rocks. The only people who like rocks in adulthood are geologists. Can we stop changing the subject yet? I want to tell Storm everything about me.”

Bran sighs. “Of course you do.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Aether adds. “We should tell Storm everything.”

Perry whimpers. “Really? Today? It’s his first day, and I don’t want to interview more people when he runs screaming in the opposite direction.”

For the first time all day, Aether’s face settles into serious lines. “That won’t happen. Trust me. This is how it’s supposed to be.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:08 am*

### CHAPTER FIVE

#### ZEPHYR

Finally! Perry still looks like he's trying to pass painful gas, but Aether's on my side, and he has the final say. Most of the time, anyway. When it comes to stuff like this.

"This is bizarre," Flame mutters. "We've never told this story so often in such a short span of time."

Cody snorts. "It's been two years since you told us. I think you'll cope. But I want to tell it."

He does? I'm not the only one surprised by that—even the air stirs a little.

"You do?" Bran asks. "Really? Why?"

"I probably won't ever get another chance to tell it," the young human says with a shrug. "I mean, maybe it'll need to get told again, but I'm leaving soon, so I'll probably miss that." He stops suddenly and frowns. "Damn it, that's gonna be George's turn. You know he'll be all growly and impossible, and I'm going to miss it."

"We'll send you a video," Perry tells him dryly. "In the meantime, if you're going to do this..." He gestures toward a bemused-looking Storm.

I lean close. "Don't worry, it's going to be okay. I'm here."

For some reason, that doesn't seem to reassure him, so I have the air wrap him up in a warm hug.

His eyes widen in... shock?

Oops. I dial back the intensity of the air. Maybe he's not ready for that yet.

"Yeah, this is why I want to tell it," Cody says. "You guys all make it into this huge, weird deal."

Bran grimaces but says nothing. Aether, on the other hand, gives Cody an approving nod. "They do, always. They make it complicated, but really, it's so simple." He turns to Storm. "This is what's meant to happen. It never has before, but that just makes it special."

That doesn't reassure Storm either. In fact, the air reports that he's begun to perspire with strong hints of anxiety. I frown. Maybe Cody's not telling it right.

As if he can hear my thoughts, Cody rolls his eyes. "Because that's not a weird thing to say." He holds up his hands. "Storm. It's all good. You know a lot about these guys because you've checked out the website and all their socials, right?"

Storm nods slowly, his blond hair shifting slightly in the air that's clinging to him. "Sure. I mean, not a lot about their personal lives, but all the rest of it... yeah."

"Great. So you know they're dedicated conservationists, as in, their whole lives are dedicated to it, and that they each specialize in a particular area. An element, we could say."

"Yeah, of course. That's where the whole marketing direction comes from. That was a great idea, by the way. A lot of Gen X-ers and elder Millennials really relate to it

because of that one cartoon from their childhood.” He smiles. “I looked it up—it’s super cheesy, but I can see why they loved it.”

“People keep commenting about it, but I have no idea what they’re talking about, so I’ll just have to trust you on that. Anyway, the thing is... they’re the elements. We can go outside and Flame can throw some fireballs around or Zeph can make you fly or whatever, if you need proof, but the bottom line is, they’re the elements incarnated to try and slow down the environmental disasters that will eventually kill off humans.”

Storm sits perfectly still. Only the movement of his eyes shows that he’s aware. They go from Cody’s face to Flame’s, then to Aether’s hair, then to... the sink? For some reason, he stares at the sink for almost a minute.

Then he nods. “Okay. Who’s Aether, then? He doesn’t seem to have a specialty.” His eyes widen again. “He doesn’t have a specialty. He’s the green superhero guy who gets summoned!”

Huh?

“What?” Cody says. “Dude, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Aether is, like... life. And Perry is the angel of death.”

Storm falls off his stool. Luckily, I’m right here, and the air and I catch him.

“I’ve asked you not to call me that,” Perry grumbles.

“Why am I hovering?” Storm’s voice is a lot higher-pitched than usual. “I’m not supposed to hover!”

“Sorry, my love.” I have the air carefully lift him back onto the stool and straighten

his clothing.

His head slowly turns toward me. He says nothing. Then he swallows hard. “It’s a good thing I’m not afraid of heights.”

The grin that crosses my face is spontaneous. “I can take you flying. Smoothest ride you’ll ever have,” I boast. “The air likes you—you’ll never fall over again.”

He nods. “I try to avoid that anyway, but that’s good to know. Um. Okay. Should I be taking notes? I feel like I should be taking notes.”

“We try to keep a low profile on this part of our story,” Perry says. “For obvious reasons.”

Storm nods again. “An involuntary psychiatric hold would be inconvenient,” he agrees. “Did Cody really say you’re the angel of death?”

Perry glares at Cody. “He did, but it’s not like you’re thinking. The guys—the four main elements people know about—incarnate if their element is going haywire and needs to be balanced out. When all four are incarnated at the same time, I get born. If, down the track, things are still haywire, Aether comes along. He’s the essence of life, but he can’t corporeate?—”

“Is that a word?” Bran asks. “It sounds made up.”

“He can’t corporealize,” Perry says, with yet another glare, “unless I’m alive, because I’m his balance. Not the angel of death, but the possibility of it.”

Storm thinks about that for a moment. “That’s kind of logical. So you two are like halves of a whole. You can’t have life without death and vice versa.”

Aether beams. “Exactly! See, he gets it.”

“I do have one question,” Storm adds.

“Go for it,” Flame encourages. He looks relieved by how well Storm’s taking everything. I am too.

“What exactly did you guys put in my lunch?”

Nooooooooo. My insides do bad flips, and the wind picks up outside, enough to make the big jacaranda tree in the backyard sway violently. Perry glances out the window, then cuts his gaze to me sharply.

“Zeph, calm down. It’s going to be okay. We don’t need a hurricane.”

I take a deep breath as Storm looks out the window, too, then puts his hand over mine. “I’m sorry! I was just kidding around because it sounds so... surreal. But I do believe you.”

The wind dies.

“You... do?” Cody looks around at us all as though in search of an explanation. “Really?”

Storm nods. “Yeah, really. I watched Aqua playing dolphins in the sink, and I’ve never seen water act that way before. It was splashing when there was nothing to make it. Plus, ever since Zephyr came in, I’ve been feeling a draft... and I swear it’s flirting with me.”

I grin. “It is,” I tell him happily. “The air likes you. A lot. When you’re around, it’s so focused on you that it doesn’t whisper so loudly to me.”

“The air whispers to you?”

“Wait, is that why you haven’t tuned out yet?” Flame demands. He and Perry exchange glances. “Storm can never leave.”

“Now it’s getting creepy.” Storm holds up his hands. “Without threatening to lock me in the basement, can someone please explain?”

“I am air.” There. That should do it.

Judging from the expectant look on his face, he wants more.

“Air is everywhere,” I add.

He’s still waiting, but now I’m confused. Why doesn’t he get it?

“What Zephyr’s trying to tell you,” Bran says, “is that since air is everywhere, and he’s the consciousness of air, he’s constantly taking in information from all over the world. Weather conditions, movements, conversations, odors... everything the air touches eventually reaches him. It’s very common for him to zone out of conversations because of the immensity of sensory input he’s getting.”

