Tell Me Another Fairy Tale

by madame_faust

Summary

It was a story that made the front pages of the newspapers: A missing grad student, a disfigured composer, a mad tale of music, and abduction, and addiction.

Dalir Nouri doesn't read the papers. Since leaving the police force on disability, he's been working as a sober companion for recovering drug addicts. And he's just been contracted to Gerard Carriere, to maintain the sobriety of his son Erik. (Based on the Charles Dance miniseries, but adding the Persian.)

Notes

Another germ of an idea, because Erik always needs his Persian (and I love the Dance version of the character). I've got some other snippets written, but for now this is just a teaser. I thought someone else might like to read it.
Chapter 1

There was one photo on Mr. Carriere’s desk - a little boy, maybe four or five years old. Redheaded, freckled, holding a spaniel puppy and grinning broadly up at whoever was taking the picture. Grandkid?

But, no, Dalir recognized the collared striped Oshkosh shirt the kid was wearing - he’d owned one himself, wore it for his Grade K school photo. So, this was probably a picture of his son. Erik. Weird that he wouldn’t have a more recent picture.

“Mr. Nouri - or is it Officer Nouri?”

Gerard - ‘Call me Gerry!’ - Carriere strode into the office, looking frazzled. He was a good-looking guy, maybe in his early sixties, with a head full of salt-and-pepper hair that was standing on end, like he’d been running his fingers through it. He had the build of a linebacker and probably cut quite an intimidating figure when he was younger, which was kind of funny for a guy who owned a performing arts center.

“Dalir’s fine,” he said, rising and shaking the man’s hand. Dalir prided himself on keeping in shape, but he was only average height; his hand was basically swallowed in Carriere’s mitt. “I’m retired, so - ”

Mr. Carriere laughed, “That’s something - how old are you? Thirty?”


Mr. Carriere nodded. No cracks about, ‘Oh, back problems?’ or complaints about city workers and their pension plans. He gestured for Dalir to sit down and he took a seat across from him at his desk. Despite his disheveled personal appearance, apparently he liked his desk arranged just so. He adjusted the picture of his son slightly, tilting the frame just enough that Dalir’s view of the image was obscured.

“Thank you for coming to see me before you head over to the apartment,” Mr. Carriere said, all business, but with a friendly smile. “I’m sure that this isn’t your usual way.”

Dalir shrugged, “Every case is different - it’s not usual for a family member to want to talk beforehand, to go over information that might not have been included on the application.”

Mr. Carriere’s smile faded slightly. “Yes. Well, Erik is - oh, I’m sure everyone tells you that theirs is an unusual case. Not the average...drug addict.”

“There is no average addict,” Dalir said. “No average people. Everyone’s got a story. Everyone’s got different reasons for getting started, different reasons for getting in deep, and different reasons for getting sober. The opioid epidemic - ”

“I’ve read up on it,” Mr. Carriere cut him off, but not rudely. He seemed overwhelmed, a little, and Dalir backed off the empathetic approach. “In certain regards he is...typical. There’s a family history of mental illness. And...there was a personal crisis, about a year ago. Obviously drugs are never an appropriate coping mechanism, I’m not saying that, I’m just...I want you to understand that he’s not...”

Mr. Carriere trailed off, either losing his train of thought or not wanting to let slip words that might make Dalir doubt his sympathetic disposition.
A junkie. One of those people.

“I’m sure he’s great,” Dalir said finally. “I’m not here to judge, I’m just here to make sure that Erik makes progress with his sobriety. That’s all.”

Once that was out of the way, Mr. Carriere got down to the usual itinerary - a set of keys for the apartment, a list of Erik’s medications, an outline of his usual schedule.

“He’s going to meetings three times a week, at the Methodist church at the end of the block,” Mr. Carriere said. “He works from home, so there’s no commute to or from the office to worry about. He doesn’t get out much, honestly. I’d like for that to change, but he’s had a really hard year. So, I know that’ll take time. I understand I’m not hiring you to be his friend, but - ”

“Establishing a normal routine is all part of the plan,” Dalir reminded him. “I’ll do whatever he likes, encourage him to get out. Coffee shop, ball game - ”

“Right, that might not...How do you feel about theatre?” Mr. Carriere asked.

Dalir shrugged, “Whatever Erik likes to do, it’s fine with me to go along with him. I’ve always thought going to the movies alone was kind of depressing, so yeah. Whatever he likes.”

Mr. Carriere took in a breath, like he was going to explain something, but he stopped himself. “Well, that’s for you and Erik to discuss. I’ll call ahead and let him know you’re on the way. Ah. The case worker told you about the...mask, yes?”

Yeah, that had been the one truly ‘unique’ aspect of this particular case. E. Carriere wears a mask, which covers a childhood disfigurement. Mask is not medically necessary.

It was weird, but not necessarily alarming. Anyway, he was a musician, so Dalir assumed it had as much to do with drama as it did with anything else.

He took his leave of Mr. Carriere with a handshake and a copy of the keys in his pocket. He usually didn’t take his suitcases into the home with him when he first arrived, he liked to get a feel of the place and the client and not come barging in like, hey, I’m your new roommate, good luck with staying clean, by the way, can you help with this? Most of his clients, even those who knew he was only there to help, were still resistant to someone coming in and sharing their space, acting like they owned the place.

The apartment was located in a cute little neighborhood full of brownstones, window boxes, college kids on bicycles. The only odd thing about Erik Carriere’s apartment were the windows. It was a nice day, not so hot that you’d want the A/C on, but the windows in the apartment that matched the location Mr. Carriere gave him were closed, curtains drawn.

Dalir buzzed himself in on a panel just inside the door - no name next to Apt. 5, but that was the number written on the application. The buzzer clicked, but no one spoke through the intercom. Dalir wondered if it could only receive and not transmit.

“Hey. This is Dalir Nouri. Is, ah, Erik there? I came to look at the apartment.”

No need to overexplain his purpose. Some clients in the past preferred he play the part of roommate and he didn’t know if Erik was alone or had someone over.

“Come on up.”

So the intercom did transmit. The door buzzed and Dalir walked through, taking the elevator up to
the second floor. Apartment 5 was located one down on the left; it looked like it only shared a wall
with one other apartment, that didn’t have a number on it. The door was cracked, but Dalir knocked
anyway.

“Come in.”

The intercom hadn’t done the guy’s voice justice - Dalir knew he was a musician, but damn. Erik
Carriere had only spoken two words, but that was enough. He had a deep, soft voice, with a warm
resonant quality. The kind that movie studios would pay through the nose to have running
voiceover for them. Or that people who distilled small batch whiskey would like to have
describing the unique oaky quality of their brew.

Dalir pushed the door open and entered the apartment - wow. Holy shit. The place was huge. It had
to take up half the wallspace of the row house, he walked into a little entryway that led into a huge
kitchen on one side and a living room on the other. No bachelor pad this, the furniture all matched
and looked like it had been chosen with the historic feel of the building in mind. Plush couch,
leather armchair, built-in shelves full of books.

It put Dalir’s sublet to shame - half his furniture he’d pulled from the side of the road when he was
in college. There were actual paintings on the walls here. With real paint! Not reproductions or
prints in plastic frames. There was nary a video game console to be had - a prerequisite in the
apartment of every other thirty-year-old man Dalir had ever known. It was only the tv mounted to
the wall and extensive DVD collection that convinced him Erik Carriere wasn’t actually some kind
of vampire, pretending at enjoying a modern existence, while actually living firmly in the 1800s.

“Do you want a drink?”

Dalir spun around. Erik Carriere - where the hell had he come from - was standing by the kitchen
island, wearing a white button-down, hands in the pockets of his jeans. Dalir sized him up, out of
pure habit. Big dude, six-four, easy, with broad shoulders and a decent build on him. It was
immediately obvious he took after dad that way. The red hair wasn’t as vibrant as it had been in the
picture on the desk, settling down as he aged into a light reddish-brown.

There was something unusual about the hairline, which seemed a little jagged, not the result of
natural receding that guys pushing thirty might expect. But that might have been because it was
pushed back by the mask which rose up higher than the average person’s forehead. It covered his
whole face, save the mouth and chin. The mouth was normal enough, but there was a scar running
across the chin which had a weird curved puckered quality, like a deep wound had been sutured
there. The closer Dalir looked, the more he saw evidence of that childhood disfigurement the
application talked about - his right ear was malformed, curving in on itself, like it had been eaten
away.

All this he noticed in about three seconds, and his lack of an immediate response might have been
attributed to being startled. No need for the guy to think he was being studied, like a high school
anatomy assignment.

“Sure,” Dalir replied, crossing over with a hand out to shake. “What do you have?”

Erik Carriere ignored the hand and opened the fridge. “I’m not really a soda drinker, but I wasn’t
sure if you might be. I’ve got Coke, Pepsi, seltzer. Or wine and beer. Obviously water. I’m not
alcohol restricted. But I don’t know if you drink.”

Dalir did drink, but it was a little early in the day to start - it wasn’t even three in the afternoon yet.
“Water’s good.”
“Ice?”

“Sure.”

Erik Carriere went into the cupboard and pulled down a glass, filled it halfway with ice and water from the fridge. He set it on the island. Weird that he didn’t hand it to him, but Dalir didn’t comment, just picked it up and took a drink. “Thanks.”

Erik Carriere’s eyes shifted around, behind Dalir, toward the door. “No bags?”

“They’re in the car,” Dalir told him. “I didn’t want to come in like I was taking the place over.”

The mouth twitched in something that might have turned into a smile had it not faded back into a line almost at once. “That’s thoughtful, but...we both know you’ll be staying for some time. Why make an extra trip?”

“It’s just two bags, a suitcase and a duffle,” Dalir shrugged. “Not too much trouble - especially since you’ve got an elevator, that’s nice. Last place I stayed at was a five floor walk-up.”

Erik Carriere drummed the fingers of his left hand on the countertop. He had huge hands, like dad, but his fingers were long, more elegant than one would expect for someone of his stature. Annoyed? Or just a habit that didn’t mean anything? It was hard to tell what the guy was thinking, what with the mask and all. What was it made of? It looked like leather, but wouldn’t that get hot? Maybe that was why he kept the windows closed and the AC on. Temperature control.

Then again, Dalir figured he wouldn’t wear it when he was alone. The mask was probably for his benefit.

“You know, you can take that off, if you want,” Dalir offered, gesturing vaguely at his own face. “I was a cop, seven years. I’ve seen some stuff.”

Again, the mouth twitched into something that might have been a smile or a grimace. “No. Thank you for the offer...but no. Do you want to get your bags now?”

It was phrased like a question, but not voiced like one. On the scale from ‘disaster’ to ‘amazing’ this encounter was squarely in the middle. Not good or bad. Clearly Erik Carriere was discomfited, having him there, but he wasn’t been rude. Just a little edgy.

“Yeah, sure, sounds good,” Dalir said, and turned toward the door. Then he remembered what Mr. Carriere said about getting his son out of the house. “Want to give me a hand?”

Erik Carriere shook his head - only slightly, a little ruffling of his hair, but he took a breath and said. “Sure. If you’d like.”

They proceeded to the staircase in silence. Dalir noticed Erik left the door to his apartment open. “Not going to lock that?”

“No,” Erik Carriere replied. “No one in this building would go in.”

Must have security cameras, Dalir figured. Not a bad set-up. He was curious about whether or not Erik Carriere rented the place himself or whether dad helped out, but that wasn’t any of his business. Anyway, the answer would definitely influence his opinion of his client and his job was to stay neutral.

They didn’t meet anyone on the stairs, or outside - Erik Carriere insisted on taking the heavier
suitcase and didn’t even bother using the wheels as he lifted it inside. Dalir was going to have to intensify his gym regimen, the guy was fit. He used his right hand to lift the suitcase and that was when Dalir realized that the scarring was not confined to his face - there were raised scars on the back of the hand, disappearing into his shirt. Burns? Skin grafts? But Erik Carriere dropped the hand from Dalir’s sight as they trudged back toward the building, just as a family was leaving.

A pretty young girl, with two kids in tow (nanny?), wrenched the kids out of their way as they came back in. Erik Carriere backed himself up against the wall to let her pass and the look she cast in his direction was pure hate.

“Don’t ever talk to that man, you guys, you hear me?” she told the children as they left the building. “He is a bad man.”

“Then why does he live here? Why don’t the police get him?” the older of the two children asked.

“They should,” she said, tightening her grip on the kids. “One day they will.”

Dalir looked at Erik Carriere, trying to get a read on him. Apart from the substance abuse, there wasn’t any criminal history on this guy, so he had no idea what the girl was reacting to, unless she thought he was dealing. Erik Carriere’s jaw went very tight, but he just walked into the foyer and pressed the button for the elevator, like nothing had happened.

“Uh...who was that?” Dalir asked when they were in the elevator. “...ex-girlfriend?”

No hint of a smile this time. “I think her name is Samantha. She nannies for a family on the first floor. Takes her job very seriously, that’s all.”

Erik Carriere didn’t say anything else until he showed Dalir his room. It was a pretty standard guest room, but it did have its own bathroom, which was fantastic. It didn’t take Dalir long to realize that there was no other apartment on this side of the building - Erik had half the floor to himself. The wall where the kitchen was should have been the limit of the apartment, but there was another door, closed, that led into another room.

“That room is partially soundproofed,” Erik told him, once they’d put the bags down. “But let me know if you want to switch with me, my bedroom’s in the back and you’re next to my music studio. I keep weird hours, so if I bother you while you’re sleeping - ”

“I’ll let you know if there’s a problem, but I’m a really heavy sleeper,” Dalir told him. “Do what you need to do. I don’t want you flipping your life upside-down just because I’m here.”

A smile now. But a very sad smile.

“It was flipped long before you turned up,” Erik Carriere said. “I’m...I know this is your job, but...thank you. For being here. And if you need anything - particular foods or brands of soap or some paid channel on the television, let me know. I’ve got a Netflix account, watch what you want, whenever you want. The wifi is RU3GR, all capital letters. The network key is on the side of the router next to the television. I opted into HBO for the month. I don’t know if you watch Game of Thrones, but since you’re an adult male between twenty-five and fifty, I figured the odds were good that you did.”

It took Dalir a minute to realize that Erik Carriere had cracked a joke. He smiled, “Yeah...you got me pinned, but I’ll pay half the HBO if you want. You don’t watch it?”

“But really my thing,” Erik Carriere shrugged. He glanced around the room once more, as if memorizing it - it smelled faintly of new paint, now that Dalir noticed it. The carpet still had that
slightly slick, brand-new feel. Had it been remodeled? “Well. I’ll let you settle in. There’s a meeting tonight at eight. But I shouldn’t need to bother you before that.”

“You’re not bothering me,” Dalir said automatically. “I’m here for you.”

Erik Carriere sighed. “Yeah. But...I’m really trying not to be a...problem. I’ve been a lot of people’s problem. And that has to stop.”

Dalir didn’t ask - he didn’t know what this guy’s triggers were and didn’t want to poke the bear. With another inscrutable look, Erik Carriere left the room and disappeared next door, into the music room. Despite his prior mention of the noise, for the next three hours, Dalir didn’t hear a sound.
Chapter Notes

Apparently I'm more invested in this story than I thought. For look - a chapter! (Though I have a sneaking suspicion that this story is going to be, like, 70% exposition since THE DRAMA as I imagine it has already come to pass.)

**Minor Spoilers for the plot of The Wicker Man - if you haven't seen it, you should!**

After a week of cohabitation, Dalir couldn’t say they’d fallen into a rhythm, necessarily, but Erik was fairly low-maintenance. They went to meetings, faithfully - Erik never tried to beg off, reschedule, or claim he had something else to do. Granted, Dalir would have seen through that immediately, since Erik *never* had other plans. Or...other friends. He was home a *lot*, usually working in the music room, which was presumably where he took his meals since Dalir had never seen him eat anything.

The fridge was always well-stocked with food, but Erik never went to the grocery store. When Dalir suggested running to the market, Erik pulled up an app on his tablet for a home delivery service that gave users the option of selecting from the inventory of several area grocery stores, including a few mom-and-pop joints. Convenient; with stuff like this at his disposal (and the money to spend on it) no wonder Mr. Carriere was worried about his son turning into a hermit.

Though (and this was where judgey!Dalir reared his ugly head), if Mr. Carriere wanted Erik to be more outgoing and independent, he might want to stop shoveling money on him. He hadn’t asked, but Dalir concluded there was no way a guy younger than him could afford this set-up on his own. Not a musician - the starving artist was a stereotype for a reason. Dalir usually avoided Googling clients, since things came up he might not want to see, but a quick search for ‘Erik Carriere, musician’ didn’t turn anything up, except for some really old blog posts from what appeared to be a defunct high school website. Nothing in the years since, save for his name popping up on lists of “workshops” being offered at the local college ten years ago.

There was one picture that came up in his limited searching, from high school. Erik apparently had a goth phase - he was wearing all black, and he was ridiculously skinny, but there was no mistaking the red hair or the white mask. There was a caption underneath that read ‘Best rehearsal pianist EVA!!!! Erik with a K!’

It was all coming together for Dalir: Erik clearly had some kind of accident after the picture in his dad’s office was taken, but before he went to high school. Dad has the means and inclination to let him live his passion, so he sets him up in a fancy apartment where he can plunk out tunes on the piano all day and not actually get a real job. Easy enough to explain where the addiction came from: whatever happened to Erik, it looked bad, from the little glimpses of his uncovered skin that Dalir caught now and again. No doubt he was prescribed some heavy-duty pain meds by a well-intentioned doctor and things went south from there. It happened all the time.

Sad, but plenty of people had it worse.
One of the terms of maintaining Erik’s sobriety was for Dalir to do searches of the apartment for stashes - Erik didn’t own a car, perk of living in the city. He’d been over every inch of the place with a fine-toothed comb, but nothing came up. It forged a kind of one-sided intimacy on Dalir’s part: he was learning a lot about Erik, even though the guy wasn’t much of a talker.

The music room was insane - when Erik first mentioned it, he pictured a little recording booth, or maybe a spartan room with a piano. Nope. The walls had weird rigged panels on them, for soundproofing and there was a recording booth, a sound mixer, computers and electronics that Dalir moved and rattled around all the while trying not to destroy them. There had to be thousands of dollars worth of equipment and instruments - all of which he had to search. He turned guitars upside down, shook violins, looked inside the piano with a flashlight, but the only thing he managed to find was a lost guitar pick.

The bedroom was scrupulously neat and Dalir’s suspicions about Erik’s medical history were confirmed when he opened the top dresser drawer. Where most people kept socks, Erik had a wide collection of NSAIDs, anti-inflammatory medication, Tylenol with Codeine, a TENS machine...but no narcotics, no opioids, nothing. Dalir even opened his pill bottles and checked every single one to make sure he wasn’t storing anything heavy-duty in with the over-the-counter stuff.

There was an extra mask on a shelf in the closet, along with a collection of jeans, button-downs, three pairs of nice sneakers - what Dalir was starting to think of as Erik’s uniform. No shorts, no sandals, and though he did have some t-shirts and long-sleeve thermal shirts, Dalir hadn’t seen him wear them.

The one slightly awkward thing about the layout of the apartment was that the master bathroom and master bedroom weren’t connected; the building owners, when knocking down walls to combine the two apartments turned what had originally been a bonus room into a large bathroom. Dalir assumed that the people who lived her before Erik were older, there was one of those built-in metal bars in the shower that people who weren’t steady on their feet could use to help with balance. Dalir never used it and with Erik’s frankly bizarre schedule - the bedroom door was as likely to be closed at noon as it was at midnight - he’d never seen him going into or coming out of the shower. Dalir had the impression that Erik saved the showers for when he was out of the house.

Despite popular media conceptions, a sober companion wasn’t an adult babysitter. He wasn’t there to hover over Erik, spy on him, or otherwise control his life. He was there to keep an eye on things, make sure he made his meetings, took his meds (typical cocktail to treat anxiety/depression), and generally took care of himself.

Sometimes there were friends or acquaintances who needed to be avoided, routines that had to be changed, but Erik’s current routine, though it didn’t do anything for him socially, at least didn’t seem to make him inclined to use.

Dalir heard him on the phone, occasionally - Erik made phone calls in the kitchen and kept his cell on the coffee table in the living room. Another way for Dalir to subtly make sure he wasn’t talking to a dealer. Lots of calls to his dad, Mr. Carriere checked in once a day, though he hadn’t come by the apartment. When Dalir checked the texts they were all from his dad, but there were a few out of state numbers in the made and received calls list, mostly Los Angeles and Chicago. Lots of calls from New York City. Those seemed to be business calls and none were close enough to arrange any kind of exchange.

Erik never seemed to have cash on him, he bought everything online. The only package that came through was a jacket from Amazon that Erik sent back, saying it was too snug in the shoulders. He left the package in the foyer; despite the theft risk, he didn’t take it to the post office himself.
The conversation about the jacket was the most Erik spoke to him since the day he arrived. He didn’t seem to be avoiding Dalir specifically, he just worked a lot and required a lot of personal space. Which Dalir could respect, as long as Erik didn’t seem to be up to anything shady.

Dalir spent a lot of time watching Netflix and catching up on his gym time, out of the apartment - he varied his hours at the gym, just so Erik didn’t notice a pattern that might give him ideas about arranging for a drop-off. Erik had his own little set-up at home, with one of those crosstraining machines and free weights, but it was located behind the music room and Dalir didn’t want to tramp through his actual working space at all hours of the day.

Besides, unlike Erik, he liked being outside. He went running in the city park and got to know the staff at the coffee shop down the block pretty well. That was one thing he learned Erik liked that he couldn’t get delivered - fancy artisanal coffee. So he picked a large house blend up for him when he came back from his runs. Tentative overture of friendliness, even if it wasn’t actually helpful for getting his ass out of his apartment. Before Dalir started suggesting things he thought wouldn’t go over well, he figured they ought to at least know each other more. Trust each other, a little - or, if it was an inherent part of Dalir’s job never to trust Erik entirely, to get Erik to trust him.

Erik’s first overt friendliness gesture came after a day of phone conversations and furious emailing with someone Dalir heard Erik call ‘Lynn,’ (which couldn’t be right since the voice coming through the phone on the other end sounded like a man). Whoever it was, apparently they were working through something difficult. Erik disappeared into the music room for an hour, banged around on the piano so loudly that Dalir actually heard him and then came out, hair standing on end around eight at night. Then, miracle of miracles, he actually spoke.

“Do you want to watch a movie or something? I need a break.”

Dalir still wasn’t quite used to that voice. Possibly because Erik used it so infrequently. He’d just popped a frozen dinner into the microwave, but he nodded and said, “Yeah. Want me to call for pizza or something? Have you eaten already?”

“I’ll eat later,” Erik said, digging around in the back of the fridge until he found a beer. “Want one? I’ve got a white IPA that’s pretty decent.”

“Whatever, yeah. That’s fine,” Dalir said, even though he wasn’t really a fan of IPAs, he preferred something darker. After his dinner pinged, he took it out of the foil wrap and sat down on the opposite end of the couch from Erik who was drinking a beer and...he was out of uniform. Wearing pajamas. Like, honest-to-god flannel pjs with a clashing plaid robe on top. He looked...unexpectedly cuddly. And wasn’t that a bizarre thought to have?

The only weird thing was Erik was still wearing his sneakers; his long legs were propped up on the coffee table, shoes and all. But Dalir just sat down, didn’t question it.

Erik asked how he felt about ‘70s horror from the UK. Dalir said, whatever he liked was fine with him. Erik studied him for a beat, then got up to search through his DVDs.

“The Wicker Man okay?” he asked, holding the case up. “I’m in a folk song mood.”

“I’ve only seen the Nicholas Cage one,” Dalir shrugged. Erik closed his eyes as if dealt a physical blow.

“You poor thing,” he muttered, popping the DVD in. Then he paused awkwardly, crouched next to the DVD players. “Uh...there’s nudity. Is that...okay?”
It was one of the more subtle ‘Hey, I’m pretty sure you’re a Muslim...but how Muslim are you? Like Muslim-Muslim? Or just...Muslim?’

that Dalir had ever heard.

“It’s fine,” Dalir replied, holding up the beer. “I’m not super-observant.”

The only thing about him that was even partially religiously motivated was the fact that he’d resolved never to get a tattoo. Half because he thought tattoos, even the nicest ones, eventually got either warped or faded and it wasn’t worth the trouble and half because he was pretty sure that his mother would murder him. She wouldn’t even have to see it, through some kind of psychic mom-sense she’d know the second a needle touched his skin and she’d drive all night to track him down and personally stab him. Again: not worth the trouble.

Oh, and he didn’t eat hotdogs. But mostly because he thought they were gross. Though from-the-freezer TV dinners were acceptable. He was a man of many complexities.

The movie was nothing like the Nicholas Cage one, but Dalir wasn’t sure, at first, that it was actually good. It was mostly weird. A Scottish cop (he had some difficulty understanding the plot because everyone had an accent) was looking for a missing girl...who might have been murdered...but was maybe alive. On an island of naked, drunk, British pagans. Erik wasn’t wrong when he said there was nudity, it was like walking through the mayo aisle of the grocery store.

“That guy is such an asshole,” Dalir said, about the cop character, more than once. It was clear the islanders were hiding something, but you don’t exactly gain friends and influence people if you go around bashing their religion - even if their religion is batshit insane.

“Yeah,” Erik agreed. “We’re not really supposed to like him. You...you used to be a police officer. Right?”

Dalir nodded, going to the fridge for another beer; it actually was good, for an IPA. “Yeah. Seven years - I’ve been off the force for the last three. Want another one?”

“Sure,” Erik replied and they drank and watched women running through fire - naked, again. Then Saruman showed up, which was a surprise for Dalir. “Do you mind my asking...what made you quit?”

“I didn’t,” Dalir said, knocking back some more beer. “I’m out on permanent disability. I got shot.”

Erik flinched a little, looking him over like he’d suddenly see the hole weeping blood. “Oh. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine, it - here,” Dalir pulled down the neck of his shirt to show off his less than impressive scar. Just a little divot on his shoulder, the doctors did a great job patching him up. “It was stupid - friendly fire. During a protest outside the college, I don’t remember who was protesting what, who got violent first, I was just trying to make sure those kids got out alright and none of my guys got hurt. One of the guys on my team got spooked, thought a kid was pointing a gun at him. There wasn’t a gun, it was a flare, like a torch. Anyway, he pulls his gun, got shoved, the thing goes off, the bullet finds me...yeah.”

All hell broke loose after that. The kids freaked out when they heard the shot, the officers freaked out when they heard ‘Officer down!’ Luckily no more shots were fired - tear gas into the crowd and Dalir at first didn’t even realize he’d been shot. He thought someone had thrown a rock or something. It was only when blood started soaking his arm that he realized he was in trouble. The
riot made CNN, someone tried to reach him for commentary, but there was nothing to say.

“I went to rehab, but I still have a tremor,” he said, lifting the arm. Steady as a rock, of course. “Okay, sometimes I have a tremor. It comes and goes. But it was the right arm and you can’t carry a gun if you can’t shoot straight. The thing that sucks is I was really sure I was going to make detective. That’s what I wanted to do when I first became a cop, work with people, you know? I’m good with details, with finding patterns. But now I do work with people, so...it worked out.”

Erik nodded, solemnly. Dalir turned his eyes back to the screen and after a minute so did Erik. They were quiet, until the climax - when Dalir, eyes wide, started yelling at the TV.

“Oh, holy shit! No way - no way. Oh no...nope, nope, don’t do that! Don’t you - well. Fuck. Fuck, man. Should have rowed your ass back to Scotland, man.”

From the other side of the couch, Erik watched him, tremendously amused. Dalir turned toward him with a bemused expression. “Those apples aren’t coming back.”

“Aren’t they?” Erik asked as he got up to put the DVD back in its case. “Or even if they do - does that prove anything?”

“See, I wasn’t expecting...like, intellectual shit. Man, you said horror and I was expecting, like, Jason or something,” Dalir explained. “Not...I don’t know, world religions.”

“It makes you think,” Erik shrugged, putting the DVD back in its proper place on the shelf. Very orderly, this apartment. Not super lived-in feeling, but then Erik was pretty neat. No photographs lying around; there were some photo albums on the bottom book shelf, but Dalir had only flipped through casually when he was doing one of his checks. No framed pictures on shelves or on the fridge, but that wasn’t all that strange. Most people just kept their pictures on their phones and didn’t bother printing them anymore. Dalir certainly didn’t. “How long...I understand if you can’t answer my questions, I won’t be offended if you can’t - but how long do you usually stay with a...client?”

“Depends,” Dalir said, looking up at him. God. Big cuddly redhaired dude in a robe. He wondered what Nanny Samantha would think if she saw him now. “Sometimes I stay for a week or two when someone’s waiting to get into treatment. Other times I stay for longer, a month, three months. One guy - two years ago - I stayed with for almost a year. It was supposed to be six months, he was waiting for a job transfer. There were influences in his city he wanted to get away from, friends, family. He didn’t want to totally cut them off, but he needed someone to help him stick with his program. That was me. The company took longer than they thought arranging his new position, so I wound up staying with him about nine months. It just depends on the situation. How long you think you’ll need. Why, want to get rid of me already?”

Dalir grinned to show he was kidding and Erik chanced a small smile back.

“Not at all,” he replied with real honesty in his voice. “I’ve...always lived alone - I had a single room in college. I thought I’d have a harder time with this, but it’s been nice. Having another person here.”

He ducked his head, shyly, when he said that. Like a little kid.

“You should get a roomie,” Dalir recommended. “I mean, not off craigslist or something. But...someone you know. This has got to be a lot of rent to keep up with.”

“Oh, I don’t ‘rent,” Erik shook his head slightly, hair flopping over the mask. “This is a condo. My
first adult purchase, since I don’t own a car.”

My first purchase, he said. Really?

“Wow,” Dalir looked around, as if seeing the place for the first time. “Um. So...your music. You’re...successful.”

A modest smile graced Erik’s face and he shrugged. “I do alright. Anyway. Thanks for the companionship - I’m going to head back in. You know. Since I’ve got a mortgage to pay.”

“Yeah,” Dalir said, brain scrambling to catch up. *If he’s this young and this successful - and wears a freaking mask - why haven’t I heard of him?* “Night, Erik.”

“Good night, Dalir,” he replied. And disappeared into the music room.
I wish I could say they've actually gotten out of the apartment, but Erik is stubborn and Dalir is patient, so we get more conversations on the couch!

**Warning for descriptions of trauma, mental illness, and bodily injury.**

After their impromptu movie night, Erik started making himself a little bit more available - they even developed a thrice a week habit of watching a movie after they came back from evening meetings. They switched off choosing - Dalir made Erik watch the new *Baywatch* movie because he thought it looked freaking hilarious (Erik definitely laughed at least once), and Erik made him watch *The Imitation Game* because apparently he wanted both of them to go to bed feeling extremely depressed. They then watched *Get Out*, which neither of them had gotten around to seeing; they agreed that the alternate ending was more powerful, but they preferred the theatrical ending. They also agreed that they would from now on only watch movies together that neither of them had seen before.

He also finally saw Erik eat for the first time! A granola bar in the middle of a Tuesday afternoon, but still. Progress.

It was unsustainable, Erik’s determination to not get into Dalir’s way, to only let himself be seen as he wanted to be seen. He was incredibly fastidious about the mask, so much so that Dalir stopped seeing it as being separate from Erik’s actual face, but the rest? Something had to slip eventually. And it was two and a half weeks into their arrangement that something did.

Erik always knocked, before he entered any room unless he knew for a fact that Dalir wasn’t in there. Dalir just thought it was a quirky Erik-thing, a weird courteousness. It never occurred to him that Erik might be extending others a courtesy that he wanted for himself.

After a trip to the gym on a rainy Thursday turned out to be a bust, Dalir entered the apartment without knocking. Erik was coming out of the bathroom, fresh from the shower, not wearing the mask. Dalir didn’t see anything of his face, he turned as soon as he heard the door creak open, rising up to cover himself. All Dalir could see was his back...but he could see his entire back. And his arms. And his...legs. Yeah, he was only wearing a towel. Shit.

A different kind of guy would have yelped, ‘Sorry!’ and run out the door, but Dalir wasn’t sure if that would make things weirder. He’d played sports all his life, went to the gym, was a cop and honestly? The more butch the situation, the more stereotypically masculine, the more comfortable guys were showing off their bodies. And if he ran off, he’d definitely show Erik he wasn’t comfortable seeing him...even if it was true. Because, despite his seven years being a cop, of ‘seeing some stuff,’ Dalir’s gut reaction to seeing Erik’s exposed skin was to turn away and shut his eyes.

The skin on Erik’s back was red in some places, white in others, shiny, puckered, and scarred. The scarring over his right shoulder was built up, layered and thick, and pieces of his back and arms looked like a ragdoll’s. Patchwork. Veiny and raw. Skin grafts. Just like Dalir thought the first day; he must have been burned and badly. The right side was the worst, places looked melted, like
Erik kind of awkwardly shifted so that his right foot wasn’t as visible, but Dalir saw anyway; he was missing three toes. As Erik took off for the bedroom, he walked with an lumbering gait, a noticeable limp. There must be inserts in his shoes to help him with his balance; hence never taking them off.

*Snap out of it, Nouri!*

“Hey!” Dalir called weakly after him, trying for ordinary. His voice broke for the first time since high school, but he cleared his throat and tried again. “Gym closed early. Rosh Hashanah. I didn’t realize gyms closed early for that.”

No answer. Shit.

“You want take-out?” Dalir called again, to the closed bedroom door, tossing his bag on the kitchen island. “I figure since my workout’s a no-go, I could just pack on more calories. How about Chinese?”

Again, nothing. Dalir just hovered awkwardly in the kitchen until Erik finally came out, ten minutes later.

Erik emerged from the bedroom wearing jeans, the ever-present shoes, and - this was new - a t-shirt. Dalir had never seen him in a t-shirt. It looked...well, if he ignored the way the neck pulled away to cling to the scar tissue, and the different shades of skin up and down his arms and neck, it actually looked really great. His initial assessment was spot on: there were muscles under those scars. Abs. Dalir swallowed and looked up at Erik’s face, masked. His hair was still wet.

“Chinese?” Dalir asked, holding up a takeout menu like he’d just been casually thumbing through, not staring at the red image of a rooster without actually reading anything. “I’ll pay.”

“Are you sure you’re hungry?” Erik asked tightly. “You’ve got a strong stomach, Dalir.”

Dalir smiled weakly, “*Game of Thrones*, man. We’re the HBO generation. I used to eat TV dinners while *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* was on. That show was...extreme.”

“But fake,” Erik reminded him. “This is…”

He gestured to himself, then folded his arms. Whatever happened to him...it was gnarly. And it happened when he was a kid.

Dalir had zero idea how to fix this. All the clients he had...some of them had physical issues, but nothing prepared him for Erik. A selfish part of himself thought they should have included ‘burn victim’ on Erik’s application, but it didn’t have anything to do with Dalir’s role as a companion. And he figured it out already. He knew Erik had scars, assumed he’d been burned. But assuming and seeing were different. Very, very different.

But that was Dalir’s problem. Erik couldn’t help how he looked. And, since Dalir had gotten a little better at reading his reactions behind the mask, he quickly realized that Erik wasn’t angry he’d been seen. The stiff posture, the folded arms...that was humiliation. Plain as day.

“I told you, I’ve seen stuff,” Dalir shrugged. “And nothing could ever make me not want General Tsos Chicken. I could have salmonella and still want General Tsos Chicken.”

Teeny, tiny smile. But it was something.
“Order whatever you want,” Erik said. “I’ll eat the leftovers.”

“Okay, so, can you just tell me what’s up with that?” Dalir asked, setting the menu down on the island. “You’re not a twig, you obviously eat, like...are you one of those sleepwalking eaters? Because -”

“I don’t usually eat with the mask on,” Erik interrupted him. “It’s awkward. It’s...yeah. So order what you like, I’ll wait.”

This was not an argument they needed to have right this second. Dalir had been at this long enough to know when to pick fights and he knew this was not a fight worth having. Someday, yes. But not now.

“Well, do you have something you like?” Dalir asked him. “I’ll order it and stick it in the fridge. Like I said, my treat.”

Erik paused, then said, “Number Seven combo dinner - sweet and sour chicken. I have the palate of a five-year-old.”

“No judgement, man,” Dalir said, picking up his phone to order. “No judgement.”

Erik sat on the couch while Dalir ate his dinner. Both of them watched Jeopardy! and in their two-person couch competition Erik was the clear winner - though there was one sports category that Dalir dominated on, and he did respectfully at geography.

Dalir put his leftovers in the fridge, along with Erik’s untouched meal.

“You want this now? I could…” he trailed off. It was way too early to go to bed. But it seemed like a dick move to park himself on the couch so he could watch TV while Erik starved.

“I’m not really hungry,” Erik said, turning down the volume of the TV, turning on the DVR. “Do you mind if we watch Dancing with the Stars? It’s the only show I can talk about with my mom, since I don’t watch The Voice. Unless you’re a Shonda fan and you’d rather -”

“I am not - every time someone reminds me that Grey’s Anatomy is still on, it’s a revelation,” Dalir said, making his way back to the couch and settling in. “My mom is also obsessed with Dancing with the Stars, so it’ll give me an excuse to call her. Does your mom live nearby?”

“No,” Erik said, selecting the recorded show. Dalir usually only caught it when he was back in Dearborn visiting the family. Every time he watched, it got sparklier and sparklier. And fewer and fewer of the celebrities were people he’d actually heard of.

The longer they watched, the less comfortable Erik seemed. His hand fidgeted in his lap and he crossed his right leg over his left knee, bouncing his leg nervously. Dalir tried not to think about the missing toes on that foot.

“Okay,” Erik said, pausing the show midway through. “This might be a me-thing and not a you-thing - I have a tendency to...mind read. According to my therapist. Anyway. I feel like I owe you an explanation -”

“You really don’t,” Dalir said. Then, trying to be accommodating to Erik’s wishes said, “Unless it’ll make you feel better - more comfortable, whatever. I don’t need to know.”

“I think you should,” Erik turned on the couch so he was looking Dalir right in the eyes. They were green, like Dalir’s own, but lighter. More hazel-y. Bizarre detail to fixate on. But they looked nice
with his hair. “You’ve probably guessed most of it, but...creating an air of secrecy only makes it more difficult to talk about things that don’t have to be difficult to talk about.”

“Your therapist tell you that too?”

“Yeah,” Erik nodded. “Sometimes he’s right - sometimes I think he’s full of shit, but whatever.”

It was the first time he’d heard Erik *swear* and it was so profoundly normal - and thus totally absurd - that Dalir laughed.

Erik smiled, but didn’t laugh. “I’ll try to give you the quick version - basically, it was one thing that happened. One night. But it’s affected me for the last twenty-five years. So it’s kind of a big deal.”

“Sure,” Dalir said simply, reaching for the remote. He turned off the TV and gave Erik his undivided attention. “And if it’s too much...stop when you need to. If you need to.”

“Thanks,” Erik said. His left arm twitched, like he was going to reach out to Dalir, but thought better of it. Instead he just lay his arm over the back of the couch. And started talking.

The story actually started before he was born - when his parents met, in college, mom was a theatre major, dad went in for business. According to Erik her voice was amazingly beautiful. They started a little theatre company with his business acumen and her circle of talented friends. It was a moderate success. They got married a few years later. Erik came along (and wasn’t that the most bizarre way to refer to having a kid? It sounds like a baby just strolled up to the house, rang the bell, and asked to come in for the next eighteen years). Three years after Erik was born, they split up.

“Are your parents still together?” Erik asked, then added, “Obviously don’t answer that if you can’t, or don’t want to.”

“No, it’s fine - yeah. They’re together still,” Dalir said. Actually his parents were the sappy sort of couple who were still ridiculously fond of each other and cute together - once, when they were detained at the airport for a “random intensive interview” the TSA officer said they were such a sweet couple. Almost made up for the scramble to get on the flight. “Thirty-five years.”

Erik thought a minute and nodded, “Yeah, it would have been about thirty-five for my parents, if they didn’t break up. It was a lot of things, partially the stress of being in business together and, partially...personality stuff. Mom had always been kind of...erratic.”

‘Erratic,’ in Dalir’s experience could mean a lot of things. It varied from running out to Home Depot at nine p.m. with an intense desire to repaint the living room to leaving the kids locked in a motel room with a box of Cheerios to go on a roadtrip with a new boyfriend.

“Very go with the flow, impulsive,” Erik explained. “My Dad isn’t like that, so that was one of the things he liked about her when they first met. She was his...manic-pixie-dream-girl, you know?”

Dalir had seen *Garden State*, so yeah, he understood.

“I remember - I was really little, like, Kindergarten little,” Erik continued, fingers drumming restlessly on the couch. “She used to come to the school in the middle of the day, randomly, and pull me out. We’d go...to the arcade, to the beach, to the park. The two of us, I thought it was great. But then she’d take me home and Dad would be furious. She was...telling the school I had doctor’s appointments that I didn’t have. Family emergencies that didn’t exist. It was at that point they realized that stuff they previously wrote off as personality quirks and character flaws - like
donating all her clothes to charity and spending her entire paycheck on a new wardrobe - were actually symptoms of something.”

There was a really long pause.

“If I get a drink right now,” Erik said slowly. “You're going to think it’s self-medicating.”

Dalir checked the time on the cable box. 4:30PM. A little early. And Erik hadn’t eaten all day. “Yeah, probably.”

Erik sagged deeper into the couch with a sigh. “Okay. But...I can’t even begin to explain how...deeply awful it is to know that during your best memories of your mom...that she was basically out of her mind.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine,” Dalir said quietly. Erik’s left hand was inches from him. Close enough to...what? To hold? No way. They barely knew each other. Dalir was realizing there was so much he didn’t know, it was overwhelming. But he listened on, gave Erik an encouraging little nod and he gamely kept up the story.

“She got diagnosed with BPD - bipolar disorder, I think they still called it manic-depression back then,” Erik carded the fingers of his right hand through his hair, but he did not touch the strings of the mask. “The only reason she went to see someone was because Dad said if she didn’t, he’d take her to court for full custody - I stayed with him most of the time anyway and...as much as she turned up when she wasn’t supposed to, she’d miss drop-offs, or cancel my weekends with her at the last minute.”

It was a story Dalir heard all before - mentally ill parent, not taking care of the kid. Thank God Erik had his dad, who at least seemed to have his shit together, even though Dalir had been writing him off for days as an enabler.

Suddenly Erik chuckled dryly, “I told you this would be short, didn’t I?”

“That’s okay,’ Dalir said, finally reaching out and giving Erik’s forearm a squeeze. He tensed, slightly, but didn’t pull away. “Take as long as you need. I don’t have a hot date tonight.”

Erik’s mom - Isabella - got on medication, started seeing a therapist, all good stuff - “She was trying,” Erik insisted, as though Dalir wanted convincing. “They started her on Lithium, which helped, but the side effects are awful. She was taking this new medication and my dad was letting me stay over again - just overnight. And she didn’t tell him that she’d changed meds. She didn’t think it was relevant. My dad’s never forgiven himself, but...he couldn’t know. And she couldn’t know. It wasn’t anyone’s fault.”

There it was again, the feeling that Erik was quoting someone. It wasn’t anyone’s fault.

“She turned on the oven, put in a pizza, went to turn on the TV, but...she fell asleep,” Erik recalled, his usually rich voice subdued, with all the plodding quality of a metronome. “I tried to wake her up. I couldn’t. There was smoke, the fire alarm was going off…”

His bright green eyes had gone very far away.

“Hey, if this is...too much, you can stop,” Dalir reminded him gently. “This is...a lot.”

“I’ve come this far,” Erik murmured. “Might as well finish.”

Erik - six at the time, six fucking years old, went into the smoke-filled kitchen to dial 9-1-1. He had
to stand on a chair to reach the phone. And the building his mother was staying in was old - faulty wiring, the investigation uncovered.

“I was panicking,” Erik said quietly. It might have been something that happened to someone else, something he saw on the news, for all the emotion in his voice. “But I knocked the phone a jar when I hung up - the operator told me to get down on the floor. I did. But there was a spark, an explosion...the next thing I knew, I was in the hospital. My Dad was there. He’d been crying. I remember just those two things: I was in horrible pain and I couldn’t move. And Dad was crying.”

He swallowed hard and Dalir felt sick to his stomach, but he schooled his features into a neutral expression. It didn’t do to get upset in front of the victims, that was what he learned at the academy. They looked to you to stay strong, stay clear-headed. And all of this happened years and years ago. He couldn’t go back and get the super to fix the electrical. He couldn’t tell Erik’s Dad to maybe hold off on the visit until Mom adjusted to her meds.

“What...happened to your mom?” Dalir asked. Clearly she was still alive if she and Erik bonded over *Dancing with the Stars*. But if Erik looked like this, and she’d been unconscious…

“The fire was contained to the kitchen, she wasn’t burned,” Erik said. “But...the fire department got me out long before they found her. They didn’t think anyone else was home - just, straight-up child neglect. She suffered major smoke inhalation, it damaged her lungs. She never...never sang again.”

Erik took a bracing breath and sat up, very straight, “The thing to remember, Dalir, is I’m actually very lucky. I have all my fingers, both my eyes. Arms and legs. Yeah. I’m lucky.”

Lucky...Dalir was beginning to suspect that Erik’s therapist was, in fact, full of shit. Because, (granted he’d only taken a few psych classes in college), he was pretty sure that it wasn’t really helpful to tell trauma victims, You know what? You’re lucky! Just think of all those other burn victims out there who don’t have hands, or eyes, or tongues! God, you’re practically perfect, compared to them! It’s basically like nothing ever happened to you! Just remember, whenever you’re feeling bad about the fucking fire that ruined your life - it’s only a little ruined! It could have been way more ruined, you lucky son of a bitch.

Whoa. Breathe. Where the hell had that come from?

“Mom’s in a long-term care facility, in Denver,” Erik concluded. “It’s...hard for me to get out there, since, you know, planes don’t really love a guy in a mask coming on board. We mostly talk on the phone. She’s...she’s doing well. It’s a nice place, very *Now, Voyager*.”

“Like *Star Trek*?” Dalir asked, confused.

Erik threw his head back and laughed; the skin on the left side of his neck was whole. Healthy. Nice to look at. “Eh...not really. Less space, more wide-open spaces. She’s gotten very into art therapy, she had a showing in a local gallery. She sent me pictures, I couldn’t go. Dad went - he still loves her. I used to think he hated her, but he just hates the situation. I get that now.”

You know, for a guy who wanted his son to get out more, it seemed like he squashed a golden opportunity. “You didn’t go because of the mask? That’s it? Or...was the timing bad?”

*Were you in rehab?* being the unspoken question.

“Because of the mask,” Erik said. “I have to take it off to get through security. I always phone ahead, ask to go into one of the interrogation rooms, I warn them...but sometimes they don’t listen,
or I get someone on the shift change and they don’t pass the message along. I usually don’t bother."

This isn’t fair, Dalir thought. None of this was fair. Poor freaking guy; no wonder he got hooked on drugs. No wonder, hell, it was incredible he was doing as well as he seemed to be. Maybe Mr. Carriere’s influence wasn’t as negative as he thought.

“I mean...I don’t know,” Dalir said awkwardly, scratching the back of his neck. “That seems...it’s just a face. You’ve been injured, but - ”

“No, you don’t understand,” Erik said, voice getting some color now, for the first time since he started the whole sad story. “I don’t...have a face. I have - I have only the semblance of a face. And no one should have to look at it.”

Shit. What did he say? What could he say? Oh, no, man, I’m sure it’s not that bad. Clearly it was. It was exactly that bad.

“Want me to clear out?” Dalir asked, finally, when the silence became unbearable. “You should eat. And I don’t want you to - ”

“No, no, I’ll wait,” Erik said, shaking his head. “It’s my problem. Just my problem. And it shouldn’t be anyone else’s. Besides, we’re only halfway through the show.”

He wasn’t running away, wasn’t retreating to his bedroom or the music studio. That was progress. And he came out wearing the t-shirt in the first place. Dalir wasn’t sure if it was an act of trust or just convenience; he’d already seen way more of Erik than the t-shirt displayed. Why bother pretending?

“How ‘bout this?” Dalir suggested. “I’ll put the show back on, and I’ll sit here on the couch. You go eat back in the kitchen. You can take the mask off - I won’t turn around. I swear.”

Erik was looking at him skeptically. Dalir was sure he was raising an eyebrow under that mask. Assuming he still had eyebrows.

“I swear,” Dalir repeated, holding up two fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

That little smirking smile that he’d come to know so well was back. “Were you actually a scout?”

“Hell yeah,” Dalir nodded. “Well, for, like, three years. I wasn’t really into camping.”

Another smile, then Erik got up and went to the fridge. Dalir concentrated on getting the remote, turning the TV back on. He could see Erik’s reflection in the dark screen; he was removing his dinner from the fridge, transferring it to a plate for the microwave.

“Hey,” Dalir called, before he pressed ‘Play.’ “It’s five-fifteen. So, officially not self-medicating if you want that beer.”

“Ha,” Erik said hollowly. “I think I will - you want one?”

“Nah,” Dalir replied, as the screen lit up in dazzling disco-colored brilliance. “I can wait.”
Chapter Notes

Christine will be played in this flashback by Cynthia Erivo (who has gone blonde and does, indeed, look fabulous). And I maybe have already written a scene where Erik and Christine eat cake together in another fic, but this is very different. Before they were eating cake in a crowd, now they are eating cake alone.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Six Months Earlier

Full O’ Beans Coffee N’ Cakes was enjoying a lull in customers, if not in volume. There were only two people in the shop, at a secluded little back table. It would have seemed like a clandestine encounter, but for how loudly one of them was talking. The staff had seen them often, at least twice a week since the college came back from break. They cut quite a figure, this giant red-haired guy in a mask and a sweet-faced black girl with a halo of curls around her head. Erik and Christine - names they only learned because Christine was chatty. Left to his own devices, Erik would come in, order his drink and leave immediately.

The first few times they patronized the shop, Erik wondered a little bit about how it would look - Christine being the definition of cute and perky, himself neither cute nor perky, looming over her like a shadow of ill-tidings.

He’d actually said that and she laughed, smacked his arm and said he was such a drama queen. That no one would care, probably. That most people were too self-involved to even notice the seven billion other people on the planet. He asked bluntly what she thought, the first time they met. When he approached her, wearing a mask. He wondered why she hadn’t run.

First of all, she said, because he could probably chase her down, so running wouldn’t do any good.

“All, you told me you wore a mask because your face was messed up,” she shrugged awkwardly. “I believed you. Like...no offense, Erik, but that’s not exactly something most guys would advertise.”

He wasn’t ‘most guys,’ she quickly added. That was why she liked him so much. Apparently the mask gave him a quietly sympathetic look - at least, he assumed that’s what she meant when she claimed he was good to vent to. And she’d had to do a lot of venting recently.

“My advisor hates me,” Christine lamented. “Absolutely hates me - she’s such a stereotype. Like, ‘those who can’t do, teach?’ Well Professor Choletti can’t sing or act, but somehow she’s head of the program. And I need her to sign off on my performance credits to graduate, but I haven’t been in a mainstage this year.”

Christine was getting her MFA from the local college - one of the few in the country to offer a musical theatre program at the graduate level. She admitted that the reason she’d (in her words) gone to grad school, gone directly to grad school, did not scramble for an Equity card, did not collect $200 dollars was because she was scared to try and ‘make it.’ But actually getting the degree was turning out to be just as daunting as trying to forge ahead with a career.
“I don’t understand it,” Erik shook his head. “You’ve got an incredible voice.”