I nod. “That. What he said. But it’s been quieter since I came in here with you.”

I’m not sure what the flabbergasted expression on Storm’s face means. Why don’t humans come with a chart for easy interpretation?

“Everything the air touches,” Storm repeats. “Wait, so... those people you were talking about before, they really aren’t neighbors? They’re just... random people? Who you’re eavesdropping on?”

I shrug. “Eavesdropping is a mean word. I’m not going to use what I hear to hurt them. I like fun information—it makes the bad stuff easier.”

“The world needs balance,” Aether points out. “And we’re of the world.”

“Thanks, Yoda,” Perry mutters. “Not helping.”

“I like Star Wars ,” I put in. “There’s always lots of happy excitement when people watch the movies or go to the theme park exhibits.”

“ Star Wars . Okay. Um... gossip and Star Wars . It’s good that I’m learning things about you. So this... sensory input, it’s not a visual thing, is it? Like, you’re not watching people. When they... do stuff.”

“I don’t see it with my eyes,” I agree. “That would be impossible.”

He visibly relaxes and huffs out a laugh. “Oh, that’s good.”

“It’s more like a Braille experience. Only instead of touching bumps with my fingertips, I’m touching events and people with air.”

The sound that erupts from his throat reminds me of a screeching cat.

“Oh my god,” Cody exclaims. “How are you so dense, Zeph? Storm, it’s fine. He never watches when people are having sex or masturbating.”

My jaw drops.

“Cody!” Bran chides.

“What? Zephyr was making it sound like he’s got the world’s biggest on-demand



porn channel in his head.”

“Was I?” I study Storm’s face and see the flush on his cheeks. “I don’t! Sometimes the air tells me when stuff like that is happening, but I don’t pay attention to the details. That’s private.”

He blows out a breath and smiles sheepishly at me. “Thank you for telling me that. And I’m sorry for thinking you would. I, uh... I guess I just got jealous.”

I blink. “Jealous? You want to watch people have sex?” I’m so confused. It seemed like he didn’t approve.

Shaking his head, he slides a hand onto my knee. “No. I don’t want you to watch them have sex. Though,” he adds, “maybe one day we can watch porn together, when we’re in the mood. If you want. But it has to be the kind I can see as well, where the people involved consented to being watched.” He covers his face with his other hand. “I can’t believe I’m having this conversation with people I just met. With my bosses .”

I twine my fingers through his, and the air gently pulls his hand away from his beautiful face. He stares at it as it moves.

“I’m not doing that. Are you doing that? If you’re not, I think you guys have a ghost.”

Bran and Cody laugh, but the sound Perry makes is less joyous. He had a bad experience with a ghost in one of our past lives.

“It’s me,” I assure him. “I won’t do it again if it bothers you.”

He smiles shyly. “No, I... It’s kind of hot.”

My cock reacts to that. It's been a long time since I had sex—with the air constantly feeding me information, bodily needs are easy to ignore.

I don't think I'll be ignoring Storm, though.

"Before you both get caught up in the ecstasy of lovemaking," Perry interjects, "we have to talk about the whole boss thing."

Storm's anxiety ratchets up. "You're firing me? Please don't! I can help—I want to help. And I really need to pay rent."

"We'd never fire you," I reassure him.

"Actually, that's exactly what we're doing," Perry replies. "Storm, you know about everything now. That makes you one of the team. You'll still have a job to do, but instead of a wage, you'll get beneficiary access to our trust account. Your expenses will all be covered."

"You probably won't be paying rent long, though," Bran adds. "If your situation is anything like mine was, you won't like being away from Zephyr and you'll move in soon."

Storm blinks at us all, looking completely confounded.

"Welcome to the family," Aether announces.

### CHAPTER SIX

#### STORM

I've never had a day like this in my life, and I would have thought it would take me a lot longer—like maybe a decade—to process it all, but the second I step onto the beach with Zephyr and the wind whips past me, all the chaos fades away. I can think clearly again, and the bottom line is the same: I don't believe in love at first sight, but I can't deny that being around Zephyr makes me feel something I can't even explain.

Ugh. If I were listening to someone else say that, I'd smile politely, try not to roll my eyes, and prepare for the inevitable fallout when their heart got broken. I've actually done that in the past, while wondering how my usually intelligent friends could be so stupid.

I owe those friends a massive apology right now, because I'm walking along the beach with a man—element? Being?—who I'm pretty sure I'm going to spend the rest of my life with, even though we only met a few hours ago. And he's not human. None of my friends fell in love with nonhumans... unless you count the guy Kaley dated a few years back. He was definitely the equivalent of slime scraped from the bottom of a sewer.

Zephyr's not like that. Our connection isn't like the one Kaley claimed to have with sewer scum guy, and anyway, I'm not going to announce that I'm running off to Vegas to marry a guy I've only known two days, like Kaley did, forcing my friends to lie about how they'd love to be there for the wedding, and could it be delayed for just two weeks? (Those two weeks made a huge, eye-opening difference.)

No, I'm going to be sensible about this. Perry says that now I'm "part of the family," I get access to their trust and basically can live a life of leisure except for the time I devote to the cause. Which sounds cult-ish when I say it like that, but it's really not. Regardless, until I'm sure of myself and everything else, I'll only spend what I would have been earning in my salaried role. I'll do the work I was originally hired for, and I'll live in my apartment... minus the occasional sleepover with Zephyr, because I'm not stupid. I'm going to take things slow and steady, the way I would with any regular guy I met, and either my certainty about my feelings will strengthen or I'll realize it was the haze of lust and attraction.

It's not, though. Zeph and I are fated; I know it deep in my soul. After lunch, he followed me and Cody down to the office off the garage and sat quietly by the open window while we worked. I guess technically he was working too, listening to everything the air tells him. He says the breeze only brings him important news when I'm around, because it's so interested in me that it wants him to be able to concentrate on me. Which gets confusing when you consider the fact that he is the breeze. It's just another part of his consciousness. So... he likes me enough to want to overcome himself so he can pay attention to me. I never really considered myself to be that interesting.

Cody's done some really great work getting everything set up, and I was initially worried that he would be resistant to the idea of me making changes. Sure, he's not going to be around when I do it, but he's a family member, and if he whines to his brother or the others, they might decide to limit the scope of my work. It was a groundless concern, though, because when I tentatively broached the ideas I had—like rebranding, redesigning the website, and tweaking the social media format—he was enthusiastic.

"I'm basically winging it," he admitted. "I love what the guys are doing and I'm committed to it, but I'm making it up as I go along and learning from whatever resources are out there. That's why I told them to hire a pro."

Overall, my first day at the new job was incredibly positive and productive... and weird. My friends are going to ask me about it, and I'm going to need to be very careful of what I say. Talking about my fated boyfriend who's the incarnation of the element of air is likely to get me an intervention and possibly an appointment with a mental health professional. Instead, I think I'll tell them that I've got an incredible workspace right on the beach—true—a fun and supportive group of employers—also true—a job that I'm going to enjoy—still completely accurate—and a guy I think I could have a thing with—a complete understatement, since I think I might have been born solely for the purpose of being with him.