The problem, Christine informed him, were the shows lined up - The Secret Garden. Sweeney Todd. Cabaret.

“You’d make a great Sally Bowles,” Erik informed her. “I think you’re a little young for Lily, but if you took some time to really work your upper range, I’d cast you as Johanna in a heartbeat.”

“Yeah, well,” Christine rolled her eyes. “Apparently I have a...oh, what the hell did she say, it was so racist - yeah, she said I have a ‘specific look.’ Which might not sound racist, but is actually super racist. I haven’t been out of the chorus since we did Ragtime last year and I got to cry on a Cabbage Patch doll.”

Erik grinned and sipped his latte. “I’m sure the Cabbage Patch doll was moved.”

“We all called him CJJ - Coalhouse Jr. Jr.,” she explained, diving into a slice of chocolate lava cake. “And the props people used to hide him and take pictures, like the Roamin’ Gnome. One time they forgot where they put him and were scrambling, like, through the entire first act to find him - Sienna, she played ‘Mother,’ had to just dig around in the dirt and scream, ‘Get Kathleen! Get Kathleen! There’s a baby in the garden, oh God!’ but, like, not actually remove the baby from the fake garden. It was hilarious.”

Auditions were coming up in a few weeks for Sweeney Todd. Christine was not optimistic about her chances.

“Belting is fine, I am comfortable with belting, but...I wuss out on the high notes,” she sighed, poking her cake. “This is delicious, by the way, want some?”

She put a spoonful of drippy cake-and-gooey chocolate center on her spoon and held it out, but Erik declined - bad enough he was risking giving the mask a foam mustache, chocolate would be a nightmare to clean off.

“I just...worry about going sharp or cracking or humiliating myself, so I get nervous and miss the notes anyway, or, like, do some...riffing to cover - which I know you hate.”

Indeed, in one of their first chats, Erik made it very clear (possibly too forcefully) that he couldn’t stand singers who decided to riff on the notes, arguably to make the song “their own,” but really to cover a weakness in their range or technique. It was a cop-out. As far as he was concerned, learn the music as written, or have it transposed down by someone who knew what they were doing. Don’t just sing the song wrong to start with.

“So, the reason I asked you here today,” Christine continued, all business, despite her enthusiastic cake-eating, “was because I need an audition song and not, like, an obvious one. I mean, I don’t think I’ll get Johanna because yellow hair and all, and, yeah, Beyonce can go blonde and look fabulous, but I think I’d look creepy - ”

“Lyrics can be changed,” Erik cut her off. “Better to change the lyrics - that don’t mean anything, really, who cares if Johanna is blonde - ”

“Oh, please, they reference it like fifty-million times! And it’s symbolic! Blonde means beauty, innocence, purity,” Christine emphasized each word with a flourish of her spoon.

“Yeah, blonde means blonde,” Erik shook his head. “Let’s not make this show more than it is - at the end of the day, it’s a musical about cannibalism. Anyway, Todd doesn’t actually know what Joanna looks like when he sings his piece. If she’s beautiful and pale with yellow hair, he’s just
fantasizing. Antony can just as easily be buried sweetly in her ‘soft dark’ hair or her ‘russet’ hair or her ‘flowing hair,’ whatever - ”

“This hair does not flow,” Christine said, tugging at her curls.

“Whatever,” Erik repeated patiently. “It’s immaterial. It doesn’t mean anything, if there’s an actress who can do the part, can sing the part, there you are.”

“Okay, but remember casting without regards to color can be problematic, let’s not pretend it’s that simple - ”

“You’re right, valid points all, but you also need to graduate,” Erik pointed out. “And the last show the school is mounting this year is Sweeney Todd. I still think you’d make a great Johanna. Who care what color her hair is?”

Christine smiled, but added, “I mean, her dad is a barber, so…”

“Self-defeat is not helpful,” Erik said. She kicked him under the table.

“Look who’s talking, Mister Looming Shadow of Gloominess,” she said fondly. Christine finished her cake as Erik thought about audition songs. Christine had sung for him before, he recorded a few tracks of her playing. A soprano with a powerful lower register was a thing of rare beauty, but she tended to get very breathy on the high notes. Breath support wasn’t a problem, as she’d told him, she had the technical skill, but just lacked gumption and backed off.

“What about ‘Soon’?” he asked as they got up to leave. “From A Little Night Music?”

“Ughhhhhhh,” she groaned, showing off the skill of her lower register. “That sounds like a really good idea, if I could pull it off.”

“You could,” Erik said confidently. “You just need to put in the work.”

They stood outside the coffee shop - the sun had gone down while they were talking and it was dark. Their breath misted on the cold air and the smell of snow was all around. Erik was about ready to turn and go back to his apartment when Christine grabbed the sleeve of his coat to stop him.

“Could you...you can totally say no!” she said, looking up at him nervously. “Could you help? Like, help me prepare? My voice coach is a pushover, if I just whine enough she lets me off the hook. I know you’re super busy, but I can come to your place! I’ll bring baked goods!”

Erik hesitated. Christine had been to his apartment a few times, but for very short spurts, just to record without the clutter of background noise or trying to book a studio. She didn’t linger afterward. Probably because he never asked her to.

“Sure,” Erik said after a beat. “I make my own schedule - ”

“Translation: I work all the time unless my awesome friend Christine drags me out for coffee.”

“- so tell me your availability. I’ll work around that,” he said.

“Call when convenient?” she asked, eyes sparkling.

“And if inconvenient call anyway,” he answered with a smile.

“Oh, thanks, Erik!” she clapped her hands and lunged forward to give him a hug. “You’re the
Present Day

After the big chat on The Honesty Couch, Dalir decided to give Erik a little bit of space. Not hard to do, he spent most of his time working - now that Dalir realized he actually made decent (more than decent) money with his music, he was less inclined to bother him while he was in there. There was a lot to process. An ill-conceived Google Images search for ‘burn victim recovery,’ accomplished absolutely nothing other than making him feel slightly queasy and really, really guilty.

He hadn’t been able to scroll through the results for more than a few minutes before he closed his laptop. It felt unnecessarily violating, to look at pictures of other people’s suffering. Anyway, it wouldn’t help him understand Erik any better. He stuck to text posts after that. He learned a little bit - that all deep burns heal by scarring. That there can be splits in the skin. That surgery is necessary years later. That the fact that Erik’s hands still looked basically normal and he apparently had full range of motion was - in spite of his own appalled thoughts at the time - really, really, lucky.

And from his professional standpoint, the chance of Erik relapsing was incredibly, incredibly high. From chronic pain management to psychological stress, the triggers were everywhere to succumb to more heavy-duty drugs than Tylenol.

_{How long do you usually stay with a client?}_

_{It depends on what they need._

What did Erik need? Dalir was less and less sure every day. There was only one workable solution: stick to the program. He’d had one major goal in mind since he met Mr. Carriere and he needed to keep working on it. Get Erik out in the world more.

The next nice day, Dalir decided to broach the topic of heading outside. This was something he was supposed to be working on with Erik and it was a weekday; aside from parents and nannies with little kids, the park would be pretty deserted. And they wouldn’t even have to run into the families if they steered clear of the playground.

“We could take a walk or something,” Dalir suggested. “I figured even you have to get cabin fever sometimes.”

He was pleased (taken aback, but pleased) when Erik said that sounded like a nice idea. He even suggested an activity.

“I haven’t ridden my bike in a while,” he admitted to missing it. “It’s...easiest. By the time someone’s noticed the mask, you’re already thirty yards ahead of them.”

Dalir said biking sounded cool; there was a rental place down the street and Dalir had an SUV with a rack on top. He hadn’t used it before, but Erik volunteered to secure the bikes to the roof; no one else from the building spotted them in the parking lot, so they didn’t have any overprotective nannies to deal with.

“Just...could we not go to the local park?” Erik asked, once they were in the car. “There’s a decent bike path a few towns over, it’s a bit of a drive, but I’ll Venmo you for the gas.”
“When the revolution comes, man, you will be *fucked,*” Dalir predicted as he plugged the alternate park into his GPS. “You have zero cash, ever. How are you going to pay for things if the robots shut down your bank account?”

Erik grinned mischievously, “Well, they’ll shut down my cards, but the robots don’t know where I keep my gold.”

Dalir laughed; the sprinkles of humor here and there were becoming more frequent. It wasn’t necessary for his job that he actively like his clients, but it was always a plus when he did. In another life - like, a crazy other life where the two of them actually had something in common besides moms who watched basic cable - he could see them being friends.

The car had Sirius radio, but Dalir was 100% sure that he and Erik had completely dissimilar musical tastes, so he stuck to NPR. Then it got depressing - half the planet’s on fire, the other half is underwater, forget the robot revolution, everything is already terrible - so he turned it off and they chatted about what their next movie night pick should be until they got to the park.

Despite Dalir’s objections, “Chafing man, chafing,” Erik insisted on wearing jeans for the bike ride. Plus a button-down shirt and a coat.

“We’re not doing the Tour de France,” he pointed out as he got the bikes off the rack. “I’ll be fine. And you’re not exactly wearing bike shorts.”

“Sweatpants *breathe,*” Dalir insisted as he put the tire back on his own bike. “You are going to feel super-gross, super-soon.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take,” Erik said as he snapped his helmet on. He was wearing a different mask - it actually provided more coverage than his usual one and it was secure with a velcro strap on an elastic band that smushed his hair down against the back of his head. Dalir wondered if it felt as tight as it looked.

But he got on his own bike and off they went. It was a gorgeous autumn day, the trees were just starting to turn and the sky was a clear blue with a few fluffy clouds to set the scene. Erik-in-sunshine was both novel and...nice. Really nice. The guy looked downright seasonal in his brown jacket and scarf, like he was advertizing pumpkin spice cologne. The sunlight really brought out the red in his hair.

“You ever seen *Grantchester*?” Dalir asked abruptly when they were stopped for a traffic light.

Erik paused a minute, thinking. “I think my mom watches it, is it one of those British mysteries?”

Dalir confirmed that it was - one of his physical therapists got him into it during rehab, she told him to watch the show and come back to explain the mysteries. She could never pay attention to anything except the vicar character because - in her words - ‘He is just. So. Handsome.’

Shades of Sidney Chambers here. Strapping redhead on a bike. Though Erik didn’t drink as much as Sidney. Or have as many girl problems. Or murders to deal with.

“The main guy kind of reminds me of you,” Dalir said, then, you know, because he sometimes suffered from diarrhea of the mouth proceeded to say, “You’ve got kind of the same hair. And he’s...you know. Buff. He’s a priest - or vicar, whatever, so he can gets married. Guy gets a lot of ass. Like a lot. I mean. He’s. Yeah. Pretty hot.”

Dalir might as well have started speaking Klingon, the way Erik was looking at him. The light changed and Erik zipped ahead, pedaling for all he was worth, Dalir struggled to keep up. Fuck.
Fuck. Everything was nice - picturesque, even. And then he had to go...practically come on to him.

Get it together, Nouri, he ordered himself. Erik was a client. And that was probably crossing some ethical boundaries. And Dalir hadn’t dated a guy since college - he hadn’t really “dated” anyone since college, now that he thought of it. Married to his job and everything. No wonder he’d forgotten how to give compliments like a normal person.

Erik slowed down at the next light; Dalir was winded, but it looked like Erik hadn’t even broken a sweat; then again, Dalir knew sometimes burn victims couldn’t sweat and he wondered if Erik was hot in his coat - temperature hot. Not...attractive hot. God, he was so stupid sometimes.

He had all the hope in the world that Erik would just drop it, or maybe just inquire about Grantchester as a show and not Sidney as a hot guy, but alas, that wasn’t to be.

“Um,” Erik started awkwardly, staring at the light in front of him and not looking down. “If you could just...not...say stuff like that. Please.”

“I’m sorry,” Dalir apologized sincerely. “It was incredibly un - ”

He was going to say ‘unprofessional,’ but apparently that wasn’t what upset Erik.

“It’s not helpful,” Erik spoke over him. “It’s...actively upsetting. I know you were trying to be...nice and, yeah, it could be that this guy and I have the same hair, but...look, it’s not really...it doesn’t make me feel better. To get compliments like that. Okay? I’m not...angry, I don’t know, maybe that was some kind of confidence-building thing, but - ”

“No, it’s cool,” Dalir said, holding up a hand to slow him down since it sounded like he was beginning to spiral. “I mean, it wasn’t cool of me. To say. But...nope, no ‘buts.’ I’m sorry.”

Erik relaxed, “Thank you.”

They finished up the bike ride after a few more miles. Conversation was stilted, at first, then turned into a mini-argument over what they would listen to on the radio, with Dalir vetoing classical and country stations and Erik vetoing pop and alt-rock. They settled on hip-hop and Dalir embarrassed himself trying to rap while Erik laughed at him from the passenger seat.

“How do you not know all the words to ‘Thrift Shop’?” Erik asked as they pulled into a spot in front of the apartment building. “I don’t even listen to the radio and I know all the words to ‘Thrift Shop,’ it was everywhere. Everywhere. And I barely leave the house.”

“Look, I don’t really listen to lyrics when I listen to music,” Dalir replied as they took the elevator up to the apartment, bikes in tow.

“Clearly.”

“But - did we leave this door open?”

They most certainly did not. Dalir put a hand out to stop Erik walking into the apartment, rusty instincts getting a workout. Early afternoons was prime time for a break-in; burglars worked on the assumption that no one would be home for hours. And they didn’t like being interrupted in their work.

They should call the cops. That was the logical thing to do. But Dalir wasn’t always logical.

He very, very carefully eased the door open. Living room looked empty - books on shelves, DVD
player in place, nothing missing. But if these guys wanted to score, they should have gone for the music room -

“Did you get my text?”

Dalir whipped around, holding the bike in front of him like a shield. A shield against...Mr. Carriere. Who was standing in the kitchen, looking startled to have startled him.

“I left my phone,” Erik said, coming in behind Dalir, briefly resting a hand on his shoulder. “Stand down, soldier.”

“Ah,” Mr. Carriere said, resting a hand on the back of his neck awkwardly. “Well, I can’t stay too long, I was just coming by to drop off some tickets - Chess will be here in a week! Time flies when you’re booking tours.”

“You got Chess?” Erik asked, sounding confused, but not as confused as Dalir felt. Could schools rent the theatre out for competitions? And...yes, he had agreed to accompany Erik to whatever outings he wanted on, but he couldn’t help the leaden feeling in his stomach when he realized Mr. Carriere said tickets - plural. And that he was now going to have to sit through hours of people staring down at a board and sometimes moving pieces. “Did you tell me already?”

“Search me,” his father shrugged, but he put the tickets down on the counter. “I got you a box - which is easy to do when you’re talking about Chess. It doesn’t have the same glitz as Wicked.”

“True, but it hardly ever tours,” Erik pointed out. “You’ll make a profit, I’ll bet you the actual price of these tickets. It’s got fans - they got Groban to do the concert.”

Mr. Carriere rolled his eyes, “Because Groban wanted to break into Broadway and he got his wish, didn’t he? Don’t remind me of that concert - if I realized they were going to play every piece of music ever written for that show, I would have brought snacks. Anyway, I’m off - I need to make sure the ballet group clears their set pieces out on time so we can get the stage ready. I think they have moveable platforms that need to be accounted for. Simulating mountains for the first act, I think?”

“One wonders what they’ll do for Bangkok,” Erik mused. “Thanks for the tickets - good to see you.”

It was really interesting watching Erik and his dad interact. They bantered and chatted like old chums - not exactly like the half-teasing, half-respectful way Dalir dealt with his own dad. Mr. Carriere went in for a hug, which Erik returned affectionately enough. Cute. But a stiffness descended on both of them as Mr. Carriere turned to leave. He put a hand against the doorframe and half-turned to ask Erik a question.

“How’s the shoulder?”

Erik rotated his right arm slightly. “Fine. It’s fine.”

“Are the NSAIDS - ”

“Adequate,” was the short reply. “I’m exercising it regularly. Dalir even took me for a bike ride, so, I’m keeping up with everything. It’s fine. Nothing to worry about. I’m a two, usually. Sometimes a four, never over a five.”

“Good,” Mr. Carriere said, looking genuinely relieved. “That’s good. I’ll see you - bye, Dalir. Thanks.”
“No problem,” Dalir said awkwardly. Erik locked the door behind his father and Dalir waited until he turned around before he asked, “Five?”

“On the pain scale,” Erik replied without looking at him. “The shoulder required surgery a year ago. Most of...most of what you saw there, it wasn’t from the initial accident. The build-up of scar tissue is from the subsequent surgeries. It needs intervention. The right shoulder. To keep the scars from adhering to the muscles and causing more problems. I had the first operation when I was a teenager - sophomore year, it was a nightmare. For that and a host of other reasons.”

The shoulder. Not my shoulder. The shoulder.

“What? Puberty kind of punched you in the face?” Dalir asked, wincing as he crossed through the music room to stash his bike in the gym. Could you have possibly chosen a more inappropriate metaphor?

“Ha,” Erik said, following along with his bike. “Basically. I’d always been kind of scrawny, but I shot up seven inches that year and conveniently my dad’s latent football player genes kicked in around then. So there were...concerns about splitting and the skin being able to keep up. I made them schedule the surgery for a break in the trimesters at my high school because I was the most stubborn kid on the planet, I had a performance to play for and I didn’t want to let anyone down even though the pain was really bad.”

So, a workaholic even from a young age. Dalir hadn’t seen Erik’s shoulder in that one grainy photo he’d found, but apparently his Googling skills needed work, because Erik continued.

“There’s a video on YouTube that I think still exists, I watch it sometimes when I’m waxing masochistic - I was playing guitar for this ill-conceived Whistle Down the Wind treatment that I think my old drama teacher is still trying to mount,” he recalled. “At the end, everyone takes a bow and I run offstage - I got to the wings before I threw up, I was in agony.”

The way Erik told the story, he seemed to think it was a funny anecdote, on par with getting on a skateboard and holding a rope tied to the back of a friend’s car. But Dalir wasn’t laughing.

“Dude. They couldn’t find someone else?” he asked, brow creasing. For a high school play?

“I never asked them to,” Erik replied, like the thought never occurred to him. “When...I basically have skill, in a specified area to offer other people. So that’s what I do. Make myself available. I don’t let people down...until I let everyone down.”

Haunted. Erik sounded haunted.

Not your business! Dalir scolded himself. It’s not your job to know what made him use. It’s your job to make sure he doesn’t use again.

“Bike ride was a success, I think,” Dalir changed the subject. “We should do it again sometime. Maybe...podcasts, instead of music? There’s a bunch of episodes of Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me on my phone too. I suck at keeping up with the news, so you can kick my ass at trivia again.”

“Sure,” Erik agreed, apparently grateful to not have to talk about himself anymore. “Name the day. I’m free...most of the time. Ah, well, except for next Friday - when Chess comes to town.”

“I suck at chess,” Dalir confessed as the two of them made their way back to the kitchen. “I don’t think I’ll be any better at watching it - I’ll go! Just poke me if I fall asleep.”

“Oh, we’re not going to see the game,” Erik clarified. “It’s a musical. From the ‘80s. Where chess
is a metaphor for the Cold War. The songs were written by Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus, from ABBA...I’m not selling you on this at all, am I?”

“No,” Dalir shook his head. “Not even a little bit.”

Chapter End Notes

The flashback scene might be the most quintessentially Erik reaction ever, 'Screw Stephen Sondheim, the greatest lyricist of the 20th century! We can change his silly words so CHRISTINE can be in the show without changing a thing about herself because she is perfect. Except she needs to practice her singing.' I'm also actively concerned about Dalir's teenage years if he was being dragged behind moving cars (though, let's be real, he was on the sidelines filming).
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

More flashbacks! More exposition, but I couldn't get five chapters into a story without someone hearing Erik sing, even if it's only a recording. I don't know if I need to warn for this, but just in case: **Warning for drug testing.***

**Six months earlier…**

Erik came armed to their first lesson with a YouTube video of Harolyn Blackwell’s concert version of ‘Green Finch and Linnet Bird,’ with a unbearably smug look on the part of his chin that Christine could see. She leaned against his piano and watched the performance on his phone with a twisted set to her mouth - admiring, but skeptical.

“I would never ask this woman to go blonde in order to sing this song,” he said at the song’s conclusion, taking the phone back.

“Because she’s, like, a beyond amaze-balls opera singer!” Christine whined (she wasn’t kidding when she said she basically annoyed her vocal coaches into submission, it was not a pleasant sound - unlike her actual singing). “Also, concert.”

“Also, warm ups,” Erik said, taking a seat so they could run scales. Once Christine was properly warmed-up (and hydrated, she liked to take a lot of water breaks...and chat...no wonder her voice teachers let her get away with cheating the high notes, she was exhausting). But Erik had nowhere else to go - he was already home and had no students waiting or hour-long time constraints. He could be patient.

They started in on ‘Soon.’ Erik let her run it once, doing her Christine thing, just so he didn’t prompt more wasting time and arguments with corrections, but once she’d run the song, he sat back and regarded her frankly.

“Okay,” he said, and that was all he said before Christine started talking. Again.

“It was that bad?” she made a face and proceeded, “I could just audition for a local show and get credit for that, I think they’re doing an all-black *Steel Magnolias* at Community Players, I’d be a good Shelby, I can faint really convincingly. Maybe I’ll convince them to let me sing some ‘80s stuff, like some Whitney, to give the show context and - ”

“Stop,” Erik ordered her and she mimed zipping her lips. “Here is a...pattern, I’ve found with your performances. You are a very dedicated actress - which is great. But you have a tendency to let the *emoting* get in the way of the music.”

“I think that’s just passion,” Christine defended herself. “And passion is good!”

“I said *emoting*,” Erik reminded her. “*Not emotion.* It’s entirely possible to perform a song without talking it or shouting it - ”

“I was not shouting,” Christine muttered, kicking a toe against the piano leg.
“It got a little shouty,” Erik retorted, fingers tapping lightly atop the keyboard, not pressing hard enough for sound. “But you can perform a piece - as written! - without losing the musicality. For an audition I am going to go so far as to say you must perform the piece that way. No one is going to hire you if they don’t know for sure that you can hit the notes.”

“As written?” she asked meekly.

Erik nodded. “As written. Here’s, let’s try again - just sing it, this time. Just sing.”

That first lesson took two-and-half hours until they were done (with a grand total of forty-five minutes of actual singing). Erik requested that she come back again - every other day until her audition. They worked the song until both of them were near to tears. On really hard nights he’d order take-out and they’d sit on the couch watching old episodes of *America’s Next Top Model* because Christine claimed it was deeply soothing to her (Erik disagreed).

It was...nice. Erik didn’t have many close friends, certainly not people who just dropped by an sat on his couch to watch awful television with him. Christine was a few years younger than him, but they got along well. The relationship followed the usual pattern with him: he had something someone wanted, a way to be of use to them, and then an actual connection was forged around that initial thing they wanted him to do.

He thought it was Eleanor Roosevelt who said the best way - or was it the only way? - to be loved was to be useful. He ought to have that quote framed, because he believed nothing else as strongly as he believed that.

Christine didn’t love him, of course. He never believed that. Not even when he got her text, two weeks later:

I AM JOHANNA AND YOU ARE A GOD AND I LOVE YOU!!!!!!!!!oneoneeleventyone

Present Day

Even though Dalir explicitly said he was going to use his newfound interest in *Dancing with the Stars* to keep in better touch with his mom, he still hadn’t called after the first episode. On a quiet afternoon with nothing to do, he shut himself in his room, flopped on the bed and dialed home.

His parents had caller ID, so after three rings, a cheerful voice greeted him, “Salām, azizam!”

“Hey, Maman -” Dalir started, but was interrupted by a male voice cutting in over him.

“Dalir! Salām, chetori? How’s your new client, the...the musician, yes?”

And Dad. Inevitably Mom put him on speaker when he called the house line - he only hoped they didn’t have visitors over, he’d never get off the phone.

“Good, everything’s good, he’s a nice guy, we get along,” Dalir said, turning his own phone on speaker so he didn’t have to hold it. “We watched *Dancing with the Stars* together, did you catch the premiere?”

“I did!” his mom sounded downright gleeful about it. “You’ll be so proud of Maman, Dalir - I’m in a fantasy league!”
He almost fell off the bed. “Excuse me? This from the woman who threw away scratch tickets because it’s a slippery slope? Who are you and what have you done with my mother?”

“Oh, I’m not gambling!” she exclaimed, like that wasn’t the exact purpose of a fantasy league. “Some of the ladies from my book club and I are doing this, no money! We’re going to take the winner out to dinner and treat her - Baba says I have to take him home a plate, if I win since he helped me pick.”

“Maks?” Dalir guessed and guessed correctly. His father’s man-crush on the pro was legendary in their household.

“Of course Maksim!” his dad shouted into the phone, prompting Dalir to scoot away from the noise. “He is the best! And the best-looking!”

Dad liked to claim he was a Persian version of Maksim Chmerkovsky, only a few decades older and not as svelte. Mom never contradicted him - she was too busy laughing at him to bother. His parents were refreshingly normal, middle-American. Such a contrast to the drama that was Erik’s life story.

“How was your Eid?” he asked, not having gone home for Eid al-Adha.

“Good!” Mom said, telling him he should have come, that his sister came with the children, that it would be good for him to see his niece and nephew, that everyone was asking for him and they said he was busy with work, but it’s so hard to explain what he does. Shirin usually told people he worked at a group home, which was not remotely accurate, but easier to understand. “Call your sister!”

Dalir said he would, and settled back against his pillows, waiting for an update on each and every one of his aunties, uncles, cousins, in-laws, and whatever-cousins-whatever removed when there was a knock on the door.

“Gotta go, client needs me!” he said, maybe just a little too quickly. “Love you guys!”

“We love you!” Dad shouted.

“Call your sister!” Mom added as he turned the phone off - and, for good measure, left it behind on his bed. Dalir opened the door, a little concerned since Erik hadn’t ever come in when the door was closed. He’d poked his head in (knocking, as always) once or twice to ask Dalir about groceries or movies, but the door had either been open or ajar at this times. He hoped nothing was wrong.

“Hey! Guess what?” Erik practically pounced on him when he came out of his room. “Remember the other day when I was talking about my old drama teacher and his Whistle Down the Wind obsession?”

Not really. Dalir remembered Erik talking about pushing himself so hard for a play that he went backstage and threw up; other details were secondary to that. “Sort of.”

“Well, I got an email from him a few days ago - he’s putting together a concept album to try and get some backers for the project,” Erik explained, hand dragging through his hair like he did when he was frustrated. Or maybe it was just a motion that he performed when he had too much energy pent up. “He wanted me to do the sound mixing, he’s called in all kinds of favors and there was no way he could get all the vocalists to record together. If you’re not...if you have time, I’d like you to listen. If you want, just to a song or two, it’s just a sampling.”
For a guy who hardly said two words to him for a week after he moved in, Erik was practically gushing. This was...new. Different. The door to the music room was wide open; except for his checks through the apartment and that one foray into the workout room to drop off the rented bike, Erik hadn’t invited Dalir inside before.

Even his energy was different. This wasn’t the quietly subdued Erik who took showers when he was guaranteed to be alone or ate behind closed doors. Erik was...pumped. Energetic. Excited, even.

It put Dalir on guard immediately. Sure it could mean good things, could mean he was adjusting well and in a great headspace, that their relationship had meshed and he was comfortable enough to really be himself, not so cut-off, not so wary.

Or it could mean he slipped. Heroin was one of Erik’s drugs of choice and euphoria, mania, could be a symptom, especially given what he knew about Erik’s mother’s mental health. He might have gotten a stellar metabolism and broad shoulders from his dad, but DNA didn’t only dole out the good stuff.

Careful searching didn’t always turn anything up; Dalir hadn’t found his shoe inserts, so it definitely wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that there was a stash somewhere that was too well-hidden to be found by someone who didn’t know what it was. Even with regular checks.

“Yeah, sure,” Dalir said, smiling and making his voice light and casual.

“I thought you might be relieved to see that I actually do have a job,” Erik grinned.

“Cool,” Dalir nodded, leaning against the doorframe. “Uh, yeah, I’m free as a bird. Quick little though, I was just coming to ask - is it cool if we do a home test? Then we can listen to your stuff, I’d love to hear it.”

Erik looked taken aback for just a second, just long enough for the light to go out of his eyes. The broad shoulder sagged. He collected himself, quickly enough, maybe just reminding himself that Dalir was there to do a job, not be a live-in buddy. He didn’t demur or get angry, which was a good sign.

“Sure,” he said, voice noticeably dulled.

Don’t feel bad or guilty. He hired you to do this. Just because you like the guy, you can’t let him get away with things. You won’t be doing him any favors.

Erik’s only request was that Dalir not come into the bathroom with him. Dalir agreed, which, yeah with other clients, he might not have been so accommodating, but Erik was a special case in that particular regard. Dalir asked that Erik use his bathroom, rather than the detached one. Erik immediately agreed; he probably would have agreed to go to the bathroom on the moon if it meant he could go in alone.

Dalir sat on his bed and waited. The home tests were fairly cheap, but pretty reliable; especially if Erik had relapsed recently, enough to be feeling the effects, it should show up. Five minutes wait time and he had his answer: nothing. Clean as a whistle.

And speaking of whistles, once Dalir was convinced that Erik was just normal-excited and not teetering into euphoria, they were in the music room and Erik popped in a CD.

“Old school,” Dalir commented. There was one thing about himself that made him very well suited for this job: his ability to compartmentalize. Granted, he’d been slightly off his game recently, but
he wasn’t the kind of guy who got too worked up about things. He could let stuff go, move on, roll with the punches.

It made him a good cop - he was great at diffusing situations, and not getting all worked up when he was getting hassled. It also translated well into this career; he could demand a urine sample one minute, then head off with a client to listen to music the next without (he hoped) carrying some kind of air of superiority and judgement around with him. Addiction was a disease; for Dalir, asking Erik to take a home test for drugs wasn’t any different than asking a diabetic to test their blood sugar levels. It didn’t require a build-up of tension and Dalir sure as hell wasn’t going to bring any tension with him and he hoped Erik could follow his lead. So far, so good.

“I back everything up onto CDs - the files are also on my external hard drive and in the emails, but you can never be too careful,” Erik replied. Then, smirked. “I want to be prepared, you know. For when the robots come.”

Dalir’s eyes narrowed. “...is this the gold you were talking about?”

Erik nodded serenely. “The revolution will require a soundtrack.”

The first track started up - and although Dalir had zero knowledge of music, he could appreciate the sound quality. At first there was just the old-timey sound of an organ being played, but slowly more instruments came in so that it sounded like a full orchestra was backing the chorus of singers.

“What’s that, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir?” Dalir asked.

“Believe it or not, half of them weren’t in the same room together,” Erik said. “The kids were, and a handful of the adults, but I had to add in some tracks over that and blend them. I think it worked out though, can you tell?”

“Of course I couldn’t tell,” Dalir said, listening on. There was a drum solo (clearly it had been a long time since he was in a Christian church because he didn’t know any that had drums and electric guitars in the choir loft), then a male soloist started in.

“The keys to the vaults of heaven
May be seen in a pure child’s eyes
The keys to the vaults of heaven
May be heard in our desperate cries…”

“Who the fuck is that?” Dalir asked, eyes going wide. Whoever he was, he was amazing - the voice sounded familiar, but he couldn’t put a face or a name to it. Not Josh Groban. Definitely not Josh Groban. Who else was a famous male singer who did fancy stuff? “He’s awesome.”

“Thanks,” Erik commented idly. Dalir did a double-take when he realized the implication of those two words. And why that voice sounded so familiar.

“That’s you?” he asked, disbelieving, but of course it was. If Erik’s speaking voice was so powerful, why should his singing voice be less so? Dalir almost smacked him on his non-fucked-up-from-surgery shoulder, but stopped himself at the last minute and just kind of flailed. “Holy shit! Do you sell CDs? How have I never heard of you?”

“No, I store my CDs for the robot apocalypse, I told you,” Erik explained patiently. “I’ve got a longer solo on the next track - it’s not perfect, the woman they hired to play Swallow - the female lead - she’s a little mature-sounding for the part. The character’s sixteen, the actress is not. But I can fast-forward if you - ”
“Hell yeah!” Dalir insisted. “Do it! I didn’t realize I was sharing a place with fucking Pavarotti, man, this is insane.”

Erik seemed to find Dalir’s admiration hilarious, but Dalir was too taken aback to be embarrassed. How had he never heard of him? He’d heard of other great male singers, even if he wasn’t a fan of theatre - like the aforementioned Pavarotti and Bocelli and...okay, yeah, Josh Groban, who maybe wasn’t in the same league. But Erik...he was something else. How was he not blowing up YouTube, at least?

“He wanted two versions - one with a Southern accent, one without, so I’ll spare you my dubious attempts at sounding like I’m from Louisiana,” Erik said as he skipped ahead. “I also played the piano and violin on this one, he wanted to keep it simple.”

Dalir was just about to say that he’d love to hear Erik singing with a shitty Southern accent, but totally forgot to be snarky when the music started. It was a pretty enough song, kind of catchy even, but Erik’s voice elevated it to something sublime. No wonder his old teacher asked him to help out; investors would be throwing money on the guy after they heard this, Dalir was sure.

“So...like, does this mean you’re in the show?” he asked when the track wrapped up.

“Oh, god, no,” Erik shook his head and took the CD own, placing it in a jewel case. “Hands and voice. That’s what they need me for. Hands and a voice. And an ear, technically. I don’t know if this is going to go anywhere, so I did the accompaniment and vocals for free, I just charged for the mixing. Whistle Down the Wind isn’t really a classic, but - ”

“So you don’t...perform. Like, ever?” Dalir was still trying to wrap his head around it. Hadn’t Erik said he did plays in high school? And with a voice like that, who cared what he looked like, whether he wore a mask or not.

“Just vocals,” he said, simply. “I get on a few concept albums a year or things like this - just a sample or a demo, just to get the backers interested. Then they cast...marketable leads.”

Dalir was flabbergasted. “I don’t even really like musicals and I’d pay for that, to hear that. Like good money too. I can’t - ”

“Okay, I need to ask you to stop,” Erik said, very calmly. Like he was on the bike. “This is...turning into another Grantchester thing. I don’t audition for shows, I don’t perform publicly. I don’t even do open mic nights. You’re not the first, you know.”

“The first what?” Dalir asked blankly.

Erik sighed and leaned back in his computer chair, drumming his fingers against the arms. “The first to suggest that I...put myself - all of myself out there. I have no interest in performing. I write. I edit what other have people have written. I play. I sing. I’m satisfied with that. I don’t need anything more and, frankly I’d be uncomfortable onstage.”

“But you said in high school - ”

“That was one time,” Erik informed him, voice rising a little. “One time for a teacher I was fond of, to do him a favor and it was a small group. I don’t want to feel like I’m...on display. The weirdo in the mask with the good voice - or worse, the burn victim in the mask with the good voice.”

Rolling the chair away from the computer, Erik stood up and paced away from Dalir, tilting his head to the side to stretch a crick in his neck. The ties of the mask stood out white against his hair. “I’ve been approached - or my dad has, anyway. To be a human interest story - well, this human is
not interested. Even before I...really hit bottom, I didn’t want to be seen as...either pathetic or inspirational. I just want to do my work.”

_Don’t push_, Dalir thought. _Just back off._

“You don’t publish under your own name, do you?” Dalir asked, a few pieces falling into place for him.

No, Erik said. He did not. He published music and edited under the name E. Belladova - a tribute to his mom, Isabella Diane Mantova - and when he was a credited vocalist, he used the name E. Carry.

“If you look up Erik Carriere all you get are articles about the fire,” Erik said. “Not so much now, but when I was in high school and college, you could still find them. And I didn’t want that to be the first thing people knew about me.”

“So, I can’t get my mom your ‘Erik Sings the Best of Broadway’ CD, huh?” Dalir asked, trying for jokey. It worked, their relationship, when they were joking.

A short chuckle and Erik gestured around the room, “It’s all here. If you think she’d want one, I can make her a mix.”

“Gold man,” Dalir acknowledged.

“Right,” Erik said, looking around the room, not really settling on one object in particular. “Gold.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I figured I’d try to tone down the exposition with flashbacks...not sure if it's effective, but I just REALLY enjoy writing Christine. (Also I love her and Erik as friends.)

Four Months Earlier

The alarm clock was buzzing. Class. Shit. He hadn’t finished that paper. He’d gone to bed at 2AM, intending to take a twenty minute power nap and wake up, refreshed, to write...what paper was it? What class was it for? Had he been? How had he managed to miss six weeks of class - and the final was tomorrow -

Wait. Wait. What?

It took Erik a long time to unfog his groggy brain and realize that he was almost ten years out of college. That he didn’t have any pending papers to get through. And that he didn’t even own an alarm clock.

It was the Klonopin. He was jittery and hyper and couldn’t sleep. He took a Klonopin. It always made him drowsy.

But the buzz...the intercom. It was the intercom. God, what time was it?

2:40 A.M. Why?

Half-dazed Erik shucked off his blankets and limped out of bed into the kitchen. The light from the microwave glowed a harsh green. 2:41 A.M. Again. Why?

He leaned heavily on the button for the intercom, but didn’t say anything; if it was kids playing a prank, he wasn’t going to give them the satisfaction. But the bleariness in his eyes and head cleared up immediately when he heard Christine’s voice on the other end.

“Erik? Erik? Are you home? I’m so sorry, I’m sorry, I just - ”

“Christine?” he asked. “What’s wrong?”

She sounded hysterical. Like she’d been crying, her voice was hoarse and he heard the tell-tale congestion that came of tears.

“Can I come up? I’m sorry to bother you, but I know you, like, never sleep.”

“Come up, come up,” he insisted. “I’ll buzz you in. Just...I’ll leave the door open, give me a minute.”

And he shuffled back to the bedroom quick as he could to get slightly more dressed. Shoes and socks, of course. And the mask hastily tied on over his bedhead. He was going to change into a long-sleeved shirt or grab a robe to cover his arms, but by the time he’d gotten the mask on he heard her come in.
The second he emerged from his bedroom, Christine ran to him and threw her arms around his waist, burying her face in his chest. He’d hardly gotten a good look at her, but her eyes were red, her nose was running and she looked exhausted, like she hadn’t slept in days. For a long minute, Erik just held her as she cried, wracking his brain, trying to think of what could have happened.

They’d talked a few days ago, chatted about rehearsals. There was supposed to be a tech rehearsal tonight; they’d made vague plans to get dinner while the tech crew did level set.

There was a boyfriend she’d been having problems with. Had they broken up? Not for nothing, but Erik didn’t really think he was the kind of guy she’d go to for a problem like that; she had to have friends who’d be better equipt to offer comfort.


“I’m out of the show,” she said into his t-shirt. Mumbled really and Erik had to replay the words in his head before he understood them.

“What?” he asked, horrified. “What do you mean - the show is opening in three days!”

That just set Christine to crying again and he sort of awkwardly side-stepped them both over to the couch since she wouldn’t let go of him. When he sat down she practically crawled into his lap, but refrained - she did keep her grip on his middle, but shifted so she was slammed up against his side like an inconsolable barnacle.

“Tell me what happened,” he implored, gently. “There’s got to be...there’s got to be a way to work it out.”

“There isn’t,” Christine said despairingly, sitting up and wiping her nose with the back of her hand. Erik took a better look at her; she couldn’t have come from her apartment, she was wearing jeans, a sweater, jewelry - if she’d been wearing any makeup she’d cried it all off. So she hadn’t been home since rehearsal. What happened? “I’m...I’m not sad. I’m not! I’m fucking furious, but I just keep crying. Mad on me is crying. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, oh, God, you were sleeping! I’m so sorry, Erik, I just...I couldn’t go home and...I thought of you. And I’m sorry because you worked so hard and didn’t even ask me to pay you!”

“Well, we’re friends, so...don’t talk about that,” he said, putting an arm around her shoulder. She melted against him, arms going back around his waist, head leaning against his shoulder - his left shoulder, thank God. “Just...how can the show possibly go on without you?”

Christine took a deep, breath. Squeezed him once. And told the story quickly, as if she was afraid she wouldn’t be able to get it out if she didn’t rush it.

There were some details that he missed, but Erik got the gist - and didn’t wonder over Christine being furious. Her advisor, the head of the department, Professor Choletti, was directing the production. Everything seemed fine, she was her usual passive-aggressive self, but they seemed to be getting along fine. There were blocking rehearsals, costume fittings, everything on the up and up. But then, that afternoon, Professor Choletti called Christine on her cell and asked if they could meet.

It was unusual, for a Monday. Rehearsals didn’t happen on Mondays and Christine hadn’t expected to be on campus at all. But she went in - she didn’t have work since she was employed part-time at a public school and classes were over for the year. So she went in.
“And...she was smiling, like this stupid, consoling smile. Like she was so sorry,” Christine hiccuped. “But she told me that it wasn’t - it wasn’t coming together. I wasn’t getting with the rest of the cast, which is bullshit, it’s fine! It was fine! And that she was going to have to ask me...not to come to rehearsals. Not to perform. I’ll still get my credit. I still graduate. But I can’t - can’t perform. I feel so used. And...and like I should have known better. Like...if it’s too good to be true...”

Impossible. The entire situation felt impossible - not simply unprofessional, which it also certainly was. How could this happen? How could the woman believe she could get away with such a thing without consequences?

There was an understudy. A first year student named Kassie. A blonde first-year student named Kassie. Although Professor Choletti hadn’t said it explicitly, Christine was convinced she’d been giving her extra coaching outside of rehearsals. How else would she be so confident that Christine could be replaced without destroying the show?

It was the biggest crock of bullshit he’d ever heard in his life - and no wonder, no wonder no professional company would have this woman. Try to pull this with union actors...but students had little recourse in these matters.

When he asked if Christine was going to take the matter to the administration she shook her head.

“She’s tenured,” she pointed out. “They can’t touch her. And I’m leaving. I don’t want to...drag this out and get it in public and have that following me around. I was going to New York after...after we wrapped - oh, God, yeah, but that’s something else shitty. Ugh!”

With a frustrated growl, she buried her face in her hands and leaned forward, elbows on her knees. Erik gingerly rubbed her back, ready to throw his hand off if she seemed to not want him to touch her, but she was a tactile person and only sighed.

“I’ve lost my grad housing,” she told him. “I got an extension for the show...but now there’s no show. I need to be out by the end of the week. I wasn’t supposed to move until the end of the month! I called the girls I’m renting the room from, but they said the earliest I can move in is two weeks from Friday. Two weeks! I’ve got to store my stuff and stay in a motel.”

Wiping her face on her sleeve, she straightened up and looked at Erik with a watery smile. “That was...way faster than the first time. I called my friend Meg - she’s a movement major, a dancer so she gets it, but she’s not involved - it took me, like, four hours to get through the whole story. She said I could stay with her, but she lives with her mom in this tiny place and I don’t want to crash with them that long.”

“Why don’t you stay here?” Erik asked, the words out before his brain could catch up. It was the Klonopin, it made him dopey. His mind, if not his mouth. But, it made sense - he had a guest room, after all. And she needed a place to stay. Why not?

“Oh, no way,” Christine shook her head. “I couldn’t - I actually thought about asking you, but…”

“You don’t have to ask,” Erik interrupted her. “I’m offering. No strings. Just stay here until you can move into the place in New York.”

Erik normally wasn’t so insistent. Maybe, if they were having this conversation in the clear light of day, he would have laid out more options, or offered to help her pay for a motel, store her stuff. Something less...personal. But at 3 A.M. becoming temporary roommates seemed like the best option - the most satisfying option. Something had been taken from her, after all. And if he
couldn’t give her Johanna, he’d give her whatever he could.

Christine seemed to be coming around to the idea, “I don’t have a job or rehearsal, I’ll just be bumming around on your couch...and...are you sure what’s-his-name will approve?”

The latter she asked almost like a challenge, but Erik shook his head.

“That doesn’t...affect him,” he replied evenly. “He’s in L.A. anyway. And he doesn’t live here. Stay. If you want to - if it’s weird for you, obviously, don’t feel pressure - ”

“No, no, it’s...if it’s okay with you,” she said, smile solidifying. “Thank you. I don’t know how I’ll make it up to you - but thank you. You’re...an awesome guy, Erik. Really.”

She stayed in the guest room that night - Erik said under no circumstances was she hitching a ride back to her place that late, not even if she Lyfted. Too many creeps around. They could go empty out her apartment the next day, rent a U-Haul. But that could wait until morning.

Erik did lock his bedroom door, just in case she woke up and needed something, he didn’t want her coming in and catching him unawares. He drifted back off, feeling blissfully unconcerned about anything else. It was only two weeks. What could go wrong?

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**Present Day**

It occurred to Dalir that he couldn’t remember having gone to a *real* theatre before. He’d been to a few plays in high school (Shakespeare, for English class), but as an actual adult human not once had he stepped foot in a theatre where live actors would be doing their thing on a screen. Should he dress up? He owned a suit, but it was definitely hanging in his sublet and he’d rather not buy a new one; he only ever wore it to weddings and he didn’t have any coming up on the horizon.

He brought his concerns to Erik who, because he was a decent person, held himself back from laughing in Dalir’s face. “Jeans are fine,” he assured him. “Just...wear whatever you think is decent to leave the house in.”

“Careful,” he replied warningly. “We might have different definitions of decent.”

On the night, he decided to default to Erik’s uniform: jeans and a button-down with nice sneakers. The only difference was, Dalir wore a black shirt and Erik’s was white; he didn’t want to get too matchy-matchy, it’s not like they were on a date...or like people on dates should match. Rephrase: It’s not like they were going to prom.

The theatre was only about a twenty minute walk from Erik’s apartment and the evening was nice enough that they decided to go on foot. They wound up sharing the elevator with one of the upstairs neighbors, who stared stoically ahead and lingered behind so that when Erik and Dalir left the building, the neighbor would not have their back to them.

Dalir noticed a lot of similar behavior when he was out with Erik. Not from most people - most people glanced at the mask and swiftly looked away, pretending Erik (and by extension, Dalir) didn’t exist. Some couldn’t stop staring, morbidly fascinated. Others smiled really big and were *really* friendly, as if trying to make up for the smallest minority of all: actual assholes. Like, people who went out of their way to whisper or snicker or mutter, “Freak!” under their breath, just loud enough to be heard, but quiet enough to pretend they hadn’t said anything.
Throughout all of it, Erik never reacted. Not to over solicitousness or to scorn. Unless he actually had to talk to someone, like in a store, he just stared straight ahead and kept on walking. Major advantage to being tall was that he rarely had to look anyone directly in the face unless he chose to.

It was easier the closer they got to the city center; everyone had somewhere to be and not enough time on their hands to take a minute to try and ruin someone’s night out of orneriness.

The performing arts center that Mr. Carriere ran was a huge hodge-podge of a building that was actually three separate buildings stuck together. There was the oldest part of the building up front, with an old-timey marquee announcing currently running productions and upcoming shows. Erik told him it was built in the ‘20s and definitely had a luxe art-deco flair with the vaulted, painted ceiling and ornately carved columns and funky inlaid tile lobby. Then there was the Sad Addition.

“No one but me calls it the Sad Addition,” Erik informed him. “But it is Sad.”

It was built in the ‘70s, to add on studios and offices, a concrete monstrosity typical of the era. The building was beginning to go into decline and the managers at the time decided to bolster community support by allowing resident artists to rent space or hold performances in the black box, which cost less to rent out than the main auditorium. That was when the resident acting company split up and for about ten years it was exclusively used for visiting shows, bands, and rentals. At the tail end of the ‘80s, a new troupe moved in and restored the place to its former glory. And they added the New Addition in the ‘90s which was a sleeker, simpler take on the original design of the building.

“Is that when your parents took over?” Dalir asked after their tickets were scanned and they made their way upstairs to their seats.

Erik shook his head, “No, Dad got this job...after. He quit his old job and the theatre my parents founded folded five years after he left. He and Mom left. It was too much to take care of - me and it - and anyway, he figured a change of location would do us good.”

It hadn’t occurred to Dalir that they moved.

“Where were you guys living before?” he asked. The answer surprised him; not just a change of city, but a change of state.

“Boston,” Erik replied. Dalir tried not to let his mouth drag on the floor when Erik informed him that the ‘college’ his parents met at was, in fact, Harvard.

“Where did you go to college?” Dalir asked, trying very hard to keep the oh-my-god-how-rich-is-your-family tone out of his voice.

“Julliard.”

Yeah. Of course he did. Why had he even bothered wasting breath on a question to which he already knew the answer.

“Where did you go to college?” Erik turned the question on him.

But before Dalir could answer (Michigan State - go Spartans! - for a degree in Criminal Justice with a psych minor), they were stopped on the stairs. Barred, actually. By Erik’s father. Mr. Carriere was dressed up, in a suit (with a tie!) but his expression didn’t match his genteel attire. He looked pissed.

“You’ve got to go,” Mr. Carriere said, physically blocking the door to the box, putting a hand on
Erik’s bad shoulder to keep him out. Even though he couldn’t see it, Dalir could swear he felt Erik furrow his brow.

“I’m sorry, I’m confused,” Erik said, glancing from his dad’s hand to his face. “Weren’t the tickets for -”

“She is here,” Mr. Carriere said meaningfully. “Performing with this company.”

The explanation sounded vague as hell to Dalir, but Erik’s right hand found the railing on the staircase and gripped. Hard. Like he was about to fall over. Dalir almost brought up a hand to steady him, but shoved his hands in his pockets instead.

“Oh, God,” he breathed, quietly, but there was so much emotion packed into that one word. Confusion, hurt, and...guilt? It threw Dalir for a loop, he hadn’t heard Erik sound this upset...ever. Not even when he was telling Dalir about the fire.

“Did you know?” his father asked, disappointment practically radiating out of his pores.

“No!” Erik exclaimed, his powerful voice very loud in the silent corridor. “How could I? How could <i>you</i> not?”

“Keep it down! And don't you blame me, this is not -” Mr. Carriere took a deep breath and looked his son closely. Like he didn’t believe him. “You’ve got to go.”

“I understand that,” Erik said stiffly, taking a step backward down the stairs, shaking off Mr. Carriere’s grip. “Only I don’t think my leaving through the lobby will be terribly practical. Under the circumstances.”

“Use the back way, by my office - ” Mr. Carriere started, but Erik had already turned away, lifting up the collar of his jacket as he went. Dalir looked at Mr. Carriere for a beat, but the man’s eyes were fixed on his son’s back.

Struggling to keep up, Dalir jogged off after Erik who was making a swift retreat for a door marked ‘Emergency Exit - Alarm Will Sound.’

“Uh, Erik - ” Dalir started, but he pushed the door open without incident.

“The upper floor alarm is never set,” Erik told him once they were in a narrow back staircase. “Come on. Sorry to ruin the night out.”

You didn’t, Dalir wanted to say, but he stopped himself. He didn’t know what was going on, after all. “What was - ”

“I’m halfway into a six-month restraining order,” Erik said abruptly. “The...filer is in the cast. I swear, I had no idea. I take the terms very seriously. I haven’t even logged into Facebook. Just in case.”

What. The. Fuck. This hadn’t come up at all, not on the application, not in his background check, not in his first interview with Gerard. This was kind of a big deal. Not something someone just ‘forgot’ to mention. Information withheld. Why?

Dalir worked with clients who had restraining orders before. It didn’t preclude a person from getting a sober companion - actually, sometimes it looked better for them in the long run. Showed they were really trying to turn their lives around. Why withhold the information?
Maybe he’d been out of the force too long. Because as Dalir tried to make sense of the situation, one major thought was pressing on his mind: that it seemed unlikely. That he couldn’t imagine anyone would feel the need to get a restraining order against Erik. The guy established serious boundaries for himself and didn’t seem the kind to overstep for other people.

But Dalir reminded himself, he only knew the Erik who was newly sober. He had no idea what he’d been like before...but still. In his experience, people didn’t usually undergo dramatic personality changes on drugs. Those inclined to harm others usually broadcast some signs, however subtle. Signs Dalir would have picked up on, but he hadn’t noticed any. Erik seemed much more the type to self-harm, but...well, the two weren’t always mutually exclusive. Exceptions to every rule. The only consistency with substance abusers was that there was no consistency.

They walked out into the cool night, deposited in an alleyway beside the theatre’s Sad Addition. Dalir was still trying to make sense of what he’d just heard. It didn’t seem like Erik, but what did he know? How well could you know someone, even someone you lived with, if you only met them a month ago?

Knowing that the filer was a girl didn’t really shore up his good opinion of Erik either. He was a big, powerful man, after all. Maybe it wasn’t right for Dalir to assume the worst, but the thought crossed his mind - maybe Erik hadn’t done anything illegal, but he could definitely imagine his type (tall, strong) doing something to warrant a restraining order. Especially if he was half out of his mind on drugs.

“I’m going back to the apartment,” Erik said, looking past Dalir the way he looked past strangers on the street. “I was going to walk. You can...find something else to do tonight, you don’t need to come with me.”

And if alarm bells hadn’t been sounding in Dalir’s head before, they were wailing now. What the hell? He thought he got this guy, thought he understood him...but he hadn't any idea.

“I’ll go back with you,” he shrugged, like nothing fundamental had changed in their relationship. “We can order take-out, watch TV. Whatever. I don’t need to go out.”

“Fine,” Erik said, shortly. And he strode off into the night, leaving Dalir to follow along behind him.

*Who are you?* Dalir asked himself. This guy - this shy, sweet guy. Damaged - and not just physically. But he got so excited over little things, like mixing a song well...but he was an addict. He had vices. He was so considerate, didn’t want Dalir to be put off eating by catching a glimpse of his face. He liked sad movies. He was lonely. But he was also someone a girl didn’t want coming near her. *Who the fuck are you?*
Chapter Notes

"Everybody's got a cousin" is a lyric from a mini-musical by Lin-Manuel Miranda written to accompany an NPR story. Even when he's high, Erik has a deep connection to musical theatre.

Three Months Earlier

Klonopin to sleep. Then, when he woke, the dull throbbing ache of a shoulder that had been rolled onto in the night. Insomnia was good for some things - if he was up every hour, on the hour, he could adjust his position. If he slept lightly he wouldn't roll around as much. But if he didn't sleep, he wouldn't work.

Ibuprofen. He had ibuprofen. It was a four - maybe a five. But sitting in front of the computer for hours would make it worse, stiffen his neck, hunch his back. Better to forestall worse pain later. He was out of Oxy. Vicodin. Just one.

But there was a problem with 'just one.' Just one every few days turned into fifteen or twenty by the end of the month. A problem when one did not have a prescription and was relying on the kindness of others.

One person in particular had been very kind. He wasn't recovering from minor dental surgery, but he had means. He understood that Erik had to work. Everybody's got a cousin who can hook them up with something.

The needles - clean needles, easy to come by - were hidden well. And the little bag of promised relief would have been hidden well too, had Christine realized that the hall bathroom was his bathroom. He couldn't imagine why she'd go in, when she had the guest room. He hadn't been careful enough.

Erik was working when she found it. Had been in the music room for hours...how many hours? How long since he'd last eaten? No idea; he hadn't been hungry. He was so absorbed that he didn't realize he had company until the door slammed open behind him, causing his hands to convulse on the keyboard, horrible discord sounding all around.

“I wanted a Tylenol,” she said, barging in without preamble, without knocking. “I wanted a Tylenol. For a headache. And I found this.”

The little baggie with the white powder dangled from her fingertips. Right. He'd hidden it in the Tylenol container, re-glued the seal. He thought he was so clever. Christine was holding it away from her, like it was a venomous snake. Erik fought the urge to snatch it away from her; such a thing had no right touching the skin of such a good kid.

“What the fuck is this?” Christine demanded. “Is this...drugs? Heroin? Do you do drugs, Erik?”

Do you do drugs? It was a stupid question. Everyone did drugs. Some were simply more potent than others.
“Only for pain,” he clarified, like that would make a difference. “I...there’s a lot of pain sometimes and there aren’t always pills - so I just...if I can’t sleep - ”

“Spare me! Spare me,” Christine said holding her hand up. “What, you’re totally in control? You can stop whenever? Because if that were true, you wouldn’t have gone to the streets to get this shit! Don’t even fucking pretend this came in the bottle!”

Erik didn’t say anything. There was no defense. The small, quietly ashamed part of himself knew there was to defense. But a larger part of him was angry. How dare she? How dare she come barging in here with her righteous indignation when she had no idea. Absolutely no idea.

“Are you high right now?” she demanded, coming so close her nose was practically bumping the masked. The truth was that he wasn’t, but he turned away, not wanting her to see the ruined skin behind the eyeholes.

“No,” he said, but she didn’t believe him.

“I’m leaving - I can’t stay here,” she said, throwing the packet on the ground in disgust, wiping her fingers on her jacket like they were dirty. “I can’t stay here - you should have told me there were drugs in your house, I never would have stayed if there were drugs in your house. I’m going to call Felipe, he can help me with my stuff. I’ll stay in a motel.”

Erik sat stoically silent through it all. What else could he do? It was her right to come or go. The one thing he chafed at - though he kept it to himself - was that he needed to tell her anything. He certainly did not. This - whatever this was - was his own business. If she hadn’t been snooping in his medicine cabinet in the first place, she never would have known.


She practically ran to the door, like he was some awful diseased thing that would contaminate her if they breathed the same air.

“Get rid of that while I’m gone,” Christine said warningly, noting looking back. “Get rid of it. And don’t you dare lie to me.”

Erik went to his room and prepared the needle. She said to get rid of it. What did she expect him to do? Flush it down the toilet?

Distantly, he wondered what day it was. He took his usual meds when he woke; enough for the disorder in his head if not his body. A Klonopin...an oxy? Or had he used the last of his Vicodin? Whoever’s Vicodin. Whatever. Christine would be back soon. And she’d told him to get rid of the drugs, hadn’t she?

He was - a buzz at the intercom. Erik left the baggie and the needle in his room. He pressed the voicebox.

“Can’t you just say ‘Hello’ like a normal person?”

A male voice. What’s-his-name. Christine hated him, so much so that she refused to call him by name, which she very well knew.

God. What day was it?

“Alexis. Hi.”
“Let me up. I saw that girl leaving your apartment. We need to talk.”

**Present Day**

Take-out was a no-go. They walked back in silence. And when they got to the apartment, Erik went right to his bedroom and shut the door.

*Fuck,* Dalir thought to himself as he rapped on the wood with his knuckles. Times like these were the worst, but it felt necessary and he’d always come out right when he trusted his instincts. And Erik behind a closed door was an Erik who might relapse. “Spot check.”

“Give me a minute - ”

“Sorry. No.”

Dalir opened the door up just in time to see Erik hastily tying the mask on. *Never* had Dalir felt the urge to rip the thing off more strongly than he did, but he checked the impulse. He just wanted to see his damn face to know what he was thinking. The blank coolness of the mask made it harder for him to guess Erik was thinking. No microexpressions for this guy. It also made it easier for Erik to lie.

Erik stood by the door, arms folded, hands tapping out and unheard rhythm on his elbows. Dalir searched the bedroom. Nothing. Nothing that he could find, anyway.

“Turn out the pockets,” Dalir said. Ordered really, and Erik complied. “Shoes.”

He hesitated a beat before he removed them, the left first, then the right with a hand against the wall to keep his balance. The left shoe was empty, the right had some kind of insert that worked its way under the sole to provide maximum stability, but other than that, it was clean.

“Do you want to do a cavity search as well?” Erik asked, very bitterly.

Dalir looked up at him, emotionless. “Should I?”

“Of course not,” Erik snapped. “I don’t have any drugs in the apartment, but, naturally, that’s exactly what I would say if I did have drugs in the apartment, so you probably shouldn’t believe me.”

“I don’t know what I should believe,” Dalir snapped. *Fuck.* He was taking this too personally. He needed to cool down. Calm down. Even if Erik had lied to him or withheld, it wasn’t personal. He had problems. Dalir came into this knowing that, of necessity, he’d been a liar. He just wasn’t sure what else he was.

The rest of the search turned up nothing, which allowed Dalir to relax, slightly. Erik hadn’t moved from his place by the door, nor had he replaced his shoes. The stump on the end of his right foot was visible even through his socks, but Dalir didn’t focus on that. He was about to bid Erik good-night and head off to his room (without eating, which said a lot about how upset he still was) when Erik spoke first.

“Her name is Christine Daee.”

Dalir looked at him, but did not reply.
A hand drove through Erik’s hair, gripping the ends very tightly. “You can Google the case - not that there was a case, no one pressed any charges. Three months ago, right before she was due to graduate, her boyfriend reported her missing. She was found twenty-four hours later in the apartment of a raving, strung-out madman. One guess whose apartment it was.”

“Erik - ”

“No, I’m telling you because you ought to know - I should have told you from the first,” Erik said, the hand that wasn’t in his hair coming up to press the mask against his face, hard. “I can’t tell you anything else because I don’t remember anything else. She was staying with me - of her own free will! She needed a place to stay, I - I shouldn’t have let her, but I wasn’t thinking. I remember her staying, two weeks. It was fine, at first, but then I went on a bender. I don’t - I don’t want to talk about why, just now. I injured myself, badly. I woke up in the hospital. That’s where I was served the restraining order.”

Shit. Dalir had heard horror stories before - way worse than the one Erik was telling him. But somehow this hurt worse. In too deep. You’re getting in too deep. You’re thinking of him as a friend. That has to stop.

“But she didn’t press charges,” Dalir said. “Other than the restraining order, no charges were filed.”

“No,” Erik shook his head, dropping his hands. “I was coming down...I’ll spare you, but the cops who visited me said she was an absolute saint. I think they thought she was my girlfriend. Claimed I never laid a hand on her. That she was staying with me of her own free will. That everyone was making a big deal over nothing and that she only called the cops because she was worried about me.”

Erik only had to look at Dalir to know what he was thinking. Shame it didn’t work both ways.

“I know, I know, it sounds like lies,” Erik said quietly, lowering his hand from the mask. “I...I don’t know. Maybe it is. I don’t remember. I haven’t spoken to her since.”

This wasn’t any of Dalir’s business. It shouldn’t affect his ability to be a decent companion. And yet…

“Why the restraining order?” Dalir pressed. “If she said everything was fine?”

“I don’t know,” Erik sighed, head lolling back on his shoulders. He closed his eyes. “If...if it really was as she said, I still wouldn’t blame her if she never wanted to put herself through it again. To deal with me again. Even if she was totally unharmed...physically. There are some things you never want to face twice.”

Erik opened his eyes and regarded Dalir frankly. “I also understand if this is not a situation that you want to continue - ”

“It has nothing to do with me, man,” Dalir said, shaking his head. “I’m here to ensure your sobriety. Not to judge you for past actions.”

Right off a pamphlet. Erik wasn’t the only person who could quote platitudes he didn’t believe.

Later, after Erik had shut himself in his room, Dalir found himself Googling Christine Daee - it took him a while since he kept spelling her name wrong. But on a hunch, he tried ‘Christine D* theatre missing’ and then he hit paydirt.
A set of pictures popped up. A smiling black girl with a round face and short hair, shaved on the sides with a shock of blonde curls, like a mohawk, on the top of her head. Professional headshot. He kept looking. An image search revealed her in a few productions for the college, the most recent for the touring company of Chess.

There were some articles from the local paper, a brief blurb on the evening news, all before she’d been found. The news footage featured an interview with a cute Latino boy - her boyfriend - explaining that she’d been hard to track down the last few weeks.

“She said she was getting lessons from someone - music lessons, she’s getting her MFA in musical theatre,” he explained. “But none of her professors have seen her either. They didn’t know anything about extra lessons.”

The follow-up articles, after Christine’s discovery, were more lurid, but fairly vague. They said the missing twenty-four year old had been found, in the apartment of a local man. No name appeared in the paper, but the descriptions...god, they were something else.

‘Deformed heroin addict.’

‘Hideously disfigured psychopath.’

‘Police are investigating other incidents of kidnapping. Opening cold case files. Looking into unsolved murders in the area, over the last ten years.’

‘Bloody scene.’

‘Neighbors demand action.’

But it was just as Erik said. Nothing came of it. Christine never commented publicly. And because there was no crime, his name was never released. In a way, it was the best possible outcome: Erik got the help he clearly needed and nothing happened to Christine - she moved on, established a career and was able to put the whole thing behind her...but the restraining order left a bad taste in his mouth.

Dalir wondered, given the fact that Erik was clearly a man of means and Christine was a young actress, whether money had changed hands. Gerard was obviously willing to move heaven and earth for his son. He could definitely see him greasing the kid’s palm. Maybe he even called in some favors, to get her that role that would take her all over the map. Away from Erik. What girl in a similar situation would say no?

If he was smart, he’d drop it. Forget it. Knowing this about Erik, it didn’t change his ability to do his job. And it was not his job to be Erik’s friend.

Yeah, screw it.

As Dalir typed her name into Facebook, he told himself he was merely satisfying a need to see justice done. If these people he’d fallen in with, Erik and Gerard Carriere, had done something to keep her quiet, it wasn’t right. It should be addressed.

Christine had two profiles. The one under her full name was clearly a professional profile. There was a black-and-white headshot as her user image and the newsfeed was full of touring dates and backstage videos, including a snippet of her singing something, but he skipped that video.

She’d liked her own page, under the name ‘Christine Elizabeth.’ It was a semi-private page, he couldn’t see all her photos or her newsfeed, but he could see her profile picture history. There were
older photos where her hair was longer, probably from high school. A few from college - rocking a ‘fro - several with that kid from the news footage, but the three most recent featured Christine alone.

It wasn’t...technically honest. It was deeply unprofessional. But Dalir typed out a message and sent it to her inbox:

‘Hello Christine. My name is Dalir Nouri. I’m a former police officer who has recently become acquainted with Erik Carriere. I am aware the situation is fresh and I more than understand if you would rather not discuss the matter with me. But I would appreciate it if we could meet. Name the place and the time, if you are interested. Thanks.’

And he sent the message, signing with his name again and his phone number. The chances he’d get a reply seemed remote, but he’d only just closed the laptop when he got a notification on his phone.

‘I’m free tomorrow afternoon before the matinee. I can meet you in Jefferson Park, by the Susan B. Anthony statue. There’s a bench there. It’s on the walking path.’

Smart girl; the park would be filled with families on a Saturday morning. She couldn’t have picked a more secure location if she tried.

Dalir was about to write back, confirming the time when she messaged him again.

‘Is Erik okay?’

He wasn’t sure how to answer that. And so he didn’t. He offered 11AM as a time to meet and she agreed.

‘I get that Erik can’t talk to me, I’m not even sure you’re allowed to send a message, but if you can tell him that I think about him every day. And that I’m sorry.’

Dalir did not respond and his phone was quiet the rest of the night.
Christine's back! **Warning for mention of: Addiction, spousal abuse and alcoholism.**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dalir left the apartment the next day just as Mr. Carriere was coming in with a cardboard tray containing Erik’s favorite coffee and a box from a bakery, different from the coffee shop. A peace offering?

“Hey, Dalir,” he said in greeting. Dalir managed a stiff smile, but broadcast an air of wanting to be on his way as quickly as possible; he was dressed for running, figuring he could kill two birds with one stone and get his cardio in before his meeting with Miss Christine Daee; it might make him feel less nervous.

“I think Erik’s still in bed,” Dalir cautioned as he passed Mr. Carrriere on his way out. “He hasn’t come out of his room this morning.”

Mr. Carriere’s smile was even less convincing than Dalir’s. “I’ll wait.”

*They’re probably not as bad as you think,* Dalir reminded himself. He remembered Christine’s texts. *Think about him every day. Tell him I’m sorry. I miss him.*

But she was so young. A kid. And the newspapers...murderers. Kidnappings. Maybe she had Stockholm Syndrome.

*Oh for fuck’s sake Dalir!* the rational part of his brain was ashamed of him. *She was missing for a day! If she was even missing; according to Erik she was staying with him, he was doing her a favor.*

That family history of mental illness, though. Erik seemed sane as anyone, but he still took his daily regimen of pills. Dalir had seen the dosages, nothing too heavy-duty, just enough to take the edge off - knowing the little he did about Erik’s life, he wasn’t surprised he was prone to depression. But his mom had something far worse. And wasn’t it in the late 20s that serious mental illness manifested? Erik was squarely in the danger zone for teetering over the edge into choppy waters.

As he ran, he tried to clear his head, but his thoughts only became more muddled. Erik standing by, wary and embarrassed when Dalir insisted on checking his space for drugs. Erik laughing on the couch watching a movie. Erik being so damn pleased with himself for his work on that demo CD, wanting to share it with Dalir who he knew couldn’t appreciate it the way he deserved.

Erik holding a twenty-four year old girl against her will and shooting up. Erik being served a restraining order from a hospital bed. It didn’t seem like it could happen to the same guy. But it had. It had.

It wasn’t like Dalir hadn’t known people - friends, family members - who’d fucked up. One of his
cousins, on his Dad’s side, beat up his wife. The family knew about it and tried to get the poor woman some help, but she thought it was her lot to suffer. Dalir only saw Hamid every so often, but he avoided him like the plague, him and his wife. He was never sure if her long-sleeved blouses were worn out of a genuine desire to dress according to modesty laws or just to hide bruises. And there was a baby on the way now.

A few of his friends from high school either struggled with addiction or got into dealing when they were young. Most of them quit of their own accord, got out, went on to respectable jobs. It wasn’t anything serious in high school, just weed. But not all of them made it. They popped up on his Facebook feed from time to time. Some found God. Some found a new person to hook up with every few weeks, flooding his newsfeed with pictures of their domestic bliss and the pets they purchased together. Then there would be long ranting posts about how they’d been used and women couldn’t be trusted and men were all liars, but they were strong, they’d get through...he always wondered what happened to the pets.

But he only distantly engaged. Kept them at the periphery of his world, of his thoughts. It was different with clients, that was his job. To be understanding, compassionate, and neutral. The neutrality was key; don’t think of them as bad people, just people who made bad decisions.

But Erik was different. Dalir had never...oh, this was going to sound like such a Hallmark card...Dalir hadn’t felt this sense of connection before, this genuine liking for a client. Where it got complicated was this: Dalir wanted Erik to like him too. It hadn’t mattered before. Not in three years. But Dalir wanted Erik’s good opinion. Wanted to be friends. Real friends. And that couldn’t happen if Erik was some kind of sleezeball. The kind of coerced vulnerable girls into staying with him under the guise of hospitality. Who wouldn’t let them leave. And then paid for their cooperation when the whole scheme slipped out from under him.

Dalir was sweaty and disgusting by the time he finally stopped at Susan B. Anthony. Even though, by his watch, he was fifteen minutes early, Christine was already there. She was holding a coffee from the place down the block from Erik, wearing an oversized sweater, leggings, boots. She could have been one of the college kids from the area. She looked really young.

“Officer Nouri?” she asked, brow crinkling when she looked up at him. Maybe she thought he was going to come in uniform.

“Just...Dalir is fine,” he said, extending a hand. She shook it; her fingers were warm from her coffee. It struck him as he looked at her how tiny she was. She couldn’t have been more than 5’3, even in the boots. Erik had to be over a foot taller than her and god knew how much weight he had over her. This wasn’t looking good for him.

“Is Erik okay?” she asked, before Dalir had the chance to even sit down. “No one would tell me anything and I couldn’t check. I’ve been so worried, you have no idea.”

“He’s...as good as can be expected,” Dalir said delicately. “He’s living in his apartment. Working on music. He, ah, he’s doing...voice stuff. For...Whistling in the Wind. Or, ah, something like that.”

Christine’s face relaxed and her hands tightened on the cup. “I don’t want to press charges. If that’s why you wanted to talk to me. I want to tell you right out - I told the other cops, but I knew they didn’t believe me - nothing bad happened. Nothing wrong. Except for when he shot up, but I wasn’t there at the time. I just found him. And I get that I should have called earlier, but I thought I could handle it on my own.”

‘Miss Daee - Christine,” Dalir interrupted her. “I - I’m not working this case. I’m actually retired.
I’m employed as Erik’s sober companion. I...just wanted to get a clearer picture of the situation. For my work.”

Liar. Liar. Lair.

“Sober companion?” she asked. “Like...I don’t know what that means.”

Dalir quickly explained the job as best he could - not a babysitter. Just an aid. Since Erik had only just gotten out of rehab and the potential to use again was its highest now. That he discovered the fact that she figured in the last incident. And he wanted to know if she had any further information that could help him out.

“There wasn’t anything in the information I was given by his father to indicate that there was a prior...domestic disturbance,” Dalir concluded, keeping the phrasing as delicate as he could.

Nevertheless, Christine’s eye narrowed and she took a long sip of her coffee. “Domestic? Like, you think he hit me?”

“You did file -”

“You said you’ve been staying with Erik,” she put the coffee down next to her on the bench and turned to look Dalir full in the face. Her eyes were hard, but there wasn’t anything wounded behind them, nothing skittish in her demeanor. She didn’t seem afraid - but why would she? She had a restraining order. “I don’t see how you could be with the guy five minutes and think he’d lay a hand on anybody! I get that he’s a big dude and...with his face and everything...people just assume things.”

There it was. A crack. When she mentioned Erik’s face, just the tiniest fluttering of her eyelashed, a tightness to her mouth allowed him to see something new in her expression, but he couldn’t determine what. Fear? Or a more complicated emotion.

Christine picked her coffee back up and took another long drink. “I know how it looked. This...big, scary white guy in a mask, little black girl, the police busted into his apartment...I know what people thought. What they said. But they were wrong! It wasn’t anything like how the papers made it out to be.”

“Did he...hurt you?” Dalir asked because he had to know. “Threaten you?”

“No!” Christine insisted, throwing a hand in the air. “He was helping me out! He’s a nice guy, I wanted to be there. But he was having a shitty time and...god, if I’d known calling the police was going to make everyone think he was some kind of freaking kidnapper, I never would have done it!”

There were tears in her eyes and Dalir began to regret asking her to meet. He might be re-traumatizing her. At the very least, he was upsetting her; the poor girl looked miserable.

“The restraining order was not my idea,” she said, looking up again, a determined set to her jaw. “My...this guy I was seeing...his dad had some issues with drinking when he was little. He said his mom - when things were bad, she’d get a restraining order just so he kept his distance, so he could figure stuff out. I was just really upset that night and the next few days - look, Felipe thought he was doing the right thing -”

“Felipe?” Dalir asked.

“My ex,” she said impatiently. “He reported me missing - I wasn’t missing. I didn’t tell him I was
staying with Erik because I knew he wouldn’t understand. Erik’s gay and even if he wasn’t, he wouldn’t...look. He didn’t threaten me. He didn’t force me to come over and he didn’t force me to stay. I didn’t pick up my phone because I was taking care of him.”

“Taking care how?” Dalir pressed. Too much. He was digging too much. But he had to know.

Christine took a deep, steadying breath and closed her eyes. “We had a fight. I found...stuff. And I freaked out since he should have told me there was illegal shit in his house. He didn’t try to stop me...Erik’s insanely non-combative, like, it wasn’t even a real fight. I yelled at him and he took it. I came back later, when I cooled off. I wanted to talk to him, to understand. I’d been gone a few hours. But...I was too late, he shot up and and he was a mess. I couldn’t leave him! He’d done so much for me and he was in such a bad place...but then he kind of snapped and I was afraid he’d hurt himself...he...his face it - I thought...have you seen what he looks like?”

Silently, Dalir shook his head.

Biting her lower lip, Christine stared at her fingers, wrapped tight around her little cardboard coffee cup. “Up until then, I hadn’t either. He told me - the first day we met, before we met he told me he was in an accident and that he wore a mask so he didn’t...upset people. I never touched it, but that day...he was bleeding. And barely conscious. And I took it off and I thought - I thought he’d had some kind of total psychotic fit and tore his own face off. That’s why I called. I thought if I didn’t...but it just made everything worse.”

“It didn’t,” Dalir insisted. “You did the right thing. He went to rehab. He got clean. He’s been staying clean, even if it’s a struggle.”

Christine’s phone buzzed before she could answer. “I’ve got to check in soon,” she said, putting the phone back in her pocket. “But...that’s good. Great! That he’s...not in that place anymore. Believe me, Officer - Dalir. Erik is a good guy. I don’t say that lightly. Look - could you...could you tell him, please, I’m not mad. I’m thinking of him? I miss him, like...a lot.”

Dalir said he would. There wasn’t any harm in it. Not for Christine, anyway. He took her hand again and made to leave, but she squeezed his fingers, rooting him to the spot.

“And one more thing,” she added hastily, looking into his eyes desperately. “What happened...it wasn’t all his fault. If it wasn’t for Alexis - but that’s not my business to tell you. Just...Erik is a really good guy. And it’s really easy to hurt him. Badly. Okay? And he got hurt and he didn’t cope well. But he’d never hurt someone else. Just himself. Got it?”

“Got it,” Dalir echoed. Christine let go of his hand. She turned on her heel, dropping her coffee cup in the trash as she left.

He ought to feel better. All she’d done was defend Erik, she didn’t have to do that - hell, he’d come in expecting her to confess all kinds of dark deeds to him! Yet over and over, she insisted that Erik was a good person. That what happened wasn’t even really his fault. It should have made him feel better. Less conflicted.

Should have. But the conversation just left him with more questions than answers.

By the time Dalir got back to the apartment it was late afternoon and Mr. Carriere was gone. No sign of coffees or muffins. Erik was standing at the kitchen island, head bent over some sheets of paper that were spread out before him, pen in hand.

“How was breakfast with Dad?” Dalir asked, shutting the door and heading for his bedroom. He
desperately needed a shower, he was actively funky.

“Fine,” Erik said and Dalir only now realized how often he did say it. Everything was always fine. The accident? Fine. Mom being committed? Fine. Getting kicked out of a show because a girl had a restraining order against him? Fine. It was infuriating.

But Dalir wasn’t going to unpack all that. Not today. That was definitely a job for Erik’s therapist. Instead he took a long, hot shower. When he went back into the kitchen, Erik was still at the island, but the papers were gone and put away. Dalir went to the fridge to make himself a sandwich.

“Something’s different,” Erik said, watching him unscrew the top of the mayo jar. “You’re not looking at me like I’m some cross between Ted Bundy and Jack the Ripper. What happened?”

If someone asked him, right after he met Erik, to pinpoint where he was from, Dalir wouldn’t have had a clue. Now that he knew he was from Boston, it was more obvious - like in the way he said ‘Jack the Rippah.’ It was actually kind of cute.

JUST STOP. Thoughts like that are what got you in this mess in the first place.

“I...okay, this was not cool of me,” Dalir admitted. Or ethical. And probably broke the confines of the contract. Why had it seemed so important last night? “But I...talked to Christine. I messaged her. On Facebook and - ”

Erik gripped the countertop like he might fall over if he didn’t have an anchor. “What?”

“I know, I know,” Dalir held up a hand, warding him off. Grateful for the granite island between them. Too bad he was only armed with a mayonaise-y butter knife in the other hand. “Like I said. I overstepped. I’m sorry - ”

“How is she? Does she...no, no, nevermind, I’m not allowed to know.”

“You’re allowed!” Dalir exclaimed. In all his years as a cop, he never met anyone who took a restraining order so seriously. They were broken all the time - usually by the filer. If Christine wanted to, she could have buzzed herself into his apartment and had lunch with the guy. Not that this was a great idea, definitely not something Dalir would advocate, but Erik seemed to think he wasn’t even allowed to say the girl’s name. Who told him that? His dad? Now that he thought of it, it seemed likely. “Look...she seems fine. She cares about you. She’s worried about you. She wanted me to tell you.”

Erik sagged against the island, head bowed. Dalir saw the strings of the mask poking out through his hair. It would be so easy to untie them...but he’d pried enough into Erik’s personal life. Far too much.

“Thank you,” Erik whispered to the counter. When he lifted his head, his eyes were glittering with tears. “Thank you. I don’t...did she say anything else?”

“Only that what happened wasn’t your fault,” he replied. Then, with a little smirk added, “That was her most important point - kind of pounded it into my head. She said this girl, Alexis - ”

“Man,” Erik interrupted him. “Alexis was…is. Alexis is a man.”

Erik is gay. Weird how he didn’t remember that conversational nugget until this second. It shouldn’t change anything. None of this should change anything. But...god, it did. It did.

“Right, okay. Christine said if it wasn’t for this Alexis person, you...wouldn’t have done what you
“She’s an angel, that girl. Too good. That I can imagine her saying, but it’s not true. I hurt her. I did.”

Erik lapsed into silence. Dalir was left with the lingering question of Alexis, but he didn’t speak either. He’d sound nosy. He felt nosy. He felt like a total asshole, an unprofessional asshole. His job was to keep Erik sober, not to dredge up the past. He wasn’t a therapist, he wasn’t even a licensed social worker. All he was doing by bringing this up was causing him pain. And, as little as he knew of his life, he felt like Erik suffered enough pain.

“I should tell you,” Erik said at last. “If you’re to work on...the solution, you might as well know the problems.”

He went into the fridge, pulled out two bottles of beer and handed one to Dalir. “Self-medicating,” he admitted, glancing at the microwave clock.

After all the rules he’d broken in the past day, allowing Erik an it's-five-o'clock-somewhere beer didn’t seem like that big a deal.

“Just this once,” Dalir said, picking up his plate. “To the Honesty Couch?”

Erik paused, then smiled. Then laughed.

“That’s hilarious,” he said, taking a draught of his beer. Dalir watched the healthy skin on his neck as Erik tilted his head back, then his eyes lingered on the hollow of his throat to where the skin, both damaged and not, disappeared beneath his shirt. “I thought I was the only one who called it The Honesty Couch.”

And a grin. Open. Inviting. A little shy.

Oh, boy, you’re in trouble now.

Chapter End Notes

Dalir is behaving INSANELY unethically, BUT there is no board of review, no official training, and little oversight for sober companions. So he doesn't actually have anyone to answer to, allowing him to constantly bend or break rules without consequences. And Dalir is REALLY good at convincing himself when he's doing something 'for the greater good' - even if that greater good is convincing himself the dude he has a crush on is, at his core, a good person.
I like to think of this as cleaning the slate of an old boyfriend to make way for a new boyfriend.

**Warning for:** discussion of addiction, enabling behavior, and emotional abuse.

They settled into the Honesty Couch, Erik taking his customary spot in one corner, Dalir in the other, the middle cushion a no-man’s-land where occasionally one of their knees dared to trespass. But today, Erik put his feet up on the coffee table, slumping into the corner as if he was already exhausted, though he couldn’t have been out of bed for more than three hours.

“I don’t even know where I should start,” he admitted, staring at the ceiling. “With the pills? With...Alexis? I’m amazed Christine told you his name - she always called him what’s-his-name. She met him maybe three times and hated him within the first five minutes. I should have known.”

“Start whenever,” Dalir replied simply. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Erik kept staring straight up, arms folded across his chest. “I swear, I’ve never talked this much about myself in my life - you probably know just as much about me as my therapist. You should charge by the hour.”

Dalir was uncomfortably aware of the money that was deposited in his account - apparently Mr. Carriere preferred using technology as much as Erik did for financial transactions. True, he wasn’t specifically being paid to function as a sounding board, but in his experience it was part and parcel with the job. Depending on the client, anyway. Some spilled their guts the first day, determined that Dalir should know they had a reason for what they did. That they weren’t just some burnout. Others pretended Dalir was just a ghost in the house - not engaging more than was necessary, always slightly surprised to see him hanging around. Erik didn’t fit into either mode. Erik...he was unique.

Mr. Carriere said that, the first day they met; Dalir dismissed it. Stupid of him. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“Why don’t you start with Alexis...if you want,” Dalir prompted gently, since Erik had lapsed into contemplative silence, studying the ceiling.

“I probably should,” he nodded, passing a hand over the mask. “It’s...humiliating to recall. So...God, I want to say, ‘try not to judge me too harshly,’ but how could you not? I kick myself every day over it - I was so stupid.”

“Hey, we’ve all been there,” Dalir said, scooting slightly closer. A knee and part of his thigh in no-man’s-land. Coming closer. Maybe making contact. “And I’m not here to judge - ”

“As you’ve said,” Erik interrupted wryly, head turning to look at Dalir. There was a fondness in his eyes, unmistakable warmth. The tight set of his arms loosened slightly; it occurred to Dalir that he’d never really seen Erik relax - but how could he? When he was wearing a mask and shoes all the time, even in his pajamas? Poor guy, he thought, not for the first time. Poor guy.
Alexis, as Dalir half-suspected from the way Erik berated himself over him, was an ex-boyfriend. In fact, his only serious boyfriend. They’d known each other for two years, dated about half that time.

“My dad also hated the guy - I was much more dismissive of his opinion than Christine’s,” Erik sighed. “Though I still believe he just hated the idea of me being in a relationship, period. He’s seen Carrie a few too many times, he never encouraged me to...date or anything. And...until Alexis came along, the opportunity never presented itself.”

Alexis, Erik informed him, started off like any other business associate - he needed help with a project and someone dropped Erik’s name as having a good ear and technical know-how. At first they emailed. Then talked on the phone. He and Alexis met up in Manhattan to watch a show together. Things progressed from there.

“It’s not exactly a badge of honor, being a twenty-nine year old virgin,” Erik said tightly. “But...it’s understandable, in my particular case.”

That Dalir disagreed with. There were plenty of reasons a person might not want to have sex, all varied and valid. But...god, had Erik actually looked at himself? Dalir had no doubt that whatever was under the mask wasn’t great, especially after he’d seen the scars on his arm, chest, and back. But seriously? Seriously? He was tall, he was built, and that voice alone could probably be the start of a great career as one of those late-night radio DJs who played smooth jazz and talked about art. Or, you know. Something a little more risque over phone lines. Not that Dalir would know. Ahem.

But whatever, if Erik thought of himself as some kind of troll, that was his problem to deal with, or work through. He just couldn’t imagine that no one except for this Alexis guy had ever looked at him and thought, ‘Yeah, I’d do him.’

“I’m sorry, I should ask,” Erik said, snapping Dalir out of his ‘Dude, you’re not unfuckable, you’re just not paying attention,’ reverie. “Are you...okay with this discussion?”

“Fine!” Dalir yelped (yeah, no way Erik was going to believe him) when his reassurance sounded like it was coming from a chicken with a sore throat. “It’s fine...really. Say what you need to say.”

Erik sat up straighter, tracing the rim of his beer with a finger, eyes on the carpet now. “Okay. Look...it’s...difficult to explain. It never occurred to me that anyone would - want me. At all. I’ve had - you know, college.”

“Oh yeah,” Dalir nodded. Erik didn’t need to say another word; he’d been to plenty of parties where alcohol and other things were passed around and consumed which led to unlikely couplings and ridiculous antics.

“And people have said, you know, if only,” he gestured to his face, then his hand went to its usual place in his hair, but only briefly. “I didn’t want to...take a chance with someone only to have them pushing themselves to do things they didn’t want to do once they’d...seen. That very concept hurts more than someone being repelled outright. To...be an object of pity, or...curiosity. I never wanted that. But Alexis...he was different. He actively pursued me. He was brash and forthright and...not actually my type. But maybe that was why I fell for him. Because he was so out of the realm of what I’d...imagined.”

Dalir asked if he could see a picture and Erik obliged, pulling his phone out of his pocket. “I’ve got to do a search - I deleted everything to do with him of my phone. Pictures, videos, even music. And his contact number. Ah. He was responsible for procuring...the hard stuff. Heroin. He preferred
Without making eye contact, Erik handed the phone over. The guy had a major media presence, he was a guest commentator on the NYC NPR affiliate, then there was his professional website with links to CDs, MP3s, vinyl, his YouTube channel...all with his face plastered over everything. Dalir made a snap assessment of him from his picture: he looked like a douche.

Okay, some of that might have come from Erik’s supplying the backstory, but he was not the kind of person Dalir could see himself being friends with. He was a good-looking guy, in a hipster nerd way, with big thick glasses, a narrow jaw and about fifteen layers of scarves on in any given photo. From the news clippings he clicked over to, it looked like Alexis was a rising star on Broadway, thirty-two, poised to become the next Jason Robert Brown, whoever that was.

“He kept up with me and once he moved back here,” Erik continued as Dalir scrolled through pictures. Erik’s boyfriend. Erik’s dealer. Not uncommon; not uncommon at all. “It was easier to get together - I stopped charging for the work I was doing, it didn’t seem right, when we were...yeah. He asked if I was interested in collaborating with him and I did, on Tiger/Tyger - heard of it?”

Dalir shook his head and handed the phone back, confident that he’d memorized Alexis’s face just in case he turned up again and needed to be avoided.

“It’s song cycle,” Erik explained, turning the phone screen off. “Like Songs for a New World.”

Dalir raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know the words to ‘Thrift Shop.’ I thought we were going to watch a chess match on Friday. Music is not my thing.”

“Someday I’m going to find out what your thing is,” Erik said, half to himself. And he didn’t mean it that way, but damn. Dalir shifted slightly on the couch. With that voice of his, he ought to be careful what words came out of his mouth. “A song cycle is music, usually written by one composer, performed onstage, generally relating to a theme. Tiger/Tyger is unrelated songs for an ensemble based on the poetry of William Blake - ‘Tyger tyger burning bright, in the forest of the night…’”?

“I did take English in high school,” Dalir said off Erik’s inquisitive look.

“Sorry, just...checking. It’s...incredibly popular in certain circles,” he went on. “Running off-Broadway right now. It’s only been open for a few weeks, but ticket sales are...insane. Anyway, we collaborated on it. Not that you’d know from the liner notes.”

His voice was bitter and he got up from the couch, leaving his beer on the coffee table. Dalir wondered whether or not that was the end of the conversation, but Erik returned a minute later with a burned CD labeled ‘TT - Demo. Belladova/Leskov’

Erik popped it in the stereo, scanned through a few songs and finally settled on Track 5. A sweet, strong female voice sounded in the apartment singing.

‘My mother bore me in the southern wild
I live in darkness, but my soul is light.
Light as the forehead of an English child - ’

He snapped off the CD player and cut the music short. Too bad; it was pretty.

“That was Christine - singing,” Erik said, taking his seat on the sofa and picking up his beer. He took a long draught. “That was one of the things Alexis and I were fighting over, in the end. I wrote the melody for the poem, ‘The Little Black Boy.’”
“Is that...like, a metaphor?” Dalir asked, forehead crinkling.

“Nope,” Erik shook his head. “Not even a little bit. At the time it was published it was taken to be an abolitionist statement, you know, ‘black people are people,’ which was then a radical position to take. I felt a little...uneasy about it, but Alexis - he’s one of those people who, when they’re explaining something to you, it makes all the sense in the world. So I went along, wrote most of the melody, we put it on YouTube. I did the vocals, and that’s where Christine came in. She made a comment on the video saying that she felt like two white men had no business making money off another white man making money off of black bodies.”

Dalir hadn’t quite followed that entire chain, but it sounded pretty legit, so he nodded.

“She was right,” he said. “And she got...flamed, in the comments, so I shut them down, but I found her Facebook and messaged her. I told her I wrote the song and I wanted to discuss it more with her. She suggested we meet at the park, near Susan B. Anthony.”

Apparently meeting strangers from the internet was no one-off occurrence for Miss Daee. Strange days.

Erik drank more of his beer and Dalir followed suit - the guy was going to make him into an IPA convert. Then he got into a little bit of his history with Christine, they met, they talked about the music and cultural appropriation and he asked if she wouldn’t mind workshopping it with him when he found out she was a musical theatre candidate at the local college. That was where the demo came from - they took out the reference to skin color as a thought experiment, to see if it could work without the racial stuff. And then to discuss whether or not robbing the poem of its original intent was useful. After a few months of meetings, they became friends.

“She’s really smart,” Erik said quietly. “And really sweet. Just...a great girl. A wonderful person - and so talented. I’m not surprised she got a spot in the Chess tour. I wish I’d been able to hear her Svetlana. Anyway...Alexis found out what we were doing. I wasn’t trying to keep it a secret, I thought, the more input the better, especially with that piece.”

“So was he - sorry to interrupt,” Dalir interjected. “Was he...living here?”

“Oh, God no,” Erik shook his head. “No, he was based in L.A. when we first met, he only even moved to New York a year ago, he’s got a place in the city. It was...it was always very long-distance. He only stayed over here a handful of times, never for longer than a weekend. I didn’t tell him I was letting Christine stay over, but he found out...it was...a bad day. We’d had a fight, she found - ”

Erik cut himself off, took a bracing breath, but Dalir headed him off. Said Christine told him about the fight. That there was no need to go over it.

“Thank you,” Erik replied. “Alexis...well, Christine hated him. She thought he was smug, stuck-up and...she didn’t like the way he talked to me. Or talked about me. See, Alexis has this notion that artistic genius and mental illness go hand in hand. He’s...he’d sort of...make little nasty remarks when I took my pills. And, like I said, he...encouraged the addiction. I’m not trying to defend myself, but I...did what I did, at first, because of pain. I don’t know why he started. I never asked.”

Fucking. Hell. On second thought, maybe Alexis wasn’t someone Dalir wanted to avoid. Perhaps he was someone Dalir wanted to suckerpunch and make it look like an accident. But he knew the type - repulsive to admit that there was a type, but these kinds of enablers were the most insidious. The kind who claimed that being an addict was some kind of personality trait. That being ill was a badge of honor. That treatment was giving up. Was a denial of self. Erik didn’t need to say another
Alexis came back to town when Christine was staying with Erik. Although Erik knew when he’d be back, he lost track of the days. He told Dalir he’d been taking more pills, supplementing with heroin when he had to. That he’d always feel tremendous guilt over allowing Christine to stay with him then, of dealing with him like that, of not telling her about the drugs. Erik didn’t blame her for being angry or for walking out; the only mistake she’d made, in Erik’s eyes, was coming back.

“When he saw her leaving the apartment he came in and laid into me,” Erik said, sounding exhausted. “He didn’t want her input. He accused me of sacrificing art to political correctness. He said I’d...God, I can’t forget this. I’d ‘defanged’ myself. And I said back, ‘What, am I a wolf?’ and he got this...awful, nasty look on his face. And said, ‘You could be. You should be. With a mind like yours, why be a man?’”

What? Who said shit like that? It sounded like something a character would say in one of the Underworld movies.

“What the hell does that mean?” Dalir asked, though he thought he knew already. ‘Those people who keep nagging you to get into rehab, they’re not your real friends. They don’t get you. I get you. I love you just as you are. You don’t need to change for me.’

“That’s exactly what I said,” Erik replied, hand going to his hair and gripping tightly. “And then he said...he got nasty. Really nasty. That maybe he was being too nice to me. That pain was the best source of inspiration. That I should be in pain.”

God. Hooked on pain pills. Turning to harder stuff. And Dalir couldn’t even imagine how many surgeries Erik had be subjected to. Who was this guy? And what had Erik ever possibly seen in him?

He thought he was never going to find anyone. And if this guy came on strong...I can see it. It’s...depressing, but I can absolutely see it.

“That...pissed me off,” Erik continued, his phrasing delicate, but his voice tight with suppressed feeling. “I told him that I was in pain, or had he forgotten? He’d seen - he’d seen. And he said - this was the worst - he said of course not. How could he forget? But he was willing to be with me, despite it all. Because of my mind. That my mind made up for what he was forcing himself to lie next to at night.”

Erik was sitting with his right ankle crossed over his left knee and he was jiggling his foot so hard it was a testament to the sturdiness of the couch that Dalir couldn’t feel the vibrations from where he was sitting.

“So...I snapped. Told him I wanted off the project - I told him a lot of other things,” Erik shook his head, dislodging the memories. “God. I was...in so much pain. Just as he liked. Christine said she’d be back for her things, but...I wasn’t thinking. I was selfish. I went back to the needle and...the rest is gone. But you already know what happened.”

There wasn’t much left to say. Alexis finished the show while Erik was in rehab. Took full credit, even though the music was mostly the work of his collaborator. It didn’t matter, Erik wasn’t going to go after him about it. Alexis knew he wouldn’t.

“It might win a Tony,” Erik grimaced. “Or not. He kept ‘The Little Black Boy’ in, so it’s somewhat controversial. Just changed the title. ‘My Mother Bore Me.’ You can look it up; I haven’t listened to it since. I don’t even know why I kept the CD, except for the fact that Christine sings on it. I
haven’t even listened to that before today.”

Abruptly, Erik was up. He started pacing, his shoulders hunched. Then, without warning, he rounded on Dalir - farther away than he’d been when they were sitting on the couch, but his eyes pinned him, like lasers. The intensity of his gaze was unnerving; it made the room feel claustrophobic. Dalir sat very still; he didn’t know whether Erik was going to yell at him or strike him.

He didn’t do either. Just kept his distance and stared. Then he said, “You just...sit there. You take it all in, all this crap. Don’t you...doesn’t it affect you? Don’t you have an opinion?”

Dalir swallowed, not sure how to respond. Of course he had opinions, but it wasn’t professional to have opinions. Training left over from the police academy - stay neutral. Stay calm. Hear all sides, don’t make a bad situation worse.

“Does it matter if I do?” he asked Erik slowly. “You’re not seeing this guy any more.”

“No,” Erik snapped. “Of course not. I’m not that desperate for affection that I’d go crawling back to the person who...helped me fuck up my life. Despite all of Alexis’s hopes, I’m not actually a masochist. I’d probably be a much happier person if I was since - never mind. Nevermind. Anyway, he hasn’t tried to call me either; he got what he wanted. He’s...free. And happy, presumably. Well-regarded by his peers.”

A cold, sneer crossed Erik’s face. It didn’t suit him.

“I think that guy sounds like a piece of shit,” Dalir informed Erik, tone flat. He was only stating facts, after all. “I think you deserve better. I think it’s fucking bullshit that he’s making money off of something that - like you just said - fucked up your life. Erik...I’m not going to say that none of it was your fault. That’d be a lie, since you made the decision to use. He might have brought you the smack, but you put the needle in your arm. Or am I wrong?”

Erik winced. Dalir couldn’t see it, just a squinting of his eyes, a tightness in his neck. But he knew it was there.

“You’re not wrong,” Erik said. “I’ve been...I’ve had issues since I was fifteen - ”

“You’re not saying it, though,” Dalir pointed out and Erik knew exactly what he meant. ‘I’m Erik and I’m an addict.’ He didn’t even like to say it at meetings, that big beautiful voice would go faint and Dalir, sitting next to him, would struggle to make out the words.

“I’ve been an addict since I was fifteen,” Erik said, grating it out, like each word was a struggle. “I think you must be...a saint. Or something. To...put up with people like me, the way you do.”

“Man,” Dalir shook his head. “I’ve been doing this for three years. I’ve had a dozen clients. And I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“Thank heaven for that,” Erik said, moving to the kitchen to recycle his empty beer can.

Dalir stood up and watched him from across the room. “You’re not a bad person.”

Erik froze, slamming the recycling drawer shut. “What?”
“You’re not a bad person,” Dalir repeated, chancing moving closer. Now only the kitchen island was between them. “Is that...does that help? Is that useful? ‘Cuz I can say it every day, if you need. Whenever you wake up - nine in the morning or ten at night. You’re not a bad person. You’ve made some bad choices. Yeah, you’ve hurt some people. But you’re not a bad person.”

Erik turned away, hands fisting at his sides. “Hate the sin, love the sinner?”

“If you want,” Dalir shrugged. “If that...makes sense for you. But Erik - if you were an actively bad person, you wouldn’t be all torn up over Christine still. You wouldn’t feel guilty about not telling her about the drugs in the apartment. Man, you might be pissed she called the cops! You might blame her!”

“I don’t have anyone to blame but myself - ”

“Yeah, see, that right there,” Dalir pointed at him, even though Erik still had his back turned. “That’s not something a bad person would say. A bad person would still be making excuses. Would be blaming anyone and everyone except themselves. You already blame yourself, but to move forward...you’ve got to forgive yourself. If you keep dwelling...you’ve got to think about what’s going to happen, not focus on shit you can’t change.”

Slowly. Very, very slowly, Erik turned around. Looked at Dalir, stunned, kind of. Like he’d slapped him. Or kissed him.

“You’re...remarkable,” Erik said, wonderingly. “Has anyone told you that?”

Dalir smirked. “Nope. Look, I think - great as that couch is - we’ve had enough honesty for one day. Maybe for a few days. You want to get out of here? I don’t care where we go, we can just drive if you want. Try to find a radio station we both like.”

“It could be a long drive,” Erik replied warningly.

Dalir smiled. “Like I said, I don’t have anything better to do. Come on. Get your coat.”
This started off as pure self-indulgence on my part since I wanted Dalir and Erik to engage in autumnal fun, but it morphed into something else. **Warning for homophobia.**

They wound up driving for about an hour, deeper into the country - or what passed for country in their neck of the woods. The houses became more plentiful and family farms started cropping up around them. Dalir rolled the windows down since it was a nice day, and the wind ruffled Erik’s hair, tangling it with the strings of his mask.

“Want me to put that - ”

“It’s fine,” Erik said, giving the strings a tug. “Double-knotted.”

Dalir shook his head, “You think of everything.”

A half-smile curved Erik’s mouth. “Sometimes.”

He seemed to be in a better headspace than he was in the living room, but that probably had to do with the fact that he wasn’t rehashing horrible traumatic experiences. Dalir was still processing, wishing he hadn’t pushed so hard for Erik to keep going, get it all out. Even if it was Erik’s idea to really delve into the past, he might not have wanted to reveal so much all at once.

Boundaries again. Dalir had come crashing through Erik’s with all the subtlety of a stick of dynamite. Erik confided in him, didn’t seem angry with him, but their most recent conversation really convinced Dalir that he needed to be more circumspect; Erik was lonely. Lonely enough to get involved with someone who didn’t have his best interests at heart. Lonely enough to pour out his guts to a near-stranger.

Recalling the first time Erik really spoke to him, when he said he’d never had a roommate and liked having Dalir around...god, his perception on that did a total 180. At the time, Dalir thought Erik was trying to reassure him, to make Dalir feel more comfortable, let him know that he didn’t resent having him over. Now he realized that he was expressing gratitude, plain and simple. The man was a mess of contradictions, something Dalir was only just beginning to discover.

Erik lived alone, but preferred having people around. He resigned himself to celibacy then leapt at the first guy who didn’t say ‘if only.’ Christine was right. It was very easy to hurt him. The guy should have had defenses made of concrete around his heart, but he didn’t. He got attached easily - Erik was probably getting attached to him, easily, just because Dalir was the only person around.

Questions burned in the back of his throat: *So, you have any...other friends? What do you usually do for fun? Or did you literally stay home, write music, and watch movies until someone dragged you into the light?*

He swallowed all of them. Erik had bared enough of himself for the day - *Mind, get OUT of the gutter! Stop that! STOP*. He deserved a break. He deserved -
There was a homemade sign on the side of the road, advertising a farmstand selling apple cider and ice cream. Dalir stopped the car so suddenly the breaks squealed.

“Whoa!” Erik exclaimed, grabbing hold of the handle over the door even though he was wearing his seatbelt and wasn’t about to slam into the dash. “Is everything okay?”

“Oh yes,” Dalir said, turning where the hand-markered poster board signs directed him to. “More than okay - uh, sorry about that, but this is important. They might have cider syrup and I am here for that.”