With a little sigh, I let those thoughts go and let myself just enjoy the beach and the company of the man beside me. The sun is still pretty high but dipping toward the western horizon, and aside from a couple of intrepid after-work joggers and a woman with a toddler, we have this stretch of coastline to ourselves.

“How do you stand how beautiful it is?” I blurt, then feel heat rise in my cheeks. “Never mind. I'm sure it's not anywhere as beautiful as it used to be. Humans have done a lot of damage, and anyway, you're part of it all, so?—”

“Sometimes I love it so much I think it might kill me,” he interrupts. “I can't even be killed, not the way most humans can, but I still think I could die from how amazing this planet is.” He smiles at me. “The fact that you can see that means so much. I knew it the moment I saw you. You glowed at me, and the whispering went quiet.”

For a second, I can't breathe. That's the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me. I reach out and tentatively brush my hand against his. He immediately latches on, twining our fingers together. His palm is warm against mine, and a little eddy of air whirls around us. It feels... happy. Can air be happy?

Wait... Zeph is air. Does that mean Zephyr is happy to be holding my hand? I hope so, because holding hands with him makes me happy. So, so happy.

“I’m glad,” I say finally. I don’t know what else to say to express myself, but that’s the bottom line. He makes me happy, and I’m glad I make him happy too. “Is... this might be a stupid question, but is there a way to get things back to the way they were? I know that Perry might decide enough’s been done to prevent, I don’t know, an apocalypse, but is there a way to undo the damage that’s been done?”

He’s quiet for a long time, and I tip my face up to the sun. I’m almost afraid to hear his answer, but I need to know in order to do my job to the best of my ability. The faint hum of traffic meshes with the rhythmic crashing of waves, and a little farther down the beach, a gaggle of seagulls are battling over something I can’t see, their squawks carrying on the air.

“Nothing’s impossible,” Zephyr replies at last. “But with the number of humans on this planet, I can’t see a way to fully heal all the harm. Even with the development of green technology, there’s a natural amount of atmospheric stress humans create just by breathing.” He shrugs. “That’s okay. The planet is designed to sustain life. Humans will eventually die out naturally—it’s the way of things. We just don’t want it to happen before your time is supposed to be up. That’s why we’re here. Our job is to restore balance to the planet as it is now.” He shrugs. “If we can’t succeed, then the planet will take over, and that’s not going to end well for a lot of species.”

I mull that over. “So what you’re saying is that the planet will do everything it can to survive? Does that mean it has a consciousness too?”

Zephyr stops walking suddenly, pulling me to a halt as well. My bare feet skid a tiny bit in the warm sand. “I’ve never considered that,” he says thoughtfully. “If it does, it’s nothing the air’s ever touched... but I suppose it wouldn’t be corporeal, would it?”

“Aether’s the consciousness of life itself,” I say slowly. “Gaia, if we’re going to borrow from existing belief systems. He’s tied in to everything living, but he’s here to

try to prevent an apocalyptic destruction of humankind. Perry's his opposite, but he's also doing everything he can toward the same end—and he's purely human, right? That's what you guys said."

He nods and starts walking again, the breeze dancing around us. "That's right. He needs to be completely of the earth to give us the perspective we need."

"But they're soul mates. Two halves of a whole. Maybe the whole is the consciousness of the planet. Aether is life; Perry is the cessation of life. The rest of you specialize in subsections of the planet, but together, they're the... management team, so to speak. I don't know." I've talked myself into a corner, and I'm not even sure what for. It doesn't matter, in the end. All that matters is that we do our best to prevent Perry from needing to make any tough calls.

"You should mention this to the others," Zephyr says. "Especially George. He likes philosophy, though I've always thought it was just because it gives him a reason to argue with people."

I laugh. "I look forward to meeting him."

For a few moments, we walk in silence, then I clear my throat and broach another subject.

"So... how do you see things going with us? I'm a big believer in communicating expectations in relationships. Especially when the situation is complicated, which I think you'll agree this is." I snap my mouth closed before the rambling can continue.

Zeph gives my hand a little squeeze. "I've never been in a relationship, so I have no expectations. I want us to spend time together and be happy."

Speechless. I'm speechless.

“I want that too,” I manage, smiling at him. “Um... you’ve really never been in a relationship?”

He shrugs. “Nope. Not the kind you’re talking about. There have been sexual encounters, but most of those don’t go well either.”

I don’t know how to respond to that. “Is it... I mean, it’s not because... Are you completely human-shaped?” He doesn’t have a tentacle or anything down there , right?

He doesn’t seem to get the implication, because he glances curiously at me. “Of course I’m completely human-shaped. In this incarnation, I am human. I’m just also a bit more.”

That doesn’t really answer the tentacle question. I’m going to guess no, since tentacles are more of an ocean thing, and he’s the air element.

“But people tend to get annoyed when I become distracted during sex. It’s not that I can’t continue, but they prefer to have my full attention while I’m making them orgasm,” he explains matter-of-factly just as we stroll past two power-walking senior citizens.

I shoot them an apologetic smile, but they don’t notice. The taller one has lowered his sunglasses to study Zephyr, while the shorter mutters, “I bet they do.” I stifle a chuckle, because Zeph’s still talking.

“I won’t have that problem when we’re together. Every ounce of my focus will be on you.”



### CHAPTER SEVEN

#### ZEPHYR

“I don’t want you to go home,” I protest an hour later. “Stay for dinner, at least.” Why is he leaving? I just met him this afternoon, and already he’s abandoning me.

“That’s sweet, but I can’t. I already said I’d meet up with some friends. They’re buying me dinner to celebrate the first day of my new job.” Storm’s smiling indulgently at me in a way that says very clearly that he finds me adorable but isn’t going to give in.

The wind picks up outside, and he glances toward the window as it rattles. “Stop that,” he chides. “I’ll be back tomorrow morning, and you’re going to be sleeping for most of the time between now and then.”

I get myself under control and press my lips together to avoid pouting. When Aqua does it, it looks adorable, but I can’t pull it off. I don’t think I’ve ever even tried to pout before. Distracted people don’t pout that much—our thoughts are on other things. “Why don’t you come back tonight? After your dinner?”

“Oh wow,” Cody murmurs, “that’s kind of pathetic. Does love make everyone pathetic? I thought it was just Bran.”

I ignore him and give Storm my best pleading look, but he shakes his head anyway.

“I want to,” he admits. “But it’s not a short drive, I’ll probably have a few drinks with

dinner, and it'll be late. Plus, it's probably a good thing for us both to have some time to process." He leans in and presses a soft kiss to my cheek. I'd turn my head and try for something more intimate, but that would be creepy. Especially with Cody watching.

Instead, I keep a tight rein on the wind and force a smile on my face. "I want you to be happy, so okay. Even though I'll miss you."

"Really?" Cody whispers. "Has he been body swapped with a thirteen-year-old girl?"

"Cody," Storm chides. "Go somewhere else."

"I would, but?—"

"Why are we standing in the damn hallway?" George bellows as he comes through the door from the garage. Great. Just what I needed.

The grumpiest member of our family stops short. "Who are you?" he asks suspiciously, eyes on Storm, and my hackles rise. How dare he talk to him that way?

"Might want to tone it down," Cody warns. "This is Storm, who'll be taking over my job. You were supposed to be here to meet him today, remember?"

George's scowl darkens. "Dammit, I was busy. Sorry, Storm. It's nice to meet you. I'm George, the team's geologist and volcanolog?—"

"He knows," I interrupt, and George freezes.

"He knows... what?" His eyes track between our faces.

"Everything. Aether said to tell him." Then, because I'm feeling particularly smug

and want to rub his face in it, I slide an arm around Storm's waist. The air reports that Storm's cheeks have flushed in response, but he's smiling, so I don't take my arm away.

George blinks rapidly a few times, then bellows, "Aether!"

"Crap," Perry's voice says from the kitchen. He appears a moment later. "Now, George?—"

"What the hell, Perry! Are we just collecting mates for everyone but me?"

"I don't think it works that way," Perry muses.

"I'm not a collectible," Storm adds. "It was good to meet you, but I've got somewhere to be, and I think this is a conversation I'm not needed for." He slips out of my hold, and I immediately feel cold and lonely.

"Early tomorrow?" I ask hopefully, and he grins.

"Sure. I'll be here at around eight. Have lots of coffee ready." He blows me a kiss and heads for the front door. I trail after him, then watch from the deck as he gets into the car. I wanted to walk him to the car door, but the air carries a whisper from Cody to me.

"Let him have some breathing space."

Fine. I can give him space. I'll wave goodbye from twenty-five feet away and not expect to see him until tomorrow morning at eight o'clock. That's plenty of space, right? Then he'll realize he missed me and decide to move in so we can be together always.

The moment he's out of sight, the breeze, a little miffed that our beautiful Storm isn't by our side, rushes in with an influx of information. Snatches of conversations, interactions, traffic movements, weather reports, pollution reports... I'm bombarded from all sides, my human brain not built to process so much input at once.

My higher senses kick in, and it's not until Cody shakes my arm and repeats my name that I realize he's speaking to me.

"Huh?"

"Wow, you really zoned out," he says. "Like, the second Storm left, you did too."

"It's true, then?" George demands. "When he's with you, you're able to stay focused?"

I nod, trying not to let myself chase after the voices drifting past my ear. "Yes."

"Does all the information stop, or?—"

"Just the nonessential input," I explain. "That's how it was today, anyway. I was still getting tornado and hurricane updates and things like that, but the rest was muted."

He looks less mad now. "That's fascinating. It's because your elemental self is so connected to Storm that you don't want to concentrate on anything else?"

"I think so." The air brings me a broken thread of news. "Hey, Ted's mom arrived early!"

Perry and Cody gasp. George rolls his eyes.

"No!" Perry says. "She wasn't supposed to come until next week! Has Brenda even

moved back in yet?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. They’re trying to cover it up, but the mom is suspicious and asking a lot of pointed questions.”

“There’s no way they can pull this off,” Cody scoffs. “They should just be upfront with her.”

Perry counters, “The time for that was when they got divorced. It’s too late now; they just have to cover their tracks and hope for the best.”

“Really? You don’t think?—”

“As fascinating and important as the story of Tim and Brandi is,” George snaps, “could I get you all to concentrate on the relevant point here?”

My attention drifts off after the sound of a crying infant.

“Zephyr!” George’s shout brings me back.

“Sorry.”

“Does nobody else think it’s worth talking about this?” he asks, exasperation in every syllable. His dark brown eyes search our faces. “Is it a sign that we’re going to win this round? Or that we’re going to lose, but this time we get consolation prizes because we’ve tried so fucking hard? Perry?”

Perry shakes his head. “I don’t know. I still haven’t gotten a feeling either way. We’re supposed to keep going—humanity can handle more, do more.”

George throws up his hands. “So why the fuck is this happening then?”

“Does it matter?”

Like puppets, we turn toward Aether. He?—

“...ever seen clouds like that before?”

“No. The weather girl said we were in for some storms, though. Don’t worry, honey. I’m sure it’s fine.”

I check in on the storms in question—not my Storm, sadly. Double sadly, the storms are the wrong kind for that area—once-in-a-lifetime-type storms. Sighing, I draw down the intensity as much as I can. I can’t stop them entirely, but I can diffuse them over a larger area and make them less destructive. Usually.

“Where’s Aqua?” I ask. I’ll need his help with the rain once the storms hit.

Aether stops midsentence. “He and River went for a swim before bed.”

I nod. He’ll be back in time—and even if he’s not, he’ll know if there are intolerable rain levels and take care of it.

“Everything okay?” Perry checks.

“Storms.” I shrug. “I’ve done what I can for now.”

“Where?” George asks, and I try to match the image in my head with the modern name of the place.

“Hobart. In the southern hemisphere,” I add, because these damn humans have a habit of using the same names for many places.

“Storms in Australia in the middle of winter?” Aether frowns. “Polar?”

I shake my head. “It’s abnormally warm there at the moment. For now, anyway.”

“See, this just makes me think we’re losing,” George exclaims, jabbing a finger in my direction. “There’s been more seismic activity in that part of the world too. Add in the new consolation prizes, and?—”

“Could you stop talking about my brother like that?” Cody asks in a pained voice. “It’s so weird.”

I look around. “Where are Bran and Flame, anyway? And why are we standing in the hallway?”

George glares at me. “I hate you.”

“They’re out back, at the firepit,” Cody says at the same time.

“Let’s all just be chill. Maybe we need to take some deep breaths,” Aether suggests, and the air around him eddies with glee. It likes him a lot—probably because he’s part air. It’s hard to explain Aether to anyone else, but he’s us and we’re him. Only not in a weird way. “Are we breathing? Inhale... ex?—”

“Aether, I swear to?—”

“If you’re talking, you’re not breathing, George,” Aether says placidly. “And if you’re not breathing, you’re not chill. We’re all being chill right now. Come on.”

George sucks a breath through gritted teeth, and I send a breeze to shiver along his spine—just because I can.

“Feel the energy of our beloved planet,” Aether continues. “We are calm. We are part of the all. From the Earth we are born, and the Earth we become.”

“Whoa! Um... I don’t think that’s gonna fit, man. Maybe we should, like, just sixty-nine instead.”

I chide the air for being so salacious and block out the rest of that conversation. Even if I didn’t have Storm now, I don’t need to violate people’s most personal moments. Though part of me wants to assure the guy that with proper preparation, it will, in fact, fit.

Usually.

“Okay,” Aether says at last. “George, I’m hearing your concerns, but they’re groundless. Finding soul mates is a wonderful thing. I’m getting only positive, warm, happy energy from these events. This is meant to happen, and it’s meant to be joyous. I can’t say if we’ll win or lose this fight—that’s Perry’s area—but I know these new members of our family aren’t consolation prizes. They’re partners, here to help us fight and bring us happiness.”

My lips curve up in a smile as I think of Storm. My partner; my soul mate.

George, on the other hand, looks devastated.