Dalir hadn’t checked before he stopped the car, but there wasn’t anyone behind him - a good thing since he and Erik might be having a very different conversation if there was another angry driver to contend with.

“Dare I ask?” Erik dared to ask as they slowed to a crawl by the side of the road and parked the car behind a row of sedans, minivans, and station wagons. It was a bigger operation than Dalir assumed - there was a big red farm store, a corn maze, pumpkin patch and - yes, thank all the gods of the harvest - apple cider syrup.

As they unbuckled, Dalir informed Erik that cider syrup was the greatest, most autumnal ice cream topping in all the world - yes, he could make it himself, by boiling apple cider, sugar, and cream, but all food tasted better when it was made by someone else. At least Dalir thought so.

“That does explain why your first impulse is take-out,” Erik mused thoughtfully. He got out of the car, zipping up his sweater, shoving his hands in his pockets. They were surrounded by families, grandparents with kids come to pick out decorative squash and enjoy the face painting booth. Young couples sipping hot cider and holding hands, taking selfies in front of haystacks. Dalir made a single-minded trek for ice cream and Erik followed along behind.

“Hi there!” a freckle-faced teen girl with carroty hair said at the ice cream stall. “What can I get for you? Or do you need a minute?”

“Cider syrup,” Dalir demanded. “I don’t care what you put it on. You could just pump it into my hands, that would be fine.”

She laughed and tossed her braid over her shoulder. “Cone or a cup? We do an apple pie sundae with vanilla bean ice cream, graham cracker ice cream, and cider syrup. With whipped cream and walnuts.”

“Yes, that, forever, please,” Dalir said, shoving cash at her when she quoted the price. The girl left to make Dalir’s sundae and he turned to Erik, wallet still open. “What do you want? I’m buying.”

“Nothing for me, thanks,” Erik said, glancing around at a display of mums stacked on hay. A pumpkin-headed scarecrow grinned at him from under the brim of a straw hat. “It’d just melt before we got back.”

Dalir wouldn’t take no for an answer. “Do you do milkshakes?” he added, because he saw a milkshake stirrer in the back - his high school job was at a Dairy Queen, he didn’t miss a trick.

The girl nodded and said she did - she said she could do the apple pie sundaes as a milkshake and Dalir put down more money as Erik feigned interest in foliage. Behind the eyeholes of the mask, his eyes widened when Dalir presented him with the styrofoam cup and, more to the point, the straw.
“Apple pie, in liquid form,” Dalir informed him, frowning down at his sundae. “I should have had her change mine, it sounds way better. Are you allergic to nuts? I should have asked - ”

“No, no allergies,” Erik shook his head, accepting the milkshake hesitantly, seemingly not sure if it was ral. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Dalir replied, digging in to his treat. “Want to walk around?”

Erik glanced from side to side, taking in the size of the milling crowds, apparently doing some kind of math known only to himself in his head. Dalir wondered what he was considering; it wasn’t that crowded and most people were too busy having a good time to pay them much mind. Anyway, they were well out of town; to most folks here a man in a mask was just a man in a mask; they might assume Erik was getting into the Halloween spirit.

“Sure,” he said after a pause. “You can’t drive with a sundae on your lap, right?”

Dalir chuckled, “That sounds like a challenge...but I’d probably lose. Come on.”

They walked in silence, Erik sipping his milkshake, Dalir wolfing down his sundae, which was amazing. Transcendent. Everything a sundae should be. Dalir paused in front of a black-painted archway, festooned with cobwebs and skeleton hands - apparently the place doubled as a haunt at night.

“Are you into Halloween?” Dalir asked, glancing up at Erik.

He shrugged and said, “I was when I was younger - I think I went as the guy from Scream about five times - but once you’re past candy-gorging age, it sort of loses its appeal. I usually spend the night at my place having a Sam Raimi marathon...but to be fair, I don’t confine that sort of thing to Halloween. You?”

“Same,” Dalir confirmed. “Before I retired, we used to run this huge haunted house fundraiser in the gym of one of the high schools, one of the Lieutenants had a contracting business on the side, the thing was solid. It was fun, big neighborhood party, but...yeah, there wasn’t any point in going anymore once I stopped working for the department. I usually just buy one of those big mixed bags of chocolates and eat my way through them...which sounds really sad when you say it out loud.”

Erik smiled and opened his mouth to say something when they were interrupted by one of the passing teenage couples.

“Hey! Freddy! You’re a few hours early, dude!”

“Shaun! Stop it!” his girlfriend squealed, laughing and swatting him playfully on the arm. “You are so mean!”

The kid - a dude-bro if ever there was one, laughed right along with his girlfriend. They passed, giving Erik a wide berth and snickering as they went. Dalir resisted the urge to chuck his half-eaten ice cream at them. Erik stared at something over Dalir’s shoulder, then continued the conversation as if nothing had happened.

“It’s only sad if you’re home alone wearing a costume,” Erik informed him. Then, noticing that Dalir was still glaring after the teenagers, added, “They’re just kids.”

“They’re big kids,” Dalir glowered. “Didn’t their parents teach them better?”

“Probably not,” Erik shrugged, sipping his milkshake nonchalantly. “But saying something doesn’t
help. *Doing* something certainly doesn’t help. So...let’s keep walking.”

There was a quiet line of fence that looked out over the pumpkin patch - with a conveniently placed trash can so they could dump the remains of their ice creams. Erik and Dalir leaned against the fence, staring out over the field.

“City or country?” Erik asked out of the blue. “Where would you rather live?”

“City,” Dalir said at once. “I’m from Dearborn - did I tell you that already? It’s not exactly Manhattan, but it’s definitely a city. I don’t like the idea of not being able to see my neighbor’s house. Stars? Overrated. If I want to see the stars, I’ll go to a planetarium.”

“Oh, yeah,” Erik smiled. “*I loved* planetariums when I was little, my dad used to take me to the Museum of Science - in Boston - and it was just awesome.”

“Did you used to have those glow in the dark stars on your ceiling too?” Dalir asked.

“Absolutely,” Erik nodded. “The whole thing. I begged my dad to let me paint the ceiling black - he said no way in hell - but he helped me put them up there. He said it wouldn’t make a difference, at night. It was a pain in the ass taking them down when we moved, though.”

“Oh, yeah?” Dalir asked, leaning backwards against the fence so he was facing Erik. “How about you? City or country?”

“City,” Erik said without hesitation. “I like the convenience. And I hate driving, so there’s that.”

“Do you have a license?” Dalir asked. Erik’s mouth tightened and he nodded.

“I do. But I can’t drive in the mask, so...I just don’t drive. Thanks for chauffering me around - I never paid you back for the gas, though.”

Dalir told him not to worry about it; what was five dollars, more or less? It occurred to him that if Erik had a license, he had a license photo...maybe, someday, he’d ask to take a look at it. Erik might not mind as much, if Dalir saw a picture of him rather than the genuine article.

“This area’s nice,” Erik continued. “It’s not just wall to wall concrete for miles, so if you want to head to a place like this, it’s not far. Dad and I used to live in the suburbs, after we moved. It was just...boring. I was homeschooled then too, so I kind of wound up hating that house, I spent so much time there.”

“Because of the accident?” Dalir asked.

Erik gave one of his famous shrugs. “Dad suggested it. I didn’t really...want to go back to school, right after. And that was when I got into music, so it was a good idea, in the short term. I went back to regular school in fourth grade.”

Ugh, that sounded rough. Fourth grade, as Dalir recalled it, had been fine - 9/11 occurred when he was a junior in high school, that was when the shit really hit the fan; Shirin was only a freshman, so she got the worst of it. But kids (even little kids) could be assholes for all kinds of reasons. And a classmate like Erik would be a prime target for bullying.

“How was the - ”

“Gaaaaaaaaay!”
There had been a countdown. Dalir was vaguely aware of it as he and Erik were chatting. A vague ‘3-2-1’ in the background, blending with the sounds of the wind in the corn and people chatting. It scarcely registered, until there was a big group shout in their direction.

“What the fuck?” Dalir exclaimed - aha! Shaun again only he and his shrieking girlfriend had been joined by a pack of other little shits, staring at them over the tops of their coffee cups with nasty grins on their faces. “What is this? Talk Like a Douchebag Day?”

“Hey!” a grandfather shouted from the pumpkin patch. “Watch your language! I’m here with my grandkids!”

Dalir turned around, assuming he was addressing the teenagers, but was displeased to see him staring hard and cold at Erik and himself. The ‘grandkids’ in question appeared to be twelve and eight respectively. Dalir couldn’t bring himself to feel guilty for swearing in front of them.

Erik touched his arm, very, very briefly. Dalir looked up at him and saw him shake his head, just slightly. Not worth it, he seemed to be saying.

“That’s another thing I like about living in the city,” Dalir commented loudly. “People actually have things going on in their lives - they’re not so bored that they need to butt in on other people’s conversations.”

“Dalir,” Erik said quietly, but forcefully. “Let it go.”

“Ha! Yeah, listen to Freddy!” Shaun crowed. “Careful! He’ll fuck you up!”

“He’d probably like that!” another dude-bro laughed. “Since he’s Freddy’s boy-toy and everything.”

Then most of the group burst into laughter - the kind of forced we-know-it-wasn’t-really-funny-but-we-want-to-egg-our-friends-on laughter that Dalir himself was sure he’d indulged in as a teenager, but had zero patience for now. He was retired, after all. In this situation, he wasn’t the one people would look to for descalation (granted, he was twice their age, so he probably should have been the bigger person, but he was feeling petty).

“Come on,” Erik said, walking away from the fence, eyes glued to Dalir’s face. “Come on. You like the city, let’s go back.”

There was something pleading in Erik’s voice, his eyes. Christine said he hated confrontation and here was the evidence, plain as day. Fourth grade was probably hell, Dalir concluded grimly.

“I want a pumpkin,” he said stubbornly. “We should carve pumpkins. Make Halloween less depressing. If we’re being festive, then we can eat as much fucking candy as we want.”

“Hey!” Grandpa shouted again from the pumpkins. “Language! I’ll call…”

But he trailed off, not sure who the Swearing Police of the Pumpkin Patch actually were. Grandma had come over to see what the trouble was, Grandpa muttered something to her and then all of them - grandkids included - turned to stare, not at Dalir, but Erik. Like all of this was his fault.

“Oh, fine!” Erik said hastily, giving Dalir’s elbow a guiding little squeeze. “You can carve a pumpkin. Just...pick one out and let’s go.”

Dalir picked two - he wasn’t carving a pumpkin by himself. Erik followed him a few paces behind, tense and unhappy, but Shaun and the Asshole Squad apparently got bored with them and
wandered off, presumably to steal a lollipop from a toddler. He paid for the pumpkins and carried both of them back to the car. As soon as the doors were unlocked, Erik took his place on the passenger side, waiting for Dalir to get in. Dalir first buckled the pumpkins into the back seat since he didn’t want them rolling around, cracking and getting pumpkin guts over the seats.

Dalir got in and eased the car back out onto the main road. They drove in silence for a few minutes. Erik’s hand strayed toward the radio, but Dalir spoke up, “Sorry. I lost my cool. That…doesn’t usually happen.”

“It’s…” Erik took a deep breath. “If it was someone else - if you were with someone else, it wouldn’t matter. But with me…people just look at me and see a threat. They respond in kind - honestly, mockery is…for the best. Better that than the alternative. I - I’m used to it. You’re not. So it’s understandable. That you’d get upset.”

Clearly Erik was figuring out his words carefully. He always talked like that, when he was discussing something touchy. Starting and stopping, stammering. Dalir thought he had a stutter, the first few days, but he wasn’t like that when he talked about music or movies, things he liked. Just when he had something difficult to talk to. Deep breaths. Long pauses. Maybe that was how Erik avoided ‘the alternative,’ as he said.

“Don’t try and tell me it doesn’t upset you,” Dalir said, eyes on the road, residual anger bubbling up. “It must.”

Erik rolled his head back against the seat. “Yes. But there’s nothing I can do. And there’s nothing you can do either. Just…that was one thing. But...if we go to a restaurant and you see people cloroxing the door handles after I use them, don’t lose your temper. Or try not to. It’s always one or the other, people assume I’m sick, or people assume I’m…a serial killer. Either way, the assumption is I’m dangerous.”

A danger to yourself, maybe, Dalir thought, but he kept it to himself. God, Erik had shitty coping mechanisms. Ignore it until it goes away - probably the worst anti-bullying advice ever. Isolation. Pills. Bad relationships borne of desperation for affection.

Technically, it wasn’t really his job to see to Erik’s general mental health - that was for his therapist to monitor. But Dalir couldn’t escape from the feeling that he needed to do more. The itch under his skin that urged help him. He thought he was, getting him out of the house, going somewhere low-key and mellow where he wouldn’t be recognized as anything other than a man in the mask. Apparently that was enough by itself to invite the asshole parade. Dalir was beginning to understand why Erik was such a homebody.

“Though,” Erik added wryly, drawing Dalir out of his funk. “In the world of possible reactions, buying two spite pumpkins is hardly the worst outcome.”

Dalir laughed and eased his stranglehold on the steering wheel. “Those are not spite pumpkins. Those are…joy pumpkins. We’re going to get festive - it’s decorative gourd season, motherfucker.”

“It is indeed,” Erik agreed, glancing behind - then laughing when he saw the seatbelts. “That is adorable. Hold on…”

He took his phone out and snapped a picture of the two pumpkins, securely belted in.

“I’m going to look at this picture the next time I’m feeling down,” Erik said, half to himself. “It’ll bring me joy - ha, there you go, I guess they’re joy pumpkins after all.”
Dalir smiled over at him, then glanced down at his phone when it alerted him that something was going on with a little ‘ping!’

At the next traffic light he tapped the screen and read the notification. Mr. Carriere’s second check had cleared and been deposited in his account. A wave of guilt washed over him and he blacked out the screen, putting the phone back in the cupholder. Erik finally turned on the radio - random Top 40 station that at least had good reception going for it. They didn’t say much the rest of the ride.

Erik carried the pumpkins inside and Dalir followed with the key to the apartment jingling in his hand. He shouldn’t feel guilty, he was doing his job - getting Erik out of the house, socializing, all that was part of carrying out his father’s wishes. Yeah, one crappy thing happened, but overall it had been a good day. Erik left the pumpkins on the kitchen counter and asked Dalir if they could put off carving them - he had a recording to make.

Dalir agreed that they might want to hold off until closer to Halloween - no point in being festive if it would just result in rot and flies a week before the actual day. Erik left the door open, which he hadn’t done before as he rehearsed the song he was going to record later that night. Dalir took that as an invitation and wandered over, leaning against the doorframe to listen.

“They get on the mule train to Jaime-land
Handful after handful of Doritos
Circling the apartment, logging miles…
And then he smiles, his eyes light up
And how can I complain?
Yes, he’s insane - but look what he can do…
And I’m a part of that. I’m a part of that.
I’m a part of that…”

Erik paused, shook his head, frowned at the sheet music in front of him.

“The bridge is the tricky part,” he muttered, scratching some notation that made zero sense to Dalir in the margins. He sang the word ‘smiles’ a few times, frowning deeper and deeper as he did. Without looking up, he spoke up louder, seemingly for Dalir’s benefit. “The song was written for a female vocalist, a friend of my Dad’s wants to do a local production, with two men, I’m just sorting out the high notes.”

Dalir nodded and offered, “Well, everything I heard sounded...awesome. So I’m sure you’ll get it.”

Erik looked over his shoulder and smiled at him, “You’ll make me blush. I was going to ask if you wanted to be an objective audience member, but - ”

“Good luck with that,” Dalir said, grinning lopsided at him. “I think you’re pretty perfect. Um. Your singing. Your singing is pretty perfect.”

A long, long pause. Then, so quietly Dalir almost missed it. “Thanks.”

Even though he had tacit permission to stay, Dalir backed out, excused himself with something generic, “Keep at it,” or “I’ll just let you get back to work,” but he honestly didn’t remember. And if he was really being honest with himself (not even on the couch this time!) he had to admit that their outing smacked more of a date than therapeutic travel.

Back in his room, he replayed the events of the day, boiling it down to three salient points: Number One - He established that Erik was single. Number Two - He took him to get food and insisted on paying. Number Three - He was attracted to him.
Number Three had been more or less a constant for the past two weeks. Maybe longer, if he thought hard about it. It brought up a whole morass of feeling he didn’t want to trudge through. Most prominent - how could he be attracted to him if he hadn’t seen him? And when, what he had seen of Erik’s uncovered body was so, so damaged. Was it an illusion he’d constructed for himself? Was he fooling himself into thinking of him as he usually was - buttoned up, covered, hot from a distance of ten feet?

But he couldn’t forget what he’d seen. When Erik occasionally walked around in a t-shirt he saw the scars on his shoulder pressing against the fabric. That burned and ruined skin leading from his right ear, down his neck; he couldn’t turn his head as far as he should be able to on that side. The foot, missing toes. No, he hadn’t forgotten and he wasn’t inventing some ideal of what Erik could or should be in his mind.

The attraction went beyond looks anyway. He liked his voice. Admired his talent. And felt a sense of connection, camaraderie, around him. He’d repeatedly reminded himself that he wasn’t there to be Erik’s friend. But this went way beyond friendship. He recognized that now. And had no idea what he was supposed to do about it.

Probably nothing. Erik was still fresh off a terrible relationship. And...emotional transferrence was to be avoided. Dalir wasn’t a therapist, but it still felt...wrong. Unethical. But when had he ever been ethical about this case? For fuck’s sake, he called the girl who had a restraining order against his client, just so he could reassure himself that Erik hadn’t really done anything to deserve it. That right there started a slow descent down a slippery slope, trying to excuse or explain behaviors that were unhealthy, that should have been warning signs. He wasn’t doing Erik any favors, indulging his feelings for him. Dalir had no way of knowing whether they were reciprocated, he couldn’t ask… and even if Erik did come out with some declaration of mutual affection, how could he know whether it was natural, or just Erik once again attaching himself to someone because he was desperate? Because he thought he couldn’t do better.

Get out, Dalir half-heartedly told himself. Erik needs someone who’ll see this through the right way. That person is not you.

But when Erik gently rapped on his door and asked what Dalir wanted to join him for their weekly dinner-and-Dancing-with-the-Stars ritual, he hopped out of bed and opened the door before he’d finished answering the question. Erik made stir fry and, as was his custom, ate at the island while Dalir ate on the couch. He joined him later, sitting slightly closer to the middle cushion than was his wont. When he stretched his left arm out along the back of the couch, his fingertips brushed Dalir’s shoulder more than once.

Just...don’t act on anything, Dalir thought as he kept his eyes on the television. You can still do this. He doesn’t need to know.

“You’re really quiet,” Erik commented during a commercial - furniture. Nothing but furniture commercials. “Are you still...bothered by this afternoon?”

Yeah he was, but not for the reasons Erik thought.

“Because...look, it was a nice day, overall,” Erik continued. “I had a good time - thanks for the milkshake, by the way. That was...thoughtful.”

That smile. That slow, shy smile. It hit Dalir like a punch in the chest, every time.

“No problem,” Dalir said. He scooched ever so slightly closer, so that Erik’s thumb as definitely making full contact with his t-shirt. Neither of them moved away.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I was really unhappy with the Erik section of the last chapter, it felt really slow, bogged down and uninteresting - Dalir's is the same, but I swapped them and Erik's bit is entirely new (sorry to anyone who saw the notification and thought this was going to be a brand new chapter!)

The pumpkins seemed happy in their new home on the kitchen island over the next week or so. Dalir kept his hormones in check and mind out of the gutter (and was more or less successful) and he and Erik even went out to the local bike path, at six at night so they were riding half in the dark and Dalir kept expecting they’d get mugged, but nothing happened. They’d reached a comfortable balance and Erik seemed to be doing well.

Maybe he’d call the whole thing off - Dalir was being paid by his dad, but it was up to Erik whether he wanted to continue with Dalir as part of the program. Three months was all he was contracted for anyway. Maybe, in another month, he’d decide that Dalir had done all he could for him. It had become one of his can’t-sleep-let’s-just-think-about-nice-things-in-the-dark fantasies.

Erik would be his hesitant, awkward self, saying that Dalir was great, he’d been so...accommodating or whatever, but that he really ought to go it on his own, he couldn’t expect Dalir to hang around forever. So thanks for everything, but he didn’t see himself needing Dalir’s assistance any longer. Maybe he’d go in for a handshake.

That was as far as the realistic imaging went. All of that was very possible, even probable. Then, at night, in the quiet, Dalir took things a step further. He’d tell Erik he understood and that he really liked having him as a client, that he thought he’d do a great job maintaining his sobriety and if he needed anything, give him a call.

Then, when Erik reached out to shake his hand, Dalir would somehow have a pen on him (he hadn’t carried pens on him since he was a cop, so where it came from, he had no clue), and instead of shaking his hand, he’d write his number down on his palm (knowing full well Erik already had it in his phone). So yeah, Dalir would shrug and say, if Erik needed anything, call. Like, moral support. Or a movie night companion. Or a candlelit dinner for two. You know. Whatever.

That was the romcom version. There was another, less PG version, that played when he was having a lot of trouble sleeping, but he recognized that was probably not going to happen - no way was Erik going to let Dalir rip one of his shirts off, Superman-style, and shove him up against the kitchen island. Especially if the pumpkins were still living there.

Clearly, he shouldn’t date a client, but there was nothing in his conscience that said he shouldn’t date an ex-client. And since he’d be giving his number to Erik, it’d be on Erik to make the first move. All very above-board. Dalir just needed to wait it out until Erik didn’t need him as a sober companion anymore.

He was doing great - really tackling his work with gusto and he wasn’t as hesitant to get out in the world as he had been before. The restraining order had to be weighing on him still, but that would run its course in a little over a month. Then Erik could forget about it, start fresh and unfettered.
Make better choices.

Dalir was confident that he was on the up and up. Until the day Erik didn’t come out of his room. No Erik in the kitchen, washing up after his breakfast at nine. Or noon. He had a therapy appointment at 5, so when four o’clock rolled around and the door was still shut, Dalir knocked tentatively.

“Hey,” he called when he didn’t get an answer. “You feeling okay?”

Nothing. Maybe a faint groan, but it was very faint.

“Erik,” Dalir said, louder and more urgently, business-mode kicking in at once. “I’m going to need to come in if you don’t answer. I’ll give you ‘til ten, okay? One...two...three…”

“Wait!” Some shifting. A hiss of pain. “Just a minute…”

Dalir waited impatiently outside the door until he heard more shuffling, some grunts and finally, “Come in.”

Erik was still in his PJs, lying in bed, half propped-up. There was an open bottle of Advil on the bedside table, a few pillows scattered on the floor - and he hadn’t actually tied the mask on, it was just sort of hanging over his face. It was lower than usual, Dalir could see the irregular line of skin where his forehead met his hairline. Some places very pale, some reddened and bumpy, like the skin on his back.

“Are you sick?” Dalir asked, stepping inside. “Want me to get you something? Soup? Or - ”

“Mmm-mmm,” Erik didn’t shake his head, just replied in the negative with his voice. “The shoulder. It’s a bad day. Could you bring me my phone, please? It’s on the coffee table. I need to call David and cancel, reschedule - that’s a hundred bucks gone, but...I can’t make it in.”

Canceling a therapy appointment was very unlike him. Erik went once a week, like clockwork, he’d leave twenty minutes before the hour and be back home exactly an hour and ten minutes later. For him to cancel - and at the last minute - he must have been hurting badly.

“You couldn’t go, even if I drove you?” Dalir asked, glancing at the pills.

“No. Thank you, but no,” Erik replied shortly.

“Did you take an Advil - ?”

“Yes,” Erik cut him off, not shouting exactly, but his voice was very all of a sudden. Dalir almost jumped. Almost. “It didn’t do anything. Nothing helpful. Please could you just get my phone?”

“Okay, okay,” Dalir said, falling into cop-mode at once. It wasn’t like with the teenagers, when he’d got his hackles up and fought fire with fire. This was responding to a threat. Just like everyone else did.

Dalir picked up the phone, sliding the lock open as he did. Erik didn’t engage any kind of keypad - probably because he was alone so much, there wasn’t a chance another person would have access to his phone. He must have hit the slide too hard because he started up a video.

“How’s it going, buddy?”

Dalir glanced down at the screen and took in the crystal-clear, but tiny image. White walls.
Colorful nurse’s scrubs and the back of a woman’s curly, honey-colored hair. The voice he recognized as Mr. Carriere’s.

The nurse shifted slightly and Dalir saw one hand, draped over the thin white sheets of a hospital bed raise in a shaky thumb’s up.

“You don’t feel sick? Nauseated?” That was the voice of the nurse, tender as could be.

“No. Not this time.” The voice was croaky and slightly slurred, but it was unmistakeably Erik’s voice. His Dad took a video of him in the hospital? Why?

“Pain level?” she asked, shifting slightly to type the response into a mobile computer unit. The movement revealed most of Erik’s right arm, some of his chest, bare beneath the blanket, but she was still blocking his left side and entire head from view.

“I don’t feel anything,” Erik croaked again. “Still numb.”

Abruptly the camera flipped and Dalir found himself staring at Mr. Carriere’s chin and neck. “Ah! Dammit, this fucking thing. Your phone is more sensitive than mine. Sorry, Bella - he’s fine! Hold on, let me just figure this out - ”

“Hit the little picture of the camera,” Erik advised from bed. “Just give it to me - ”

The right arm remained immobile, but his left hand - his thumb’s up hand - rose, a little shakily. The nurse commented, off-camera now, that he’d better just stay still and let dad sort it out himself. As Mr. Carriere frowned into the screen, Erik commented.

“You know, most people just take videos of vacations, not soldier surgery. Um. Shoulder surgery.’

Mr. Carriere grinned briefly, “Atta boy. Well, you know, we strive for uniqueness in this family - ”

The camera flipped around. The nurse moved. And over Mr. Carriere’s cheerful narration, Dalir saw Erik, lying on the bed. At least he assumed that was Erik. It had to be. Because when Mr. Carriere said, “Doctors said he got through like a champ - no complications,” the mouth of the face - with the sutured chin, the only thing Dalir recognized - twitched and he managed a less shaky, “Hi Mom,” for the camera. A very forlorn attempt at a smile. Oh, god.

Dalir hit the home screen button to shut the video off. His armpits felt damp - he was sweating, he was actually sweating.

“Fuck,” he muttered, twitchy fingers fighting to find the ‘clear all’ button so Erik wouldn’t know what he’d done. “Fuck. Fuck.”

There was another glimpse of that face as the screen cleared. He didn’t need to see it again. He wouldn’t soon forget it.

“Dalir?” the Erik of the present called from his room. “I’m sorry I snapped at you. Is the phone not there? I might have left it in the kitchen - ”

“Got it!” Dalir said back, managing not to squawk this time. “Sorry! One sec!”

*Give him the phone and don’t act like a freak,* was Dalir’s tiny pep talk to himself as he marched to Erik’s room. *Give him the phone and get out of there.*

Erik was still in the same position, mask still resting on top of his face - but how...what was the
mask made of? Because it gave the illusion of normal proportions under there. Of symmetry. But...it didn’t match what Dalir had seen in the video. Not at all.

That sad little smile again. The one Erik gave his parents right out of surgery was back only now it was fixed on Dalir. “Thanks,” he said as he took the phone from his numb fingers. “Today sucks, sorry.”

“No problem,” Dalir heard himself say. “I’ll, uh…”

But just what he was ‘uh…ing’ he never got out, just left as Erik called his therapist’s office and waited to talk to a receptionist. Dalir shut the door behind him and sagged against it. Oh god. Oh god.

For some time, he’d really wondered about the mask. Wondered why Erik wore it, how long he’d worn it, who suggested it to him. Because in the era of special interest television series, he wondered just what medical conditions could truly shock and horrify anymore. Sure, people could be cruel, but most people (he figured) were generally polite enough to know that you don’t openly comment on people who are visibly different. But having seen the video...he got it. God, did he get it.

Dalir moved away from the door, leaning on the kitchen island. Fuck. He shut his eyes and there was the face again. He’d only felt uncomfortable and a little sad, that night after Erik told him he’d been burned and he’d looked at pictures online. Badly injured people, eyes blocked out for anonymity. But none of them - not a one looked like Erik.

The right side - the less visible side in the video - looked the worst. It was like there hadn’t been anything left for the doctor’s to work with, just skin - stiff, scarred, discolored skin pulled over the cheekbone, the jaw, winding its way back to the eaten-off ear and down the neck. The forehead was either unnaturally prominent or that was the result of yet more scar tissue, making his eyes look shadowed and sunken. Erik’s eyes didn’t look abnormal behind the mask - how was it made, that it corrected so much?

The brow was just a craggy line. Dalir wondered if all those times he imagined Erik furrowing his brow, raising an eyebrow, that he’d really imagined it. Because it didn’t look like he should be able to move the top half of his face. The skin was just...patchwork. Rough. Discolored all over, veiny in some places and so thick with white and red scar tissue that it looked fake. Like a Halloween mask. There was some glimpse of what Erik’s face should have been on the left side. From the cheek down it was just about normal, a square jaw, healthy looking skin. But the nose...that was the worst part. The other burn victims the might have lost pieces of their noses, but they had something. Not Erik. Just a hole, an irregular, gaping hole right in the middle of his face.

If he could call it a face. Erik told him once, I have no face. He wasn’t wrong. Wasn’t being melodramatic. Fuck.

How am I going to look at him? was Dalir’s first, most pressing thought. He couldn’t maintain a poker face indefinitely and he had the feeling that Erik would just know. Like some seismic shift in the earth’s crust occurred, leaving everything off-balance. He’d know and he wouldn’t trust him again. How could he? Even if it was an accident, Erik valued his privacy so much, that no matter what the cause, Erik couldn’t forgive the results.

Dalir parked himself in front of the TV, mindlessly zoning out watching the cooking channel, episode after episode of a dude being loud and obnoxious in other people’s restaurants. It was strangely soothing. And made him hungry, which was a good distraction for feeling guilty.
Erik dragged himself out of bed a few hours later, upright, mask tied on, for all the good it now did either of them. Dalir kept his eyes on the TV when he started talking, leaning heavily on the back of the couch with his left arm.

“Advil kicked in,” he said quietly. “Look, I’m really sorry I was short with you. I get frustrated, but I don’t have the right to take it out on anyone else.”

It was actually much easier to look at Erik than he thought. Dalir’s head whipped up and he stared at him in disbelief. Erik thought he was mad at him? For what? Getting a little loud? Maybe the force of his voice kicked something into focus in Dalir’s lizard hind-brain, but Dalir’s human fore-brain hadn’t thought about that since he went to get the phone.

“You don’t have to apologize,” Dalir said at once. “I was just...thinking about fried chicken. Honest. Hadn’t even crossed my mind.”

His mouth turned down. A frown. Dalir could almost imagine what was happened behind the mask - and immediately wished he couldn’t. Did it hurt to make facial expressions? Or was the scarring so stiff and so deep that he couldn’t feel anything at all?

“I can become...resentful,” Erik chose his words carefully, as always. “Especially when the shoulder acts up. Because it’s my fault, I slip. On my PT, I get either complacent or...bratty. I think, ‘Well, other people don’t have to do all this extra work to just...get through the day. Why should I?’ It’s childish.”

“It’s not,” Dalir shook his head, eyes sliding to rest on Erik’s hand on the couch. His knuckles were white. Whatever the Advil was doing, it wasn’t much. “How...um. What number are you? On the pain scale?”

“Seven,” Erik replied automatically. “But I’m a ten on the hunger scale, so - ”

“Sit,” Dalir said, getting off the couch. “I’ll call something in. I’ll eat at the island, okay?”

Erik’s voice sounded relieved when he replied, “Okay.”

He limped to his usual spot on the couch. Really limped; Dalir just glanced down and saw that his feet were bare. Poor guy; couldn’t even bend over and tie his damn shoes. Erik, conscientious as ever, didn’t assume his usual reclining posture with his feet on the coffee table. Presumably to spare Dalir he sat upright, crammed in the corner of the couch.


The voice that came out of Dalir’s mouth sounded like himself, no trace of an accent, but he could have sworn that he’d just been possessed by his mother.

“You don’t have to - ” Erik started, but Dalir wouldn’t hear it. He was right - it wasn’t fair that he had to do so much extra to grasp at normal. And only just grasp. After what Dalir had seen in the video, he knew normal wasn’t on the table.

“Yeah, I’m getting you a pillow,” Dalir said, wandering off into Erik’s room, returning with a pillow and the blanket from his bed. “I’m tucking you in, too. Whether you like it or not.”

Erik looked up at him and laughed, very lightly, though he did sit up to let Dalir jam a pillow behind him - thoughtful, sure, he was thoughtful, but a light and delicate nursemaid he was not. The blanket he heaped over him with all the delicacy of an avalanche. But he did tuck the edges in around Erik’s arms - so tight he couldn’t move and jostle the shoulder, he looked like a mummy.
“Are you planning on spoon feeding me?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Dalir smirked. All while looking at him, forgetting, almost. It was just Erik, after all - though it was Erik wearing his mask. “What are you feeling?”

“There’s a deli around the corner with really good chicken soup…” Erik said and Dalir thought he would shrug if it wouldn’t cause him agony.

“Alright, soup for you, corned beef for me,” Dalir confirmed. “Fries?”

“You know me very well,” Erik smiled, settling back against the pillow, closing his eyes with such simple trust that Dalir felt his stomach lurch uncomfortably, but it wasn’t with the usual pang of longing - that was guilt.

*Oh man,* he thought as he picked up the phone to dial in their order. *You have no idea.*

The arm felt better after a few days and Erik took the time to go downstairs and collect his mail. Bills, junk, a few items that required closer consideration, but he just dumped it on the kitchen island and proceeded to his little home gym; he’d been neglecting his PT and he’d paid for it in a big way.

PT stood for physical training, in the real world, but in Erik world it stood for Personal Torture. Not just because he had to engage in a series of exercises that caused more pain than relief at first, but also because he had to do so in front of a mirror, to check his posture and make sure he wasn’t overcompensating for the weakness in the right shoulder and inadvertently making his body worse than it already was.

No mask either; there were precious few places on his face that could sweat and he shouldn’t cover them, he’d overheat and the absolutely last thing he needed was Dalir to find him unconscious under a barbell; he’d dealt with enough of Erik’s crap already.

Though Dalir was making himself scarce, recently. More jogs in the park. Less time parked in front of the television. Probably just a reaction to spending a lot of time with Erik, going above and beyond the tasks lined up for him in the contract. He brought him soup, after all. And helped him hobble back to bed that first night; Erik was too grateful to be embarrassed at the time.

Still, such a lack of one-on-one time did spark a spiral of self-doubt and paranoia. *Did I do something to upset him? Am I too much? Who am I kidding? Of course I’m too much. I’m the textbook definition of too much. But that’s alright he’s getting paid to spend time with me. He’s got to come back eventually. For the money. Because he wouldn’t be here otherwise.*

No matter how hard he tried to tamp down on his inappropriate emotional transference crush, the feelings just kept bubbling up over the stupidest things. The aforementioned soup delivery. The arm around his waist on the way back to bed. The impossible offer of a massage - recinded as soon as it was given since Dalir admitted he had no idea how to give a massage, but he’d pay for one if it would help.

It was pathetic, Erik acknowledged to himself. His infatuation. Borne of nothing more than being touch-deprived and companion-deprived and...well. Maybe not entirely that. Sometimes his therapists liked to play a little what-if game with him. When they thought he was shutting down or withdrawing from the world too much and wanted him to differentiate between avoiding situations that would cause unnecessary conflict and distress, or just being a coward. They didn’t call him a
coward, of course. But said that while some distance was healthy to maintain for peace of mind, if he put up too many walls he might actually be doing himself more harm than good.

‘What if you didn’t wear the mask?’ was the question. ‘Is this just about your appearance? Would you feel this way otherwise?’

It was a game he hated playing because often the answer was, *Of course this is about my appearance, isn’t that enough?* or else, *I have no idea what I would or wouldn’t do otherwise.*

There was nothing to be done. There was no going back. Why pretend? His appearance was always going to be a problem. Anyone who thought otherwise was delusional - or they simply hadn’t seen him. Once they saw, they understood. *If* they wanted to interact with him again. Even if he replaced the mask, it was always different, afterwards.

Erik aimed to cut the rest of the world a lot of slack. He knew what they were looking at all too well and he couldn’t blame anyone for being discomfited, even now when he was as used to his appearance as he possibly could be. He remembered his first glimpse of his face, which resulted in screams and tears - his own. How could he cast aspersions on others who reacted no more poorly than he had himself? And when someone *had* seen him and insisted on hanging around (granted, of that small, select group his parents had absolutely no choice in the matter)? He tried to keep their exposure to a minimum.

Case in point: The Shower Incident. Just because he and Dalir had a nearly-naked encounter which was handled with as much maturity and level-headedness as possible, it did not therefore follow that Dalir wanted Erik to wander around in a towel regularly. So when his workout ended and Erik was desperately in need of a shower, not only did he wait until Dalir was off running to use the bathroom, he also took his clothes in with him. That resulted in a wet t-shirt contest (which he won, as the only entrant) every time he emerged, but it was better than the alternative; he’d been caught off-guard once and it was not happening again.

Dalir had come in while he was dressing, picking through the mail on the off-chance that something was in for him. There wasn’t anything there, but he rearranged the pile, putting a shiny invitation on top.

“Mia and Dante want you to come to their wedding,” he informed Erik, nudging the pile toward him. “Whoever they are.”

“I went to high school with Mia,” Erik replied carelessly. Old news, he wasn’t going. “You can toss that in the recycle, it must be a mistake, I already sent my regrets.”

They were getting married in Germany, where Mia was engaged as an actress and it was *way* too much trouble to be bothered. She even acknowledged that on the back, accompanying his invite with a personal note about how she wanted him to know he was wanted at the wedding, but she more than understood if he couldn’t come; neither of them could get enough time off from work to justify flying stateside for a long weekend.

Dalir went to do what he said, but noticed the message on the back. “She wrote you a note,” he said, holding the letter out. Erik took it, just to humor him, but realized that the message was different.

**Hi Erik!**

**Change of plans! My dad is paying to bring us home, so we can get married in Poughkeepsie! I’m re-inviting everyone who I thought might have had issues with travel, but no judgement**
if you have other plans that weekend. We’d just LOVE you to come, if you can! Hope you’re
doing okay, you should email me! Or let me know if you’re free that weekend - I’ll come up
for a post-wedding visit! I’ll bring Wes!

Love,
Mia

P.S. Did Hattendorf get in touch with you about WDTW? I gave him your email, did he follow-up?

Mia’s love of exclamation points had not dimmed at all in the last thirteen years, but at least she’d
stopped dotting all her i’s with a star.

“They changed the venue,” Erik explained to Dalir, circling the island to open the recycling bin and
drop the invitation inside. “So it’s in Poughkeepsie. I’m still not going.”

“Why not?” Dalir asked. “Other plans?”

Yep, I have plans not to ruin a good friend’s wedding.

“I don’t go to weddings, if I can help it,” Erik replied, feeling that should be explanation enough.
That the reason should be obvious. But Dalir’s eyebrows contracted as if he was being vague.

“Why not?” he asked. “Weddings are kind of...fixtures on the calendar of my childhood. My
people are big into weddings, it never actually occurred to me that some people said no to going to
weddings until I was in college. I’ve been to weddings for people I don’t actually know because
one of their grandparents is a friend of my great-aunt’s.”

It was absolutely endearing, the way Dalir pretended Erik was like everyone else. Endearing, but
also exhausting when Erik had to patiently explain time and again just why he was not.

“I’m going to illustrate a scenario for you,” Erik said, leaning on the island, ignoring the way
Dalir’s t-shirt clung to his chest and shoulders - apparently he came in second in the damp t-shirt
contest today, but he didn’t mind in particular. “A guest shows up to the wedding wearing a white
lace dress. What happens?”

“Everyone talks about what a bitch she is trying to upstage the bride,” Dalir replied immediately.

“Right,” Erik agreed. “So, here’s another scenario: guest shows up in a white mask. What
happens?”

“Um...well, that depends,” Dalir said, evidently playing stupid. “Is the mask made of lace?”

“Ha.” Erik folded his arms and sighed uncomfortably. “Everyone talks about the guy in the mask
rather than the flower arrangements and DJ and ceremony. It’s rude to upstage a wedding. So I
don’t. The last wedding I went to was five years ago for my cousin Mykayla and I left right after
the ceremony. Didn’t stop her mother-in-law from complaining that I was stealing her limelight.”

“Her mother-in-law sounds like a bitch,” Dalir observed. Erik couldn’t disagree, but Kayla was
also kind of...difficult, so they were really peas in a pod. Either way, he wasn’t the kind of person
most people wanted on their guest list.

“Your friend there did send you two invites,” Dalir pointed out, nodding at the recycling bin. “So I
think she wants you to come.”
She was being polite, that’s all it was. People could be very polite to him, but that didn’t mean they wanted him around. Erik had been living this life for twenty-five years, he understood the nuance. Mia might want him at her wedding in theory, but the actual experience would not match her theoretical expectations. Easier for everyone if he bowed out quietly.

“I’ll see if we can get together when she’s in town,” Erik replied dismissively. “Her parents have a St. Bernard, Wes, and she knows I’d rather hang out with him than with fifty of her closest friends and family.”

A light seemed to go on behind Dalir’s eyes and he looked Erik up and down with a grin, “Dog person?”

Erik nodded, “We always had a dog. I’d probably have one now, but there’s no yard here.”

“My parents like cats,” Dalir replied, shaking his head as if he was hard done-by. “I begged them for a dog, but my mom said it was too much work, too much mess, she wouldn’t want it in the house, blah, blah, blah.”

“It is a lot of work,” Erik acknowledged. “Some breeds, anyway. I’ve always wanted a Newfoundland, but they’re big. Too big for a condo.”

Dalir nodded, eyes cutting back to the recycling. “So, you’re seriously not going? Not even going to consider it?”

“Well, I considered it,” Erik replied evenly. “For about two seconds before I determined that it was too much trouble. Either no one asks me directly why I wear it, they speculate amongst themselves and it’s awkward. Or they ask me directly and I tell them and...it’s awkward. There is no non-awkward way to say I was disfigured in a fire when I was a child. It’s not the kind of story to tell at a wedding.”

Dalir started to nodded, then looked at him suspiciously. “You go to a lot of funerals?”

Okay, he had him there. “My family is mostly Catholic,” Erik said. “So I just rush through the receiving line at the wake. Because talking about your personal tragedy at someone else’s personal tragedy is tacky.”

“I guess,” Dalir agreed reluctantly.

“It’s for the best - really,” Erik said before Dalir could start to feel bad for him. “I don’t even like weddings! They’re...boring. I don’t dance, I don’t eat in front of people. There’s nothing for me to do but sit and stand and I can do that at home without dressing up or buying someone a present they won’t use.”

If Dalir was his therapist, Erik had no doubts they’d start playing the what-if game. But what if you did eat in front of people? What if you weren’t worried about stepping on people’s toes with your shoe-inserts? What then?

Impossible questions, all. Fortunately, Dalir didn’t ask any of them.

“Whatever you want,” he shrugged, then grinned up at Erik with a mischievous look on his face. “I could be your plus one, though - I’m a professional wedding guest. We’d have fun.”

Cue fantasy: Waltzing with Dalir on a balcony under the stars. Erik shook his head to clear the image.
“We might have fun,” he admitted. “But...I have to think of other people.”

“That’s not f - ”

“Okay,” Erik’s patience was wearing thin, he could feel it fraying, like the ends of an old rope. “I need to ask you to stop.”

Dalir cocked his head at him, eyebrows contracting. “Grantchester thing?”

“Not...no,” Erik sighed, hand going to his still-damp hair. “It’s...if I start to think about things in terms of fairness, I slip. Like with the shoulder therapy. It’s not a good outcome. And it wouldn’t be fair to Mia - someone I care about - to use her wedding to prove a point to myself. Or...to you. Do you understand?”

*Please don’t argue,* Erik thought, trying to project the words into Dalir’s mind by force of will. *Very few things in my life are easy. Except for being with you. Can...can’t you let this be easy? Please?*

Maybe Dalir didn’t hear him exactly. The look he gave Erik was inscrutable, like he was trying to see through him, but at last he nodded and dropped the subject.

“We’re coming up hard on Haloween,” he pointed out. “Want to carve those pumpkins?”

Erik nodded, smiling a very relieved smile, "I'll put down some newspaper."
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I should tag this thing as 'slow burn' - maybe 'slowest burn.'

The pumpkins were re-housed, on a little coffee table placed under one of the kitchen windows so that they actually looked out on the street. Erik wasn’t keeping the shades drawn since Dalir moved in - in the first place, he wasn’t as likely to walk around his apartment without his mask and in the second, Dalir said the lack of vitamin D was making him depressed. But that was their last time they’d spent significant time together. Dalir tried to convince himself it was a mutual decision.

It wasn’t like he was running away. He was just running. Daily. In the park. But not away - he always came back to the apartment after he was done. The weather was going to turn soon, he wanted to get his outdoor time in before he risked falling on a slick patch of sidewalk and breaking his neck. And Erik had his own stuff to keep him busy.

Once Erik’s shoulder wasn’t acting up so badly he put himself on a more regimented schedule. Up by nine, an hour or so in his home gym, shower, then composing until two, break for lunch, back in the music room until six or seven, dinner in front of the TV. Lather, rinse, repeat.

Dalir did a check of the apartment (nothing) and they went to meetings together. But they didn’t veg out on the couch and Erik’s therapy re-do clashed with their weekly movie night. They’d even fallen behind on Dancing with the Stars which was highlighted accusingly at them from the DVR. Erik didn’t say anything; probably didn’t want to impose.

This was how it was supposed to be, Dalir reminded himself. Just doing his job, keeping an eye on Erik’s progress, holding him accountable. If he really convinced himself, he could almost believe that he was correcting his own previously unethical behavior. Finally back on the straight and narrow. And Erik was benefitting.

The most extended conversation they had recently was about his friend Mia’s wedding. Then they carved pumpkins, ate pizza...like old times (yeah, the old times of two weeks ago, get a grip, Dalir). It was nice. Comfortable...it made Dalir forget why he’d started spending so much time out of the house in the first place.

But at night, when it was quiet, Dalir would remember what he’d seen on Erik’s phone and he’d have to be honest with himself. He wasn’t pulling away for Erik’s benefit. He was pulling away for his own. Not because he wanted to double-down on ethical behavior, but because he’d seen his face and it was every bit as terrible as Erik believed it to be. And the sight was enough to banish Dalir’s attraction, at least in the short-term.

It was totally involuntary - his lizard hind-brain kicking into overdrive. Erik would brush against him in the kitchen or run a hand through his hair or smile his adorable smile and rather than feel a rush of desire, something would short-circuit. That face from the hospital bed would impose itself over Dalir’s vision and it was like an automatic shut-down. Lust extinguished. Like a spark that wasn’t allowed to catch.

He ought to feel relieved, but he was mostly frustrated. He wasn’t too proud to admit that he’d been
at loose ends since he got shot. He was an action-oriented guy and he wanted to feel helpful. Useful. Like he was making a difference. In the past, his clients made him feel needed, but Erik was different. Erik made him feel wanted. It had been so long, it was such a good feeling - and Dalir fucked it up by watching a video on a cell phone.

Maybe it was more fair to Erik that way. If he got attached to Dalir just because Dalir was attracted to him, the relationship would start off uneven. And relationships that started that way didn’t run a good course. Especially - god, this was the worst - especially if they did become something. Did establish trust and Dalir, trying to be a good guy, a brave guy, a worthy guy, told him to take off the mask. Just let him see. Reassure him that it wouldn’t change anything.

If Erik did, and Dalir responded like this? It’d break his heart. He didn’t deserve that. There couldn’t be any taksies-backsies either. ‘Oops, sorry! I thought I could look at your fucked up face and shrug it off, but I can’t! Have a nice life!’

The thought, the very idea that he could do that to Erik horrified him more than his face had. More than his face could. But seeing it changed things. Despite all the smug self-assurance at the back of Dalir’s mind that, whatever Erik was hiding under there, he could handle it.

The pumpkins rotted eventually and neither of them remembered to buy a large bag of mixed chocolates for their movie marathon - which also never happened. Dalir was sad to see them go and wondered if Erik felt the same. If Erik…missed him, too.

Then, one day after Dalir finished his post-workout shower, there was a knock on his bedroom door. Dalir braced himself, wondering if Erik was going to ask him why he was suddenly being weird and running, like, every day, but instead he asked if Dalir felt like driving to a local shopping plaza.

Erik’s cold-weather uniform was only mildly different from his warm-weather uniform. The button-downs became plaid. A solid-colored sweater (usually blue, sometimes green) was added over the top, making Erik look like the cuddliest hipster college professor - but evidently he required additional warmth.

“There’s a coat sale at the Gap,” Erik said, holding up his phone which displayed a scannable 40% off coupon. “I need a new heavy coat. I also hate going shopping, I was hoping you could provide some…moral support.”

“Can do!” Dalir said, maybe a touch too brightly. Erik smiled though, so he figured everything was more or less cool between them - clearly, nothing could have changed on Erik’s end - and why would it? He had no idea what Dalir had seen.

On the drive down, Dalir thought maybe he should come clean. Just say, ‘Hey, remember when you were in agony and I brought you your phone? Accidentally opened a video. Wow, your Dad’s a shitty cameraman! But I did see your actual face. So. Yeah.’ There was no good way that conversation could end. And so Dalir didn’t say anything, just pulled into the parking lot and walked with Erik into the store.

“Good mor - ” one of the employees started to greet them, then stook stock-still, his eyes going wide, his face draining of color when he saw Erik.

“Good morning,” Erik said to the employee, dismissing him at once and turning to Dalir. “I usually get a pea coat because you can’t go wrong, but I thought I might like a change.”

The employee stared at the two of them, hands gripping a half-folded shirt. Then it dawned on
Dalir just why Erik asked him to come along. Guy in a mask enters a store - employees assume they’re going to be robbed. Dalir was a prop. A way of ensuring the employees that Erik wasn’t a threat, just a guy buying a coat. On one level, it was kind of hilarious that a Middle Eastern dude was being used by a white guy to prove that said white guy wasn’t a threat - on another level it wasn’t funny at all.

“Whatever you want, man,” Dalir shrugged. “I mean, I won’t know unless I see you in them, so...where are the coats here?”

There was a huge display immediately to their left with a giant sign that read ‘40% OFF ALL MEN’S OUTERWEAR’ so it was a stupid question, but the Gap employee was probably used to stupid questions because he pointed them in the right direction - literally, pointed behind them, then went back to folding shirts.

Erik shopped like a machine, moving coats out of the way with quick precision, occasionally stopping to check sizes. Dalir tried to be helpful, holding up a coat that he thought might be Erik’s thing - and quickly learning what his tastes were. Nothing too bulky, nothing too sporty, nothing with fur. That left them with a limited rack of wools.

“How about this one?” Dalir asked, holding up a navy blue coat. “It seems like it fits the criteria.”

Erik’s mouth scrunched up on one side. “I usually go with black - what size is it?”

“Medium,” Dalir said. And Erik told him to find a large - the shoulders were always a problem. The shoulders. Not ‘my’ shoulders. Dalir wondered if Erik even visualized himself as having a body, or if he went all Sherlock Holmes and considered it ‘transport.’ And if Erik was Sherlock, was he Watson? Shaking his head because fixating on British murder mysteries was not what he was supposed to be focusing on - aha! A large. Elementary, indeed. “Try it on.”