“You’ll get someone,” Cody assures him kindly, reaching out to pat his arm. “Zeph meeting Storm should make you even more sure of that. We just have to wait for your special someone to arrive.” He hesitates. “Mine too, though I’m okay with waiting a while and meeting a lot of non-special someones in the meantime.”

“I’m telling your brother you said that,” Perry informs him. “Prepare for a lecture on responsible dating and sexual health and safety.”



“Cody’s right, though,” I add, because George is still wearing an expression that implies his favorite rock just got crushed to dirt. Only worse. “George will meet his soul mate too. Then this house will be full and we can all concentrate on saving humanity.”

George swallows hard. “It’s not... I’m not worried that I won’t meet them.”

Perry frowns. “Okay. So, what, then?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing. I’ve had a long day. I’ll make sure I’m around tomorrow to talk to Storm. Sorry I didn’t get back when I was supposed to.” Without another word, he disappears up the stairs toward his bedroom, leaving us staring after him—even me. The air is so surprised that it stops whispering to me.

“Dude needs to breathe more,” Aether says sagely. “It’ll all work out.”

### CHAPTER EIGHT

#### STORM

“It sounds like you had a good first day,” Pete comments, lifting his beer in salute. “Let’s hope it continues that way.”

I smile down at my burger and dip some fries in ketchup, but before I can reply, Hannah, his girlfriend, butts in.

“Stop being so negative. Just because you thought he was crazy to leave his old job doesn’t mean the new one isn’t exactly what he needs.” She turns an encouraging face to me. “Go on—you were going to say something else. I could tell.”

Pete snorts, but I only grin. Hannah’s a perpetual mother hen, and even though Pete’s been my friend longer, I think if they broke up, she’s the one I’d keep.

“You know I like her better than you, right?” I ask him now. We’ve had this conversation in the past. This is the part where he rolls his eyes and mutters something about everyone liking her better, including him.

“Yeah, yeah,” he says. “If we break up, she gets to keep the cat and all our friends.” A sly smile tugs at his mouth. “That’s why I’ve taken steps to ensure we’re not breaking up.”

I blink. “What?”

Hannah, grinning so wide I think her face might crack, reaches into her pocket and pulls out a fucking diamond ring that's so huge, it nearly blinds me, and slides it onto her finger. "Surprise!"

I drop my fries. "You're kidding! And you let me waffle on about the beachfront location of my new job? Congratulations!" I get out of my chair and go around the table to hug her and then slap Pete on the back. "Finally doing something right, hey?"

"Sometimes I think you forget who brought her into your life," he complains as I sit again.

"Tell me everything," I demand—of Hannah. Pete's an accountant; it's not likely that he has interesting plans for the wedding, other than it can't be in April. Tax time rules all.

"It just happened today," she divulges. "You're the first person to know other than our parents and my brother. Pete asked me to meet him for a coffee break at that bakery near the office, where we met?"

I nod. "The place with the carrot cake I would commit murder over."

"That's the one. I just ordered a latte, but he convinced me to order a cupcake as well—not that it took much effort—and when the server brought it out, it had a little chocolate plaque on it with the words 'Marry Me Please.' Hold on, I have a photo." She grabs her phone and shows me a picture that I dutifully coo over. "I thought it was some kind of promotion or new flavor, but when I looked up, he was holding the ring."

"Wow." I raise a brow at my friend. "Who knew you were so good with the romantic gestures?"

“Hey, I watch YouTube like everyone else,” he defends, making us all laugh.

“So what plans—” I start, but Hannah interrupts me.

“We have zero plans yet. I haven’t even bought any magazines or created a Pinterest board. I want to hear about whatever other thing has happened to you that’s made you all glowy.”

I sputter even as Pete laughs and says, “What the fuck does glowy mean? He’s not a firefly!”

Hannah waves in my general direction. “He’s... happy. Not that he was sad before, but there’s just something glowy about him. I don’t know how to explain it, except it wasn’t there last week and now it is.”

Pete squints at me dubiously. “I... guess? I’m not sure I see it.”

“I do.” Her voice is firm. “Now spill, Storm.”

Squirming a little, I say, “There’s not much to spill.” There’s so much to spill. So, so much. Just nothing they’d believe. “I might have had a vibe with this guy today.” All the vibes.

She squeals so loudly that other diners look over and Pete winces. “That’s okay, I don’t need that ear,” he mutters.

“Shut up, Pete. Storm, tell me everything ! Who is he?”

“A guy at my new job. We met at lunchtime.” All true.

“That’s so fantastic! That’s?—”

“Wait,” Pete interrupts. “I thought this was a really small nonprofit. Like... you and the people who own it.”

I wince. “Yeah. He’s... kind of one of my bosses.”

My friend shakes his head, and even Hannah doesn’t seem sure what to say.

“But not the one I’ll be working with the most,” I rush to add. “Definitely not the one who does the hiring and firing.”

“Storm, come on,” Pete warns. “You’re the first person to say it’s a bad idea to get involved with the boss.”

“Yeah. This looks super bad, I know. But I promise, it’s not. And I’m going to be very cautious. The stakes are big.” They have no idea how big.

“It’s a mist?—”

“We trust your judgement,” Hannah says firmly. “We just don’t want you to end up brokenhearted and jobless. But whatever happens, we’re here to support you.”

“Thanks, Hannah.” I look at Pete. “See? Stuff like that is why people like her better.”

He flips me the bird.

“Now tell us about him,” Hannah insists, smacking his hand.

“His name is Zeph,” I begin, deliberately using the shorter version because it’s easy to believe that could be a shortening of an actual name that people give their kids.

“He’s an expert in air pollution and storm activity?—”

Pete laughs so hard he chokes on his own spit and starts coughing. Hannah passes him the water. “Sorry,” she says to me. “He’s a child.” But her lips are twitching too.

I don’t get it.

“He’s...,” Pete wheezes. “He’s an expert on Storm activity!”

Oh my god. How did I miss that? Heat rushes to my face. “Holy fuck, that’s...” I slap a hand over my mouth and start to snicker.

It’s a few minutes before we’re all straight-faced again, and we’re avoiding eye contact because otherwise, we won’t be able to stop laughing. I clear my throat. “Just to be clear, we only met today. He hasn’t got that kind of expertise yet.”

Pete cracks up again.

I pull out of the parking lot and turn left, still smiling. I’m so glad I decided to come tonight. Aside from the amazing news my friends shared, it was really good to laugh and clear my head after the massive shift in perspective I experienced today. It’s not like it’s a common thing to learn that superheroes are real and fighting to save the planet... oh, and one of them is your fated soul mate.

Holy crap, fated soul mate. That’s heavy stuff.

Still, as good as it was to see Pete and Hannah and give my brain the chance to reset, I can’t deny that part of me wanted to be with Zephyr instead, or wished he could be there. I’m not sure what Pete would make of him—and Ted and Brenda—but I missed him.

Missed. Him.

It's been about four hours since I saw him, and I've missed him this whole time. Is that what having a fated mate is like? Not an ache, exactly, but just this sensation that something that should be here isn't. Like the nagging feeling when you know you forgot something important. That could get annoying after a while.

The car behind me honks, and I realize the light I didn't know I was stopped at has turned green. I wave in apology and put my foot on the gas. Fuck, I need to pay more attention to what I'm doing instead of...

...driving back to the beach house. I am driving back to the beach house. Almost halfway there, to be clear. Sometime after I left the restaurant, while I was lost in my thoughts of how dreamy Zeph is, I navigated toward him instead of home.

I briefly consider turning the car around—to prove a goddamn point, mostly—but then shrug and continue on. So tonight I stay with Zephyr, and tomorrow, I'll go directly home after work. I'll have to, for clean clothes if nothing else.

There are still a few lights on in the house when I park in the driveway, and as I start up the steps, the front door opens. Zephyr grins at me. "You came back."

"I wasn't going to." I stop in front of him. "I was heading home, but somehow ended up here. It's inexplicable."

"It's the way things are meant to be," he corrects. "Come in. You must be tired. Don't worry about saying hello to the others."

I'm not going to protest—I can say hello to them tomorrow. It's not like coming back for a booty call with my boss is something I want to talk to my other bosses about.

Zephyr leads me up the stairs and along the hallway to a big room with a wall of windows. They're all open, of course, and the night air wafts around me. The wide

bed has a fitted sheet and pillows only—no other covers. That might be a problem come winter?—

The breeze eddying through the room turns warm, and I laugh in surprise. “Okay... so you can keep me from being cold.”

Zephyr’s smile is reassuring and intimate. “Always,” he promises. “Come and lie with me.”

We take a moment to undress, but then we’re stretched out on the mattress together, air flowing over and around us like our own personal climate control system. Our mouths find each other’s in long, languid, lazy kisses that have no beginning and no end, and soon the night takes on a hazy quality. I’m floating in the moonlight with Zephyr, and nothing matters—nothing is real—except for his hands and mouth on me and my hands and mouth on him. I’m hard, and I can feel that his cock against my leg is equally hard, but there’s no urgency in this moment. There’s just me and Zeph and the night.

A thousand tiny fingers begin to stroke along my skin, and I shiver, but not with cold. “Okay?” Zeph asks, and I murmur a breathy assent. It’s better than okay.

While the very air surrounding me is working over my erogenous zones, intent on arousing me, I slide my hands down Zephyr’s flanks and reach for his dick. Almost as soon as I close my fingers around the throbbing shaft, an equally firm grip encases mine.

Zeph’s hands, however, are still on my shoulders.

My lips curve against his, and we lazily jerk each other off as we hover, supported only by eddying air in the shadows of his bedroom. It’s the most surreal and yet real moment of my life—I finally get it. I understand what this world is about, what my



purpose here is.

And when we both erupt in breathless, sweaty completion, Zeph lowers us to the mattress again, and we lie together in the patchy moonlight for the first night of the rest of our lives.

### CHAPTER NINE

#### ZEPHYR

#### ONE MONTH LATER

“Zeph?” Storm’s voice brings me back from a very odd tornado in Texas. It’s much farther south than it should be, and I’ve been gently nudging it northward, where people are more prepared for it.

I turn so I can see him. He’s crossing the flat part of the roof toward me, and the breeze dances around him as always. Since the time he slipped and almost fell, but I caught him—from fifteen feet away—he’s been a lot more confident walking around up here. He knows I’d never let him get hurt.

“Hello. Isn’t it a beautiful day?” I hold out an arm to him, and he slips under it and presses against my side. I never thought I could feel this content while corporeal. As much as I love being on this planet, being able to touch and smell and see with the senses of a living creature, I only get to be here when there’s a battle to fight. But now, even knowing we still have so much work to do, I also get to have a little slice of happiness for myself.

“Gorgeous,” he agrees. “I’m sorry to interrupt; I know you’re busy, but?—”

“I’m never too busy for you.”

Storm smiles and presses a kiss to my cheek. “You’re the sweetest thing. You’ll

probably change your mind when you hear what I have to say, though.”

I wince. “Did I accidentally mess up your papers again?” I’d only meant to send him a cooling breeze, but he was getting some files organized, and I might have been a little enthusiastic.

“No,” he assures me. “My papers are fine. I was looking through all the videos Cody did, and I noticed there aren’t as many with you. Why is that? I would have thought the weather is something that would get a lot of clicks, since so many people are concerned about climate change.”

Oh. I try not to look guilty. “Cody tried,” I admit. “I tried too. But I kept getting distracted when he was videoing.”

Awareness brightens his expression. “Ahhh.”

“Yeah. He said we could just keep going and he’d edit it, but sometimes we’d be here for hours and he couldn’t even piece together a two-minute video. So we gave up.”

“That makes sense. Well, things are different now. You don’t get distracted as much when I’m here, and definitely not when I’m talking to you.”

“Only for emergencies,” I agree.

“So it’s settled. We’ll do a couple hours of filming, and I’ll put together some videos for the YouTube channel and other socials.”

“Okay.” Whatever he wants. “What do I need to talk about?”

“Your favorite subject.”

I frown. “You?”

His laugh is beautiful. “No, honey. The air. Don’t worry, I’ve got a list of talking points I think will interest people. We might also start doing some short lives when there’s a notable weather event around the world. Come and find me when you’re finished with your tornado.” He kisses my cheek again and then steps away. My side is instantly lonely without him pressed to it, and I want to ask him to stay.

He won’t though. He’s very strict about getting work done.

It’s another hour before the tornado is in the right place, and thirty minutes after that before I’m convinced it can be left without intense supervision. Then I go down to the office in search of Storm.

He’s typing industriously when I walk in, that little crease between his brows telling me he’s concentrating hard, and pauses just long enough to hold up a finger asking me to let him finish. I recognize the screen as being the back end of our website—I’ve watched him working enough times to know that now—so he’s probably posting an update. That’s okay—I don’t mind waiting. Just being around him is better than anything else.

While he’s finishing up, I sit in the extra chair by the wall and check in on all the news. Meeting Storm has had a lot of benefits—my element has trained itself to process information better. I can prioritize the input so that I’m not ever getting bombarded anymore. The emergency news comes directly to my attention, anytime, anyplace. Important but not urgent information only pops up when I’m between tasks, and gossip is on-demand. The best part is that the air is learning what kind of gossip I like and what can be left unheard. Storm says I’m teaching it to behave like an algorithm, which I don’t fully understand. As long as it’s working, that’s all that matters.

“Done!” He pushes back from the desk and swivels to face me. “Sorry to make you wait.”

I smile at him. “I would wait forever for you.”

His beautiful face goes soft. “You gotta stop saying that stuff while I’m working, Zeph. But you’re getting epically laid tonight.”

“You too. Hey, do you want to hear an update on Ted and Brenda?”

He lights up. “Yes! I’m dying to. The last I heard was when they took his mom out to dinner at that restaurant and Ted’s ex-girlfriend came over to tell him he left some of his stuff at her place.”

His mom’s meltdown when she heard that was something I’ll never forget. After a rant that got the attention of all the other diners, she stormed out of the restaurant and didn’t speak for the rest of the night. “Well, Brenda wanted to tell her the truth then, but Ted begged her not to—said his mom would forgive an affair since they were staying together. Brenda didn’t want his mom to think she’d ever take her husband back after an affair, so they compromised and ended up telling her that they’d gone through a rough patch, separated for a few months, then reconciled and were now better than ever.”