Erik shrugged into it, buttoning it up experimentally. And oh, hey, there it was. Ridiculous to get lusty over a guy putting more clothes on, but damn. Those shoulders - no matter how much pain they caused him, sartorial and otherwise, Erik cut a very fine figure. Dalir admired him for a whole ten seconds before his desire short-circuited. Still, it was something.

“Yeah, get that coat, it looks good,” Dalir told him. “Unless you want…”

He held up a big red and black plaid jacket, with a fur-lined hood. Erik laughed.

“Nope, no thank you, my ancestors might have cut down forests in Canada, but I don’t need to recreate their fashion choices,” Erik said, then looked around at the neatly-folded shirts and overpriced jeans all around them. “You need anything? Since it’s forty percent off. Consider it a repayment for all the gas money I owe you.”

“Nah, I’m good - and let me remind you, I’m from Michigan,” Dalir pointed out. “You might be prejudiced against the puffy coat, but I think I would have literally frozen walking from class to my dorm in college without one.”

“Fair enough,” Erik smiled at him, lightning-quick, then made his way to the register. As he was inserting his card his phone went off at the cash register; he silenced it and listened to the message on the walk back to the car. “Could you drop me off at the theatre? My Dad needs me for something.”

“No problem,” Dalir agreed. He’d already gone running that morning, it wasn’t like he had other plans.
He parked in a non-metered spot and followed Erik inside the theatre - the New Addition. Erik hadn’t specified what Mr. Carriere wanted, so he figured he should stick around, in case he wanted a ride back to his place. They walked through a sleek, modern lobby complete with those card-reading tablets at the ticket counter. This was where the resident acting company did their thing in the black box theatre - which Erik patiently clarified was a decent size thing and not particularly box-like, though it was black.

Turned out a guy named Neal - the artistic director for the resident theatre company - wanted Erik’s help orchestrating a musical he was running. At least, that was the gist, as Dalir understood it, from a frazzled Mr. Carriere who met them at the doorway of the theatre.

They could be twins - twins who were thirty years apart in age, but still. Mr. Carriere was wearing jeans, a plaid shirt, and sneakers (though the jeans were a light wash and the sneakers were white Adidas that looked like they’d seen better days), just like Erik. Apparently when he got out of his goth phase he started taking his fashion cues from his dad.

“I’m going to ask him how much he wants to haunt a house,” Mr. Carriere grumbled, breaking the illusion. His voice was higher than one would expect for a man of his stature, nothing at all to Erik’s. “The guy has been emailing and texting me nonstop since two a.m. Probably having nightmares over the lead actress’s voice.”

“Now you tell me?” Erik asked his father as Mr. Carriere ushered them inside. Erik turned to Dalir and told him he didn’t have to stay. “Neal isn’t my biggest fan - actually, he hates musical theatre, thinks it’s a cheap art form, so I don’t know what possessed him to decide to do a musical.”

“It’s Cabaret,” Mr. Carriere interjected, not even bothered to pretend he wasn’t listening in. “It’s depressing, which he thinks elevates the material beyond the art.”

This was not Dalir’s usual idea of a good time, to put it mildly. He wasn’t a fan of musical theatre either - he’d been dragged to Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, Godspell, and Jesus Christ Superstar over and over again in elementary school and his only fond memory was the time they were ushered out of Godspell in sixth grade when the actor playing one of the apostles lit up an actual joint onstage. He didn’t know Cabaret, but Mr. Carriere hadn’t exactly talked it up. Still, he admitted to the father-son pair, “I’ve got nothing else to do.”

Neal was a spindly white guy, tall and gaunt with hair gone prematurely gray. He was wearing black-on-black and the two-day’s scruff on his face bespoke a sleepless night. He didn’t say anything to the Carrieres or Dalir when they came in, just gestured that they should sit.

Sit they did as Neal fumbled around with a CD player, “They don’t have a rehearsal pianist?” Erik muttered into his father’s ear, and a tall, world-weary looking redhead started to...um...sing. If you could call it singing.

“Maybe this time, I’ll be lucky
Maybe this time, he’ll stay.
Maybe this time, for the first time,
Love won’t hurry away…”

Now, Dalir was no expert in vocal performance, but even he knew there was nothing good going on in that girl’s throat. There was a weird...buzz in her voice. A nasality that sounded put-on. But her voice was kind of raspy, like there was a frog in her throat. Overall, not pleasant...neither were the faces she was pulling, like she was trying for sultry, but was just giving off pain. Like it physically hurt her to sing the song.
“Who is that?” Erik muttered to his father.

“Charlotte Deluca,” Mr. Carriere replied quietly. “Neal’s new discovery. He hired her last year to play Laura in Glass Menagerie.”

“She can’t sing,” Erik pointed out, left leg doing that agitated shake thing it did when he was really uncomfortable and anxious.

“She doesn’t know that,” Mr. Carriere told him.

“Someone should tell her.”

“She’s dating Neal.”

“Oh,” Erik said and was silent after that until the end of the song. Dalir wasn’t sure if they were supposed to clap or not (wasn’t it polite to clap after a performance - even a really shitty performance?), but neither Erik nor Mr. Carriere clapped, so Dalir followed suit. Erik hauled himself to his feet and addressed the director directly, “Neal, a word?”

Neal and Erik conferred privately in the corner; Dalir tried not to look like he was listening in too hard, but...yeah, he was listening in really hard. He caught a few snippets, mostly Erik because his voice carried. “Karaoke rehearsals,” and “Untrained is one thing, but...atonal is another,” and “She has five songs,” ending with “Just what do you want me to do, here?”

“Does Erik...work here, much?” Dalir asked Mr. Carriere since he probably wasn’t making a great impression, sitting next to him and straining to listen to his son’s private conversation.

Mr. Carriere smiled, lopsided and awkward - yeah, no doubt he and Erik shared the same genes. Even their eyes were the same, Dalir noticed, now that they were so close together. Hazel green.

“That’s a complicated question - not really, since he won’t let me pay him, so I don’t ask for too many favors...he consults, advises, about groups I bring in from outside. Some orchestral, not a lot. The acting company is Neal’s baby, I just make sure everyone gets paid. I wouldn’t have asked Erik to come down, except that Neal is desperate.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Dalir nodded, looking back at Charlotte who seemed unconcerned by the goings-on around her; she was scrolling through her phone without a care in the world. She looked up when Erik approached her, asked if she’d ever taken a voice lesson and would she be interested, if the theatre paid for a tutor.

“Oh, no,” she shook her head. “I’ve got a really good ear. I just listen to the soundtrack and I get it.”

Thank god for the mask, Dalir thought, watching a quiver go through Erik’s fingers. He didn’t doubt that whatever appalled disbelief he was feeling would be evident, even through the scarring. He didn’t have nostrils to flare, but maybe his nose-hole would expand. The thought was more funny than grotesque and as Dalir’s imagination ran away with him he had to turn a chortle to a cough in his hand.

“Oh.” Erik paused, clearly tamping down the thousand and one other things he wanted to say. “Okay.”

“Good boy,” Mr. Carriere breathed quietly next to Dalir.

Erik turned back to Neal and said, “I could...listen to a run-through of the songs. Transpose some of the orchestrations down or up. You’ll need a rehearsal pianist, though.”
Neal did have a nose - kind of a big one, actually - and he snorted, shaking his head as if Erik was being sarcastic.

“Yeah, I can’t afford that,” Neal said dismissively, waving a hand. “Could you just record it and send me the MP3s? As a personal favor? I mean, if you have time, I just figured you’d want to keep busy after, y’know. All that stuff.”

Wow. Some people had zero tact.

“What the fuck, man?” Dalir breathed quietly, watching Erik’s fingers briefly curl into fists before returning to hang by his sides.

Erik took a deep, steadying breath - held it for a count of three - then let it out again. Neal was staring at him cluelessly, tapping his fingers on his elbow, evidently impatient. It was a mighty effort - Dalir could practically sense Erik’s temper flaring, like a living thing and was duly impressed when he reeled it back in, stuffing it down enough to very calmly reply, “I’ll see what I can do. Excuse me.”

Mr. Carriere practically jumped out of his seat and bolted for the door, holding it open as Erik strode out like he was being chased. Dalir hurried past at his heels and the three of them ignored the waves and thanks that Charlotte and Neal belatedly called up after them.

“Office?” Mr. Carriere asked Erik.

“Please,” his son replied, tense. Dalir just followed behind, uninvited, but not sure what else he was supposed to do with himself. Maybe he should have just dropped him off.

Once they were all inside and the door was locked, Erik rounded on his dad, sounding furious. “What the hell? I get that you can’t deny your second son anything, but that was something else!”

Dalir’s eyes went wide and, in his shock, he forgot his technically uninvited status and yelped, “That’s your brother?”

Both Carrieres looked at Dalir in confusion and surprise - they seemed to have forgotten he was there.

“What?” Erik asked. “No!”

Mr. Carriere favored his son with a pointed, but somewhat smug look, “See what happens when you make a big deal out of things? People get the wrong idea. No, Dalir, Neal isn’t a relative, Erik just...was making a joke. A bad joke.”

“It’s not a joke, it’s a statement of fact,” Erik muttered, sounding a little petulant.

“Will you drop it?” Mr. Carriere asked, some of his professional cool heating a little. “This is childish.”

“Never took me to a Red Sox game at Fenway,” Erik couldn’t seem to help himself and Dalir started to get the picture.

“You hate sports,” Mr. Carriere replied, then before Erik could get another word in, continued more loudly, “Anyway! I asked you here to come up with a solution, not to bitch about Neal.

“Oh, I’ve worked out a perfect solution,” Erik laughed humorlessly. “I’ll kill them both! Live up to my reputation, as established in the local papers: Mad Masked Man Murders Musical Mutilators.”
Dalir snorted out a laugh, but Mr. Carriere didn’t seem to find that funny.

“It doesn’t solve my problems,” Mr. Carriere said grimly. “If you won’t do Neal a favor, will you do one for me? Just...send him his MP3s. He’s a talented director, he’s just bitten off more than he can chew. He needs to stick to what he knows. He doesn’t know music, you do. So, will you help or are you going to throw a tantrum?”

Erik was quiet for a beat, apparently considering his options. “Can I throw a tantrum then help?”

Finally, Mr. Carriere smiled, “Sure, just don’t do it in my office. Thanks, buddy, I owe you one.”

“No you don’t,” Erik smiled back and shook his head. Then he turned to Dalir and said, “Do you mind taking me back? I could walk if you - ”

“I’ve got nothing else to do,” Dalir said, aware he was sounding a tiny bit pathetic.

Erik cocked his head at him, opening his mouth, then closing it. For a beat he regarded Dalir closely, then he just shook his head. “Thanks. They were back in the car when Erik said, out of the blue, “I don’t hate sports, I’m indifferent to sports.”

It took Dalir a second to realize he was finishing his argument with his dad and he chuckled as he buckled his seatbelt. “You always need to get the last word? Because I wouldn’t have pegged you for that.”

Erik sighed and rolled his eyes, “Only when it comes to Neal. He just...showed up, directed an admittedly brilliant production of Pillowman and since then he can do no wrong.”

“Until now,” Dalir pointed out.

“Yeah, well,” Erik shrugged. “I’m the biggest screw-up in my Dad’s orbit, so...a bad production of Cabaret is nothing. Neal’s a chain smoker, but that's his only vice.”

“That and Charlotte,” Dalir added, glancing sideways to see if he could get a smile out Erik. Not a crack.

“Mmmm,” he hummed, drumming his fingers on the armrest. Beating out, unless Dalir was mistaken, the song they just heard. “I can transpose it down - she can talk-sing it, which will be a pity, but what can you do? I hope he doesn’t want to include “Mein Herr,” she can handle “Don’t Tell Mama” I think. I hope. I’m not putting my name on this…”

Dalir let him talk to himself and drove back to the apartment with a contented little smile on his face. Erik was unbearably cute. Another glance. Looking at his left side, it was hard to tell there was anything off about his face. Just the smooth line of his jaw, leading down to his neck…

He waited for the short-circuit, but it never came. Not even when Erik turned around in the seat to grab his coat from the back and Dalir saw his melted ear full-on. That he was used to. And, it stood to reason, if he could get used to part of Erik’s face, he could get used to the whole thing.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I swear they are MINUTES away from starting a relationship. MINUTES.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the first time in their brief acquaintance, Erik was spending more time out of the house than Dalir. Three days a week his dad would swing by the apartment to pick him up and together they’d go to the theatre. Despite Erik’s protestations about not having his name on the production, only making MP3s and attending exactly one music rehearsal, it appeared he couldn’t help himself. If he was going to be involved even a little bit, he wanted the actors to put on the best show they could. And if Neal wouldn’t hire a rehearsal pianist, Erik would volunteer his time.

“You should make your dad shell out a little cash,” Dalir mentioned idly one day as Erik rushed out the door.

“He offered, I refused,” Erik shook his head. “I owe him several hundred favors, remember?”

How could he forget? It was the whole reason they’d met. The only reason Dalir was there.

There was a definite perk to Erik’s prolonged absences: it allowed Dalir to engage in a little...investigating. He had wanted to get a promotion to detective before his forced retirement, so he might as well put some investigative skills to use. He did have a problem to solve: the question of Erik’s face. Dalir had resolved that he’d get used to it, but how was he supposed to get used to it, when Erik never took the mask off?

Stealing his phone was right out, especially since there was every possibility that Erik might have deleted the video. But there were those photo albums. Dalir had only flipped through them on his searches, just in case there was a tell-tale bump of something jammed in a photo sleeve or stuffed in the binding, he’d never really looked before. So Dalir took advantage of a last-minute rehearsal to settle down on the living room floor, the books stacked beside him. Erik had that face since he was six years old, there had to be pictures of him without the mask on. So he’d start there.

The first album was jammed full of shots of a much younger Mr. Carriere with a pretty red-haired woman who Dalir assumed was Erik’s mom, Isabella. She was slim, pale with blue eyes and a spray of freckles across her nose. Dalir would have pegged her as Irish, except that Erik told him once his background was solely Italian and French-Canadian, “Classic New England combination,” according to him. The initial dozen or more pages were mostly the two of them, on vacation hiking in the woods, at various parties, wedding snapshots, a few from shows she’d been in and Mr. Carriere had managed. They looked really happy together and distantly, Dalir thought it was too bad it hadn’t worked out for them.

He had to smile at the last page - it was a full-page insert of a very red-faced, very wrinkly, very new baby scrunched up with a hospital band on one wrist and a little yellow cap pulled down to his puffy eyes. Dalir’s own hospital picture wasn’t any better, though his mother displayed it with pride in his baby book - he wasn’t wearing a hat and the shock of black hair sticking out of his head made him look like a really ugly human-cockatiel hybrid child.
The second album was *nothing* but baby pictures. Newborn baby Erik in a hat and blanket (significantly less red and puffy), newborn baby Erik being held by dozens of adults, newborn baby Erik in his crib, in a white gown in a church. Fat, bright-eyed infant Erik with a smattering of red hair in a swing, in a high-chair, on a blanket outside. Toddler Erik on a train, toddler Erik at the beach, toddler Erik with a dog…but Dalir did notice that in the pictures, increasingly, as Erik got older, he was photographed alone. When he was a tiny baby he was usually pictured with one of his parents. As he entered the preschool years, he was by himself, meaning that only one parent was with him to take the pictures, spending less time together as a family.

There were a few exceptions as he opened album number three. First day of preschool, mom and dad were there alongside him - he was a pretty cute kid, his hair was curly and bright red, just like the picture in Mr. Carrière’s office. He had a face full of freckles and a very sweet smile. And in a photo with a Cookie Monster cake sporting a giant ‘5’ candle, they were right there behind his chair as he leaned over to blow it out. Dalir was nearing the end of his pile since the third album was very much like the other two, a bunch of pictures from a very short time frame, the lion’s share taken from a Disney vacation Erik went on with his dad and an older couple, probably grandparents. Mom wasn’t in a single frame.

Dalir was starting to get a little bored by the time he started on the fourth album. Baby pictures of adult friends were novel for about five minutes, but the Mantova-Carrière clan were such shutterbugs that the whole thing felt slightly tedious. He waded through Kindergarten graduation, more beach pictures, more grandparents…then something strange. The photos jumped ahead - and kept jumping. Dalir flipped back and forth to see if the pages were stuck together, but they weren’t. The first five years of Erik’s life took up three entire photo albums. But the next eighteen? Didn’t even fill one. Picture of the back of his head playing the piano. Picture from another room while Erik played the violin - just enough of his face was visible that Dalir could tell something wasn’t right about it, but the shot wasn’t clear enough to make out.

By the time the pictures started appearing more regularly, Dalir was disappointed in his quest, and a little alarmed. The Erik in the pictures was entering middle school age, maybe nine or ten - and scrawny, as he said, in group shots with friends and classmates he was the shortest and usually the skinniest - but he was also wearing a mask. Not the molded leather-looking one he sported now, or the thin plastic he wore on bike rides, but a mask made from stiff-looking cloth that covered his face, leaving the area around his mouth free.

Despite knowing what he did of what Erik looked like and understanding *why* Erik kept his face covered, Dalir’s gut twisted uncomfortably. Who got that for him? Did the doctors tell him to wear it for…protection? Like, since his nose was all…gone, maybe he got sick without it? But the paperwork he read said it wasn’t medically necessary. Did his dad force it on him?

That seemed likely. After all, the only picture Mr. Carrière kept on hand had to have been taken almost a year before the accident. And for Dad to go from snapping a picture of his son every time Erik turned around to taking a few dozen photos in almost twenty years smacked of embarrassment. Shame? Guilt? Dalir had no idea, but it didn’t seem fair. There were so many gaps that Dalir was actually able to see that puberty-punch that Erik mentioned weeks ago. In one picture from high school he was wearing a black suit, the jacket way too big for him, standing next to an older guy holding a baton - Erik’s head was in line with the guy’s shoulder. Then three pictures later, there’s Erik again with the same guy, but now the baton-guy’s head barely scraped Erik’s chin. That photo was a little loose and as Dalir slid it out to reposition, he saw that there was something written on the back.

Tough year, but you made it. Can’t tell you how happy I am about Julliard, you’ll do great. I’m very proud of you. -The Dorf Man
He flipped through the remaining pages, but it was the same as before. In every photo, Erik was wearing a mask. Family holidays. Pictures taken at his school. Friends’ parties. Dalir found himself going back to the beginning, to the photo of Erik holding his violin. He was familiar enough with those endless baby pictures to know he was in a different house in that shot. Before it looked like he’d been living in an apartment, but the picture was definitely taken in a living room of a house that looked out onto a sunny backyard. The glare from the windows was what made it so hard to see his face.

_I hated that house_, Erik told him once. He saw too much of it, he said, being homeschooled for two years. Must have been lonely, just him and his dad. The relatives from years past were gone, and it wasn’t until Erik was older that other kids started popping up here and there.

He couldn’t help thinking about his own niece and nephew. Reza was three, but Yasmin was six. Erik’s age during the fire. Just _thinking_ about something like that made him feel nauseated, but he was sure that no one in his family would have disappeared on her. No matter what she looked like, they would have rallied round. Why did it seem so different for Erik?

Dalir leafed through the final album again, slowly. Mom cropped up at major events. Concerts. Graduations, where once again she and Mr. Carriere suffered through being in the same photo together so there could be a family shot. Erik was smiling in most of them, but as Dalir looked closely, he could see a habitual tic in his body language. A ducking of his head and a look in his eyes that said, _Really? You really want a picture?_ that might have been indicative of teenage surliness, but probably meant something else. Scratch that, definitely meant something else. For a kid who hadn’t left the house with his face uncovered since he was in first grade, it was a wonder he let anyone take his picture at _all_.

There was a tell-tale knock at the door and Dalir sat bolt-upright as if he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t have been. The bolt slid back and in walked Erik as Dalir hastily put the albums back on the shelf - too late. He was still holding the last album as Erik walked in, holding a brown take-out bag.

“They decided they didn’t need me,” he said, not sounding too disappointed. “Nobody’s off-book yet, which is horrifying, but decidedly not my problem. I got take-out from an Asian fusion place near the theatre, if that’s okay - do you need my coat?”

It took Dalir a minute for his brain to catch up with Erik’s mouth - he thought he was leafing through the albums looking for drugs. Not trying to put the pieces of Erik’s childhood together while simultaneously trying to find a picture to stare at like a lovesick puppy until he could honestly say Erik’s face didn’t bother him.

“Oh, yeah, why not?” Dalir said, stumbling to his feet - pins and needles radiated down his legs and he wondered how long he’d been sitting there. Erik handed the coat over and Dalir felt the lining and pockets in a perfunctory way. Just the apartment keys.

“You’re good,” Dalir said, handing the coat back; Erik tossed it over one of the chairs next to the kitchen island and started doling out portions of food.

“Do you…” Erik started, then trailed off. “Uh. Do you have plans tonight? Or, I’m sorry, do you still need to look over more rooms?”

_It’s cute that you have such faith in my professionalism, but it’s totally misplaced._

“Uh…” This time it was Dalir’s turn to stutter. “Nope, I’m…good. We’re good. It’s…good.”
“Good,” Erik echoed, hand fisting in his hair convulsively. “Want to…finish up Dancing with the Stars? I know it’s over, but - ”

“Oh, yeah,” Dalir nodded. “We can bang it out - my mom didn’t win her fantasy league. I think I told you about her fantasy league? Whatever, she didn’t win, but she won’t tell me who won the show because she doesn’t want to ‘spoil me.’”

They banged out the final five episodes over dinner and beer, wrapping up their marathon around midnight. Erik and Dalir agreed that the best dancer won, both of them would rather that either of the other two finalists had gotten the trophy.

“At least you’ll have something to talk about at the dinner table that isn’t politics,” Erik mused as he put their plates in the dishwasher and their bottles in the recycling. “Over the holidays - sorry, that was rude. I shouldn’t just assume - ”

“Nah, totally fine,” Dalir cut him off before he could descend into a white-guilt induced word vomit. “The family usually gets together when the kids have their break from school - everything’s closed, the kids have a few days off, makes sense. Uh…when I talked to your dad, he gave me two weeks. End of next month. Is that okay?”

Dalir had been vaguely aware of his appointed time off, but didn’t want to harp on it, in case it spiked Erik’s anxiety, but he assumed Mr. Carriere had told Erik about Dalir’s contract months ago. Maybe not. But luckily, Erik didn’t seem bothered.

“Yeah,” Erik nodded immediately. “That’s fine. If I feel…like I need extra support, I can just stay at my dad’s place. Or ask him to stay here. It’s beyond not a problem, you’ve been…great. Definitely deserving a vacation.”

Dalir smiled and shrugged. Erik was definitely his most unique client, but hardly his most demanding - he’d been cussed out, screamed at, even shoved around by other clients in the past. All in a day’s work, as he saw it. Then again, he didn’t have the warm and fuzzies for any of his past clients, so that might have been dulling his perception on the matter.

“How about you?” he asked, cocking his head at Erik curiously. “Just…you and Dad?”

There was a pause and Erik drummed his fingers on top of the island. “This year…yes. I think so.”

“Going to try and see Mom?” Dalir asked, prying just a tiny bit.

A longer pause and Erik shrugged, “Maybe. She’s flying out to Connecticut to be with her family, so I might see if she can come up here while she’s…nearby. No, I mean, I will see. I should call her tomorrow. Or. Ah. Tonight. Since it’s past midnight. So. Um. Bed, I guess.”

Erik hadn’t stammered that badly in ages and Dalir instantly felt shitty for asking. No doubt it was tough, but it still bothered him, all those missing family members in the fourth album. But talking about it probably wasn’t going to help, especially if Erik wanted to sleep. So he just smiled and bid Erik good-night. Not being tired himself, he channel surfed for a bit, finally settling on Iron Chef because it was on and watching it made him feel slightly nostalgic - in college, he and his floormates would smoke weed and watch cooking shows until three in the morning. Looking back he really wasn’t sure how he passed all his classes.

The mystery ingredient had just been revealed, “APPLES!” when Erik emerged from his bathroom, wearing his pajamas - but no shoes, so Dalir heard his approach.

“Question,” Erik began, running a hand through his hair. “Are you busy next Tuesday? It’s
previews for *Cabaret*. I’m supposed to go and watch, give final notes. It’s press night for the show as well, but I wasn’t going to sit in the house, so you don’t have to worry about dressing up or anything.”

“Are we going to have to be backstage?” Dalir asked, not wanting to be in the way at all.

“Oh, no,” Erik shook his head immediately. “There’s a decent spot to watch up on the catwalk, since the blackbox isn’t huge, you get a good view of the stage and the acoustics are better up there. And, ah...there’s no reason we won’t be able to get in this time.”

Erik tried for a smile - that weak, sad one from the video. No need to look through photo albums anymore because Dalir could remember the rest of the face, clear as day. He wasn’t exactly grossed out anymore, the overwhelming emotion morphed into pity, which was basically a cousin to disgust, so he didn’t think he’d made progress. Dalir couldn’t bring himself to smile back.

The restraining order was no longer valid, but as far as he knew Erik hadn’t tried to contact Christine, nor she him. Probably for the best, he reminded himself. If Christine needed space - or wanted to put the whole thing behind her completely, that was her right. And if Erik was half the guy Dalir thought he was, then he’d wait for her to decide to invite him back into her life, as it appeared he was doing. Still, it was sad.

Apparently he was taking too long to answer because Erik started to backtrack, “I mean, it’s not going to be good. I just suggested some things to make it...not terrible. Charlotte isn’t a singer, but her acting is solid. You wouldn’t have to pay or anything - um. But you know? Just forget - ”

“Sounds good,” Dalir interrupted. “What time?”

Erik relaxed marginally, chest expanding as he inhaled, then let the breath out - stop looking at his chest, Dalir! - “Seven - show starts at seven-thirty, but I figured we could walk. Unless it’s freezing, then you can drive.”

“Seven,” Dalir confirmed. “Cool. It’s a date.”

“Heh,” Erik chuckled, his mouth relaxing into a more natural smile. Dalir might have imagined it, but he thought he saw a change in his eyes, a little brightness that he’d never noticed before. “Yeah. It’s a date.”

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*This is not a date,* Erik reminded himself as he stared at his closet, looking for something to wear. *This is a work-thing for you and a favor-thing for him. Not a date.*

Jeans, a thermal shirt, and a sweater. Not formal, but not sweats. And it would be better to have a long-sleeved shirt on just in case it got too hot in the theatre for the sweater. It was nothing Dalir hadn’t seen before and therefore even further cemented the notion that this was *not* a date.

Funny how Erik hadn’t been this apprehensive before The Touring Production That Wasn’t, but technically Dad invited him. And Dalir hadn’t said ‘it’s a date,’ when he accepted that invitation. And Erik hadn’t repeated it back to him like a doofus.

Erik frowned as he patted his hair - static-y from the sweater - but soon gave up trying to get it to lay flat. It wasn’t like perfect hair was going to improve his general appearance and it was just going to frustrate him to try. But he wasn’t going to be in a bad mood. Nothing was going to go wrong this time. He was trying for normal. They were going to have a *normal* night out. No ghosts
of overdoses past, no surprise restraining orders, the worst thing about tonight would be the singing. On that point, Erik was determined.

Apparently he’d taken longer getting himself together than he thought because Dalir was standing by, holding Erik’s coat and glancing anxiously at the microwave clock.

“Want me to drive?” he asked. “We’re cutting it close.”

Erik shook his head, nabbing his coat with one hand and a notebook with the other. “No, we’re fine - preview nights always start late.”

At least, they did under Neal’s command. He was a decent actor and a better director, but he could be a forest-for-the-trees guy. He’d get so hung up on some little nuance or message he wanted to portray that he’d forget to confirm with the lighting guy, or he’d miss a meeting with the stage manager and she’d be stuck trying to schedule level-set without the director’s input. From the reports Erik heard, they’d only had one full dress rehearsal because Neal neglected to build time in the rehearsal schedule for adequate costume fittings and there was a scramble at the last minute. Still, he always pulled it out in the end, and that was all the audience required.

The walk to the theatre was nice, the air was brisk, but not freezing and they hadn’t had snow for a few days so the sidewalks were mostly clear. The city hadn’t decorated for Christmas yet, but some of the homes and shops in the area were already bedecked with lights and inflatables in their yards and strewn over balconies; people who left their lights on all year had the advantage.

Every year Dad waged and won a war with the board over decorating the theatre for the holidays - he claimed it was too polarizing and exclusive since not everyone celebrated this time of year and he didn’t want to make it seem like the theatre was in any way for one particular group of people. It crossed Erik’s mind to tell Dalir about the time one of the board members (earnest and trying to please) suggested doing a little of everything and asked where she could find Ramadan decorations, but he probably wouldn’t think it was that funny. So, no tree for the foyer, no menorah in the lobby. Personally, Erik thought Dad had a touch of SAD this time of year, but he never mentioned it; it’d be like the pot calling the kettle black.

“Want to grab a coffee on the way?” Erik asked as they neared the shop on the corner. Seasonal lattes were a weakness of his, as if depression could be staved off with sugar and caffeine.

Dalir looked at him incredulously. “Man, aren’t you a little worried about being late? Don’t we have to hustle?”

“I told you, it’s fine,” Erik said, walking to the door and holding it for Dalir. “I’m getting one.”

“Well, if you’re getting one…”

Travis behind the register rang them up - he’d been working at the shop for years and knew Erik both pre and post emotional breakdown, but he never said anything about it either way. Probably because he always stank of weed and that probably cocooned him from feeling particularly strong emotions. Whatever the cause, Erik was grateful.

Dalir snorted as Erik ordered his personal favorite concoction (three shots of espresso with one pump of caramel and two pumps of gingerbread syrup, whole milk steamed, no foam, and yeah, go ahead and add whipped cream), while he just got a large hot coffee with cream.

“You are such a millennial,” he teased as they left the shop and picked up the pace to the theatre. “I don’t think I’ve ever said ‘no foam’ in my life.”
“You’re, what, three years older than me?” Erik asked. “I think you’re a millennial. A digital native, anyway.”

Dalir shook his head serenely and sipped his coffee. “Nope. Not me. We were still using MS-DOS at my elementary school - floppy discs! I’m a digital immigrant. I come from Pencilandpapervania.”

“A Luddite,” Erik concluded, taking a swig of his perfect beverage. “Which is why you won’t make a Venmo account.”

“I don’t want the internet to have my bank account!” Dalir insisted with all the surety of a man wearing an aluminum foil baseball cap - the kind of man who would stand in front of a board depicting Roswell, New Mexico, covered in thumbtacks and red string. Was it worth it to tell him “the internet” already had his bank account information? Assuming that his bank was an actual bank and not just a fancy word for a shoebox under Dalir’s bed? And if that was the case, where were his dad’s direct deposits going?

Oh no. Nope. Don’t go there.

But Erik’s mind always was happiest when it was ruining his sense of equilibrium. And so his imagination ran wild and pretended that they were just two friends - maybe more - going to the theatre because they wanted to. That Dalir wasn’t coming across out of a sense of duty and obligation. That he was with him because he wanted to be and not because he was being paid.

They approached the theatre from the back, Erik leading Dalir away from the lobby where he saw his dad, wearing a nice suit, making smalltalk with a handful of reporters and blog writers while members of the board and the high-level investors milled around, sipping chilled white wine and carrying tiny plates of cheese.

“They having a party?” Dalir asked, craning his neck back to look inside.

“Not really,” Erik shrugged. “It’s a small reception for the bigwigs, Dad does that during show-opens that he thinks need a little extra buzz.”

“Hard day at the office,” Dalir grinned at him. Erik smiled back quickly and led him upstairs.

If Erik had to booze and schmooze, he’d go out of his mind. He had absolutely zero talent for making small talk, and only the tiniest ability to feign interest in a topic he didn’t care about. The purchase of a third home in Palm Springs? Nope, he didn’t care. The fact that Biff made National Honors Society and Happy was starting pre-med? His eyes would glaze over. But his dad was an absolute pro, he had a great head for names and faces and an ability to catalog seemingly unimportant trivia about people to call up the next time he saw them. He was a fantastic acquaintance - the kind of person you could run into at a bar and be genuinely happy to see, who could sit down for a drink or two and converse casually and cheerfully, leaving you wondering why you didn’t get together more often.

But Erik knew the reason why - the reason why it was going to be him and his Dad eating elaborate sandwiches on Christmas and watching movies on the couch all day. At first, when he was a teenager, he thought it was his fault, that his Dad was so busy taking care of him that he let all his other relationships fade away. It made him feel tremendously guilty, especially as he found his stride in high school, made genuine friends and consequently left his dad alone at home more than he ever had before.

Yet, it wasn’t that simple. Few things were. Turned out, Dad just sucked at maintaining close
friendships. He liked vegging out on the couch at the end of a workday - when his shoes came off after work, they *stayed* off, as he liked to say. Mingling was fine, he was even happy to run into people or participate in the occasional night out, but that was the extent. After the show got out, Erik had little doubt that his dad would swing through a drive-through and immediately head home to eat in front of the TV. The apple didn’t fall far, sometimes.

As if though some preternatural Erik-sense, Dad glanced up and noticed him and favored him with a tiny smile, but no wave, no beckoning over. All for the best: no need to sour the evening by taking his deformed, drug-addicted son around to meet the backers.

Jean-Claude, a handsome, Haitian assistant building manager met them in the hall. This kind of meet-and-greet was much more his speed. “Erik!” he grinned a thousand-watt smile at him and gestured that he come closer. “I stole a little wine from the festivities - you like Merlot, yes?”

“Yes,” Erik confirmed as Jean-Claude handed over a bottle of red and a Solo cup. “Wow, this *is* a classy party, isn’t it?”

“The classiest,” Jean-Claude winked. “Ah! Let me get a cup for your friend - in the interest of class, you understand. I heard Charlotte during a mic check - good luck!”

Erik rolled his eyes and thanked Jean-Claude for the bottle and the cups. Dalir had been oddly quiet during the encounter, only speaking when Erik touched his arm to urge him forward.

“He’s hot,” Dalir blurted out, staring back over his shoulder. “Like...a younger, darker Morris Chestnut.”

...what?

“True,” Erik agreed slowly, looking Dalir up and down. Huh. All this time he just assumed Dalir was straight, but (generally) straight guys didn’t pronounce other guys hot. Especially not while staring after them as though trying to conjure up the image of hotness back to their eyes. Especially-especially not comparing them to universally acknowledged as hot actors. Maybe...maybe Dalir was just a progressive, new-age guy. Yeah. Probably that. “He’s married though. Uh. To a woman.”

Dalir flashed Erik a quick, knowing smile. “Too bad.”

Shit.

Erik swallowed hard. *Still not a date! If that’s Dalir’s standard, you fall well short!* “Okay, let’s keep moving, otherwise we really will be late.”

They had to climb a ladder to get to the catwalk, no easy feat when juggling hot coffee, a bottle of wine, cups, and a notebook, but they got up there, even if Erik had to shove the notebook inelegantly between his teeth to manage it. The surroundings were not glamorous, Erik actually kept lawn furniture cushions up there for maximum comfort, but the view was great.

He split the cushions between himself and Dalir then got as comfortable as possible. He even opened the wine, a twist-top (pinnacle of class!), and poured himself and Dalir two portions.

“This is so bizarre,” Dalir muttered, but he seemed pleased. “I feel like we’re having a secret picnic. Too bad French Morris couldn’t get us some cheese.”

“We can thieve some from the foyer during the act break,” Erik informed him, but the house lights flickered and he leaned over to whisper, “If I don’t talk during the show, I’m not ignoring you - my
voice carries and people complained about noises in the rafters.”

“I feel like that could be good for business, though,” Dalir pointed out. “Doesn’t every theatre need a ghost?”

Erik was about to explain that while ghosts brought an air of gentility to a huge auditorium, they were mostly annoying in a little black box, but then the house lights came down and the MC emerged, in character, to point out emergency exits and to encourage the audience to silence their phones. So he only put a finger to his lips and sat back to enjoy the performance - or try to.

It wasn’t a bad show, but Neal upped the sleaze factor to max - he’d sourced all the lingerie from second-hand stores and Erik could feel his own skin starting to itch as he watched the chorus girls dancing around in torn lace and faded - oh, god, was that stained? silk.

Charlotte, at least, looked marginally less haggard than the other actors - she legit bobbed her hair for the show and it looked great. And her accent was very good, she got through her numbers just fine and possessed a spunk that made you root for her - if it wasn’t a musical, Erik would have applauded Neal’s casting decision, girlfriend or not.

He’d wound up doing a lot more one-on-one work with Charlotte than he expected to, probably more character work than Neal wanted, but it helped her overall performance. At least, Erik thought so. They watched a few YouTube videos of vintage Marlene Dietrich and Edith Piaf to get a sense of the sound of the era, so he was able to work with her limited range to produce a vocal performance that was marginally period-accurate, even if it wasn’t impressive.

The one major departure from the script came at the end, a compromise for Neal since his original concept was unworkable. Charlotte would come out to sing the title song, but be woozy and faint (Neal wanted blood trickling down her legs, but the usual mix of corn syrup and food coloring would be too hard to scrub from the costumes), and collapse halfway through. Then one of the chorus girls would come to the front as the other Kit-Kat dancers shielded her from the audience, to deliver the number in that Liza With a Z style that so many people liked while poor Sally stumbled to her feet and limped offstage.

Every so often Erik would glance at Dalir to see if he was engaged in the show or bored out of his mind - and concluded that it was somewhere in the middle. He actually choked on his wine during “If You Could See Her From My Eyes”, Neal would be thrilled. They didn’t wind up stealing cheese at all, Erik spent all of intermission explaining the plot, but by the end of the show, the wine bottle had somehow emptied itself.

“What’d you think?” Erik asked Dalir as the cast took their bows and they gathered their things to shimmy back down the ladder.

“Good,” he said brightly. “Yeah, it was great! You made me think this was going to be a trainwreck - I mean, yeah, Nazis and everything, but no! I mean, yeah, Nazis. But it was a good show. I don’t go to theatre...ever, but I liked it! The acting, I mean. Not the Nazis.”

“Nazis are bad,” Erik nodded, pausing to collect himself before he ventured down the ladder; he was feeling temporarily light-headed.

The combination of caffeine, sugar, and alcohol was probably not mixing well with his medication. The notes for the second act were going to be entertaining, at least (he’d written ‘nice’ in all capital letters with three exclamation points, but couldn’t remember what he was so pleased about), if not particularly helpful. He made it down the ladder okay and dropped the notes off in the booth, texting Neal to let him know where they were - wading through the morass of excited post-show
actors was inadvisable under the best of circumstances and Erik was feeling less than sturdy on his feet.

Evidently, Dalir noticed because he snaked an arm around his waisted and favored him with a very silly smile. “Steady on, captain,” he said - apparently double-fisting coffee and wine had done a number on both of them.

The physical proximity was nice - maybe that was what he’d been referring to in his notes? - and he draped an arm around Dalir’s shoulders, just to have a place to put it. Oh yeah, no doubt he was treading in dangerous waters, but he was too mellowed out to care. He’d never actually been this close to Dalir before, he could smell his shampoo and his Old Spice body wash. It was an excellent combination.

“We should eat,” Erik suggested.

“Good idea!” Dalir enthused. “You want to order out or grab something on the way?”

Damn it, but Dalir was adorable when he had half a bottle of wine and a large coffee in his system. Scratch that, he was adorable all the time; Erik just didn’t think he’d be such a cheery drunk. Not that they were drunk. Just...relaxed. He didn’t figure him to be such a cheery relaxed person. Had either of them eaten lunch? Erik hadn’t and Dalir had gone to the gym, so...no. Nope. They really needed to find food.

“Well, we’re walking,” Erik pointed out as they left through a backdoor, strategically avoiding the crowds darting out to the parking garage or their Ubers. “If something strikes us on the way, we can duck in, or just order when we get back.”

“Nice night,” Dalir observed, arm still around Erik’s waist even though both of them were walking along normally now. “Not too cold.”

“Give it time,” Erik replied, favoring Dalir with a sly grin. “Then you’ll have to take out your puffy coat.”

“The best coat,” Dalir corrected him loftily. “You just don’t get it. Maybe I’ll let you try it on, just to show you how wrong you are. I’ll be warm and comfy-cozy in my puffy coat while you’re cold and classy.”

“The classiest,” Erik chuckled, but he was increasingly distracted by the weight and pressure of Dalir’s arm on his side. Maybe he should pull away? Just in case Dalir wasn’t actually into the closeness anymore, but was too polite to be the first one to walk along solo. It was just that it felt so nice (that word again). It wasn’t...it hadn’t been like this, with Alexis. He didn’t do PDA. Not hand-holding, not affectionate hands on shoulders, nothing. All their physical exchanges happened in a bedroom with the lights off.

The memory was sharp and sobering. Erik loosened his hold on Dalir’s shoulder and let his arm fall away. Dalir’s hand tightened convulsively on his side for a second before he let go as well. There was a trendy micro-brewery with a takeout window on the corner and Erik picked up the pace and hurried over there as if he really wanted a sausage sandwich.

*He’s here to keep you sober, not for you to impose your fantasies on,* Erik reminded himself, shoving his hands in the pocket of his coat. *Stop being a creep.*
Dalir might be...playing up his inebriation. Just a touch. I'm all for it because one of them needs to make the first move.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

AT FREAKING LAST.

Everything had been going well, from Dalir’s slightly buzzed perspective. The show had been good and Erik was - just as he suspected - very cuddly up close. He was solid, but warm and the weight of his arm around Dalir’s shoulder was comfortable.

Then off he went to a take-out window and the air was suddenly freezing. Dalir’s brows knit, slightly perplexed, but he ordered his sandwich and fries, both of their hands too occupied with brown paper bags and soda in paper cups to be much use anywhere else.

Erik wasn’t taking care to match his stride to Dalir’s and as such was always a half-step ahead of him, moving just quickly enough that Dalir didn’t want to lose concentration in trying to keep up a stream of chat, lest he lose his balance and slip on an icy patch of sidewalk.

Things only got weirder when they got to the apartment. Erik stuck his dinner in the fridge, hurriedly thanked Dalir for keeping him company during the show and then went right into his bedroom, door shut. He didn’t even come out to use the bathroom or brush his teeth. And Dalir waited a while - through half his lamb meatball sandwich and all his french fries. He stuck the other half of the sandwich in the fridge, then crept toward Erik’s bedroom door, ear pressed against the wood (he didn’t use an upturned glass to listen more closely because he wasn’t actually guest starring on an episode of Scooby-Do). Not a sound. He must have gone to bed - it was only a little after ten, so this was unusual. Maybe the wine played more havoc with him than Dalir realized.

For lack of anything better to do, Dalir took himself to bed, maybe walking extra-slowly past Erik’s door, just in case.

Since he’d hopped into bed way before his usual time, he found himself stuck awake, thoughts churning. First thing in the morning, he’d call Mr. Carriere, tell him that he wanted to terminate their contract. He was serious about being a part of Erik’s life and if he was going to pursue Erik-the-person, he needed to detangle himself from Erik-the-client. Even if Erik didn’t want him like that, even if it fizzled out, putting the moves on him (such moves as Dalir had) couldn’t be bound up with his current job. He was a contract employee, after all, and he had to admit to himself that he was looking forward to a future where he didn’t have to fill out a 1099 and wave goodbye to half his bank account when the IRS came calling.

He’d been toying with the idea of getting a job at a school - back when he was in college, he thought he might do well as a school resource officer. They got a lot of flack in the press, but he thought the idea was solid - having someone around with the training to de-escalate heated situations before they became violent or, if that wasn’t going to work, to at least know how to handle a person or persons who were lashing out. He’d have to look into how being technically retired might factor into that...or, if law-enforcement wasn’t in his future, maybe he could look into being a guidance counsellor. Something community-oriented, anyway.

Maybe at a high school, Dalir thought as he drifted off. He’d just need to keep his cool - you know, not swear at the kids like he did at the pumpkin patch. He was pretty sure swearing at the kids was
Dalir couldn’t say what woke him, but all of a sudden he was wide awake. He blearily squinted at his phone - quarter past one. He hadn’t been asleep that long. He looked around the room - the baseboards were clanking a little, maybe they’d pinged too loudly and he’d been startled awake?

That seemed likely and Dalir rolled over intent on getting back to sleep when he heard the sound of Erik’s door opening and the tell-tale shuffle of his walking without shoes on.

Against his better judgement, Dalir slid out of bed, inching the door open - Erik didn’t notice, he was shuffling around the kitchen, his hair bedraggled from sleep. He poured himself a glass of water and drank it as he opened the fridge, apparently going for his untouched sandwich. The light from the fridge illuminated - oh. Either Erik was sleep-eating or he had tremendous faith in Dalir’s ability to not be incredibly nosey because he’d left his mask behind.

The darkness made his eye sockets look hollow and his...the middle part looked grotesque. Angled as he was with his right side toward Dalir’s door, it was a pretty sorry sight, that tight-pulled, blotchy scarring against his cheek and jaw which he got a full view of as Erik leaned against the island with his arms folded, waiting for his sandwich to reheat.

The only thing that drew Dalir’s unblinking stare from Erik’s face was what Erik did next - he pulled the cone of fries from the brown bag and started to eat them. Cold. It was horrifying, the only thing worse than a soggy fry (in Dalir’s opinion) was a fry that had been in the fridge. He remembered thinking when Erik shoved his dinner in there that he thought it was a pity he’d wind up throwing his side away. But no. The truth was out: Erik was the kind of weirdo who ate fridge fries.

Was this his cue? His time to burst from the room and shout, Hey! Guess what? You thought your face was the grossest thing about you, but you were wrong! It’s actually your french fry preferences.

But...no. Dalir was pretty sure the time to make that little proclamation was never.

When Erik went to retrieve his sandwich, Dalir took the opportunity to close his door, resting against the frame for a few seconds to gather himself. That wasn’t so bad, was it? He admittedly stared at Erik like a crazy person, but he’d been waiting for this opportunity for weeks. Weeks to prove to himself that he could handle Erik’s face without freaking out.

How had he done? Well, he hadn’t made any noise. And he wasn’t sweating - he’d even refrained from gasping out loud when Erik started munching on a pathetic excuse for a cooked potato. Not bad. Not bad at all.

The sound of the TV turning on made Dalir bold and also made him decide to test his acting skills. Purposefully, endeavoring to make noise, he opened his bedroom door and headed for the kitchen.

“Oh, hey!” he exclaimed, apparently astonished to see Erik sitting on the couch, channel surfing. The remote fell to the floor with a clatter, hitting the coffee table on the way down. “You can’t sleep either?”

“No, uh, sorry, just…” Erik started fumbling around for food, for water, awkwardly half-rising from the couch. “I thought you were asleep, I left my mask in my room, I’ll - ”

“I can get it!” Dalir offered - yeah, apparently his version of ‘acting’ was to sound like a chipmunk on steroids and raise his eyebrows to his hairline. It was a good thing Erik wasn’t turning around.
“If you don’t mind.”

There was a beat, then, Erik sat back down on the couch and said, softly. “If you don’t mind.”

Dalir took off - the mask was lying on the bedside table, looking super creepy with the empty eyeholes staring at it. It was lined on the inside - made of stiffer material than Dalir imagined and he studied it. Padding on the right side kept that side of the face looking symmetrical from the outside with the left. Despite the muted ivory tone of the outside, there were some stains on the inside - like sweat stains on a t-shirt, Dalir figured. He did wear it all the time, stood to reason it would wear out like other pieces of clothing. The straps hung limply by, stitched on, so it looked like they could be replaced relatively easily. The lining was also stitched to interior padding, so that could be changed out too.

It was incredibly practical and functional. Once again, Dalir wondered who got him the first one, that cloth one from the photos. Or whether or not Erik changed manufacturers. Or...was it custom? Something he’d had made just for him. Who by?

Those questions would have to go unanswered. Dalir brought the mask back - tapping Erik on the shoulder so he could reach behind and grab it. Erik tied it back on and then got up to retrieve a knife and fork from the island. He’d have to cut his sandwich to eat it; Dalir felt slightly guilty and thought he should have stayed in bed.

But he was out. He was pretending to have insomnia, after all and insomniacs didn’t take a little constitutional from the kitchen to a bedroom, then suddenly feel sleepy. Anyway, Dalir was kind of hungry and the smell of Erik’s dinner drove him to the fridge in search of his own sandwich to heat up.

Either Erik was really serious about not eating in front of other people, or he’d been starving when he got up because the sandwich was reduced to its soggy bread bottom when Dalir got to the couch; the fries were mostly demolished too, which was equal parts sad, astonishing, and repulsive.

Dalir hesitated only slightly before he sat down - on the middle cushion. Erik shifted slightly and tried to cram himself further into the corner of the couch, but there wasn’t anywhere else for him to go.

“You want me to turn up the heat?” he asked, glancing at the thermostat. “I could put on the guest heat. A toasty 65.”

“No, I’m good,” Dalir said, tearing into his sandwich. “You feeling okay?”

“Me?” Erik asked, like there was someone else there. Bedhead suited him - even without his mask on in the eerie glow of the microwave, he’d looked cute with his hair stuck out all over in his long-sleeved shirt and pjs. “I’m okay. I just...got lightheaded. And I went to lie down. I fell asleep, it...never mind.”

Dalir looked at him curiously, but didn’t push. At least not much. “Woke up hungry?”


“Oh,” Dalir replied, nodding knowingly, but he didn’t know anything, not really. A dream about what? The fire? Did he ever dream about the fire? Or whatever he’d done to himself that scared Christine so badly she dialed 9-1-1? Or...something else?

He leaned back against the couch eyes closed, right hand pressing into the mask. “Probably the
holidays. Stress. I’m okay, really. I...um. I know that the insomnia contributed to my last...slip. But I’ll be fine. So you don’t have to stay with me. Up, with me, I mean. Unless you want to be up, obviously you’re allowed to be up. You’re allowed to do whatever you want - ”

His voice faltered when Dalir lay a hand on his leg - not in a sexy way, just in a ‘stop freaking out, Erik’ way. At least, he hoped that was how it came across. He balled his sandwich wrapper up and tossed it onto the coffee table with the remains of Erik’s dinner. “I want to be here.”

Erik sighed, but didn’t take his hand away. “That makes one of us.”

It was such a switch. Where was the guy from earlier who got loopy on half a bottle of wine? Who called him a Luddite with such fond amusement? Who let him snuggle up against him as they weaved their way out of the theatre, laughing?

“Ever consider a vacation?” Dalir asked, not moving his hand. “Like...I’m not saying you have to spend Christmas with your family, but...it could be a break.”

“I don’t get a break,” Erik said automatically. “If I was going to take a vacation, it’d be from my life, not my apartment.”

Boston again - apartment. He sounded exhausted. But not sleepy. Big difference.

“Is your shoulder - ”

“It’s not about that,” Erik interrupted. He lowered his hand and regarded Dalir with a quiet despondency. “It’s not just about that. I don’t expect you to understand - I’m really not trying to be bitchy, I’m really not, it isn’t a criticism. But I don’t...I don’t get a break. Ever. Even when I’m asleep. Want to know what woke me up?”

“I don’t have to - ”

“Five years ago,” Erik said, like he hadn’t heard Dalir at all. “I spent Christmas with the family. My mom’s family. We were having a good time, actually, everyone was there for the fishes - uh...the seven fishes. On Christmas Eve?”

Dalir shrugged. It wasn’t important to the story - Erik’s Italian grandmother made a spread of seven fish dishes and everyone ate after church.

“Anyway, my oldest cousin,” he continued. “Angela, my uncle’s - you know what? Not important. But she’s got two kids, Tom and Tristan. They were little at the time, like...seven, I think, and four. Her husband Billy and I were messing around with the kids, we put them on our shoulders, they were playing chicken, everything was...really normal. But Tommy knocked my mask off - by accident. I put him down and picked it up, but not before Tristan saw. And started crying. And screaming.

“I almost left then, but Angela told me not to, said he’d get over it, that it wasn’t a big deal, he’d forget in ten minutes...and yeah, I went back to the party, everyone acted like nothing was wrong, even Tristan was running around, playing. But then, when Billy and Angela left, they said, to the boys, they said to say good-bye to me. Tommy hadn’t seen anything, so he was fine. Tristan...just looked at me, kind of...confused and says to his mom - ‘But where’d the monster go?’”

Fuck.

“He was...just a little kid,” Dalir said because he couldn’t think of anything else to say.
Erik shook his head, hand rising to cover his eyes again. “I know. I don’t...blame him. But that’s how it always is. I mean, apart from being an addict. On my best days, when...everything’s even keel in the brain and I’ve been really productive at work and my shoulder feels great...all I have to do to have a bad day is go outside. It sucks.”

Dalir was fairly sure Erik hadn’t meant for him to hear that last part, but like he said before, his voice carried. He let his hand fall down to press against the couch between them. The dull glow of the TV - stuck on DVR, frozen on an empty screen since there were no taped series to view - cast a bluish hue on Erik’s hand, which illuminated the mask when he dropped the hand. His fingers brushed Dalir’s and he pulled his hand away immediately. Then he stood up and limped off to lean against the bookshelf, posture hunched, head hanging.

“Even when I’m asleep…” he shook his head. “I don’t even remember what it’s like. Not to...be like this. I don’t remember not having to worry about...the pain. Or...scaring people. That should make it easier, but it doesn’t. I thought, you know, it would be at least kind of fair if...when I was asleep, I dreamed I was...normal, you know? But I don’t.”

“But you said…” Dalir collected his thoughts, trying to make sense of everything Erik told him. “About your mom. She took you to the beach and stuff. You remember that. You said those were your best memories -”

“Oh,” he clarified. “I remember...being at school. I remember being with my mom - fuck, I remember being at Disney World when I was five, but I don’t remember what it felt like doing that with a normal face. I don’t remember what normal felt like. So I can’t even imagine it. You must think that’s pathetic - that it’s pathetic. To be bothered so much.”

“I don’t!” Dalir protested, getting to his feet, intent on doing something. It wasn’t...right. To see Erik in so much pain. He wanted to do something, to take it away. But he didn’t know what to say. Because he didn’t understand, he could never understand. But he wanted to help. Even if he couldn’t understand the source of his pain, maybe he could ease it. 

Erik’s posture was slouched, Dalir had gotten so close, too close, maybe, but their mouths were very near one another’s and the time seemed right.

Dalir rose up, just a little. Eyes fixed on Erik’s mouth, his slightly chapped lips and he leaned closer still -

Only for Erik to tilt his head back and straighten up. He was just too tall for Dalir to reach without his having to bend a little.

“What are you doing?” he asked, not angrily. Just...confused. Like he honestly had no idea.

“Uh…” Dalir began, but didn’t know how to end. “I...I don’t know.”

Such a lie. He did know, had known forever it seemed. He just hadn’t done anything about it. He just wanted to give him something that wouldn’t hurt.

“Okay,” Erik said slowly, adopting a posture that was a little less rigid, but not exactly relaxed. His head came back to where it ordinarily was, but Dalir didn’t try to kiss him again. “Let’s...just forget it. Chalk it up to the...insomnia.”

The latter he said to himself.

“I’m not actually an insomniac,” Dalir blurted out, all in a rush. “I got up because you were up. I wanted to keep you company.”
Erik eyed him warily. “Okay. So...what were you - you know what? Never mind. I don’t want to know. Good night, Dalir.”

He walked away, hands shoved in his pajama pockets, shoulder bunched up stiff and painful looking. His strides were unnaturally long, even if they weren’t even, and Dalir had to practically pounce on him before he got to his bedroom door. He’d started something - even if it wasn’t going anywhere, he’d started something and if the only thing keeping Erik from continuing was...self-loathing or whatever, he had to know.

“All right. Sorry...” Dalir swallowed hard, heart pounding. “Are you mad?”

“No!” Erik exclaimed, slightly too loudly. His mask was gleaming in the TV light, but dimly now.

“So…” Dalir swallowed hard, heart pounding. “You’re not interested?”

Erik stopped, just short of the bedroom door. He put his hands on the doorframe, braced himself.

“Why would you ask me that?” he asked him, sounding...heartbroken. Like if he kept talking he’d actually cry. “Why would you...that’s not...that isn’t fair. None of this is fair. These things are not...for me.”

“What’s not?” Dalir asked, worried. Shit, he hadn’t meant to make the guy fall to pieces. He thought...maybe wishful thinking, but he thought he’d felt something mutual. A spark. Something real. He’d thought the time was right. “I mean, if you’re not - ”

“Why I want,” Erik said tightly, “is immaterial. It’s about what I can have. And I can’t have you.”

“Why not?” Dalir asked simply. A cautious hand lay against Erik’s left shoulder - the good shoulder. “Is...because if you’re not interested, that’s cool. But I am. Interested, I mean.”

Erik turned around, eyes scanning every inch of Dalir’s face, afraid and...something else. Something Dalir hoped he saw that wasn’t wishful thinking - want. Not desire, necessarily. But want. Like a man who had been in the desert suddenly spotting a well.

“Why?” he managed to choke out. “How? You know everything about me? Even if you haven’t seen me...how can you want me? Everything is wrong with me!”

“Because…” Dalir wasn’t second-guessing his thoughts, his feelings, he was trying to gather his thoughts so he didn’t sound like an idiot, but Erik would think any pause was regret, so he just blurted out the first thing that came to me. “Because I know you. And...I like you. Can’t it be that simple?”

Erik wouldn’t bend down. But he wasn’t pulling away anymore. Dalir slowly raised his hands. He didn’t move. He lay his hands on his shoulders - slowly, deliberately. First the left. Then the right. He tugged, gently. Erik’s back bent, only a little, but it was enough.

The mask was cold where it pressed against his nose and cheek. But Erik’s lips were warm.
Warning: for masturbation and panic attacks, I wanted this encounter to go very differently, but things can't really move swiftly with these two - still, it's a start!

Don't overthink it.

If he just kept his mind blank, he could do this.

Don't overthink it.

So long as he didn't ask too many questions - of Dalir, or himself.

Don't overthink it.

Just concentrate on sensation, Erik told himself. Just concentrate on how good his mouth feels on yours. How good his body feels pressed against yours. And concentrate on staying on your feet.

Dalir had pushed him away from the door and they were stumbling toward Dalir's bedroom instead - Erik stumbling significantly more than Dalir, since he wasn't wearing his shoes.

Does he have some kind of amputee fetish?

Damn it, no! Erik wasn't sure how this had happened, the point was that it was happening. Stay in the present. Don't get in your head. Your head is an awful place to be.

Maybe I'm still dreaming. Maybe I never woke up. If this is a dream, I can do whatever the hell I want.

His hands found Dalir's hair, every bit as thick and smooth as he imagined it would be. His left hand ghosted down Dalir's neck, to the taut muscles of his shoulders and Dalir's arms tightened on his back, fingers fistping in his shirt. Dalir tilted his neck, presumably to keep the edge of the mask from pressing into his cheek -

Stop, stop, stop, don't think about it, don't think about it, it's a dream, remember? So it doesn't matter...

But it was not a dream. The edge of the mattress bumping the back of his legs would not have happened in a dream. They would have just found themselves on the bed, by magic, a perfect fit. Without any graceless fumbling and toppling over.

Erik went down first, losing his balance. He might have just sat on the bed (if they were in some kind of romantic comedy version of their lives, Dalir would have ended up in his lap and they could have kept kissing without any interruption), but Dalir kind of had his arms locked around Erik's waist and Erik didn't let go of him as he fell over. Erik was heavier than him, and he threw Dalir off balance such that Erik wound up flat on his back with Dalir's full weight on his chest and stomach, knocking some of the wind out of him. He must have made a distressed 'Oof,' against Dalir's mouth, because he pulled away, shimming his trapped arms from under Erik's back and
shifted his weight onto his elbows.

The loss of contact was jarring, but Dalir cocking his head and asking, "You okay?" was even more so.

Not a dream. And all the thoughts, the questions, the panic Erik had been battering away came rushing back.

"Yeah," he said breathlessly. Dalir hadn't gotten off him, he was still effectively trapped, but he could breathe. Rapidly. And not a sexy kind of rapid, but a verge-of-tears kind of rapid. Which was off-putting, he knew from experience. Nothing less likely to end a potential tryst than having a panic attack in bed.

Erik closed his eyes and tried to regulate his breathing. In, one-two-three...Hold, one-two-three...Out, one-two-three... but it was too late. Dalir was sitting up, shifting onto the bed next to him, looking down at him with concern and Erik just shut his eyes again. "Sorry."

"For what?" Dalir asked. "You okay? You want me to get you...water or something?"

Wordlessly, Erik sat up and shook his head. God, what a loser. Pathetic. Just like he said before.

Only Dalir didn't think he was pathetic then and apparently didn't think he was pathetic now. He let his hand hover over Erik's arm and, when Erik just sat there, staring at the floor, let his fingers rest on his forearm. "You need a minute?"

How was he so nice? Erik had been around therapists and hospital staff for much of his life, people who were basically hired based on skill and empathy and he'd never met anyone like Dalir. Probably why he liked him so much. Probably why he'd been able to let things get this far before he started to panic.

There was one difference between Dalir and Alexis. Dalir noticed something wasn't right. Dalir pulled back. Dalir asked if he was okay. After the first time Erik had a freak-out when they were getting intimate, Alexis just kept going and eventually Erik would work through it, or work around it. At the time he thought it was for the best that way, not giving him an out to let the worry take over. Now he knew better; Alexis wouldn't have been about to get through the encounter if he paused. If he stopped to really think about the thing he was letting sleep in his bed.

"Look," Erik said to the floor. "If we're going to...do this, there's some stuff you should probably know."

Dalir went very still next to him, Erik felt his fingers stiffen on his arm and heard him audibly swallow before he gamely replied, "Okay. Go ahead."

"I'm not taking my mask off," Erik said, head still ducked down, refusing to look Dalir in the eye - or look at any part of Dalir, really. The pressure on his arm was enough to let him know he was still there, listening. At least for now. "And...I'm not...sleeping here. After. I'll just...get up and go. And I want the lights off. Which...they're already off, moot point, but if we...continue. I know, I know, I'm making a lot of presumptions, I don't know if you even want to, or if you've come to your senses. And, okay, this is really embarrassing, but I've got anxiety. Like...next time I get like this, actually, don't ask questions or let me talk. Just...keep going, but know that sometimes I can't...finish or...I get in my head and..."

He trailed off with a frustrated groan and only then shook Dalir's hand off so he could balance his elbows on his knees and bury his face in his hands. This wasn't going to work. For the split-second
between the hallway and the bedroom, he thought maybe, but there was no way. At least he had something Alexis wanted. Dalir didn't care about music. Dalir didn't care about theatre. He didn't have anything to give him that he wanted, so what was keeping him here?

Dalir was shifting, getting off the bed, Erik thought, but actually he was just coming behind him, kneading his shoulders like he was a boxer facing a big bout. "This okay for your shoulder?"

"...yeah," Erik said into his hands. What was he doing? Giving a good-bye massage?

"Great," Dalir said easily. His chin was on Erik's head and he leaned forward, chest against his back. "So...um. I don't want you to think...I didn't bring you in here thinking we'd...y'know. Like. Get it on."

Erik's heart sank at the same time that his temper flared. So what the hell was that? A pity kiss? A series of pity-kisses? Why are you letting me make a fool out of myself?

"Not that I wouldn't!" Dalir said abruptly, too loudly, in Erik's ear. "But...we don't have to. Tonight. I just figured this would be more comfortable. You know? Since...um. You're really tall. So I thought, if we were lying down and the couch isn't big enough for both of us, so...yeah. I didn't mean for you to get freaked out."

Okay. Not a good-bye massage. The kneading of his shoulders cut off abruptly and Dalir leaned against him more closely, wrapping his arms loosely around his neck. "I actually was going to...I didn't mean to...get all up in you tonight. I was going to talk to your dad. Tell him that I couldn't work for you guys anymore. Since it didn't seem right for me to have feelings for my client. Like, I don't want you to be my client anymore, I want you to be...something else. Something more."

"Like, your boyfriend?" Erik asked, and hated himself for that. He sounded like he was twelve-years-old. Pathetic.

But Dalir chuckled - not a mocking sort of laugh at all, but an appreciative one. Like he was happy Erik was the one to say it. "Yeah. Like my boyfriend. If you...want."

Erik tilted his head back and Dalir sat down on the bed, letting Erik use him as a backrest. Crazy. Really. How they hadn't touched all that much, but this felt...right. Comfortable. All the panic gone - the threat that it would start up again came with the thought that Dalir might let go of him. It almost made Erik rethink his 'I'm sleeping in my own bed,' policy. Almost. But he was determined not to repeat past mistakes. Alexis had gone into the relationship knowing what he looked like. Dalir did not and he was desperate to keep it that way. Even if what Dalir thought he wanted was...a lie, it was an acceptable lie. It was the best, the absolute best Erik could ever hope for.

"I do," he admitted quietly, bringing up a hand, curving his fingers around Dalir's wrist. "I just...don't know why you do."

"I told you - "

"Yeah, you like me," Erik shook his head wonderingly. "I still don't understand why."

Long ago, he'd resigned himself to being alone for the rest of his life. When his best friend in middle school, Darren Wong, managed to wheedle out the fact that Erik wasn't interested in girls and, according to their Y2K mindset, that if he wasn't interested in girls he had to be interested in boys (which was true in Erik's case, but by the time they got to high school, they realized that was not a universal fact), he immediately started listing off likely matches at their school. But Erik cut him off.
Can you, like, stop? he remembered the conversation plain as day. They were in Darren's living room, Erik was getting his ass kicked at Soulcalibur and a conversation about Ivy's relative hotness devolved into a Serious Conversation about Erik's sexuality. Well, as serious as two eighth-graders could get, anyway. Because I'm not going to date anyone.

My mom said no girlfriends 'til I'm eighteen, Darren lamented, flipping his bangs out of his eyes (he'd had an awful bowl cut until he was fifteen, probably his mother's version of a chastity belt). So I get it.

No, I mean, like...ever, Erik said. And when Darren stared at him blankly, pointed at the mask. Then a light went on in Darren's eyes and he nodded, slowly. They went back to playing. Erik proceeded to continue to get his ass kicked. And that was the last time Darren brought up the idea of Erik dating.

And that was before. Before the surgery. Before the drugs. Dalir knew about all of it. And here he was, letting Erik use him as a pillow, holding him in his arms like he wanted him to be there. He'd asked, a few short minutes ago whether the 'why' mattered. It did. It had to. Because it didn't make sense from Erik's perspective. He disliked himself so thoroughly that he couldn't understand how anyone else could have a favorable opinion of him.

Dalir snorted a laugh over Erik's head, causing him to look up - the eyeholes of the mask cut off some of his vision, but he saw Dalir was smiling. He didn't know whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"Man, you have no idea," Dalir shook his head, "how weird it is for you to ask me that. I feel like I should be asking you that. Well, then again, I don't know if you're actually into me, you never said - "

Erik pulled away from him, sitting bolt upright and turning, staring at Dalir incredulously. "Are you kidding me?"

Dalir's smile went lop-sided and he shrugged. "Kinda. But really, you're insanely...smart and talented and nice and funny...and yeah, you've got some problems, I know, but..."

He trailed off and shrugged again, helplessly. "If it makes you feel better, I tried really hard not to like you. Not because of your...stuff. But because I didn't want to take advantage. If you didn't feel the same way. Which...I guess it's fair for me to ask - do you?"

This time it was Erik's turn to laugh though his was more of a half-hysterical giggle rather than a good natured chuckle and he quieted himself immediately, lest it put Dalir off more than Dalir was presumably already put off. Did he like him? Had Dalir ever looked at himself? In the first place, he was gorgeous and in the second he was kind. He was compassionate and patient and generous.

Probably best not to lead with 'gorgeous.' Lest he remind Dalir of all he didn't know about Erik. What he couldn't know, or the whole thing would fall apart.

Just like with Darren. They'd been friends since they were ten - for twenty years now - and he'd never seen him. It worked better that way, this he knew from experience. It allowed them to forget. Friends became so accustomed to the mask that they forgot it was covering anything up. People who saw, they never forgot. And even if they stuck around, after, something changed in their perception of him. Either he was a poor, broken thing in their eyes or...a monster. Like Tristan said. Not, a bad monster, necessarily, not in his words or his actions, but the mask became both protection and threat. If it slipped, if he was careless, then they'd see. And they'd be frightened.
So don't bring it up. Appearance. Just let Dalir forget; if Erik was careful enough and lucky enough, he'd never have to know.

"Of course I do," Erik replied finally, lest Dalir read the wrong thing into his silence. "You're...remarkable. You're nice. And funny."

"That's my line."

"And, as we both know," Erik continued, rolling his eyes self-consciously. "An incredible listener. To long, rambling stories about horrible things that I've done. And you don't respond with pity or bad advice or...disgust. You're so good. I've never met anyone like you. Ever."

Dalir's smile broadened and he gave Erik the sweetest look imaginable. God, he was beautiful. Smooth skin, those bright green eyes, that friendly, open expression. Erik told him, weeks ago, that Alexis wasn't actually his type...the arrogant, artist stereotype, never actually did anything for him. Dalir, though? The athlete's build, the tolerance for awful reality shows, the fact that he called his parents once a week, even his predilection for wearing gym shorts in all weather? Ticked every box of 'Erik's type.' Jock with a heart of gold. "Same. There you go, I guess we're on the same page."

Oh, they weren't. Not by a long shot. But they were still on the same bed. Which counted for something.

This time it was Erik who reached for Dalir. Briefly, Dalir smiled against his mouth, but they managed to get back to something like what they'd been doing before - less desperate this time, a sweet meeting of mouths and tongues. Their clothes stayed on. Erik's heartrate stayed steady and there wasn't any trembling, any tears. No panic. They went slow, Dalir neither showing signs that he was impatient to get more out of this, nor willing to push for something Erik wasn't able to give. Not even when they drew very close and Erik felt Dalir's hardness press against his hip and he started to spiral again.

Oh, shit, I'm not hard, he's going to think I'm forcing myself to do this, he's going to think I don't want him, that he's doing something wrong, he's going to -

But Dalir felt him tense and drew back far enough to say, "Don't worry about it, I'm good - I can get myself off. Will that bother you?"

Silently, but gratefully, Erik shook his head.

"Just chill out - relax," Dalir said soothingly. "Just relax."

He spent himself into his own hand, cleaned up with some Kleenex from his bedside table. The blankets were all rucked up at the bottom of the bed, and Dalir pulled them up, leaving open an inviting place beside him. With a joking tone, he asked Erik if he wanted to get in next to him.

"You didn't put on the guest heat," he reminded him.

It looked so inviting, that place beside Dalir...but there was too much that could go wrong. The mask, for instance. Sleeping in it was an actively terrible idea, for a host of reason - rubbing causing lesions, lesions getting infected, infections making his face worse - but the big fear was that it could fall off. And they'd be done before they'd even gotten started.

Erik shook his head again, regretfully, and gingerly got off the bed - he was half-hard himself, but wasn't going to do anything about it, not with Dalir beside him, it would be...too much. Despite his patience and understanding. Erik sucked at getting out of his own way. "I've got flannel sheets," he replied. "I'll be okay. Thanks for...being so understanding. And...just, thanks."
The smile faded a little - turning sad. Just around the eyes. Erik limped for the door before he read too much into it, before he worried himself to fits and wound up knocking on Dalir's door in an hour, unable to sleep, unable to turn his thoughts off and come asking endlessly if Dalir was really as comfortable with this with him as he claimed to be. He left before he could ruin in.

"Good-night, Erik," Dalir called from the bed. "Get some sleep, okay?"

Erik turned back, hand on the doorframe. He swallowed hard. Dalir was still sitting up. The covers were turned down, it would be so easy -

No. No, it was impossible. Just impossible.

"Sure," he replied, shutting the door as he left. "Good-night, Dalir."
This chapter is mostly here to move the plot along, not a lot of relationship stuff - not even smooches! But now I'm at a crossroads - do I chronicle the Mantova Christmas party/Nouri winter break shindig? Or do I skip the holidays and get back to the lovin’?

Dalir woke up before Erik the next morning, as usual, and almost went straight to Mr. Carriere’s office first thing to give notice. He’d even put his jacket on when he realized what Erik might - scratch that, would - think if he got up and Dalir was gone. That he’d made a mistake and was trying to sneak out. That he regretted what passed between them. That he couldn’t handle it.

And...okay. To be 100% honest, yeah, he’d never had a partner have a panic attack in bed before. That was new. But not insurmountable. Though Erik’s, ‘Keep calm and do the deed while I hyperventilate beside you’ advice was bizarre. And probably not recommended by his therapist. Anyway, it was advice Dalir had no intention of following, though he’d honor his other requests...to a point.

The parts of last night that weren’t accompanied by Erik freaking out were nice, though. Dalir took his jacket off and smiled at the memory - the guy might have been a twenty-nine year old virgin, but he could kiss. The mask was a slight impediment, but not that bad. It would take some getting used to, since the nose of it didn’t bend like a normal nose so Dalir’s just wound up getting smushed, making breathing tricky.

Of course, Erik doesn’t have that problem, Dalir thought with a slight wince. Granted, he’d done a great job of looking at him (from a small distance, in bad lighting) without losing his lust, but...kissing was something else. Maybe it was for the best that the mask stay on, in the short-term. Anyway, Erik wanted it that way.

And speaking of Erik, out he came, bedhead and all, pajamas lying low on his hips, the pale skin of his stomach visible for just a second as he stretched a kink out of his back on his way into the kitchen.

Dalir wished he’d spent the night in his bed. Like, just sleeping there. It had been so long since he’d spent the night with anyone, he’d forgotten how much he liked having a warm body breathing beside him. And Erik had one hell of a body, solid and strong beside him. Briefly under him which...yeah, that was hot. But he meant what he said, he was willing to go at Erik’s pace, do whatever made him comfortable. He just hoped he was still comfortable, in the light of day.

“Morning,” Dalir said brightly. Hey, maybe he was getting a little more comfortable. As he shuffled toward the cabinet to pour himself a bowl of Bran Flakes, he noticed Erik wasn’t wearing his shoes. Progress!

“Hey,” Erik said, taking a breath. He eyed Dalir up and down, looking a little apprehensive. “You’re...really going through with it. Telling my Dad you...can’t work for him anymore.”

“Yeah,” Dalir nodded, assured, if not overly confident. He didn’t anticipate the conversation was going to go well, Mr. Carriere was nothing if not overprotective, but he also couldn’t see himself
backing out or carrying on as if nothing happened. He was in too deep for that. “It wouldn’t be right. Taking his money, now.”

Erik’s Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat as he swallowed, putting the cereal down on the counter. “I guess not - um. So. You’re sure. Even...even after last night?”

“Uh, I’d say especially after last night,” Dalir smiled and he noticed Erik’s lips twitch upward, indicating that it hadn’t exactly been awful for him. “I’m sure if you’re sure.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Erik replied immediately, then ducked his head, looking embarrassed to be so eager. “Just...ah...so. My Dad. I told you he doesn’t like the concept of me dating.”

Dalir confirmed that Erik had mentioned that once or twice. But apparently, it went slightly beyond that. Apparently, every person who forged a friendship with Erik - platonic or not - who wasn’t personally vetted by Gerard Carriere, was viewed with suspicion.

“After I went back to school, I was invited to a party for this kid Darren Wong,” Erik informed him. It was an arts-intensive private school, he and Darren both played violin and struck up a tentative friendship. The party was at one of those indoor arcades/playgrounds that Dalir loved when he was little and viewed with dread now that he was an adult - they were loud, expensive, and probably crawling with germs.

“So, I have the invitation, I give it to my dad so he can RSVP,” Erik continued. Looking back, he probably came across as too hyped about the party, which sent his Dad’s hackles up - the more he was looking forward to something, the more crushed he’d been when he realized it was just as set-up. “Well, that’s dad’s thinking - I don’t know, apparently he imagined that once I turned up they’d chain me to the climbing wall, steal my mask and throw pizza at me. Like Quasimodo or something. So he says no, he doesn’t think it’s a good idea. I don’t really know these kids, blah, blah, blah.”

Evidently it took a personal phone call from Mrs. Wong, asking why Mr. Carriere hadn’t RSVP’d (they needed a head count for the pizza, presumably to work out what slices would be used to feed kids, versus what slices would be used to pelt Erik) to convince him the whole thing wasn’t a wicked plot.

“Did he let you go to the party?” Dalir asked, wrinkling his brow.

“No,” Erik shook his head. “He still thought I’d have a terrible time. But eventually he warmed up to Darren...I think it took him a few years, but he came around.”

Then Erik smiled like this was some cute quirk his dad exhibited; Dalir didn’t return it.

“All I’m saying,” Erik continued, shrugging helplessly, “is he might...get a little...riled. So maybe...don’t tell him about last night. Is my advice. Which obviously you don’t have to take.”

“No, no, noted,” Dalir said uneasily. He knew how this looked, from the outside - honestly, like a crappy Lifetime movie where...like, a professional horseback rider broke a leg and fell for the kindly, but studly ranch hand who was...um. Doing whatever ranch hands did. Actually, he might have been merging Lifetime movies and Nicholas Sparks novels. Whatever, the point was that while employer/employee relationships seemed fine on paper (or in film), from Mr. Carriere’s perspective, Dalir probably looked like he was taking advantage of his son.

With a promise that he’d be thoughtful and spare Dad the gory details, Dalir drove to the theatre. He caught Mr. Carriere at a good time, he had a minute to sit and chat, though he immediately
assumed something was wrong with Erik, for Dalir to come see him at work. He relaxed and seemed quite at ease when Dalir assured him that, from a sobriety standpoint, Erik was doing great. So great, in fact, that his services as a companion were likely no longer required.

Mr. Carriere took that all in stride, nodding his head, saying that he appreciated everything Dalir had done for his son, that he enjoyed knowing him and wished him luck in future endeavors.

"Thanks," Dalir said, taking a quick breath to steady himself; this was the hard part. "I do...I do want to offer to refund you this month’s salary. Since I’m...not going to be your employee and I’ll be leaving soon to go back to Michigan."

"Oh, don’t worry about that," Mr. Carriere waved a hand like he was clearing the air. "You already gave me plenty of lead time for the holiday, I figured Erik could just stay at my place, if he needed to. As far as I’m concerned, we’re square."

Yeah, but I spent most of this month making cow eyes at him and then last night we made out for, like, an hour, Dalir thought, but didn’t say. Instead he cleared his throat and said, "There are...some issues that came up that I think might have clouded my judgement this month."

Mr. Carriere had been leaned back in his chair, unconsciously moving from side to side, but he stopped. Both feet hit the floor. He looked suddenly pale. ‘What issues?"

Dalir didn’t answer immediately; he was trying to be delicate, trying to keep his promise to Erik that he wouldn’t tell Dad too much and freak him out, but that only made Mr. Carriere assume the worst.

“Did you get him pills?” Mr. Carriere’s expression changed immediately from his usual look of flustered chagrin into...well, Dalir didn't read a lot these days, but when he was on the force, he did have a taste for thrillers. 'Cold, deadly intent,' seemed like an apt description. “Anything stronger than an NSAID he can’t take. You knew that going into this, that’s where it started - ”

"No!" Dalir exclaimed, insulted. "God, no, of course not! No, Erik's been clean and sober the whole time I've been there, I'd never compromise his sobriety."

"He's done it before," Mr. Carriere said warningly, hands resting on his desk like he was barely restraining himself from leaping across and throttling the truth out of Dalir. His broad shoulders were bunched beneath his suit jacket and Dalir found himself altering his original assessment. Mr. Carriere did not cut an intimidating figure in his youth. He was plenty intimidating right now. "In high school. And more recently with...someone else. Frankly, it wouldn't surprise me. And...look, if he's backsliding, I want to know now before it gets out of hand again."

"He's not," Dalir said firmly. "There are no drugs in the apartment that I've been able to find. He took Advil once. For his shoulder."

Mr. Carriere relaxed slightly, settling down in his chair, looking a little less like a lion about to pounce. "Good. Well, it probably didn't do him much good, but...you said issues have come up. What issues?"
were different from adult's. That his body might have a different reaction this time. Everyone
darkly chuckled at that.

Dalir hadn't known what made Erik start using again - he knew that Alexis had been his happy
dealer, but he didn't know that Erik started with pills prescribed by his doctor. It seemed, when he
first got on the job, like it was an act of extreme negligence, but it happened all the time. That
helped boost his confidence in Erik's continued sobriety: he had no upcoming surgery dates. He
could have presented Mr. Carriere with the plain fact that Erik was functioning well, had
established healthy routines and didn't need him anymore.

But it wouldn't be the truth, would it? And Mr. Carriere wasn't an idiot; if Dalir stuck around
beyond the terms of their contract, he'd want to know why. If they really started a relationship, he'd
figure it out eventually. The question that plagued Dalir was this: Was it better for Mr. Carriere to
know up front that Dalir developed feelings for his son, that those feelings were mutual and it
started when he was engaged as a sober companion? Or should he say nothing and hope against
hope that Mr. Carriere assumed the relationships started weeks or months after they parted ways
professionally.

"Look, I'm going to be honest with you," Dalir said, locking eyes with Mr. Carriere. Since they
looked so much like Erik's eyes, that should make the conversation easier...should. But it didn't.
"I...care about Erik. A lot. More than...a professional companion should. I have every confidence
that he'll be able to maintain his own sobriety going forward, sticking with his current self-care
regimen - but I can't bee responsible for overseeing him. Because I'm too close. I've allowed myself
to get too close, emotionally."

Rather a clinical assessment, to be sure, but definitely better than, 'I've got a crush on your son,'
which sounded awfully juvenile, or, 'I want to have sex with your son,' which sounded crude and
wasn't Dalir's consuming goal. I'm in love with your son...' closer. But probably not going to play
well with Mr. Carriere.

Clinical didn't seem to be playing well either. Mr. Carriere was frowning at him, but didn't seem to
understand.

"I don't get it," he said flatly. "You care about him, so you couldn’t do your job? Shouldn't
that...help you do your job?"

*Not if I don't want him to look at me with that distant, sad puppy expression he gets. You probably
know the one I mean.*

Dalir cleared his throat awkwardly and shifted in his seat. Mr Carriere wasn't one of those weirdos
who insisted that people sitting in his office be in ridiculously tiny chairs so that he towered over
him, but he still felt about two inches tall, on the receiving end of Mr. Carriere's penetrating stare.

"I mean...obviously, some investment in a client's life is optimal," Dalir replied, like he was
quoting a manual. "But what I feel for your son goes beyond...general empathy. I want to...continue
to be in his life, personally, not professionally. Indefinitely."

Mr. Carriere stiffened, then got up out of his chair. Dalir wasn't sure what he was going to do and it
looked like Mr. Carriere wasn't either. He just started pacing behind his desk, finally stopping and
staring out a window at the cloudy sky beyond.

"I don't know..." he started, took a deep steadying breath, then continued, "I don't know what Erik's
told you about...his past. When he was younger. Or even how much he told you about this past
year - "
"Some," Dalir replied. He stayed seated, not wanting to turn a conversation into a confrontation. "I know he...well. He told me about Alexis."

Mr. Carriere whirled around, looking absolutely furious, but this time Dalir had a sense that the emotion wasn't directed at him. "Then you know he...he doesn't have good judgement. When it comes to people. Erik's...remarkable in a lot of ways, but he's also...stunted. Emotionally. How could he not be? He didn't do the ordinary teenage stuff, dating and all that. When other kids were off getting their first cars and their first jobs, Erik was in rehab. The first time."

"I'm aware of that," Dalir said, feeling a flare of indignation on Erik's behalf - the sort of thing that made him a bad sober companion, but possibly a good friend. "But I think you need to give him some credit. Lots of people make poor choices in partners at some point in their lives. For many different reasons."

"Yeah, well," Mr. Carriere said, his professional calm slipping. "Lots of people also don't wind up with assholes who buy them heroin and treat them like shit. Do you understand that? Erik...he latches on to people, gets invested in people easily. And they're not always people who have his best interests at heart. He gets used."

"I wouldn't do that," Dalir said at once, trying not to feel defensive. He knew Mr. Carriere loved his son, was protective of him. But didn't he also bear some responsibility for the person Erik was today? Keeping him home, away from other people, only taking pictures of the back of his head? How had that contributed to the development of a healthy adult with normal ideas of attachment?

"Maybe you wouldn't mean to," Mr. Carriere shot back, unconvinced. "But...all Alexis had to do was express interest and Erik was all over him. You've been living with him. Paying attention to him. Did Erik tell you he...has feelings for you?"

Eventually, Dalir thought. He seemed pretty enthusiastic, before he got in his head about it.

But he said none of this and only nodded.

Mr. Carriere shook his head and folded his arms. "Don't trust that, he doesn't - he doesn't necessarily know what he wants, or...what's best for him. Look...Dalir, I think you're a nice guy. I think you're trying to be a good guy, coming to me like this - I'm not going to ask you to give me my money back. Erik hasn't been using. You've done your job. But...look, you're going away for a while, right? Out of state?"

"Back to Michigan, yeah," Dalir said, throat a little dry.

"Good," Mr. Carriere nodded decisively. "I think...I think some distance will be good. For you both. Give you some...perspective. Okay?"

Mr. Carriere didn't move to shake his hand, he didn't try to usher him out of the office, but Dalir had a pretty good idea that this meeting was over. He got up and put his coat on, tucking his hands in his pockets. He made for the door, but Mr. Carriere stopped him with a question.

"You haven't seen what he looks like. Have you?"

Dalir paused on the threshold, one hand on the door handle. Actually, yes. Only he doesn't know that. You're a terrible cameraman.

"He hasn't taken the mask off in front of me," Dalir said honestly, over his shoulder. He certainly wasn't going to tell him the whole truth, not if there was a chance of it getting back to Erik.
Mr. Carriere grimaced. "I didn't think so. Yeah. Some distance will...be helpful for you both."
I could not resist family holiday shenanigans - so much so that I had to split this into two halves. This is the cheerful half, the next part...not so much.

“I can’t believe you *fucked* your client!”

Dalir's sister Shirin was a picture of righteous fury - righteous fury with a fresh blow-out and perfectly threaded eyebrows, which somehow made her look more intimidating, not less.

“I did *not* and could you possibly be any louder? There are kids in the house!”

“They’re *my* kids,” Shirin pointed out with a huff. “So if I want them to hear swearing, they can hear swearing. This could be an object lesson - come on in kids! Let’s learn about ethics!”

Dalir hadn’t even intended to *tell* Shirin about Erik, but his mom asked about work and Dalir said he was wrapping up with his current client and would be seeking new employment after the holidays.

His mom sighed and said that she hoped his new client wouldn’t be too far away - apparently two hours in a plane, plus twenty minutes by cab was as great a distance as Sima Nouri could stand to be parted from her only son. Dalir made the mistake of saying that he was going to try to find a job close to his current location.

That satisfied his parents. Not so much Shirin. She followed him around the house, pestering him with questions.

“So, you’re going to try to find another client in the area? How much control do you realistically have over that? Can you really dictate your location? Or is it that you’re ideally located - surrounded by economically depressed mill towns does that, but I’m sure you’d be just as much in demand in Detroit. Though there aren’t going to be as many pill-popping professors’ wives or their revolving rehab trust fund babies.”

Shirin thought his job was stupid - more than that, she thought his job was bourgeois - she was an immigration lawyer whose firm did a lot of pro bono work. Often, she lamented the multitude of inequalities in the country, not least of which the way drug offenders were treated by the courts.

“How long have you been at this, Dalir?”

“Three years.”

“Mmm. How many non-white clients?”

“One.”

“Mmm.”

In short: Upper-middle class white addicts got rehab, support groups, and sober companions.
Brown addicts got mandatory minimums. To Dalir, that meant the system needed to change, not his job - he was helping people, even if it was generally a certain kind of people. In Shirin’s eyes, he was profiting off of systemic inequality.

Dalir often wanted to tell her to check his bank account if she thought he was profiting. But that would start a fight and it seemed beyond petty to get into a fight with his sister at Christmas. Even if they weren’t actually celebrating Christmas.

But apparently she had just enough respect for his job to go to pieces over the fact that he made out with his client. Or, as she insisted in ever-more shrill tones, fucked his client.

“Oh! Oh! Let me guess!” she exclaimed, her hand shooting into the air like she was an elementary schooler who desperately needed the bathroom. “You’re going to keep living with him? In his swanky-ass apartment that he pays for with daddy’s money?”

“He pays for it with his own money,” Dalir gritted out, back teeth clenched. God, he wished he’d never heeded his mother’s advice to ‘call his sister.’ The last time they talked, he’d been more clueless about Erik’s life and past than he was now. “He’s a successful musician.”

Pfft, was all the reply Shirin made.

“At least you had the decency to quit,” she said, when it was clear Dalir wasn’t going to take the bait and give her more information without wheedling. “Because I can imagine the lines got damn blurry when he started treating you. You - oh, I’m sure you know this because of your work and all, but you know addicts are manipulative, right? Nice digs, fancy clothes - did he buy you anything? New coat, maybe? You know, for being such a help to him?”

The fact that Erik had offered to buy him a coat, Dalir wisely kept to himself. Even if it wasn’t like that, Shirin wouldn’t care.

“He bought me a coffee,” Dalir said, folding his arms. “Take-out a few times. I also bought him coffee - he owes me gas money. That’s it.”

“Let me guess - square-jawed, American, classic good looks?” she rolled her eyes mightily, sitting down on his bed. She’d followed him into his room when he tried fruitlessly to escape her and closed the door behind her, apparently anticipating making noise, but not wanting a scene. “You are so obvious. Maman and Baba might have thought all those Men’s Fitness magazines you hoarded in high school were aspirational, but I knew better. You played soccer, for fuck’s sake, not exactly the sport of muscled he-men.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dalir retorted, standing over her with folded arms - okay, she had a point about the magazines, but that was it. “So stop talking.”

“Can I see a picture?” she asked suddenly, tone shifting from accusatory to eager. “I’d like to assume he’s something special since you’re seriously bending all codes of acceptable client-social worker -”

“I’m not a social worker.”

“- interactions,” she concluded, not really caring about Dalir’s facts when she had already formed her own opinions.

“He doesn’t like to have his picture taken,” Dalir said, but Shirin already had her phone out.

“I’ll Google him,” she shrugged, proving that some predilections were genetic. “What’s his name?
Eric Corey? Or something? If he’s *that* successful, he’s got to have a website.”

Erik actually did have a website, where clients could contact him for mixing, arranging, playing, whatever they needed. Dalir visited once, briefly, but all he concentrated on were the samples of Erik’s work. The partial list of credits meant nothing to him and there wasn’t anything personal on the website. Certainly not a professional headshot.

“Erik Carriere - with a k,” Dalir said, knowing she wouldn’t find anything. “He doesn’t have a big media presence. And he works under a pen name.”

“Oh, *God*, he sounds like the worst,” Shirin squinted down at the phone, coming up with nothing, predictably. “K-a-r-i-e-r?”

“No - just, fuck it,” Dalir snapped, frustrated. “Fuck it, hold on. He doesn’t like having his picture taken, you’re going to be disappointed.”

Since the restraining order had run its course, Erik had started using Facebook again. Dalir friended him a little while ago and, a few days before they went to see *Cabaret*, Erik accepted the request. His profile was locked down like Fort Knox, ‘E. A. Carriere’ was his username and, predictably, there was no profile image.

Erik had a few pictures uploaded, the most recent a shot of the pumpkins all buckled in to Dalir’s car, which he captioned ‘From a height/weight standpoint, they probably need carseats.’ An Amelia Mantova commented and said, ‘That’s the pot calling the kettle black - weren’t you in a booster seat until sixth grade?’ to which Erik replied, ‘Fourth.’

The next most-recent pictures were taken two years ago and none of them were of Erik. He’d just uploaded snapshots taken on his phone from his most recent trip out to Denver to see his mom. Mostly scenery, but a couple of the pictures featured his mom, Isabella. She was softer in the jaw and had more lines around her eyes than she had in the pictures from the photo album, but Dalir recognized her instantly.

No, in order to find pictures of Erik online, one had to be his Facebook friend and go hunting through pictures he’d been tagged in by other people - that he hadn’t untagged himself from. The most recent was from a year ago and it was really crappy quality. A selfie taken in a very dark bar, the flash hitting Erik’s mask providing most of the illumination.

Erik was ducking down to fit into frame - the picture taker was a young lady with Zooey Deschanel bangs and Facebook identified her as ‘Mia Rosenberg,’ presumably the same Mia whose wedding Erik was blowing off. There was a husky black guy with thick-framed glasses on Erik’s right (Dante Williams, presumably the fiance) and an skinny Asian dude with a man-bun on Erik’s left (Darren Wong of the infamous party). The caption read: ‘Pre-surgery pub craaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaawwl! Don’t worry, Erik, by morning you won’t feel anything!’

It was unlikely to satisfy Shirin’s curiosity, but it was the best Dalir could do.

Shirin took the phone and frowned at the picture. “You could show me one where he isn’t dressed like Jason Voorhees…”

But the frown only deepened as she swiped through the pictures.

“So…” Shirin said slowly, handing the phone back to Dalir. “What’s up with the mask?”

The picture she’d ended on was someone else’s Throwback Thursday - a grainy, blurry high school photo of Erik holding a flute like a baseball bat, while someone else crouched down behind him
holding a cymbal and another kid was posed about to throw something. Must have been wild, to go
to a school entirely populated by band geeks.

“He was burned in a fire when he was little,” Dalir said, shutting off Facebook so he wouldn’t eat
up all of his data plan. “He prefers wearing the mask.”

“What does he look like?” Shirin asked. “It can’t be - ”

“Yeah,” Dalir interrupted her. “It is that bad, so...yeah. It is.”

“O-kay,” she rose from the bed, cocking her head at Dalir. “Whatever. It’s still not ethical. But
mask aside - he is absolutely your type, I was spot-on about that. You always go for the beefcake,
meathead guidos.”

“I don’t,” Dalir countered irritably. “And he’s not. He plays the flute. And - ”

“Is he Italian?” she jumped in, one eyebrow cocked.

Dalir was forced to admit that he was, in fact, half Italian. But he wasn’t a ‘guido.’ And for all of
his sister’s pretensions to living in a genderless, secular, classless society, he thought that was an
awfully loaded term to be throwing around. Specifically regarding her brother’s taste in men.

"Pffft," she snorted dismissively again. They’d been gone long enough that someone was going to
come looking for them eventually (probably one of the kids, they had vague plans to go skating in
the afternoon), so Dalir shooed her out of the bedroom. On the threshold, she turned back, grinning
up at him, so he assumed they were relatively cool now. "If I didn’t disagree with this relationship
on purely professional grounds, I’d say you should just talk about Erik all during dinner and see
how long it takes Hamid to blow his gasket.”

“Yeah, even if you didn’t, I wouldn’t do that,” Dalir informed her. “I prefer to spend my life
pretending Hamid doesn’t exist.”

“I’m sure he could say the same about you,” Shirin said before she made her way down the hall
stairs. “Brother.”

Dalir made a gagging sound and Shirin laughed as she bounded down the stairs. Since Hamid was
literally the human embodiment of the sludge that collected at the bottom of the kitchen sink, Dalir
somewhat bristled at being called ‘brother’ by him. And ever since Hamid “re-discovered” his
faith (read: got hired as a janitor at a local mosque and decided to negate twenty-three years of
horrible life choices by becoming super-religious), everyone was ‘brother and sister.’ Probably so
the idiot didn’t have to bother keeping people’s names straight.

On impulse, despite the fact that his phone hadn’t buzzed, Dalir decided to check for messages.
Nothing. The last text he had was from one of his aunts, asking if Shirin’s kids had any allergies
(why she asked him and not Shirin, he had no idea). Before that, a message from Erik, a smiley face
emoji in response to Dalir telling him he got to his parents’ house okay.

Would it look clingy to send him a text? Intrusive? It wasn’t like they’d established a ‘no-text
during family time’ rule. But Erik hadn’t texted him either.

It was the 24th - Christmas Eve. Erik’s mother had worn him down to the point that he decided
he’d head to Connecticut for the holiday, but he was iffy about just how much time he was going to
spend at the house. Dalir could at least ask how his drive was.

How was seven hours in the car with Dad?
There. Not too pushy. Vaguely commiserate-y. No pressure for Erik to respond right away. Dalir even set his phone on his bed. No reason to take it with him - what if he landed on his ass on the ice and busted it?

“Dayi Dalir!” Yasmin burst into his room and grabbed his hand. “We’re going skating! There’s bumper cars at the ice rink and Mommy and Daddy said if you took me I could go because they don’t want to! You’re going to take me, okay?”

Bumper cars on ice? Yeah, what could go wrong?

“We’ll see, kiddo,” he said. Yasmin bounced around his room like a bunny rabbit. She was wearing one snow boot and a pair of mittens, but was otherwise not dressed for the weather. “Get your coat on, okay? Then we can go.”

“WHOO-HOO!” Yasmin hollered, bounding down the stairs shouting, “HE SAID YES! BUT REZA CAN’T GO BECAUSE HE’S TOO LITTLE, RIGHT?”

On second thought, Dalir doubled back to grab his phone. He should probably keep it on him, just in case Erik needed moral support. The way the afternoon was going, Dalir thought he might. And Erik’s family was way more dysfunctional than his.

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**How was seven hours in the car with Dad?**

Erik was surprised to feel his phone buzz - most of his clients took the holidays as a breather, even if he didn’t take days ‘off’ as such. Despite the fact that he was going out of town for a few days, he still checked his email every few hours, just to make sure he didn’t miss anything important. Nothing but spam, so far, but the text was a surprise.

And it was an even pleasanter surprise to see that it was from Dalir. Actually, ‘pleasant’ was an understatement. Erik spent the last seven hours in a revolving door of panic, thinking that Dalir had decided, after a few Erik-less days, that the relationship wasn’t worth pursuing. He half-expected the text to read, ‘Never coming back, I’ll send for my things.’ Which was absurd, because his car was still there. You couldn’t send for a car.

**Good. How’s Dearborn?**

There. Sent. Nice. Normal conversation. No taglines of ‘Miss me?’ that could be read as coy, but were actually a heartsick plea, You still like me, right? Okay. How about now? How about now? Are you sure? Are you really sure?

His phone buzzed again.

**Cold. We’re taking the kids skating - Yas wants to go on some kind of bumper cars on ice thing. I might be coming back in a body cast.**

Erik smiled and typed back, Are you wearing your puffy coat? That could insulate you from cold and harm.

Buzz. You know it.

“Is that Mom?” Dad asked, glancing over as though he could simultaneously drive and read Erik’s
texts. Best to keep his eyes on the road, it wasn’t snowing, but the streets were still unpleasantly wet and icy. “Tell her we’ll get there in time for church, so everyone can calm down.”

“Not Mom,” Erik said, tucking his phone away in vacant cupholder - he’d tossed his coffee cup at the last rest stop. “You said you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Ah,” Dad said, knuckles tightening on the steering wheel as comprehension dawned. “Okay.”

Dad had, true to form, called immediately after Dalir left his office. He only had two things to say: Number One - That Erik was making a bad decision. And Number Two - That was the last time he was going to mention it.

It was for the best, really. This trip was going to be stressful enough without a seven-hour lead up where his father berated him for having the emotional maturity of a golden retriever and the decision making skills of...well. Of an anxiety-riddled drug addict.

He ought to be grateful, really. Not only was Dad sparing him a lecture, he was willingly foregoing his preferred Christmas plans of eating on the couch in front of the TV to getting a hotel room and subjecting himself to his ex-wife’s family for the weekend. He was due a nomination for sainthood - Saint Gerard, patron saint of exasperated parents of disappointing children.

“Thanks again,” Erik said as they pulled onto the main street of town.

“No problem,” Dad replied, grip relaxing on the steering wheel as last-minute shoppers took their sweet time getting through the intersection. “Your mom called me too - laid on the guilt. ‘Who knows how long Nona can have Christmas?’ ‘Erik couldn’t come last year, but he doesn’t have an excuse this year!’ ‘Everybody wants to see him!’ At least they want to see you. I’m the unwelcome chauffeur.”

“Aunt Amy likes you,” Erik pointed out, but Dad just shook his head and kept his eyes on the road. Mom had given him the same treatment, only she added, ‘Baby, if you won’t do it for Nona or the aunts and uncles do it for me. Please?’ It was the ‘please’ that put him over the edge. He was hard-pressed to deny his Mom anything.

She’d also reassured him that his cousin Mykayla and her family weren’t due down until late on Christmas since they were spending the day with her in-laws. If he came down for church on Christmas Eve, stayed for the fishes, and returned for presents in the morning, he wouldn’t even have to see them.

*That* was what settled him on not making the journey at all, originally. Despite his mother’s reassurances that she, his grandmother, and her siblings and their spouses all wanted to see him, he’d been told, quite unequivocally, that there was one contingency of the family who did *not*.

Last year had been a no-go for Christmas. Erik had just had the surgery, sitting up like that in the car was going to be more trouble than it was worth while he was recovering, so he sent his regrets. Everyone had known, so he got a bunch of Christmas/get-well cards and brown boxes delivered to the lobby of his building in lieu of wrapped gifts. It was nice, he reflected, that they sent him things, even though he only saw his mother's family, at most, once or twice a year. They were nice people. Thoughtful.

They even called him when he was in rehab - sent emails, texts, general well-wishes. More than a lot of other people got, people who had already used up all their family's patience and good will in the throes of addiction, or people who kept their demons well-hidden and didn't want anyone to know where they were. Some people were in-between; their families cared and wished them well,
but didn't know what to say or how to say it. So they said nothing. Pretended they ceased to exist while they were in treatment.

The Mantovas weren't like that. Even when they didn't know what to say, they insisted on talking. So when Erik got an email from his cousin's husband, he was only a little bit surprised. Colin and Mykayla joined an evangelical church shortly before their wedding, and generally didn't have much to say to him. Not necessarily out of malice, they just didn’t have much in common. When he opened the email, he expected platitudes and possibly Bible verses. Reassurances that they were praying for him.

And they did. Say they were praying for him. That they wished him the best. That they urged him to 'get right' with God. And that they requested, please, that he stay away from them and their family until he was willing to open himself up to God's grace. They'd just had a baby. Before that, they said, they could tolerate his vices. But now, little Judah had to be protected. Erik wasn't living a righteous life. They understood - many in their church overcame addiction, but only with God's help. And if God was going to help, Erik had to turn away from sin. Until then, they asked that he keep his distance.

That seemed to be all there was to say. Erik concluded that it would be rude to go when he wasn’t wanted. Except that his mother assured him that he was wanted. And enlisted various other family members to text or call to confirm the fact - and reassure him that Colin and Kayla weren’t coming until late.

Even his therapist urged him to go.

“But aren’t boundaries important?” Erik pressed, trying to throw some of David’s own logic back at him.

“People can only establish boundaries for themselves,” he replied. “Your cousins can tell you that they’d prefer not to interact with you, but they can’t make that call for the rest of the family. I’m not saying you should show up at their front door with a fruitcake and demand entry when they’ve told you they prefer not to see you, but they can’t order you away from your grandmother’s house when you’ve been invited.”

At least, Erik reflected grimly, he had a defense. Even if he wasn’t getting right with God, he was getting right with his therapist.

They pulled into the driveway - and were immediately instructed to turn right back around. But not because the family decided last-minute that Erik wasn’t wanted after all.