Storm’s jaw drops. “Why? They had the out right there! How old is Ted’s mom, and do they really think they can fake being married to each other for the rest of her life?”

I shrug. “That’s the best part—she was supposed to go back to Spain next week, but she’s just told them that she’s decided to move here. Apparently, this visit was to test out whether she wanted to live in the US again, and she does. She said, and this is a quote, ‘I want to be near my beloved son and daughter-in-law, and hopefully many grandbabies.’”

The choking sound Storm makes worries me, but then he bursts into laughter. “That’s the best thing I’ve ever heard! They are so screwed.”

“Yep. That happened today. They haven’t had a chance to talk in private yet.”

“That’s going to be one hell of a conversation! Oh, oh—Brenda’s sister is going to be so smug! She told her not to do this.” He shakes his head. “Make sure you tell the others this later. Cody and Bran have a bet going about whether Ted and Brenda will actually end up back together by the end of all this.”

“They told me. Cody wanted to know if I had any inside information.”

Rolling his eyes, Storm turns back to the desk and grabs his tablet. “He would. Okay. Enough fun. Time for us to do some work. I’ve made a list of things we can do some videos about. For today, I thought we’d start off easy and just do two.”

I look at the list on the screen. I could talk about all those things for hours, especially if Storm is the one asking me questions. “Which ones did you want to do today?”

He taps the top of the list. “What are storms, and then, this isn’t on the list, but since there’s going to be a lot of attention on the freak Texas tornado, what if we do a short video about that? Why it happened and why it’s bad, in very basic terms.”

My face must show what I’m thinking, because he laughs. “I know it’s complicated and not basic at all. But if you had to explain it to an older child or teenager, or anyone who doesn’t have any knowledge about weather patterns, that’s what we want to put online. We’re trying to educate people who are looking for answers but can’t or don’t want to parse through the technical terminology.”

“I guess I can do that. You might have to stop me if I start getting too off-track,” I warn.

“Don’t worry, I will. Come on.”

He takes me over to the filming area he and Cody set up. There’s a green screen that I’m supposed to stand in front of, with some big lights and a camera pointing at it.

“I just stand there and talk?” This is a bit different from when Cody was trying to do this with me. He would find me wherever I was and point his phone at me.

“Stand on the piece of tape.” Storm points to the taped X on the floor. “Then wait while I set things up.”

It’s interesting to watch him fiddle with the lights, look at the camera screen, then fiddle some more and mutter to himself. I love his intensity for the things he cares about, and the fact that the things he’s most intense about involve me.

“This damn—ugh!”

“What’s the matter?”

“I only want this light to move, like, a millimeter , but it keeps going— Oh. Thank you.” He shoots me a grateful look as I send a probe of air to adjust the light.

“Is that how you want it?”

“Yeah, that’s perfect. You’re the best. I should have just asked for help, huh?” He steps back from the light with a rueful shake of the head.

“That’s why we found each other, right? To work together?”

He taps a button, and the lights blaze to life, making me squint as my human eyes adjust. “Stop saying shit that makes me want to jump you. We’re working. Okay,

now I'm going to start filming, and you're going to talk to me."

"About tornadoes?"

"Not yet. Have you had lunch yet?" His attention is mostly on the camera screen.

"Yeah, Aether brought me a sandwich. Ham and cheese," I add, since he wants me to talk. "What I really wanted was sponge cake. Have you ever had really good sponge cake? The kind that's so airy, it feels like it dissolves in your mouth? I like it without any fillings or toppings."

"In other words, you like it because it's got a lot of air in it," he says dryly, and I shrug.

"Aqua makes us eat soup a lot, but we don't eat sponge cake and souffle anywhere near enough."

"Do you get along with your colleagues?"

"We're brothers," I reply simply. I know what he's doing now—trying to get soundbites he can edit into the video, or a video at some point. "Sometimes it seems like we're opposites, but it's the simple truth that everything exists in balance. That balance isn't always perfectly equal, like people think, but as long as the balance is maintained, the status quo continues. Seventy percent of the planet's surface is water, not land, but that's from a human perspective. We can't breathe or live beneath the surface of water, so we discount the fact that the floor of the oceans are still rock, in the simplest terms. And below that is the core, which is basically molten metal. The air and water and other influences from above balance with the heat and movement in the center, and we all go on about our day."

"And air is in everything, right? Even if it's not breathable for humans."



“Exactly,” I agree. “Almost everything, anyway. Everything works together, in balance.”

“So even though air and water might seem like they’re opposites, they’re connected?”

“There’s plenty of air in water.” I smile. “Humans just don’t have the right filtering system for it. There’s a lot of water in air too. We just call it humidity.”

“Why is it more humid when it’s hot, or in places that have hotter temperatures?”

“That’s a fun fact—cold air doesn’t retain moisture as well as warm air. So if you live in a more temperate climate, it’s more likely that you’ll have higher humidity.”

“Does that mean there’s no humidity in places like the Arctic?”

“Not exactly. There needs to be a certain amount of humidity in the air for snow to be able to form. But there is a place in Antarctica, for example, where it’s both so cold and has so little humidity that there’s no ice.”

Storm looks up from the camera. “Really? No ice? In Antarctica?”

I nod. “Really. Air and water have to have the right balance for snow and ice to occur, and in the Dry Valleys, that balance isn’t there. There could be a blizzard just a few miles away, but not there.”

“Wow. Water and air are what people think of when it comes to weather—wind, rain, and humidity. What about bigger weather events? What’s a storm, exactly?”

I take a second to collect my thoughts. He wanted me to keep this relatively simple.

“There are a lot of things that make a storm, but…”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:08 am*

STORM

A YEAR LATER

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” Perry asks. “You don’t have to do it, you know.”

I link my hand with Zephyr’s and smile. That’s sweet, but “I’m sure. People have been asking a lot, and it’s starting to distract from the content. It’s time to share.”

He shrugs. “Your call. Okay, so I hit the Live button, right? That’s all?”

“And then read out the questions and comments,” Zephyr informs him gravely. “Only the nice ones, though. This is a safe space.”

I give his hand a little squeeze. He and the other guys have gotten a lot of traction since they started doing live Q&As. We set a lot of them up during school hours so classes can participate, and that turned out to be so popular that we trialed doing them during school hours in different time zones around the world. My favorite outcome from that has been the number of new adult followers who say their kids came home and talked about us.

In the last few months, the guys have been approached individually and together to appear on various talk shows, some of them more serious than others. We agree with strict guidelines about what can be discussed: nobody here is interested in celebrity, only in raising awareness of the damage being done to the environment. Unfortunately, with the increased platform comes the haters and trolls, and Zeph got

pretty upset when I had to tell him why I sometimes frowned when reading comments or questions during a live. He hadn't realized before then, since I always skip them, of course.

The thing is, with me leveraging platforms like Instagram and TikTok, and the guys all looking the way they do... I make them wear shirts in all the videos, with the exception of when Aqua and River took me diving with them, and then they wore dive suits with one very brief bare chest moment in the boat after. Aqua unzipped his suit while he was explaining something we'd seen for the camera, and what he was saying was important enough that I decided not to edit it out. I had to police the comments in that video hard .