“Nona wants to go to the early service, then have dinner,” Uncle Guy said, jogging over to the car to meet them. “Just drive over to the church, we’ll meet you there - I don’t question the woman, she’s eighty-seven years old, I just follow orders.”

“Jesus,” Dad swore, backing out of the driveway as a veritable troop of Mantovas poured out of the house and piled into cars. “Who has a service at four on Christmas Eve?”

“Oh, the service isn’t at four,” Erik assumed, shaking his head. “I’ll bet you a dollar it’s at five. And Nona wants the get there early to pray the rosary.”

Dad swore an oath that was definitely not part of the Rosary and drove off toward the church. “At least we get a little break before the flood.”

But no such luck. No sooner were they parked and making their way to the church than the same
flood washed over them. The Mantovas firmly believed in the value of hugs and kisses - one hug and one kiss per family member and if you skipped someone, it had to be only because you were mad at them. Erik wasn’t opposed to this, in theory. It was a logistics thing. Because, really, the only way in which Erik resembled any member of his mother’s family was the fact that most of them were redheads. Otherwise, one would be hard-pressed to assume they shared any genetic material.

In that way, he and his father could share some of the same discomfort of being around the Mantovas - specifically back pain. Because they were a short people, Mom was the tallest of the ladies at a towering 5’6 and Uncle Guy was the biggest of the men, since Papa had passed five years ago. And Papa had been 5’9.

Without hesitation, Erik was embraced and kissed - they took the mask in stride, mostly just acted like it was his actual face - by no fewer than a dozen aunts, uncles, and cousins, his grandmother, and, last but not least, his mom.

She looked really great - healthy skin, bright eyes. Sometimes, when her meds were adjusted she could be a little flat, other times when she was a little off-center she could get kind of gaunt-looking. She’d never had the sturdiest frame and both mania and depression caused her to lose any sense of an appetite. But Denver was doing her good - had to be the mountain air.

“Hi, baby!” she grinned, squeezing him tight around the middle and tilting her head up to give him a kiss on the chin. Of all his relatives, Mom was the only one who really hated the fact that he wore a mask. Even Dad never said anything about it either way; privately Erik assumed it had to be something of a relief. No doubt she’d squirrel him away in some private corner so he could take it off and they could ‘actually talk,’ as she liked to say. “You look great!”

“You too,” he said, swallowing back an automatic reply of, ‘No I don’t.’ “How was your flight?”

“Ugh,” she pulled away and rolled her eyes. “I hate flying, it’s the worst. And I had a stick of gum in my back pocket - for the ear popping, you know? And the security woman had to feel me up because it turned up on the scan. But, you know, I didn’t mind - it’s more action than I’ve had in a while.”

She winked and turned to embrace his dad who shot Erik a look that said, ‘Don’t judge me too much for being in love with his woman.’

It was...deeply strange for his parents to be in the same room together. Erik spent so much of his life with the two of them living in different states that he just started to think of them as having very little to do with one another. Mom, after the accident, went to live with his grandparents in Connecticut - it was only after his grandfather’s passing that she decided to get on the wait list for the residential center. Then there were occasions like this - holidays, concerts, graduations - where the two of them would come together for extended periods of time and Erik couldn’t help but feel like they might have stayed together if it wasn’t for him.

It had nothing to do with the accident, they’d split long before that. Mom’s doctors suspected she’d always exhibited signs of BPD, but that it became more pronounced after the pregnancy - hormones could do a whammy on one’s mental health. Dad started losing patience with her because of Erik - there was a child that had to be taken care of, and generally, flightiness was not a great parental attribute. Establishing routines and daily rhythms, schedules, was what Dad excelled at. Mom? Not so much. That was when the cracks started to appear.

Erik had been over it a thousand times with his therapists; ever since he was little, he blamed himself for his parents divorce. For the decline in his mother’s mental health. It was pretty evident,
he thought, from the photo albums that Dad would have relegated to the attic, if Erik hadn’t saved them and put them in his room after they moved. They looked so happy.

And they seemed so happy now, when they were together. Mom teased Dad, he chuckled softly and rolled his eyes. He’d put his arm around her when they were on the couch together. They didn’t fight, when they were together. Dad only ever got frustrated with her long-distance.

Once, when Erik was younger, maybe nine or ten, he asked his father whether they’d ever get married again. Once he was an adult and moved out of the house.

Dad looked at him like he had two heads. No, he said, sounding alarmed by the prospect. He and Mom would not be getting married again. Whether he was out of the house or not.

We can’t live together, he shook his head. We’re good friends. Not good married people. We don’t fit.

But, watching how his mom snuggled her face against his dad’s chest, how he lifted her just slightly off her feet when he gave her a kiss, Erik found himself wondering just why they couldn’t make it work.

No time to think about it - Nona had to hunker down and do a round of the beads. She sidled up next to Erik, transferring her cane to her left and and taking his arm with her right, even though the parking lot wasn’t slippery. “Come in with me - Father Bucci remembers you from Papa’s funeral and he wants to talk to you.”

Oh, God, Erik thought, but it wasn’t quite a prayer. He was right to be apprehensive - Father Bucci remembered Erik very well, because Erik sang at his grandfather’s funeral and he was hoping he could put his talents to good use for the Christmas Eve service. The choir wasn’t coming until midnight, it was canned music for the evening liturgy, and it would be such a blessing, the priest said, if he could sing. And play - his grandmother said he was quite the musician.

Thank God for small favors - Erik got to beg off saying (truthfully) that he’d never played an organ before and didn’t really want to start during Christmas Eve mass. Nona was insistent, but thankfully the priest understood - said he knew he was putting him on the spot, but he hoped to hear his voice during the service.

Erik did not sing during the service, but mostly because no one else in the church was - the place was only half-full, most of the congregants would come later, for the full effect of the choir and the dozen altar servers carrying candles. Mostly it was families with little kids who’d come to this service, and there was a little Nativity play put on by kids from the local school. Very cute. Angela’s youngest son was a reader and her daughter, Emmie, who was in preschool at the parish school was a highly distractable angel who waved at her family and took her headband halo off to play with when she was supposed to be announcing the birth of the Christ Child with all her friends, by way of singing ‘Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.’

“What do you think?” Angela whispered as the kids belted along to a pre-recorded Kidz Bop version of the song. “Should I reserve a place for her at your fancy high school?”

“Yep,” Erik agreed. “I’ll put in a good word for her. It’ll take her far - I’m their most infamous pupil.”

“Oh, stop,” Angela nuded his arm, then reached over and squeezed his hand. “Really happy you decided to come, Erik.”
“Thanks,” he said, then wisely shut up because his grandmother had whipped around in her pew to glare at them.

They went back to the house afterward, where the oven was turned on to warm (no one in the Mantova family trusted ovens anymore, so they didn’t leave them on while they were out of the house) and flames were lit under the chafing dishes.

Baked scrod, steamers with drawn butter, crab cakes, calamari, octopus salad, codfish in red sauce, and stuffed squid were on the menu - along with hamburgers and cheeseburgers grilled up on the porch, courtesy of Uncle Guy.

There were a lot of people. Thankfully it was a big house - Papa had a contracting business when he was alive and retired with a healthy little retirement fund, so he invested back in the family, as he said. Guest rooms, so the children and grandchildren could stay over. Most of the family would be spending Christmas Eve, to Nona’s delight.

Once upon a time, when Erik was still small enough not to care about such things, he used to spend the night too. He’d spend the whole school break there, in the finished basement with his cousins. One big sleepover. It was fun until he was old enough to be self-conscious. To realize that though it might be rude to say anything, most people didn’t want to see his sorry excuse for a face looming at them from an upper bunk. Ever since high school, when he and his dad made the trek down, they stayed in a hotel.

His mother was one of four - Uncle Guy was the oldest, his daughter Angela had three kids, his son Luca had two girls, his youngest Rico was engaged to be married. Then Aunt Tina, mother of Mykayla and her younger sister Maya. She didn’t say anything about the email, but greeted him warmly, so he had to assume that her daughter’s feelings weren’t her own. Maya hated her sister and took Erik aside to bitch about what assholes Kayla and Colin were, while her new boyfriend hovered awkwardly nearby, waiting to be introduced. Then Aunt Amy who never married (and who Erik was fairly sure was a lesbian, though they never talked about it). Finally, his mom.

The little cousins passed by for the obligatory hugs and kisses (they’d either been serving the mass or had a role in the play, so he missed seeing them earlier) - Erik settling for fist-bumps since he didn’t think it was right to expect the kids to hug him when he rarely saw them. The only exception was Emmie, who Angela made a point of re-introducing to him.

“This is your cousin, Erik,” she said, bringing Emmie up on her hip so Erik wasn’t obliged to kneel on the floor. “The last time he saw you, you were just a baby. He wears a mask because he has a boo-boo on his face.”

Erik waved, the picture of awkwardness. Emmie frowned at him, hard. It was always hard to tell how little kids would react to him - some were just curious, others were actively afraid.

“You knew me when I was a baby?” Emmie asked, finally.

“Yeah,” Erik replied, nodding his head. That was all it took. Emmie decided that they were going to be best friends. She insisted that her mother put her down. Then she seized Erik’s hand and dragged him off to show him the Christmas tree (which she helped decorate), the Christmas cookies (which she helped frost) and the Christmas presents (which she assumed her all for her). Emmie inventoried the entire house, from the stockings, to the ceramic village that took up half the sitting room, to the kids’ playroom in the basement, as if Erik was a prospective tenant and she his very bossy realtor. After about an hour, Angela came to his rescue.

“Erik needs to eat his dinner,” she informed her, just in the nick of time because Erik was on the
verge of letting himself get talked into playing Barbies. “And talk to big people.”

Emmie looked at her mother skeptically. “No one’s as big as him.”

“Well, kind-of big people,” Angela acknowledged. To Erik she added, “It’s not going to kill the child to hear the word, ‘no.’”

“I didn’t mind,” he shrugged, getting off the floor, placing Barbie, Skipper, Midge, and all the rest back into their plastic tub. At least Emmie only wanted to talk about presents and dolls, he’d rather do that than answer strained questions about how he was doing, and how he was feeling, not being sure if it was okay to offer him a glass of wine.

But once he was back upstairs, everyone was surprisingly great. Dad must have told them it was okay for him to drink because Billy pressed a beer into his hand, expressing his sincere thanks for entertaining the ‘Jumping Bean’ since they got back from church. And Rico buttonholed him into a corner saying that he knew Erik didn’t like weddings, but he really wanted him to come to his - and to help him come up with a decent playlist since they didn’t have money to hire a DJ.

“But we don’t want it to be lame,” he cautioned. “We want it to be lit. But also have music the grandparents can dance to.”

Erik said he’d see what he could do - and almost choked on his beer when Emmie tried to put in a dinner order for him.

“Erik and me want cheeseburgers!” she informed her father. Erik thanked her very much, but said he actually liked fish. She was so shocked and horrified, that she seemed to reconsider his status as her very best friend, but made up her mind that she still liked him, despite his flaws. And insisted on eating her dinner on his lap.

Everything was going really well - even Dad seemed to be having a good time - until the door rang at nine.

“Carolers?” Aunt Amy guessed. She set her eggnog aside and excused herself from a hushed conversation she’d been engaged in with Erik - she was thinking about moving back in with Nona full-time and if she did that, his mother could come back to Connecticut. This was all news to him and Erik was so distracted by the what-ifs that he totally missed the arrival of Colin, Mykayla, and baby Jude. Until, for the first time the whole night. The house went silent.
Erik and Dalir's holidays are about to turn very stressful for oddly similar reasons. Check out the warnings.

Warning for: Descriptions of panic attack, negative self-talk, drug dependency, family dysfunction, ableism, religious fundamentalism, sexism, spousal abuse.

The antiseptic smell of the hotel sheets, soft against his cheek and the rush of blood in his ears was all Erik could concentrate on. That and the litany of abuse he was hurling at himself, silently.

Pathetic. You're pathetic. Who did you think you were, going into the at house? What gave you the right? You knew you weren't wanted. They were pretending. Just pretending.

He tried not to think of the scene that followed Kayla's cheerful, "Merry Christmas!" her explanation that they'd come early because her in-laws were sick. Tried not to, but he couldn't help himself. He replayed it over and over, thinking of how he might have done something, anything other than what he did.

He might have bolted. Run for the back door, forget the coat, forget finding his father. Just stood on a street corner in his sweater and called for a Lyft.

Erik was bolted in place, both from panic (flight or flight had never been his thing, he'd always frozen, doing nothing), and from the fact that his mother came, took the vacant seat, lay a restraining hand on his arm.

"It's okay," she said, glancing anxiously toward the hall. "You're here now, it's not like they can kick you out."

Or, if he hadn't made a run for it, when Colin barreled in spindly under his heavy coat, blonde hair standing on end with static from his hat. He was still holding Macy's bags full of presents. Erik could have stood up, hands raised in a harmless way, apologized for their paths crossing. Say he understood that Colin and Kayla didn't want to see him and he was leaving right away, out of respect to their wishes. That he'd only come to see his mother.

Instead he sat there, mute, stupid, glancing up at Colin, who glared at him, full of righteous fury.

"What's he doing here?" he asked, looking around with accusatory eyes at the aunts and uncles who stood by, similarly quiet. Was there any excuse for his being there? Any at all? Despite all their protestations that they wanted him to come, that he was welcome, in the face of Colin and Kayla's actual arrival the request that their infant son not be in the same room as a drug addict suddenly did not seem half so unreasonable. "We said - you should have told us he was coming! We wouldn't have made the trip if we knew he was coming! You knew that!"

Erik could have apologized then. Said he was sorry, but he was leaving. That he didn't intend to stay so long. He should have said something. Should have left, then. Called his father and told him to get into the car. That they had to go.
Angela spoke up, hands out in supplication.

"We thought you guys weren't coming until tomorrow," she explained. "But this doesn't have to be a big deal! Just put the presents down, come on in! We're having a nice dinner. There's no need to get upset."

"No need?" Colin declared, eyes bulging. "Are you kidding? He might have drugs in the house, right now! Right now! I've read up on it, right after they get out of rehab is the worst time! That's when they're most at risk for slipping and he has no reason to stay clean!"

Maybe if Erik tried to defend himself, he could have gained some ground. But he didn't know where to begin. How to explain that he did have reasons, lots of reasons, but not reasons that Colin would understand. A wife, a child. That was his definition of things to live for, things to be a better person for. Nothing else compared to that for him. It was unlikely Erik would have been able to persuade him, even if he'd tried.

The room was suddenly full of voices, of motion. Some people left, dragging children along with them, unwilling to witness a fight. Others took Erik's side, leapt to his defense, his mother first among them, only to be out-bellowed by Angela. Of all the family, save his parents, she was the one who called the most when he was in rehab. She was probably the best informed.

"He's been clean and sober for seven months," she said, hands going to her hips. Kayla hovered on the outskirts of the room, Jude clutched against her, probably sweltering in his snowsuit. She turned his face away, as if even a glance at Erik might sow the seeds of future addiction. "You're making a scene! Everything is fine and under control. He babysat Emmie earlier and she's just buzzed on candy right now, which is very much my fault - "

"You left him alone with her?" Kayla cried, aghast. Then uttered the fateful phrase. The remark that rendered the evening totally unsalvageable, "What kind of mother are you?"

Even those not comfortable defending Erik to Colin and Mykayla jumped in to defend Angela. Everyone was standing - everyone but him. For once, Erik was the shortest person in the room.

"Now, now, everybody," Aunt Tina said, putting a comforting arm around Kayla. "They're just new parents, and you know...of course parents want what's best for their children - "

"But Erik doesn't count?" Mom asked, flushed and furious. "He's my son, Tina! He's a member of this family as much as anyone else, he's got as much of a right to be here as anyone else!"

If only he'd spoken up! If only he'd said something, rather than sitting there like some vicious dog they were debating putting down. But panic had him by the throat and no matter how he tried, his thoughts flew apart like birds and damn him if he could catch a one. He was too preoccupied trying to catch his breath.

"It's not fair!" Kayla exclaimed. "It's not fair - we've got to accommodate him! This isn't the first time this has happened! This - you're all giving him permission to do terrible things, by pretending there isn't something wrong with him! That he's just like everyone else! How is he supposed to get better when there aren't any consequences? Then, one day, he'll just OD and we'll all have to pretend to be sad about it!"

Almost as soon as the words left her mouth, Kayla realized she'd made a mistake. Mom's jaw went slack, Aunt Tina's arm fell from her daughters shoulders and Maya, who had been drunkenly contributing nothing of substance to the argument said, "Wow. Way to be fucking compassionate, Kay."
“That’s not what I meant!” Kayla started crying again, noisy tears that set Jude off, the two of them wailing in the living room in tandem. "Of course it'll be sad, but it's preventable! But only if he hits rock bottom! He needs to earn people's trust, earn a place in the family, he can't just expect us to forgive and forget!"

The door to the hotel room opened, quietly, but Erik heard the sound of his dad's key card swiping in the reader. Once. Twice, because he always inserted it upsidedown. There was no way to pretend to be asleep. Not when he was lying on the bed fully clothed, but he turned away toward the window so his father wouldn't have to look at him.

It was Dad who called a halt to the whole thing. Who stood in the doorway with his keys and their coats, announced to all of them that he and Erik were leaving. The sound of his dad's voice, giving him a command finally cut through the panic in Erik's mind. That was something simple. An order he could follow. It cut through the bullshit and he waded through his stunned, angry, and weeping relatives. Mom tried a last-minute intervention, said she'd just go with them back to the hotel, that they should wait for her. But Erik shook his head, bent down to give her a kiss, then took his coat from his dad and followed him out to the car.

For someone who was famous for his voice (well, his pseudonym was famous), it failed him at critical times. Last time he'd been laid this low, he shot up. This time he just face-planted in a hotel bed. An improvement, he thought. He was more trainable than Kayla gave him credit for being.

We'll all have to pretend to be sad about it.

Pretending. They were just pretending. No one wanted him there. He was a fool to think he should even try.

Dad sat down heavily beside him on the bed. He carded his fingers through Erik's hair, palm resting on the nape of his neck. "I'm sorry, buddy."

God, if that wasn't the most prominent phrase of his childhood. Doctors' visits interfering with recitals. Sorry, buddy. Invitations to sleepovers denied because Dad could never trust that Erik wasn't going to be picked on. Sorry, buddy. Christmas Eve dinners ruined because of him. Sorry, buddy.

And not even because of his face. If this was just because Colin and Kayla didn't want their baby to be around ugly people, then he could have summoned up a little indignation. Just a little, mind, because Erik knew what he looked like and didn't necessarily hold with Angela's opinion that forcing her kids to look at his face was an object lesson in tolerance. No, this was a monster of his own making. He started it in high school, when Mila Liu-Kowalski mentioned that she had some Vicodin left over from her wisdom tooth surgery. Not just some, a whole bottle. The pain hadn't been intense enough to use it, she said. She got by on Tylenol.

For Erik, who was having trouble getting through the day, through his music classes, and orchestra without awful pain shooting down his arm, her claims were unbelievable. Twelve weeks out from surgery and he still felt like shit, but he'd run out of refills and the doctors wouldn't write him a new script. It didn't seem like a big deal, to him, to either of them, if he took her unused pills.

And maybe Kayla was right. If he'd stopped then, if he was 'fixed' by his time in rehab the first time, maybe he might be entitled to forgiveness. He was young. He'd messed up, but kids mess up. Senior year had been his reset button.

Flash forward. Another surgery. Sorry, buddy. And a surgeon who wrote him a script, the one he wanted when he was seventeen. Erik tried to be good. Told him about his previous struggles with
pills. Said that, if it was all the same, he'd like to try an alternative pain management system.

The doctor hadn't listened. Erik was young, he reasoned, strong. Healthy, aside from the shoulder. He thought the chance of dependency was very low. So he wrote the script.

Dad was furious, blamed the doctor, when he got the whole story out of Erik. He hadn't known about the prescription, and why should he? He'd stopped coming to Erik's doctors' appointments after high school. Trying to give him some freedom. Freedom that Erik, at the age of twenty-nine, was evidently ill-equipped to handle. Once again, pain. Once again, a filled script. And he kept filling it. Until he couldn't. Then he looked for alternatives.

He did all that. It wasn't something that happened to him, Erik did it to himself. And there was no one to blame, not old wires, not doctors. Just him. Just Erik, making a monster.

"Check-out's at nine," Dad said, his hand a warm weight on Erik's neck. "But I asked for a late check-out, we've got until eleven. I know how much you like to sleep in."

"Don't," Erik spoke into the sheets - the most he'd said in two hours. Dad didn't move. "Don't be...nice to me."

Pretending. They're all pretending. Out of a sense of obligation. Because they're good and decent people. Not like you. You're a monster. Never forget just what you are. Alexis knew. And you thought you were so much better than what he said about you that you stuck a needle in your arm. And proved him right.

How long would it take Dalir to understand what a mistake he'd made? He was too close. Erik saw it clearly now. That was what made him slip. Gave him an improved opinion of himself. Made him dare to step foot in his grandmother's house, like he was supposed to be there. Dalir spent three years working with drug addicts. He'd become numb to it. But he'd learn. A little distance and he'd learn. What if he got a job at a school and saw at-risk kids? Kids who had their lives ahead of them but could ruin them, just as Erik ruined his own life? All Erik's bad qualities would be starkly laid to light. And Dalir would see. He'd know. And he'd be sickened when he realized just what he thought he wanted to take to bed. Face or no face. A monster.

"Well, it's too late to change the check-out time," Dad said, Erik felt him shrug. "So I guess I just have to be nice to you. This one time. Don't get used to it."

"Don't," Erik said and his voice broke. God, he hated crying. Hated the feeling of his throat closing up. Hated the mess. Hated the fact that he did it so much. Dad just kept stroking his hair and didn't say anything. Once Erik's sobs had quieted somewhat, he did get up, to cross the room and grab the box of Kleenex so he could clean himself up. With a deep sigh and a shudder, Erik got up, still keeping his head ducked down so his dad didn't have to look at him, if he didn't want to.

Dad was staring down at his phone. "You need to text your mom, she's worried sick. I told her you're okay, just a little shaken up, but she wants to hear from you."

"Sure," Erik said, tossing the tissues in the pile and reaching for his mask, first, before he went for the phone.

"Oh, Erik," Dad sighed when he saw what he was doing. "Just leave it, okay? It's just me here. It's alright."

Erik tied the mask on and reached for his phone. "Nothing about me is alright," he said, shaking his head.
25 texts. Surprisingly, not all of them were from his mom. 10 from Mom. 5 from Angela. 7 from Aunt Amy. 1 from Rico. 1 from Maya. And one...one from Christine.

He'd never deleted her number out of his phone. Every time he scrolled by 'C. Daee' he felt a twinge of guilt. He'd thought it was good for him. Nothing reminded him of how much he'd fucked up than that last time he'd spoken to Christine. His stomach clenched at the memory of how he'd tried to justify the unjustifiable. But she was texting him. He ignored everything else and tapped on her name.

**Merry Christmas!** And an emoji of a little wreath. It was a group text. Just a big holiday wishes blast to everyone in her phone, maybe. It probably meant nothing - or maybe the fact that she'd kept his number in her phone, even after everything...maybe it did mean something.

Erik didn't bother reading any of the messages from his family. He didn't text his mother back - he called her. "Hey, Mama. No, no I'm okay. I'm just sorry - you're where? Oh. Yeah, go ahead. Put me on speaker."

Bumper cars on ice was...an experience. It was more like bumper boats, which meant the little round rafts moved incredibly slowly, so Dalir wasn't in danger of being killed. He even let Yasmin take the wheel - as a result, they just spun around in circles for five minutes while she laughed her head off like a maniac. Luckily, his stomach calmed down by the time he got back to his parents' house for dinner.

Winter break get-togethers for the extended Nouri family were a trip. On the one hand, it was kind of like Eid al-Fitr in that it was a big potluck gathering at his parents' house (they had the biggest back yard and thus were automatic hosts for most gatherings) and usually everyone just brought their signature Eid dishes. But it was also Christmastime, they all had cable and several of his aunts and a few of his cousins were enamored of cooking shows. Apple didn't fall far from the tree in that regard, but as opposed to Dalir who watched Food Network and snacked, they actively decided to try out recipes. With the result that there was an orange-cranberry bundt on the table, and a seven-layer 'holiday' taco dip, and a version of albaloo polo made with a mix of cherries and cranberries.

Dalir wasn't one to complain about the hybrids - his Zanamu Tara made a Fluffernutter pirashki that was out of this world. Erik, with his five-year-old palate, would probably love it. If Dalir was confident there would be any left by the end of the night, he'd take a few back with him, but he knew he wouldn't get that lucky and he was too conscious of his own laziness to ask for the recipe.

They ate buffet-style, plates on the dining table with the food set out in the kitchen. There were way too many people for everyone to eat at the dining table and the little skating adventure meant that Dalir and Shirin's family were some of the last to arrive and seize plates. Which meant, when Dalir went to find a place to sit there was only one spot available. The arm of the living room couch. Right next to Hamid.

Briefly, he considered the merits of taking his plate up to his room, but it was so overloaded he doubted he'd make it upstairs without spilling it everywhere. And his mother would kill him for staining the nice carpets. That, more than the sheer childishness of avoiding his pile-of-dog-shit-on-the-bottom-of-your-boots cousin was what made him trek slowly over to the couch.

"Dalir!" Hamid exclaimed, not rising to get up to hug or shake hands. He was sitting on the couch like a king on his throne, waiting for his wife Sarah (who was way more pregnant than anyone had the right to be) to pick her way through the crowd of little kids eating on the floor and bring him his plate. "Where have you been, brother?"
"Shirin, Ibrahim, and I took the kids skating," Dalir said and immediately, Hamid frowned. He was sure he was going to start in on some kind of rant about how ice skating was haram because figure skaters wore short skirts which was totally the same thing as a six-year-old kid in a pair of snow pants inching her way around a rink. Then rant about how Ibrahim and Shirin were Westernized, bad parents, raising kids who'd be wild and disobedient...but he was looking past Dalir at Sarah.

"Where's my drink?" he asked, expectantly.

Sarah lowered her eyes and folded her hands in front of her. "I didn't want to spill it."

"Well, get it now," he said. Coke. No ice. "And one for Dalir - what do you want?"

"Nothing!" Dalir said, quickly, he got up from the couch and gestured for Sarah to sit. The arm wasn't going to be the most comfortable place, but it was clear Hamid wasn't moving. "Why don't you get off your feet. Are you hungry? I'll get you a plate."

"No, no, no, sit," Hamid said, ordering Dalir now. "She likes to help. She's shy. She doesn't like to sit and be idle and make chit-chat. Do you? My wife is a good woman."

Sarah said nothing. She just walked back toward the kitchen to get Hamid his Coke. He sent her back again when she brought him a can - even though he didn't want ice, apparently, he did want it in cup. Dalir looked at his plate - brimming with polo, samosas, lamb and beef and suddenly felt none of it was appetizing.

"So, when are we going to your wedding, brother?" Hamid asked, settling down on the couch, getting good and comfortable after his long afternoon of presumably doing nothing at all.

_I hate you. I hate you. I hate you._

"Uh...probably never?" Dalir replied, like it was a trick question. If he was ever married, Hamid was not invited. It would be the scandal of the century, it would rock the Nouri family forever, someone being excluded from a wedding. But knowing the someone was Hamid meant he was going to be forgiven.

Hamid chuckled, forced and grating - at first, Dalir thought he had a chicken bone stuck in his throat. "That's just selfish. A man should be married! Your parents need grandchildren!"

"They have grandchildren," Dalir said, setting his plate down on the coffee table because...yeah. Not eating. Someone had put the ESPN on earlier, but, due to Hamid's presence probably, the TV was currently off. The only station that he thought was halal was probably The Weather Channel. "Shirin and I took them skating. Remember? I literally just told you that."

Again, that awful chuckle. There was spinach lodged between his teeth. Dalir found himself fixating on that. Better the spinach than the forced-calm, paternal tone Hamid took with him when he got it in his head to set Dalir on a better life course. Like the little fucker wasn't ten years younger than him. Like he wasn't a hypocrite who was all smiles and, "As-Salaam-Alaikum, brothers and sisters!" at the mosque, who turned violent dictator when his wife did something he didn't like. Sarah was nowhere to be seen, but maybe Dalir would see if Shirin or his mom would talk to her (again). The thought of an innocent kid going into that house just made him feel more sick.

"Your sister has children, yes, alḥamdulillāh," Hamid nodded his head slowly, contemplatively. "But you know, I find that, in my experience - "

_You have no experience, your kid hasn't even been born yet._
"- the father's family has more of a hand, more of an influence, than the mother's," he said, taking a long draught of Coke. "We hardly ever see Sarah's family."

*Probably because they hate you.*

"Isn't that right, Ibrahim?" Hamid concluded as Ibrahim came into the living room with Reza wrapped around one leg.

"What?" Ibrahim asked, squinting at the TV. "Who turned the game off?"

"Dalir and I were just discussing," Hamid began -

*We weren't discussing, you were talking to hear yourself talk. Probably because you're the only person who listens to you.*

" - how fathers exert a greater influence over their children than mothers. Don't you agree?"

"Uh, no," Ibrahim said distractedly, looking around for the remote. "The thing with smart TVs that I don't like is there's no way to change the channel without the remote..."

"Why are you so invested in this game?" Hamid asked sharply, some of the jocund familiarity falling away. "You don't have money on it. Do you?"

"Oh, Maman!" Dalir said, seeing his mother and seeing an out. He practically leapt off the couch and grabbed her arm as she crossed the room to get to the kitchen. "I got you something, it's not - "

"I don't want anything!" she protested, as she always did when her children got her presents. Unless it was an attachment for her Kitchen Aid or accessories with a little 'Coach' tag on them, which were special-occasion only gifts, she always begged off taking anything from the kids.

"It's not a present," he reassured her, digging around in his coat pocket - he'd been carrying the CD around all day, even to the ice rink which, he reflected now, had been a risky proposition. "My client, remember, I told you, he's a singer? I asked him to put together a CD of his for you, since he does a lot of Broadway and you like musicals."

"That's so nice of him!" she exclaimed. "Can I listen now? Come in the kitchen, I'll put it on the stereo."

They had to pick their way through the half-dozen aunts and cousins making small talk around the roasting pans full of steaming polo, bowls of lentils, eggplant stew, and seemingly hundreds of cups of half-drunk chai taking up all the available counter space.

"Dalir's friend from his work has a CD!" she informed the room. "He sings on Broadway!"

"Oh, wow," his cousin Parisa said - she was in a production of *Annie* at her middle school and now thought she was a theatre goddess. "Anything good? What's his name? Is he in something running right now? I'll look him up!"

The phone went out, but Dalir shook his head, no, no, no, Khale Sima was...misrepresenting (he couldn't very well accuse his mother of lying, could he?), his friend didn't sing *on* Broadway, he sang for Broadway.

"What does that mean, he sings for Broadway?" Risa's mother, Vida asked, frowning. "Like in that obscene puppet play? Just a voice?"
"What obscene puppet play?" Mom asked, looking between her sister and her son. "He doesn't do anything obscene, does he Dalir? You said he's very well-respected."

"No, you know the play!" Khale Vida insisted before Dalir could confirm or deny that Erik was involved in obscene musicals. "With the...oh, it was years ago, but it was like Sesame Street. You know? With the puppets."

"Sesame Street is obscene?" Zanamu Farrah asked, laughing. "Since when?"

"They did move to HBO," Risa pointed out, still poised to go with her phone. "So there's that. But mom means Avenue Q - which came out, like, a million years ago. So if he was in that, I figure his career has basically tanked. So no wonder he's in a group home."

"I don't work for a group home and he's never been to Sesame Street, as far as I know," Dalir exclaimed impatiently - then he immediately felt shitty. Sarah was hovering on the outskirts of the room and, when he raised his voice, she flinched. "He's a writer - and a technical...music...person. I don't really understand what he does, but he mixes! Mixes...tracks, to make them sound good."

"So like a DJ?" Risa asked, trying to be helpful.

Like a fancy DJ, Dalir clarified. And he wrote his own music. So he had credits on Broadway and even some film, but his voice was incredible.

"Go get Baba," Mom advised him. "I'm sure he'll want to hear too."

Dalir went and fetched his dad, who was talking to Showharamme Hassan about the percentage of students' parents (they were both college professors) who personally called their offices to intervene on behalf of their kids to boost their GPAs. Fascinating stuff, he was sure, but both Dad and Hassan's interest were piqued when Dalir said Mom wanted him to come listen to her new CD.

"Erik sings on it," Dalir told his father, seeing a look of dawning comprehension in his eyes when he explained who the vocalist was. "I figured you and Mom could listen to it whenever, but now it's a whole...thing."

"Oh, I want to hear it!" Shirin declared, ears pricked for any mention of the name 'Erik.' "I mean, I know you think he's something really special. So I'm in!"

The kitchen was way too small for the number of people who'd assembled inside and although Dalir knew just how amazing Erik's voice was, he was suddenly kind of nervous. What if they all had a lukewarm response and wondered why Dalir was so eager for his parents to listen to the man's voice? Whether they, like Shirin, would pick up on what was so special about him, to Dalir. Too late now; Mom was inserting the CD and after a minute of whirling, the first track started playing.

"In a place that won't let us feel
In a land where nothing seems real
I have found you. I have found you..."

Erik sang first and the effect on the room was incredible. There had been some dull roar, a few
fringe conversations that had been buzzing even as Sima set up the stereo. But they hushed immediately as the song played. Mia had a good voice, but Erik overtook her, even though he’d blended their voices masterfully. There was just something indescribable about his voice. Not just the emotion he sang with, but a tone, a resonance that people felt. Even though his mom’s dusty ’90s stereo. Some of the family actually applauded when the track ended.

"Dalir, what is this guy's name?" Risa insisted, waving the phone around. "I've got to find him, does he have a YouTube channel?"

Track two started up, a solo this time, accompanied by acoustic guitar.

"No man, no madness
Though their sad power may prevail
Can possess, conquer my country's heart
They rise to fail..."

In a room that was half full of immigrants and refugees, the song had additional power to touch. Khale Vida had tears in her eyes and Dad's hand was over his mouth, his free hand steadying himself on the kitchen table.

"That's incredible," Dad breathed. "Absolutely...incredible. You must thank your friend. He's...got quite a gift."

"Can I have a copy?" Risa asked. Then clarified that she meant, like, the tracks on her phone. Not a CD. Because she was pretty sure they didn't make CD players anymore.

The kitchen was way past capacity now, but more people were trickling in from the living room. Including Hamid, either because Ibrahim had finally found the remote and put the football on, or because he was curious about what was happening in the kitchen it was hard to say. Either way, he was there when the third track came on. This track had more instruments in the background and Dalir wondered if this was the one where Erik did his own accompaniment - a sample piece, to try out a new software program.

"I wasn't born to walk on water
I wasn't born to sack and slaughter
But on my soul I wasn't born to stoop to scorn
And knuckle under - "

"Sarah!"

Hamid shoved his way in, grabbed his wife's wrist and Mom immediately cut the power to the CD player. The room was unbearably tense.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, not letting go of her wrist. She was trembling.

"I just... they put on the music," she said, one hand on her stomach, the other held limply in Hamid's grip. "It was so crowded, I knew I should leave - "

"You knew, but you didn't do it?" Hamid interrupted, Dalir heard her sharp intake of breath as he bore down on her wrist and he was at Hamid's side in a second.

"Let her go," he said, snapping into cop-mode.

Hamid glared up at him, face flushing. "This isn't your business. This is between me and my wife - "
"You made it my business when you touched her like that," Dalir replied, locking his eyes on Hamid. Hamid was the first one who looked away, at Sarah. This was dangerous. She was going home with him, after all. And the last thing Dalir wanted was for Hamid to take his anger over this on her. But he couldn't let this go on. Not in front of him. Hamid couldn't think this was somehow acceptable. "She was in the kitchen. My mother put on the music. She didn't do anything wrong. Okay? So let her go."

Hamid dropped her hand. It fell to Sarah's side as if there wasn't any life in it at all. "We don't hold with this kind of music in our house!" he declared, loudly.

"This isn't your house, Hamid," Dad said steadily. "You are a guest. We were enjoying the music. You may stay and enjoy it. Or you may leave."

Hamid left. With Sarah. Neither of them said anything on the way out the door. But even after they left, no one wanted to put the CD back on again.

Fuck, Dalir thought later that night as he checked his phone for messages. Thankfully, nothing from Erik. Dalir was dreading that he might have to respond to a query about whether his mother liked the CD or not.

Yeah, she liked it, Dalir thought bitterly. We all liked it. Only my cousin's psychotic and ruined the afternoon. I hope your family visit is less stressful than mine.
There were enough workaholics who had Erik on their payroll that he wasn’t left entirely without work for the rest of the holiday season. Which was good because without work he would have spent the remaining week before Dalir’s return lying on the couch, channel surfing, like the sad sack that he was. The wisdom of cohabitating with someone whose entire purpose was to keep him clean had never felt so just - Erik assumed that stress would make him most inclined to use. It never even occurred to him that it would be boredom.

For one horrifying, wild fifteen minutes, he even found himself missing Alexis. At least Alexis forced him to get out of the house. He hated eating in someone’s apartment, or even his own. He preferred going to restaurants - trendy, overpriced restaurants where Erik would pick at breadsticks and drink wine or beer while he had his dinner. Erik took his own food home in a take-out container to eat later.

“I’m not going to coddle you,” Alexis told him more than once when Erik requested that they do things his way, at least for that night. “I’m going out. You can come or you can stay, but I’m leaving.”

Erik always went with him trailing along in his wake like a faithful dog. Sometimes it was okay. They’d go to a show at a bar or performance space and he’d appreciate Alexis’s uncompromising attitude. Be glad he went. Delude himself into believing that Alexis was trying to prevent him from becoming a total recluse.

It was slavish devotion, he grimly recalled, that kept him from accepting the truth: that Alexis didn’t really care whether Erik went or not. He’d have just as good a time by himself or with him. He just liked the power play of heading out the door and watching Erik chase after him.

Erik closed the lid of the piano and rested his elbows on it, head falling into his hands. He massaged his eyelids with the heels of his hands and sighed. Nope. Forget waxing nostalgic: being with Alexis was terrible. Everything about Alexis was terrible. All this...stuff with Dalir was just bringing it back. Reminding him of how much he was not meant to be in a relationship.

Maybe Dalir isn’t really looking for a relationship, Erik thought pessimistically. Maybe he just wants you for your body.

He let out a rueful chuckle and got up from the piano, to spare his back and stretch his legs. Dalir was coming back today, he’d be getting a Lyft from the airport, arriving early afternoon. Erik glanced down at his phone, which was lying on the piano. Not buzzing. No word from Dalir since his ‘got to the airport’ text in the morning. Erik wasn’t sure if he was dreading his return or looking forward to it.

On the one hand, he was feeling horrifically lonely - so lonely that he’d spent the night at Dad’s three times since he got back from Connecticut.

Dad offered to stay at his place, if he thought he needed someone. That way Erik didn’t have to go back and forth for work. But after living with Dalir for three months, having Dad crash in his room (yep, no longer ‘the guest room’ anymore) or on their couch (ditto the couch) seemed wrong. Back and forth he went, until he forced himself to stay put and get some work done. Waiting for Dalir to
So, he was attached. One might even say, ‘dependent.’ And there was the rub. If he was in so far now, when they’d barely done anything other than make mutual declarations of affection and kiss (a lot), what would happen when (to use Dalir’s words) they did ‘have their way’ with each other? It was likely self-defeating to predict the end of the relationship at the beginning, but Erik made the mistake of not doing that last time. He was less prepared than he should have been. And look how that turned out.

Piano was no good. The piano made him think of Alexis, leaning against it, impatient, breathing down his neck, expecting brilliance, glowering and pouting when all Erik could offer was mediocrity.

“Music is your life,” he’d grouse. “You don’t have anything else going on for you - I don’t think it’s too much to ask that you manage to be good at it.”

Violin, then. Work on a piece for a 25th anniversary album release, the bonus disc, all instrumental.

Erik practiced it a few times through - he was contracted for backing violin for the whole album, but this particular song struck him as being particularly apt for his mood, so he thought he might as well bang it out while he was feeling it.

And I still need the beauty of words sung and spoken
And I live with the fear that my spirit will be broken
And that’s the way I thought it would be.
That’s the way I always wanted it to be.

He was going to send them a few samples, one played straight, a few others with variation and improvisation - not too much, not too extreme. Not the way it was when he was mixing and playing, the jobs he relished the most. That way, selfishly, he got the most creative control over what his performance sounded like. Erik had almost no ego to speak of, but...well. Music was his life. As had been pointed out to him before. He ought to be good at it.

A knock at the half-open door. Erik stopped playing and turned, slowly - he’d worn the mask in anticipation of Dalir’s arrival.

He stood in the doorway of the music room, wearing an enormous blue coat - the puffy coat of legend. Somehow - through some strange Michigan voodoo, no doubt - he managed to make even a shapeless, waterproof, down jacket look good. Dalir smiled and held up his phone in one guilty hand.

“Hey,” he said sheepishly. “Watching YouTube on the flight drained all my battery, so I couldn’t text you and let you know I was on the way. Sorry to bug you, I just didn’t want to freak you out if you didn’t know I was here.”

“That’s okay,” Erik said, lowering the violin, but not putting it down. Just because Dalir wanted to
check in, didn’t mean he wanted to sit and chat. “Um. How was your trip?”

“Good,” Dalir said, then grimaced. “Mostly good. Yours?”

Erik hesitated. The truth? A lie? Little of both. “Mostly good.”

“Good,” Dalir said again. He unzipped the jacket and bundled it up in his arms. Like a shield? Like a blue squishy shield? Like a ‘keep your distance, Erik’ shield? He hadn’t come in for a kiss or a hug - though, they didn’t really hug each other and they hadn’t kissed before Dalir left for his plane. Was kissing a nighttime thing? Or were they not doing that anymore? And how did Erik ask for clarification without looking crazy?

“Do you need to get back to work?” Dalir asked, nodding at the instrument. “Or can you talk for a while?”

It took Erik a minute to respond. Verbally, anyway. Because his brain was going a mile a minute.

*Talk. Like, talk about our holidays? Or talk as in, ‘We need to talk.’ Couldn’t you have said ‘chat’? It’s a much less loaded word.*

“I was just...yeah, no, it’s fine,” Erik stuttered, putting the violin and bow down. “I can...talk.”

Whatever that means.

Dalir brightened and jogged out of the room to put his stuff away. He emerged from the bedroom coat-less, hair slightly static-y from his hat. He tried smoothing it down, but the strands just stood straight back up again. Dalir sat down on the far end of the couch - *Distance, establishing distance, definitely a Talk, not a chat. Crap. Crap. Crap.* - then kicked his shoes off and swung his legs up onto the couch, pressing into Erik’s leg with the heels of his feet.

“So,” he said, leaning back, tucking his hands behind his head in a supremely relaxed pose. “What’d you do while I was gone?”

Erik was going to get emotional whiplash going from ‘Dear God, he regrets everything and needs to tell me,’ to, ‘I guess he just does want to talk about our holidays,’ every three seconds.

They got in a solid fifteen minutes of talking about their holidays. Erik highlighted the good parts - church, food, Emmie dragging him around the house. Talking about Emmie reminded Dalir of his niece and nephew and he pulled his phone out, scooting closer to Erik on the couch so he could watch video of Reza jumping off the couch while his father tried in vain to eat dinner and watch football and then skipped to a video of himself and Yasmin driving (in very slow circles) around an ice rink in a rubber tube.

They were super cute kids. Reza was a little chubby with big brown eyes and straight hair that still looked baby-fine. Yasmin was harder to make out because the video was taken farther away. Her hair curled beneath her knit cap with a pom-pom on top. She had the loudest laugh Erik ever heard from a child.

“She laughs like a witch,” Dalir said so Erik didn’t have to. He shook his head and snorted. “Like, the Wicked Witch of the West. She *cackles.* It’s so weird - her Kindergarten teacher actually mentioned it, like ‘Okay, Yas, that’s enough silly laughing,’ but that is straight-up what she laughs like.”

“It’s cute,” Erik replied automatically. Then, off Dalir’s skeptical look amended, “Quirky. Maybe it will mellow when she’s older.”
Dalir put his phone on the coffee table and glanced at Erik out of the corners of his eyes, like he was being sly. “How about you? Any pics? Video? Because, not gonna lie, I’d like to see you playing Barbies.”

“We didn’t play Barbies,” Erik clarified. “We took out Barbies with the intention of playing with them - no pictures, though. I didn’t take any.”

There were pictures from the party on Facebook - after he left. Better that way, for everyone. That way friends and acquaintances wouldn’t flood them with comments about what was up with the guy in the mask.

“So, you had a good time?” Erik asked, trying to get the subject off of himself and what he did. “With your family? No drama?”

Dalir grimaced. “Some drama. Everything was fine after my asshole cousin left.”

And just like that, the tension returned. It was like someone dropped an ice cube down the back of Erik’s shirt. Asshole cousin.

“Oh?” Erik asked, his throat suddenly dry. He got up to pour himself a glass of water. He didn’t ask Dalir if he wanted one. Then, when he tried to take a sip, his body suddenly decided to forget how to swallow liquid and he choked, enjoying a rather spectacular coughing fit.

“Shit,” Dalir said, bounding off the couch and smacking him on the back a few times. “You okay?”

Feeling hot and stifled in the mask, Erik managed a nod, blinking back the water in his eyes and inching the glass away from him with trembling fingers, as though Ikea glassware was to blame and not his extreme case of nerves.

“Mmm-hmm,” he nodded, shifting just enough away from him that Dalir took his hand off his back. “Sorry.”

“It went down the wrong way?” Dalir guessed.

Erik just nodded, eyes on the countertop. Everything was fine after my asshole cousin left. Apparently they’d had very similar holidays, after all. Just from two different perspectives.

“I’m...going to go back to work,” Erik said finally, his voice a little hoarse. He turned to go, but Dalir put a hand on his arm - not gripping, but clearly intending that Erik shouldn’t leave.

“Why? What’d I say?” Dalir asked, squinting up at him in confusion.

“Nothing,” Erik said, not meeting his eyes.

“No, clearly it was something,” Dalir continued, his tone a little annoyed now. Erik tensed, sure he was about to be yelled at for being moody, childish, pouting, just act like an adult for once, could you? “We were cool and now you’re not cool. What’d I say? Tell me so I know not to say it again.”

“It...it wasn’t you,” Erik insisted. “It’s me.”

“Man,” Dalir sighed, shaking his head. “‘It’s not you, it’s me,’ is never good. Seriously. What’s wrong?”

Erik slipped his arm away from Dalir’s hand and gripped the countertop nervously. “Nothing. It is
me. I...was the asshole cousin at my family’s party. So...I don’t know. I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

Dalir folded his arms and Erik braced himself, waiting for the onslaught of insults...which never came.

“Uh, no,” Dalir shook his head. “I don’t know what went down at your place - you can tell me if you want, or don’t. But...yeah, I can’t imagine whatever you did is in the same ballpark as the shit Hamid pulls. Like, not even the same sport. Okay?”

No, not okay. Because even though the words Dalir was using were particularly heated, the tone was. And it didn’t make Erik feel inclined to relax.

“Sure,” Erik said softly, eyes on the ground. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Dalir said, slightly quieter. “Well. Not to me. You didn’t do anything to me. You want to talk about it, or…?”

Mutely, Erik shook his head. What would be the point? He’d gone somewhere he shouldn’t. Done something he shouldn’t. There were rules, after all. Rules he’d broken. Boundaries he’d crossed. There was a small, select group of people who could tolerate him, after everything. Dalir knew more than most and he was sticking around, but the doubt lingered: What would finally drive him away?

Everyone had a breaking point. Everyone had a limit for what they could tolerate from another person. Erik had reached that limit with certain family members, certain people. It was always his fault when things fell apart, he was always to blame. Even with Alexis - after all, if Erik hadn’t been stupid enough as to believe that he was worth more to Alexis as a person than as an instrument, none of last year would have happened.

“You...want a hug?”

The offer was completely unexpected; shock raised Erik’s head and he locked eyes with Dalir who shrugged and smiled self-consciously. “I mean, I’m going to level with you - you basically always look like you need a hug. Like, I’ve been seriously holding back for months. On hugs. Or offers of hugs.”

Unbidden, a small smile crossed Erik’s lips. “You’re a hugger?”

“Only with certain people,” Dalir admitted, then opened his arms. “Bring it in?”

Against his better judgement - against his knowledge of what he did and did not deserve - Erik brought it in. Dalir hooked his arms around his waist and Erik, slightly more loosely, embraced Dalir around the shoulders. And sighed. Evidently, he really did need a hug. Dalir’s hair smelled really nice.

“You smell really nice,” Dalir said, voice slightly muffled in Erik’s shoulder. “You use Old Spice? Because it’s working for you.”

“My cousins who expressly didn’t want to see me over the holidays showed up,” Erik said in a rush, into Dalir’s hair. “I...just froze. I knew I wasn’t supposed to be there. But I didn’t...do anything. Say anything. Apologize. Nothing. Until my Dad told me we were leaving. Then I left. I shouldn’t have gone in the first place.”

Dalir was quiet. Considering. Then, “Yeah, not the same sport. But come on. Sit back down. Tell me about it.”
Erik let Dalir lead him back to the couch. Sat down. Dalir sat next to him this time, on the middle cushion, draping his arm over the back of the sofa in such a way that Erik couldn’t help but lean on him as he sat down. And he recounted the second half of the night while Dalir listened, without judgement, nodding occasionally.

“That sucks,” he said at the conclusion, which ended with Erik in a hotel room, talking to his mom and a couple of sympathetic relatives who were holed up in the basement so the rest of the family wouldn’t know they called him. “I...for what it’s worth, I don’t think you did anything wrong. It was just shitty timing, you know? But it still...”


Dalir’s face darkened and Erik immediately wished he hadn’t asked.

“He’s...really evil to his wife,” Dalir said, that note of heat the so alarm Erik right back in his voice. “He’s...domineering. Orders her around. And I think he hits her - no, I’m sure he hits her. And...like, I just get so angry. That I can’t do anything. I can’t do anything that will help. We - my Dad, me - basically kicked him out because he was...being terrible. To her. But even that...like there’s no right answer. There’s no good that can come out of it. Not if she can’t leave. And she won’t or can’t or...she’s not leaving. And he’s not going to be any different.”

Erik’s stomach sank. Here he was, freaking out about Dalir’s opinion of him, his bad weekend when Dalir was actually dealing with serious stuff. And Dalir was the one who offered him a hug. Erik felt like dirt. But he sat and listened. Dalir extended him that courtesy, so Erik owed him the same.

“I...Shirin thinks I’m nosy or whatever,” Dalir scrubbed his free hand over his face, resting it on the back of his neck and talked to the ceiling. “That I get myself involved with shit, but then back out, don’t see it through. That’s what she didn’t like about me being a cop - did I tell you she didn’t like me being a cop? Anyway, she complained that the police...that even when the police weren’t doing anything shitty that we weren’t helping anyone, really. Like, we’d jump in, hopefully de-escalate a bad situation, but it was like putting a Band-Aid on a severed leg. It doesn’t really help. And that’s the way it is with Hamid and Sarah. Like, if we intervene, he could take it out on her. If we don’t intervene, then it looks like we’re condoning what he does. I’ve got - you know, my niece. And young cousins. I don’t want them to think that I - that we - their dads and uncles and grandfathers - think that shit’s okay. That it’s ever okay.”

“That sucks,” Erik said softly, because he couldn’t think of what else to say. It was so inadequate. He was so inadequate.