Even with shirts on and talking about environmental science, they've attracted attention from a subset of social media people who usually only watch thirst traps. And also, weirdly, BookTok and Bookstagram. I'm still not sure how it works, but there's a viral video of a woman playing short clips of the guys and saying, "This is why I'm bisexual and not a lesbian. This! Men, this is the kind of man women want."

We've picked up a whole lot more followers since then.

Everyone's welcome, of course, and a lot of the new people have commented about stuff they never knew before watching our content, and how they've started sending emails to their local representatives, or that they switched brands of a certain product to one they know has more sustainable practices. Then there are the comments asking personal but inoffensive questions about the guys. Bran largely stays off camera, but Flame has mentioned that his boyfriend is a firefighter, and of course River is in most of Aqua's videos and some of his own. Perry even pops in occasionally. But people have been asking a lot lately about "the voice behind the camera," i.e., me. They know my name is Storm, because it's come up a few times, and I'm identified on all accounts as the admin/moderator, but I've never had the camera pointed at me. That hasn't stopped a lot of speculation about whether I just work for the team or if I'm with one of them, though—some of it is even right. Group orgy theories pop up on a

semiregular basis, and I always delete those. Sometimes I think people forget the guys—and me, by extension—are real people.

Hence, today. My big introduction to the world. We decided on a TikTok live, since that's where most of the speculation is, and then we'll also post videos on other platforms and add a bio for me on the website. I'm definitely not going anywhere.

I take a deep breath—not used to being on this side of the camera—and nod to Perry. “Do it.”

He taps the screen with one hand and gives us a thumbs-up with the other.

“Hi, everyone,” Zephyr says. “Today's a special day. Storm has finally agreed to show his face!”

I start to lift my hand in a wave, then realize it's still holding Zeph's—on camera, oh my god—and wave the other one instead. “Hey! You all probably know my voice by now. I'm the Marketing and Social Media Manager for the Conservation Kings, aka the guy who runs the website, asks the questions while filming, and replies to—or deletes—your comments.” I pause, then add, “I'm also Zephyr's boyfriend. We've been together a year.”

Perry holds up a finger to indicate the questions and comments are already coming in.

“Zeph and I will answer a few questions—the respectful ones. Perry's moderating, and from the look on his face right now, he's a lot stricter than I am.”

“Is this really what people ask while we're doing these lives?” he exclaims on cue. “No wonder you won't let us see the comments until you've had time to go through them.”

Zephyr's eyes widen, and he looks at me. “Really?” He turns back to the camera. “Be

nice to Storm, everyone. Nice questions only.”

Perry winces. “Not that kind of nice, koderie567. I’m definitely deleting that one. Okay, there are a lot of really kind wishes. Do you want me to read everyone’s names?”

“If they’re not questions, Zeph and I will go through and like and reply later. Let’s not drag this on too long. But thank you to everyone who’s being nice enough to impress Perry, the most cynical person I know.”

“Here’s a question I can actually ask,” Perry announces. “Storm, does this mean you’ll be appearing in Zephyr’s videos from now on?”

“Probably not,” I say honestly. “For one thing, he’s the expert, not me. I also need to do my job, which is mostly behind the camera. But you’ll see me occasionally.”

“I promise to make him show his face sometimes,” Zeph adds.

“How did you get your job?” Perry reads. “Was it because— Yeah, I’m not reading the rest of that question.”

I tsk at the camera. “Be good for Perry, everyone. I’ll answer the first part, though. Before I started, the social media manager here was Flame’s brother-in-law, Cody. He’s awesome, and he managed everything while he was still in high school, but when he left for college, the guys advertised for a marketing manager who could take what Cody had built and grow it. Enter, me. I have a degree in marketing and web design and a master’s in social media management. Plus I worked for years with a team of experienced branding and PR professionals. I got this job because I’m qualified for it... I just didn’t realize the bonus would be falling in love.”

“Aww,” Perry says. “Lots of likes for that.”

“It was a bonus for me too,” Zeph says softly, and I smile at him, breaking my own rule, which is not to look away from the camera during a live. He’s got that look in his eyes that says he wants to kiss me, and I rub my thumb over the back of his hand, part warning, part promise for later.

“Are you hiring?” Perry reads, then answers, “We’re not, are we?”

“Not right now,” I confirm. “It’s not off the table for the future. As we’ve said before, Conservation Kings is a not-for-profit with the aim of raising awareness and improving education about the planet and the current environmental situation. The guys are really private, and before Cody convinced them to bring me on board, they really did prefer to run things themselves.” I make a face. “It honestly wasn’t planned for me to end up with Zephyr, I swear. When I told my best friend I had a vibe with one of my new bosses, I got a lecture like nobody’s business, and I agreed with every word.”

Zeph snorts. “What’s a little hypocrisy every once in a while? It worked out for me.”

I elbow him as Perry laughs. “Okay, you said you wanted to keep this really short, and it’s already nearly four minutes. One more question?”

“One more,” I agree. Under five minutes is the goal—I don’t need this video stealing attention from our other content.

“Are we actually helping or making a difference? How do you guys not get discouraged by how bad things are for the environment?” Perry shoots me wide eyes. “That ended up being darker than I thought.”

If I do this again, I’m going to have to teach him to read the whole question to himself before saying it out loud.

“I’ll take this one,” Zeph says confidently. “Yes, we’re all helping and making a

difference. All of you, especially. It's easy to be discouraged when every day there's news of climate-change-impacted natural disasters or weather events, or of an oil spill, or that another species is endangered. Yes, we do sometimes get discouraged too. But you need to think of the change that's been effected in just the last few decades, as we learn and share new information. Conservation awareness is at its peak right now, and every new generation is more informed and more idealistic about what's going on and what needs to be done. Educate yourself, and gently correct misinformation when you hear it from friends and family, and then use that knowledge to show your elected representatives how you want them to legislate. Write letters and make phone calls. Share information on social media."

"After you've fact-checked it," I add, and Zeph nods.

"Yes, definitely that. Change might be slow, but it's happening, and it will speed up as education increases. There are still a lot of things that can be done, and even though we get discouraged some days, it's important to carry on the next day."

I'm definitely going to be using parts of that speech for other videos.

"Our goals are to let awareness and education drive better environmental practices," I add. "The fact that you're watching this video and maybe follow us means we're making progress on that. One step at a time."

"And on that after-school special note," Perry says, "I think it's time to say bye-bye."

"Zeph will be back tomorrow," I promise the camera. "Bye, everyone!"

"Thanks for watching," Zephyr adds, and then Perry taps the button to end the live.

I heave a sigh of relief. "That went pretty well."

"Easy for you to say," Perry complains. "You didn't have to read some of those

comments. I need a shower.”

I read them for every post, but then, that’s my job. “Aether will console you,” I tease, then turn to Zephyr. “The way you handled that last question was perfect. You were perfect.”

He leans in and kisses me. “The only reason I can do any of this is because of you. It’s not me that’s perfect, it’s us. Together.”

I’m never going to argue with that.

Thanks for reading Zephyr !