Dalir nodded and turned toward him, face lined and looking much older than he actually was. “Yeah. You know...I never...I’ve never gotten that out before. I never told anyone how...bad the whole thing makes me feel. Because, like, who am I, you know? To complain? I’m not the one who’s getting beat up. But...thanks. For listening.”

“Any time,” Erik said, and meant it. Hadn’t Dalir listened to countless hours of Erik’s fears and insecurities? Hadn’t he let Erik pour his heart out to him and come back without judgement?

Come through some of the worst of what he’d done and told him that he wasn’t a bad person? Dalir was...good. At his core. How could Erik do any less?

“What was that song you were playing?” Dalir asked, changing the subject after a long, contemplative silence. “You write it?”
“No,” Erik shook his head. “I was just trying a few things out, practicing. It’s for an album I’m contributing to. Want to...hang out while I practice?”

Dalir smiled at him, “Yeah, I’d like that - if I won’t be in the way.”

“You won’t be in the way,” Erik said, returning the smile. He stood up and offered his hand for Dalir to take, unnecessarily since Dalir didn’t need help getting off the couch. Dalir took it anyway and let Erik haul him to his feet. He held on a second longer than was strictly called for and, in silence, the two of them walked into the music room.

Music was easier. The easiest thing in the world. No talking required. The sun set and the question of dinner came up.

“You want to go out?” Dalir asked when Erik was finally satisfied with the arrangement and finished jotting it down to record later. “I kind of want to go out. Like, eat out, in an actual place. Um. But if that’s not going to work for you, we don’t have to. I just thought maybe we could have...like...a date. If you want.”

Oh, thank God, you still like me, was the bizarre, unbidden, selfish thought that bubbled up in Erik’s consciousness. It might have seemed obvious from their afternoon of interactions, but it wasn’t. Not for Erik, who liked vocal confirmation. Validation. Everyone did. But not everyone needed it over and over and over again. Too much. He was trying so hard not to be too much, while being concerned that he wasn’t enough.

But Dalir wanted to go on a date. He was asking if Erik wanted to go with him. Asking. Not demanding, with his coat on, one foot already out the door, fairly vibrating with impatient. This was new. Different. Possibly weird, the idea of going on a first date with a guy who’d been living with him for three months. But Erik was himself nothing if not weird. Different. Apparently Dalir didn’t mind that much.

“We can go out,” he said, trying to give a little. To be accommodating. To be enough and not too much. “It’s a...date.”

“Yeah,” Dalir grinned. “It is. How about that?”

Chapter End Notes

It's a date! Finally! And the song Erik was playing was 'In Love, but Not At Peace' by Dar Williams, who, as far as I know, has no intentions of releasing a bonus disc of instrumentals for The Honesty Room, but I can dream!
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Erik and Dalir retreated to their respective bathrooms to get ready for their First Official Date. Getting ready, in Dalir's case, consisted of a quick shower and change of clothes; dark wash jeans and a really nice sweatshirt.

*This is why you're single!* Shirin's voice sounded in his head like a conjured demon from the abyss. *No one wears gym clothes on a date, Dalir!*

But it wasn't gym clothes. It was North Face. Ergo expensive. Ergo nice. Ergo, date clothes.

The one real concession to fanciness he made was a comb slathered in hair product, some kind of styling gel his mother bought for him...maybe three years ago that he still hadn't gotten to the bottom of. It didn't smell or anything, so he figured it was still good to use. He took a little bit of time in front of the mirror, checking his reflection, giving himself a side part - if he slicked his hair too much to the back he'd look like a midcentury gangster, which was to be avoided. There. He didn't smell funky, he looked more presentable than usual, and he didn't look like an extra from *Goodfellas*. Totally ready for a date. He figured.

Something that had been niggling at his mind a little bit was the fact that this was his first date with a guy in...forever. Like...years. Erik might have been down on himself for being a twenty-nine year old virgin, but at least he'd *had* a boyfriend (admittedly, a bad boyfriend) within the last two years. While Dalir had gone on dates in the semi-recent past, none of them had been with men.

It wasn't that his sexual preferences were a secret from his family...exactly. It just hadn't specifically come up between anyone other than himself and Shirin. So his well-intentioned aunties and uncles would set him up with girls from the mosque, girls from work, girls from the neighborhood, whenever he was in town and mentioned he had a free night. (That was how they got to him, 'Oh, Dalir!' they would ask, all smiles and innocence. 'What are your plans next Saturday night?' Nothing, he would reply, speaking the truth before his rational brain kicked in and reminded him to lie through his teeth. 'Oh, good!' they'd exclaim, smiles broadening. 'There's a lovely girl, I think you'd have a lot in common, here's her number, call her!' You know. If they hadn't already called her and set up the place and time of their date themselves. So helpful, his family.)

Dalir had flirted, in the recent past, it just hadn't gone anywhere. The nature of his job was such that even finding a night when he'd be guaranteed to be free was tough and before that the police department ate up most of his life - newbies worked the night shift, so unless he found someone who literally only ever wanted to get coffee immediately after *they* got out of work, his prospects were limited.

So this was slightly uncharted territory for him - finding a date and asking him out. It also fell to Dalir to pick the restaurant since was the one who brought up eating out in the first place. He settled on a local brewery that served food. Not super-new, so it probably wouldn't be packed to the gills with people, but still nice enough to necessitate the sweatshirt and hair gel. It also looked kind of dark inside from the pictures he'd seen online and, though he hadn't specifically asked Erik if he preferred mood lighting, he figured it couldn't hurt to go to a place where the light wouldn't be bouncing off his mask like a beacon.
Erik was already waiting for him in the living room when Dalir emerged from his room. He too had gone with jeans and a button-down (blue plaid) with a light brown sweater over it. He looked a little dorky, actually, with the sleeves rolled all the way down to his wrists, but he'd also put some gel in his hair which was strangely reassuring. It was nice to go out with someone who shared his notions of what making an effort looked like.

"That's a really nice sweatshirt," Erik commented and Dalir grinned like he'd just won the lottery. Take that, Shirin.

"Thanks," he said, grabbing his coat. Erik did likewise and also wrapped a scarf around his neck, covering the lower half of his face in the process. Dalir assumed at first that it was just an additional layer between his face and the world - until he got outside. It was freezing, the cold felt like a punch in the face and Dalir performed an involuntary full-body shiver when the icy wind whipped up his nostrils, in his ears, and down the back of his neck. He did have a hat, but left it upstairs, fearing it would mess up his I-made-an-effort hair.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," he muttered, as if swearing was a worthwhile insulation technique. "I wish I had a remote starter."

But alas, he did not and they slid their butts into very cold seats, Dalir's breath misting in the air as he turned the heater on - in vain. A gust of frigid air smacked him in the face. Frigid, stale air since his car hadn't been driven in two weeks.

"Why did you let me do this?" Dalir asked, turning to Erik in mock-accusation as he locked his fingers on the steering wheel. "Why didn't you insist on take-out? We could have done Foodler!"

"You told me Foodler was a waste of money," Erik reminded him, but Dalir could hear the smile in his voice. It was technically true, that Dalir, in his early acquaintance with Erik did express the opinion that he was overspending, making use of his countless delivery apps and Amazon Prime subscription. But it was balmy outside when he made that statement, not an unusually cold winter night in a car whose heating system was taking forever to kick into action.

"Yeah, I'm a closed-minded person sometimes," Dalir informed him, eyes on the road as he inched along the icy streets. "Next time I want to leave your nice, cozy apartment for outside...just say no."

But Dalir knew exactly what they were doing out there. Knew it better than Erik did, probably. It was a perverse desire for normalcy, for doing things the 'right' way that brought this insanity on. They'd met in an unusual way, their relationship proceeded in an unusual way, a date night seemed refreshing, by contrast. Mozzarella sticks and beer, not sob stories on couches and spot-checks for drugs. He wasn't looking for a fresh start for them, not exactly, but at least a starting place for their new relationship.

Normal, Dalir reflected grimly, could be vastly overrated.

It was a twenty minute drive to the brewery and Erik reached over to fiddle with the radio. It landed on a Justin Bieber song, which, astonishingly, Erik let play.

"What about no pop music?" Dalir asked, glancing over at him. Erik cocked his head, but his expression was unreadable since Dalir couldn't see his mouth.

"I never said no pop music," Erik replied, tapping a finger along the arm rest to the beat unconsciously.
"What about that first time we went for a drive - you said no pop music and no alt rock," Dalir reminded him. "Remember? I rapped. Badly."

From beneath the scarf came a low chuckle, "Well, I didn't know you that well then," Erik replied with a shrug. "I didn't want to bug you. I tend to sing along to songs I know, in the car. It's annoying, I've been told. I'm using all my willpower to hold back right now."

Dalir grinned; the car was heating up and improving his mood. "Now you don't care about annoying me?"

"Not as much," Erik admitted and Dalir laughed. This was good, that Erik was relaxing around him. If Dalir couldn’t get normal from this relationship, he’d settle for a relaxed Erik.

Or a more relaxed Erik, at any rate. He wasn’t treated to any Bieber covers, but Erik did hum along to ‘Havana,’ which wasn’t annoying. Dalir thought Erik’s music was the one thing he was confident about. Who told him it was annoying when he sang in the car? His...dad?

Ugh. No, Dalir reflected as they pulled into the restaurant’s parking lot. Probably Alexis. He had no intention of asking for confirmation, but Dalir was perfectly content assuming that at least some of Erik’s self-esteem problems had to do with Alexis. Who wanted him to be...a panther or something equally stupid, rather than a guy who wore dorky sweaters and sang in the car.

He banished all thoughts of Erik’s ex as he got the door and held it for him. No ghosts allowed on this Official First Date.

Gingerly and (he hoped) inconspicuously, Dalir checked to see if his hair was staying in place. Ah, better than he hoped. The air had frozen the gel in place. He’d have to chip it off with a hammer later.

The pub was half empty, though the bar area was pretty well populated. There was no hostess stand, just a sign by the door that invited them to seat themselves. Erik made a beeline to a back booth, unwound his scarf and tossed it onto the seat, then inclined his head toward another sign that said ‘Restrooms.’

“I’ll be back in a minute, if they have porter on tap, I’ll take it.”

“What?” Dalir asked, surprised. “Not IPA?”

Erik shook his head, “Not on a night like this.”

He disappeared and a girl with large gauges and a sweet smile came over a minute later to take his drink order and point out the menus stuffed behind the ketchup bottle rack.

“Should I wait until your friend comes back to give the specials?” she asked.

“No need,” Dalir said as Erik emerged from the restrooms. “He’s back.”

The girl turned slightly and did what Dalir was coming to think of as the Classic Erik triple-take. First they looked and saw a dude. Then they looked as saw a very large, very tall dude. Then they realized that said large, tall dude was wearing a mask. Dalir was pretty sure he only did a double-take the first time he met Erik and privately congratulated himself on perfecting the art of chill.

“Excuse me,” Erik said, sidling around her to slide into the booth. She blinked rapidly, then cleared her throat and informed them that there was a French onion soup on offer, prime rib au jus, and a fish casserole.
“Cool, thanks,” Dalir said. She took a beat to glance at Erik again before she scampered back around the bar. “I don’t know why I asked to hear the specials, I’m going to get sliders and fries. Are you eating?”

Erik shook his head, “Hence the porter, it’s like drinking a loaf of bread.”

“See, I love that,” Dalir sighed blissfully. He’d ordered a nitro coffee stout and was looking forward to it. “If I knew you drank dark beers, I would have stocked your apartment better.”

“Somehow I doubt it,” Erik replied, idly picking up the salt shaker and whirling it around on its base with the tip of his finger. “Letting me drink is one thing, but I feel like it would have been an ethical violation to run out and procure liquor for me.”

Dalir snorted; he’d had done with ethics months ago, as Shirin yelled at him for so very recently. “Well, I wouldn’t get you wine LaLaLoopsy. I didn’t realize you were such a lightweight.”

“First,” Erik said, leaning across the booth, “it was a lot of wine in a very short time period. Second, you weren’t exactly the picture of sober decorum that night either. Third...who or what is LaLaLoopsy?”

“A terrifying doll,” Dalir explained, taking his phone out of his pocket to show Erik a series of pictures of dolls with colored hair, spaghetti limbs, and soulless eyes. “Yas wanted one a few years ago. Someday the thing is going to fall out of a closet and scare the shit out of my sister…”

They spent a few minutes reminiscing about the toys of their childhoods and how they just weren’t as scary as the current crop of childrens’ toys (Furbies, Teddy Ruxpins, and Garbage Pail Kids excluded). They were keeping up such a lively conversation that fifteen minutes went by before Dalir realized they didn’t have drinks. Not even water.

He glanced over to the bar where their waitress was making chit-chat with another customer. At first, he assumed she was also serving him, but then another server came out of the kitchen with the man’s dinner (he went for the prime rib) and Dalir felt himself getting annoyed.

“I don’t snap in restaurants,” he said, leaning far over the table to whisper to Erik while also staring at the waitress hoping she’d telepathically realize she’d forgotten their beers. “It’s incredibly rude and I recognize that. But I’m tempted.”

Erik glanced in the direction Dalir was looking and shrugged. “Maybe she’s busy.”

“The beers are on tap,” Dalir pointed out. The bartender (a stocky guy who might be cute under a big red lumberjack beard) was slicing lemons. The ultimate indicator of Not Busy. “I’m going over.”

“It hasn’t been that long - ”

But Dalir was up and standing by the edge of the bar - drumming his fingers on the wooden counter for good measure. The waitress saw him and suddenly busied herself refilling waters another table. The bartender stopped cutting lemons. He smiled and asked, “Dining in or taking out?”

“We put in our drink order twenty minutes ago,” Dalir said, nodding toward Erik. “Just making sure they didn’t get...lost.”

The bartender glanced over Dalir’s shoulder and his smile faded slightly. Rather, it disappeared into his beard. “Yeah, sorry. Um. What’d you order?”
Dalir repeated the order, slowly, like he thought the bartender might be hard of hearing. The guy didn’t seem insulted, he just poured the drinks quickly and handed them over.

“Let them settle!” was his parting piece of advice.

Erik had stopped playing with the salt shaker and looked up at Dalir through the eyeholes of the mask. “Do you...want to go?”

“No,” Dalir said, setting their drinks down a little harder than was necessary on the table. “Why would I want that? I’m just pissed that unless you go to the same tattoo place as the servers or listen to the same bands, apparently, they just forget about you here. It’s bullshit, is all I’m saying.”

Erik didn’t say anything, he just looked at his drink. Stared, really. Maybe he was taking the bartender’s advice to heart.

“So,” Erik ventured when both the beers and Dalir’s temper settled. “You said you don’t really care about music...but you must have some favorite bands at least. Doesn’t everyone?”

“I listen to podcasts,” Dalir shrugged. “Like, even before smartphones, I listened to the radio, like whatever was on.’

“But not the lyrics,” Erik recalled.

“Nope,” he shook his head and drank some of his beer. “I mean...okay, bands. I definitely used to listen to Blink-182. Um. Coldplay, a little. Red Hot Chili Peppers because, come on.”

Erik was nodding like he was listening and found Dalir’s response to be reasonable, but his eyes were crinkled and he brought a hand up to his mouth like he was trying to stifle laughter. “Mmm. Mmm-hmm.”

“Oh, come on!” Dalir said, waving a hand a little extravagantly. “Everyone loves that song about Napoleon!”

“It’s not...” Erik took a sip of his beer and tried to gather his thoughts. “It’s not...individually, it’s not really anything, but...taken together. As a group. I’m trying to figure out your taste - ”

“So what, I have bad taste?” Dalir asked, but he smiled so Erik knew he wasn’t annoyed.

“You don’t have bad taste,” Erik shook his head. “I just don’t think you have any taste.”

Dalir laughed and Erik chuckled, giving him an apologetic shrug. “I don’t know what I expected you to say, it’s not like I was...thinking you’d say Rufus Wainwright’s Poses got you through high school or that Gogol Bordello is your workout jam or...I was thinking maybe some Radiohead - ”

“They wrote ‘Creep’!” Dalir interrupted him triumphantly, like this was a contest and he was going to win a prize.

“They did write ‘Creep,’” Erik said, but try as he might he couldn’t keep the patronizing tone out of his voice. “Very good.”

“I’m going to throw this sugar packet at you,” Dalir said, holding up a little yellow paper package threateningly.

The smirk Erik was levelling at him was downright impish. “I think that’s Splenda, actually.”

Wham. Right between the eyes. Of the mask, but still, Dalir made his point.
They were both giggling like idiots, their beers almost done, but still the waitress hadn’t made a triumphant return. Instead, a clean-shaven, middle aged man approached the table with a resolved look on his face.

“I’m going to have to ask you guys to leave,” he said firmly. Erik stopped laughing at once and Dalir looked at the guy like he suddenly sprouted a second beardless, middle-aged face to match the first.

“What? Why? Because I threw a sugar packet at him?”

“Splenda,” Erik muttered under his breath, but he was already going for his scarf.

Dalir held up a hand to stop him, “Hang on, this is ridiculous - ”

“You’re disrupting the other diners’ evening,” the man who Dalir figured had to be the manager stated. “We’ve had complaints.”

Erik threw a twenty on the table, muttered, “Sorry,” and got out of the booth, shrugging into his coat. Almost like he’d been expecting it. Dalir, for his part, was still too stunned to move. What the fuck?

Once, exactly once he’d gotten kicked out of restaurant and that was a group kick-out, when he was in high school and his Auntie Farrah’s mother wouldn’t take off her hijab following ‘customer complaints.’ They hadn’t so much been kicked out as they refused to eat in a racist restaurant - something his Auntie Farrah actually said to the manager on the way out.

Erik was halfway to the door; clearly he had no intention of trying to fight the power and he was waiting, radiating a nervous energy that Dalir wasn’t the only one to pick up on. One of the burlier guys at the bar got up and stood between Erik and his date, like he was a tipsy knight. He even did the dude-bro thing of folding his fisted hands under his biceps, like a pufferfish in the wild trying to look intimidating. Erik didn’t appear to notice, his eyes were locked on Dalir and he jerked his head toward the door.

Still determined to prove some kind of point, Dalir picked up Erik’s twenty and substituted a ten and a five from his own pocket.

“You people don’t deserve that kind of tip,” he muttered, handing the money back to Erik and stalking toward the door. Erik followed along quickly, darting out the door behind Dalir, letting out a grunt of discomfort and hastily wrapping the scarf around his face as they made their way to the car. Storming out in a huff was difficult when the ground was frozen, Dalir discovered. He was forced to shuffle out in a huff, which did not have the same impact.

Back into the cold car they went - unfortunately Dalir wasn’t fuming enough to let off any actual steam. “I don’t know if that was a gay thing or a Middle Eastern guy thing - ”

“Pretty sure it was a creepy guy in a mask thing,” Erik cut him off, slumping down in his seat, half turned away. “Sorry.”

“Do. Not. Apologize,” Dalir gritted out. “Because, I was just going to say if it was any of the above, that’s fucking bullshit. And discriminatory - ”

“People can’t help what makes them uncomfortable - ”

“Okay,” Dalir could interrupt Erik just as well as Erik could interrupt him. “If it was actually a gay thing or a Middle Eastern racist thing, would you be saying that? Like, if they said, ‘Hey, no homos are allowed to drink our beer!’ or ‘Take your Sharia Law back to Iran,’ like, would you be all hang-dog? Or would you be pissed.”
Erik hesitated, “I’d be pissed. But I’m pretty sure that wasn’t what it was.”

Frankly, so was Dalir, despite all his protestations that it might have had to do with him. Or both of them together, not just Erik by himself.

“Restaurants are tricky,” Erik said quietly. “Go in with the mask, people are afraid. Without it...sickened. So...lesser of two evils. I was seven the first time I was kicked out of a restaurant - not wearing the mask, I didn’t have one then. They didn’t even take our drink order, so really, this was a much better experience.”

Don’t ask him. Don’t ask him. Don’t ask him.

“Who...” Dalir licked his lips, unable to help himself. “Who...came up with the mask, anyway? Whose idea was it?”

“Mine” Erik replied and Dalir was so taken aback he whipped his head around to look at him incredulously. Erik looked back and shrugged. “I was sick of being homeschooled, but I knew I couldn’t just...go to school looking like I do. Those little medical masks don’t do the job, they don’t...cover everything. So I asked for something like this. And for a while it was okay. People figured it was medical, surprisingly no one ever tried to take it, touch it. I wasn’t even teased about it, really. People stuck to making fun of my hair, or the fact that I was short. Then...in high school...”

He sighed. Gestured at himself with his left hand. All six-and-a-half feet of him.

“Shit,” Dalir replied, well able to guess the rest. He might have a visceral, pleasurable response to (as Shirin called them) ‘meathead Guido gym rats,’ but other people (college-age girls with friendly smiles and gauged ears, maybe) did not.

“I’ve read memoirs and stuff, articles,” Erik went on. “From people who were...disfigured, or disabled and they’re always talking about how hard it is to be pitied. But actually, I really liked pity. Pity I could work with since it’s...kind of rooted in empathy, you know? But I still don’t cope well with people being afraid of me. I can’t...work with that. I don’t know how to handle it.”

Erik leaned his head back against the car seat. The radio was quiet, off. For once his hands were still. “So that’s why I don’t go out. Why I waste my money on Foodler and Prime and Blue Apron and all that crap. I don’t know how to handle it. Them. Other people. It’s...really exhausting, to go out and not know how people are going to react, to constantly be on guard.”

“You could have said,” Dalir said softly, wanting to take a hand off the wheel to lay on top of one of Erik’s. But he didn’t know if he wanted contact. Despite Erik’s claims, there was still a lot Dalir didn’t know about him. “We didn’t have to go out.”

“You wanted to,” Erik replied simply. “You were...so nice about it. Excited, like...it didn’t occur to you that it would be a problem. Do you know how rare that is for me? For people to forget like that? It only ever happens with people I’ve known for years and years.”

It was true, Dalir realized. He had forgotten - or he hadn’t considered just how people, strangers, would perceive Erik. He didn’t know if that was laudable or just callous.

“You forgot,” Erik repeated, softly, like he was savoring the word. “And I tried to forget too.”

They were quiet the rest of the car ride home. Erik put his elbow on the center console, cradling his brow against his palm. Dalir didn’t reach out for him, not until he pulled into a spot in front of the apartment. Erik unbuckled and Dalir reached out and grabbed his elbow.
“We’re going to have to go into the tundra eventually,” Erik said with a small smile and Dalir’s heart gave a quick thump-thump, infusing his body with a kind of frenzied adoration. Even after their crappy night out, Erik still tried to keep it light. Make a joke (a weak joke, but still).

Dalir leaned across the console and pressed a kiss to his lips. The smile morphed into an answering pressure, which proved difficult to build on in the cramped confines of a car.

“Into the tundra,” Dalir pulled back to mutter. “Then, Foodler. Then...you tired?”

“Not really,” Erik replied before he tugged his scarf back up. Dalir smiled.

“Me either.”

Chapter End Notes

I bet their food was crappy anyway.
Burgers and fries were a double-edged sword - the one edge was greasy and delicious and extra-satisfying, especially after downing another beer waiting for the Foodler guy to get to the apartment. The other edge was that consuming greasy deliciousness didn't really fire up the libido. So rather than indulging his fantasy of ripping off one of Erik's button-downs against the kitchen island, Dalir found himself snuggling up against Erik's sweater on the couch. Not sexy, but undeniably cozy. Maybe a little too cozy.

“I overcompensated,” Erik said out of the blue, glancing at the thermostat which he’d cranked up way past guest heat after they got in from the cold. “Hold on a sec…”

Dalir groaned as Erik rose off the couch to turn the heat down. While he was standing, Erik also took the opportunity to pull off his sweater, which didn't seem to want to peel off his arms. The action caused his shirt underneath to ride up enough to expose the skin of his stomach - pasty white, but firm, the muscles shifting briefly as Erik struggled to get himself un-stuck. Graceful the guy was not, but Dalir fixated on his body moreso than on his klutziness. For a guy who subsisted on burgers, fries, and glorified chicken fingers, he was unfairly fit.

Definitely a result of the PT - Dalir had a sense that the Carriere metabolism alone would not be enough to compensate for Erik’s five-year-old palate and preferred lifestyle of parking his ass on a piano bench or in front of a computer seven hours a day.

It had taken Dalir a while to realize that, apart from the occasional granola bar for midday sustenance and vegetables that were included in a noodley stir-fry, Erik’s diet was absolute crap. Still, crap or not, Dalir was taking it as a good thing that Erik was getting slightly more comfortable eating in front of him. He’d done so tonight, but he did it Erik-style, cutting his burger into bite sized pieces. It made Dalir wonder how he'd gotten through school - did he subsist on carrot sticks and fries? Mask-friendly lunch items only?

"So, like, when you were in school - " Dalir started to ask once Erik was free of the sweater and had smoothed his shirt back down, but he was cut off by Erik raising a hand to silence him. Didn’t take a genius to get the message and Dalir smiled up at him apologetically, "Sorry. I told you, my sister thinks I'm nosy."

Luckily, Erik didn't seem pissed. His mouth turned up at the corner into an ironic smile, he put his hands on the back of the couch and leaned over to suggest, "Let's play a game - every time you feel like asking me one question, I get to ask you three."

"Three?" Dalir asked, tilting his head back, kind of hoping Erik would just forget the game thing and kiss him, but no dice. "Why three?

Because, Erik patiently explained. They'd spent the last few months focusing on Erik's past, problems, and current drama. Which made sense, given what Dalir's job entailed.
"But," he continued, slightly hesitantly, fingers tightening on the back of the couch as Erik leaned slightly away. "You've kind of got the upper hand. You know basically all the awful things I've done, you could probably write a book about me if you want, Poor Pain Management and You, or something - "

"I don't only know awful things about you," Dalir tried to defend himself, but Erik lifted up his left hand and clamped it over Dalir’s mouth. The callouses on his fingers rubbed against Dalir’s cheek and the place on his upper lip where Erik’s thumb was resting. It was unexpectedly hot.

"Three things," Erik repeated, lowering his hand. Dalir blinked and tried to pay attention. "For every one. So, go ahead, what were you going to ask?"

What was he going to ask? Something really boring and basic. Dalir struggled to come up with something profound, but fell short.

"What'd you do in school, like, for lunch?" he asked lamely. "Since you don’t like people watching you eat - did you eat in the guidance office or something?"

Erik shook his head and took up his place on the sofa beside Dalir who immediately relaxed into his side. He felt Erik tense underneath him very slightly, but it was only a second before he relaxed in turn. "I ate in the cafeteria, like anyone else. I just packed lunches that didn't make a mess. Passed on pizza Fridays."

Okay, maybe the question was banal, but the answer was shocking.

"I could never," Dalir shook his head, practically scandalized. "I love pizza."

"Well, so do I, so does everybody," Erik acknowledged this universal fact. "But the mask is kind of expensive, I try really hard not to let it get stained. Okay, so, my turn - also school-related, so I'm staying on topic...anyway. Were you popular in high school? Like, in terms of being a Popular Kid - all-caps?"

Erik was looking down at Dalir curiously, though it took him a beat to parse the question: What did he mean by "all-caps"? Like, superlatives in the yearbook? (Dalir was nominated for both Most Athletic, but didn’t win.) But that would be asking another question and that was Against The Rules.

"Ehhhhhh," Dalir made an either-or gesture with his right hand. "I don't know that my school had a popular crowd - "

"You were," Erik grinned, shaking his head. His left arm drifted down to where it had been resting on the back of the couch to curl around Dalir’s shoulders. "You so were, that's something only a popular kid would say."

"I was on the soccer team," Dalir informed him with a shrug. "If you played sports, you were kind of...generally popular. Not popular, I should just say well-liked. It's not like people copied my style or anything - not that I had style to copy. But I had friends, I don't think anyone was trash-talking me, or if they were, I didn't hear about it. Did your school have sports?"

Erik pressed his lips together and shook his head, "Nope. I only asked you one, you have to wait."

"Hey, that was not established when you laid out the rules - "

"It was implied," Erik said simply. "So I asked you one question: Were you popular? You said yes, which, yeah, I kind of figured you were - "
"How did you figure that - "

"You are so awful at this game," Erik muttered, craning his neck back and addressing the critique to the ceiling. Dalir was about to comment that Erik himself did not seem unpopular (or did he forget that he was put on the school blog with the title of 'Best Rehearsal Pianist EVA?') when he continued, "Question Number Two - Did you go to prom?"

Why are you so interested in my high school experience? Dalir managed to keep that question to himself and thought he might have guessed the reason already, or at least a possible reason: Dalir already knew a bunch of mundane stuff about Erik's life and past, so he was playing catch-up and trying to learn some random factoids about Dalir. And add to that the fact that Erik went to a funky private school, he might just have been wondering about what life was like for the plebs at Dearborn High School (class of 2003).

"Yes, I went to prom," Dalir replied, then elaborated. "With a girl from the girls' soccer team - and if your third question was something along the lines of 'Did you get laid?' the answer is no - in the first place, I wasn't interested, and in the second place I'm pretty sure she wasn't either. We went in a group, our parents got a limo, we took pictures, we ate really boring banquet hall food, danced...there was an after-party at some kid's house, but there was a keg and Noor - my date - got a little freaked out, thinking that the cops were going to bust the party and she'd get in trouble for being there and lose her college scholarship. So I called one of my cousins and he picked us up. I was home by midnight, all in all, kind of a bust. What's your third question?"

Erik smiled like the cat that got the canary. "I'm good for now."

"Man!" Dalir exclaimed. "That is not fair! You said three questions."

"I did," Erik agreed sedately. "I just didn't tell you how they'd be spaced out."

Dalir folded his arms and glared at Erik in mock-accusation. "I bet you cheat at Monopoly too."

Erik laughed and the sound was adorable, so Dalir forgave him. And he was honest enough with himself to admit that maybe he could ease up on investigating Erik's life. Just a touch. Maybe that had actually been Erik's goal all along - a cutesy, non-confrontational way to request that Dalir please mind his own business unless he was specifically invited into Erik’s business.

He's insanely non-confrontational, Christine told him, that long-ago afternoon in the park.

Before he could stop himself, Dalir started to voice yet another question. "Hey, have you heard from - "

But Erik was already shaking his head and holding up two fingers with his right hand.

Dalir couldn't help himself, he laughed. "Okay, okay, I get the message. No more questions. I'm just wondering - not asking or anything like that, just wondering, out loud, like, putting a thought out into the universe - what we're going to do with the rest of the night. Period. No question marks."

"Um…” Erik hesitated, eyes flickering between Dalir’s face and his bedroom door. “I don’t want to waste my third question...but that kind of depends on whether you’d like to...ah...have a repeat of last week. Would you?"

Erik smiled at him shyly and Dalir just about melted. You are so fucking cute, he thought. That should not be a turn-on.
And yet there they were. There was just something about Erik’s shyness, his politeness, his trying so hard not to impose or be in the way that drove Dalir to distraction. There was something just sort of...unexpectedly sexy about a big guy like that being so gentle and courteous.

Dalir stood up and cocked his head at the doorway of his bedroom. “Come on.”

This time they made it to the bed without incident, Erik reclining and Dalir half on top of him, curling his fingers around the back of his head, feeling short bristles brush against the pads of his fingers. Ah, the fresh, fuzzy feeling of new-haircut. Dalir had noticed it before, but hadn't touched Erik's hair since he arrived home. The cut wasn't new, just a tidy of Erik's usual look: a kind of old-fashioned standard man's haircut, as if the barber had been going for an undercut, but left the top just a little too short. His fingers drifted up, but slowly, purposefully to tangle with the longer, wavy hair on the top of his head. Erik responded by tilting his head and their lips met for a kiss, but when Dalir’s fingertips ventured too close to the mask’s strings, the muscles in his neck stiffened perceptibly and he pulled away.

“I’m not going to touch it,” Dalir said, lowering his hand immediately, drawing back in an instinctive response to Erik's withdrawal.

Erik closed his eyes and shut his mouth, frowning. “I didn’t think you were,” he muttered, half to himself. “Or...I figured you weren’t. Just habit. Sorry.”

"It's okay." It wasn't okay, but Dalir tried to tamp down on his mounting frustrations regarding the mask. That fucking mask. After he first glimpsed Erik’s face in the video, he found himself grateful for it. If he was brutally honest with himself he could admit that, had he seen Erik's face from the start, he might not have fallen for him in the first place - scratch that, he might have declined the case and never met him at all.

Not because he was that squeamish, but because he would have doubted his ability to treat Erik normally from the get-go. He would have stared, then made every effort to look away so that he was pointedly not staring. He might have felt some irrational, involuntary anxiety about touching him, sitting too close. Instinctive lizard hind-brain survival instinct about avoiding things that might contaminate him. Because he'd met him with the mask on, interacted with him for a while before he realized exactly why he wore it, for weeks before he found out what it covered, he'd never developed that first instinctual revulsion.

But now the mask left them in this shitty in-between place. In getting used to the mask, Dalir wasn’t able to get used to his face - and it was pretty clear that Erik wasn’t going to take it off of his own volition. That the idea of Dalir taking it off actively scared him.

Alexis saw, Dalir reminded himself a little resentfully. And was a dick. I won’t be a dick...but he doesn’t know that.

Determination furrowed Dalir's brow and set his mouth in a hard line - a game face better suited for soccer or riot squad duty, not for romance. When Erik kissed him back, it was tentatively, and there was tension in his shoulders, in the line of his neck under Dalir's hand...though that might have been because he had difficulty turning his head, with the thick bands of scars pressing now against Dalir's fingers.

Eventually though they found a rhythm, and Erik started touching Dalir for a change, able to snake his own fingers through Dalir's hair (getting too long, he hadn't gotten a haircut on vacation) and sneaked one hand under Dalir's shirt, long fingers splayed against his back.

Dalir pulled away to remove his shirt and Erik twisted away, getting off the bed - he was hard this
time, so it wasn't like he wasn't enjoying himself...but Dalir realized they'd left the door open and light from the hallway was streaming in.

"Lie down, I'll get it," Dalir insisted. "Just...um. If you want to get...y'know. Less-clothed. And stuff..."

Stop talking! he shouted at himself in horror. You have no game. NO GAME. Don't try to have game!

Luckily Erik didn't hold his sorry version of pillow talk against him. Dalir glanced at him over his shoulder before he plunged them into darkness. Erik was undoing the buttons of his shirt with one hand and undoing the buttons on his jeans with the other. Yes!

But if Dalir thought the rest of the night was going to pass in romantic bliss, everything flowing beautifully like...some kind of big, gay, sex river into a, uh, ocean of romantic tranquility (nope, nope, terrible similie STOP PRETENDING YOU HAVE GAME), he was destined to be disappointed.

There was a lot of start and stop. Granted, it had been a while since Dalir had gone to bed with someone, but Erik was...skittish. There were places he didn't want Dalir to touch, clearly. Anytime Dalir started to get too close to a patch of scarring, Erik would stick his own hands between his skin and Dalir's hands or lips. Dalir was constantly repositioned away from touching Erik on his back too much, or his neck. The chest seemed fine (and Dalir wondered if the hair on his chest was red or brown), his arms were fine (and Dalir wanted light to know if the freckles that dotted Erik's arms so profusely continued anywhere else), but Erik jerked away when Dalir's thumb brushed his right ear on its way to his hair.

Dalir was starting to feel less insecure about his lack of game; nothing went further toward killing the mood than a guy who constantly fidgeted under him like he didn't want to be touched.

There was a chunk missing from Erik's side, near his right hip, an unnatural indentation which Dalir only realized was there when he moved his hands lower down Erik's side. Erik practically rolled off the bed, prompting Dalir to sit back on his haunches. There wasn't any light to see by, but he sensed Erik raising an arm, probably to press his fingers against the mask.

"Sorry," he grunted unhappily.

"It's..." Dalir trailed off. It wasn't okay. It was shitty - for both of them. Dalir sucked in a breath and asked, "I mean, do you want...would you rather...do...me?"

It was blunt, but effective.

"That could be...better, yeah," Erik said, clearing his throat. "Um. Is there anything you'd like me to...do?"

"Um...just...whatever," Dalir said vaguely, a dozen or so scenarios running through his mind, all of which he dismissed since it would probably involve too much mutual touching. "Improvise."

They switched positions slightly, Dalir lying back while Erik traced his body with his mouth and hands. It was a little strange, sometimes, to feel the hard drag of the mask's nose against his chest, unyielding and cold. It was also similarly disconcerting when they kissed and the warmth and give of Erik's mouth and chin was interrupted by the hard planes of the mask. Once or twice Dalir wondered whether or not Erik kissed Alexis with the mask on. Whether he only did this because he'd gotten so hurt the last time.
This isn't fair, Dalir thought, distracted from pleasure just enough to feel resentful. For him or me.

Erik was a little more vocal than Dalir was - constantly asking if this was okay, if Dalir liked that, if he'd rather he did something else. Dalir wasn't sure whether Erik's politeness just got turned up to full-throttle when he was in an intimate situation or whether this was just his inexperience talking, but Dalir responded back, a little curtly. "Yeah. That's fine. You're, um, doing great."

When Erik actually got around to sucking him off, Dalir gave him a thumb's-up of approval, quickly aborted, and sent a silent prayer of gratitude that it was pitch dark and the evidence of his supreme dorkiness could not actually be seen. This part though...this was nice. Erik couldn't ask any questions and Dalir didn't feel any pressure to whisper sweet nothings that would just turn into clunky pronouncements.

Maybe neither of them were the smoothest lovers in the world, but it all worked out pretty well in the end. At least, Dalir wasn't complaining.

"Want me to do you?" he asked a little breathlessly when Erik had risen back up to lie beside him.

"Sure," Erik said, a little out of breath himself. "Um. If you want."

Erik scooted back up on the bed and Dalir pushed him back against the pillows, one hand on his stomach. "Just...relax, okay? Just try...god, I feel like I'm about to do some weird medical thing, sorry, that's not romantic."

He heard the smile in Erik's voice, a low chuckle that brought the mood back with a vengeance. "That's okay."

It was kind of funny: Erik wasn't loud, but he did make a lot of noise, which was kind of encouraging. Little groans and gasps that urged Dalir on - it took longer for him to get Erik off than it had for Erik to bring him to completion, but Dalir managed it, which made him feel a sense of possibly misbegotten pride; take that anti-anxiety medications with libido-killing side effects. One point Nouri! Victory over SSRIs!

All of this he kept to himself; no doubt Erik would be less than flattered if he realized Dalir reduced their burgeoning sex life to a battle between Dalir's non-existent game and his daily pharmaceuticals.

Dalir flopped down onto the bed beside Erik, tucking his head under Erik's chin. Erik lay an arm around him loosely and muttered, "I'm getting up in a minute. Definitely getting up."

"Mmm," Dalir muttered, already half-asleep. "You can stay if you want, you know. No skin off my back."

"I shouldn't," Erik yawned. "I really shouldn't."

Stay, Dalir thought drowsily, draping an arm over Erik's bare stomach. Just let this one thing be easy, okay? Just this one thing...

Despite Erik's protestations, when Dalir fell asleep it was with Erik's chin resting on the top of his head and to the feeling of his stomach, rising and falling gently, under his arm.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dalir woke up feeling pleasantly warm. The room was still dark, presumably the outside was still sub-arctic, but evidently Dalir's mattress had developed a furnace setting. Or maybe he'd gone out and bought himself one of those microwaveable rice bags and lined them up so that he could benefit from their heat all night long. Dalir didn't remember having done that, but sometimes he was smart...ah, ah. It wasn't that Dalir was super smart and sleep-buying bedwarmers. Just that Erik was still there.

The tiny bit of ambient light creeping under the door, through the cracks in the window hadn't been enough for Dalir to see clearly earlier, but he could make out Erik's shape beside him. Carefully, trying not to wake him up, Dalir shifted and looked at him through heavy-lidded eyes; Erik was sleeping on his right side, face was turned away and Dalir hoped he hadn't slept in the mask. The ties weren't visible in his hair, so maybe it had fallen off. Couldn't be comfortable to sleep in.

The blankets were half fallen off, revealing the untouched flesh of his left shoulder and arm. Erik explained, a little, when they first met about the damage, how he'd been lying facedown on the floor, body slumped to the right, which was where most of the worst of the scars were located. The left side was more or less whole, at least in huge swatches of skin. If Dalir squinted, he could just make out the freckles on his shoulder, trailing down his arm, the skin smooth over muscle and bone. His neck on that side was smooth too, and the ear, the hairline...

Dalir must have come too close, been breathing too loudly in his ear because Erik startled awake. He rolled onto his back, blinking in that eyelids-crusted-together way. The mask had fallen off and all of a sudden that face was inches from Dalir's own. Instinctively, Dalir flinched back, the motion enough to rouse Erik into full consciousness. Having no recourse, Dalir lay stiffly back against the pillow, shut his eyes and feigned sleep.

Beside him, Erik went stiff, hesitantly sitting up, looking down at Dalir. Dalir didn't move - then he realized he was holding his breath, which would look suspicious. He tried to exhale in as natural a manner as he could while he felt Erik staring at him. If he opened his eyes, they could just have it over with. It could be an accident, an 'Oh, hey, what a surprise! You slept here and I looked at you and everything was okay!' Dalir already knew what he looked like, after all, now he knew he wasn't wearing his mask. It would be simplicity itself to let his eyes flutter open.

But Erik was already up and moving out of bed, pulling his pants back on, planting his feet on the floor, shuffling away. Dalir opened his eyes too late and then, proving that acting was not in his future, let out a very fake-sounding yawn. "Oh, hey," he said into his hand. "Coming or going?"

"Going," Erik said, back to him. He was tying the mask back on even as he walked away. "Sorry."

"About what?" Dalir asked, because pretending to be an idiot occasionally got him out of trouble. "For sleeping here? I told you I don't care."

He sat up and stared at Erik's back, exposed now, both sides, the good and the bad.

"But I do," Erik said simply. "I care very much. Sorry. It won't happen again."

But I want it to happen again.
Without considering...well, anything other than what he wanted, Dalir tossed the covers up and got behind Erik before he could leave - yeah, naked, but desperate times. He wrapped his arms around Erik's back and pressed his face between his shoulder blades. Erik stiffened, as he expected, but Dalir was dogged.

"I'm not looking," he promised. "Eyes shut and everything."

Dalir was kissing his way down Erik's spine when he felt rather than heard him say, "Stop. Please stop."

"Why?" Dalir asked, pressing his head against Erik's left shoulder, with mounting frustration. "Don't you want - "

"I am asking you - please - to stop," he said again. The hands that had been holding Dalir's arm's in place gently pulled them away from his abdomen. He put a hand on the door and left. "Like I said - it won't happen again."

Erik darted out before Dalir could say anything else - too quickly, maybe because as the door shut behind him, Dalir heard the sound of something heavy stumbling back and landing on the floor.

"Fuck."

Erik's voice carried through the door, a melancholy oath. Dalir grabbed a pair of pajama bottoms, just to cover up, wanting to go out there, wanting to give the guy some privacy, some dignity, wondering all the while just what the fuck they thought they were doing.

Even with his thoughts muddled what with the just waking up and the rejection, Dalir knew with certainty that they couldn't just...keep going like they were. With Erik so twitchy and Dalir so unsure as to what was going to set him off. Intimacy - not just the physical kind, but real closeness - was going to be impossible if Erik was so preoccupied about keeping his face covered. It wasn't like Dalir was naive, he didn't think that if Erik took his mask off they'd have some kind of epic kiss, thus fixing all their problems forever. Relationships were work. He understood that. Just this part of it shouldn't be so much work.

"Erik," Dalir said through the door.

"Yeah?" Erik asked, voice coming from somewhere around Dalir's knees. "If the question is 'Do you need help?' the answer is no."

"This isn't going to work."

Shuffling. A thud. Then Erik again; apparently he was sitting on the other side of the door. "Yeah. I thought not."

"No, listen - you're sitting there so I can't open the door, aren't you?"

"...maybe."

"Okay," Dalir crouched down so that, even if he and Erik couldn't see each other, they were on a level. "See, when I say 'this isn't going to work,' I don't mean you and me can't work in general, okay? Okay? Say something so I know you're listening."

"I'm listening."

"Good." Dalir sat down, mimicking Erik, unseen on the other side. "But if you...are seriously
going to pretend to be a doorstop just so I don't see your face, that's a problem. I don't...I understand
that you don't want me to look at you on the regular. But it's not reasonable to assume I can't look
at you ever. You want to wear the mask around the house? Fine. You want to wear it in bed? I
won't stop you, that's your call. But...I can't be with you if you're going to be this tense and freaked
out all the time. You're making it shitty for both of us. And it doesn't have to be."

Long long pause. Then, "I'm listening."

Dalir blew out a breath and knocked his head very gently into the door. "I mean, Alexis saw you.
And he's a douche."

"Right, but you know what he said," Erik pointed out with a sigh so heavy Dalir felt the door rattle.
"Being a douche doesn't make him any less right. I look awful, Dalir. It's...it barely looks like a
human face. I'm not throwing myself a pity party, I've lived with this face for twenty-five years
and I don't like to look at it. My father doesn't like to look at it. You won't either, believe me."

"So I won't run out to Walgreens and your picture printed on one of those throw blankets," Dalir
replied.

"What?"

"Not important, my parents have one of Yas and Reza, it's awful - also, not relevant," Dalir turned
the conversation back on course. "I'm not saying that in order for us to have a relationship I need to
look at you all the time - especially if it makes you uncomfortable. But I'm saying that you
constantly trying to keep me from seeing you is going to sink us before we even get started. And
that seems like a waste to me, man, it really does. Because I think we could have something.
Something...really good. Are you listening?"

"Right," Erik murmured; Dalir had to press his ear to the door to make out what he was saying. "It
isn't fair. For you not to know what you think you want."

"That is not what I - crap!"

Erik opened the door and Dalir, who had been leaning against it, fell backwards, head landing
between his feet. For a split second, Erik seemed to forget why it was he opened the door, he
cried down and put an arm under Dalir's elbow to haul him upright. "Sorry!"

"It's...um. It's okay," Dalir said, letting Erik help him up. The mask was back on. The lights weren't
on in the hallway, but there was enough light coming in from the kitchen to see by. "So. Are we
doing this?"

Erik swallowed. Took a deep breath.

"Yeah," he said, his ordinarily smooth and remarkable voice thin and croaky. The defeated posture,
the already wounded look in his eyes almost made Dalir call it off, but he held firm. They'd just be
having this same conversation in a few hours, a few days, it didn't matter. They'd keep circling
each other, Erik constantly convinced that Dalir was going to take off, Dalir frustrated that Erik
kept pushing him away. It wasn't a magic bullet. It wasn't going to guarantee that they'd never
break up. But this had to happen for them to have a chance to get started.

Erik didn't move.

"Do you want me to..." Dalir trailed off, raising his hand as if he was going to take the mask, then
stopping himself. No, he shouldn't. Erik should be the one to take it off. Dalir could ask. Could
insist. But it was on Erik to actually remove it.
Erik seemed to realize the same thing. He didn't reply verbally, but he closed his eyes and shook his head. He reached his right hand back, deftly untied the strings. His eyes remained shut.

"I don't want to see the look on your face," Erik muttered, mostly to himself, but Dalir replied anyway.

"That's..."

The mask was off.

"...ironic," Dalir managed, throat gone awfully dry himself. He braced himself, as well as he could. Thought of the video. The microwave. Even the tiny semi-conscious glimpse he'd just gotten in the dark. But he couldn't be prepared. Not really.

There was a lot to take in, and seeing the scars, the edges of the grafts up so close was painful. It looked painful, anyway. The skin didn't really move normally either, it creased and wrinkled along the lines of the scars, sutures, and places where the grafts met, not along the lines of the muscles, making his expressions hard to read. And...well, there was no delicate way to put it. The lack of a nose was especially jarring up close. Raw. Like an open wound, even though the skin had healed over years ago.

"Can't they...do anything about...I just...why'd they leave it like that?" Dalir asked a question that had been fairly boiling inside him since he saw the video of Erik in the hospital. Distantly he was proud of himself that his voice sounded normal. Awkward. But normal.

Erik's didn't. He sounded breathless, almost like he might faint. And he still hadn't opened his eyes. "It was the best they could do. I was...very small, remember. They didn't have much to work with."

"But...like..." Dalir squinted, trying to come up with some improvement on his own that several surgical teams couldn't figure out in twenty-five years. "Is it okay for...uh...it just to be all open like that? Wouldn't you get...I don't know, infections?"

"Sinus infections, yeah," Erik nodded at the floor. The hand that was holding the mask was shaking. "So, better to call things off now before we really get into cold season."

"Hey," Dalir said gently, grabbing Erik's right elbow and snaking his head around, trying to put himself in a position to catch Erik's eyes, should he deign to open them. Wasn't this...wasn't this okay? It wasn't like Dalir had screamed or run away or thrown up or anything. He thought he was coping admirably (especially since Erik didn't know Dalir had a decent idea what he looked like). Why was Erik still so visibly upset? "I didn't say we were calling anything off. I just said...that if we didn't do this, there was no point in trying to move forward. So this is a good thing. Okay?"

Nope. Not okay. Because Erik was definitely crying.

"Oh, shit," Dalir said, wrapping his arms around Erik's waist and pulling him into a very tight hug. "It's fine. It's - "

"It is not fine," Erik whispered, voice thick and hitching with tears. He rested his forehead very lightly against Dalir's left shoulder, evidently not wanting to touch him too much. "It's awful. You don't have to pretend it's not. I know what I look like. And now so do you. And even when I put the mask back on, you'll still know - "

"Listen, just listen," Dalir said, speaking into Erik's good ear, quietly, but firmly. "You're right. Your face is not...it's not good. I mean...yeah. We both know that it's...pretty messed up. But that's not a deal-breaker for me. I knew what I was getting into, it's not like I expected that you'd take off
the mask and...I don't know, who's handsome? I can't think of any handsome guys right now."

"Wow," Erik laughed hollowly. "I short-circuited your memory for attractive people."

"Shut up," Dalir said, gripping him harder. "But I didn't think you'd whip the mask off and I'd be...impressed. But I know now. I've seen you. So...isn't it better that you don't have to worry? Do you...is there any part of you that's relieved about this?"

"Nope," Erik said tightly. "But that could be because I'm having a panic attack."

Oh. Okay. Dalir loosened his arms so Erik could pull away, but he didn't, keeping his head resting heavily on Dalir's shoulder. "Um. What should I - ?"

"Just don't say anything," Erik said raggedly. "Please."

This time Erik made a request that Dalir heeded. They stood like that for a while, Erik breathing very slowly, until Dalir realized there was a pattern to it: In, one two three, hold, one two three, out one, two, three. Repeat. Then he lifted his head, simultaneously bringing his right hand up to put the mask on. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Dalir said simply. What else was there to say? It wasn't great. It wasn't ideal. But it was reality. And it was okay. "Could you...actually look at me? Just...for a sec. Before you put the mask back on? At least let me get you a Kleenex."

Yeah, there was side-effects to having sinuses and no nostrils. Erik's eyes were red and puffy under the ridge of his brow, and there was...a lot of moisture. Just, in general. Which was admittedly gross, but Dalir kept his poker face on. But he opened his eyes and looked at Dalir. Dalir looked back and smiled. Erik's mouth twitched like he was going to smile back, but couldn't allow himself to.

"And this is really okay?" he asked as Dalir darted around him to grab a paper towel in lieu of Kleenex, it being the closest thing in proximity.

"Yes," Dalir affirmed, holding the paper towel out so Erik could clean himself up. "It really is."

Chapter End Notes

And that's it, folks! If you like these characters and this universe, look out for them in a continuation fic - 'For the Music Alone.'

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